The Marxist turn
The New Left in the 1970s

Carl Davidson, Tom Riley, and Mel Rothenberg

On May 19, 2011, Platypus invited Carl Davidson, formerly of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Guardian Weekly, *Tom Riley of the International Bolshevik Tendency, and Mel Rothenberg, formerly of the Sojourner Truth Organization, to reflect on "The Marxist turn: The New Left in the 1970s." The original description of the event, which was moderated by Spencer A. Leonard at the University of Chicago, reads: "The 1970s are usually glossed over as a decade of the New Left's disintegration into sectarianism, triggered by the twin defeats of Nixon's election and the collapse of SDS in 1968–69. But the 1970s were also a time of tremendous growth on the Left. The embarrassed silence retrospectively given to the politics of this time contradicts the self-understanding of 1970s radicals' finally "getting serious" about their leftism, after the youthful rebellion of the 1960s. After a decade of searching for new revolutionary agents, and faced with the reordering of global capital towards post-Fordism, the 1970s saw a return to working class politics and Marxist approaches, in both theory and practice. The conventional imagination of the 1970s as the long retreat after the defeat of the late 1960s occludes an understanding of the political possibilities present in the 1970s. Our contemporary moment provides an opportunity to rethink the politics of this period. The collapse of the anti-war movement and the disappointments of the Left's hopes for a reform agenda under Obama have exhausted the resurgence of 1960s-style leftism that took place in the 2000s. The reconsideration of Marx in the wake of the current economic crisis, which parallels the neo-Marxism of the 1970s (if much attenuated by comparison), raises the question of the possibility of a Marxian politics that could fundamentally transform society. Therefore, in this panel discussion we will investigate the neglected significance of the legacy of 1970s-era Marxism for anticapitalist and emancipatory politics today." Full audio is available online at http://www.archive.org/details/PlatypusForumTheMarxistTurnTheNewLeftInThe1970s*

Opening remarks

Mel Rothenberg: The big question behind this topic is whether it's possible to build a viable, significant movement nationally and internationally in this period. I do not know the answer, but I am certain that the failure to build a significant socialist movement over the next decade will mean the deterioration of environmental, social, and economic conditions to an unprecedented level of barbarism and misery for the vast majority of the world's people. Such a catastrophe will not wipe out modern society, but it will be unlike what any of us would wish on our children, and many decades of social conflict will ensue. What is at stake in discussions like this therefore is very high.

In terms of my own experience on the Left: I was a red diaper baby. My parents were Jewish immigrants who came from Poland and Russia in the 1920s as teenagers. The revolutionary rhetoric and activity of the Communist Party attracted them, and they stayed reds for most of their adult lives. My father first became a union organizer, then a union official, and spent a year in jail in Pennsylvania convicted of "anarcho-syndicalism" in the 1920s. My parents represented the core elements of the communist movement of the 1930s and 1940s: working class activists for whom the Russian Revolution represented the hope of emancipation. Their decisive political experience was in the trade union movement and the movement opposing fascism. The central political values which grew out of these movements were, first of all, a belief in the leading role of the working class; second, a belief in the international character of the struggle; and, third, a hatred of militarism and racism. After World War II they became increasingly disillusioned with the Soviet Union and then with the Communist Party. My father, along with many other comrades, left the party in 1939 to protest the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. They returned when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, which resumed its United Front policy against Fascism. In any case, by 1948 my parents had left the Communist Party and become extremely critical of the bureaucratic repressiveness, the police-state character, and the lack of democracy in the Soviet Union.

I entered the significant social movements of the 1960s, first with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) picketing Woolworths in Berkeley in the late 1950s, one of the earliest campaigns in the Civil Rights movement, then in Chicago with the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which played a leading role in the fight against school segregation in the early 1960s. When I started college in 1951, at the height of McCarthyite anti-communist hysteria, I had absorbed the central political doctrines of my parents' period of activism but also their rejection of "totalitarian communism." I was a radical Democrat who shared the social-democratic rejection of revolution and belief in piecemeal reform as the key to social change. The politics of SNCC, SDS and the peace movement fit in with this. However, the worldwide revolutionary upheaval that began in the mid-1960s pushed against this reformism. Everyone is aware of the mass uprisings from Paris to Beijing, from Chicago to Los Angeles, all in the midst of a war engulfing Indochina and rebellions in Africa against Portuguese colonialism and the apartheid regime in South Africa. The radical leadership of the Civil Rights movement, now that it had realized its initial aims of ending legal segregation, turned more favorably to the revolutionary black nationalism, African Marxism, and anti-imperialism of Fanon and Nkrumah. The leadership of SDS constituted the radical wing of the anti-Vietnam war movement—actively identifying with the Vietnamese and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Disenchantment with the liberalism of the Democratic Party led to the search for more fundamental change. That was the background of the 1960s that led to the turn towards Marxism and radicalism in the late 1960s and 1970s.

I was buffeted by these forces and currents. In the fall of 1969 I went to Paris and spent a year as a visiting math professor. While the wave of revolutionary activity had ebbed by this time, the Maoist students were still active and dynamic. I took the opportunity to study and read their theoretical works, which were at a higher level than what was available in America. Along with many others, I was at that time won to a Marxist revolutionary politics. When I returned to Chicago I became involved with the Black Panthers support group and within a year I joined the Sojourner Truth Organization (STO), a Maoist collective. By that time, the most radical elements of the movement had turned to party building. Many joined small collectives, some of which, STO included, later became larger, even national organizations. I joined it largely because they took the issue of working class organizing seriously.

STO was led by people who had experience in point-of-production organizing. Some came out of the old Communist movement and were very sophisticated in this respect. Most of the organization was involved with plant-level organizing. I left STO after about four or five years because I didn't believe that they were making progress. The involvement in organizing workers was successful, but marred by some very serious mistakes characteristic of the broader Left, the most fundamental of which was their over-assessment of the revolutionary potential of the U.S. working class in that period.

Mao had convinced us that revolution was in the air. That is why Sojourner Truth and other groups went into the working class. We thought the workers were ready for revolution, that they were going to break with their traditional unions. There were formidable working class struggles in the 1970s in a number of industries—mining, steel, auto. The unions all had radical caucuses organized by leftists who had come out of the earlier movements. The conviction that the 1970s would be a period in which the industrial working class turned to the Left was not entirely mistaken, but it was seriously overestimated. The divisions within the working class, particularly racial divisions, were underestimated. When the working class movement encountered the full resistance of the social and economic order to a working class advance, they went into retreat. Revolutionaries were stranded. The failure to involve broad sections of the working class in party building and the Marxist movement was the basic failure of the 1970s and its legacy remains. Any movement that seeks to overcome the current impasse must overcome that legacy.

Tom Riley: It's important to recall the close connection that existed between the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s and the Old Left of the 1930s and 1940s. The Communist Party (CP) and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) were, of course, the two largest groups, the CP being considerably bigger in the 1960s. Both played important roles in the Civil Rights and anti-war movements. But the manner in which they had influence was subtle as well, and certainly few New Leftists read *The Daily World* or *The Militant*. Much of their influence came indirectly through more militant split-offs: Progressive Labor, the Communist League, Workers' World, Workers' League, and the Spartacist League. Such groups brought a lot of the CP's or SWP's politics with them. Some had a direct and lasting impact on the New Left. Like Mel, many New Leftists were red diaper babies, including Bob Avakian, Noel Ignatiev, Mike Klonsky, Kathy Boudin, and many others. These people knew something the rest of us did not. There was a real continuity. The SDS itself, which became the main organized forum for student radicalism in the 1960s, originated as the youth group of a social-democratic wing of the Old Left. Even the Panthers, who initially had no connection whatsoever to the Old Left, were pushed by murderous FBI repression into the orbit of the CP.

I first became active in 1969. In fact, the first demonstration I ever went to was in Chicago, called "Days of Rage." It seemed to us then as if the movement was just going to continue broadening and deepening until one day we arrived at the revolution. The high point of the New Left came in May 1970, when millions of students were on strike across the country, closing down almost every campus in the U.S. in a protest against the killing of students at Kent State and Jackson State. Everybody in the New Left with any sophistication at all was well aware of how the strike by French students in 1968 had spread to the working class general strike involving 10 million workers. American workers didn't follow the French example, but the May and June events in France had a lasting impact on the consciousness of the New Left.

By 1971, however, it was pretty clear the movement was losing momentum: SDS had disappeared, state repression neutralized the Panthers, the ruling class had pretty much decided to get out of Vietnam because the draft army was starting to come apart. At home, the war was hugely unpopular, as well as expensive.

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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

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By the early 1970s, the movement had created a layer of people, perhaps 20,000 to 30,000 young Americans, including thousands of combat veterans, who may not have openly identified with the communist enemy we were supposed to be fighting, but who were serious on some level about their own subjectively revolutionary commitments. On May 23, 1970, at the height of the student strike, Mao Tse-tung issued a statement in which he declared, "Nixon's fascist atrocities have kindled the raging flames of the revolutionary mass movement in the United States. The Chinese people firmly support the revolutionary struggle of the American people. I am convinced that the American people who are fighting valiantly will ultimately win victory and that the fascist rule in the United States will inevitably be defeated."

It's hard to exaggerate how inspiring it was that Mao, our hero and the scourge of the bourgeoisie all over the world, would predict our inevitable victory. So imagine our shock when, less than two years later, Richard Nixon, the world's leading imperialist pig, was invited to Beijing. He turned up quoting glibly from the Red Book as Mao hummed "America the Beautiful." It was a traumatic experience for us Maoists. Red China was aligning itself against Soviet "social imperialism" which, according to *Peking Review*, had recently become "worse than Hitler." China's earlier support for reactionaries like the Shah of Iran and Madame Bandaranaike, both of whom had wiped out thousands of leftists in their own countries, was something that Maoists were uncomfortable with, but which many managed to ignore. A wholesale reconciliation with U.S. imperialism, on the other hand, no one could ignore.

There were different responses. The true believers thought, "Well, if Mao did it, it must be okay. Maybe it is some sort of trap for the imperialists." Some said, "Maybe China is still a revolutionary country, but the leadership for some reason has adopted a counter-revolutionary foreign policy." Others wondered the degree to which China was ever revolutionary. Mostly there was a lot of confusion and demoralization. This was at a moment when the broader movement was already winding down, while, at the same time, the more serious of us were beginning to coalesce around the idea that if there was going to be a socialist revolution in the United States, it would first be necessary to build a revolutionary party like Lenin's or Mao's.

The party-building orientation went hand-in-hand with a turn to the working class. A lot of small leftist collectives spread across the country. I was a member of one of them called the Workers' Group. We had about twenty politically serious members with significant experience. We had a two-point basis of unity: first, no existing Left group was worth joining. Second, capitalism had to be overthrown and replaced by the dictatorship of the proletariat, which deterred the social democrats. Implicitly there was a third requirement: a proletarian job.

I eventually worked as a meatpacker. We had the charmingly innocent notion that, by sinking roots in the working class, we would somehow be able to hammer out a common program among ourselves on the basis of our experience in the class struggle, rather than reading books and quarrelling about what went on somewhere else. Of course, this did not work out, and within a year or two former members of the Workers' Group splintered to a variety of different groups, mostly Maoist, but some became Trotskyists, as I did.

The New Left's turn to the industrial proletariat and the idea of the vanguard party marked the end of the New Left since it represented a return to the core precepts of the Old Left. Neither the pro-Democratic Party unity mongering of the CP nor the peaceful, legal suit-and-tie socialism of the SWP appealed to anyone I knew. But suddenly a lot of the old disputes seemed to be relevant again. Brother Davidson contributed an influential pamphlet "Left in Form, Right in Essence" that combined criticisms of contemporary American Trotskyist groups with arguments recycled from Stalin's purge trials.[1] (The Spartacist League replied with "The Stalin School of Falsification Revisited.")[2]

Much of the debate between Trotskyists and Stalinists revolves around the question of whether the workers' movement can find allies among the progressive capitalists, such as the Democratic Party in America, or whether the workers' movement has to remain independent of the bourgeoisie. The "good cop–bad cop" Democrat-Republican division provides a very useful mechanism for maintaining capitalist rule. As Malcolm X put it, when you keep the Democrats in power you keep the Dixiecrats in power, and if you put the Republicans in, you get pretty much the same thing. This is why Marxists often refer to them as the twin parties of racism and imperialist war.

As it happens, I first came to seriously consider the question of the role of the progressive bourgeoisie after reading a publication by STO critical of the call by the Revolutionary Union, now called the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), for a United Front against imperialism. STO argued that there could be no progressive wing of American capitalism, so there is nothing to unite with or vote for. That made sense to me, and it still does. The idea of politically supporting the Democrats was introduced, of course, in the 1930s as part of the Comintern's "Popular Front." In countries like France and Spain, the CP sought to participate in Popular Front governments with democrats and progressive capitalists, whereas in the U.S. the CP didn't have the weight to make a direct approach to the Democrats for an alliance. So the Popular Front meant voting Democrat under a banner of "unite against the right."

In 1905, in the preamble to their constitution, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) stated flatly that "the working class and the employing class have nothing in common." That proposition has always separated revolutionaries from reformists, Bolsheviks from Mensheviks, and Trotskyists from Stalinists. In the 1970s many of the cadres who went in with the intention of importing revolutionary politics were soon swept up in supporting various oppositionist formations that existed in the unions. Many of these had as their main activity suing the unions in the interests of democratic reforms. But class-conscious militants do not, and cannot, as a matter of principle, appeal to the bosses' courts to settle differences in the workers' movement. That was the policy of the Wobblies, the Communist Party, and of the Trotskyist movement.

Very few of the thousands of young New Left militants who went into the unions succeeded in recruiting significant numbers of workers. One who did is Jack Heyman, recently retired from the International Longshoremen in the Bay Area. Three years ago this month 25,000 longshoremen along the west coast closed down every port from San Diego to Seattle on May Day. They were protesting the continuing American occupation of Iraq. That was significant, and it was big news on the west coast, though I bet it got little if any coverage in the *Chicago Tribune*. The union militants who carried out this action did so in defiance of both the shipping bosses and the government labor arbitrators who declared it to be an illegal action. They also had to contend with the obstruction of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) bureaucracy who were concerned that it might make trouble for the Democrats in November. Still, the strike was exemplary in that it constituted the first strike ever conducted by American workers against an American imperial military adventure. It did not, unfortunately, signal an historic shift in class forces, but it did show what can be achieved by the intelligent intervention of serious militants with coherent class-struggle politics. Most of the Left ignored it, or downplayed it, either because they no longer regard the organized working class as a potential agent of social transformation or because of political hostility to the people at the core of it, because they were Trotskyists.

In 1967 Isaac Deutscher, Trotsky's biographer, addressed New Leftists in Binghamton, New York, as follows:

> You call yourselves New Left not because you have a new philosophy, but because you want to be distinguished from the previous generation of Marxists. You think that your elders have done badly and you want to make a new start. This sounds very tidy. New people make a new beginning, and call themselves [the] "New Left." But in what sense are you new people? You are young. Young people can be very old if they start with very old ideas....If you just announce this is the end of ideology, you start from their own bankruptcy...[3]

The best cadres of my generation ultimately recognized that, if we want to move towards socialism, there is no alternative to developing social consciousness in the working class. Those who looked for shortcuts, other ways of doing it, ended up as radical liberals or worse.

In the 1970s our generation renewed the Left and the workers' movement, but we contributed very little that was new. Almost everything was learned or rediscovered from those who had gone before us. In his autobiography, *My Life*, Trotsky wrote that, upon being converted to Marxism, "I had a feeling that I was joining a great chain as a tiny link."[4] I had exactly the same feeling in 1973 when I came over from Maoism to Trotskyism. I believe to this day that the struggle to create a viable, mass, working class, revolutionary Leninist party in this country and internationally, though extremely difficult, is nonetheless possible. I believe there's no other way out.

Carl Davidson: I started out with no connection to the Left. I was a culturally alienated kid from a working class family, living in a working class town in the late 1950s—so, I wanted to be a beatnik. A steelworker veteran of the Korean War handed me a copy of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* at a pool hall in the town where I grew up in 1959. That was the first piece of left-wing literature that I ever saw. After that I read everything that Jack Kerouac wrote. When I finally lucked my way into college, my rebelliousness led me to identify with the kids from SNCC and the anti-war movement. People around me at that time read French existentialists—Sartre on "Marxism and Existentialism" and Camus's *The Rebel*. Then I read Erich Fromm's *Marx's Concept of Man* (1961)[5] that contained large sections of Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. The ensuing study of Hegel was actually my entrance into Marxism. It came from trying to make sense of this huge institution that we were all alienated from that was racist and tied to the war machine. I read Marx's *Capital* and other books by Marx to try to understand what it was, exactly, I was alienated from.

Regarding students, there was a pamphlet at the time saying, "student is nigger." I knew that wasn't true. Some people said students were the new workers. I knew that wasn't true. Some people said, "we're the intelligentsia," to which I replied, "not in the way that it used to be, because we are children of the working class, not the bourgeoisie"—at least, this was the case at the school I attended. My first efforts at Marxism were dedicated to thinking through a theory of where students fit in to the productive process. I wrote a number of pamphlets for SDS trying to understand knowledge as a commodity. This was tied up with opposition to the war because of the war machine's presence on campus. Parallel to the question of the war was the upsurge in the Civil Rights movement. These kids on the front lines in the South were our heroes. John Lewis came up to my apartment when he was raising money for SNCC. Eventually I went to Mississippi myself. That was the crucial turning point in my life, the point where I became a revolutionary, walking through Mississippi, sleeping at night in small cottages, going to out-of-the-way, rickety old churches for mass meetings with sharecroppers talking about Black Power, watching that electrify the audience, fighting with the Ku Klux Klan, getting tear-gassed and beaten by the Mississippi Highway Patrol. By the time I came back from that, I was a different person.

There came a time when SNCC addressed the young white students, saying, "Your time down here is over. It's time for you to take a trip back into white America. If you want to fight racism, there's plenty of it back there. We need a division of labor." I took that seriously. I went back north, joined SDS, and became part of the national leadership after about a year or so. We tried to develop Marxism by viewing the student as a constituency in its own right and understanding its connection to the wider society. At the time of the student strike at Columbia in 1968, there was a group of us who tried to develop this into a whole picture of the new working class, drawing upon some French neo-Marxists like André Gorz and Serge Mallet. We wanted to put it out in a paper called the *Port Authority Statement*, to supersede the *Port Huron Statement*, but it was never published.

Then in 1968 the shit hit the fan. January, the Tet Offensive, then the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., rebellion in 180 cities, and tanks in front of SDS headquarters on Madison Street. Everything was in flames around us. We had to make sense of a huge, mass revolt that was taking a national form, but half of our organization took the position that all nationalism was reactionary, including the Black Panther Party. We knew that was wrong. I knew from my experience in the South what Black Power was and what it meant to those sharecroppers. Of course, our opponents were claiming to be communists. So, we had to enter Leninism through the door of the national question, by studying national liberation struggles in order to understand the dynamic of the Vietnamese and the Chinese Revolutions, and the black question in this country. After SDS fell apart, we formed another group called the Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) and worked in different collectives. We had long debates on the question of agency and finally settled on the working class as the agent of change. We also come to realize that all of our models were led by a communist party, but the Trotskyist parties were insanely left, and the CPUSA was too right. So I was with the trend that said, "When there is no communist party, the first task is to build one." And to be a real communist party, workers have to be involved; it has to be built in the factories. So, that's what my comrades and I did at the beginning of the 1970s.

I joined the October League in 1976. They sent young people into factories all around the country to build an organization. Once it developed a core of young workers who had been recruited into the organization, it opened up and brought in intellectuals like myself. When the October League fell apart in 1981, I joined the League of Revolutionary Struggle until it fell apart, sometime in the late eighties. The time from Mao's death to the exposures of what Pol Pot was doing in Kampuchea, up until the end of Gorbachev, constituted a crisis in socialism. Eventually, I reassembled my old cell in Chicago, and we spent the next 16 years reconsidering everything, trying to work out a new position. But that's another story.

Responses

MR: I disagree more fundamentally with Tom, for while our experiences are perhaps not so different, the conclusions we draw from them are. When I was in STO, it was serious about working class organizing. The conclusion I drew when I left was that a working class socialist movement had to emerge in a different way. It was not a matter of explaining Marxist ideas to workers who will then become revolutionaries. Revolution has to grow out of experience, and community, and one's own culture in a very deep way. In the 1970s this was not going to happen.

Where would a revolutionary working class movement come from today? I think it would somehow have to emerge from the workers themselves. I am not saying this could happen without intellectuals, since I agree that there's a necessity of building a party, an organization of revolutionary intellectuals. In that sense I am a Leninist (although, in this matter, Lenin followed Kautsky). But the issue is whether in fact the revolutionary intellectuals are the people that somehow bring socialism to the working class by serving as direct organizers of socialist activity within the working class. The intellectuals bring to the working class a broad conception of political issues, not the question of the immediacy of the class struggle. The daily grinding oppression of workers is something that the workers know better than any intellectual. So there's a kind of ambiguity, even with Lenin, on this issue. A movement for socialism cannot be built purely on the basis of the industrial proletariat, and never has been. Still, I would argue that the movement for socialism cannot come from missionaries, intellectuals, and students going into the factories and promoting Marxism. It would need deeper sources. I will only add that the failure of the trade union movement in our time is worldwide. The situation is more dire than at any other time in my life.

TR: On Lenin's proposition that intellectuals have to organize and recruit for Marxist ideas: A few scattered intellectuals criticizing this or that signify nothing unless they are able to make a connection with the fundamental forces in society, with those who might benefit from creating a new society that does not consist in a worldwide political order likely to result in inter-imperialist war, which, if it happens again, means there probably won't be a lot of pieces to pick up.

The Spartacist League opposed the Vietnam War by going into the working class and calling for labor strikes against the war. It never happened. After the Pinochet coup in 1974, the Spartacists in longshore unions wrested enough support for a boycott of Chilean cargo for one day, on one ship, for one shift. Flash forward—the Spartacist League goes crazy and walks away from the unions. Yet, in 1984, one of them again succeeded in stopping cargo bound for South Africa. For eleven days they stopped this ship. After three court injunctions, the cops come and bust them, which led to a shutdown of the entire West Coast in 1999 in solidarity with Mumia [Abu-Jamal]. This is not a series of random coincidences. There's a chain, a line of continuity that we are trying to keep alive.

CD: Yet the vast majority of workers participating in such actions probably also vote Democratic!

For the last several years, I've been spending all my time organizing in an entirely blue-collar milieu, and I believe that we have to build two types of interlinked organizations at the same time. First, an organization that can unite a progressive majority of the workers in our country. For that we use the PDA, the Progressive Democrats of America, which is not affiliated with the Democratic Party. Second, we also build an organization that can unite a militant minority, the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism. Step by step, I am trying to build a group of workers who form a militant minority, but it is the interplay between those guys and the broader group that enables us to have anti-war actions every week, to take part in the mobilizations in Washington D.C., and getting union guys into office. How does this fit in with Trotskyism, Stalinism, or Maoism?

Spencer Leonard: How did your assessment of the 1970s change in retrospect? How do you view it now within the long history of the American and the international revolutionary movement?

MR: In the late 60s we all thought there was a real possibility for revolution in the United States. There was a revolutionary wave around the world, so that our task in the United States where there was no revolutionary party, was to make it. Most of us thought of ourselves as Leninist organizers.

And although we never succeeded, a major concern of mine and of STO's was the overcoming of the racial barriers in the United States. White skin privilege and the divisions between black and white were extremely sharp. We felt this was the major barrier to working class revolutionary struggle. Different organizations tried to deal with this in different ways. Some Trotskyists went back to the old Socialist Party position whereby socialists have nothing in particular to offer blacks or people of color—they should become union men and socialists like everybody else. The Maoist view was that black workers constituted a special category of workers and that this involved a national question that had to be integrated with a working class perspective. And nationalism was a very strong current among black workers; the Panthers and the Muslims had more of a following than did the Marxists.

TR: In every organization I've ever been in the black question has been understood as key for working class revolution in the United States. That was true when I was a Maoist. It didn't change when I became a Trotskyist. Moscow had a hand in foisting the "Black Belt" theory on the American party and this disoriented it significantly. It's our view that blacks in the U.S. are not a distinct nation, but rather a color caste that have been forcibly segregated. It's not a matter of simply "unite and fight," but that the class interests that bind workers together can transcend the sectional differences that separate them.

I was very impressed by Weatherman. There were no Weathermen where I was from, but my friends and I were RYM II-ish. We were Maoists because Mao was our leader. You would read the Red Book, threw rocks at the cops, were arrested, and supported strikes. But as I started reading histories of the Russian Revolution to try to figure Marxism out, I was quite open to the idea that it all went wrong with the Workers' Opposition when Lenin and Trotsky clamped down on Kollontai's syndicalist faction within the Bolshevik Party, though eventually I came to a different conclusion. Everything was up in the air: Stalin was good, Stalin was bad, Russia became capitalist when Stalin died as Mao taught us, or perhaps not.

CD: Looking back, I sum up my insight in one word: waves. Light moves in waves, gravity, water, everything moves in waves. So do social movements. They have ebbs and flows. We were in the middle of an ebb in the 70s, but we did not know it, since we thought it was always onward and upward. So when the wave that peaked around 1970 started to recede, we were caught out in left field. It's very important to make adjustments. One has to know when to cast the net out and when to haul it in.

Another thing that I learned is that the South is a national homeland for African-Americans. This was not completely imposed by Zinoviev. A number of African-American comrades were involved in devising that theory. The African-American revolt of the 1960s had a national character. African-Americans are an oppressed nationality, and have the right to self-determination. I still believe that.

Q & A

What explains the shift towards Marxism if the Left was politically in decline in 1970s?

Today we are seeing a decline in college attendance by the sons and daughters of the working class. How does this change things from what the three of you experienced?

CD: When I went to Penn State, my tuition was $1500 a year, so if I decided to drop out of school and go run around the country organizing against the war, nobody's mortgage was at stake. I had no $50,000 student loan burden. The conditions under which the first wave of the baby boomers went to the newly expanded state universities and community colleges were new. It was relatively easy to get into school, and when you got out, it was relatively easy to get a job. The conditions that students face today are different. But the characterization of students as a multi-class stratum still holds.

We are now paving the road as we travel. I have learned that every revolutionary victory that has been won has broken the mold of the one that went before it. So you can't pick up some formula from 1917 or 1905 and think you are going to repeat it today. There is not a single revolution since 1917 that could copy what the Bolsheviks accomplished.

MR: When I was a student at the University of Michigan, I worked in an auto plant, which was possible then. It's not possible today. As to the first question, it is true that there were more people in the 70s who thought of themselves as revolutionary Marxists than there were in the 60s, but in the 60s there was a much bigger mass movement of people who thought of themselves as radicals of some sort. That is what reached a culmination around the world in the late 60s.

TR: The changing character of the student population is part of the generalized assault on working class living standards since about 1970. So why was there an expansion of post-secondary education in the United States

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This socialist apparatus, with a bourgeois state run by armed workers at its center, extends a certain factory discipline to the whole of society.[18] Lenin's understanding of "bourgeois right" leads him to see the "bourgeois state without the bourgeoisie" as an enforcer of equality and equal rights in production. It does not, contra Cutrone, lead to a liberal political perspective, or any notion of independent political parties whatsoever, despite the fact that the phrase "bourgeois right" sounds exceedingly liberal. Since it is the workers' state that ends up enforcing "bourgeois right," the liberal virtues of this state depend fundamentally on how the workers' state is conceived. In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin supports the idea of a vanguard party assuming power and "directing and organizing the new system."[19] By Cutrone's standards, this vision is discontinuous with the liberal tradition: he claims that, "the articulation of [political parties] with political power struck classical liberal thinkers as particularly dangerous."[20] If such a vanguard party enforces something called "bourgeois right," this does not make it any more liberal.

The practice of politics

Cutrone claims that Lenin supported the non-identity of party and state, and states that Lenin's party was meant to be "one party among many parties." He wants to portray Lenin's model of the party as a more liberal, less authoritarian formation than a social-democratic "party of the whole class," but he is unable to offer a compelling argument. For at the Eleventh Party Congress in March 1922, Lenin *identifies* the party with the state: "... the state is the workers, the advanced section of the workers, the vanguard. We are the state."[21] This is hardly an isolated comment, and it reflected the political reality—the dictatorship of one party, which Lenin had defended for years. As he said in July 1919,

> When we are reproached with having established a dictatorship of one party and, as you have heard, a united socialist front is proposed, we say, "Yes, it is a dictatorship of one party! This is what we stand for and we shall not shift from that position because it is the party that has won, in the course of decades, the position of vanguard of the entire factory and industrial proletariat. This party had won that position even before the revolution of 1905. It is the party that was at the head of the workers in 1905 and which since then—even at the time of the reaction after 1905 when the working-class movement was rehabilitated with such difficulty under the Stolypin Duma—merged with the working class and it alone could lead that class to a profound, fundamental change in the old society."[22]

Not only did Lenin believe that the Bolshevik party in some sense "merged with the working class," but he also berated the German Left for the "most incredibly and hopelessly muddled thinking" in distinguishing between party dictatorship and class dictatorship.[23]

Lenin often tried to justify a lack of democratic rights by identifying such rights with bourgeois society, as if they are merely identical with the freedom of capital.[24] Rather than try to preserve "the possibility of politics *within* the working class," as Cutrone imagines, Lenin refused to support freedom of the press for opposition parties.[25] Within the party, the ban on factions moved by Lenin at the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921 helped contribute to a decidedly illiberal party culture.[26] One could argue that Lenin's approach was the only realistic one in Russia at the time or surmise that freedom of the press and free elections to the Soviets would have swept the Bolsheviks from power and empowered the forces of reaction. Lenin, however—and this is a crucial point—did not seem to see the fusion of party and state (inevitable or not) as problematic with respect to the building of socialism. The justice of this fusion was predicated on the assumed identity of interest of the masses and the Bolshevik Party, a party described by Lenin as having "as far back as 1905 and even earlier merged with the entire revolutionary proletariat."[27]

With regard to the trade unions, while Lenin did not identify them with the state or the party, he was also not a principled champion of their independence. In January 1918, for example, Lenin called for the expulsion from the Party of the Bolshevik trade unionist A. Lozovsky, who, according to Lenin, refused "to accept the idea that it is the duty of the trade unions to take upon themselves state functions."[28] In *"Left-Wing" Communism—An Infantile Disorder*, Lenin denounced as one of the "counter-revolutionary machinations" of the Mensheviks their defense of trade union independence from the state, despite the fact that Cutrone cites this text as exemplifying some sort of liberal approach.[29]

The trade union debate of 1920-1921, mentioned by Cutrone, highlighted Lenin's opposition to the complete subsumption of the unions in the state. This should not be seen, however, as a principled rejection of his previous positions, but rather as a response to a changing political situation. Lenin came to characterize the function of the trade unions as contradictory: as "participants in the exercise of state power" the unions would need coercion, but in their key educative role, persuasion had to be their mode of operating.[30] Lenin had accused Trotsky of ignoring the latter function of trade unions. Unlike Trotsky, Lenin acknowledged the need for the trade unions to play a mediating role between the workers and the state. Since Lenin saw the state as fundamentally representing working class interests, workers' struggles could *only* be justified as a correction of "bureaucratic distortions of the proletarian state."[31] Lenin's overall view of the unions was instrumental rather than liberal or democratic:

> Just as the very best factory, with the very best motors and first-class machines, will be forced to remain idle if the transmission belts from the motors to the machines are damaged, so our work of socialist construction must meet with inevitable disaster if the trade unions—the transmission belts from the Communist Party to the masses—are badly fitted or function badly."[32]

While the trade unions were supposed to play an educational role, the party was to have authority in industry until the time when the workers become capable of self-management. During the trade union debate, Lenin stigmatized the "syndicalist deviation" of those who wanted the unions to take on managerial functions. "Why have a Party," Lenin asked in January 1921, if industrial management is to be left to the trade unions, "nine-tenths of whose members are non-Party workers?"[33] It is here, in the relation between the workers and their work—and *not* in regard to the function of a political party—that Lenin could be said to be a liberal.

With regard to the socialist transformation of industry, Lenin argued that the question of collective or individual and dictatorial administration of industry has nothing to do with which class is the ruling class. Against opposition from the left, Lenin appealed to the example of liberal capitalism in a March 1920 speech:

> You know that one of the points in dispute, one that arouses the liveliest discussion both in the press and at meetings, is that of one-man management or corporate management. I think that the preference for corporate management not infrequently betrays an inadequate comprehension of the tasks confronting the Republic; what is more, it often testifies to insufficient class-consciousness. When I reflect on this question, I always feel like saying that the workers have not yet learned enough from the bourgeoisie....Look how the bourgeoisie administer the state; how they have organized the bourgeois class. In the old days, could you have found anyone who shared the views of the bourgeoisie and was their loyal defender, and yet argued that individual authority is incompatible with the administration of the state? If there had been such a blockhead among the bourgeoisie he would have been laughed to scorn by his own class fellows, and would not have been allowed to talk or hold forth at any important meeting of capitalists and bourgeois. They would have asked him what the question of administration through one person or through a corporate body had to do with the question of class. The shrewdest and richest bourgeoisies are the British and American; the British are in many respects more experienced, and they know how to rule better than the Americans. And do they not furnish us with examples of maximum individual dictatorship, of maximum speed in administration, and yet they keep the power fully and entirely in the hands of their own class?[34]

In a December 1920 speech on the trade union question, Lenin made a decidedly liberal argument as well, denouncing the slogan of "industrial democracy": "Democracy is a category proper only to the political sphere," he insisted.[35] The liberal assumption is that democracy is rightfully restricted to the sphere of politics, while the workplace is governed by purely economic imperatives.

Lenin's liberalism, to the extent that it exists after the October Revolution, is not the sort that Cutrone imagines. On the basis of an understanding of socialist transformation as nationalization, Lenin was able to reconcile the task of economic development on the backs of the workers with the idea of proletarian dictatorship. In this theoretical universe, an incredible amount of weight was put on the correct politics of the ruling party, the minority that was actually implementing this proletarian dictatorship. In this way, a certain preservation of bourgeois conditions was coupled with a decidedly illiberal narrative regarding the just dictatorship of a party that had "merged" with the masses. |**P**

1. Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Program," in *Later Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 213. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/index.htm>.
2. Ibid., 213.
3. Ibid., 214.
4. Ibid., 214.
5. V.I. Lenin, "The State and Revolution", in *The Lenin Anthology*, Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1975), 376. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/index.htm>.
6. Ibid., 377.
7. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1990), 1:172. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/index.htm>.
8. V.I. Lenin, "The State and Revolution", 378.
9. Ibid., 381.
10. Paresh Chattopadhyay, "The Economic Content of Socialism: Marx vs. Lenin," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 24, no. 3&4 (1992), 108.
11. Lenin, "The State and Revolution", 383.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 384.
16. Ibid., 382.
17. V.I. Lenin, "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?" in *The Lenin Anthology*, 401. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm>.
18. Lenin, "The State and Revolution", 383.
19. Ibid., 328.
20. Chris Cutrone, "Lenin's Liberalism," *Platypus Review* 36 (June 2011), available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2011/06/01/lenin%E2%80%99s-liberalism/>.
21. V.I. Lenin, "Political Report of the Central Committee of the R.C.P. (B.)," in *Collected Works,* vol. 33 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), 278. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/mar/27.htm>.
22. V.I. Lenin, "Speech at the First All-Russia Congress of Workers in Education and Socialist Culture," in *Collected Works*, vol. 29 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 535. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/aug/05.htm>.
23. V.I. Lenin, " 'Left-Wing' Communism—An Infantile Disorder, in *The Lenin Anthology,* 567. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/index.htm>.
24. Lenin, "Speech at the First All-Russia Congress of Workers in Education and Socialist Culture," 534.
25. Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24: Soviet Workers and the New Communist Elite* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 100-101.
26. Ibid., 89.
27. V.I. Lenin, "Letter to the Workers and Peasants Apropos of the Victory Over Kolchak," in *Collected Works*, vol. 29 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 559. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/aug/24.htm>.
28. Hal Draper, *The "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" from Marx to Lenin* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987), 100-101.
29. V.I. Lenin, "Left-Wing" Communism—An Infantile Disorder, 573.
30. V.I. Lenin, "The Role and Functions of the Trade Unions Under the New Economic Policy," in *Collected Works*, vol. 33 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), 193. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/dec/30.htm>.
31. Ibid., 187.
32. Ibid., 192.
33. V.I. Lenin, "The Party Crisis," in *Collected Works*, vol. 32 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 50. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/jan/19.htm>.
34. V.I. Lenin, "Speech Delivered at the Third All-Russia Congress of Water Transport Workers," in *Collected Works*, vol. 30 (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1977), 426-427. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/mar/15.htm>.
35. V.I. Lenin, "The Trade Unions, the Present Situation and Trotsky's Mistakes," in Collected Works, vol. 32 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 26. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/dec/30.htm>.

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the Commune, the revolution that opened in 1917 was abortive. Isolation in Russia was defeating: the failure of the German Revolution 1918–19 was the defeat of the revolution in Russia. Stalinism was the result of this defeat, and adapted itself to it. Lenin already contended with this defeat, and distinguished his Marxism from both Right opportunism and ultra-Leftism.[10] The question is, what can we learn about this failure, from Lenin's perspective?

Because democratic discontents, the workers' movement, and anti-capitalist and socialist political parties, operate in a differentiated totality of bourgeois society that must be transformed, they are subject to politicization and the problems of democratic self-determination that liberal bourgeois society has historically placed on the agenda. Proletarian socialism, in Lenin's view no less than Marx's, does not nullify these problems but seeks to allow them a fuller scope of activity. Lenin advocated not only a workers' "state," but also workers' political parties and other workers' civil society institutions such as labor unions and workers' publications, which the struggle for socialism necessitated. This is true after the revolution even more than before because the workers' social revolution is meant to build upon the existing society. Lenin was an avowed Marxist "communist." As Marx put it, communism seeks a society in which the "free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."[11]

Both "libertarian" and authoritarian tendencies in socialism tend to avoid the importance of Lenin's Marxism on this score, because both tendencies tend to conflate society and politics. This is not only anti-liberal but illiberal—and un-Marxist—whether understood hierarchically or "democratically." Capitalism is already a "grassroots" and thus a democratic phenomenon, and not merely a baleful hierarchy of authority: its problem goes beyond democracy.

The proletarian socialist revolution, in Lenin's view as well as Marx's, was not meant to bring about the Millennium, but rather to clear certain obstacles to the struggle for the working class's social and political self-determination (not exclusively as a matter of the state), which Marx and Lenin thought could lead society beyond capitalism. Moreover, this was conceived largely "negatively," in terms of problems to be overcome. The revolution, in Marxist terms, does not produce an emancipated society ready-made, but only, perhaps, political forms through which emancipatory social transformation, otherwise blocked by capitalism, might be pursued and developed further. Lenin, like Marx, thought that overthrowing both the rule of capitalist private property in the means of production and the subjection of society to the vicissitudes of the market, the classic demands of proletarian socialism as it had developed after the Industrial Revolution, might allow this.

Neither Marx nor Lenin came with blueprints for an emancipated society in hand. Rather, Lenin, following Marx, advocated pursuing the forms of the struggle for socialism that had emerged historically in and through the development of the workers' movement itself. Historical Marxism did not formulate independent schemes for emancipation, but sought the potential social-emancipatory content of emergent political phenomena in light of history. Lenin as well as Marx advocated the workers' right to rule, but followed other socialists in doing so. It is necessary to address Lenin as a consistent advocate of workers' power, and consider how he understood the meaning of this in the struggle for socialism.

Socialism in the original Marxist sense that Lenin followed does not seek to undo but rather tries to press further the gains of historically "bourgeois" liberal democracy. Liberalism is not meant to be negated but fulfilled by democracy, just as bourgeois society is not meant to be torn down but transcended in overcoming capitalism. Liberal and democratic concerns need to answer to the historical tasks of emancipatory social transformation, not timeless political "principles."

Lenin himself was very clear on this, even if neither most of his supposed followers nor his detractors have been. The problem is anti-Marxist interpretive bias that is blinding. |**P**

1. See my "1917," in The Decline of the Left in the 20th Century: Toward a Theory of Historical Regression, *Platypus Review* 17 (November 2009).
2. See my "Lenin's Liberalism," *Platypus Review* 36 (June 2011).
3. See Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958), in *Four essays on Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 1969).
4. See Tamas Krausz, "Lenin's Legacy Today," *Platypus Review* 39 (September 2011).
5. See Spartacist League, Lenin and the Vanguard Party (1978). Available online at: <http://www.bolshevik.org/Pamphlets/LeninVanguard/LVP%200.htm>.
6. See Moshe Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle* (New York: Pantheon, 1968).
7. See Rosa Luxemburg, "The Russian Tragedy" (1918). Available online at: <http://www.marx.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/09/11.htm>.
8. See Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," trans. Lewis White Beck, in *Kant on History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963).
9. The reason why the global state under capital tends toward liberal democracy at the core but tolerates tyranny in its subordinate domains or peripheral extremities is the expediency or convenience of opportunism; despotism in the center, by contrast, is highly politically contentious and untenable. Indeed, it has led to world wars.
10. See V.I. Lenin, "Left-wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder (1920). Available online at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/>.
11. Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848). Available online at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm>.

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to begin with? Because of *Sputnik*. The Russians were getting ahead, communism was going to win, so we had to invest in teaching our working class kids. Now there is no money for education, healthcare, or anything else. This is because STO and the Spartacist League and the October League failed to build large, powerful communist movements but instead quarreled among each other.

As regards the contrast between the 60s and the 70s, there was no difference when I was going to high school in the 1960s between smoking dope, having sex, and growing long hair and going on demonstrations and being gay.

The 60s ran until 1971 or 1972. After that came the turn to Marxist party building, the working class, etc., which exhausted everyone. You could feel the Left decomposing.

I completely agree with Carl about 1917. But 1917, which happens to be the name of our publication, is a special case. It is the only time that a politically conscious working class led the masses of the exploited to expropriate the capitalists. Prior to 1917, Marxism was seen by intellectuals as nice in theory. The Bolshevik experience shows how it is possible to recruit people, build cells, and intelligently address what the workers are concerned with. The IBT attempts to continue that work as best we can. And in our edition of Trotsky's *Transitional Program* we have incorporated a lot of historical background on trade union work up through the 70s that has been exemplary. Where STO went wrong, in my view, was not in attempting to bring Marxism to the working class, but in thinking they were going to create new unions.

To achieve socialism, the working class has to acquire political consciousness and has to act in its own interests. Outside of that, you can overthrow capitalism, as happened in Cuba, in China, in Albania, and various other places, but you cannot set out on the path to consciously achieve a classless society. That is impossible unless the producers have political consciousness, unless they themselves understand, participate in, and drive the process forward. It takes leadership, but leadership that is organically part of the class. Lenin's conception is that the party is the most self-sacrificing, the most revolutionary-minded and the most far-seeing element of the class itself. To me nothing is achievable without that. But I can't show that we've made a socialist revolution yet so therefore the proposition remains to be proved. |**P**

Transcribed by Ryan Hardy and Jacob Cayia

1. Originally published in the *Guardian Weekly* (1973). Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/critiques/guardian/index.htm>.
2. Originally published in the *Workers Vanguard* no. 22–30 (1973). Available online at <http://www.bolshevik.org/history/Other/falsification.html>.
3. Isaac Deutscher, *Marxism in Our Time*, ed. Tamara Deutscher (Berkeley, CA: Ramparts Press, 1971), 65.
4. Leon Trotsky, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 99.
5. Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/fromm/works/1961/man/index.htm>.

Lenin the liberal? A reply to Chris Cutrone

David Adam

CHRIS CUTRONE'S RECENT ARTICLE "Lenin's Liberalism" (*Platypus Review* #36) claims that Lenin's politics are distorted when characterized as a pure opposition to bourgeois conditions. In fact, he suggests that Lenin insisted on "the mediation of politics in society" even after the creation of a "workers' state," demonstrating a liberal desire to preserve certain features of bourgeois society. His use of Lenin's theory regarding the continuation of "bourgeois right" betrays an inattention to the context of Lenin's remarks, and the notion that Lenin applied a liberal perspective to the question of working class political power does not ring true. The essay seems to conjure an ideal Lenin that can more readily be used as a reference point for contemporary Marxism. Cutrone's claim that Lenin sought to "fulfill the *desiderata* of bourgeois society" rests on a strategy of nonconfrontation with the messy historical details of Lenin's relationship with liberal political ideals.

In this response, I will appraise the content of Lenin's liberalism in more concrete terms, particularly the claim that Lenin's notion of the persistence of "bourgeois right" in socialism undergirds his belief in "an articulated non-identity of state, political parties, and other voluntary civil society institutions such as labor unions." We will see that the notion of "bourgeois right" is not evidence of a liberal perspective in Lenin, and that within Lenin's discussion of socialist transition it supports an understanding of the state as an economic actor, not as the site of political mediation. Then I will show how the liberalism ascribed to Lenin is largely mythical in light of his political practice in the context of a so-called "workers' state." In the early Soviet state, the imperatives of economic construction and the management of power led Lenin both to a more radical rejection of liberal values in politics, as well as a reinforcement of bourgeois relations in production. While I reject Cutrone's expansive interpretation of Lenin's liberalism, there are other, more restrictive reasons for calling Lenin a liberal.

"Bourgeois Right" and socialist transformation

Lenin elaborates the idea of "bourgeois right" in *The State and Revolution* (1917), while discussing Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* [1875], where the phrase "bourgeois right" is used. In that text, Marx describes two phases of communist society that follow the transformation of capitalism into communism. The first phase of communist society is characterized as one that has just emerged out of capitalism, while the "higher phase" develops on the basis of communist society itself.

The distinguishing feature of the first phase of communism is that individual consumption is linked to labor expended in production. The individual producer "gets from society a receipt that he has contributed such and such an amount of labor (after a deduction of labor for common reserves) and withdraws from society's stores of the means of consumption an equal amount costed in labor terms."[1] This is a communist society, a "cooperatively organized society based on common ownership in the means of production," in which the labor expended on products does not appear *"as the value* of these products."[2] Nonetheless, insofar as the common standard of labor expenditure is applied to all, the equal right of the producers "is still—at least in principle—a *bourgeois right*," according to Marx.[3] It is a bourgeois right because only in bourgeois society does the notion of abstract human equality, and thus the application of a common standard of justice to all people, become prevalent. In the context of Marx's text, however, the notion of "bourgeois right" has little connection with the mediation of politics in society.

Marx writes of the "limited horizon of bourgeois right," and describes how equal right on the basis of labor leads to inequalities due to the different needs and abilities of the producers.[4] Lenin describes this "equal right" as "a violation of equality and an injustice."[5] He describes how communist society "is *compelled* to abolish at first *only* the 'injustice' of the means of production seized by individuals," and is unable "to eliminate the other injustice, which consists in the distribution of consumer goods 'according to the amount of labor performed' (and not according to needs)."[6] It is worth noting that the distribution of consumer goods "according to the amount of labor performed" is not a feature of capitalism, as Lenin implies. In a capitalist society, workers sell their labor-power in exchange for wages. The wages they receive, and thus the consumer goods they are able to acquire, do not have a direct connection with the amount of labor they perform, which *would* be the case in Marx's conception of the first phase of communism. Instead of an exchange of commodities, as in capitalism, the first phase of communism features a conscious social organization of production, replacing the capitalist opposition between the producers and the conditions of production. As Marx wrote in *Capital*, in such a society "the social relations of the individual producers, both towards their labor and the products of their labor, are here transparent in their simplicity, in production as well as in distribution."[7] Lenin does not clearly distinguish the relation of the producers to their labor and their products in capitalism from this relation in socialism. Lenin therefore imagines that the concept of "bourgeois right" describes a determinate social relation that persists throughout the change from capitalism to communism.

After describing the first phase of communism in terms of the notion of "bourgeois right," Lenin deduces from this notion that "there still remains the need for a state, which, while safeguarding the common ownership of the means of production, would safeguard equality in labor and in the distribution of products."[8] The continued existence of economic functions for a political state separate from society as a whole reveals that economic relations have not completely been brought under the collective control of the producers. Lenin further describes this state as a "bourgeois state, without the bourgeoisie."[9] Lenin's assertion of the necessity for a bourgeois state does *not* follow from Marx's argument in *The Critique of the Gotha Program*. Marx had long identified the state as an expression of class rule, and the existence of a state in a communist society is incompatible with Marx's basic framework. Paresh Chattopadhyay has pointed to the strangeness of Lenin's conclusion:

> Inasmuch as the first phase [of communism] is inaugurated only *after* the transition period has come to an end—along with the proletarian dictatorship which had arisen on the ruins of the bourgeois state—the existence of the bourgeois state in this phase, then, would imply that, in the absence of the bourgeoisie (by Marx's as well as Lenin's assumption), the workers themselves *recreate* the bourgeois state (however partially) after having abolished their own. Does not this sound a little far-fetched, to say the least?[10]

It seems probable that this is not quite what Lenin had in mind. It seems likely that the "proletarian state" associated by Lenin with proletarian dictatorship was not clearly distinguished from the "bourgeois state without the bourgeoisie."

For Lenin, the economic revolution presided over by the "armed workers" (proletarian dictatorship) consists of nationalization of industry, such that the state continues to persist as an economic actor and employer during the first phase of communism. From this, it seems inconsistent in the extreme to imagine that, after the workers' state successfully nationalizes industry, the state withers away and is replaced by a bourgeois state that manages that same industry. It seems more consistent to interpret Lenin as describing the *same state* as both a "proletarian state" and as a "bourgeois state without the bourgeoisie" in different contexts. That Lenin uses Engels's description of the Paris Commune as "no longer a state in the proper sense of the word" to refer to the state in the first phase of communism appears to support this interpretation.[11]

In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin's notion of a bourgeois state without the bourgeoisie is central to his understanding of socialist transition. While Lenin's discussion of the Paris Commune does focus on the theme of democracy and political emancipation, the discussion of "bourgeois right" grounds an understanding of the state as an economic actor in the transition period. The latter is all the more important in light of Lenin's politics in the Soviet "workers' state."

Lenin understands the first phase of communism as necessitating the transformation of all workers into "hired employees of the state."[12] He writes, "the whole of society will have become a single office and a single factory, with equality of labor and pay."[13] His notion of a bourgeois state resting upon "bourgeois right" elides the difference between the capitalist organization of production and the socialist organization of production. While Marx assumed a fundamentally different organization of production from capitalism, and then discusses a parallel with capitalism—"bourgeois right"—Lenin deduces the existence of the main organizer of production—the state—from the abstract level of *right*. While the producers *must* co-operatively administer production for Marx to talk about communism, Lenin writes that, during this socialist phase (he describes the first phase of communism as socialism), all workers are to *learn* to "independently administer social production."[14] After this is accomplished, "the door will be thrown wide open for the transition from the first phase of communist society to its higher phase, and with it to the complete withering away of the state."[15] Essentially, Lenin conflates the revolutionary transformation of capitalism into communism with the transition to what Marx had called "the higher phase of communist society."

The transformation of capitalism into communism, which for Marx must take place before we can speak of a new society, finds its equivalent for Lenin in something that occurs "overnight," namely the replacing of the economic control of capitalists and bureaucrats with that of the "armed workers."[16] While Lenin writes of a long transitional period, the introduction of socialist economic planning is actually surprisingly swift, insofar as it merely consists of replacing the capitalists and bureaucrats. In a text written within months of *The State and Revolution*, Lenin explains that "a single State Bank" will constitute

> as much as nine-tenths of the *socialist* apparatus. . . We can 'lay hold of' and 'set in motion' this 'state apparatus' (which is not fully a state apparatus under capitalism, but which will be so with us, under socialism) at one stroke, by a single decree, because the actual work of book-keeping, control, registering, accounting and counting is performed by *employees*, the majority of whom themselves lead a proletarian or semi-proletarian existence.[17]

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Lenin's politics A rejoinder to David Adam on Lenin's liberalism

Chris Cutrone

Stalin, Lenin, and Mikhail Kalinin in 1919. Kalinin was the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, or head of state of the Soviet Union, 1919–46.

THE PRINCIPAL MISTAKE made by those who contemplate Lenin's political thought and action is due to assumptions that are made about the relation of socialism to democracy. Lenin was not an "undemocratic socialist" or one who prioritized socialism as an "end" over the "means" of democracy. Lenin did not think that once a majority of workers was won to socialist revolution democracy was finished. Lenin was not an authoritarian socialist.[1]

Socialism is meant to transcend liberalism by fulfilling it.[2] The problem with liberalism is not its direction, supposedly different from socialism, but rather that it does not go far enough. Socialism is not anti-liberal. The 20th century antinomy of socialism versus liberalism, as expressed in Isaiah Berlin's counterposing of "positive and negative freedoms" or "freedom to [social benefits] versus freedom from [the state],"[3] or the idea that social justice conflicts with liberty, travesties (and naturalizes) and thus degrades the actual problem, which is not a clash of timeless principles—liberalism versus democracy—but a historically specific contradiction of capitalism. To clarify this, it is necessary to return to a Marxist approach, such as Lenin's.

The error consists of addressing a dialectical approach to politics such as Lenin's in an undialectical and eclectic manner, as if there were a number of criteria to be checked off (anticapitalism, democracy, etc.), rather than a set of intrinsically interrelated historical problems to be worked through together. The actual dialectic of the historically interrelated developments of capitalism, democracy, and the struggle for socialism demands a dialectical approach in both practice and theory. The reason that various moments of Lenin's thought and action can appear contradictory is due to an undialectical interpretation of Lenin, not to Lenin himself. Lenin is subject to the same interpretive problem as Marx: the question of Lenin cuts to the heart of Marxism.[4]

This is recognizable by way of considering Lenin's various discussions of the state, political parties, and society.[5] Lenin assumed that these were not the same thing and did not assume that "socialism" meant making them into the same thing. Most of Lenin's readers (both followers and detractors) either praise or denounce Lenin, mistakenly, for his supposed attempts to make society into an undifferentiated totality. Not only what Lenin said, but what he did shows otherwise. Furthermore, one must take into account how Lenin avowedly sought to be true to Marx, whether one judges Lenin to have been successful in this or not. Therefore, at least in part, one must reckon with the problem of evaluating Lenin as a Marxist.

It is a fundamental error to regard Lenin as a largely unconscious political actor who was reduced to theoretically "justifying" his actions. Readers often commit the fallacy of projecting their own inclinations or fears onto Lenin and misinterpret him accordingly. On the contrary, one must address what Lenin said and did in terms of the coherence of his own self-understanding. For this, it is necessary to regard the historical, that is, social and political, circumstances within which Lenin not only acted but spoke. From the various available records, Lenin did not write treatises but political pamphlets, moreover with propagandistic purpose, including his most "theoretical" works such as *The State and Revolution* (1917).

What is clear is that Lenin did not advocate the partyification of the state (or statification of the party) or the statification of society—in this crucial respect, Lenin remained a "liberal." Both of these phenomena of Stalinization post-date Lenin and need to be addressed in terms of a process beginning after Lenin's medical retirement, the dangers of which Lenin was well aware and against which he struggled, in vain, in his final years.[6]

The ban on factions that seems to impugn Lenin's motives and show a supposed continuity between him and Stalin can be addressed rather straightforwardly. Lenin came in 1921 to advocate banning organized factions—not *dissent*!—within the Russian Communist Party, precisely because of the differentiated realities of the party, the state, and society in the Soviet workers' state of the former Russian Empire. Many careerist state functionaries had joined the party (though, according to Lenin, they deserved only to be "shot"), and the party-controlled state faced a deeply divided society, in which he thought that the party could become a plaything in the hands of other state and greater societal forces. The ban on factions was meant not only to be merely a temporary measure, but it should be noted that Lenin did not call for such ban on factions in the Communist International, which was considered a single world party divided into national sections. The ban on factions was meant to address a danger specific to the Bolsheviks being a ruling governmental party under certain conditions, and it was inextricably tied to the contemporaneous implementation of the New Economic Policy. One might interpret the ban as directed against the Left, whereas in fact it was directed against the Right, that is, directed against the power of the status quo in the former Russian Empire swamping the politics of social revolution. So, the ban on factions was a self-consciously limited and specifically local compromise to Lenin's mind, and not at all the expression of any kind of principle. It is a serious mistake to regard it otherwise. The fact that the ban on factions helped lead to Stalinism does not make it into an "original sin" by Lenin. Revolution beyond the Soviet Union was the only way to ameliorate the problems of Bolshevik rule, as Rosa Luxemburg, for one, recognized.[7]

The other mistake, indicative of a fundamental misunderstanding of the relation of the struggle for proletarian socialism to democracy and the politics of the state, is to regard problems of economics and politics as similar in kind. There is no contradiction between democracy in politics and hierarchy of authority in various concrete activities, whether economic or military. The question is one of social and political leadership and responsibility. Is a factory responsible only to its own employees, or to society as a whole? Lenin was certainly not a syndicalist or "council communist," that is, Lenin did not think that socialist politics can be adequately pursued by labor unions or workers' councils (or more indeterminate "democratic assemblies") alone, but this does not mean Lenin was undemocratic. The issue of democracy in economic life cannot be considered in an unmediated way without doing violence to the societal issues involved. The point of "democratizing the economy" is not to be understood properly as simply workplace democracy. This is because socialism is not merely a problem of the organization of production, let alone merely an economic issue. Socialism is not merely democratic. Rather, democracy poses the question of society and, from a Marxist perspective, the "social question" is capitalism. Marxism recognizes the need for democracy in capitalism. Lenin addressed the possibility of overcoming the necessity of the state or, more precisely, the need for democracy. Marxism agrees with anarchism on the goal of superseding democracy, but disagrees on how to get there from here. Marxism recognizes the need for a democratic state posed by capitalism that cannot be wished away.

The society and state in question were addressed by Lenin with respect to the "dictatorship of the proletariat," which is, importantly, not a national state. His vision was for a workers' state at a global scale. Because the bourgeois state is a global and not a national phenomenon, neither is the Marxist vision of the "workers' state." Lenin did not pursue a national road to socialism. As a Marxist, he recognized that, under capitalism, "the state"—of which various national states were merely local components—was essentially the "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie." This did not mean that there were no political struggles among the capitalists to which various nation states could and did become subject. Rather, the need for socialism was tied to a need for a global state as well as a truly free global civil society already expressed under capitalism.[8] Only by understanding what Marx meant by the "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie" in liberal democracy can we understand what Lenin meant by the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in a revolutionary "workers' state."[9]

Lenin was a liberal because he understood the necessity of politics within the working class, which does not and cannot take place outside the domains of bourgeois rights and politics, but which is rather inevitably and necessarily part and parcel of them. Lenin did not advocate the unmediated politicization of society, which he knew would be regressive, whether understood in authoritarian or "libertarian" terms. The Soviet workers' state in Lenin's time was indeed like the Paris Commune of 1871, if it had been led by Marx and Engels, had fought off Versailles, and had held on to power.

The Russian Revolution presented new problems, not with regard to socialism, which was never achieved, but rather with regard to the revolution, which failed. Like

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