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The “Renegade” Kautsky and his Disciple Lenin

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The three sources of Marxism; the historic work of Marx is clearly of historical interest. Kautsky was unquestionably the major thinker of the Second International and his party, the German Social Democratic Party, the most powerful. Kautsky, the guardian of *orthodoxy*, was almost universally regarded as the most knowledgeable *expert* on the work of Marx and Engels and their privileged interpreter. Kautsky’s positions therefore bear witness to a whole era of the working class movement and are worth knowing if only for this. We are concerned here with a central question for the proletarian movement: the relationship between the working class and revolutionary theory. Kautsky’s reply to this question formed the theoretical foundation of the practice and organisation of all the parties which made up the Second International. This included the Russian Social Democratic Party, and its Bolshevik fraction, which was an orthodox member until 1914, that is until the collapse of the International in the face of the First World War.

However, the theory expounded by Kautsky in that text did not collapse at the same time as the Second International. Quite the contrary, it survived and equally formed the basis of the Third International through the medium of “Leninism” and its Stalinist and Trotskyist avatars.

Leninism, by-product of Kautskyism!

Leninism, by-product of Kautskyism! This will startle those who only know Kautsky from the abuse hurled at him by Bolshevism, and in particular Lenin’s pamphlet, *The Bankruptcy of the Second International and the Renegade Kautsky* (*La faillite de la III Internationale et le renégat Kautsky*), and those who only know about Lenin what is considered good to know about him in the various churches and chapels they frequent.

Yet the very title of Lenin’s pamphlet very precisely defines his relationship with Kautsky. If Lenin calls Kautsky a renegade it’s clear that he thinks Kautsky was previously a follower of the *true faith*, of which he now considers himself the only qualified defender. Far from criticising Kautskyism, which he shows himself unable to identify, Lenin is in fact content to reproach his former master-thinker for having betrayed his own teachings. From any point of view Lenin’s break was at once late and superficial. Late because Lenin had entertained the deepest illusions about

German Social Democracy, and had only understood after the *betrayal* was accomplished. Superficial because Lenin was content to break on the problems of imperialism and the war without going into the underlying causes of the social democratic betrayal of August 1914. These causes were linked to the very nature of those parties and their relations, with capitalist society as much as with the proletariat. These relations must themselves be brought back to the very movement of capital and of the working class. They must be understood as a phase of the development of the proletariat, and not as something open to being changed by the will of a minority, not even of a revolutionary leadership, however aware it might be.

From this stems the present importance of the theory which Kautsky develops in a particularly coherent form in his pamphlet and which constituted the very fabric of his thought throughout his life. Lenin took up this theory and developed it as early as 1900 in *The Immediate Objectives of our Organisation* (*Les objectifs immédiats de notre mouvement*) and then in *What Is To Be Done?* in 1902, in which moreover he quotes Kautsky at length and with great praise. In 1913 Lenin again took up these ideas in *The Three Sources and the Three Component Parts of Marxism* in which he develops the same themes and sometimes uses Kautsky's text word for word.

These ideas rest on a scanty and superficial historical analysis of the relationships of Marx and Engels, to the intellectuals of their time as much as to the working class movement. They can be summarised in a few words, and a couple of quotations will be enough to reveal their substance:

A working class movement that is spontaneous and bereft of any theory rising in the labouring classes against *ascendant* capitalism, is incapable of accomplishing... revolutionary work.

It is also necessary to bring about what Kautsky calls *the union of the working class movement and socialism*.

Now: "Socialist consciousness today (!) can only arise on the basis of deep scientific knowledge... But the bearer of science is not the proletariat but the bourgeois intellectuals;... so then socialist consciousness is something brought into the class struggle of the proletariat from outside and not something that arises spontaneously within it." These words of Kautsky's are according to Lenin "profoundly true."

It is clear that this much desired union of the working class movement and socialism could not be brought about in the same way in Germany as in Russia as the conditions were different. But it is important to see that the deep divergence's of Bolshevism in the organisational field did not result from different basic conceptions, but rather solely from the application of the *same principles* in different social, economic and political situations.

In fact far from ending up in an ever greater union of the working class movement and socialism, social democracy would end up in an ever closer union with capital and the bourgeoisie. As for Bolshevism, after having been like a fish in water in the Russian Revolution ("revolutionaries are in the revolution like water in water") because of the revolution's defeat it would end in all but complete fusion with state capital, administered by a totalitarian bureaucracy.

However Leninism continues to haunt the minds of many revolutionaries of more or less good will who are searching for a recipe capable of success. Persuaded that they are "of the vanguard" because they possess "consciousness", whereas they only possess a false theory, they struggle militantly for a union of those two metaphysical monstrosities, "a spontaneous working class movement, bereft of any theory" and a

disembodied “socialist consciousness.”

This attitude is simply voluntarist. Now, if as Lenin said “irony and patience are the principal qualities of the revolutionary”, “impatience is the principal source of opportunism (Trotsky)”. The intellectual, the revolutionary theorist doesn’t have to worry about linking up with the masses because if their theory is revolutionary they are already linked to the masses. They don’t have to chose the “camp of the proletariat” (it is not Sartre using these terms, it is Lenin) because, properly speaking, they do not have the choice. The *theoretical and practical* criticism they bear is determined by the relationship they hold with society. They can only *free themselves from this passion by surrendering to it* (Marx). If they “have the choice” it’s because they are no longer revolutionary, and their theoretical criticism is already rotten. The problem of the penetration of revolutionary ideas which *they share* in the working class milieu is entirely transformed through that milieu... when the historical conditions, the balance of power between the warring classes, (principally determined by the autonomised movement of capital) prevents any revolutionary eruption of the proletariat onto the scene of history the intellectual does the same as the worker: what they can. They study, write, make their works known as best as they can, usually quite badly. When he was studying at the British museum, Marx, a product of the historical movement of the proletariat, was linked, if not to the workers, at least to the historical movement of the proletariat. He was no more isolated from the workers than any worker is isolated from the rest. To an extent the conditions of the time limit such relationships to those which capitalism allows.

On the other hand when proletarians form themselves as a class and in one way or another declare war on capital they have no need whatsoever for anyone to bring them KNOWLEDGE before they can do this. Being themselves, in capitalist production relations, nothing but variable capital, it is enough that they want to change their situation in however small a way for them to be directly at the heart of the problem which the intellectual will have some difficulty in reaching. In the class struggle the revolutionary is neither more nor less linked to the proletariat than they were before. But theoretical critique then fuses with practical critique, not because it has been brought in from outside but because they are one and the same thing.

If in recent times the weakness of the intellectual has been to believe that proletarians remain passive because they lack “consciousness”; and if they have come to believe themselves to be “the vanguard” to the point of wanting to lead the proletariat, then they have some bitter disappointments in store.

Yet it is this idea which constitutes the essence of Leninism, as is shown by the ambiguous history of Bolshevism. These ideas were in the end only able to survive because the Russian revolution failed, that is to say because the balance of power, on the international scale, between capital and proletariat, did not allow the latter to carry through its practical and theoretical critique.

The True Role of Bolshevism

This is what we shall try to demonstrate by analysing, in summary, what happened in Russia and the true role of Bolshevism. In thinking that he saw in Russian revolutionary circles the fruit of “the union of the working class movement and socialism” Lenin was seriously mistaken. The revolutionaries organised in social-democratic groups did not bring any “consciousness” to the proletariat. Of course an exposition or a theoretical article on Marxism was very useful to the workers: its use however was not to give consciousness or the idea of class struggle, but simply to clarify things and provoke further thought. Lenin did not understand this reality. He not only

wanted to bring to the working class consciousness of the necessity of socialism in general, he also wanted to give them imperative watchwords explaining what they must do at a specific time. And this was quite normal since Lenin's party alone (as the trustee of class consciousness) was fit to discern the general interest of the working class beyond all its divisions into various strata, to analyse the situation at all times and to formulate appropriate watchwords. Well, the 1905 revolution would have to show the practical inability of the Bolshevik party to direct the working class and reveal the "behindness" of the vanguard party. All historians, even those favourable to the Bolsheviks, recognised that in 1905 the Bolshevik party understood nothing about the Soviets. The appearance of new forms of organisation aroused the distrust of the Bolsheviks: Lenin stated that the Soviets were "neither a working class parliament nor an organ of self-government". The important thing is to see that the Russian workers *did not know that* they were going to form Soviets. Only a very small minority amongst them knew about the experience of the Paris commune and yet they created an embryonic worker's state, though no-one had *educated them*. The Kautskyist-Leninist thesis in fact denies the working class all power of original creation when not guided by the party, (as the fusion of the working class movement and socialism). Now you can see that in 1905, to take up a phrase from *Theses on Feuerbach*, "the educator himself needs educating".

Yet Lenin did accomplish revolutionary work (his position on the war amongst others) as opposed to Kautsky. But in reality *Lenin was only revolutionary when he went against his theory of class consciousness*. Let's take the case of his activity between February and October 1917. Lenin had worked for more than 15 years (since 1900) to create a vanguard organisation which would realise the union of "socialism" and the "working class movement". He sought to regroup "political leaders" (the "representatives of the vanguard capable of organising and leading the movement".) In 1917, as in 1905, this political leadership, represented by the central committee of the Bolshevik party, showed itself beneath the tasks of the day, and *behind the revolutionary activity of the proletariat*. All historians, including the Stalinist and Trotskyist ones, show that Lenin had to fight a long and difficult battle against the current in his own organisation to make his ideas triumph. And he was only able to succeed by leaning on the workers of the party, on the true vanguard organised in the factories inside or around social-democratic circles. It will be said that all this would have been impossible without the activity put in over many years by the Bolsheviks, as much on the level of workers' everyday struggles as on that of the defence and propagation of revolutionary ideas. The great majority of the Bolsheviks, with Lenin in the foreground, did indeed contribute through their unceasing propaganda and agitation to the insurrection of October 1917. As revolutionary militants, they played an effective role: but as the "leadership of the class" or the "conscious vanguard", they were *behind the proletariat*. The revolution took place against the ideas of *What Is To Be Done?* and to the extent that these ideas were applied (created by an organ directing the working class but separated from it) they showed themselves to be *a check and obstacle to the revolution*. In 1905 Lenin was behind history because he clung to the ideas of *What Is To Be Done?* In 1917 Lenin took part in the real movement of the Russian masses and in doing this rejected in his practice the concepts developed in *What Is To Be Done?*

If we apply to Kautsky and Lenin the opposite treatment to that which they subjected Marx to, if we link their ideas to the class struggle instead of separating them from it, Kautskyism-Leninism emerges as characteristic of a whole period of the working class movement dominated from the start by the Second International. Having developed and organised as best they could, proletarians found themselves in a

contradictory situation from the end of the 19th century. They possessed various organisations whose goal was to make the revolution and at the same time they were incapable of carrying it through because the conditions were not yet ripe. Kautskyism-Leninism was the expression of the solution of this contradiction. By postulating that the proletariat had to go through the detour of scientific consciousness in order to become revolutionary, it authorised the existence of organisations to enclose, direct and control the proletariat.

As we pointed out, Lenin's case is more complex than Kautsky's, to the extent that Lenin was in one part of his life, a revolutionary as opposed to Kautskyism-Leninism. Moreover, the situation of Russia was totally different to that of Germany, which virtually possessed a bourgeois-democratic regime and in which a working class movement existed which was strongly developed and integrated into the system. It was quite the opposite in Russia, where everything was still to be built and there was no question of taking part in bourgeois parliamentary and reformist union activities as these didn't exist. In these conditions Lenin was able to adopt a revolutionary position despite his Kautskyist ideas. We must nevertheless point out that he considered German social-democracy a model until the world war.

In their revised and corrected histories of Leninism, the Stalinists and Trotskyists show us a clear-sighted Lenin who understood and denounced the "betrayal" by social democracy and the International before 1914. This is *pure myth* and one would really have to study the true history of the International to show that not only did Lenin not denounce it but that before the war he understood nothing of the phenomenon of social democratic degeneracy. Before 1914 Lenin even praised the German Social-Democratic party (SPD) for having been able to unite the "working class movement" and "socialism" (cf. *What Is To Be Done?*). Let us just quote these lines taken from the obituary article "August Bebel" (which also contains several errors of detail and of substance concerning this model "working class leader", and concerning the history of the Second International).

The basis of the parliamentary tactics of German (and international) Social-democracy, which doesn't give an inch to the enemy, which doesn't miss the slightest opportunity to obtain some improvement, however small, for the workers, which at the same time shows itself uncompromising on its principles and always aims towards achieving its objectives, the basis of these tactics was established by Bebel...

Lenin addressed these words of praise to "the parliamentary tactics of German (and international) Social Democracy", "uncompromising its principles"(!) in August 1913! A year later he thought that the issue of *Vorwärts* (paper of the German Social-Democratic Party) which announced the vote for war credits by the Social-Democratic deputies, was a fake manufactured by the German High Command. This reveals the depth of the illusions he had held for a long time, in fact since 1900-1902, since *What Is To Be Done?*, in the Second International in general and German social-democracy in particular. (We won't examine the attitude of other revolutionaries, Rosa Luxemburg for example, to these questions. That question would require a detailed study in its own right.)

We have seen how Lenin had in his practice abandoned the ideas of *What Is To Be Done?* in 1917. But the immaturity of the class struggle on a global level and in particular the absence of revolution in Europe, brought the defeat of the Russian Revolution. The Bolsheviks found themselves in power with the task of "governing Russia (Lenin)", of performing the task of the bourgeois revolution which hadn't

occurred, that is to say, of actually securing the development of the Russian economy. This development could not be anything but capitalist. The bringing to heel of the working class – and of opposition in the party – became an essential objective. Lenin, who had not explicitly rejected *What Is To Be Done?* in 1917, immediately took up again the “Leninist” concepts which alone would allow the “necessary” enclosure of the working class. The Democratic Centralists, the Workers’ Opposition, and the Workers’ Group were crushed for having denied the “leading role of the party”. The Leninist theory of the party was likewise imposed on the “International”. After Lenin’s death, Zinoviev, Stalin and so many others would have to develop it whilst insisting ever more strongly on “iron discipline” and “unity of thought and unity of action”. The principle on which the Stalinist International rested was the same as that which formed the basis of the reformist socialist parties (the party separate from the workers, bringing them consciousness of themselves), whoever rejected the Leninist-Stalinist theory fell into “the morass of opportunism, social-democracy and Menshevism”.

What Is To Be Done?

For their part, the Trotskyists clung to Lenin’s ideas and recited *What Is To Be Done?* Humanity’s crisis is nothing but *the crisis of leadership*, said Trotsky: so a leadership must be created at any cost. This is the ultimate idealism, the history of the world is explained as a crisis of consciousness.

In the end, Stalinism would only triumph in countries where the development of capitalism could not be assured by the bourgeoisie unless conditions were created for the working class to destroy it. In Eastern Europe, China and Cuba, a new leading group was formed, composed of the high ranks of a bureaucratised working class movement, along with former bourgeois specialists or technicians, sometimes army cadres or former students who rallied to the new social order as in China. In the final analysis, such a process was only possible because of the weakness of the working class movement. In China for example the revolution’s driving social stratum was the peasantry: incapable of directing it themselves, they could only be directed by “the party”. Before the seizure of power the group organised in “the party” directs the masses and the “liberated zones” if there are any. Afterwards it takes in hand the totality of the country’s social life. Everywhere Lenin’s ideas have been a powerful bureaucratic factor. For Lenin the function of directing the working class movement was *a specific function taken care of by “leaders” organised separately from the movement and with that as their role*. To the extent that it sanctioned the establishment of a corps separated from revolution, professionals leading the masses, Leninism served as an *ideological justification* for the formation of leaderships separated from the workers. At this stage Leninism, taken out of its original context, is no more than a technique for enclosing the masses and an *ideology* justifying bureaucracy and maintaining capitalism: its recuperation was a historical necessity for the development of those new social structures which themselves represent a historical necessity for the development of capital. As capitalism expands and dominates the entire planet, so the conditions which make revolution possible become ripe. Leninist ideology is beginning to have had its day.

It’s impossible to examine the problem of the party without putting it in the context of the historical conditions in which the debate originated: in every case, though in different forms, the development of Leninist ideology was due to the impossibility of proletarian revolution. If history has sided with Kautskyism-Leninism, if its opponents have never been able either to organise themselves in a lasting way or even to

put forward a coherent critique of it this is not by chance: the success of Kautskyism-Leninism is a product of our era and the first serious attacks – practical attacks – on it mark the end of an entire period of history. For this to happen it was necessary for the capitalist mode of production to fully develop over the whole world. The 1956 Hungarian revolution sounded the death knell of a whole period: of counter revolution, but also of revolutionary flowering. No-one knows when this period will be *definitively obsolete* but it is certain that the critique of the ideas of Kautsky and Lenin, products of that period, becomes possible and necessary from that time. That's why we recommend reading Kautsky's *The Three Sources of Marxism, the Historic Work of Marx* so that the dominant ideology of a whole era is more widely known and understood. Far from wanting to conceal the ideas which we condemn and oppose, we want to spread them widely so as to show both their necessity and their historical limits.

The conditions which allowed the development and success of organisations of a social democratic or Bolshevik kind are today obsolete. As for Leninist ideology, besides its use by bureaucrats in power, far from being of use to revolutionary groups who crave the union of socialism with the working class movement it can from now on only serve to temporarily cement the union of passably revolutionary workers with mediocre intellectuals.