

A Leninist Reading of Marx (and Engels): A Note

by Paresh Chattopadhyay

The prolific pen of the famous communist-economist, Prabhat Patnaik (hereafter PP), has recently produced in his party organ *People's Democracy* (January 13 2013) a defence of Lenin from which there is much to learn, as is generally the case with his writings. For us of particular interest in his paper is his reading of Marx and Engels as a weapon in his defence of Lenin (which he uses interchangeably with the ideologically surcharged term 'Leninism') against Lenin's critics.

He starts the paper with the statement, "A basic proposition of Leninism is that theoretical understanding that leads to the formation of class consciousness comes to the proletariat from 'outside', the proletariat does not spontaneously achieve revolutionary class consciousness." (p. 1) He asserts that this idea originated in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, not in Lenin. But "Lenin gave it both a centrality and a concrete shape". (p. 1) However, this idea comes, not from the *Manifesto*, but from Kautsky, as Lenin himself underlined in his *What is to be done* (1902) with a long citation of a text by Kautsky. One wonders why PP does not even once mention Kautsky. Now, PP mixes up—à la *Lénnine*—three different things, consciousness, theory, education, whereas, Kautsky, to his credit, speaks in the cited text only of consciousness. The long quotation from Engels which Lenin cites in support of his own position against workers' spontaneity, does not help Lenin, since Engels speaks only of 'theory' and 'theoretical struggle' as needed for the workers. Engels does not speak there at all of workers' consciousness. In fact in his 1890 Preface to the *Manifesto* Engels stresses the need for workers' intellectual development, not of workers' revolutionary consciousness, supposed to be brought to the workers 'from outside'. "For the ultimate triumph of the ideas set forth in the *Manifesto*," writes Engels, "Marx relied *solely and exclusively* on the intellectual development of the working class, as it necessarily had to ensue from united action and discussion"(Emphasis added) Here the expression "action and discussion" refers obviously to the action and discussion taking place within the working class movement.

The *Communist Manifesto* itself underlines that "the proletariat alone is the real revolutionary class", and since there is no revolution without revolutionary consciousness, it follows that the proletariat as itself the revolutionary class gains this consciousness by its own effort, without waiting for the intellectuals to bring the necessary consciousness from outside. Indeed, in a letter to his friend Schweitzer (February 2, 1865), Marx stressed: "The working class is either revolutionary or it is nothing." We find this basic idea already in two successive works by Marx and Engels. In the *Holy Family*, they wrote: "The proletariat can and must liberate itself." Does not this self-liberation automatically indicate that the working class must be capable of gaining the revolutionary consciousness by its own effort which impels it to undertake the revolution for self-liberation?

In the *German Ideology* the thrust is even sharper: "the consciousness of a profound revolution arises from this class itself". More than a decade later, in his late 1850s manuscripts, Marx wrote referring to the worker: "The recognition of the products as her own and the judgment that her

separation from the conditions of realisation as something improper and imposed on her by force is an enormous consciousness which is itself the product of the mode of production based on capital and which rings its death-knell in the same way as the consciousness of the slave that she cannot be a property of somebody else.” No mention of the need for the intellectuals bringing consciousness from outside (*pace* Kautsky-Lenin). Indeed, this whole Kautsky-Lenin position directly contradicts Marx’s clarion call of 1864: “The emancipation of the working class is the task of workers themselves.”

In this connection it may not be irrelevant to note that Lenin, already in an early article on Engels, held that “in 1864 Marx founded the International Workingmen’s Association”, which is a total

Untruth

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What does history tell us? “Facts are stubborn things,” as Engels used to say. How many Parisian Communards of 1871 were aware of Marx’s ideas? Only the very few members of the International, who became members of the Commune, an infinitely small minority. It was rather Marx who

Learnt

from the Communards. The idea of a decentralised federation of workers’ self-governing organs (communes) starting from the rural areas from below upwards with delegates subject to election and recall—“destroying the state power” in the process—was something new to Marx, such that he showered praise on the Parisian workers for creating this “political form under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour“. Next, turning to Russia, virtually none among the millions of labouring participants in the great revolutionary uprising of February 1917 initiated by the most oppressed of workers—the women textile workers—had even heard of Marx. They obviously did not require the intellectuals to imbibe them with revolutionary consciousness for creating their self-governing organs—the councils, and a little later, factory committees. Precisely the Bolsheviks as professional revolutionaries, full of revolutionary consciousness, seized power really from the Soviets—and not the Provisional Government—and rather quickly destroyed the great revolutionary process. Beginning with summer 1918, the Soviets as independent self-governing power of the labouring people evaporated. Thus the century’s greatest chance for a future socialist revolution—subjective and material conditions permitting—was annihilated.

The *Communist Manifesto* mentions the role of the bourgeois intellectuals, particularly the ideologues, who at a particular phase of the class struggle go over to the proletariat. Many years later, Marx and Engels in light of further experience, notably of the German workers’ movement, returned to this question more critically. In their so-called “circular letter” (1879) to their comrades, they wrote, referring to the German bourgeois and petty bourgeois intellectuals, inclined favourably

towards the workers' movement: "Such people to be useful to the movement must bring with them the real educational elements. In a workers' party these people are falsifying elements. Though for (different) reasons they may be tolerated for the time being, it is obligatory *only* to tolerate them, but in no way to allow them to exercise any influence on the party leadership, being always conscious that a break with them is only a question of time...With the foundation of the International we have expressly formulated the battle cry: the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself. Therefore we cannot associate with those people who openly say that the workers are too uncultivated to liberate themselves and can only be freed from above by the philanthropical big and the petty bourgeoisie" (Emphasis in text)

PP takes great pains to establish the democratic credentials of Lenin and the Bolsheviks under him, mentioning "socialist democracy", and underlining that "common people" must not be left aside by the experts for decision-making. He forcefully defends Lenin against the charge that the Leninist view militates against democracy. The reality of this 'socialist democracy' was demonstrated by Lenin and his associates by seizing power independently of and behind the back of the workers' self governing organs (soviets), and over the period leading to this event, in his confidential letters to the party leaders, Lenin showed complete distrust and utter disdain for the Soviets while shouting in public "all power to the Soviets". This should be seen as a preparation for the ultimate elimination of the soviets within a few months of the party seizing power.

All this happened *before* the civil war started. Now there was only a straight line from that point to the mass massacre of the labouring people of Kronstadt *after* the civil war on completely false charges, on Lenin's own admission. At the Ninth Party Congress Lenin denounced the still "surviving notorious democratism", and characterised the "outcry against appointees "as pernicious trash (*vrednyi khlam*)". To cite another example of this 'socialist democracy', which contradicts PP's assertion. From E.H. Carr we learn that at the Eighth Party Congress Osinsky complained that even the Central Committee as the collegiate organ did not exist and that "comrades Lenin and Sverdlov decide current questions by way of conversation with each other" or with individuals in charge of the particular department. Where is socialist democracy here?

Finally, it may not be totally out of place to refer to another recent piece by PP in a Kolkata newspaper, *The Telegraph* (December 12, 2012) where he seemed to be trying to improve the public image of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. There he asserted that it was the Bolshevik party which had abolished capital punishment in Russia. This is another

Untruth.

As a matter of fact, it was the Provisional Government and not at all the Bolsheviks who had abolished death sentence in the country after the fall of monarchy.

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