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Lenin Reloaded

:

Toward a Politics of Truth

sebastian budgen, stathis kouvelakis, and slavoj žižek, editors

Lenin Reloaded

SIC

A

series

edited

by

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SIC stands for psychoanalytic interpretation at its most elementary: no discovery of deep, hidden meaning, just the act of drawing attention to the litterality [*sic!*] of what precedes it. A "*sic*" reminds us that what was said, inclusive of its blunders, was effectively said and cannot be undone. The series SIC thus explores different connections to the Freudian field. Each volume provides a bundle of Lacanian interventions into a specific domain of ongoing theoretical, cultural, and ideological-political battles. It is neither "pluralist" nor "socially sensitive": unabashedly avowing its exclusive Lacanian orientation, it disregards any form of correctness but the inherent correctness of theory itself.

Toward a Politics of Truth

Lenin Reloaded

Sebastian Budgen,
Stathis Kouvelakis,
and Slavoj Žižek,
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Sebastian Budgen,
Stathis Kouvelakis,
and Slavoj Žižek

Introduction: Repeating Lenin

The project of this book began almost as a provocative gesture, with the conference on Lenin ("Toward a Politics of Truth: The Retrieval of Lenin") held at the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut, in Essen (Germany) in February 2001. For some commentators in the media, it remained just that. With the essays that comprise this book, some of them papers given at that conference, some others generously offered by their authors to be included in this volume, we want to show that this is something more than an attempt at scandal-mongering in an epoch dominated by the "post-political consensus."

So why focus on Lenin today? Our answer is this: the name "Lenin" is of urgent necessity for us precisely now, at a time when very few people seriously consider possible alternatives to capitalism any longer. At a time when global capitalism appears as the only game in town and the liberal-democratic system as the optimal political organization of society, it has indeed become easier to imagine the end of the world than a far more modest change in the mode of production.

This liberal-democratic hegemony is sustained by a kind of unwritten *Denkverbot* (thought prohibition) similar to the infamous *Berufsverbot* (banning the employment of leftists by any state institution) of the late 1960s in Germany. The moment one shows a minimal sign of engaging in political projects that aim at seriously challenging the existing order, he or she receives the following immediate answer: "Benevolent as it is, this will necessarily end in a new Gulag!" The "return to ethics" in today's political philosophy shamefully exploits the horrors of the Gulag or the Holocaust as the ultimate scare tactic for blackmailing us into renouncing all serious radical commitment. In this way, the conformist liberal scoundrels can find hypocritical satisfaction in their defense of the existing order: they know there is corruption, exploitation, and so forth, but they denounce every attempt to change things as ethically dangerous and unacceptable, resuscitating the ghost of totalitarianism.

Breaking out of this deadlock, the reassertion of a politics of Truth today, should, in the first place, take the form of a *return to Lenin*. But, once again, the question arises: Why Lenin, why not simply Marx? Is the proper return not the return to origins proper?

Returning to Marx is already something of an academic fashion. Which Marx do we get in these returns? On the one hand, in the English-speaking world, we get the cultural-studies Marx, the Marx of the postmodern sophists, of the messianic promise; in continental Europe, where the "traditional" division of intellectual labor remains stronger, we get a sanitized Marx, the "classical" author to whom a (marginal) place can be accorded in the academy. On the other hand, we get the Marx who foretold the dynamic of today's globalization and is as such evoked even on Wall Street. What all these Marxes have in common is the denial of politics proper: postmodern political thought precisely opposes itself to Marxism; it is essentially post-Marxist. The reference to Lenin enables us to avoid these two pitfalls.

There are two features that distinguish his intervention. First, one cannot emphasize enough Lenin's externality with regard to Marx: He was not a member of Marx's inner circle of the initiated. Indeed, he never met either Marx or Engels. Moreover, he came from a land at the eastern borders of "European civilization." This externality is thus part of the standard Western racist argument against Lenin: he introduced into Marxism the Russian-Asiatic despotic principle; at yet a further remove, Russians themselves disown him, pointing toward his Tatar origins. However, it turns out that it is only possible to retrieve the theory's original impulse from this external position. In the same way that St. Paul and Lacan reinscribed original teachings into different contexts (St. Paul reinterpreting Christ's crucifixion as his triumph; Lacan reading Freud through mirror-stage Saussure), Lenin violently displaces Marx, tearing his theory out of its original context, planting it in another historical moment, and thus effectively universalizing it.

Second, it is only through such a violent displacement that the original theory can be put to work, fulfilling its potential of political intervention. It is significant that the work in which Lenin's unique voice was for the first time clearly heard is *What Is to Be Done?* The text exhibits Lenin's decision to intervene into the situation, not in the pragmatic sense of adjusting the theory to the realistic claims through necessary compromises, but, on the contrary, in the sense of dispelling all opportunistic compromises, of adopting the unequivocal radical position from which it is only possible to intervene in such a way that our intervention changes the coordinates of the situation.

Lenin's wager—today, in our era of postmodern relativism, more actual than ever—is that truth and partisanship, the gesture of taking sides, are not only not mutually exclusive but condition each other: the *universal* truth in a concrete situation can only be articulated from a thoroughly *partisan* position. Truth is by definition one-sided. This, of course, goes against the predominant ideology of compromise, of finding a middle path among the multitude of conflicting interests.

For us, "Lenin" is not the nostalgic name for old dogmatic certainty; quite the contrary, the Lenin that we want to retrieve is the Lenin-in-becoming, the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which old reference points proved useless, and who was thus compelled to *reinvent* Marxism. The idea is that it is not enough simply to return to Lenin, like returning to gaze at a painting or visit a tombstone, for we must *repeat* or *reload* him: that is, we must retrieve the same impulse in today's constellation. This dialectical return to Lenin aims neither at nostalgically reenacting the "good old revolutionary times" nor at the opportunistic-pragmatic adjustment of the old program to "new conditions." Rather, it aims at repeating, in the present global conditions, the "Leninian" gesture of reinventing the revolutionary project in the conditions of imperialism, colonialism, and world war—more precisely, after the politico-ideological collapse of the long era of progressivism in the catastrophe of 1914. Eric Hobsbawm defined the concept of the twentieth century as the time between 1914, the end of the long peaceful expansion of capitalism, and 1990, the emergence of the new form of global capitalism after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. What Lenin did for 1914, we should do for our times.

The texts included in this volume engage precisely with this perspective, not in spite of but because of the multiplicity of positions they occupy and defend. "Lenin" stands here for the compelling *freedom* to suspend the stale existing ideological coordinates, the debilitating *Denkverbot* in which we live. It simply means being allowed to start thinking and acting again.

Chapters 1, 2, 4, 7–9, and 12–17 were delivered as papers at the Essen conference. Chapters 3 and 5 were written specifically for this volume. Chapter 6 originally appeared in Greek and was translated into English by Jeremy Lester of the University of Reading, United Kingdom. Chapter 8 was translated from the original French by Ian Birchall, and chapters 9, 10, and 11 were translated from the original French by David Fernbach. Chapter 16 was translated from the original Italian by Graeme Thomson.

The editors would like to take this opportunity to thank Anne von der Heiden for her inestimable help in organizing the conference, as well as Doug Henwood, Robert Pfaller, and Charity Scribner for their participation.

PART I retrieving Lenin

Alain Badiou

1

One Divides Itself into Two

Today the political *oeuvre* of Lenin is entirely dominated by the canonical opposition between democracy and totalitarian dictatorship. But actually this discussion has already taken place. For it is precisely through the category of democracy that, from 1918 onward, the "western" Social Democrats led by Kautsky have tried to discredit not only the Bolshevik revolution in its historical becoming but also Lenin's political thought.

What particularly deserves our interest is the theoretical response by Lenin to this attack, contained above all in the pamphlet that Kautsky published in Vienna in 1918 under the title "The Dictatorship of the Proletariat" and to which Lenin responded in the famous text "The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky."

Kautsky, in a way that is natural for a declared partisan of a representative and parliamentary political regime, stresses almost exclusively the right to vote. The interesting thing is that Lenin sees in this procedure the very essence of Kautsky's theoretical deviation. This is not at all because Lenin would think that it is a mistake to support the right to vote. No, Lenin thinks that it can be very useful, even necessary, to participate in the elections. He will vehemently repeat this against the absolute opponents of participation in parliamentary elections in his pamphlet on leftism. Lenin's criticism of Kautsky is much more subtle and interesting. If Kautsky had said, "I am opposed to the decision by Russian Bolsheviks to disenfranchise the reactionaries and the exploiters," he would have taken position on what Lenin calls "an essentially Russian question, and not the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat in general." He could have, and should have, called his booklet "Against the Bolsheviks." Things would have been politically clear. But this is not what Kautsky did. Kautsky wants to intervene in the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat in general and of democracy in general. The essence of his deviation is to have done this on the basis of a tactical and local decision in Russia. The essence of the deviation is always to argue on the basis of some tactical circumstances in order to deny the principles, to take the starting point in a secondary contradiction in order to make a revisionist statement on the principal conception of politics.

Let us have a closer look at the way Lenin proceeds. I quote:

> In speaking about the franchise, Kautsky *betrayed himself* as an opponent of the Bolsheviks, *who does not care a brass farthing for theory*. For theory, i.e., the reasoning about the general (and not the nationally specific) class foundations of democracy and dictatorship, ought to deal not with a special question, such as the franchise, but with the general question of whether democracy can be *preserved for the rich, for the exploiters* in the historical period of the overthrow of the exploiters and the replacement of their state by the state of the exploited.[1]

So theory is precisely what integrates in thought the moment of a question. The moment of the question of democracy is in no way defined by a tactical and localized decision, such as the disenfranchisement for the rich and the exploiters, a decision linked to the particularities of the Russian Revolution. That moment is defined by the general principle of victory: we find ourselves, Lenin says, in the moment of victorious revolutions, in the moment of the real collapse of the exploiters. This is no longer the moment of the Paris Commune, the moment of courage and of cruel defeat. A theoretician is someone who addresses the questions, for example, the question of democracy, from the inside of the determined moment. A renegade is someone who doesn't take the moment into account, someone who uses a particular vicissitude as an occasion for what is purely and simply his political resentment.

Here we can see clearly why Lenin is the political thinker who inaugurates the century. He turns victory, the real of the revolutionary politics, into an internal condition of the theory. Lenin thus determines the major political subjectivity of the century, at least until its last quarter.

The century, between 1917 and the end of the 1970s, is not at all a century of ideologies, of the imaginary or of utopias, as the liberals would have it today. Its subjective determination is Leninist. It is the passion of the real, of what is immediately practicable, here and now.

What does the century tell us about the century? In any case, that it is not a century of promises, but of accomplishment. It is a century of the act, of the effective, of the absolute present, and not a century of announcement and of future. The century is lived as the century of victories, after the millennium of attempts and failures. The cult of the sublime and vain attempt, and hence the ideological subjugation, is relegated by the players of the twentieth century to the preceding century, to the unhappy romanticism of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century says: the defeats are over, now it is time for victories! This victorious subjectivity survives all apparent defeats, being not empirical, but constitutive. Victory is the transcendental motive that organizes even the defeat. "Revolution" is one of the names of this motive. The October Revolution in 1917, then the Chinese and the Cuban Revolutions, and the victories by the Algerians or the Vietnamese in the struggles of national liberation, all these serve as the empirical proof of the motive and defeat the defeats; they compensate for the massacres of June 1848 or of the Paris Commune.

For Lenin, the instrument of victory is theoretical and practical lucidity, in view of a decisive confrontation, a final and total war. The fact that this war will be total means that victory is victorious indeed. The century therefore is the century of war. But saying this weaves together several ideas, which revolve around the question of the Two or the antagonistic division. The century said that its law is the Two, the antagonism, and in this sense the end of the Cold War (American imperialism versus the Socialist bloc), which is the last total figure of the Two, is also the end of the century. The Two, however, has to be declined according to three acceptations.

1. There is a central antagonism, two subjectivities, which are organized on planetary level in a mortal struggle. The century is the scene of that antagonism.

2. There is a no less violent antagonism between two different ways of considering and thinking this antagonism. It is the essence of the confrontation between Communism and Fascism. For the Communists the planetary confrontation in the last analysis is the confrontation between the classes. For the radical Fascists, it is the confrontation between nations and races. There is an interlocking here of an antagonistic thesis and of antagonistic theses on antagonism. This second division is essential, perhaps more so than the first one. In fact, there were certainly more anti-Fascists than Communists, and it is characteristic that the Second World War was about this derived opposition, and not about a unified conception of the antagonism, which has only led to a "cold" war, with the exception of the periphery (the Korean and Vietnam wars).
3. The century invokes, as the century of production through war, a definite unity. The antagonism will be overcome by the victory of one of the blocs over the other. One can also say that, in this sense, the century of the Two is animated by the radical desire for the One. What names the articulation of the antagonism and the violence of the One is the victory as the mark of the real.

Let me remark that this is not a dialectical scheme. Nothing lets us foresee a synthesis, an internal overcoming of the contradiction. On the contrary, everything points to the annihilation of one of the two terms. The century is a figure of non-dialectical juxtaposition of the Two and the One. The question here is to know what balance sheet the century draws of dialectical thinking. The driving element for the victorious outcome, is it the antagonism itself or the desire for the One? This is one of the major philosophical questions of Leninism. It revolves around what we understand, in dialectical thought, by the "unity of the opposites." This is the question that Mao and the Chinese Communists have worked the most on.

In China, around 1965, began what the local press, which is always inventive in naming conflicts, calls "a big class struggle in the field of philosophy." This struggle opposes those who think that the essence of dialectics is the genesis of the antagonism and that the just formula is "One divides itself into two"; and those who estimate that the essence of dialectics is the synthesis of the contradictory notions and that consequently the correct formula is "Two unite into one." This seeming scholasticism conceals an essential truth because it is about the identification of revolutionary subjectivity, its constituent desire. Is it the desire to divide, to wage war—or is it the desire for fusion, for unity, for peace? At that time in China all those who supported the maxim "One divides itself into two" were said to be on the left, and all those who supported "Two unite into one" were said to be "rightists." Why?

If the maxim of synthesis (two unite into one) taken as a subjective formula, as desire for the One, is rightist, it is because in the eyes of the Chinese revolutionaries it is entirely premature. The subject of this maxim has not gone through the Two until the end; it does not yet know what the completely victorious class war is. It follows that the One from which it nourishes the desire is not even thinkable, which is to say that under the cover of synthesis it makes an appeal to the ancient One. So this interpretation of dialectics is restorationist. Not to be a conservative, to be a revolutionary activist nowadays, means obligatorily to desire division. The question of the new immediately becomes the question of the creative division in the singularity of the situation.

In China the Cultural Revolution, especially during the years 1966 and 1967, opposes in an unimaginable fury and confusion the proponents of the One and the other version of the dialectical scheme. In reality, there are those who, like Mao, who in this period practically was a minority in the leadership of the party, thought that the socialist state should not be the polite police-like end of mass politics but, on the contrary, an incitement of its unleashing under the sign of progressing toward real Communism. And there are those, like Liu Shaoqi and above all Deng Xiaoping, who thought that economic management is the most important aspect, that mass mobilization is more harmful than necessary. School-age youth is the spearhead of the Maoistic line. The party cadres and a vast number of intellectual cadres oppose it more or less openly. The peasants remain in a state of expectancy. The workers, the decisive force, are torn apart in rival organizations so that at last, from 1967–68 onward, the state, which risks being torn away in the political hurricane, must let the army intervene. Then comes a long period of extremely complex and violent bureaucratic confrontations, which does not exclude some popular eruptions; this goes on until the death of Mao in 1976, which is quickly followed by a Thermidorian coup that brings Deng back into power.

Such political turmoil is so novel in its stakes and at the same time so obscure that many of the lessons it undoubtedly entails for the future of any politics of emancipation have not been drawn yet, even if it provided a decisive inspiration for French Maoism between 1967 and 1975—and French Maoism was the only innovative political tendency in France in the aftermath of May 1968. It is clear in any case that the Cultural Revolution marks the closure of a whole political sequence, in which the central object was the party and the major political concept was the concept of the proletariat. It marks the end of formal Leninism, which was in reality Stalin's creation. But maybe it is also what is most faithful to real Leninism.

Incidentally, there is a fashion today, among those willing to indulge in renewed servility toward imperialism and capitalism, to call this unprecedented episode a bestial and bloody power struggle, where Mao, finding himself in a minority in the Politburo, attempted by means fair or foul to regain the upper hand. To such people, we will first answer that to call this type of political episode a power struggle is ridiculously stating the obvious: the militants who took part in the Cultural Revolution constantly quoted Lenin when he said (perhaps not his best effort, but that is another question) that at bottom "the only problem is the problem of power." Mao's threatened position was explicitly at stake and had been declared as such by Mao himself. The "discoveries" of our Sinologists were simply immanent and explicit themes in the quasi–civil war that took place in China between 1965 and 1976, a war in which the truly revolutionary sequence (marked by the emergence of a new form of political thought) was only the initial segment (between 1965 and 1968). Besides, since when have our political philosophers considered as terrible the fact that a threatened political leader tries to regain his influence? Is this not what, day in and day out, they elaborate upon as the exquisite democratic essence of parliamentary politics? Next, we shall add that the meaning and importance of a struggle for power is judged by what is at stake, especially when the means of that struggle are the classic revolutionary means, in the sense that Mao said that the revolution is not "a formal dinner party." It involved an unprecedented mobilization of millions of young people and workers, an entirely unheard-of freedom of expression and of movement, gigantic demonstrations, political meetings in all places of work or study, simplistic and brutal discussions, public denunciations, a recurrent and anarchic use of violence, including armed violence, and so forth. And who could say today that Deng Xiaoping, whom the activists of the Cultural Revolution called "the second of the top leaders who, although members of the party, follow the capitalist path," did not indeed follow a line of development and social construction utterly opposed to Mao's line, which was collectivist and innovative? Did it not become apparent when, after Mao's death, he seized power in a bureaucratic coup that he encouraged in China, during the 1980s and up to his death, a form of neocapitalism of the wildest sort, utterly corrupt and all the more illegitimate as it nevertheless preserved the tyranny of the party? So there was indeed, on every question, and particularly the most important ones (the relationship between town and country, intellectual and manual labor, the party and the masses, and so forth) what the Chinese in their pithy language called "a struggle between the two classes, the two paths and the two lines."

But what about the violence, which was often extreme? What about the hundreds of thousands of people who died? What about the persecutions, particularly against the intellectuals? What we can say about this is what can be said of all the episodes of violence that made a mark on history, including any serious attempts today at constructing a politics of freedom: you cannot expect politics to be soft-hearted, progressive, and peaceful if it aims at the radical subversion of the eternal order that submits society to the domination of wealth and the rich, of power and the powerful, of science and the scientists, of capital and its servants. There is already a great and rigorous violence of thought whenever one no longer tolerates the idea that what people think be held for nothing, that the collective intelligence of the workers be held for nothing, that indeed any thought that fails to conform to the order in which the obscene rule of profit is perpetuated be held for nothing. The theme of total emancipation, when put into practice in the present, in the enthusiasm of the absolute present, is always situated beyond good and evil, because in the middle of the action the only good that is known is the one that bears the precious name whereby the established order names its own persistence. Extreme violence is, therefore, the reciprocal correlative of extreme enthusiasm, since what is at stake is indeed, to talk like Nietzsche, the transvaluation of all values. The Leninist passion for the real, which is also a passion for thought, knows no morality. Morality, as Nietzsche was aware, has only the status of a genealogy. It is a leftover from the old world. Consequently, for a Leninist, the threshold of toleration of what, in our peaceful and old world of today, is to us the worst is extremely high.

This is clearly why certain people speak today of the barbarism of the century. But it is completely unjust to isolate this dimension of passion of the real. Even if it is about the prosecution of intellectuals, disastrous as its spectacle and its effects may be, it is important to remember that what renders it possible is the fact that it is not the privileges of knowledge that dictate the political access to the real. Such was the case in the French Revolution when Fouquier-Tinville condemned Lavoisier, the founder of modern chemistry, to death, saying, "The Republic has no need for scholars." It was a barbaric utterance, completely extremist and irrational, but one has to know how to read it, beyond itself, under its axiomatic, abbreviated form: "The Republic has no need." It is not from need, from interest or from its correlative, or from privileged knowledge that the political capture of a fragment of the real derives, but from the occurrence of a thought that can be collectivized, and only from this. In other words, the political, when it exists, founds its own principle concerning the real, and it does not have any need for anything except for itself.

But perhaps any attempt to submit thought to the test of the real, political or not, would be taken today as barbaric? The passion for the real, strongly cooled down, temporarily gives place to an acceptance of reality, an acceptance that sometimes can have a joyful form and sometimes a sad one.

Certainly the passion for the real is always accompanied by a proliferation of semblance. For a revolutionary, the world is an ancient world full of corruption and treachery. One has constantly to start again with purification, with disclosing the real under its veils.

What has to be underlined is that purifying the real means extracting it from the reality that envelops and obscures it. Hence the violent taste for the surface and for transparency. The century attempts to react against profundity. It puts forward a strong criticism of the fundamental and of what lies beyond; it promotes the immediate and the sensitive surface. It proposes, following Nietzsche, to get rid of the "worlds behind" and to state that the real is identical with the appearance. The thought, precisely because what animates it is not the ideal but the real, has to grasp the appearance as appearance, or the real as pure event of its appearance. In order to arrive at this point, it is necessary to destroy every depth, every presumption of substance, every assertion of reality. It is reality that forms an obstacle against the discovery of the real as a pure surface. There is the struggle against the semblance. But since the semblance of reality adheres to the real, the destruction of the semblance identifies with the pure and simple destruction. At the end of its purification, the real as a total absence of reality is nothingness. This way, taken by numerous attempts of the century—political, artistic, scientific—will be called the way of nihilist terrorism. Since its subjective animation is the passion for the real, this is not consent to nothingness but a creation, and it seems appropriate to recognize in it an active nihilism.

Where are we today? The figure of active nihilism is taken to be completely obsolete. Every reasonable activity is limited, limiting, bordered by the gravities of reality. What one can do best is to avoid the bad and, in order to do this, the shortest way is to avoid any contact with the real. Finally one finds nothingness again, the nothing-of-the-real, and in this sense one is always within nihilism. But since one has suppressed the terrorist element—the desire to purify the real—nihilism is now deactivized. It has become passive nihilism, or reactive nihilism, a nihilism hostile against every action as well as against every thought.

The other way that the century has sketched, the one that tries to keep up the passion for the real without giving way to the paroxysmal charm of terror, I would like to call the subtractive way: it means to exhibit as the real point not the destruction of reality but a minimal difference. The other way set forth by the century is to purify reality, and not to annihilate it in its surface, by subtracting it from its apparent unity in order to detect the tiny difference, the vanishing term that is constitutive for it. What takes place hardly differs from the place where it takes place. It is in this "hardly" where all the affect is, in this immanent exception.

With both routes, the key question is that of the new. What is new? This is the obsession of the century. Since its very beginning, the century has presented itself as a figure of advent or commencement—above all the advent or recommencement of man: the new man.

This phrase, which is perhaps more Stalinist than Leninist, can be understood in two ways. For a whole host of thinkers, particularly in the field of fascist thought (including Heidegger), the new man is in part the restitution of the ancient man, who was obliterated and corrupted. Purification is, in reality, a more or less violent process of return to an origin that has disappeared. The new is a reproduction of the authentic. Ultimately, the task of the century is restitution through destruction, that is, the restitution of origins through the destruction of the inauthentic.

For another group of thinkers, particularly in the field of Marxist Communism, the new man is a real creation, something that has not yet come into existence because it arises out of the destruction of historical antagonisms. It is beyond class, beyond the state.

The new man is either restored or he is produced.

In the first case, the definition of the new man is rooted in mythic totalizations such as race, nation, blood, and soil. The new man is a collection of characteristics (Nordic, Aryan, warrior, and so forth).

In the second case, the new man, in contrast, resists all categorization and characterization. In particular he resists the family, private property, and the nation-state. This is Engels's thesis in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Marx, too, stressed that the universal singularity of the proletariat is to resist categorization, to have no characteristics, and, in particular, in the strongest sense, to have no particular nationality. This negative and universal conception of the new man, which rejects all categorization, persists throughout the century. It is important to note here the hostility toward the family as a primordial, egoistic kernel of the search for roots, tradition, and origins. Gide's pronouncement—"To all families, I hate you!"—participates in this sort of vindication of the new man.

It is quite striking to see that, at the end of the century, the notion of the family has regained its consensual and almost taboo status. Today the young adore their families and seem not to want to leave the nest. The German Green Party, which considers itself to be oppositional (but this is all relative, as we are talking about the government), envisions a day when it will be able to call itself "the family party." Even homosexuals, who in this century, as we see with Gide, are an oppositional force, are demanding their integration in the family and in the national heritage, and their right to citizenship. This tells us something about where we are today. In the real present of this century the new man was first of all, speaking in progressive terms, the one who would escape from the family and from the tethers of private property, as well as from statist despotism. He was the one who wanted militant subversion and political victory in the Leninist sense. Today, it seems that "modernization," as our masters would put it, consists in being a good little father, a good little mother, a good little son, to become an efficient executive, to profit as much as one can, and to play the role of a responsible citizen. The slogan is now "Make Money, Protect the Family, Win Votes."

The century draws to a close around three themes: impossible subjective innovation, comfort, and repetition. In other words, obsession. The century ends in an obsession for security, it ends under a maxim that is actually rather abject: it is not really so bad to be just where you are . . . there are and there have been worse ways. And this obsession goes completely against the century that, as both Freud and Lenin understood it, had been born under the sign of devastating hysteria, of its activism, and of its intransigent militarism.

We are here—we are taking up Lenin's work—in order to reactivate the very question of theory along political lines. We do this against the morose obsession that is now so prevalent. What is your critique of the existing world? What can you propose that is new? What can you imagine and create? And finally, to speak in the terms of Sylvain Lazarus, what do you think? What is politics as thought?

Note

1 V. I. Lenin, "The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky," in *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 28:269.

Alex Callinicos

2

Leninism in the Twenty-first Century? Lenin, Weber, and the Politics of Responsibility

"Ceaselessly the thinking man praises Comrade Lenin," wrote Brecht in the 1930s. Nothing could be further from the task the thinking man or woman sets him- or herself today. Demonized and despised, Lenin remains firmly beyond the pale of the politically acceptable, as much in *bien pensant* left-liberal circles as those on the right.

Fashionable historiography faithfully reproduces this attitude. Admittedly the portrait that Orlando Figes paints of Lenin as a macho aristocratic thug in his execrable anti-Bolshevik polemic *A People's Tragedy* is evidently absurd and riddled with inaccuracies.[1] Robert Service's recent biography provides a much more persuasive reconstruction of Lenin's family background, which stresses the Ulyanovs' recent and precarious entry into the gentry but then proceeds down the track of routine denunciation unsupported by any significant revelations from the archives.

Service's treatment of a remark on Lenin by the Menshevik leader Dan during their years in exile is symptomatic of his general method: "there's no such person who is so preoccupied twenty-four hours a day with revolution, who thinks no other thoughts except those about revolution and who even dreams in his sleep about revolution." The obvious reading of this comment is that it ascribes to Lenin unusual single-mindedness—a quality of character that, as numerous platitudes record, involves both strengths and weaknesses. But Service glosses Dan's remark as evidence of Lenin's belief that "only his ideas would genuinely advance the cause of the Revolution"; by the next page this has become straightforward "megalomania."[2] By the time Service reaches the Civil War, all restraint is lost—thus the killing of Nicholas II and his family in July 1918 is attributed to Lenin's "rage," "appetite for revenge," and hatred of the Romanovs without any consideration of the sources or of the kind of instrumental calculations that seem in fact, rightly or wrongly, to have motivated the Bolsheviks' decision to have the imperial family shot.[3]

It is easy enough to dismiss such cases of intellectual shoddiness as examples of the negative impact of post-1989 capitalist triumphalism on historical scholarship. But when we have set this kind of stuff aside, there remains a much more serious question to address: Does Lenin have anything to say to the Left in the twenty-first century? This question is posed at a very important political conjuncture, when resistance to global capitalism is growing, as the succession of demonstrations at Seattle, Washington, Millau, Melbourne, Prague, Seoul, Nice, and Davos shows. Some of the strongest currents in the new Left emerging in these protests are explicitly committed to highly decentralized forms of organizing that seem quite antithetical to the Leninist conception of the vanguard party. Indeed anarchists sometimes seek to exclude from anti-capitalist coalitions anyone who defends this idea, calling them authoritarian.[4]

So does Lenin have anything to say to the new anti-capitalist Left today? We are greatly in Slavoj Žižek's debt for answering this question with an emphatic "Yes!" By using some of the cultural capital his brilliant critical writings have accumulated over the past decade or so to call for a return to Lenin, Žižek has helped to open a space in which serious discussion of Lenin can be renewed on the Left. In seeking critically to interrogate the precise form in which Žižek has issued this call I am (or so I hope) acting in the spirit of solidarity that should inform the work of anti-capitalist intellectuals when they engage in the strategic discussions necessary to confront the common enemy.

As this passage from his announcement of this conference makes clear, Leninism for Žižek marks a division within the anti-capitalist Left:

> Lenin's politics is the true counterpoint not only to the center-left pragmatic opportunism, but also to the marginalist . . . leftist attitude of what Lacan called the "narcissism of the lost cause" [*le narcissme de*

> *la chose perdue*]. What a true Leninist and a political conservative have in common is the fact that they reject what one could call liberal leftist irresponsibility, that is, advocating grand projects of solidarity, freedom, and so on, yet ducking out when the price to be paid for them is in the guise of concrete and often "cruel" political measures. Like an authentic conservative, a true Leninist is not afraid to pass to the act, to take responsibility for all the consequences, unpleasant as they may be, of realizing his political project. Kipling (whom Brecht admired very much) despised British liberals who advocated freedom and justice while silently counting on the Conservatives to do the necessary dirty work for them; the same can be said for the liberal leftist's (or "Democratic Socialist's") relationship toward Leninist Communists: liberal leftists reject Social Democratic compromise; they want a true revolution, yet they shirk the actual price to be paid for it and thus prefer to adopt the attitude of a Beautiful Soul and to keep their hands clean. In contrast to this false liberal-leftist position (of those who want true democracy for the people, but without secret police to fight the counterrevolution, and without their academic privileges being threatened . . .), a Leninist, like a conservative, is authentic in the sense of fully assuming the consequences of his choices, that is, of being fully aware of what it actually means to take power and to exert it. Therein resided the greatness of Lenin after the Bolsheviks took power: in contrast to hysterical revolutionary fervor caught in a vicious cycle, the fervor of those who prefer to stay in opposition and prefer (publicly or secretly) to avoid the burden of taking things over, of accomplishing the shift from subversive activity to responsibility for the smooth running of the social edifice, he heroically embraced the heavy task of actually running the state, of making all the necessary compromises, but also of enacting the necessary harsh measures to assure that Bolshevik power would not collapse. . . .[5]

Žižek here identifies Leninism with what one might call the politics of responsibility. He differentiates this from "liberal leftism," an expression that Žižek uses to refer not to defenders of the Blair-Clinton Third Way and their postmodernist accomplices but rather to those who are genuinely opposed to global capitalism but shrink from the harsh consequences of applying their principles. Tacitly at least, "liberal leftism" thus understood extends to the Trotskyist tradition: are we not meant to recognize Trotsky and those influenced by him among those who fall victim to “hysterical revolutionary fervor caught in a vicious cycle, the fervor of those who prefer to stay in opposition and prefer (publicly or secretly) to avoid the burden of taking things over, of accomplishing the shift from subversive activity to responsibility for the smooth running of the social edifice”?

By contrast, “like an authentic conservative, a true Leninist is not afraid to pass to the act, to take responsibility for all the consequences, unpleasant as they may be, of realizing his political project.” This opposition between the “liberal leftist” eager to save his “Beautiful Soul” and the “true Leninist” who sternly accepts responsibility for the consequences of his actions recalls nothing more than the celebrated concluding pages of Weber’s lecture “Politics as a Vocation.” Here he distinguishes between two basic ways in which ethics and politics may be connected:

> Ethically oriented activity can follow two fundamentally different, irreconcilably opposed maxims. It can follow the “ethic of principled conviction” (Gesinnung) or the “ethic of responsibility.” It is not that the ethic of conviction is identical to irresponsibility, nor that the ethic of responsibility means the absence of principled conviction—there is of course no question of that. But there is a profound opposition between acting by the maxim of the ethic of conviction (putting it in religious terms: “The Christian does what is right and places the outcome in God’s hands”) and acting by the maxim of the ethic of responsibility, which means that one must answer for the (foreseeable) consequences of one’s actions.[6]

Delivered in January 1919, in the aftermath of the German Revolution of November 1918 and within days of the unsuccessful leftist rising in Berlin in which Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht perished, “Politics as a Vocation” is far from the piece of disinterested scholarship it purported to be. As Perry Anderson has noted, the text brims over with anti-revolutionary and nationalist rhetoric.[7] It is the revolutionary Left that Weber treats as the main instance of the ethic of conviction: valid when authentically experienced—as is not so in “nine cases out of ten,” where “I am dealing with windbags, people who are intoxicated with romantic sensations but who do not truly feel what they are taking upon themselves”—it implies a renunciation of this world and of practical success. Any attempt practically to realize absolute principles must inevitably founder, since it requires the resort to violence that is inherent in all politics, and hence a struggle with "the diabolical powers that lurk in all violence." Not only are the political acts thereby undertaken morally compromised, but the revolutionary movement itself becomes a vehicle for the material interests that will inevitably use its promises to legitimize themselves, "for the materialist interpretation of history is not a cab which may be boarded at will, and it makes no exceptions for the bearers of revolutions!" [8]

The political animus behind Weber's contrast between the ethics of conviction and of responsibility is best conveyed in this letter to Robert Michels, written when the latter was still a Marxist syndicalist:

> There are two possibilities. Either: (1) "my kingdom is not of this world" (Tolstoy, or a thoroughly thought-out syndicalism . . .) . . . Or: (2) Culture—(i.e., objective, a culture expressed in technical, etc., "achievements") affirmation as adaptation to the sociological condition of all "technology," whether it be economic, political or whatever . . . In the case of (2), all talk of "revolution" is farce, every thought of abolishing the "domination of man by man" by any kind of "socialist" social system or the most elaborated form of "democracy" a utopia . . . Whoever wishes to live as a "modern man" even in the sense that he has his daily paper and railways and trams—he renounces all those ideals which vaguely appeal to you as soon as he leaves the basis of revolutionism for its own sake, without any "objective," without an "objective" being thinkable.[9]

The ethic of responsibility thus implies the acceptance of the objective realities of the modern world—realities that make democracy as well as socialism mere utopias. The practitioner of this ethic therefore renounces revolution and stoically accepts the necessarily compromised character of all political action that arises from its entanglement in the unpredictable nexus of cause and effect and its reliance on "morally suspect or at least morally dangerous ends." [10] The entire construction and rhetoric of "Politics as a Vocation" makes clear Weber's preference for this ethical stance, against what he portrays as the destructive dilettantism of his Bolshevik and Spartacist foes.

It is, therefore, highly paradoxical to find Žižek using very similar terms to Weber: "a true Leninist," let us recall, "is not afraid . . . to take responsibility for all the consequences, unpleasant as they may be, of realizing his political project," whereas the ethic of responsibility commands that "one must answer for the (foreseeable) consequences of one's actions." Yet for Žižek this defines the ethical stance of the authentic revolutionary, as opposed to the liberal-leftist "Beautiful Soul" who, in avoiding the messy practical consequences of realizing his ethic of conviction, leaves the world as it is.

Paradoxes are not necessarily to be feared. Indeed, by bringing Weber and Lenin into the same intellectual force-field we may throw light on what is distinctive and valuable in a genuine Leninist politics. Such, at any rate, is what I shall try to do in the rest of this essay.

The Centrality of Theory

The first thing to note is the philosophical presuppositions implied by Weber's contrast. The distinction between the ethics of responsibility and of conviction maps onto a neo-Kantian scission between facts and values. The unconditional character of the normative goals pursued by practitioners of the latter ethic reflects their independence of any actual state of affairs. "My kingdom is not of this world": a life governed by ultimate conviction cannot mix factual appraisals with ethical considerations. Correspondingly, the assessment of consequences involved in the ethic of responsibility irreparably comprises the realistic practice of politics, inherently engaged as this is with the "diabolical powers" of violence.

But Weber's version of neo-Kantianism figures in the contrast in a second form. Common to both ethics is the fact that they cannot be rationally justified: "whether one *ought* to act on the basis of an ethic of conviction or one of responsibility, and when one should do one thing or another, these are not things about which one can give instructions to anyone." [11] The adoption of any set of values is irreducible to a rationally motivated judgment. An inherent gap separates the way the world is from the ends that govern human action: it can only be crossed by a leap, by a decision implied by no set of normative principles, and indeed it is not necessary for a person to recognize the authority of any such principles. Reason can only play at best an instrumental role, identifying the most effective means for achieving ends in whose selection it has played no part.[12]

What Anderson rightly describes as Weber's "decisionism" seems a world away from Lenin's approach to politics.[13] This is best brought out in two stages—first by considering the role played by theoretical analysis in Lenin's politics, and then by confronting the place occupied there by ethical considerations of any kind. The figure of Lenin-the-Machiavellian-opportunist is now well entrenched in mainstream academic discourse. Service is the most recent to express this conventional judgment. Describing the Second Congress of the Communist International in the summer of 1920, he writes of

> the casual fashion in which Lenin treated his Marxism whenever a goal of practical politics was in his sights. Although he thought seriously about social and economic theory and liked to stick by his basic ideas, his adherence was not absolute. In mid-1920 the priority for him was the global release of revolutionary energy. Ideas about the unavoidable stages of social development faded for him. Better to make Revolution, however roughly, than to fashion a sophisticated but unrealized theory. If intellectual sleight of hand was sometimes necessary, then so be it. Even when he stayed close to his previously declared policies, Lenin was mercurially difficult to comprehend. Parties belonging to the Comintern, he declared, should break with "opportunistic" kinds of socialism which rejected the need for the "dictatorship of the proletariat"; but simultaneously he demanded that British communists should affiliate themselves to the Labour Party: Lenin's argument was that communism in the United Kingdom was as yet too frail to set up an independent party.[14]

Yet what a serious intellectual biography of Lenin would reveal is less his casual attitude to theory than the systematic manner in which every significant turn in events drove him to reconsider how best the situation was to be understood from a theoretical perspective.[15] Before the 1905 Revolution a rigorous analysis in particular of Russian agrarian structures in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899) provided the theoretical basis of Lenin's critique of populist hopes of rural socialism. The capacities for collective action displayed by the peasantry in 1905 forced a reappraisal registered in *The Agrarian Question and the "Critics of Marx"* (1908) and *The Agrarian Programme of Russian Social Democracy in the First Russian Revolution* (1908). The crisis that the outbreak of the First World War precipitated in the international socialist movement prompted Lenin into a more general reconsideration of socialist theory and strategy that was reflected notably in the *Philosophical Notebooks*, which were produced by his reading of Hegel, and in "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism." The process culminated in *The State and Revolution*, the incomplete text on the Marxist theory of the state written while he was on the run in the summer of 1917, between the February and October Revolutions.

What this record suggests is neither the cynical opportunist nor the fanatical dogmatist portrayed by conventional historiography. Rather we see a constant tracking backward and forward between theory and practice as new problems force Lenin even in the most pressing of circumstances to step back and to reappraise the situation theoretically. But to say this is not to settle the question of precisely how Lenin himself understood the relationship between theoretical analysis and political practice. Reflecting on the experience of the October Revolution toward the end of his life, he famously quoted Napoleon: "On s'engage et puis . . . on voit." Rendered freely this means: "First engage in a serious battle and then see what happens."[16] This seems to invite a decisionist reading of Lenin's actions in 1917, with the October Revolution a gambler's throw of the dice.

Such a reading would, however, be misleading. Lenin's role in 1917 reflects rather two key themes of his political thought—(1) the complexity and unpredictability of history, and (2) the necessity of political intervention. This first theme is perhaps most evident in the "Letters from Afar" with which Lenin greeted the February Revolution. In the first letter he comments on the apparently miraculous way in which the tsar was suddenly overthrown: "There are no miracles in nature or in history, but every abrupt turn in history, and this applies to every revolution, presents such a wealth of content, unfolds such unexpected and specific combinations of forms of struggle and alignments of forces of the contestants, that to the lay mind there is much that must appear miraculous."[17]

Lenin proceeds to analyze the various elements that came together in February 1917—long-term conflicts in Russian society, the "mighty accelerator" provided by the First World War, Russia's relative weakness among the Great Powers, conspiracies by conservative and liberal politicians who, with Anglo-French encouragement, had concluded that the Romanov dynasty was an obstacle to the effective prosecution of the war, and growing discontent among the workers and garrison of Petrograd. Thus, "as a result of an extremely unique historical situation, *absolutely dissimilar currents, absolutely heterogeneous* class interests, *absolutely contrary* political and social strivings have *merged*, and in a strikingly 'harmonious' manner."[18]

Althusser, of course, used this very text in "Contradiction and Overdetermination" in order to argue for an interpretation of the Marxist dialectic that highlighted the inherent complexity of the historical process, its irreducibility to any simple essence, even the economy.[19] I am, however, more interested here in the implications of this complexity for political action. If "absolutely heterogeneous" elements can form "such unexpected and specific combinations" as those that Lenin analyzes in the "Letters from Afar," then there are strict limits to what even the best social theory can predict. This doesn't mean that historical events are unintelligible, or genuinely miraculous, but the process leading to an "abrupt turn in history" may often be grasped only through retrospective reconstruction—as Lenin did when he sought to understand the February Revolution after it had taken him, along with everyone else, by surprise.

In what passes for contemporary thought, such a recognition of what Merleau-Ponty called the ambiguity of history typically leads to the avoidance of political action and to the passive contemplation of the ironies thrown up by an infinitely complex social world. This was not so in Lenin's case: the very unpredictability of history requires that we intervene to help shape it. In *What Is to Be Done?* (1902), Lenin replies to a claim that, in effect, things are too complicated for his proposed centralized organization of revolutionaries to advance the Russian socialist movement with the famous metaphor of the key link in the chain: "*Every* question 'runs in a vicious circle' because political life as a whole is an endless chain consisting of an infinite number of links. The whole art of politics lies in finding and taking as firm a grip as we can of the link that is least likely to be struck from our hands, the one that is most important at the given moment, the one that most of all guarantees its possessor the possession of the whole chain."[20]

But political intervention is not a blind leap into the dark. Careful analysis is required in order to identify which is the key link, and that in turn involves an understanding of the "whole chain." Thus Lenin