

SHORT INTERVIEWS:

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Crisis&Critique: This year is the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Emancipatory thinkers, regardless if Leftists, Marxists, or Communists felt for a long time - and still seem to feel - the pressure of the Bolshevik past weighing upon them, demanding that political methods, tactics, means and achievements have to be constantly measured against the successes and related to the atrocities of the Soviet experience. What is the relevance and the actuality of the 1917 revolution for you (if there is any)?

Kevin B. Anderson: I agree that October 1917 still has great relevance, even if one repudiates its legacy. For how can one return to Marx's critique of capital, as so many are doing today, but skip over a century of post-Marx Marxism? Instead, we need to analyze critically the legacy of Marxism, even as we look at Marx with 21st century eyes. And in that legacy of 21st century Marxism, October 1917 still stands out as the most important event inspired by Marx's thought.

How to do so?

First, we need to separate, as the anti-Stalinist left has always done, the early legacy of October 1917 from the brutal atrocities of Stalinism. Soviet Russia of the 1920s saw important steps toward the emancipation of women, policies that recognized the languages and cultures of national minorities, peasants tilling their own land, and workers able to strike and organize to a degree, even if the actual soviets of 1917-18 had ossified. Moreover, the new regime forcefully backed revolutionary movement around the world, something socialists had done before, but now with a new emphasis on anti-imperialism and national liberation, especially in the Global South. It thus called for the overthrow by the local populations of colonialism and imperialism in India, China, Africa, and Latin America. And it provided material support toward that aim.

Second, we need to recognize some key flaws of the Bolshevik system from the beginning, that are not a result of the pressures of outside imperialist intervention against the revolution or Russia's technological backwardness. As Rosa Luxemburg pointed out, the dictatorship led by Lenin and Trotsky had undercut revolutionary democracy, setting a bad precedent. One could add that the fact that the new Soviet Union became a one-party state by the middle of 1918 undermined many of its positive features mentioned above. This is something that those working in the tradition of Trotsky still have great difficulty appreciating. Of course, most anarchists (and of course liberals) see the Soviet Union as

totalitarian from day one, an equally one-sided perspective.

C&C: Would you see anything contemporary in these experiences that might have or has a direct (or indirect) impact on the present situation? Even if, to freely reformulate Hegel, the only lesson from history is that there is no lesson from history (that is no direct one-to-one correspondence of different historical situations) and even if this is also what Lenin always advocated, is there anything to be learnt from 1917 that is still valid today?

K.B.A: What Hegel is saying in his *Philosophy of History* is that one cannot learn much about how to conduct politics or statecraft from the distant past, as in how the French revolutionaries of the late eighteenth century attempted to model themselves on the ancient Romans. However, one can learn from the history of one's own epoch, Hegel argues. Critically appropriating this insight for Marxism, one could say that one can learn something important about the state and revolution, or other key topics, from the history of periods within one's own mode of production. In this sense, because we still inhabit the capitalist mode of production, the Russian revolution of 1917 could be considered part of our epoch, as could the 1871 Paris Commune of Marx's time. Therefore, lessons learned from their history would still have some validity today. This is of course a broader concept of one's own epoch than that emphasized by bourgeois reason, which tends to view events of even a decade ago as irrelevant to today.

Are there, therefore, lessons from the Russian revolution for today? To take one example from early, revolutionary Russia, the Bolsheviks' insistence that one cannot be a communist without firmly opposing one's own society's racism at home and its imperialism abroad was crucial in helping the global left to move away from class reductionism, from saying, as even the great U.S. Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs did, that there was no race question outside the class question. This kind of thinking advanced by the Bolsheviks -- and carried onward by many afterward like W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Frantz Fanon, and others since then -- remains of crucial importance for any kind of truly emancipatory left politics, then as now. This debate has been renewed, and necessarily so, with the election of Trump in the U.S., a reactionary racist and misogynist who played the class card as part of a very narrow electoral victory, but one that is already doing terrible damage to the U.S. and the world.

Second, there is the legacy of Stalinism, as seen in how some misguided parts of the global left speak in the name of anti-imperialism in order to support a Milosevic, a Qaddafi, or an Assad. Here the kind of wild opportunism associated with the Stalinist mentality seems to persist in a different form. For the Stalinists turned anti-imperialism into a caricature, one that allowed them to sign a pact with Hitler in 1939, in supposed opposition to the British and other imperialists and plutocrats.

C&C: After the fall of the Paris Commune Lenin famously reflected on the means of a long lasting successful emancipatory politics and sought to solve problems the Communards encountered (like its military weakness when confronted with the enemy, the short life of the Commune, and geographical limitedness). From this inquiry he arrived at developing organizational instruments like the revolutionary party, the vanguards, also the idea of emancipatory media (revolutionary newspapers or leaflets) and constantly emphasized the importance of strategic analyses of the coordinates of one's specific historical situation and the need to adopt political means in accordance with it. Do you see any actuality in any of those means for a contemporary political thought and for working through the foundations of emancipatory politics?

K.B.A: This question is not posed very exactly. Lenin's main writings concerning the Paris Commune are in his 1917 *State and Revolution*, the book he considered his most important theoretical legacy. As his correspondence makes clear, he wrote it for an international Marxist audience, not just a Russian one, and he wanted it translated into German and other languages as quickly as possible. In *State and Revolution*, he stresses the fact that Marxists after Marx had wanted to take over the state and use it to implement a socialist agenda. Lenin broke with that legacy, beginning in 1914 with his opposition both to the First World War and the reformist social democrats who endorsed that war. Then came his book on imperialism as a new stage of capitalism, and finally, *State and Revolution*. Like Marx after the Commune of 1871, Lenin concluded that the existing state apparatus had to be smashed, destroyed, rather than taken over. Lenin saw the soviets or workers' councils that arose on a mass scale in 1917 as a continuation of the Commune. In fact, until Lenin's *State and Revolution*, Marxists had mostly forgotten Marx's *Civil War in France*, the analysis of the Commune's achievements where he called its mass grassroots democracy -- and takeover of some factories by the workers -- the non-state political form under which the emancipation of the working class could be achieved. Thus, for both

Marx and Lenin, the key issue is destroying the state as a basis for overcoming the capital relation.

(Because Hegel was mentioned in an earlier question, I would like to note that amid all of his rethinking of Marxism around the questions, of war and imperialism, race and class, and the state and revolution, Lenin was studying Hegel's *Science of Logic*. In fact, that study, in 1914-15, formed the philosophical, dialectical foundation for these innovations around the issues of imperialism, war, the state, and revolution, as I showed in my book on Lenin and Hegel.)

Of course, Lenin pretty quickly allowed the soviets to wither and die during the period of imperialist intervention and civil war, and he certainly did help set up a centralized, bureaucratic state. But as he was dying in 1922, he warned of the dangers of the new state, which was beginning to run roughshod over national minorities, and called for Stalin's removal as General Secretary of the Communist Party. That warning was ignored even by Trotsky until it was too late, and he published it -- for the first time -- only after Stalin had already taken over.

As to Lenin's concept of the vanguard party, to which the question seems to allude, that was first formulated much earlier, in 1902, at a time when he still thought of revolution as the takeover of the existing state and had not written yet on imperialism. As Dunayevskaya shows in *Marxism and Freedom*, Lenin himself seemed to repudiate some aspects of vanguardism as early as the 1905 revolution and surely in 1917 when he pronounced the rank-and-file workers more revolutionary than the party members and definitely than the Bolshevik Party leadership. This was when he was trying to overcome the reluctance, if not outright opposition, of his co-leaders to a second, anticapitalist revolution, what we now call the October revolution. At the same time, however, Lenin never gave up completely on the vanguard party, and it returned with a vengeance once the Bolsheviks were in power and faced with a civil war. That thread was the one picked up by Stalin and his allies, of course, who twisted it into something truly elitist and ultimately, totalitarian.

C&C: After 1917 and the peculiar failures of the subsequent Cultural Revolution in China, the century of Revolution seems over. What is to be done today with the very concept of revolution?

K.B.A: Certainly we have had a number of revolutions in recent years, for example, in Egypt and Tunisia. Moreover, these revolutions have

inspired a number of movements around the world, from Occupy to the Sanders, Corbyn, and Mélenchon campaigns. Therefore, I think the fact and therefore the concept of revolution are very much alive today, even if the new revolutions and movements are usually not moving in a directly anticapitalist direction as espoused by the Bolsheviks in 1917. For a while, in the retrogressive 1980s and 1990s, intellectuals often stressed that revolution of any kind was too dangerous risk, because it was so unpredictable and destructive. In its most anti-Marxist versions, this meant revolution = gulag. One could find such viewpoints among ordinary liberals, among Habermas and his followers, and among the poststructuralists as well. That kind of statement was often coupled with the problematic notion that real change was local and particular, not global and "totalizing." This kind of thinking has declined in the 21st century, especially since the Great Recession, when critical intellectuals and the left are again targeting the global capitalist system. This is part of why it is more crucial than ever to re-examine the legacy of 1917, the most serious and far-reaching attempt to date to dislodge that system.

C&C: The emancipatory project of the 20th century was carried out under the name of *socialism*, with the concept of the *dictatorship of the proletariat* as its political form. In your view, is there and can there be a "return" to socialism, or should the emancipatory project of the 21st century seek to go beyond both socialism and capitalism, that is, should it rather be communist in nature and form (or not)?

K.B.A: I think Marx's vision of communism as a society that breaks with the capital relation in favor of one based upon freely associated labor in a non-state form is even more relevant than when he wrote about this in the commodity fetishism section of *Capital* and in *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Recently, Peter Hudis and Paresh Chattopadhyay have argued, correctly in my view, that one cannot grasp Marx's critique of political economy without looking at capitalism, as he did, from the vantage point of a new, communist society of the future.

If by socialism one means the legacy of Marx, and a critical appropriation of the thought of the most original Marxist thinkers that followed, then I say no, one cannot give up the word socialism. But I agree that we do need to go beyond socialism as well as capitalism, if by socialism one means either of the forms of statist socialism that dominated left-wing theory and practice during the 20th century: Stalinist and Maoist communism or reformist social democracy.

Lenin's concept of smashing the state and replacing it with bottom-up soviets or councils of workers, peasants, and soldiers was not implemented for long in the wake of 1917, as Samuel Farber showed some years ago in his critique from the left. But Russia was a technologically backward society and what Lenin really had in mind in *State and Revolution* was an advanced capitalist country like Germany, or at least a revolutionary Russia that was linked to and being aided by a revolutionary Germany or the like. Germany did begin to develop some of these features -- workers and soldiers' councils, for example -- during the revolutionary upsurge of 1918-19. Some of this took place under the leadership of Luxemburg, but her brutal assassination helped to cut it short. The failure of the German revolution isolated Russia and paved the way for Stalinism and its deeply flawed notion of "socialism in one country," a concept totally alien to Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg, or Trotsky, but an ideological notion appropriate to Russia's new state capitalist system.

To move toward real, revolutionary communism today, we have to carry out a rigorous critical analysis of this entire theoretical and practical legacy, from Marx through 1917 to today. In so doing we need to focus not just on anticapitalism, but also a vision of what a new, humanist society beyond capitalism would look like. And for that, there is no better place to begin than Marx's own writings.

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