Article

THE WORSE, THE BETTER: A CRITICAL COMMENTARY[1]

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Abstract

I often hear students say that the reason there's no mass movement for revolution is that things haven't gotten bad enough yet. I argue back, explaining why worse doesn't automatically lead to better. Yet, I must admit, as a political activist, I routinely emphasize the depths of the latest crisis and warn of worse to come. If the path to liberation runs through catastrophe, why do I have such a hard time admitting that? If not, why do we on the Far Left revel in bad news? This essay answers these questions by comparing "the worse, the better" politics as attributed to Lenin with what Lenin actually said and did. I make a case for seeing a crisis as neither wholly good nor wholly bad, but instead as a collection of forces fueling resistance and reaction.

Keywords

crisis, revolution, ideology, Lenin, social movements

The best time to teach classes about democracy is when mass movements are on the rise. When movements are thriving, students don't need my stories of the past to get a feel for the power of the people. They can look outside at Occupy Wall Street, the Quebec Student Strike, Idle No More, Black Lives Matter, strikes for climate justice, and campus encampments for Palestine.

In 2011, the Government of Quebec announced plans to hike university tuition by seventy-five percent, no ifs ands or buts, no negotiation. In 2012, a months-long student strike forced that government from office, effectively cancelling the hike. The power of policing seemed unshakeable; then crowds in Minneapolis torched a cop station and millions around the world took the streets while chanting, "Defund the police." I've watched students on my campus who've never thought of themselves as "political" organize radical reading groups linking themselves to Montreal, Minneapolis, and more.

When I'm teaching at the height of social struggle not far away, I always ask students: What would it take for that to happen here? Montreal's not so far from my campus in Brantford, Ontario. For that matter, neither is Wet'suwet'en territory, or Oaxaca, or Bengal. What would need to happen for movements surging elsewhere to spread? I have a suite of good answers in mind: solidarity

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actions, stronger city-to-city activist networks, bold leadership from big labour unions. But students never give these answers.

The answer I hear first and most often is this: "Things here would have to get a lot worse first." People only rise in their millions when life has become so bad that they have no choice but to resist. Every town has a leftwing fringe demonstrating about every damn thing; but most people most of the time don't care enough to act. They go along with the status quo, whether they like it or not.

Students don't frame the idea in theoretical terms, and I'm not (yet) pronouncing on its merits (although, at the risk of stating the obvious, I will say that the idea has been more on my mind than usual in the time since Trump's second election win). In any case, it's worth noting that the idea that "things would have to get a lot worse" before mass unrest breaks out rests on a bold theory of social change. Core assumptions of the theory include: there is a direct correlation between increasing mass misery and increasing collective action; the status quo is not so bad, at least as measured by public opinion; crisis is an essential component of social transformation. It must also assume that the historical record shows that when social conditions worsen, movements for social justice surge.

On the radical left, there's short-hand for this kind of thinking: namely, the-worse-the-better politics (hereafter TWTB).[2] Some on the Left build strategy from the idea. For example, *The Coming Insurrection* (The Invisible Committee 2009) argues that small groups wishing to change the world need to accelerate the contradictions in society by committing political violence.

In class, I've always pushed back against TWTB thinking. I do so partly because it pains me to think that students' political horizons are so narrow that they can't conceive of weighty movements in political counter-flow developing locally. Partly, I want to challenge the idea that things in Brantford (or anywhere) are so good. Mostly, though, I'm expressing my understanding of how change happens, which I've developed through years of (sporadic, modest) political activism, and a great deal of reading and talking about radical social theory and history.

I say words to the effect of: But it isn't true, historically, that things only get better after they get worse. Foot's (2005) *The Vote* shows that the UK's broad welfare state formed because of pressure from a working class newly emboldened by defeating the Nazis. In postwar Britain, it was rising working-class confidence, not worsening conditions, that expanded social supports and deepened democracy. Certainly, we see victories-from-below inspiring new movements throughout the protest wave of the late 1960s. Katsiaficas (1987, 10-11) uses the concept of "the Eros effect" to refer to how people learn from, draw strength from, expand their sense of what's possible, and take audacious new action when observing powerful campaigns by allied groups.

[2] I'm using "radical left" in contrast with leftwing political perspectives that believe that social justice and genuine democracy can be achieved within current political-economic structures. Radical left perspectives assume that achieving social and environmental justice requires a fundamental break with (or overthrowing) capitalism and the state.

I experienced what Katsiaficas was talking about when I marched among the half-million strong supporting the Quebec student strike in Montreal on 22 May 2012. Blocks and blocks of downtown were filled with marchers and their supporters waving from cafes and apartment buildings. Somewhere along Sherbrooke St., not far from McGill University, it struck me that the cops were not in charge. The people, in their overwhelming, shape-shifting mass, were in full control of the streets. I understood with my full body what John Berger (1968) was talking about in "The Nature of Mass Demonstrations." The true power of demonstrations, wrote Berger, isn't to appeal to the conscience of authorities. Rather, the demonstration "*demonstrates* a force that is scarcely used": the collective strength of the subordinate classes (11-12, italics in original). The more people taking part in the demonstration, "the more powerful and immediate (visible, audible, tangible) a metaphor it becomes for their total collective strength." In short, progressive politics often do "better" as a result of doing better.

Then I make a corollary point: Sometimes things get worse, then just keep getting worse. When material conditions deteriorate, often people give up – too broken to fight back, too cynical to organize. In the days following Trump's 2024 election victory, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor described precisely this dynamic. Trump's first presidency was dangerous and disgusting, says Taylor, but it was President Biden who dismantled the COVID welfare state, Biden who funded and provided diplomatic cover for Israel's genocidal war on Gaza, and Kamala Harris who campaigned from the right on everything from the border to fracking to the need to appease Republican elites. The economic and political situation of working-class people deteriorated under Biden-Harris; then Trump was elected again, and things went from bad to worse. "There's this idea from liberals," says Taylor, "that, 'Oh, this has happened before, we confronted this before, let's have a Women's March in January…' And, things are worse! Things are materially worse for people," and this time Trump's governing team has a policy plan they didn't have in 2016 (Taylor 2024, 48m40sec). "They have the government! They have all the chambers of Congress. They have the Supreme Court! This is worse!" The brutality of Trump's first administration, the horrors of Biden-Harris, and now? Trump 2.0.

History is full of situations that couldn't be much "worse" when collective action was rare or non-existent for decades. European colonization of North America made life worse for Indigenous people. It got worse, then worse. The terror of the Nazi regime didn't trigger a mass coordinated fightback among Jews in Europe. The transatlantic slave system held for more than three hundred years. I'm not ignoring the many examples of resistance to these brutal regimes: the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the Red River Rebellion, the Amistad mutiny, righteous assassinations of slave-owners. I'm saying that "the worse, the better" theory of change runs into trouble when it comes to historical periods when worse just led to worse. Only the most sadistic logic could interpret campaigns of worsening violence as agents of salvation for persecuted populations. Do not say that Palestinian liberation depends on Israel committing genocide. As for the motivating power of bad news, Markowitz and Graves (2020) note that "crisis and catastrophe narratives don't keep people engaged for long, especially when there's a new emerging crisis to worry about every few weeks or months."

My kind of radical pooh-poohs the idea that making things worse will build people power. My kind of radical says, No, we need to build people's confidence through winning reforms, and showing that change is possible.

And yet.

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It feels as though every Far Left meeting I've ever been to begins with a speaker detailing how bad things are today, and forecasting much worse ahead. The socialist press invariably dubs each economic crisis the worst in history. My social media are filled with radicals giddy over negative economic forecasts, and the latest promises broken by centrist governments. Two weeks after Trump's second election win, a socialist collective in the US organized a panel under the proposition: "Trump is back, Fascism is back on the horizon" (Tempest 2024). There's no denying it: aspects of TWTB politics are embraced even by lefties who wouldn't put it that way. What's going on? Does the path to liberation run through catastrophe? If so, why do some intellectuals and activists, myself included, have such a hard time admitting that? If not, why do we on the Far Left revel in bad news?

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In a loud Manhattan diner in spring 2011, my Marx-ish friend smirked as she said it: "Marxists love a crisis." We'd just left a panel at the Left Forum. The panelists debated whether the 2008-09 economic crash was a crisis of underconsumption or overproduction. They described stages through which the crisis had morphed (from housing to banks to sovereign states) and speculated about the struggles to come. Zuccotti Park is just around the corner from where the Left Forum was held, but the birth of Occupy Wall Street was still six months away.

I'd been active in a revolutionary socialist organization for three years at that point. In fact, it was the 2008 crash that forced me to get serious about radical politics. Through graduate school in the early 2000s, I thought reading French postmodernists, growing a rat-tail, and wearing puffy blouses would foment revolution. OK, I didn't really think that. But I did have a foot-long rat-tail. I half-believed that unconventional dress exposed the artifice of bourgeois society. How is my cape any more ridiculous a uniform than your Oxford shirt and khaki pants? The world can mean whatever we want it to.

Then, over a matter of days in October 2008, events with very concrete meanings began to unfold. Stock markets crashed. Banks threw millions of people out of their homes. Factories shuttered. Governments who all my life had said that there's nothing to do but cut, cut, cut, now shovelled trillions of dollars into private companies. Workers, too, were lashing out in ways I'd not seen before at such scale or with such militancy: kidnapping bosses in France, occupying factories in the US, waging a mass revolt in Guadeloupe and Martinique.

There were weeks in the fall of 2008 when I honestly wondered whether the system would survive. While US Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson was admitting to his wife "I am really scared" (in McNally 2011, 13), I was sitting on an overturned milk carton in my Toronto apartment, reading

articles in the *Globe and Mail* about whether this was the end of capitalism. I recall saying to my partner at the time: "What the fuck am I doing? Social order is collapsing, and I'm in the basement writing about ancient parliamentary rituals?" (the topic, more or less, of my Ph.D. dissertation). I renounced my dalliance with postmodernism and pledged myself to democratic struggles for social justice.

I regret that it took me until the age of twenty-nine to choose activism over stylized apathy. I also know that not everyone changes political course while living through a social crisis. I tell my personal story of transformation because it gets at the wisdom in my friend's teasing about Marxists loving crises. Marxists love crises not primarily as means of theoretical point-scoring, or because they take pleasure in watching class enemies suffer (though I like watching bosses kidnapped as much as the next comrade). The fondness for crisis goes to the Greek root of the word, the verb krino/krinein, meaning to separate, choose, decide, judge. Gramsci (in Wald 2022) once said that "living means taking sides." Because crises tend to lay bare real antagonisms typically hidden below the surface in "normal" periods, they are times of choosing sides; for Gramsci, times of living. By exposing and expressing the violence and instability of social order, crises are openings toward the potential of a better future.

When COVID-19 kicked off another worst-ever capitalist crisis in March 2020, there I was in *Spring Magazine*, writing: "As the crisis exposes dirty secrets of capitalism normally hidden under the laws and rhetoric of business-as-usual, a window has been flung open through which it's easier to see not simply the irrationality and brutality of capitalism, but the fact that market rule is not the only way to organize society" (Cairns 2020). Am I more of a the-worse-the-better guy than I realized? I've long considered TWTB thinking politically immature. Perhaps I should be more concerned about the hypocrisy in my rejection of TWTB logic.

It's impossible to imagine today's growth in movements for ecological justice without the worsening ecological conditions of the past decade. Recent successful union drives in hyper-precarious work sectors (like those at Starbucks and Amazon) are responses to worsening conditions of work in the gig economy, unaffordable housing, and soaring inflation. The reemergence of socialism in the Anglo-American mainstream since 2008 has taken place against the backdrop of two once-in-a-lifetime global crises of capitalism, growing inequality, and the dismantling of the welfare state, which is, in short, to say, working-class loss. Set aside for a moment the question of whether progress in leftwing movements outweighs the hardship of worsening conditions. If one goal of radicals is to learn from history to inform our efforts to change the world, then let's be honest that sometimes worse leads to better.

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The phrase itself is often attributed to Lenin. The political scientist Albert L. Weeks (1980) once wrote: "'Worse is better' was [Lenin's] slogan. Destruction-followed-by-construction was the Leninist sequence." A 2008 article in *Forbes* referred to Lenin's "old 'the worse, the better' ploy. […] What he meant is that the worse things go, under the czar or during the chaos following the czar's

toppling, the greater the chance that ordinary Russians would turn to Lenin's brand of Marxist revolution" (Karlgaard). The Harvard professor Walter Clemens (2020, paragraph 9) wrote that Lenin and Marx would've loved Donald Trump because "Leninists don't care how bad things get. For them, 'the worse, the better.'"

If Lenin had said "the worse, the better," he would've been partially correct in the context of Imperial Russia. The Tsar's authoritarianism no doubt drove many Russians toward revolutionary politics. This isn't the same as saying that Lenin loved seeing peasants starved and comrades executed. However, every history of the Russian Revolution (Trotsky's towering book included) frames Tsarist terror as a major reason why democratic political parties ballooned in the early twentieth century. In a similar vein, you could say (many have) that the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919 caused Gandhi's commitment to national liberation. Police raids triggered the Stonewall uprising of 1969. Many friends and comrades have told me how they suddenly saw the world in new ways as a result of being evicted, or being attacked by cops, or battling through a long strike.

But here's the thing: Lenin didn't say the worse, the better. OK, he did write those words, in a 1901 article in the political journal *Zarya*. But he wrote them to repudiate the general principle! Lenin was criticizing the reformist wing of European socialism, which believed that communism could replace capitalism by gradual policy changes. Lenin ([1901] 2003) condemned the "narrow-mindedness and stupidity" of reformists who believed that "'the better things are, the better.'" This general principle ignores the history of ruling powers making concessions to opponents in order "to disunite the attacking party and thus to defeat it more easily." However, Lenin also rejects the inverse of reformism. In his words, "This principle [of the better things are, the better] in its general form *is as untrue* as its reverse that the worse things are the better'" (italics added).

Only a few years after Lenin's article appeared, the Tsar's violent crackdown against dissent following the Revolution of 1905 crushed democratic organizing in Russia for nearly a decade. In that sense, worse (from the Tsar) wasn't better (for the revolutionaries). Moreover, you might say that the 1906 "better" (better at least in the eyes of liberal reformists), in the form of the Tsar's modest political reforms was worse for Lenin and the Far Left. Reform broke the fragile unity among the Tsar's political opponents. Liberals and social democrats alike channeled energy into the new Duma, a severely limited, ultimately impotent representative institution.

We're now faced with a jumble of worses and betters pointing in so many different directions that it's pointless to try to formulate a universally valid theoretical conclusion. (And we've said nothing about the plight of revolutionaries during the First World War, the formation of the soviets in 1917, or the civil war – yet more contradictory examples of worse-and-better in each moment). You'd find the same jumble no matter what episode of historical struggle you examined. The women's movement, battles for national liberation, union struggles, the civil rights movement – all are records of harms endured, gains made, losses, and victories (some more partial than others), that include moments in which worse appears to lead to better, other moments demonstrating the opposite relationship, and yet more moments in which the only sure dynamic is contradiction.

Returning to Lenin has led me to realize that asking if worse is better is the wrong question. I've been drawn into the debate countless times with students, comrades, and by my own inner-

critic. But debate, no matter how thorough the evidence, no matter how long the argument, cannot settle the dispute. Sometimes worse is better; sometimes it isn't. The point is summed up nicely in Hammond's (1949, 287) study of Lenin's view of Russian trade unions:

> [Lenin] did say that a worsening of conditions, as in a depression, might prove to some of the workers that revolution was the only way. On the other hand, he also pointed out that under proper circumstances the winning of improvements (which he believed could be only temporary) might be accompanied by a strengthening of revolutionary spirit and an increase in mass participation in the struggle against capitalism. Sometimes the achievement of temporary economic reforms by the workers resulted in a "corruption of political consciousness," but on other occasions it strengthened class solidarity. Consequently, from Lenin's viewpoint it would be impossible to make a broad generalization either that "the worse things are the better," or that "the better things are, the better."

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When movements for social justice and ecological sustainability don't appear to be winning, it's understandable why it seems to some that the only way for things to improve is for everything to fall apart first. The problem, for one thing, is that worsening social and ecological conditions entail worlds of pain at the individual level. It's sadistic (and movement-defeating) to want our neighbours to suffer. Second, believing that worse is the source of our salvation effectively nullifies the claim to want better. If worse is better, then join shills for the oil industry chanting "Drill, baby, drill!" Vote for racists and warmongers. Launch a union decertification campaign at your workplace. Help Stephen Miller implement Project 2025. How much worse does it have to get before it's OK to start building again?

Most important, though, when people who want social and environmental justice believe TWTB they ignore the reality that there is potential for movement advancement and risk of movement losses in every moment, every turn of events, every rebalancing of power. The key question for radicals and students of revolution isn't whether movements are helped more by social improvements or hardships. The question in every situation, worse and better, is: Which forces are feeding revolutionary struggle, and which forces are defending current systems of inequality, suppressing democracy-from-below? In Lenin's ([1901] 2003) words, "only by having the 'ultimate aim' in view, only by appraising every 'movement' and every reform from the point of view of the general revolutionary struggle," is it possible to develop sound strategy. This means seeing both potential gains and losses in every worse and every better. In the case of the 2024 US election, rejecting simplistic notions of worse (as Trump) and better (as Harris) led some US-based progressives to refuse to support Harris' candidacy. For example, the Palestinian-American lawyer and professor Noura Erakat (2024), wrote on social media that voting for Harris on the grounds that it's a vote against fascism

> imagines that fascism is emerging only from a Trump camp. It does not recognize how the mobilization of state violence, identity politics, the disregard of law/accountability, rejection of 'truth', media censorship, & normalization of genocide stems from the Dems now.
>
> It also forgets that in 2020, this was the same impulse that united the left with the Dems to defeat Trump. The compromise then was dropping abolition as a serious social and political priority.
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> With it, dropped a critique of how securitizing borders, neighborhoods, and ppl served to protect an economic & political elite that continued to accumulate and hoard resources through dispossession. The party has since platformed police and delivered genocide.

When we look from the point of view of radical struggle, we're able to see suffering driving collective action, and suffering leading to apathy. We observe political victories leading to bold experiments in struggle (as the victory against US imperialism in Vietnam fed global struggles for decolonization), and political victories pacifying movements (as legal protections around collective bargaining – essential wins – played a role in demobilizing the union movement in the second half of the twentieth century). To say that worse (in the form of the seventy-five percent Quebec tuition hike) is what made things better (in the form of a militant, popular strike and rolling mass demonstrations) is to miss the worse and better that went into the confidence-building organization of popular assemblies across campuses, and decades of student organizing in Quebec prior to 2011-12. Worse: both cause and effect; better: both cause and effect.

From the point of view of the general struggle for social and ecological justice, crises are neither wholly good nor wholly bad. They are, like all political episodes, a collection of forces fueling resistance and reaction. They are uniquely condensed moments of struggle – condensed both in terms of time (they are brief), and in terms significance (the stakes are high). But they don't possess an inherent worseness or betterness outside of the context of past and future struggles. The primary question is not what crises do to people, but what people do with crises, which depends on manifold historical variables, not least the state of radical infrastructure – formal organizations, informal networks, cultures of resistance – when crises break out (Sears 2014).

My friend in the Manhattan diner was partially right when saying that "Marxists love a crisis." But only to the extent that crises unleash possibilities for progressive collective action. Look around during a crisis: what are the most advanced, organized sections of the radical left doing? Fighting against layoffs, campaigning for "a people's bailout," organizing disaster relief hubs, protesting war, supporting undocumented people's struggles. They're not making merry in the ruins of the crisis but trying to protect people from the worst of its effects. And when gains are made, during crises and in calmer times, activists celebrate what's been won, publicize the victory, strive to create momentum that could carry onto new ground.

If anything, Marxists are guilty of exaggerating the extent of working-class advances. The very same radicals who emphasize the depth of the crisis also portray every new episode of mass mobilization as the spark that could set off the fire next time. If Marxists love a crisis, they also love workers winning job security, the defeat of right-wing street gangs, periods of full employment (because they improve workers' bargaining position). Answering my question of why leftists revel in bad news involves answering the question of why leftists revel in good news. Their axes of interpretation are not calibrated around abstract concepts of worse and better. Their interpretive frame is "the point of view of the general revolutionary struggle" (Lenin [1901] 2003). In every worse and better, there are forces fueling struggle-from-below, and forces fueling reaction. Radicals feed the former and fight the latter. Crises are worse and better; periods between crisis are worse and better.

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