

Theorist versus Revolutionary - Marxism-Leninism Born in Midst of Contradiction

Peter Gogan
August 1977



The name of Lenin (V.I. Ulyanov) is as closely associated with the doctrine of Marxism today, as is that of Marx, himself. Indeed, the peculiar application of Marxism to the Soviet Union has earned the name Marxism-Leninism, since it was Lenin who brought the theory of Marx and Engels into revolutionary practice in that country. It was Lenin who sustained the revolutionary aspect of the ideology, and laid the foundation for its continued power in the undeveloped world, even to this day.

While denying that he was "revising" Marx, Lenin obviously adapted the philosophy to the particular Russian, tsarist situation in which he had to labor. This study will deal specifically with what I consider to be his major contributions to Marxism: (1) his notion of the planned and organized revolution, as opposed to the idea of spontaneous social change; (2) the role of the centralized revolutionary party in a revolution; (3) the role of the peasants in a Social-Democratic revolution, and, connected with this problem; (4) the question of whether the capitalist phase is a necessary step toward the socialist state; and (5) the concept of bourgeois and proletariat nations in the worldwide revolution.

Europe after Marx

In his writings, Marx had delineated certain historical/ economic "laws" upon which he based certain future predictions. It was his expectation that the proletariat would soon become excruciatingly poor, and that the working class would expand greatly. This historical process, in his view, would see the polarization of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, followed by an inevitable revolution which would establish the dominance of the working class in a "dictatorship of the proletariat."

However, at the end of the Nineteenth Century, events began to contradict Marx' predictions. The proletariat was growing richer, rather than collapsing into impoverishment. Neither was the bourgeoisie contracting, but, rather, it was rapidly expanding with the growth of industry. The state, defined by Marx as an instrument of oppression, was, at least in Western Europe, recognizing some of the claims of the proletariat by instituting programs for social welfare-insurance and restrictions on working hours and conditions. Because of this unexpected historical development, the socialist movement had become less relevant to social reality.

The first to respond to this seeming failure of Marx' theory was Eduard Bernstein, the founder of the German Social Democratic Party. In 1899 he published *Evolutionary Socialism*, a work which clearly indicated the failure of Marx' predictions. He stated there that Marx' failure was due to faulty concepts of value and profit. According to Bernstein's observations, the profit rate didn't necessarily fall as the economy matured -- thus he placed himself in opposition to Marx' theory of impoverishment, polarization, and revolution. His book stressed programs that would work for the benefit of all social classes. In essence Bernstein stressed a concept of gradual and inevitable evolution, which would originate and proceed from the workers, themselves.

This particular apology for Marx was opposed by one who had matured in a totally different historical situation. The tsarist Russia of Lenin's era (the end of the Nineteenth Century) was closely similar to Western Europe of 1848, the period in which Marx developed his critique of capitalism. Before the year 1900, Lenin had lived his entire life in Russia. He had observed none of the social advances that Bernstein had pointed out, so he concluded that the book was a fabrication. Moreover, Lenin was greatly influenced by the tradition of the peasant-oriented Russian revolutionaries of the 1870's. With this background, he took it upon himself to respond to Bernstein, and to create a doctrine of revolutionary Marxism, a doctrine uniquely applicable both to semi-feudal Russia, and to backward nations in general.

The Role of the Revolutionary Party

In response to Bernstein, Lenin faced the problem of developing a theory of active revolution. For Lenin, to be a Marxist meant to be a revolutionary.

Lenin promulgated the view that the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy, "... arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia." He pointed out further that Marx and Engels, themselves, belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. Therefore, Lenin concluded, the intelligentsia alone were qualified to introduce the proletariat revolution to the laborers. This was the foundation for his idea of the elite, centralized party. It was his desire to head a small, disciplined, ideologically advanced party that would educate and lead the workers.

Thus, Lenin gave his answer to the Bernsteinian economists. Marxism is a doctrine of revolution, and the bourgeois tendencies of the labor movement must become elevated by a militaristic, centralized party of professional revolutionaries.

The Role of the Peasants

Lenin's inclusion of the peasantry in his proletarian revolution has been called by some his major contribution to Marxism. It was to accelerate the process of this bourgeois revolt, that Lenin developed his concept of "the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry." Simultaneously, Lenin recognized an eventual struggle between these same peasants and workers. He took the view that the peasantry was basically petty bourgeois in its attachment to property, and, thus, it was the natural enemy of the proletariat, yet he qualified his position by saying that there was a great semi-proletariat element in the peasantry as well. Thus did Lenin give the peasantry a role, not only the revolution of the proletariat, but also in the pre-capitalist, bourgeois revolution. This idea has become the basic ideological step to those who have attempted to bring Marxism-Leninism to a backward, unindustrialized nation.

The Role of Bourgeois and Proletariat Nations

The last of Lenin's important contributions to Marxism was his notion of bourgeois and proletariat nations.

Basically, his theory made the point that the vast majority of wealth and power had been concentrated in a small handful of nations, at the expense of the vast majority of poorer nations. In this way, Lenin developed the idea of nations, as well as masses of individuals, involved in the class struggle. He predicted the eventual triumph of proletariat nations in the international conflict. Employing Lenin's expression, "The world has become divided into a handful of usurer states and a vast majority of debtor states..." Once again, this idea was destined to have a much greater impact, particularly upon the developing nations of today. It has been the basis for much of the anti-United State polemic at the United Nations, for example.

Comments on Lenin's Positions

Not surprisingly, Lenin's acceptance and revision of Marx has not lacked its critics. Bertrand Russell, in his early book on Bolshevism (1920), introduced three questions in regard to the centralized, revolutionary method of reaching Marx' Utopia: *"First, would the ultimate state foreshadowed by the Bolsheviks be desirable by itself? Secondly, would the conflict involved in achieving it by the Bolshevik method be so bitter and prolonged that its evils would outweigh the ultimate good? ...is what Marxians assert it to be, why should the rulers neglect such opportunities for selfish advantage?"*

Adam B. Ulam, in his book entitled *The Unfinished Revolution*, takes Lenin to task from a different standpoint. He calls to question Lenin's particular adaptation of Marxism, as something that can be applied only through a revolutionary central party. Ulam makes the point that this is a fundamental contradiction of the Marxist view of history. He believes that Lenin should have thrown out Marx' theory altogether, as he says, *"You do not jettison Marxism because it failed to predict the psychology of the worker in an advanced industrialized country, says Lenin. You 'improve' and advance this psychology in*

the revolutionary direction by means of a party. A remarkably illogical performance. You reject the major premise of your ideology, yet you claim strict orthodoxy. Your argument is rationalistic and materialistic, and yet you set out, almost in Sorel-like fashion, to propagate the myth of revolution, the necessity of which, you have just asserted, the workers will feel less and less."

Ulam justifiably believes that Lenin and his contemporaries ...

Thirdly, is this method likely to lead, in the end, to the state which the Bolsheviks desire, or will it fail at some point and arrive at a quite different result?"

Russell answered these questions by saying, first of all, that the state desired by the Bolsheviks is, indeed desirable in itself. He responded to his second query by saying that there is a question as to whether the struggle (probably another world war) would be worth the Utopian result. And he answered his third and most important question is the kind of a state the Bolsheviks desire likely to emerge from the adoption of their methods? -- with an absolute "no."

As a philosopher, Russell believed that the assumption of power by a small minority would become an equally oppressive substitution for tsarism. In his opinion, the assurance that corruption would occur in Lenin's central party lay in the Bolshevik view of Man, "*What motive would they have for not doing so? What motive is possible except idealism, love of mankind, noneconomic motives of the sort Bolsheviks decry? The system created by violence and the forcible rule of a minority must necessarily allow of tyranny and exploitation; and if human nature were first and foremost Russian revolutionaries, and, secondarily, theorists. He describes Marxism as "the culmination of a century's search for a concrete and convincing philosophy and strategy of revolution."* In Ulam's view, Lenin had chosen to overlook the basic objective issue: Was the worker's position getting better or worse under capitalism? If the lot of the proletariat was improving; if the bourgeoisie was expanding; and if the workers didn't naturally desire a revolution; then Marx was wrong,

Andrew C. Janos, another commentator of Leninism, first of all, has pointed out that the deterministic view of history inherent in Marxism should eliminate the necessity for an activist doctrine, such as Lenin's. He believed that Lenin's use of revolutionary strategy and complex political preparations gave an extreme importance to the wills of the individuals involved, "...reflecting their perceptions rather than the 'objective reality' of their material environment." He maintained that Lenin's theory of activism, in itself, disproved Marx' deterministic theory and thus undermined the basis for his own revolutionary activity.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Primarily, Lenin failed in his unconditional acceptance of Marx. This was his "sacred scripture," taken as a priori truth. Because of this he was unable to see errancies in Marxist theory. Basically, he believed Marx to be correct, and, given this tenet, he "proved" it in his practice of revolution. Because he took Marx' view whole, he then used his will to create the "inevitable" revolution. It wouldn't have happened without him. However, Marxism expressly denies the primacy of human will over historical conditions. This is the great contradiction of Marxism-Leninism. As Ulam says, Lenin was primarily a revolutionary, with Marxism providing him with his theoretical justification. In order to achieve his revolution he found it necessary to circumvent certain of Marx' predictions and principles (i.e. the notion of the petty bourgeois peasantry), by explaining what they really meant. In a very real sense, he was correct, more correct than Marx. The practicality of creating a real revolution was his lifetime concern. Marx was a theorist, but his theory was flawed. Lenin was a practical activist with few flaws, and he began a revolutionary movement that would shake the world. Unfortunately, he swallowed whole a theory that was incapable of accurately describing late-capitalist reality, or human nature, or the purpose of human life.