

THE STUDY OF LENIN'S TEACHINGS

(ON THE TWENTY-FIRST ANNI-
VERSARY OF LENIN'S DEATH)

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THERE HAS BEEN some discussion about the immediate practical value of the study of Lenin's writings, because today our world is enormously changed from that of Lenin's time, changed in many ways precisely because of Lenin's contribution. There has been some expression of a fear that emphasis upon the study of Lenin, among the workers and especially the youth now coming to political activity, could result in a tendency to apply automatically Lenin's formulations of the problems of 1914-1918 to the fundamentally changed problems of the present war.

We must answer this question boldly, that the only cure for incomplete understanding of Lenin lies in an ever more emphatic demand for deeper study of Lenin, as well as his great predecessors, Marx and Engels, and his successor Stalin. In the works of these giants of the human intellect we have the highest achievements of social science; we must only learn how to utilize them, not by repeating their words as sacred formulae, not by dealing with them as abstract truths independent of the situation to which they were applied, but on the contrary, as the supreme

examples of how the human mind can grasp and command *the particular and unique historical present moment* only through a correct understanding of the past. More, much more, emphasis upon the study of the classics of Marxism, and especially of Lenin, is called for now and in the coming years, if we are to be able honorably to meet the demands of history.

CLASS COLLABORATION OR CLASS STRUGGLE?

At the crisis of World War I, Lenin fiercely denounced class collaboration with capital and demanded class war against capital. Today, in the crisis of World War II, we, Americans who are proud to consider ourselves disciples of Lenin, are in practice collaborating with capital, and fiercely denounce those who advocate a class war against capital in the United States today. Superficially considered, this presents a glaring contradiction. But the contradiction is only apparent, not real; and those who really study Lenin can quickly dissolve it.

Let us turn back to Lenin, and see

concretely how he dealt with that question.

On May 19, 1917, Lenin published an article entitled: "Class Collaboration with Capital, or Class War Against Capital?" The first paragraph said:

That is the way history puts the question; and not history in general, but the economic and political history of the Russia of *today*. (*Selected Works*, Vol. VI, p. 137.)

Thus, with his first words, Lenin emphasized that he was not laying down a formula for all countries in general, but for Russia; and that he was not even speaking of Russia in general, but the Russia of May, 1917. He had analyzed the problems of one country at a particular historical moment, and his conclusion was that in that country and that moment the problems could be solved only by the working class making war against capital; but this conclusion was based not upon abstract theory but upon the concrete facts of the situation, which he set forth. Because his judgment of the facts was accurate, his policy was correct, as it was proved later by events.

Lenin remorselessly cited *facts* to prove "the futility and hopelessness" of the Menshevik program of collaboration with capital. He showed that it would not solve the problems of the nation, but only make them more insoluble, only throw the nation deeper into crisis. Those facts could be summed up in the statement that

capital, the bourgeoisie, was united on a fully reactionary program that ignored the interest of the nation, and therefore, inevitably, such collaboration meant subordination to that reactionary program.

Today, in America, the *facts* are fundamentally different from those upon which Lenin based his conclusion. First of all, capital, the bourgeoisie, is conducting a just war as an ally of the Soviet Union, the great socialist state; this alliance is necessary to victory in the war and cannot be discarded; and therefore the whole policy of the war, which includes victory for the first socialist state, takes a progressive path toward the liberation of peoples. Secondly, while capital inevitably continues to generate reactionary tendencies, the bourgeoisie is no longer united upon a program of reaction, but a section of growing size and influence is consciously taking the progressive path; and therefore the problem is no longer how to combat the whole bourgeoisie but how to strengthen the progressive against the reactionary sector; under such circumstances the policy of class war against capital would only strengthen the reactionary forces against the progressive.

If we are judging the facts accurately, therefore, we will find that our policy is in fundamental agreement with, not contradiction to, Lenin. The problem is no longer on the plane of theory, but only one of accurate judgment on the facts of the situation. Since we have stated and

analyzed these facts at length elsewhere, it is not required in this article to go over that ground again.

"UNCOMPROMISING" REVOLUTIONIST?

The superficial observer says that the present policy of American Marxists, professed disciples of Lenin, is based upon a compromise and is therefore a departure from the teachings of Lenin, who is pictured as an "uncompromising revolutionist."

When one really knows Lenin, however, one learns that he specifically repudiated the characteristic of being "uncompromising." Lenin was ready for any "compromise" which would smooth the path of progress, minimize or eliminate violence, find peaceful means for solving the people's problems. He opposed only those "compromises" which in reality solved nothing, but only made the final solutions more difficult.

An outstanding example of Lenin as a master-compromiser, was his proposal on September 14, 1917, to "guarantee the peaceful advance of the whole Russian revolution" by supporting a government of the Socialist Revolutionary and Menshevik parties without participation of the Bolsheviks. His arguments on this proposal were most illuminating for today, for they reveal Lenin as one who was willing to risk "even one chance in a hundred" to find a peaceful road of development. Lenin said:

The usual idea of the man in the

street regarding the Bolsheviks, an idea fostered by the systematic calumniations of the press, is that the Bolsheviks are opposed to all compromises, no matter with whom and under what circumstances. . . . The truth must be told; this idea does not correspond to the facts. . . . The Russian revolution is experiencing so abrupt and original a turn of events that we, as a party, may propose a compromise. . . ." (to the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks). "At this moment, and only at this moment, *perhaps only for a few days*, such a government might be set up and consolidated in a perfectly peaceful way. It is extremely probable that it would guarantee the peaceful advance of the whole Russian revolution. . . . For the sake, and only for the sake, of such a peaceful development of the revolution—a possibility *extremely rare* in history and *extremely valuable*, a possibility that comes only in exceptionally rare cases—the Bolsheviks, partisans of world revolution and of revolutionary methods, may, and should, in my opinion, consent to such a compromise. . . . Perhaps this is *already impossible*? Perhaps. But if there is even one chance in a hundred, the attempt to achieve such a possibility would still be worth while. (*Ibid.*, pp. 208-214.)

Two days later Lenin wrote, in view of new events: "Apparently the proposal for a compromise is already too late." Despite this, however, he was so determined to find a peaceful path through compromise "if there is even one chance in a hundred," that on October 9, 1917, less than one month before the great turning point of world history (November 7) he

again developed, in a programmatic article, the proposal "of securing a peaceful development of the revolution." Lenin said:

If this opportunity is allowed to pass, the entire course of development of the revolution, from the movement of May 3 to the Kornilov affair, points to the inevitability of a bitter civil war between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Inevitable catastrophe will bring this war nearer. To judge by all the signs and considerations comprehensible to the human mind, this war is bound to terminate in the complete victory of the working class and its support by the poor peasantry in carrying out the program set forth above. The war may prove arduous and bloody and cost the lives of tens of thousands of landlords and capitalists, and of army officers who sympathize with them. The proletariat will stop at no sacrifice to save the revolution, which is impossible apart from the program set forth above. On the other hand, the proletariat would support the Soviets in every way if they were to avail themselves of their last chance of securing a peaceful development of the revolution. (*Ibid.*, p. 249.)

Thus we see that even in the dark days of 1917, when there existed none of those great world factors which underlie and make possible the program of American Marxists today, Lenin was searching with a keen eye for any and every small possibility for peaceful paths of social progress, for mitigating or avoiding class war, for "compromise" to that end even

if it had only one chance in a hundred of success. Surely Lenin would see, if he were with us today, much more than one chance in a hundred of success for the present policy of American Marxists.

So it turns out, again, that the more we study Lenin today, the more we are confirmed in the correctness of our present line of policy; in fact, we can say without hesitation, that the only factor which creates doubts about the theoretical soundness of our policy is lack of sufficient knowledge of Lenin and his profound thought—unless one also doubts the theoretical soundness of Lenin himself!

Of course, we also must say, with Lenin, that it takes two sides to make a compromise and, therefore, our own most serious determination to carry through a line which is a compromise between conflicting class interests is not, and cannot be, a guarantee that it will succeed. Only the bourgeoisie can finally determine whether the path of inner development will be a peaceful one; if and when the bourgeoisie commits itself to its own narrow class line again, we will have to repeat with Lenin the question: "Perhaps this is impossible? Perhaps. But if there is even one chance in a hundred, the attempt to achieve such a possibility would still be worth while." And in that case, we will be all the stronger among the masses of the people because of the fact that we determinedly explored every possible way out.

DO COMMUNISTS TRY TO "WRECK CAPITALISM?"

A few confused persons who consider themselves Communists said they were "shocked" when, in January, 1944, I expressed "the perspective of a capitalist post-war reconstruction in the United States" and said that the Communists "are ready to cooperate in making this capitalism work effectively . . . with the least possible burdens upon the people." But such persons would not have been shocked if they had studied Lenin sufficiently, and Lenin's teachers, Marx and Engels. For I was expressing not some new idea but a commonplace of Communist thought; it needed to be emphasized at the present moment, not for informed Communists, but rather for the benefit of misinformed capitalists and the general public, who have been fed the false idea that the Communists are out to "wreck capitalism" as their basic program.

For the benefit of those who have been unconsciously influenced by the slanders against the Communists, or by the Trotskyist caricature of "Communism" in the service of the reactionary bourgeoisie, let us make it very clear that since Marx it has never been in the program of the Communist movement to "wreck capitalism." That is an anarchist or Trotskyist concept which has nothing in common with Marxism.

"It is manifest," wrote Lenin, "that Marx deduces the inevitability of the

transformation of capitalist society into Socialist society wholly and exclusively from the economic law of the movement of contemporary society." (*Collected Works*, Vol. XVIII, p. 39.) ". . . Discarding subjectivism and free will in the choice of various 'leading' ideas or in their interpretation, showing how all the ideas and all the various tendencies, without exception, have their roots in the condition of the material forces of production, Marxism pointed the way to a comprehensive, an all-embracing study of the rise, development, and decay of socio-economic structures . . . to a scientific study of history as a unified and true-to-law process despite its being extremely variegated and contradictory." (*Ibid.*, p. 26.)

It is clear that in such a concept of history, there is no room whatever for the "subjectivist and free will" idea of "wrecking capitalism" in order to clear the way for socialism to be established in its place. The whole Marxian analysis of capitalism shows, on the contrary, that it is an enormously powerful system which can be wrecked only by one force—and that is itself, its own inner contradictions which grow stronger even more rapidly than capitalism itself grows. Only capitalism can wreck capitalism, and if it does not wreck itself, then it will live indefinitely. With such an understanding it is impossible for a Marxian movement to play with such childish ideas as to itself undertake such a task. (For a brief but comprehensive survey of the chief features of the Marxian demolition of subjectivist and Utopian so-

cialism, see Lenin's Collected Works, Vol. XVIII, pp. 15-46, also published separately as a pamphlet, *The Teachings of Karl Marx*.)

Indeed, it is a commonplace of Communist thought that, in the economically backward areas of the world the Communists actively support the growth of capitalism as opposed to all pre-capitalist forms of economy—and they are not fooled when these pre-capitalist forms present themselves under the mask of a spurious “socialism.” Thus in China, it is in the area under the leadership of the Chinese Communists that capitalist economy is flourishing, while in the area dominated by the Kuomintang the capitalist economy is being choked to death by a centralized economic dictatorship which masquerades under “socialist” phrases, but which is in reality semi-feudal or even fascist. This can be confusing only to those shallow and vulgar thinkers who see in every governmental intervention in economic matters a “step toward socialism” and therefore a step of progress. But economic intervention by the state may be, and often is, reactionary rather than progressive.

Frederick Engels, whom Lenin never tired of praising as the co-founder with Marx of scientific socialism, or communism, over seventy years ago, castigated such “spurious socialism” in an immortal footnote in his famous book, *Anti-Duhring*. Engels said:

For it is only when the means of

production or communication have *actually* outgrown management by share companies, and therefore their transfer to the state has become inevitable *from an economic standpoint*—it is only then that this transfer to the state, even when carried out by the state of today, represents an economic advance. . . . Recently, however, since Bismarck adopted state ownership, a certain spurious socialism has made its appearance—here and there even degenerating into a kind of flunkeyism—which declares that *all* taking over by the state, even the Bismarckian kind, is in itself socialistic. If, however, the taking over of the tobacco trade by the state was socialistic, Napoleon and Metternich would rank among the founders of socialism. (P. 303.)

At another point Engels explains the historical prerequisites for socialism thus:

Since the emergence in history of the capitalist mode of production, the taking over of all means of production by society has often been dreamed of by individuals as well as by whole sects, more or less vaguely and as an ideal of the future. But it could only become possible, it could only become a historical necessity, when the material conditions for its realization come into existence. Like every other social advance, it becomes realizable not through the perception that the existence of classes is in contradiction with justice, equality, etc., not through the mere will to abolish these classes, but through certain new economic conditions. (P. 307.)

But it is not only in economically advanced countries, where capitalism

is strong and therefore the Communists “cooperate in making this capitalism work effectively with the least possible burdens on the people”; it is not only in backward pre-capitalist lands, where Communists welcome and assist the development of capitalism as a general advance forward; under certain conditions, even a working class holding the state power in its hands under Communist leadership, a dictatorship of the proletariat, may find it correct policy consciously to cultivate a capitalist economy for a certain time. This is not only theoretically possible, it actually happened as a matter of history, in the Soviet Union, under the leadership of Lenin, in the famous New Economic Policy (N.E.P.) of 1921-1927. We can very profitably re-study today the writings of Lenin in the period of the inauguration of the N.E.P. (1921), and understand how the “retreat” to capitalism was the absolutely necessary pre-condition for the successful Five Year Plans which some years later completed the foundations of a socialist economy in the Soviet Union. (See Lenin, Vol. IX, *Selected Works*.)

The working class cannot advance to socialism simply by an act of will or heroism. It cannot prepare the ground for socialism by trying to “wreck” capitalism. Every variation of such ideas is only an expression of anarchism or Trotskyism, of “revolutionary” phrase mongering, and has nothing in common with Marxism, or scientific socialism, or com-

munist; such lines of thought, and policies influenced by them, can lead not to success but only to defeat and frustration.

CONCLUSION

We need today not less, but more, study and understanding of Lenin and the other great teachers of Marxism. We do not need the mechanical repetition of slogans from other times and circumstances, taken out of their historical connections, which is sometimes put forth in Lenin's name out of ignorance or malignancy.

Serious and sustained study of Lenin will equip us to solve more successfully and quickly all our problems of today and tomorrow.

Marxism, which finds its highest expression in the writings of Lenin and Stalin, is not an esoteric doctrine confined solely to the moment of transition to socialism; it is the science of history as a whole, and is the guide for each and every step and stage in the development of history. It is the sure guide to progress in all phases of the historical process, including that particular one through which we are now going, which is at once unique and at the same time a link in the whole chain of history.

A deeper and clear understanding of Lenin, of Marxism, will also help at this particular moment in combating the Red scare in America, one of the most important political tasks of the day. It will enable us more effectively to cooperate with such

men as the progressive Republican, Senator Ball, who expressed in his own form a central thought of this article, in a speech on December 10 at Baltimore, reported by the Associated Press as follows:

Senator Ball said last night that Americans must overcome an unwarranted fear of Communism if the United States is to work successfully with Russia for a lasting peace in the post-war period.

Addressing a rally in honor of the Soviet Union and the eleventh anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between that government and the United States, Senator Ball declared that Communism can never replace the capitalistic system in this country unless the capitalistic system fails.

Therefore, those who believe in the capitalistic system, instead of attacking the Communist doctrine, should concentrate on making their own system

meet the country's needs—jobs and a decent living for every one.'

The Minnesotan added that if the capitalistic system succeeded in that 'we needn't worry about Communism. If it doesn't, all the anti-Communist resolutions in the world won't prevent a change.'

The Senator is correct. Not only that, but he can count upon the help of the Communists in every sincere effort to make the present system meet the country's needs in both domestic and foreign policy. That is not a special, emergency, decision of American Communists, departing from the basic teachings of their movement; it flows logically out of the facts and is confirmed by the teachings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. And it is based today upon the joint declarations in Teheran of Roosevelt, Churchill, and the greatest living Marxist-Leninist, Stalin.