Anagha Uppal

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Reflection #2

I spent a lot of time feeling critical of the lack of novelty in Lenin’s ideas in comparison to his style of structuring an argument. His writing is almost composed entirely of logical fallacies – he attacks the “opportunists” of the Second International at least once a page. He places Marx in the authority position, against which he compares the teachings of all other socialist philosophers and defends his own theories. Many of his arguments are circular. Yet there somehow appear new phrases like “dictatorship of the proletariat” or the state’s “withering away” that one would assume were regularly used in the *Manifesto* (I didn’t see them). But – I realize the historical context while Marx and Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto* and that while Lenin wrote *State and Revolution* is perhaps most important as one disentangles the route from Marxism to Leninism and further on and the shifts in theory over time. Marx and Engels wrote their pamphlet *before* the Russian Revolution, with an aim to inspire a widespread proletariat overthrow. Lenin created his theoretical base after the revolution was already underway. He could then use empirical evidence to evaluate Marx and Engels and tweak their teachings as per the need at the time. That should be the foundation on which discussion on Lenin proceed.

Central to the tenets of Leninism is the destruction of the current infrastructure and state and overthrow of the ruling class so that a new state can be formed and governed by the proletariat class (more specifically, the Communist party on behalf of the proletariat class), eventually leading to the “withering away” of the state. Lenin spends a fair bit of ink detailing how the socialist sense of removal of the state differs from the anarchist view, where the state is immediately abolished (20-22). If by undergoing a proletariat overtaking of the state, the state will eventually become superfluous and die, the ends are identical. Is not then the socialist model a slower and steadier route to the anarchist goal?

And in accessing that triumph of the overthrow of the capitalist state, Lenin encourages a violent overthrow. What were Marx’ beliefs about violence? From last week, I remember a description of the inevitability of a resulting communist state for a capitalist economy. I had assumed that this would involve some degree of violence (the Paris Commune seems to have been so). That seemed to be the inherent implication in the passages Lenin quotes:

One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes.' (45)

And

It is only with sighs and groans that he admits the possibility that force will perhaps be necessary for the overthrow of an economy based on exploitation — unfortunately, because all use of force demoralizes, he says, the person who uses it. And this in Germany, where a violent collision — which may, after all, be forced on the people — would at least have the advantage of wiping out the servility which has penetrated the nation’s mentality following the humiliation of the Thirty Years’ War. (25)

Lenin seems to argue that unlike the misleading interpretation of the “opportunists,” violent revolution is in fact almost a necessary precondition a successful socialist utopia. This makes the original *Manifesto* quotes seem less clear. Did in fact Marx advocate violence as a means to the desired end? Or by the inevitability of the “impending dissolution of modern bourgeois property,” did Marx and Engels imagine an equally adamant, but more peaceful transition?

One aspect of Marx’ vision is clear. The “inevitable” transition goes from a capitalist, industrialized economy to a communist one. Upon reading Lenin and his customization of Marxism for the Russian context, I am no longer clear as to what differentiates the capitalist state such that it is necessary for the socialist cause? I understand that for wage workers, the means of production have been snatched away, thus producing a circumstance of helplessness that would provide the ignition for a socialist revolution. Is it impossible that similar sentiments would arise from a serf economy, so that such a revolution would be successful, just as large parts of Russia still were at the time of the revolution?

Let’s return to the historical context to provide a template for the present. In March 1917, workers in Moscow and Petrograd carried out mass protests and armed conflicts against the monarchy and achieved partial control of the government ([Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/February_Revolution#Protests)). During this time, Lenin was living in exile in Switzerland, and when he returned, he attempted to capitalize on these events to forward his philosophy. He hoped to convince the Bolshevik party to undertake a complete overthrow of the government ([Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/February_Revolution#Protests)). I wonder if Lenin’s exploitation and radicalization of the movement is a bit like today’s progressives’ interpretation of the [“chaotic situation”](https://www.socialistalternative.org/2018/10/05/midterm-elections-coming-blue-wave-growing-radicalization/) in the US as a radicalized “blue wave” that may not really have such clear leftist intentions, or may not be as strong of a movement as it appears to be, especially one that would lead to as high margins of victory in votes and voter turnout as is needed for a shift in governing bodies to occur.