

The Revolution Party and the Russian Revolution

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Socialist Project and Constellations

Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

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A fresh and compelling new account of the Russian revolution to mark its centenary concludes by paying tribute to the Bolsheviks for acting as history's switchmen, a term derived from the small booths that dotted the railway tracks across the Russian empire, where local revolutionaries had long gathered for clandestine meetings.

Against those so-called 'legal Marxists' who in 1917 used the term as an epithet to scorn those who would try to divert the locomotive of history on its route from the feudal to the capitalist political station it was scheduled to arrive at before it could depart for its final socialist destination, China Miéville asks:

'What could be more inimical to any trace of teleology than those who take account of the sidings of history?' What makes October 1917 not only 'ultimately tragic' but still 'ultimately inspiring' is that it showed it was possible to act decisively so as to engage 'the switches onto hidden tracks through wilder history' (Miéville, 2017, pp. 1, 318-19).

There were, of course, no hidden tracks. If the metaphor were to continue to be deployed, it would require recognizing that the tracks which would form a branch line away from the siding of the October 1917 insurrection had yet to be forged and laid. The Bolsheviks who led the insurrection, above all Lenin and Trotsky, certainly weren't intending to construct a parallel branch line. Rather they believed that those trains already far ahead of Russia's on history's track were scheduled to imminently reach capitalism's final station (the "highest", as Lenin had designated it in his [1916 pamphlet on imperialism](#)).

And they expected that those trains would hasten to leave that station, once inspired by the determination of the Russian switchmen, who would then reengage the switches to merge onto history's track to the socialist station. But, as was quickly signaled by the failure of the German communist revolution of 1919, the trains on the main track failed to leave the capitalist station. The result, as Miéville puts it, was that the 'months and years to follow will see the revolution embattled, assailed, isolated, ossified, broken. We know where this is going: purges, gulags, starvation, mass murder' (Miéville, 2017, p. 306).

Actual Construction

The branch line that was actually constructed – tortuously winding from the Civil War through the marketized NEP of Lenin's last years to Stalin's centrally planned industrialization and forced agricultural collectivization – made two-track time a reality for most of the twentieth century. The revolutionaries who broke most sharply with the practice of 'socialism in one country', and suffered grievously from its particular methods, still believed that, as Trotsky put it in exile in 1932, 'capitalism has outlived itself as a world system' (Trotsky, 2016, pp. 208).[1]

And even amidst the American-led capitalist dynamism of the post-1945 era, it was the Soviet track to industrialization that most impressed revolutionaries – and a good many reformists – in developing countries. Yet it turned out that it was the parallel branch line that was constructed from the siding of the October revolution which culminated in an historical dead-end. Before the century was out, eying the high-speed trains now running on the capitalist track, new switchmen appeared all too eager to engage the switches once more and merge with the track on which capitalism sped into the 21st century to who knows where.

It is time to dispense with the metaphor. And what should also be dispensed with is the proclivity to proclaim the imminent ‘end of capitalism’ (Streeck, 2016). However useful historical materialism still proves in revealing how capitalism displaced previous modes of production – and thereby in revealing the possibility of a post-capitalist future – there are no hidden tracks through history. There are still only people making history under conditions not of their choosing. And however essential Marxist analyses of capitalism’s old and new contradictions may be for understanding those conditions, neither constraints on the development of productive forces, nor economic crises, or even ecological ones, will themselves end capitalism. Only people capable of making history can do that, and if that new history is to be a socialist one, they will have to become capable of doing that too.

It should be noted in this respect that there is also a strong trace of teleology inherent in the all too common view that, in diverting Russia from its presumed ‘natural path of development’, October 1917 signifies an arbitrary act organized behind the back of Russian society by a group of Marxist ideologues who were bent on carrying out their so-called ‘socialist experiment’ at any price. In fact, what still lends October ‘historical legitimacy’, as David Mandel reminds us in another new book commemorating the centenary, is how extensive was the support for it. ‘October was indeed a popular revolution’ (Mandel, 2016, p. 155).

Insofar as the centenary of the Russian revolution occasions some new reflections on the possibility of a transition from capitalism to socialism a quarter century *after* the demise of Communism, this is much to be welcomed, with two provisos. First, the proper place to start is a quarter century *before* 1917, i.e., with the novel political phenomenon of the widespread emergence of organized mass socialist parties deeply embedded in the working classes. And second, the point of this returning must be to identify and learn from not only the possibilities they evinced but also their misconceptions and limitations, the better to see whether and how these might be, if not avoided, then at least transcended in new attempts that will no doubt be made under 21st century capitalist conditions to develop new political parties to act as the organizational and strategic fulcrum between working class formation, on the one hand, and capitalist state transformation, on the other.

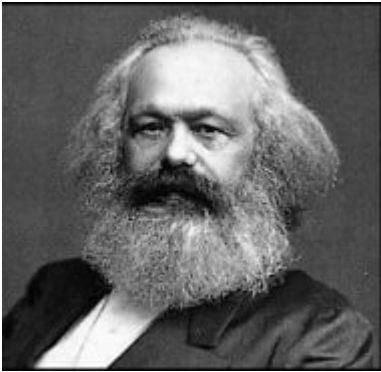
Social Democracy’s Legacy

Subordinate classes had throughout history engaged in slave revolts, or in bread riots usually led by women, but such long standing institution building as was involved in the mass working class political parties spawned by the late 19th century were an entirely new historical phenomenon. They did not come out of nowhere. They often involved the confluence of various previous formations which had been unable to be as encompassing of the working classes or sustain such longevity. But it was for the most part the socialist parties which emerged between the 1870s and 1920s out of previous attempts at political organization and revolt as well as a myriad of trade union struggles that, as Eley affirms,

'consistently pushed the boundaries of citizenship outward and onward, demanding democratic rights where anciens regimes refused them, defending democratic gains against subsequent attack and pressing the case for ever-greater inclusiveness. Socialist and Communist parties – parties of the Left – sometimes managed to win elections and form governments, but more important, they organized civil society into the basis from which existing democratic gains could be defended and new ones could grow' (Eley, 2002).

As C.B. Macpherson once put it, even though

'the principle introduced into predemocratic liberal theory in the nineteenth century to make it liberal-democratic... [was] a concept of man as at least potentially a doer, an exacter and developer and enjoyer of his human capacities, rather than merely a consumer of utilities', the practical advancement of such a conception largely depended on the emergence of these entirely new forms of political agency which were explicitly aiming for a 'maximization of democracy' through 'a revolution in democratic consciousness' of the working classes (Macpherson, 1973, pp. 51-2, 173-4, 182-4).



A good deal of the inspiration these parties took from Marx and Engels' 1848 [*Communist Manifesto*](#) was the stress it had put on 'the formation of the proletariat into a class, and hence a political party' (Marx, 1996, p. 13). And when Marx and Engels had even earlier contended that

'the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution', their notion of both 'movement' and 'revolution' was conceived not so much as a spontaneous cathartic moment of insurrection, but rather as involving a long process of class organization and institution building through which workers' capacities could be developed, so they would 'become fitted to found society anew' (Marx, 1947, p. 69; see also Carver and Blanks, 2014a; 2014b; Nimtz, 2000).

They were likely thinking here of something like the German Workers Educational Society founded in London in 1840, which advertized on one of its posters:

"The main principle of the Society is that men can only come to liberty and self-consciousness by cultivating their intellectual faculties. Consequently, all the evening meetings are devoted to instruction. One evening English is taught, on another, geography, on a third history, on the fourth, drawing and physics, on a fifth, singing, on a sixth, dancing and on the seventh communist politics" (Bender, 1988, p. 10).

The Communist Leaguers who as part of 'their historic mission to change the world' had founded that educational society and later commissioned the *Manifesto* – let alone 'the *quarante-huitards* that soon crowded the streets of Paris' (Gabriel, 2011, pp. 109, 132) – could hardly qualify as a party in the sense that this would come to be understood some four decades later by the time the Second International of mass socialist parties was founded on Bastille Day in 1889. When the Communist League broke up in 1850 amidst a factional dispute, Marx defined the issue behind the fatal split as the difference between his sides' materialism and the other sides' idealism in their approach to revolutionary time: 'The materialist standpoint of the Manifesto has given way to idealism. The revolution is seen not as the product of realities of the situation but as the result of an effort of will.'

Whereas we say to the workers: You have 15, 20, 50 years of civil war to go through in order to alter the situation and to train yourselves for the exercise of power, it is said we must take power at once, or else we may as well take to our beds' (Marx, 1978, p. 626; see also Nimtz 2016, pp. 248-52).

Marx's timeline for party building was remarkably prescient. The new Social Democratic parties which emerged over the following 15, 20, 50 years, with mass working class involvement over these decades, premised their activities on the understanding that, as Engels himself put in 1895, 'the time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses, is past. Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organization, the masses themselves must also be in it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what it is they are going for, body and soul. The history of the last 50 years has taught us that. But in order that the masses may understand what is to be done, long persistent work is required' (Engels, 1960, pp. 199-200).

The Marxist legacy these new parties drew on, and to no little extent manufactured, involved bringing the *Manifesto* back from relative obscurity as a key aid in their own role of forming 'the proletariat into a class'. This was explicitly seen as involving a patient process of organization building and mass popular education. The most recent and comprehensive analysis of socialist party programmes before 1914 – starting with the foundational 1891 German Erfurt programme but also covering those of the Belgian, Swedish, French and Russian Social Democratic parties as well as of the British Labour party – clearly demonstrates that inspirational socialist goals were always linked to the articulation of more immediate reforms. These ranged from those designed to improve living and work conditions, to those aimed at the extension of the suffrage, freedom of association and the rule of law, to those designed to secure full equality for women, separation of church and state, universal secular education and the democratization of arts and culture. They showed to broadly-defined working classes, as August Bebel once put it, that the parties 'were acting for them in practice, and not simply referring them to some future socialist state, the date of whose arrival nobody knows.' Even so, they were also seen as crucial 'to equip the working class intellectually and culturally to master its own political destiny', which involved, above all, developing the self-governing capacities of the working classes.

To be sure, Marx's early admonition of the German party for its statist tendencies in his 1875 [*Critique of the Gotha Program of the German Social Democratic Party*](#), in sharp contrast with the admiration he had expressed for the forms of democratic administration briefly evinced in the Paris Commune, stands as a notable marker that something was always amiss here. In any case, by the time Marx died, it was by no means clear that the German Social Democratic (SPD) would survive its legal proscription by the 1878 Anti-

Forcing the law's repeal by 1890 was an historic victory but it was also notable that Engels critique of the SPD's 1891 Erfurt programme warned that, 'fearing a renewal of the Anti-Socialist law', a certain 'opportunism' was gaining ground in the party. This he saw as not only reflected in the programme's apparent acceptance that all of the party's demands could be achieved within the 'present legal order in Germany', but even more so in the programme's implication that 'present-day society is developing toward socialism' (Engels, 1970, pp. 434-5).

What Engels was discerning here, *avant la lettre Bernstein* so to speak, was what later became known as 'revisionism'.^[3] The issue was not so much whether a peaceful road to socialism was possible; it was rather what 'opportunism' represented in terms of the growing autonomy of the leadership of the party from the mass membership amidst a host of internal party practices which inhibited rather than developed workers' revolutionary ambitions and democratic capacities. So far had this gone in the first decade of the 20th century that Roberto Michels could conclude his famous study of the operation of 'iron law of oligarchy' within the SPD by pinning his hopes instead on the public education system 'to raise the intellectual level of the masses so they may be enabled, within the limits of what is possible, to counteract the oligarchical tendencies of the working class movement.'

Still, even Michels did not 'wish to deny that every revolutionary working class movement, and every movement sincerely inspired by the democratic spirit, may have a certain value as contributing to the enfeeblement of oligarchic tendencies' (Michels, 1962, pp. 368-9).

It was this democratic spirit which had infused Rosa Luxemburg's famous series of articles in 1898-99 on '[Social Reform or Revolution](#)', written as a direct response to Eduard Bernstein's explicit justification and elaboration of the view that 'present-day society is developing toward socialism'. Bernstein asserted that the social reforms produced by trade union and parliamentary action, sustained by the concentration and socialization of production and finance accompanying the full development of capitalism, would prove to have an inherent socialist character. Against this, Luxemburg argued that pursuing only this type of reform would ensure that 'the daily practical activity of Social Democracy loses all connection with socialism' (Luxemburg, 2004e, p. 141).



With razor sharp clarity, Rosa Luxemburg foresaw that a strategic perspective premised on the compatibility of capitalist and working class interests, with the party treating 'immediate practical results, the social reforms... as the principal aim', could only lead to the adoption of a 'policy of compensation, a policy of horse-trading, and an attitude of sage diplomatic conciliation'. And in this context a revolutionary

perspective based on a 'clear-cut irreconcilable class standpoint' would come to be seen by the party as an *obstacle* to be overcome.

What would be foregone thereby was 'the great socialist significance of the trade-union and parliamentary struggles' – which was precisely 'that through them the *awareness*, the consciousness of the proletariat becomes socialist, and it is organized as a class. But if they are considered as instruments for the direct socialization of the capitalist economy, they lose not only their supposed effectiveness, but also cease to be a means of preparing the working class for the proletarian conquest of power.' Luxemburg pithily summed up the revolutionary perspective as follows:

"Socialism will be the consequence only of the ever growing contradictions of capitalist economy and the comprehension by the working class of the unavoidability of the suppression of these contradictions through a social transformation. When the first condition is denied and the second rejected, as is the case with revisionism, the labor movement is reduced to a simple cooperative and reformist movement, and moves in a straight line toward the total abandonment of the class standpoint" (Luxemburg, 2004, p. 142).

This was initially articulated in the late 1890s as a defense of the party's revolutionary strategy 'on which up to now everybody agreed': but it would very accurately capture the predominant revisionist practice of Social Democracy, certainly from the turn of the century onward. This would culminate in 1914 in the historic split of Second International Social Democracy between those who supported each particular state and ruling class at the outset of the Great War, on the one side, and those who sustained a revolutionary perspective, on the other.

Yet there was much that was deeply problematic in the articulation of this revolutionary perspective against the revisionist one at the turn of twentieth century. And this reflected problems deeply embedded in the Marxist legacy as it was both inherited and manufactured by the mass socialist parties. The first of these had to do with what Luxemburg simply called 'The Breakdown'.

In rejecting what Bernstein claimed was capitalism's propensity to 'adaptation' which would smooth its contradictions and facilitate its morphing into socialism, Luxemburg insisted that socialist theory's 'point of departure for a transition to socialism' was not just 'a general and catastrophic crisis', but the 'fundamental idea' that as a result of 'its own inner contradictions', capitalism moves to the point 'when it will simply become impossible' (Luxemburg, 2004, p. 132).

Engels had admitted that in his 1895 Preface to Marx's [*Class Struggles in France*](#) (originally published in the wake of the 1848 defeats) that he and Marx – 'and all who thought like us' – were wrong in thinking at the time that conditions were 'ripe for the elimination of capitalist production', insofar as the second half of the 19th century had proved that capitalism still had 'great capacity for expansion' (Engels, 1960, pp. 191-2).

But by the end of the century most revolutionary Marxists, including Engels, generally shared Luxemburg's view that this very expansion had 'accelerated the coming of a general decline of capitalism.' Against Bernstein's claim that the spread of financial credits accompanying the concentration of capital in cartels allowed for the mobility of capital so as to overcome otherwise 'fettered productive forces', Luxemburg insisted that this only reflected the 'greater anarchy of capitalism' and aggravated 'the contradiction between the

international character of the capitalist world economy and the national character of the capitalist state' (Luxemburg, 2004e, pp. 134-9).

This perspective – so fundamental to revolutionary strategy in the years before World War One as well as after (indeed, right through the Great Depression of the 1930s) – neither foresaw the capitalist state's capacity for adaptation so as to contain severe capitalist crises, nor capitalism's continuing dynamic expansion of productive forces (Panitch and Gindin, 2011, pp. 1-20). And it is precisely this which now allows us to see exactly how problematic was a strategy which presented socialism as a 'historical necessity', as Luxemburg put it, on the basis of the expectation of systemic capitalist collapse on a world scale at the beginning of the 20th century.

To be fair, for revolutionaries who were, if anything, obsessed with the importance of working class agency, the notion of socialism as a 'historical necessity' did not, ipso facto, imply an economistic conception of history. Rather, it stressed the importance, on the basis of the material conditions and the contradictions capitalism had created, of actively engaging in working class formation so as to develop the potential for its revolutionary agency. Indeed, Luxemburg explicitly rejected 'a mechanical conception of social development... positing for the victory of the class struggle a *time fixed outside and independent* of class struggle'. She argued instead that – since it was 'impossible to imagine that a transformation as formidable as the passage from capitalist to socialist society can be realized in one act' – the proletariat would 'necessarily have to come to power "too early" once or several times before it can enduringly maintain itself in power' (Luxemburg, 2004e, p. 159).

There was nevertheless a fundamentally problematic disjuncture between, on the one hand, a strategic orientation based on the imminent collapse of capitalism (usually combined, moreover, as it was by Luxemburg herself, with an expectation of 'the abandonment by bourgeois society of the democratic conquests won up to the present') and, on the other hand, a strategic recognition of the sheer length of time and the amount of political space that would be needed for 'preparing the working class for the proletarian conquest of power' (Luxemburg, 2004, p. 153). This was further aggravated by the enthusiastic embrace of the no less problematic strategic conception of this 'conquest' in terms of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', a concept which only further obscured the 'long and persistent work' involved in workers 'training themselves for the exercise of power' (see Panitch, 1985, pp. 231-40).[4]

Luxemburg's allowed, citing Marx, for the possibility of 'the peaceful exercise of the dictatorship of the proletariat', even while insisting it was impossible to imagine that 'the henhouse of bourgeois parliamentarism' could usher in 'the most formidable social transition in history, the passage of society from the capitalist to the socialist form' (Luxemburg, 2004, p. 157). But her [Social Reform or Revolution](#) completely left aside what she would so famously identify as '[the problem of dictatorship](#)' twenty years later in her critical comments on Lenin's *The State and Revolution*:

"Lenin says: the bourgeois state is an instrument of oppression of the working class; the socialist state, of the bourgeoisie. To a certain extent, he says, it is only the capitalist state stood on its head. This simplified view misses the most essential thing: bourgeois class rule has no need of the political training and education of the entire mass of the people, at least not beyond certain narrow limits. But for the proletarian dictatorship that is the life element, the very air without which it is not able to exist" (Luxemburg, 2004d, pp. 304-5).

The Russian Revolution

The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) was always something of an outlier among the parties of the Second International. The social and political conditions in Western Europe by the 1890s, which led Engels to insist that insurrections were a thing of the past, simply did not obtain at the time in Russia. Although the RSDLP grounded itself in the rapid growth of an industrial proletariat in the cities of the Russian empire, it was the peasantry which remained by far the larger subordinate class.

Russia at the beginning of the 20th century was still more like Germany had been in 1848 than what it had become half a century later. Moreover, Russia's Czarist regime afforded almost none of the political space available to the SPD and its affiliated unions in Germany by the 1890s. This is precisely why Lenin told the RSDLP's first Congress 'that in Russia, the Social Democrats would need to work underground, create false identities, and rely on other forms of deception'. As he explicitly put it: 'Without a strengthening and development of revolutionary disciplines, organization and underground activity, struggle against the government is impossible' (Ali, 2017, p. 79).

As Lars Lih has shown, the organization of the RSDLP as a vanguard-led party was thus more a matter of its operation in the Czarist regime in Russia than of Lenin's rejection of the German mass social democratic party model (Lih, 2005, pp. 517, 527, 547-8).[5] To be sure, Lenin stood steadfastly with the revolutionary wing of German Social Democracy: [*What Is To Be Done*](#) (1902) opens with a decisive rejection of the Bernsteinian revisionist 'trend' in Social Democracy for its attempt to change it 'from a party of social revolution into a democratic party of social reforms'. Yet the stress this seminal tract placed on 'training in revolutionary activity' had nothing to do with mastering techniques of violent insurrection, but rather with developing hegemonic capacities.

'Working class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless workers are trained to respond to all cases of political tyranny, oppression and abuse no matter what class is affected... unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis of all aspects of the life and activity of all classes, strata and groups in the population.'

This could only take root through the party developing the capacity

'to organize sufficiently wide, striking and rapid exposures of all the shameful outrages... to bring before the working masses prompt exposures on all possible issues... to deepen, expand and intensify political exposures and political agitation' (Lenin, 1970, pp. 175-7).

The emphasis here was similar to Luxemburg's in terms of the party's key role in 'preparing the working class for the proletarian conquest of power'. But Lenin gave much less weight than she did to trade-union and parliamentary struggles through which 'the consciousness of the proletariat becomes socialist, and it is organized as a class'. This was only to be expected given how restricted all such activity was in Russia. And it was a highly significant measure of how limited trade union and parliamentary activity in Germany itself had become in terms of developing class capacities that Luxemburg came to see the 1905 mass strikes in Russia as spontaneously showing what the SPD itself needed to most be attuned to instead.

The central argument of her famous 1906 pamphlet on this was that ‘the mass strike in Russia does not represent an artificial product of premeditated tactics on the part of the Social Democrats, but a natural historical phenomenon.’ The development in absolutist Russia of ‘large-scale industry with all its consequences [of] modern class divisions, sharp social contrasts, modern life in large cities and the modern proletariat’ had come at a time when ‘the whole cycle of capitalist development had run its course’ in the more advanced capitalist countries. The result of this, she claimed, was that bourgeoisies – not only in Russia, but everywhere – were ‘partly directly counterrevolutionary, partly and weakly liberal’. And this in turn meant that Russia, far from being the outlier in what should be the Second International’s strategic considerations, had become the leading edge:

“The present revolution realizes in the particular affairs of absolutist Russia the general results of international capitalist development, and appears not so much as the last successor of the old bourgeois revolutions as the forerunner of the new series of proletarian revolutions of the West. The most backward country of all, just because it has been so unpardonably late with its bourgeois revolution, shows ways and methods of further class struggle to the proletariat of Germany and the most advanced capitalist countries” (Luxemburg, 1971, pp. 70-3).[6]

If this was similar in substance to the theory of ‘uneven and combined development’, it went beyond what even Trotsky, let alone Lenin, would yet claim, at least in terms of the strategic implications to be drawn from it. The stakes involved were signaled by Luxemburg in her address to the fifth Congress of the RSDLP in 1907, decrying the ‘very negative attitude to the general strike [that] prevailed in the ranks of the German Social-Democratic Party; it was thought to be a purely anarchistic, which meant reactionary slogan, a harmful utopia’.

It may have been more wishful thinking than entirely accurate when she went on to tell them that the German proletariat itself ‘saw in the general strike of the Russian proletariat a new form of struggle... and hastened fundamentally to change its attitude to the general strike, acknowledging its possible application in Germany under certain conditions’ (Luxemburg, 2004a, p. 201).

But what is certainly the case is that both the trade union and the party leadership were determined that their memberships should not come to see things this way; hence Luxemburg’s subsequent polemics against Kautsky’s steadfast insistence that the mass strike actually signaled Russia’s backwardness, and that to emulate it in Germany would be the worst strategic blunder (Luxemburg, 2004f, pp. 208-31). The intra-party struggle between revolutionists and reformists in the SPD was thus taken to another level, foretelling the historic split that was soon to come.

But Luxemburg was also concerned with what the mass strike revealed about the Russian party, which as early as 1904, as well as subsequently, she criticized for a lethal combination of ultra-centralism with vanguardist factionalism. As was also the case with the ‘more temporizing parties... in Germany and elsewhere’, it could not accept ‘the insignificant role of a conscious minority in shaping tactics... in the face of great creative acts, often of spontaneous, class struggle’ (Luxemburg, 2004c, p. 256; see also 2004b pp. 266-80).

In any case, amidst massive state repression as well as the unmistakable waning of the strike wave between 1907 and 1911, the RSDLP collapsed from over a hundred thousand

members to a few thousand. While the Menshevik wing of the party looked more and more toward a strategic alliance with the small liberal bourgeoisie, Lenin in exile clung, as Miéville tells us, “to a pitiful optimism, managing to interpret any scrap – an economic dip there, and up-tick in radical publications here – as a ‘turning point’” (Miéville, 2017, p. 27). When the Bolsheviks failed to predict the renewed labour upsurge of 1912-14 in Russia, this appeared to confirm Luxemburg’s general claim that ‘the *initiative* and conscious leadership of social democratic organizations played an extremely insignificant role’ in such developments.

Yet this did not prevent the Bolsheviks from this point onwards becoming ‘the dominant political force in the labour movement’ (Leblanc, 2016, p. xi). After the massive demonstrations of January 9, 1917 – the twelfth anniversary of 1905’s ‘Bloody Sunday’ – it was the Bolsheviks who were most acutely attuned to keeping pace with the many waves of protests and strikes that shook the old regime right up to the moment it collapsed at the end of February.

What they were especially attuned to was that through the course of this popular upsurge “to be a ‘worker’ took on important social and political meaning, even if one worked as a waiter in a Petrograd café or a cab driver in Piatogorsk” (Koerner and Robinson, 1992, p. 135). As a fascinating study of the press at the time has shown, what especially distinguished the Bolshevik’s strike reports was the recognition that “activist behaviour by generally ‘dormant’ workers like shop assistants, and women laundry employees was itself a matter of real political import.” Moreover, not only the editors of the Bolshevik papers, but ‘socialist editors of all persuasions appeared to portray class struggle, as illustrated by the strike movement, in the broadest possible terms, encouraging diverse segments of the labour force to abandon their narrow interests and to identify with a working class that transcended the limits of manufacturing industries.’ The conclusion drawn from this is especially important:

“The very identification of shop assistants with leather workers, laundresses with industrial workers, could not help but suggest a broad commonality of interest and an aggregate workers’ ‘class’, legitimately entitled on these grounds to share in determining the political future of Russia. In these circumstances, the competitive identity of ‘citizen’... was seriously compromised... and the liberal values, on which Provisional Government authority was based, were likewise weakened” (Koerner and Robinson, 1992, p. 143).

Trotsky’s own monumental *History of the Russian Revolution*, written in the first years after his forced exile by Stalin from the USSR, captured exactly this in relating two significant incidents in the days just before the February revolution, both of a kind that go unrecorded in most accounts. The first describes a street encounter of workers and Cossacks which

“a lawyer observed from his window, and which he communicated to the deputy... [This] was to them an episode in an impersonal process: a factory locust stumbled against a locust from the barracks. But it did not seem that way to the Cossack who had dared wink to the worker, nor to the worker who instantly decided that the Cossack ‘had winked in a friendly manner’. The molecular interpenetration of the army with the people was going on continuously. The workers watched the temperature of the army and instantly sensed its approach to the critical mark.”

Trotsky's account of the second incident is based on a quote from a senator's incensed report against a tramcar conductor ("I can still see the face of that unanswering conductor: angrily resolute, a sort of wolf look") who on encountering a street demonstration had immediately told everyone to get off. On which Trotsky comments:

"That resolute conductor, in whom the liberal official could already catch a glimpse of the 'wolf look' must have been dominated by a high sense of duty in order all by himself to stop a car containing officials on the streets of imperial Petersburg in a time of war. The conductor on Liteiny boulevard was a conscious factor of history. It had been necessary to educate him in advance" (Trotsky, 1934, pp. 167-8).

Thus does Trotsky introduce his brilliant critique of 'spontaneity':

"The mystic doctrine of spontaneousness explains nothing. In order correctly to appraise the situation and determine the moment for a blow at the enemy, it was necessary that the masses or their guiding layers should make their examination of historical events and have their criteria for estimating them. In other words, it was necessary that there should be not masses in the abstract, but masses of Petrograd workers and Russians in general... It was necessary that throughout this mass should be scattered workers who had thought over the experience of 1905, criticized the constitutional illusions of the liberals and Mensheviks, assimilated the perspectives of the revolution, meditated hundreds of times about the question of the army, watched attentively what was going on in its midst - workers capable of making revolutionary inferences from what they observed and communicating them to others. And finally, it was necessary that there should be in the troops of the garrison itself progressive soldiers, seized, or at least touched, in the past by revolutionary propaganda.

"In every factory, in each guild, in each company, in each tavern, at the military hospital, at the transfer stations, even in the depopulated villages, the molecular work of revolutionary thought was in progress. Everywhere were to be found the interpreters of events, chiefly from among the workers, from whom one inquired: 'What's the news' and from whom one awaited the needed words. These leaders had often been left to themselves, had nourished themselves upon fragments of revolutionary generalizations arriving in their hands by various routes, had studied out by themselves between the lines of the liberal papers what they needed. Their class instinct was refined by a political criterion, and though they did not think all their ideas through to the end, nevertheless their thought ceaselessly and stubbornly worked its way in a single direction. Elements of experience, criticism, initiative, self-sacrifice, seeped down through the mass and created, invisibly to a superficial glance but no less decisively, an inner mechanics of the revolutionary movement as a conscious process" (Trotsky, 1934, p. 169).

Dual Power

It was their attunement to this that led the Bolsheviks, gradually and not without considerable divisions among the leadership, to move strategically as they did between February and October. Even if they initially accepted what Trotsky admitted was the "equivocal formula 'democratic dictatorship'" in reference to cross-class party alliances constituted in the Duma 'at a time when the official Social Democratic programme was still common to the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks', the Bolsheviks themselves nevertheless stayed out of any such parliamentary alliances (Trotsky, 1934, p. 337). Their acute sense was that

the Russian bourgeoisie, whatever promises were made, would not be able to actually accommodate even the eight hour day, let alone 'land reform as the peasants wanted it – without compensation', or the workers' ubiquitous demands for the right to elect representatives to factory committees which would 'oversee internal work rules' as well as hiring and firing in the factories (Mandel, 2016, pp. 119-54). As the Bolsheviks took ever greater distance from the various attempts other socialist parties made to sustain alliances with the representatives of the propertied classes, popular support for them increasingly grew.

The novel notion of 'dual power' – which placed the haphazard democracy of various layers of representation in the workers and soldiers councils ('soviets') at the centre of Bolshevik strategy, was developed in this context. But there were many fits and starts, entailing much controversy within the leadership, before the Bolsheviks moved to adopt an unequivocal stance just before the October insurrection in favour of an immediate 'dictatorship of the proletariat' under the heady slogan of 'All Power to the Soviets'.

To be sure, this was Lenin's inclination from time he arrived in Petrograd from exile earlier in the spring, once he observed, as did Trotsky later, just how far 'elements of experience, criticism, initiative, self-sacrifice, seeped down through the mass and created, invisibly to a superficial glance but no less decisively, an inner mechanics of the revolutionary movement as a conscious process.' Yet what must be kept in mind is that the central message of Lenin's famous April Theses – already proclaiming the passage 'from the first stage of the revolution... to its second stage, which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants' (Ali, 2017, p. 162) – was not primarily conceived with the intention of launching what anti-revolutionists derided as an irresponsible socialist 'experiment' on the morrow of taking power. It was rather, as it always had been, strategically bound up with breaking the capitalist chain at its weakest link – that is, with what decisively ending Russia's participation in the terrible imperialist war would also do by way of inspiring a revolution in Germany and elsewhere in the more advanced capitalist countries. Lenin, as well as Trotsky, still saw this as the *sine qua non* for rendering viable any transition from capitalism to socialism.

The diffuse but palpable anger at the suffering and chaos of Russia's continued participation in the Great War, together with an accumulating sense that a pro-Czarist counterrevolution against the weak and vacillating Kerensky government might succeed, is what lay behind the mass popular support for the October revolution. That said, David Mandel is completely convincing in his assessment that a crucial factor in addition to this was the fear among militant class conscious workers, whom the Bolsheviks had not only influenced but whose attitudes they were always most attentive to, that employers were about to resort again to the prolonged lockouts that had broken the 1905 uprising. Yet in terms of what happened *after* the Bolsheviks took power, he is no less convincing in showing that 'the Bolshevik organization in the capital almost disappeared in the year following the October revolution. The politically active workers – and most of these were organized in the Bolshevik party – felt that, now that the people had taken power in its hands, the task was to work in the soviets, in the economic administrations, to organize the Red Army' (Mandel, 2016, p. 162).

To this should be added Sheila's Fitzpatrick's insightful observations on how 'radical intellectuals who knew... little about the working of bureaucracy..., whose study of Marx had given them some understanding of economic interest but none of institutional' responded once they entered the highest offices of the old state.

'It was a shock to members of the first Soviet government when they found that being socialists, bound by Party discipline, did not automatically produce consensus once they were put in charge of a particular sector – industry, education, the army – and started to see the world through its eyes' (Fitzpatrick, 2015, p. 184).

The notion that creating a totalitarian state was the whole object of the revolutionary exercise was always either a figment of the counter-revolutionaries' imaginations, or a cynically-deployed arrow from their ideological toolbox. The anti-Marxist historians' position has always been to claim contingency rather than inevitability regarding the revolution itself, but 'when the contingency in question applied to the revolution's Stalinist outcome... to insist on inevitability' (Fitzpatrick, 2017, p. 13).

There was no direct passage from Lenin to Stalin's leadership, and even under the latter, as all of Fitzpatrick's great historical work on the USSR has shown, both the party and the state were much less monolithic, if not any less bureaucratic, than they looked from the outside.

Lenin's own antipathy to bureaucratic statism was evident in *The State and Revolution*, written on the very eve of the October revolution. While extolling some aspects of the planning capacity of the wartime German state (especially the post office), his central concern was with showing how a 'workers' state' founded on the soviets which had formed in the process of making the revolution would displace the 'bourgeois state' with something like 'facility and ease' (Krausz, 2015, p. 183). Even if that is regarded more as unrealistic rhetoric than as a sober assessment of possibilities, Lenin was also concerned to show that he was not 'utopian' in this respect, explicitly recognizing that 'an unskilled labourer or cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration'. The key point is that in challenging the prejudiced view that only 'officials chosen from rich families are capable of *administering* the state', Lenin was explicitly defining the central revolutionary task as the preparation of workers for this task. Lenin's first proclamation after the October revolution "[To the Population](#)" as Chairman of the new council of People's Commissars clearly drew on this perspective: 'Comrades, working people! Remember that now you yourselves are at the helm of state. No one will help you if you yourselves do not unite and take into *your* hands *all affairs* of the state. *Your* Soviets are from now on the organs of state authority, legislative bodies with full powers' (Lenin, 2016, p. 173).

Whatever capacities workers and soldiers may have developed through the soviets during the course of 1917, how far they could respond adequately to such an exhortation was bound to be most severely tested, especially in wake of the failure of German revolution, during the civil war, exacerbated as it was by the interventions, military and otherwise, of the victorious capitalist states in World War One. As Miéville puts it:

'Under such unrelenting pressures, these are months and years of unspeakable barbarity and suffering, starvation, mass death, the near-total collapse of industry and culture, of banditry, pogroms, torture and cannibalism. The beleaguered regime unleashes its own Red Terror' (Miéville, 2017, p. 311).

Far from the soviet democracy of workers and peasants the revolutionaries had envisaged and promised, thus was established the dictatorship of what from 1918 was called the Russian Communist Party (bolsheviks). If it was in any sense a dictatorship of the proletariat, it was only one that would 'at best represent the idea of the class, not the class itself', as

Isaac Deutscher later insightfully put. The Bolsheviks had not merely 'clung to power for its own sake', he insisted. In identifying the new republic's fate with their own – banning opposition parties and reconstructing the soviets as well as trade unions as agents of the new party-state as 'the only force capable of safeguarding the revolution' – they were steadfastly refusing to allow 'the famished and emotionally unhinged country to vote their party out of power and itself into a bloody chaos.' Nevertheless, his key point was this:

"They had always tacitly assumed that the majority of the working class, having backed them in the revolution, would go on to support them unswervingly until they had carried out the full programme of socialism. Naive as the assumption was, it sprang from the notion that socialism was the proletarian idea par excellence and that the proletariat, having once adhered to it, would not abandon it... It had never occurred to Marxists to reflect whether it was possible or admissible to try to establish socialism regardless of the will of the working class" (Deutscher, 1954, pp. 505-6).

What Rosa Luxemburg discerned within the October revolution's first year would soon come to definitively mark the outcome. The revolutionary party itself would become a 'clique affair' where 'in reality only a dozen outstanding heads do the leading and an elite of the working class is invited from time to time to meetings where they are to applaud the speeches of the leaders, and to approve proposed resolutions unanimously.' The great danger, Luxemburg foresaw, was that in a state 'without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element' (Luxemburg, 2004d, pp. 304-6).

Lenin himself admitted in 1923 that virtually no progress had been made in developing capacities for popular administration. He lamented that state institutions still bore all the traces 'of the overbearing, centralized, merciless Russian Bureaucracy, inherited in large part from the tsarist system.' Tamas Krausz has recently aptly summed Lenin's quandary in coming to this conclusion shortly before his death:

"Because of the limits imposed by historical circumstances and individual mortality, Lenin was able to provide only a limited Marxist answer to the issue of having to resort to a dictatorship even against its own social base for the sake of preserving Soviet power. On the one hand, he tried to compensate for political oppression by proclaiming, in opposition to the remaining and ever stronger state power, that 'the working class must defend itself against its own state'. He left unexplained how it could do so with the support of that very state. In other words, the workers must confront the state, yet defend the state and all its institutions at the same time. There was no dialectical solution for such a contradiction" (Krausz, 2015, pp. 342, 368).

The effects of this on working class consciousness and democratic capacities was chillingly captured by what a leader of a local trade union committee at the Volga Automobile plant expressed in 1990, just before the USSR collapsed:

'Insofar as workers were backward and underdeveloped, this is because there has in fact been no real political education since 1924. The workers were made fools of by the party' (Panitch and Gindin, 1992, p. 19).

The words here need to be taken literally: the workers were not merely fooled, but *made* into fools; their democratic capacity was undermined. The Russian revolution yielded not so much a 'deformed workers state' in the authoritarian communist regimes as a deformed working class. There is indeed a lesson here. If the revolution party, after a long and active process of class formation, proves incapable of effecting a state transformation that in fact yields a 'maximization of democracy', the effect of this will be class deformation.

Conclusions

From our 21st century perspective amidst neoliberal global capitalism it is very clear that the understanding of the revolutionists within the Second International – that capital concentration plus social reform, far from gradually tipping capitalist societies into socialist ones, could at best only ameliorate certain contradictions and conflicts within capitalism while intensifying others – has been proven completely correct. Moreover, the parlous state of the liberal democracies today, where increasingly precarious and disorganized working classes have been left politically naked before xenophobic appeals, depressingly reveals the consequences of an absence of mass socialist parties engaged in developing democratic capacities through their role in class formation. This brings us back to where we began – with the historical importance of such parties as the fulcrum between class formation and state transformation.



Redeeming this historical fact is not a matter of nostalgia. It was for good reason that Simone Signoret forty years ago already titled her autobiography, *Nostalgia Isn't What It Used to Be* (Signoret, 1976). Nor is it the 'left-wing melancholia' so haunted by 'the defeated revolutions of the past' as to be rendered immobile in the present, and thus effectively negate the admirably positive spin Enzo Traverso today proposes to give to the notion of a 'fruitful melancholia' which 'does not mean to abandon the idea of socialism or the hope for a better future; it means to rethink socialism at a time in which memory is lost, hidden, and forgotten and needs to be redeemed. This melancholia does not mean lamenting a lost utopia, but rather rethinking a revolutionary project in a nonrevolutionary time' (Traverso, 2016, p. 20).[\[7\]](#)

The various attempts that were made at 'redeeming the revolutionary project' via new Leninist parties in the wake of the heady spirit of 1968 proved so barren precisely because they did not encourage such rethinking. As Ralph Miliband noted in his famous 'Moving On' essay in the 1976 *Socialist Register*:

'All these organizations have a common perception of socialist change in terms of the revolutionary seizure of power on the Bolshevik model of October 1917. This is their common point of departure and of arrival, the script and scenario which determines their whole mode of being'.

It was this 'basic perspective' rather than some innate 'sectarianism, dogmatism, adventurism and authoritarianism' that explained not only why they 'failed to become mass parties or even large parties' but even 'why they have scarcely become parties at all', and it was 'their isolation which at least in part if not wholly produces their unpleasant characteristics' (Miliband, 1976, pp. 138-9).

The final demise of the authoritarian communist regimes between 1989 and 1991 hardly

rated as very significant in itself for a 1960s left generation which had been radicalized not because of but rather *in spite of* the example of ‘actually – existing socialism.’ Nor was it necessary to await the ‘realism without imagination’ that the craven accommodation to neoliberalism of the Blairite ‘Third Way’ represented by the late 1990s to recognize that social democracy’s own reformist historical course had long before this reached its own dead end. As traditional working class supporters of both Communist and Social Democratic parties were left bereft of any ideological – let alone material – buffers against the grotesquely rising class disparities of the early 21st century (advanced capitalism, advanced inequality, one might call it), it should not be surprising to see them falling prey today to the patriotism of political scoundrels.

The accumulating failures of both Communist and Social Democratic parties over the past 50 years was accompanied by a marked shift on the radical left toward a broad-ranging ‘movementism’ – whether in its pressure-group or protest-oriented dimensions. As Jodi Dean has recently argued, those trying thereby to escape ‘the constraints of party’ often reduced it to ‘the actuality of its mistakes’ while ‘its role as concentrator of collective aspirations and affects [was] diminished if not forgotten.’ She observes that more and more movement actors themselves today

‘increasingly recognize the limitations of a politics conceived in terms of issue- and identity-focused activisms, mass demonstrations which for all intents and purposes are essentially one-offs, and the momentary localism of anarchist street fighting. Thus they are asking again the organizational question, reconsidering the political possibilities of the party form’ (Dean, 2016, pp. 202-3, 205).

It is just this which also serves to heighten a sense of the importance, and yet also the inadequacies, of Syriza and Podemos among the newer parties, as well as of the Corbyn/Momentum and Sanders/Our Revolution insurgencies in the old ones (Panitch and Gindin, 2016).

These have emerged in direct response to the severe demobilizing effects of the old social democratic reformism even vis-à-vis its own base. Yet they also clearly have regarded the Bolshevik model as anachronistic. What new party forms will emerge to succeed both of these in the very different conditions of the 21st century, with all that will mean for class formation as well as state transformation, remains to be seen. But one thing is very clear. The question of the party – which appeared to have been relegated to the political scrapheap of history, rather like the steam locomotives that once powered certain teleological representations of historical materialism – is palpably back on the agenda of the left. •

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Notes

[1.](#) While stressing the 'seamy side of the Soviet economy,' Trotsky (2016, pp. 204-5) noted that its industrial production had increased fourfold since 1925, while in America industrial production was cut in half by 1932; only a socialist revolution along the lines of October would be able to harness America's 'unbounded practical initiative, its rationalized technique, its economic energy' to the benefit of

humanity.

[2.](#) There were no less than '332 trade unions linked to the SPD dissolved, 1,300 newspapers and magazines banned, more than 1000 activists sent underground and 1500 members imprisoned for at least a year', before the law was finally repealed in 1890 in the face of increasing working class support for the party despite all this repression (see Ali, 2017, p. 116).

[3.](#) Engels (1970, pp. 434-5) insisted against the SPD's 'opportunists' that the 'semi-absolutist' Wilhemine regime in Germany did not allow for a peaceful transition to socialism there – as might happen in a constitutional monarchy like the UK, or democratic republics like France and the USA, his main argument in the 1890s was that in Germany – 'our Party and the working class can only come to power under the form of a democratic republic. This is even the specific form of the dictatorship of the proletariat...' Notably when Engels new introduction to Marx's *Class Struggles in France* was published in the party newspaper *De Neue Zeit* in 1895 crucial passages were omitted. What was included was the stress Engels put on the positive effects of mass suffrage and the legal political space already secured by the working classes, on the one hand, and on the other, the greatly increased capacity of the state's coercive apparatuses as well as important changes in urban form over the previous decades which impeded the construction of barricades and street fighting. What was omitted was this: 'Does that mean that in the future street fighting will no' longer play any role? Certainly not. It only means that the conditions since 1848 have become far more unfavourable for civilian fighters and far more favourable for the military. In future, street fighting can, therefore, be victorious only if this disadvantageous situation is compensated by other factors. Accordingly it will occur more seldom in the beginning of a great revolution than in its further progress; and will have to be undertaken with greater forces' (Engels, 1960, pp. 199-200; for a more thorough account see Carchedi, 1987, pp. 12-14).

[4.](#) For my own long-standing critique of this concept, as well as the concepts of 'smashing the state' and the 'withering away of the state', see Panitch, 1985, chapter 9 "The State and the Future of Socialism", especially pp. 231-40.

[5.](#) The famous split at the 1903 party congress was originally over whether affiliated membership should be allowed, not over 'democratic centralism' which was in fact a term first adopted by the Mensheviks.

[6.](#) Emphasis in text. Chapter ten of Luxemburg's *The Mass Strike* (from which this quotation is drawn) is not included in Hudis and Anderson's 2006 compilation of Luxemburg's writings, perhaps because parts of it were used by Luxemburg again in her 1910 'Theory and Practice' polemic with Kautsky, which is included there. See Luxemburg, 2004f, pp. 225-6.

[7.](#) Traverso (2016) ascribes such fruitful melancholia to Walter Benjamin in the 1930s, and to Daniel Bensaid in the 1990s. See also Antentas, 2016, pp. 51-106.

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