

SPECIAL SECTION ON RETHINKING LENINISM

Introduction: Rethinking Leninism

ALEX LEVANT

Departments of Political Science, York University & Wilfrid Laurier University, Toronto & Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Abstract:

This special section on 'Rethinking Leninism' emerges from sessions organized at the Society for Socialist Studies' Annual Meetings, held at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in May 2009 at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. The articles re-consider Lenin's legacy, suggesting new ways of understanding his political thought and the implications for political strategies on the left today.

Résumé:

Cette section spéciale sur le thème 'Re-penser le léninisme' est le résultat de sessions organisées lors des réunions annuelles de la société pour les études socialistes, qui se sont déroulées pendant le Congrès des sciences humaines en mai 2009 à Carleton University à Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Les articles réinterrogent l'héritage de Lénine, suggérant des nouvelles manières de comprendre sa pensée politique et leurs conséquences en termes de stratégie politique pour la gauche aujourd'hui.

Keywords

• Leninism • political strategy • socialism

Mots clés

• Léninisme • stratégie politique • socialisme

This section is based on two panels entitled 'Rethinking Leninism,' which were held at the annual conference of the Society for Socialist Studies in Ottawa in May 2009. Senior and innovative scholars presented their recent work, breaking a near-silence on Leninism in the academy. These panels were organized as part of an effort to consider the nature and significance of Lenin's intervention in Marxist praxis. While there is little

Alex Levant is a Sessional Lecturer in Political Science at York University and Communication Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada. He writes on the problem of subjectivity in classical and contemporary Marxism. He can be reached at alevant@yorku.ca.

Alex Levant est chargé d'enseignement en science politique à York University et en communication à Wilfrid Laurier, Canada. Il écrit sur le problème de la subjectivité dans le marxisme classique et contemporain. Il peut être contacté à alevant@yorku.ca.

disagreement about the magnitude of his influence on Marxism, this influence is not properly reflected in contemporary Marxist scholarship. Rethinking Marxism has won a measure of legitimacy in the academy, but rethinking Leninism continues to exist largely on the margins. The current collection, along with the recent publication of *Lenin Reloaded*, edited by Budgen, Kouvelakis, and Žižek, and *Lenin Rediscovered* by Lars T. Lih, points to the importance of returning to Lenin, to re-examining his engagement with a set of questions, which continue to confront us today.

Perhaps the most significant and enduring of all the questions is: ‘What is to be done?’ Lenin’s 1902 pamphlet on the subject remains an important point of reference in Marxist theory. His conception of a ‘party of a new type’ has been seen as a turning point in the break with bureaucratic, reformist, and fatalist tendencies that plagued the Second International. However, as some of the contributors to this special section forcefully argue, Lenin’s thought on organization is not so straightforward. On the contrary, there seems to be the development of an engagement with Lenin that is much richer and perhaps even more ground breaking than the Leninism we know. As the title of Paul Kellogg’s piece provocatively states, ‘Leninism: It’s not what you think.’

Our current understanding of Lenin’s work is, in fact, quite limited. However, this should come as no surprise given the various ways in which his thought has been refracted through the fissures in the communist movement and through the ideological wars between East and West. Vilified by some and deified by others, he continues to be one of the most controversial figures of our time. Shortly after his death, and against the wishes of his widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya, he was mummified, and countless colossal statues of his likeness were raised across the USSR. It is interesting to note her plea to the Soviet people in *Pravda* only days after his death. On 24 January 1924, she wrote, ‘Comrades Workers and Peasants! I have a great request to make of you: do not allow your grief for Ilich to express itself in the external veneration of his person. Do not build memorials to him.... If you want to honour the name of Vladimir Ilich – build day care centres, kindergartens, homes, schools’ (Buck-Morss 2000, 72). This collection of articles is not another memorial to Lenin; it is part of a renewed effort to open Leninism to a critical re-examination.

For instance, Paul Kellogg identifies two very different Leninisms: the Leninism of the Third Congress of the Comintern (1921) with which we are more familiar – ‘the central leading body of the Party controls the activity and the correct functioning and composition of all the committees subordinate to it’ – and that of Lenin’s own comments in 1905 which insist

on 'the autonomy of every Party organization' and that all higher-standing bodies should be 'elected, accountable, and subject to recall.' Kellogg argues that the difference between the two approaches reflects Lenin's close attention to context. In fact, according to Kellogg, Lenin critiqued the 'hard Leninism' of the Third Congress as 'too Russian,' i.e. as inappropriate to conditions that existed in liberal democracies. 'There is, in other words, a discontinuity – a very large discontinuity – between what most people think Leninism is (the authoritarian, top-down, steel-hardy party) and the "Leninism" that Lenin himself thought appropriate for liberal democracies in advanced capitalist society: party organization that allowed tremendous scope for debate, disagreement and discussion, party organization where the central unit was not the Central Committee, but the local organization, party organization imbued with democracy from top to bottom.'

The point of this special section is not, however, to rehabilitate Lenin, to rescue a 'nice, democratic' Lenin from the shadow of his 'authoritarian, vanguardist' image. His rehabilitation is only necessary for, and occurs in the process of, uncovering a rich terrain of Marxist thought that is useful for struggle in the present. Similar to Kellogg, Stephen D'Arcy approaches Lenin with an eye to the current context.

D'Arcy's article, 'Strategy, Meta-strategy and Anti-capitalist Activism,' offers an original reading of Leninism as a political strategy that is relevant for contemporary anti-capitalist activism. He argues that the political strategy that we tend to associate with Leninism is only a first-order strategy – a strategy developed for the situation in Russia at the time. However, underlying this first-order strategy is a second-order meta-strategy – a deeper set of strategic imperatives that are broader in scope and applicability. D'Arcy identifies this meta-strategy and applies it to the current context, generating a Leninism for today. The result challenges some deeply-held assumptions about Leninism and offers strategic vision for anti-capitalism today in the form of the concept of 'anti-capitalist attrition.'

Perhaps the most ground-breaking intervention in contemporary scholarship on Lenin has been Lars T. Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered* (2006), which challenges the significance and meaning of Lenin's *What is to be done?* as an articulation of a 'party of a new type' that eventually signalled a break with the reformism of the Second International. 'The experts regarded *What is to be done?* as the founding document of Bolshevism, the book where Lenin first revealed the essence of his outlook. But even the experts worked without a proper knowledge of context – particularly the large context of international Social Democracy and the small context of

the polemical infighting among the Russian Social Democrats in late 1901. To speak plainly, they misread *What is to be done?* and therefore misunderstood Lenin, and then successfully raised up this image of Lenin to textbook status' (4-5). Through a meticulous reconstruction of the debates of the day, Lih re-contextualizes Lenin's pamphlet bringing it into focus in a new and astonishing way. 'I reject all the central propositions of the textbook interpretation. The keynote of Lenin's outlook was not worry about workers but exhilaration about workers. The formulations about spontaneity are not the heart of *What is to be done?* but a tacked-on polemical sally.... *What is to be done?* did not reject the Western model of a Social-Democratic party but invoked this model at every turn. Lenin certainly advocated a "vanguard party," for this was the common understanding of what Social Democracy was all about.... The positions advanced in *What is to be done?* were not the cause of the party split in 1904' (20).

Among the various consequences of Lih's reading is the surprising continuity between Kautsky and Lenin. Specifically, he notes the origin of the 'party of a new type,' not in Lenin's *What is to be done?* but in Kautsky's 1892 *Class Struggle*. He demonstrates that Lenin considered himself a Kautskyist up to 1914, and that even after 1914, when he referred to Kautsky as a 'renegade,' he continued to see himself following the principles expounded by Kautsky pre-1914, i.e. that it was Kautsky, and not himself, who changed course. This reading challenges not only our understanding of Leninism, but also how we have understood the relationship between the Second and Third International, and the problem of reformism through this 'Leninist' lens.

Lih continues to develop this line of thought in his present piece, 'Lenin's Aggressive Unoriginality, 1914-1916.' He demonstrates that Lenin continued to draw on Kautsky's thought even after 1914. In fact, he makes a convincing argument that Lenin's ideas from 1914 to 1919 do not represent a break with orthodox Second International Marxism, that in fact his ideas at that time came directly from Kautsky, especially Kautsky's 1909 work *Road to Power*, as well as other orthodox writers, and that Lenin himself emphasized his own unoriginality. This article is a continuation of Lih's recent work, which has shaken the textbook interpretation of Lenin, the consequences of which are yet to be fully appreciated.

This special section offers a re-examination of Leninism that leaves the reader with a Lenin that is no longer larger than life, a Lenin that does not obstruct our view of the strategic debates of this important time in the

history of socialism. For too long, 'Leninism' has served as a gloss on a complex history of struggle, which grappled with many of the issues that continue to confront the Left today. The articles in this collection contribute to clearing some of the deadweight that has been associated with Leninism, uncovering a rich terrain of ideas that we would be wise to examine.

References

- Buck-Morss, Susan. 2000. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Budgen, Sebastian, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek (eds.). 2007. *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Lih, Lars T. 2006. *Lenin Rediscovered: 'What is to be Done' in Context*. Leiden: Brill.