

Lenin, Trotsky and the Marxism of the October Revolution

By David North
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This is the text of a lecture delivered by David North, chairperson of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site and of the Socialist Equality Party (US), at the University of Leipzig in Germany on March 16.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to attend the Leipzig Book Fair, and also to speak here at the University of Leipzig. At the book fair, Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the International Committee of the Fourth International, presented its two-volume collection of lectures and essays marking the centenary of the Russian Revolution. The title of the two volumes is *Why Study the Russian Revolution?* I am confident that the material in them answers this question.

In brief, the central theses advanced are, first, that the Russian Revolution was the most significant event of the twentieth century; and, second, that the lessons of this revolution must be studied if the global crisis that now confronts humanity in the twenty-first century is to be resolved on a progressive basis—that is, through the ending of the capitalist system, the establishment of workers' power, and the democratic, egalitarian and scientific reorganization of the world economy on a socialist basis.

The October Revolution was the culmination of the massive social uprising of the working class and oppressed masses of Russia in 1917. It was, and remains, unique in one fundamental sense: it was the first, and remains to this day, the only revolution carried out consciously by the working class, led by a Marxist party acting on the basis of an international socialist program and perspective.

If I may be permitted to quote from my first lecture on the Russian Revolution, delivered last March and published in the first volume of *Why Study the Russian Revolution?*

The Russian Revolution demands serious study as a critical episode in the development of scientific social thought. The historical achievement of the Bolsheviks in 1917 both demonstrated and actualized the essential relationship between scientific materialist philosophy and revolutionary practice.

The evolution of the Bolshevik Party vindicated Lenin's statement in *What Is To Be Done?:* "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement." As Lenin continuously insisted, Marxism is the most highly developed form of *philosophical materialism*, which critically reworked and assimilated the genuine achievements of classical German idealism, chiefly that of Hegel (that is, dialectical logic and the recognition of the active role of historically evolving social practice in the cognition of objective reality).

In no other revolution was there such a conscious and explicit relationship between Marxist theory and the revolutionary practice of the working class. In order to explain, more precisely, the nature of this

relationship, it is necessary to take note of the significant historical anniversaries that we are marking in 2018.

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx. It also marks the 170th anniversary of the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*. Of all the great philosophers, none speaks to our own time so powerfully and directly as Karl Marx. His work does not require "retranslation" into a comprehensible modern language. In a letter to Lassalle in May 1858, Marx noted, "Even in the case of philosophers who give systematic form to their work, Spinoza for instance, the true inner structure of the system is quite unlike the form in which it was consciously presented by him."

In Marx, by contrast, there is a remarkable correspondence between the "true inner structure" of the philosopher's system and the form in which it found expression. Beginning with his critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Law*, Marx set out to liberate theoretical thought from the mystical obfuscations of philosophical idealism. There is a wonderful moment in Raoul Peck's *The Young Marx*, when Engels says, to the not entirely congenial revolutionary journalist, "You are the greatest materialist philosopher of our age. You are, my dear man, a genius."

Engels is referring specifically to Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*. In this work, written in 1843, Marx draws attention to the central problem of Hegel's philosophical idealism:

Not the logic of the matter, but the matter of logic is the philosophical element. The logic does not serve to prove the state, but the state to prove the logic.

That is, Hegel derived the state and its laws from the movement of pure thought, from the self-movement of the abstract categories of Logic. This was an inversion, in the realm of idealist philosophy, of the actual relationship between matter and consciousness. The critique of Hegel's system required a return to philosophical materialism, which asserts the primacy of matter over consciousness; that consciousness is derived from and reflects the movement of a material universe. Marx's critique of Hegel's idealism—what Engels praises in the scene, to which we have just referred, with the well-known phrase, "Placing Hegel on his feet,"—established the theoretical foundation for the revolution in social, historical and political thought that was accomplished jointly by Marx and Engels between 1844 and 1847.

In *The German Ideology*, written in 1845 (though not published for 80 years), Marx and Engels contrasted their materialist philosophy to the idealism of the Young Hegelians, who followed in their deceased master's footsteps:

In direct contrast to German philosophy, which descends from

heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven. That is to say, not of setting out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh; but setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process.

The outcome of this work was the elaboration of the materialist conception of history, its application to the scientific study of the laws of motion of the modern capitalist system, and, on this theoretical foundation, the conscious political organization of the international working class, and the development of the strategy and tactics of the world socialist revolution. Marx concisely summarized his materialist conception of history in the *Preface to a Critique of Political Economy*, written in 1859:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

Throughout his life, Marx insisted on the materialist foundations of his theoretical work. In his introduction to the first volume of *Das Kapital*, published in 1867, Marx explained:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, *i.e.* the process of thinking, which, under the name of ‘the Idea,’ he even transforms into an independent subject, is the *demiurgos* of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of ‘the Idea.’ With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.

Marx resisted all efforts to reconcile his materialist philosophy with Hegelian or any other variation of philosophical idealism. In 1868, in a letter to his good friend Ludwig Kugelmann, Marx explicitly refuted the claim of the young professor Eugen Dühring that *Das Kapital* was based on a Hegelian schema:

He [Dühring] knows full well that my method of exposition is *not* Hegelian, since I am a materialist, and Hegel an idealist. Hegel’s dialectics is the basic form of all dialectics, but only *after* being stripped of its mystical form, and it is precisely this which distinguishes *my* method.

Marx and Engels’ application of the materialist conception of history in

their analyses of the economic and social contradictions of the capitalist system are being substantiated, as never before, in the contemporary world. The global expansion of capitalism, particularly during the past quarter century, has created a state of permanent and continuously intensifying crisis. It has become something of a cliché to state that Fukuyama’s “End of History” thesis—proclaimed in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR and the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe—has been refuted by events. All the contradictions exposed by Marx now manifest themselves with unprecedented intensity. The accumulation of wealth is accompanied by an extraordinary degree of social inequality. A few dozen people in the world control and dispose of more wealth than three-quarters of the planet’s entire population. The real state of capitalist society exceeds in its injustices, its fixation with the mindless accumulation of personal riches, the clumsiest of populist caricatures. In every critical social sphere—education, health care, housing, and a secure old age—capitalist society is moving backward, renouncing even the limited reforms of the past century.

The descriptions given by the ruling elites of the present state of the world speak for themselves. The possibility of a cataclysmic war between nuclear armed powers is widely acknowledged.

And yet, in the midst of global crisis, the intellectual representatives of petty-bourgeois pseudoleft politics, occupying prominent positions in the academic world, proclaim the death of Marxism. Countless professors, obsessed with issues of race, gender, ethnicity, psychology, environmentalism, and, of course, sexuality, assert that Marxism cannot provide a guide to the problems of the present. Answers must be found outside the theoretical framework of Marxism. In a volume that bears the imposing title, *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*:

We are no longer dealing with a crisis *within* Marxism, between various interpretations, provoking expulsions and splits ... We face a crisis that involves Marxism’s very existence, capped as it is by the disappearance of the institutions, party or other, that officially referred to it, and by its erasure from the cultural sphere, the collective memory, and individual imaginations. ...

The most important authors we present, from Bourdieu, via Habermas and Foucault, to Derrida, can in no way be identified as Marxists. Such figures, along with others, simply seem to us to be indispensable to any reconstruction. They represent other elements in our culture, which cannot be assimilated to Marxism, but which are nevertheless precious to us.

A more appropriate title of this volume would be *Companion for Contemporary Anti-Marxists*. The publishers, editors and contributors are seeking to resolve the “crisis of Marxism” on the basis of its liquidation into various forms of idealist, irrationalist and explicitly anti-Marxist thought. What is involved in this project is not only incorrect theoretical conceptions. Underlying the anti-Marxist theoretical conceptions are reactionary political positions, rooted in interests of sections of the petty bourgeoisie—its more affluent sections—that are hostile to the entire theoretical and political legacy of the October Revolution.

For example, a leading academic representative of the contemporary pseudoleft, Alain Badiou, wrote in 2011:

Marxism, the workers’ movement, mass democracy, Leninism, the party of the proletariat, the socialist state—all the inventions of the 20th century—are not really useful to us anymore.

The celebrated pseudoleftist celebrity and intellectual charlatan Slavoj Žižek states in his latest book *Lenin 2017: Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through*

Let's face it: today, Lenin and his legacy are perceived as hopelessly dated, belonging to a defunct 'paradigm'. Not only was Lenin understandably blind to many of the problems that are now central to contemporary life (ecology, struggles for emancipated sexuality, etc.), but also his brutal political practice is totally out of sync with current democratic sensitivities, his vision of the new society as a centralized industrial system run by the state is simply irrelevant, etc.?

None of these critics of Marxism offers any credible theoretical and political alternative. The same Monsieur Badiou who proclaimed that Marxism and other "inventions" of the 20th century "are not really useful to us anymore" wrote just two years later: "[T]he majority of the political categories movement activists are trying to use to think and transform our current situations are, as they now stand, largely inoperative." The title of this essay is, appropriately, "Our Contemporary Impotence."

In discussing the intellectual bankruptcy of the contemporary pseudoleft, I cannot avoid calling attention to yet another anniversary. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of 1968, a year that witnessed massive social upheaval on a world scale—from the struggle waged against American imperialism in Vietnam and the mass student protests throughout the world against this neo-colonial war, to the events of May-June 1968 that threatened the survival of capitalism in France, and the anti-Stalinist Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia.

In that critical year, what were the theoretical works that influenced politically-radicalized youth, students and broad sections of the left intelligentsia? Of course, Marxism was very much "in the air." But it was a "Marxism" that was, in its theoretical foundations and political orientation, profoundly different from the Marxism that formed the basis of the practice of the Bolshevik Party. It was not the school of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky that influenced the Generation of 1968, but the Frankfurt School of Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Wilhelm Reich and, most popular of all, Herbert Marcuse.

Two characteristics of the Frankfurt School need to be stressed: First, its indifference, and even explicit hostility, to the working class and the development of its struggle against the capitalist system. The essential element of the historical pessimism and skepticism of the Frankfurt School was its rejection of the classical Marxist conception of the decisive revolutionary role of the working class in the struggle against capitalism. This pessimism can be politically explained as a demoralized reaction to the defeats suffered by the German working class between 1918 and 1933. For intellectuals such as Horkheimer and Marcuse, these defeats were not to be explained as the outcome of the errors and betrayals of the political parties of the working class—that is, of the Social Democratic and Communist parties—but as the demonstration of the non-revolutionary character of the working class.

As early as 1927, in an essay titled "The Impotence of the German Working Class," Max Horkheimer wrote: "The capitalist process of production has ... driven a wedge between the interest in socialism and the human qualities necessary for its implementation."

The political pessimism of the Frankfurt School was intensified by the catastrophe of 1933 and the horrors of Nazism and the Second World War. What little remained of the Marxism of the Frankfurt School academics served as little more than window dressing for their accommodation to the post World War II imperialist order and, especially in the case of Horkheimer and Adorno, the reconstruction of the

bourgeois democratic state under the aegis of Konrad Adenauer ("Der Alte"), Ludwig Erhard ("Der Dicke"), and even Kurt Georg Kiesinger ("Der Nazi").

Herbert Marcuse attempted to maintain a more critical and radical attitude to capitalist society. But his rejection of the working class as a revolutionary force was no less explicit:

Now to the question of the working class. I said, and I still say it today, that the American working class is not a revolutionary class. ... I said that in the present situation, in view of the fact that the American working class is not a revolutionary class, it so happens that the political consciousness, the radical political consciousness, is concentrated among minority nonintegrated groups such as the students, such as the black and brown minorities, such as women and so on.

As I have already stated, the theoretical conceptions developed in opposition to Marxism are, in the final analysis, rooted in definite social and political interests. The theoreticians of the Frankfurt School expressed the outlook of sections of the German petty bourgeoisie. Moreover, the main representatives of the Frankfurt School showed no interest in, let alone active political support for, Trotsky's struggle against the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union. This is a political fact that is, without question, of great importance in understanding the evolution of the Frankfurt School. However, it would be wrong to neglect consideration of its theoretical-philosophical roots. An examination of the theoretical influences that found expression in the Frankfurt School is necessary, not only to understand this intellectual tendency and its many offshoots, but also to identify its essential difference from the Marxism of Bolshevism and the October Revolution.

Marxism played an immense role in the development of the German workers movement. It provided the theoretical foundation for the development of the SPD as the mass party of the German working class. It is unquestionable that the advanced sections of the working class were educated on the basis of Marxism, and that Marxism also influenced broad sections of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. But it must be stressed that the relation of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia to Marxism was frequently ambivalent and even hostile. This is a complex subject, which has been the subject of extensive historical study. Only a brief overview of this issue is possible within the framework of this lecture.

It is a striking historical coincidence that, at precisely the point when the Social Democratic Party emerged from illegality in 1890, with virtually unchallengeable authority within the working class, sections of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia expressed increasing dissatisfaction with the Marxist foundations of the movement. Specifically, the philosophical materialism of Marxism, its insistence on the primacy of matter over consciousness, on the law-governed character of social development, and the dominant influence of economic forces, aroused increasing objection within sections of the petty bourgeois periphery of the SPD. Marxism, they argued, placed excessive emphasis on the law-governed character of social processes, of objective necessity over subjective initiative, and of conscious motivation over unconscious and even irrational impulses. Marxian determinism, rooted in philosophical materialism, discouraged the individual expression of free will and personal initiative.

In opposition to Marxist materialism, with its insistence on the primacy of socio-economic forces and processes, and its elevation of scientific knowledge and objective truth over intuition and subjective will, political and intellectual tendencies drew inspiration not from Marx, but from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. One such tendency was represented by the well-known anarchist, Gustav Landauer. He declared himself a bitter

enemy of Marxist materialism:

We perceive the coming condition of things as possible or even as necessary because we love and desire it. Man is the measure of all things and there is no objective knowledge in which concepts are a mirror of the objects perceived. ... It would be much more worthwhile if socialists would first give unconstrained expression to their will and then make clear why they believe that the thing is also capable of realization. But to proclaim the unconditional necessity, founded upon nature, of a definite course ... is to cripple the driving power of the movement through a ... superstition that everything will develop by itself ...

Marxism ... must be told to its face that it is the plague of our age and the curse of the socialist movement.

The views expressed by Landauer emerged in the context of an intellectual environment in which substantial sections of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois intelligentsia and, especially, artists, were increasingly drawn to the exploration of the unconscious. Even as science was making extraordinary advances, these layers were seized by the conviction that the key to an understanding of reality and ultimate truth lay in the exploration of subjective experience.

This was by no means a tendency that found expression only in Germany and Austria. It was a broad based intellectual phenomenon, which found a response throughout Europe, including Russia. The implications of this assault on philosophical materialism were far-reaching. It raised the following questions: were the program, strategy and tactics of the socialist parties, and the practice of the working class, to be based on a scientific analysis of an objective reality that exists independently of consciousness, or on the basis of intuition and subjective will? Were the goals and actions of the working class to be based on an understanding of objective laws of social development or, as George Sorel and others urged, on psychologically provocative myths?

Two prominent figures in the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party, Alexander Bogdanov and Anatol Lunacharskii, under, to a not inconsiderable extent, the influence of Nietzsche, argued that Marxism had to be revised in a manner that would infuse the struggle for socialism with a far greater emotional content. Lunacharsky even proposed the development of a new socialist religion, which would sustain the revolutionary movement with faith and enthusiasm, and thereby counter the pessimism and demoralization that followed the defeat of the 1905 Revolution. Lunacharskii declaimed: "Let us adore the potential of mankind, our potential and represent it in an aureole of glory, the more strongly to love it." As one historian noted in a study of Nietzsche's influence on Russian socialists, Lunacharskii's "preaching has the manufactured enthusiasm and false cheerfulness of scoutmasters whipping up support for an unpopular but necessary chore: Lunacharskii frequently expresses the conviction that in the current social crisis only the enthusiasm produced by his religion can provide the strength and motivation needed for the victory of socialism." [1]

Lenin, bemused by Lunacharsky's religious ecstasy, began referring to him as "the blessed Anatole." But Lenin did not limit himself to endowing his erratic comrade with a humorous nickname. Recognizing the dangerous political implications of the development of subjective and irrationalist tendencies within the socialist movement, Lenin wrote his greatest theoretical treatise, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. There is no other work by Lenin that has provoked such outrage as his intransigent defense of philosophical materialism. Not even *What Is to Be Done?* has been so bitterly denounced. *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, it is claimed, is a work of "vulgar materialism," which impermissibly

simplifies the relationship between matter and consciousness, promoting the "crude" conception that consciousness is merely a reflection of the material world, and that human thought and practice are nothing more than a programmed response to material stimuli. It is even claimed that Lenin, when he wrote *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, had not yet studied Hegel and was not familiar with dialectics.

Such descriptions of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* unscrupulously distort Lenin's text, not to mention his intellectual biography. One will find in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* numerous passages in which Lenin brilliantly illuminated the relationship between materialism and dialectical logic. But he certainly did insist on the primacy of matter over consciousness, and on the objective existence of a material world independent of thought. Lenin's profound respect for Hegel's *Logic* was always tempered by his criticism of its idealist foundations. To the very end of his life, Lenin remained firmly committed to the defense of the theoretical method and heritage of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The recognition of the objective world, existing independently of consciousness, formed the essential basis of a materialist epistemology. And this materialist epistemology was, in turn, the theoretical foundation for the development of a scientifically grounded program and perspective upon which to base the practice of the working class. In a critical passage of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin wrote:

The highest task of humanity is to comprehend this objective logic of economic evolution (the evolution of social life) in its general and fundamental features, so that it may be possible to adapt *to it* one's social consciousness and the consciousness of the advanced classes of all capitalist countries in as clear and critical a fashion as possible.

What this means is that the working class must understand the laws of historical and social development, and it must be able to correctly analyze objective developments in order to conduct a revolutionary struggle against capitalism and change the world. It is on this basis that the great Russian Marxists—above all, Lenin and Trotsky—prepared for and led the working class to power in October 1917.

Lenin's commitment to materialism was not of a merely abstract and intellectual character. The defense of materialism was inseparably bound up with the fight to develop a correct appraisal of political developments, define precisely the tasks of the working class, and provide a correct political and practical orientation. The essential link between philosophical materialism and the political orientation of the working class was repeatedly stressed by Lenin. In his 1913 essay, "The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism," Lenin wrote:

The philosophy of Marxism is *materialism*. Throughout the modern history of Europe, and especially at the end of the eighteenth century in France, where a resolute struggle was conducted against every kind of medieval rubbish, against serfdom in institutions and ideas, materialism has proved to be the only philosophy that is consistent, true to all the teachings of natural science and hostile to superstition, cant and so forth. The enemies of democracy have, therefore, always exerted all their efforts to 'refute', undermine and defame materialism, and have advocated various forms of philosophical idealism, which always, in one way or another, amounts to the defence or support of religion.

An examination of the work of Lenin and Trotsky in the years prior to 1917 reveals an intense and unrelenting focus on issues of political

perspective and analysis. The Marxism of Lenin and Trotsky, rooted methodologically in dialectical and historical materialism, was occupied, above all, with understanding the dynamics of the escalating crisis of the world capitalist system, and the implications of that crisis within Russia. Again, to quote Lenin, this time from his biographical-theoretical essay on Karl Marx, written in 1913:

Only an objective consideration of the sum total of the relations between absolutely all the classes in a given society, and consequently a consideration of the objective stage of development reached by that society and of the relations between it and other societies, can serve as a basis for the correct tactics of an advanced class.

Notwithstanding the differences that existed between Lenin and Trotsky before 1917, their work was concentrated on the development of the strategic orientation of the socialist movement. With the outbreak of war in 1914, Lenin's study of the world crisis acquired an extraordinary depth and intensity, with far reaching consequences for the orientation of the Bolshevik Party in 1917. The theoretical work that underlay the writing of *Imperialism* in 1915-1916 led to the crucial shift in Bolshevik strategy, which found expression in Lenin's *April Theses*. Though he had followed a different political path, Trotsky's extraordinary role in 1917 was prepared by his development, during the previous twelve years, of his theory of permanent revolution.

There can be no revolution without will, that is, without the highest degree of subjective determination. But will and determination must be guided by a correct appreciation of objective reality, upon which the practice of the socialist movement must be based. From a theoretical standpoint, the rejection of the glorification of subjective will as a basis for political action separates Marxism from countless varieties of petty-bourgeois radical politics, including anarchism and Maoism, and, of course, the most counter-revolutionary of mass middle-class movements, fascism. At a speech before the Third Congress of the Communist International in 1921, Trotsky explained:

If we detach the subjective from the objective aspect, this philosophy leads logically to pure revolutionary adventurism.

And I believe that we have learned in the great school of Marxism to unite dialectically the objective with the subjective. That is, we have learned to base our action not only on this or that expression of subjective will but also on the conviction that the working class must hew to this subjective will of ours and that the will to action of the proletariat is determined by the objective situation.

Two years later, when Trotsky was already engaged in the struggle against the growth of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, he brilliantly explained the relationship between the scientific appraisal of objective reality and subjective will in the work of Lenin:

Leninism is, first of all, realism, the highest qualitative and quantitative appreciation of reality, from the standpoint of revolutionary action. Precisely because of this it is irreconcilable with flying from reality behind the screen of hollow agitationism, with passive loss of time, with haughty justification of yesterday's mistakes on the pretext of saving the tradition of the party.

Leninism is genuine freedom from formalistic prejudices, from

moralizing doctrinairism, from all forms of intellectual conservatism attempting to stifle the will to revolutionary action. But to believe that Leninism signifies that "anything goes" would be an irremediable mistake. [*The New Course*]

We live in a world of extraordinary complexity. The vast and immensely powerful productive forces, global in scope, appear to overwhelm humanity. Certainly, they overwhelm the ruling class, which does not know how, and on account of the economic logic of the capitalist system, cannot develop and make socially progressive use of these forces. This is the essential problem that underlies the unending series of economic crises, intensifying social dislocation, and the mounting danger of a Third World War, fought with nuclear weapons.

The working class, by virtue of its objective position in the global productive forces, can solve the historical problem that eludes the bourgeoisie. But it can only accomplish this to the extent that it is able to align its subjective consciousness with objective reality. The revolutionary Marxist party is the essential political instrument for the achievement of this alignment of consciousness and reality, of objective political necessity with mass revolutionary practice. This alignment was achieved in 1917. It must be achieved again, and the accomplishment of this task is the central objective of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

[1] "Empiricriticism: A Bolshevik Philosophy?," by Aileen Kelly in *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*, Volume 22, No. 1 (January-March 1981), p. 104

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