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Fur flies over Lenin

What has the debate over 1912 got to do with current communist practice? James Turley answers the philistines



Lenin: why debate?

The broad sweep of the character of today's left - its divisions, profound and trivial, and the strengths and weaknesses of its practice and theory - hinge, one way or another, on one concept: the 'Leninist party', or 'combat party', or 'party of a new type' ...

Stalinists justify their purges and bureaucratism on the basis of the 'iron discipline' supposedly bequeathed to the communist movement by Lenin. Anarchists accuse Lenin of envisaging an enlightened dictatorship of intellectuals over the benighted working class.

Trotskyists justify every other pointless split on the need to purge their ranks of 'centrists'. Even, as with the recent ructions in Workers Power, when the organised left attempts to break from this practice, it self-conceives as breaking with Lenin, thus leaving him to the tender mercies of the bureaucrats.

The core idea in this narrative is that Lenin broke decisively with the mainstream of the Second International - whereas the latter aimed to build slightly diffuse 'parties of the whole class', Lenin aimed to build a delimited, highly disciplined party of 'professional revolutionaries'. He came to this conclusion in 1901, with the publication of *What is to be done?*; or he came to it in the revolutionary days of 1905; or he came to it in 1912, with the *de facto* Bolshevik-Menshevik split; or in 1914, with the outbreak of World War I; or in 1915, after rereading Hegel's *Logic*.

He came to it consciously, or unconsciously - or unconsciously and

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then consciously. This innovation marked him out as the great Marxist of his time (Trotskyists, Stalinists and Maoists); a petty bourgeois bureaucrat (anarchists and council communists); or a hopeless Blanquist (the late Kautsky). Whatever the details, his break is decisively important.

It should be said, at the outset, that all these loaded variations on the same theme have one other thing in common - they are historically false. Cracks, at least, are starting to appear in this monolithic narrative. Lars Lih, a scholar of Russian left history, has done much of the more recent legwork, in his book *Lenin rediscovered* and short biography, *Lenin*, as well as other writings.

Lih argues that Lenin drew the essential points of his strategy from the Second International mainstream, especially its foremost leader, Karl Kautsky; that he aimed to build a mass socialist party on the model, so far as it was applicable to tsarist despotism, of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD); and that he foregrounded the question of *political freedom* and vehemently opposed those who argued for a focus on low-level agitation that could produce meaningful concrete actions ... as does most of today's far left.

The latter has responded to Lih's work in a slightly two-faced manner, promoting it on the basis that it proves conclusively that Lenin was not an aspiring Bonaparte throughout his political career, but simply ignoring much of the fine detail, which places most Trotskyist groups squarely *against* Lenin on general political questions. This approach, too, is failing, as is obvious from the expanding debate on Lih's work taking place in and around the American International Socialist Organisation - formerly allied to the Socialist Workers Party in this country, until a bitter and basically apolitical split a decade ago.

The debate was initiated by Pham Binh, an ex-member of the ISO, who advanced a scathing critique the biography of Lenin written by SWP founder-guru Tony Cliff^[1]; ISO comrades Paul D'Amato^[2] and Paul Le Blanc^[3] responded, as did comrade Lih.^[4]

This is, on one level, a discussion about abstruse points of history; but there can be few of those where the stakes among Marxists are higher. At issue is the whole political method of the contemporary far left, founded on a particular reading of Bolshevism's trajectory from 1903 to 1917 (and interpreted either positively or negatively). Also at issue, it has to be said, is the post-1920s mainstream of Hegelian Marxism, which in the work of Georg Lukács and the young Karl Korsch was equally founded on a philosophisation of 21-conditions Bolshevism, and an argument that Lenin made a clean and decisive break from the Second International centre.^[5]

Not all of these issues apply to all participants in the debate. Le Blanc is a latecomer to the ISO, has less invested in defending Cliff's *Lenin*, and has highlighted the importance of political freedom to Lenin's political thought in different ways. The same cannot be said of Paul D'Amato, who in his response to Binh is left squaring the impossible circle; he is unwilling to call Lenin anti-democratic, yet he defends an account of Lenin's political work in which the latter comes out as a great man with a good nose, a distaste for procedural fussing and a habit of wildly and cynically overstating the case to reposition a given debate (the infamous 'stick-bending').

Indeed, D'Amato quite unwittingly puts his finger on the matter when he claims that Cliff's textual jiggery-pokery is justifiable on the grounds that his book is not a work of academic history, but - in the words of Duncan Hallas - "a manual for revolutionaries" that "might

well have been called *Building the party - illustrated from the life of Lenin*. Cliff mobilises a caricature of Lenin precisely for *his own* political purposes, which at that time amounted to transforming the International Socialists definitively into the sect we now know as the SWP.

Already political

Another, anonymous, commentator - obviously close to the ISO - takes the only route left open: avowing suspicion at the debate's relevance. Lih is criticised for focusing on two particular disputes in 1905 and 1912, and failing to justify doing so in terms of present political priorities. "We have to justify ... why we read Lenin right here, right now, rather than, say, phone books. Our answer, inevitably, will [have] something to do with our practical political commitments, goals and self-understanding."^[6]

The problem is that Lenin's behaviour, at these junctures and others, has been mobilised by the left, Cliff included, to justify concrete political practice - and still is. Reading *Lenin rediscovered*, an extended commentary on *What is to be done?*, is quite an odd experience, since Lih's position is that the latter is simply an incidental polemic to which Lenin assigned no great significance until his opponents spuriously seized on it to hammer him. It is a book that argues in substance that it should not have had to be written.

Simply doing the history in an academic fashion - as Lih does, with scrupulous attention to detail - is *already* political, because the issues themselves have *already* been politicised. The far left has imagined itself to be following the royal road to October 1917; but it has actually ended up weak, demoralised and divided into a swarm of competing sects. Debunking the myths of October, and the myth of the Bolshevik break from 'Kautskyism', leaves the way open to try something different.

"What matters for socialists today," our anonymous author says, "is when, where and why [Lenin] (and, for that matter, Trotsky, Luxemburg and others) broke with Kautsky, and why they thought it necessary to build an entirely new international." Indeed, that does matter (although the very different circumstances obtaining today maybe do not qualify it for *immediate* importance). But the more significant question is surely: *what was it about Lenin and Bolshevism that allowed it to make revolution*, where all others failed? It is partly, to be sure, the question of 1914 and the split in social democracy; but Luxemburg, unlike Lenin, was unable to build effective opposition to the social-chauvinist traitors; and Trotsky later acknowledged his hopelessness in this period with lacerating self-criticism.

The truth is that, unlike the followers of Trotsky (whose conciliationism was utterly hopeless) and Luxemburg (whose ambiguous connection to mass-action leftism led her primarily to build sects), the Bolsheviks emerged into a revolutionary situation a *mass party*, with profound roots in the class, untainted by August 1914. It was precisely the perspective of building *mass* revolutionary workers' parties, inherited through Kautsky from Marx and Engels, that allowed the Bolsheviks to win out.

The more that serious work is done on this question, the more cold war historiography (in both its Soviet and anti-communist forms), and the Trotskyist myth of 'Leninism', are debunked. The whole edifice is built on air - or, in its more sophisticated forms, philosophy ... which amounts to the same thing.

Of course, only the most self-defeating of conspiratorial sects would argue that larger parties as such are worse than smaller ones; but innumerable justifications exist for political practices destined for diminishing returns. D'Amato excoriates Pham Binh for daring to advocate unity of the socialist left: "a 'united' socialist organisation that has in its ranks both those who consider North Korea, China and Vietnam socialist, and those who think that they are bureaucratic despotism; both Stalinists and genuine Marxists; and both supporters and opponents of the Democratic Party would be a stillborn project".

Pham Binh, in reply, rather acidly points out than none other than Paul Le Blanc is a supporter of 'socialist' Cuba, and that has not blocked his path to ISO membership in good standing.^[7] He probably does, in fact, underestimate the strategic importance of differences on the left - but he is right, nonetheless, to argue for the democratic unity of Marxists.

The Bolsheviks were more than a little prone to enormous and wide-ranging polemics in their ranks: Bukharin very obviously represented a different trend, in the 1910s, to Lenin, to name one example, and the two came into dispute repeatedly. What is important is disciplined unity *in action*, and *acceptance* of (rather than full agreement with) the party programme as a guide to action. With those conditions met - both formulations of Lenin, as it happens - it is right and proper to let the fur fly on disputed issues great and small.

Enforcing ideological unity on particular interpretations of the class character of Stalinism, or any other point of dispute in theory, is simply the road to split after split. Any ISO member should know better (but, given the ISO's characteristically *laissez-faire* attitude to educating recruits, probably does not) - for a cigarette-paper difference on the character of the anti-globalisation movement, the ISO was summarily expelled from the SWP's 'international'. The SWP claimed, of course, that it was terribly important, that the ISO was drifting into 'abstentionism' and so forth; it was all nonsense. A healthy culture of debate (and perhaps a democratic vote on the matters of immediate practical significance) would have resolved things perfectly productively.

That the Bolsheviks managed to build such a culture under conditions of tsarist autocracy is one of their greatest achievements; that we cannot do so under relatively benign political regimes is the surest mark of our desperate condition.

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Notes

1. 'Mangling the party of Lenin' *Weekly Worker* February 2.
2. <http://links.org.au/node/2726>.
3. www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?page=article&id_article=24112.
4. 'Falling out over a Cliff' *Weekly Worker* February 16.
5. See especially Lukács's *Lenin: a study in the unity of his thought*.
6. <http://pink-scare.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/politics-of-debate-over-lenin.html>.
7. <http://links.org.au/node/2735>.

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