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Lenin's approach to Marxism

In the West, non-Marxist writers have regarded Lenin's thought as contributing very little to political and sociological theory. Most Western writers on Lenin have seen him first as a revolutionary activist rather than as a social theorist. Conquest, for instance, says that 'the power and influence of [Lenin's] writing has arisen largely from the fact that the author himself carried out a major revolution' (Conquest 1972: 12). Carew Hunt writes that 'The theoretical side of Lenin is in a sense not serious. It is in the sure instinct with which he grasps the reality of a given situation that his genius lies, though the tactics then adopted are always justified with Marxist texts' (Carew Hunt 1963: 171). Sartre has dismissed Lenin's philosophy as 'unthinkable' and Merleau-Ponty has described it as 'expedient' (cited by Althusser 1971: 33).

Kolakowski (1978: vol. 2) is the latest and most sophisticated of this school: 'To Lenin . . . all theoretical questions were merely instruments of a single aim, the revolution; and the meaning of all human affairs, ideas, institutions and values resided exclusively in their bearing in the class struggle. . . . [B]y a natural progression, the dictatorship first exercised over society in the name of the working class and then over the working class in the name of the party, was now applied to the party itself, creating the basis for a one-man tyranny' (pp. 383, 489). Such writers tend to conflate Lenin's thought, the legitimating doctrine of Leninism devised in the USSR after Lenin's death and the practices of Stalin: these different phenomena are conveniently labelled by such writers as 'Leninism'.

One reason for this neglect of Lenin as a theorist is that, as Meyer has pointed out, his views are 'based on a philosophy that is uncongenial to thinkers in our culture' (Meyer 1957: 1; see also Althusser 1971: 37). The *weltanschauung* of liberal-democracy is so strongly held by many of Lenin's Western critics that they are unable to penetrate his tactical policies to comprehend the emancipatory qualities and creative aspects of

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his thought. But not all Western non-Marxist commentators have made such a negative evaluation: of particular note are Meyer (1957) and Harding (1977 and 1980), who have both sought to provide a cogent summary and a more sympathetic interpretation of Lenin's theory and practice.

Marxists have been even more divided about Lenin. Most Western Marxists have had little time for Lenin and attention has, at least until the late 1970s, been focussed on the young Marx (Anderson 1976; see below p. 89). Lukacs, as early as 1924, is exceptional in describing Lenin as 'the greatest thinker to have been produced by the revolutionary working-class movement since Marx' (Lukacs 1970: 9). But it was only in the 1970s that many serious Western Marxists turned to consider Lenin's ideas: in particular Timpanaro (1975), Hoffman (1975), Claudin-Urondo (1977), Althusser (1971), Liebman (1975) and Corrigan, Ramsay and Sayer (1978). In the Communist world, however, Lenin is held in high esteem as philosopher, sociologist and revolutionary politician (see, for example, Stalin 1934a; Mao Tse-Tung 1964).

But here again Lenin has been the subject of abuse from many communists and ex-communists alike who have considered Lenin's thought, or the doctrine of Leninism, to be an unacceptable development or extension of Marxist thought. This has a long history going back before the Revolution with criticisms by Luxemburg (1961). Also, and perhaps of more importance, is the fact that the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in 1917 linked Lenin's theories with the practice of the Soviet Union and provided a catalyst for the principled opposition of many Marxists to Lenin's version of Marxism: Pannekoek (1975) and Korsch (1970) are examples of this tendency which is echoed by the writers associated with *Telos* (see Santamaria and Manville 1976; Piccone 1977).

Yet a third group of Marxists considers Lenin to have developed Marxism and to have related it to the conditions of the twentieth century (Trotsky, see particularly 'The 21st Anniversary', 1970: 172–3; Garaudy 1970). At the same time, however, they have argued that a distinct break occurred between the theories of Marx and Lenin and the ideology of *Marxism–Leninism* as articulated by the Soviet Communist Party under Stalin and his successors.* These criticisms have to be related to the politics of the twentieth century, particularly the rise of the USSR as a world power and the problem this has subsequently created for European Communist parties and their Marxist critics.

* On different meanings of 'Leninism' and differences between Lenin and Stalin, see Gerrata (1977).

Introduction

In this book we shall be concerned with some of the divisions which have occurred within the framework of Marxist thought about Lenin's theories and their development. Some writers in their opposition to Lenin and the kind of Marxism he has developed have gone back to Marx's work to find the original source of Lenin's heresy; one important school has tried to develop a more humanistic type of Marxism, derived often from the work of the young Marx, and this is particularly in opposition to the writing of Engels (see P. Anderson 1976, Avineri 1968). There is thus a distinction made between Marx's thought and Marxism, and one which might be made in my view between Lenin's thought and Leninism. Ideas from the original writings are reinterpreted to gain an affinity with the interests (material or ideal) of political elites (or even counter elites). It seems to be true that unless ideas do gain this affinity, they are abandoned by political actors and become mere objects of intellectual thought and are only studied for their intrinsic interest. One way that they can be used, and which is quite foreign to their original intention, is to legitimate the activity of a ruling stratum, group or class. The process of elective affinity, to use a Weberian term (Gerth and Mills 1948: 62), applies to Communist parties' interpretation of Marx's and Lenin's thought as it does to various Christian churches' interpretations of the teaching of Christ.

This analogy, however, cannot be carried too far. For Marxism and Leninism, unlike Christianity, claim to be scientific theories to interpret and to change society. Hence they were devised first and foremost as a method of analysis and any particular 'teachings' have only a limited application; they become redundant and useless knowledge in the face of historical change. *Marxism* and *Leninism* are the application and development of Marx's and Lenin's theories: it is quite un-Marxist to resolve an argument solely in terms of what Marx (or Lenin) said, unless related to its social context. Hence one cannot naively dichotomise Lenin's thought and Leninism, or Marx's thought and Marxism – though to be sure, there is an important difference between them. Social thought does not stay still but reflects, and changes with, new circumstances and problems; unless it is analysed as a movement in relation to a changing society it becomes merely a collection of museum pieces – one moves from an 'account' of Marx to Engels to Lenin as one would view different fossils in museum display cabinets. Leninism we may define as a set of values, beliefs and practices derived from the thought of Lenin and which are said to guide the actions of the leaders of Communist parties (whether in power or not). As such, it is much more than

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the sum of Lenin's thoughts: it is an approach to politics and society. In this sense, Stalin described Leninism as 'Marxism in the era of imperialism and of the proletarian revolution . . . Leninism is the theory and tactics of the dictatorship of the proletariat in particular' (Stalin 1934a: 10).

Citing Stalin in this way immediately and directly confronts one with the fact that Marxism–Leninism is now a legitimating ideology of the world's ruling Communist parties and their sympathisers. But Marxism–Leninism is more than just that: it purports to provide an explanation and a course of political action to change the world, to introduce socialism. It is in this context that we shall examine it. But I shall not argue that Stalin was correct in saying that the policies he evolved in Russia, despite their affinity with Lenin, were appropriate to the development of socialism on a world scale. Rather, I shall attempt to show how Lenin's thought and policy (and Stalin's too) were closely related to conditions of Russia and of the world in the early twentieth century. As Lenin would concede, his prognostications and policies are time- and place-bound, and should not be confused with his method of analysis. Delineating the specific Russian and Soviet policies from his general method of analysis will lead to the clarification of the relevance of his work today.

What then are the methodological underpinnings to Lenin's thought, and what kinds of criticisms can one make of them? Here I do not intend to discuss in detail Lenin's philosophy of history or his methodology. The importance of Bolshevism lies in its social and political analysis – and it is only indirectly that method and philosophy become relevant. Most Western commentaries on Lenin pay little attention to his methodology and philosophy. Neither Harding nor Meyer systematically deals with these topics and the latter comments that the 'impact of philosophical beliefs and attitudes on policy in the Leninist movement and the Soviet State has been of no more than marginal importance' (Meyer 1957: 5). Lenin himself, however, as Meyer concedes, thought that dialectical materialism was the key to 'a correct understanding of reality and . . . expedient action' (*ibid.*: 8).

We might identify three assumptions derived from Marxism which inform Lenin's approach. Firstly, and strongly influenced by Engels, he emphasises a materialist position: this involves the priority of matter over mind, and the conditioning effects which nature exercises over man. The relationship of man and nature is a 'dialectical' one, there is an exchange between man and nature, man is limited by, yet he actively

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shapes, the physical and social world. Secondly, Lenin's analysis of society is predicated on an historical materialist viewpoint that history progresses through definite stages and that there is a replacement of capitalism by communism: this movement, however, can only be the result of activity by class conscious actors (individuals and collectivities). Thirdly, the interpretation of social facts has a class character and Marxists in the era of capitalism orientate their work to speed the rise of a communist society. Politics, sociology and history are sciences in the sense that they take account of the objective laws of nature which condition the evolution of society but, at the same time, Marxist writers attempt to influence the rate and direction of change. Freedom to act is the recognition of necessity: political class interests are inextricably part of human action; not only do they condition it, but they too are stimuli to action. A key to Lenin's approach to society is to recognise not only a political commitment to social change but also that an understanding of the world is necessary prior to changing it.

Leaving aside Lenin's actual political activity and its political conjuncture, how can one characterise the object and methods of his thought? All Lenin's work must be seen as being predicated on his analysis of the conditions for, and on the tactics of, the proletarian revolution: this was his major aim and his life work. (The Revolution is here considered to continue into the post-1917 period of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the Soviet Union.) Marx might be regarded as formulating laws of history while Lenin concentrated on political action – though he himself amended Marx's laws in the process. Lenin added a dimension of the theory of political *action* to Marxism. In addition to his methodology, there are three substantive components to Lenin's interpretation of capitalism. These three elements should be seen in combination and as such they may be regarded as Lenin's theory of socialist revolution. There is first, based on Marxist laws of historical materialism, the idea of the uneven development of capitalism; second, an organisational theory of decision-making and participation, to be utilised by the Party of the working class, and a policy of political action in relation to the state; and third, a theory of imperialism which describes the stage of capitalism in the early twentieth century (i.e. up to the First World War) and which focusses on the relations between the advanced capitalist states and those in the process of capitalist development. Each of these components was developed by Lenin on its own and one does not find in Lenin's works an analysis synthesising these components, and many commentators have tended to view each part on its own. It is important

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to stress that they are interconnected and that emphasis on one to the exclusion of another destroys the unity of Lenin's praxis. As Lenin points out many times, the Marxist approach is to see the whole and to consider the parts in relation to the whole. In addition to his analysis of capitalism, Lenin made a number of prognostications about socialism as an ideal state and provided what was in effect a theory of development for Soviet Russia after the Revolution. These substantive topics will be the concern of following chapters.

HISTORICAL AND DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM

Lenin's analysis of society is based on three inter-related foundations: materialism, dialectics, history. As a materialist, Lenin shares a general approach in common with Marx, and particularly Engels, as well as many other bourgeois scientists and writers such as Priestley and Feuerbach. The rise of natural science and the positivistic, agnostic and materialist world view accompanying it, was a concomitant of the rise of industrial capitalism. Lenin followed Engels in accepting materialism in the following terms: 'The great basic question of all philosophy, especially modern philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking and being. . . . Those who asserted the primacy of the spirit to nature and, therefore, in the last instance, assumed world-creation in some form or other . . . comprised of the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism' (Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, 1951: 334–5; see also Lenin, *Karl Marx*, SW 1: 20–1). Materialism, then, posits the priority of nature over mind. In the sense of diachronic priority we have the order: earth, life, man; or physical level, biological level, socio-economic level (see discussion in Timpanaro 1975: 34). Nature, which has its own laws independent of man, conditions him and it imposes constraints on him. This helps to explain why 'freedom' becomes the recognition, or the appreciation, of necessity. Lenin quotes Engels as pointing out that only bourgeois 'freedom' conceives of human action independently of natural laws; but in fact freedom consists of 'the knowledge of these laws, and in the possibility this gives to systematically making them work towards definite ends' (*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, CW 14: 187). 'The necessity of nature is primary, and human will and mind secondary' (*ibid.*: 188).

Materialism as a *weltanschauung* developed independently of Marxist thought. Positivism, and in Lenin's time, empirio-criticism and prag-

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matism, provided a materialist methodology for many natural scientists. Lenin went to some length to show that these doctrines could not be squared with Marxism and that scientists supporting this position tend to lapse into idealism. Although laws are discovered by men, their agnosticism leads them to believe that laws are made by men, rather than being independent of them in nature.

Lenin is also, we should note, very much at odds with today's 'radical' or 'critical' sociologists, such as Gouldner and Atkinson, who see the sociologist as actively 'intervening' in 'his subject matter. . . . His theories affect social attitudes and social life' (Atkinson 1972: 270). Gouldner regards the view that the laws of the social world are 'mirrored' in the sociologist's work as being 'a myth'; and he conceives of the social world as being 'conceptually constituted by the sociologist's cognitive commitments and all his other interests' (Gouldner 1971: 496). For Atkinson, the recognition of laws of nature makes Marxism a 'conservative force' (Atkinson 1972: 283) restricting the individual's creative activity. Similarly, Gouldner sees the 'liberating effects of the scientific revolution' as being a constraint on man and having been superseded by history (Gouldner 1971: 500). For Gouldner, 'Reflexive Sociology' is not distinguished by its subject matter, but by the relationship of the sociologist to his work (*ibid.*: 495). Lenin, on the other hand, sees purposeful social activity to be qualified by objective laws which are external to the individual actor. Lenin also emphasises that Marxist materialism is both dialectical and historical.

Dialectics is a most complex and wide-ranging topic which cannot be adequately covered here. My task is to describe Lenin's use of the dialectic as a method of analysis. One current interpretation of Lenin defines dialectical thought as the study of things in their relations and in process of development and change (Shirokov: 9). Dialectics is a method of thought which regards phenomena in nature as being in constant change and movement; change is a result of the contradictions, or the interaction of opposed forces, in nature. * Lenin explicitly saw that a dia-

* Stalin (1973: 302–5) defines four component parts of Marxist dialectical method. In summary these are: (1) That the phenomena of nature are inter-related to each other; any given phenomenon must be related and connected to its surrounding environment, in its interaction with other facts. (2) That nature is in a state of perpetual movement and change, dialectics considers the ways that nature is changing. Dialectics, says Engels, 'Takes things and their perceptual images essentially in their inter-connection, in their concatenation, in their movement, in their rise and disappearance' (*Dialectics of Nature*). Dialectical thinking is empirical: 'whatever facts emerge in experience must be recognised' (Shirokov: 11). (3) That development and change take place quantitatively and qualitatively, the former occurring gradually but leading to rapid

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lectical approach meant that matter contains its own contradiction. 'Dialectics is the theory of knowledge of [Hegel and] Marxism. . . . The cognition of the contradictory parts [of a single whole] . . . is the essence of dialectics' (*On the Question of Dialectics*, CW 38: 362, 359). Hence dialectics is inevitably concerned with change. Class struggle is the social dialectic expressed in the laws of historical materialism which shows history to be moving through different stages: feudalism, capitalism, communism. A cornerstone of Lenin's historical analysis is the dialectical movement of history and the solution to the problem of this progression as it applied to Russia was to be found in the theory of combined or uneven development. Lenin's dialectics, in contrast to much philosophising, called for concreteness, for an empirical frame of reference. It seems clear that Lenin adopted, in his philosophical writings, a dialectical as well as a materialist approach, Corrigan *et al.* (1978: 37) argue that dialectics only appeared in Lenin's thought after 1914–16. A study of *Materialism* seems to me to show that this is false (see CW 38: 308, 329, where Lenin emphasises the dialectic).

A distinction made between materialism generally and the materialist theories of Marx and Engels is that the latter are applied to the evolution and structure of human societies. Materialism is grounded in the natural sciences, whereas *historical materialism* applies the dialectical and materialist method to the analysis of societies: from this position historical materialism is the science of society. Materialists observe, and consider themselves to be discovering, laws of the world of nature, whereas historical materialists see man as being conditioned by, and reacting upon, the world of nature. The specific application of historical materialism to societal analysis is a controversial topic among Marxists. There is general agreement that development of society occurs through the dialectical process of class struggle. The 'anatomy' of society is viewed through the prism of basis and superstructure: but the relative weights and importance of basis and superstructure respectively are matters of debate. This reflects a lack of consistency in Marx himself: in his early work (up to *The German Ideology*) Marx was less of a materialist than in his later work; and he tended to bring out the active role of man's intellect and moral personality in shaping nature. In Marx's later work (*Capital*) and in the writings of Engels, 'economic materialism', as a

and abrupt changes of state. (4) That contradictions are inherent in all phenomena of nature and development is a struggle of these opposing tendencies. 'Dialectics is the study of the contradiction *within the very essence of things* . . . it is the "struggle" of opposites' (Lenin, cited by Stalin 1973: 305).

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primary influence in shaping man's environment, becomes clearer. It is this 'version' of Marxism that was adopted by Lenin and his compatriot Plekhanov, and has become an important component of Bolshevism. Indeed, Plekhanov's *Development of the Monist View of History* has been said to argue the 'determining influence of the economic substructure of society more fully even than Marx had attempted' (Harding 1977: 79).

Whatever contemporary Marxists may argue about the relative importance of non-material or ideological agencies, Lenin asserted the decisive primacy of the economic and social structure over legal, political and cultural phenomena. In the final analysis the 'basis' (or 'base') controls the superstructure; the major social transformations of society are consequences of changes in economic structures. Lenin, in describing Marx's thought, says that the 'principal content of Marxism [is] Marx's economic doctrine' (*Karl Marx, SW 1*: 19). This is another cornerstone of Lenin's approach and flows directly from Marx's 'Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*', where Marx argues that men as producers enter into productive relations entailed in the particular stage in the development of productive forces: these form the base of society to which legal, political and social superstructures correspond (see Lenin, *Karl Marx, SW 1*: 24). Consciousness 'must be explained from the *contradictions of material life*, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production' (Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1958: 363; italics added).

On this grounding Lenin argues that priority be given to matter over mind and to basis over superstructure. Viewed dialectically, this does not exclude the influence of ideas on matter nor the impact of superstructure on basis; it does, however, put considerable limits on such influence. Lenin saw class struggle as the social dialectic in the laws of historical materialism and he, like Plekhanov, treated seriously the now unfashionable, different 'stages' through which human society develops: these being primitive, communal, slave, feudal, capitalist and communist. The implication here, which must be emphasised, is that socialism is a stage in the development of history, it is an objective necessity, given by the laws of history; socialism is not an 'ideal' social system derived from an ethical subjective evaluation of normative action which underpins non-Marxist Western social-democracy and even much of Western Marxism. Unless this crucial distinction is grasped, the motive forces of Bolshevism cannot be understood.

Lenin attempted to apply this approach to the study of concrete his-

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torical conditions. In *The Junius Pamphlet* (1916) Lenin pronounces that 'The Marxist dialectic demands a concrete analysis of each specific historical situation' (CW 22: 316). Lenin emphasised the importance of a knowledge of the detail of history and the need to generalise on the basis of empirically verifiable facts, rather than on *a priori* reasoning. *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* is an application of Marx's general analysis of the capitalist mode of production to Russian conditions. Lenin criticises Plekhanov for attempting 'to find answers to specific questions in simple logical developments of general truth. . . . [This] is a vulgarisation of Marxism and a complete mockery of dialectical materialism' (CW 3: 32). Lenin here emphasised the importance of taking account of the empirical facts as they emerge in experience. Again, in criticising Trotsky and Bukharin, Lenin makes it clear that one should study concrete conditions rather than bare abstractions. He condemns Bukharin for not conducting a 'concrete study of a particular controversy' (*Once again on the Trade Unions*, CW 32: 94–5). The inner core of the analysis of society is to be found in the contradictory nature of class relationships. As Lukacs (1970) has put it, Lenin 'always related all phenomena to their ultimate basis – to the concrete actions of . . . [class conditioned] men in accordance with their real class interests' (1970: 79). The actual subjective consciousness of the working class is a conditioned consciousness and is not the same as objective class interest. We shall return later to discuss the problems to which this gives rise.

Marx and Engels used England as their chief empirical referent. Lenin's generalisations were based on his observation of Russian society mainly before the First World War and he related them to the evolution of capitalism as a world social system, as a system whose contradictions would only be resolved by a movement to socialism. By extending Marx's approach and linking it in this way explicitly to Russian problems,* Marxism as it developed in Russia became differentiated from the Marxism of Western Europe.

Lenin emphasised that it is important to examine phenomena from all sides and to see them in the context of the way that they develop: 'in order really to know an object we must study it from all sides [and examine it] in all its connections and "mediations"'. We shall never achieve this completely, but the demand for all-sidedness is a safeguard against mistakes and rigidity. . . . Dialectical logic demands that we

* Trotsky's analysis was much more comparative. See, for example, his discussion of the composition and size of the working class in Germany, England and France (Trotsky 1967: Chapter 1).