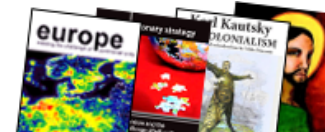




**Books offer:  
3 for 2**



Party & Programme   Democracy & State   Imperialism & War   Capitalism & Crisis   Society & Culture  
 What is imperialism?   War and peace   United States   Middle East   Protoimperialism

Party & Programme -> Bolshevism

Thursday March 29 2012

Weekly Worker 907

## Wanting to get Lenin wrong

Pham Binh challenges those who insist on maintaining their fictional image of Lenin and the Bolsheviks - despite the overwhelming evidence



Stalinist fakery: cropped photo designed to give a false impression of the closeness of and Stalin

The response by blogger 'Pink Scare'<sup>[1]</sup> to the debate ignited by my review<sup>[2]</sup> of Tony Cliff's *Lenin: building the party* affords me the opportunity to clarify issues of secondary importance. Things like timing, judgments, method and implications did not fit with the content of my responses to the Cliff book's two defenders, Paul Le Blanc<sup>[3]</sup> and Paul D'Amato<sup>[4]</sup>. In addition, I will discuss the role of Lars T Lih in this little firestorm.

PS is appreciative, but ultimately dissatisfied with Lih's contribution,<sup>[5]</sup> because the latter does not spell out the practical implications of his research for revolutionary Marxists today and instead adopts a "non-political posture" of "scholarly neutrality". Le Blanc<sup>[6]</sup> and D'Amato<sup>[7]</sup> also tried to fault my book review for similar reasons - namely, that it did not situate Cliff's book in today's context - although my views on party-building today were made abundantly clear in two different articles<sup>[8]</sup> prior to the Cliff debate and one article<sup>[9]</sup> after it. It seems no-one is allowed to examine the historical record surrounding Lenin or challenge anyone else's presentation of Lenin's work without including a detailed 'how to' manual for today's revolutionary left.

This line of criticism fails to address a very basic point: why should a book review of Cliff's *Lenin* (written in 1975) include a discussion of

### Share

Like Share 0

Tweet 0

### More on this subject

True to revolutionary social democracy

The 'new era of war and revolution'

Taaffe: Superannuated teacher, superannuated politics

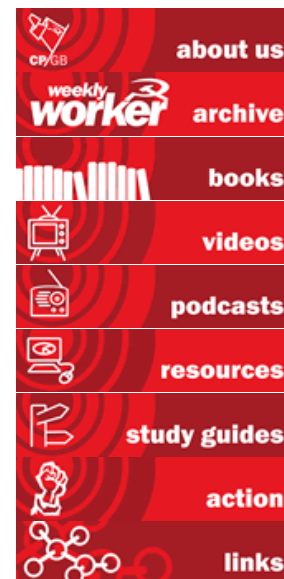
The party we need

Debate: Lukács reloaded

About the Weekly Worker

Support the WW

[Donate](#)



**communist  
students**

red mist reviews

how Lenin's actions are applicable today when Cliff's book contains no such discussion of how its content should be applied by Cliff's group, the International Socialists (predecessor of the British Socialist Workers Party) in their political context of the mid- to late 1970s? Surely what is good for the goose is good for the gander.

I mirrored Cliff's narrow focus on Lenin and the history of the Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). If my book review or Lih's contribution suffered because neither of us drew up a balance sheet of applicable lessons for today, the same is equally true of Cliff's book, although our contributions have not been shown to contain the kind of errors that marred Cliff's *Lenin*.

## Timing and judgments

So the question remains: why did I review Cliff's book in early 2012? Why re-litigate battles from a century ago, as battles today rage in the streets of New York city, Athens and Homs?

In fact, I began my review of Cliff's *Lenin* around the time I wrote 'The Bolshevik experience and the "Leninist" model'<sup>[10]</sup> in the summer of 2011, before Occupy Wall Street (OWS) broke out almost literally on my doorstep. The lull in OWS activity following the November 15 eviction<sup>[11]</sup> allowed me to complete this project, since I had far more important things to do during the encampment than reread Cliff.

This explains the 'odd' timing of the book review. What prompted me in the first place to look at Cliff's book carefully, chapter by chapter, in the summer of 2011 was Lars Lih's response to Chris Harman and Paul Le Blanc in *Historical Materialism* No18. Here, Lih mentioned some of *Building the party's* factual errors. I was curious to see if there were any errors that Lih had not brought to light. The rest, as they say, is history.

Does it follow then, as PS claims, that, "Pham thinks Cliff's book is of zero value and should be thrown in the dustbin of history. He makes it sound as if the most important debate right now is, in some sweeping sense, 'Tony Cliff: yay or nay?'"

My book review never claimed that Cliff's *Lenin* has "zero value and should be thrown in the dustbin of history". I was much more careful and specific, arguing that the book was "useless as a *historical* study of Lenin's actions and thoughts". Believe it or not, plenty of books have value even if they are not historical studies of Lenin's thoughts and actions. Cliff's *Lenin* is no exception.

The value of Cliff's *Lenin* is a separate issue from any sort of sweeping judgment of Tony Cliff as a man, writer or revolutionary. He wrote about a huge range of subjects during the almost 90 years of his life. One book, no matter how awful or problematic, is an insufficient basis for making a "yay or nay" judgment on someone's life and work. Anyone who read my book review and thought that my goal was to 'get Tony Cliff' or make such a judgment has probably spent too much time in the marginal and unhealthy environment known as the socialist movement, where straw men, sweeping personalistic condemnations, and sweeping yays and nays have become the rule rather than the exception.

PS says that the body of my review consisted of "quibbling complaints about this or that error made by Tony Cliff". Getting the meaning of democratic centralism wrong, distorting Lenin's attitude towards party rules, failing to represent Lenin's view of the famous 1903 Menshevik-

Bolshevik dispute, as expressed in painstaking detail in *One step forward, two steps back*,<sup>[12]</sup> and ignoring the fact that the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks did not become separate, independent parties until 1917 hardly constitutes quibbling for any serious student of Bolshevism.

If all of the above is quibbling, it begs the question of what exactly for PS would constitute significant distortions, inaccuracies, flaws or factual errors? Should we rest content that the moral of the story - we must build a revolutionary party! - is the correct one? If so, why bother being accurate at all?

## Accuracy

Historical accuracy is paramount if we are trying to use history as a guide to action.

We cannot learn from what happened unless we actually know (and acknowledge) what happened. History, like the present, will always be contested to some degree, but intelligent debate over what happened, when, and why is not possible when those involved in such disputes maintain their views despite a growing body of evidence that contradicts the factual basis for their particular interpretation. Paul Le Blanc's insistence<sup>[13]</sup> that the Bolsheviks became a separate party from the Mensheviks in 1912 at the Prague Conference falls into this category because to adhere to this interpretation one must ignore or downplay the testimonies of conference participants such as Lenin and Zinoviev, as well as a slew of documentary evidence from the period, since all of it points in the opposite direction.

Why the 1912 issue is important I will examine later in this piece.

Cliff's *Lenin* has value - as a cautionary tale of how not to approach the work of others (Lenin's primarily, but also that of scholars) and how not to handle historical documents and complex issues (*Building the party's* Russian-language citations are copied from secondary sources without proper attribution, making it almost impossible for anyone else to look at the material he used to write his book).

The single most important lesson we can learn from Cliff's *Lenin* is the necessity of putting the work of Lenin and the Bolsheviks back into its proper historical context, which is the international social democratic movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s. This Cliff did not do in his zeal to 'prove' this or that point about the nature of the revolutionary party (a loaded concept that deserves to be unpacked), the nature of said party's internal regime and its alleged leadership style. By contrast, Lih's work will withstand the test of time and the harshest of critical examinations because he seeks to understand Lenin historically, as he was, as he evolved over time, *regardless of the implications for revolutionary organisers today*.

Lih has no dog in our fight, nor should he. Claiming, as PS does, that he "position[s] himself as a mere scholar - rather than activist - [who] repeatedly invokes his expertise and specific role as a 'historian'" and, as a result of such so-called positioning, "offers little insight into the questions that really matter here" is ridiculous for the following reason: no matter how wonderful Lih's scholarship on Lenin is, *he is not going to do our thinking for us*. Drawing out the implications of his work is *our* job, not his.

Any student of that era, those issues or the man (Lenin) would do well to imitate Lih's method in approaching the history of Bolshevism if they really want to mine that experience for the valuable lessons it

undoubtedly contains.

When studying history we should focus on precisely that - history. Engaging in historical study focused on “advancing our understanding of the contemporary conjuncture and struggles within it”, as PS suggests, will inevitably distort what we get out of looking at events that occurred yesterday, yesteryear and a century ago - especially when they happened in foreign countries, whose cultures, languages and traditions are not readily comparable to our own. Approaching the past with a ‘what do I get out of it in the here and now?’ or a ‘what in this is immediately applicable to my situation?’ mentality is to blind ourselves to history’s rich contradictions and nuances in favour of something simplistic and readily digestible.

## Clarifications

The dedication of my book review to “anyone and everyone [who] has sacrificed in the name of ‘building the revolutionary party,’” has nothing to do with declaring that project to be a “bankrupt political goal”, despite what PS seems to think. If that is what I thought I would just come out and say it. I do not mince words.

The dedication is a reference to the fact that generations of socialists all over the world have made personal sacrifices of one sort or another in the name of the title of Cliff’s book, *Building the party*, under the assumption that their efforts would contribute in some way to the creation of a Bolshevik-type party. I have no problem with people choosing to make such sacrifices, but choosing to do so based on severe distortions or a non-existent historical precedent is a different story.

PS’s concluding words compel me to clarify where I do *not* stand on some questions as well:

If there is one relatively clear political implication of Pham’s intervention, it seems to be that Lenin was “an orthodox Kautskyist” and that the distinction between Second International reformism (associated with Kautsky and the SPD) and early Third International revolutionary politics (associated with Luxemburg, Trotsky and Lenin) is historically inaccurate.

I am mystified how anyone could read my book review of Cliff’s *Lenin* and my replies to Le Blanc and D’Amato and write that Cliff getting Lenin wrong has “one relatively clear political implication” on issues such as Lenin’s relationship to Karl Kautsky or the Third International’s relationship to the Second. Cliff’s book did not delve into those topics at all and neither did I. Perhaps I am somehow being confused or conflated with Lih, since he has actually done work on Lenin’s take<sup>[14]</sup> on Kautsky?

Whatever the case, I would never be so stupid to think that the distinction between the Second and Third Internationals “is historically inaccurate”. I do believe that the character of those distinctions has been profoundly misunderstood by ‘Leninists’. That topic, along with ‘Leninism’ and whether the Bolsheviks really constituted a ‘party of a new type’, will be addressed in a future piece that I began before OWS. Stay tuned.

## The importance of 1912

To be candid, these debates have zero importance beyond the ranks of historians like Lih and those who continue to find inspiration in or lessons to be learned from the Bolsheviks. But the issue of 1912

looms large for those of us in the latter milieu because of statements like this from D'Amato:

The outcome of the period 1912-17 was that two independent political parties entered the arena of struggle in 1917. The irreconcilable differences between these two parties, which led one to support soviet power and the other to oppose it, led to a Bolshevik victory over the opposition of the Mensheviks, and later to the founding of a new international that was based upon soviet power and the need for revolutionary Marxists to organisationally *separate* themselves from social democratic reformism. Can a debate over the exact date when the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks split shed any more light in these critical developments in the history of the socialist movement?

My answer to his closing question is unequivocally 'yes!' - although the evidence indicates that there is no single "exact date" in 1917 when this separation took place. It was a process - more like balding than a divorce.

The reason I say yes is because the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were part of the same broad, multi-tendency party from 1903 until 1917 that 'Leninists' today strenuously reject as a bankrupt model doomed to fail. The 1917 Russian Revolution *proves* that this model is anything but bankrupt or doomed in advance. The differences between the two factions were not always irreconcilable. To insist otherwise would be ahistorical (or undialectical, if you prefer). Lenin's writings up until 1917 are filled with rejections of the notion that there could or should be two "organisationally separate" RSDLPs: one Menshevik, the other Bolshevik. (Interesting fact: the phrase "Bolshevik Party" never occurs in Lenin's *Collected works* during the 1912-16 period except as explanatory editorial notes written by people other than Lenin. Only in 1917 does Lenin himself speak and write of the Bolsheviks as a party.)

Conflating the liquidationists, the Mensheviks and social democratic reformists (Bernsteinists) with one another, as D'Amato does, makes all of this impossible to understand or even acknowledge. Neither Lenin nor the Bolsheviks were what we call 'Leninists', and they did not build a 'party of a new type' totally unlike and superior to their international social democratic brethren. The historical evidence indicates that they were *revolutionary social democrats* who defended what they considered to be orthodoxy from the likes of Eduard Bernstein and, later, the man who did more than anyone else to create that orthodoxy, Kautsky.

All of this goes to show how history's rich complexities and ironies clash with the simplistic and distorted accounts of the Bolsheviks and Lenin put forward by detractors and would-be imitators alike.

What (if anything) this means for us today is a matter of debate, but historical falsehoods and fictions (when we know better!) should not be part of that debate!

## Notes

1. <http://pink-scare.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/politics-of-debate-over-lenin.html>.
2. 'Mangling the party of Lenin' *Weekly Worker* February 2.
3. <http://links.org.au/node/2718>.
4. <http://links.org.au/node/2735>.
5. 'Falling out over a cliff' *Weekly Worker* February 16.

6. <http://links.org.au/node/2716>.
7. <http://links.org.au/node/2726>.
8. <http://links.org.au/node/2657>;  
<http://louisproyect.wordpress.com/2011/07/29/a-response-to-paul-leblancs-marxism-and-organization>.
9. <http://spnyc.org/home/2012/02/17/another-socialist-left-is-possible>.
10. <http://louisproyect.wordpress.com/2011/07/29/a-response-to-paul-leblancs-marxism-and-organization>.
11. [www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/569.php](http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/569.php).
12. [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1904/onestep/index.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1904/onestep/index.htm).
13. <http://links.org.au/node/2752>.
14. See 'VI Lenin and the influence of Kautsky' *Weekly Worker* September 3 2009.



Respond to this article

---

Like Share Be the first of your friends to like this.

---

---

[home](#)

[about the cpgb](#)

[videos](#)

[study guides](#)

[subscribe](#)

[join](#)