

# Lenin Reloaded: the comic repetition of a tragic history

*Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth*

Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis,  
and Slavoj Zizek, editors  
Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

---

Review article by Don Milligan, 26<sup>th</sup> February 2008

---

**“The qualities of hardness and firmness account for Lenin’s *solidity*. In matters of Marxist theory, Lenin is a totalitarian dogmatist, in other words a tower of strength. But he was not only that. For he has a third quality, the quality of *subtlety*.”**

**Jean-Jacques Lecercle**

**W**hen the October Revolution finally came to an end during the counter-revolutions of 1989-1991 the revaluation of the Bolshevik seizure of power seemed as urgent as it was overdue. Both the Communist Party and the Soviet Union disappeared almost without institutional or political trace. Gone was the notion that the working class and progressive sections of the bureaucracy might restore

© Don Milligan,  
'Lenin Reloaded: the comic repetition of a tragic history',  
26<sup>th</sup> February 2008. Posted on *Reflections of a Renegade* at  
[www.donmilligan.net](http://www.donmilligan.net) on 29th February 2008.

the fortunes of Soviet Power; gone was the idea that workers would infuse post-Stalinist societies with an authentic socialist content. Capitalism, ranging from the oligarchic to the law-governed, came roaring into the vacuum left throughout Russia, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe. Events in China, already in the hands of 'those taking the capitalist road', completed the defeat of Bolshevism, leaving only North Korea and Cuba to carry the *Gains of October*: a state monopoly of foreign trade and an entirely state-run economy.

Of course, the defeat or disintegration of Bolshevism had long been deemed to be the result of the disintegration of the revolutionary proletariat in the wars and economic chaos of the years 1918 to 1921 which led in their turn to Stalin's assumption of power variously dated as 1924, 1926, or 1927; the destruction of Bolshevism had also been attributed to the physical *liquidation* of the Bolshevik cadre in the cellars of the secret police during the nineteen thirties. These catastrophes had not, on the whole, required a thorough going re-valuation of Lenin's role because they were deemed to be the effect of the Wars of Intervention and the Civil War, and more directly the work of Stalin and the reconstruction of the Communist Party following Lenin's death in January 1924.

Consequently, Lenin's legacy benefited both from his beatification by the *Ogre in the Kremlin* and the fact of his early death. This early death has meant that he was not besmirched by the famines, enslavement and massacres, which accompanied the destruction of the Soviet peasantry during the process of industrialisation. He was not regarded as personally responsible for the institutionalising of terror as the key instrument of Soviet economic management between 1918 and 1921, and again between 1928 and 1956. In the earlier period, *events* or *historical contingency* was the culprit in the later period Stalin was held personally

© Don Milligan,

'Lenin Reloaded: the comic repetition of a tragic history',  
26<sup>th</sup> February 2008. Posted on *Reflections of a Renegade* at  
[www.donmilligan.net](http://www.donmilligan.net) on 29th February 2008.

responsible. At any event Lenin was a decent chap who did his best in very trying circumstances.

This view is implicit in the contributions, which make up *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*. The book emerged from the 2001 conference, ‘Toward a Politics of Truth: The Retrieval of Lenin’.<sup>1</sup> It is a collection of papers delivered at the conference, of work already published elsewhere, and of essays especially commissioned for the book. It is not, strictly speaking, committed to a reevaluation of Lenin’s role in revolutionary politics or to a defence of his legacy, but these purposes are implicit throughout; they haunt every page. However, the book’s explicit purpose is to insist upon the need for a politics of commitment to revolutionary change. The book’s editors explain their focus upon “the name ‘Lenin’” by their recognition of the “urgent necessity” of offering a challenge to the hegemony of liberal-democratic thought ushered in by the collapse of communism. The authors are keenly conscious of the need to respond to a situation in which any proposal for a displacement of capitalism elicits warnings concerning the horrors of the Gulag.

They insist upon returning to the name of *Lenin* because they know from bitter experience that a return to Marx or Marxism will simply run into the sands of academia. Concentration upon Lenin, the *outsider*, rather than *the Marx of the academy*, permits a focus upon the manner in which “Lenin violently displaces Marx, tearing his theory out of its original context” and “planting it in another historical moment” and in this revolutionary process, “universalizing it”. (2-3) Clearly, the authors want to employ the name of Lenin to restore the political energy of Marxism lost by its assimilation into European thought:

---

<sup>1</sup> The conference was held 2<sup>nd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> February 2001 at the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut, Essen, Germany.

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. (2)

The volume is composed of seventeen essays set out in four parts: ‘Retrieving Lenin’, ‘Lenin in Philosophy’, ‘War and Imperialism’, and ‘Politics and its Subject’.<sup>2</sup> The editors hope that it will contribute to the repetition in the present global circumstances of the *Leninian* “gesture of reinventing the revolutionary project in the conditions of imperialism, colonialism, and world war”. (3) In step with Lenin, they understand truth as, by definition, one-side, and insist that truth and partisanship are not mutually exclusive but the condition of each other: “*universal* truth in a concrete situation can only be articulated from a thoroughly *partisan* position.” They understand the novelty and value of Lenin’s political contribution as

---

<sup>2</sup> The full contents page is set out at the end of this article.

one that arose from his being pitched into thoroughly new circumstances, which compelled him to *reinvent* Marxism. The authors want to return to Lenin, to *repeat* or *reload* him so that they can retrieve the *Leninian* revolutionary impulse within today's constellation. (3)

This project demands nothing less than that we should transcend the notion of both defeat and terror and focus instead upon the necessity and potential of taking sides in the struggle against the inequality and injustice implicit in the rule of capital. We should see Lenin for what he really is, the name for unequivocally taking sides and for taking decisive action against *bourgeois liberalism* and the exploitation and modes of dominion, which it seeks simultaneously to impose *and* conceal under the veils of necessity and democracy.

Etienne Balibar's essay (*The Philosophical Moment in Politics Determined by War: Lenin 1914-16*)<sup>3</sup>, is interesting in its rejection of the idea that Lenin ever participated, "in a strong sense" in philosophical discourse. For Balibar there is no "philosophy of Lenin":

This is clearly something that "Leninist" ideology in its different variants has totally misunderstood. To constitute the figure of a "philosophy of Lenin," this ideology had to have wholesale recourse to his prewar works (in particular *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*). When it referred to the *Philosophical Notebooks*, raising these from the status of

---

<sup>3</sup> This text by Etienne Balibar first appeared as 'Le moment philosophique déterminé par la guerre dans la politique: Lénine 1914-1916', in *Le philosophe et la guerre de 14*, edited and with an introduction by Phillippe Soulez, Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1998.

private notes to that of fragments of a finished work, or aphoristic writings, it had to offer a selected and biased reading, denying in practice their essentially unstable character. (209)

The *Philosophical Notebooks* are the trace of this philosophical moment, which occurred towards the end of 1914 and the beginning of 1915, when Lenin set himself to reading the metaphysicians. It is from this period, Balibar argues, that Lenin begins to radically undermine the established idea that there would be a breakdown of capitalism in either a progressive or catastrophic form. This idea, which continues to inform the texts of 1915-16, including *Imperialism*,<sup>4</sup> begins to shift:

With the analysis of late 1916 and early 1917, immediately preceding the revolutionary moment, this evolutionism was profoundly rectified. Not only was all historical development now conceived as “uneven,” but the complexity of the political field appeared definitively irreducible to a logic of “tendencies.” Following Althusser, we can call this the discovery in the theoretical and strategic field of the *overdetermination* intrinsic to class antagonism. (211)

Lenin recoiled from the notion of the *final* crisis of capitalism to “situate the revolutionary perspective in the element of the duration and complexity of conjunctures.” (211) For Lenin, acceptance of the a priori philosophy of history, had increasingly to be

---

<sup>4</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, written in Spring 1916 in Zurich, first published during May or June 1917.

held in tension with a strategic empiricism, and “analysis of concrete situations” and “the *plurality of forms* of proletarian struggles (“peaceful” and “violent”), and the *transition* from one form to another”. (211)

As events unfolded, “*Lenin did not cease to change*, not simply his “tactics,” but his definitions and analyses of the role of the proletariat and the party – even concerning their very composition – and consequently, in the last analysis, of the identity of the “revolutionary subject.” (212)

Balibar understands that this is a problem that will not go away. He is, in his elusive and understated manner, acknowledging Lenin’s capacity to characterise the proletariat, not as an “established *socio-economic presupposition*” (including the notion of the development by the class of the consciousness of being a class-for-itself), but as a *political construction* in which Lenin and the Bolshevik party thought of the proletariat as coterminous with those sections of society that supported them and their rule. In fact, Balibar goes so far as to suggest that Lenin’s constant destabilising of categories, and the perpetual interrogation of concepts, which arose during the War, were carried by Lenin on into the Revolution leading to the *disappearance* of the proletariat in its stable “classical sense”. (212)

Despite the disastrous consequences of this process Balibar remains sanguine in his meditation on some of the tendencies in Lenin’s thought. His critical conclusion is laconic:

From 1914 onward, Lenin the “philosopher” advanced beyond Lenin the revolutionary, but Lenin the “theorist” of the revolution still remained behind his own practice. (218)

Antonio Negri (*What to Do with What Is to Be Done?, or Rather: The Body of the General Intellect*) is rather more troubled by the changes that have occurred since Lenin's day; he is troubled, dare I say it, by the looming possibility that Lenin's thought might be radically outmoded.

Leaving the Chinese working class silently to one side, Negri informs his readers "These days . . . the nature of productive labor is fundamentally immaterial". This is a strange observation; apart from the daily manufacturing endeavours of tens of millions of workers from Germany to Seattle, and from San Francisco to Hong Kong, which fill the world with an ever-swelling, never-ending, torrent of material goods, it is difficult to see what is *immaterial* about selling insurance, lending money, designing products, writing computer programs, selling clothes or greetings cards, and designing websites. I'm not sure that Lenin, or Marx for that matter, would have regarded the *production of surplus value* during the course of these activities as *immaterial*.

To be sure, workplace organization has radically altered, as has the manner in which discipline is imposed. Highly articulated levels of engagement and cooperation are demanded of modern workers; these in turn result in high levels of autonomy and in an expectation on the part of both employer and worker that individuals will use their initiative in the furtherance of the enterprise's goals. Consequently, Negri is right in trying to identify what is different between *then* and *now*. His notion that design, distribution, promotion, and sales, are *immaterial* can be usefully set to one side. Because, he is surely right when he observes that workers in modern economies refuse representation and seek autonomy in flight from disciplinary forms of capitalist production.

Consequently, he asks:



How can we posit Leninism within these new conditions . . . How can the flight [from the foreman and supervisor] and self-evaluation of the immaterial worker be transformed into a new class struggle, in terms of an organized desire to appropriate social wealth and liberate subjectivity? How can we connect this wholly different reality to the strategic project of Communism? How can the old be remodelled in terms of a radical opening toward the new, which is nonetheless – as Machiavelli demanded of every real revolution – a “return to origins,” in this case Leninism? (300)

Negri is conscious that within the tradition, which both Marx and Lenin worked, the commune or the party was the engine, which sought to produce subversive subjectivity. Whereas in contemporary conditions the entirely social character of *immaterial* production produces what Negri calls a “general intellect”. The question which then arises is: how can we construct a *subversive* general intellect. This he thinks calls for a move into the realm of “Lenin beyond Lenin”.

This moving of Lenin *beyond* Lenin amounts to a programme for what Spinoza described as “absolute democracy”, a form of government that the multitude exercises over itself, which Negri thinks “is a term particularly suited to describing the invention of a new form of liberty, or better, the production of a people “to come.”” (307) Negri likes this term, “absolute democracy” because it is uncontaminated by the *modern*. However, he is, in the same breath, so to speak, entirely at ease with the thoroughly *modern* notion of *producing* the people of the communist future to come.

© Don Milligan,

‘Lenin Reloaded: the comic repetition of a tragic history’,  
26<sup>th</sup> February 2008. Posted on *Reflections of a Renegade* at  
[www.donmilligan.net](http://www.donmilligan.net) on 29th February 2008.

Indeed, his *post*-modernity is radically interfused with modernity throughout the essay, and nowhere more than in his clarion call for a *post-Leninist* Leninism:

Today, then, revolutionary decision must be grounded on a completely different constituent scheme: no longer positing a preliminary axis of industrial and/or economic development, it will propose instead the program of a liberated city where industry bends to the needs of life, society to science, and work to the multitude. Here, the constituent decision becomes the democracy of the multitude. (306)

This is indeed *The State and Revolution* for our day in which the state will whither away in a process during which something called “Life” will be placed before industry, work will be subordinated to the multitude and interestingly, society will bend to the needs of science. Negri is, of course, despite the apparent novelty of his approach careful to include the traditional communist disclaimer – we cannot, of course, know in advance what form these steps into the future will take: “There is no measure we can use to decide in advance the criteria for what the multitudes will create.” (306)<sup>5</sup>

At times, Negri’s *scientific utopianism* veers remarkably close to Lenin’s thoroughgoing modernity.

---

<sup>5</sup> This echoes the standard view concerning utopian schemes and crystal gazing into the future. See Frederick Engels, *Anti-During: Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science* (1878), translated by Emile Burns, Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1934; and the pamphlet by Frederick Engels: *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* together with the ‘Special Introduction to the English Edition of 1892’, Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1954.

But his utopian meditation avoids the charge of sopiness by the manner in which he emphasises that the Leninist device “of intervention on a weak point at a critical, objectively determined moment”, is completely ineffective and outmoded. He insists that:

It is just as clear that it is only where the immaterial workforce’s energy is higher than that of the forces of capitalist exploitation that a project of liberation will become possible. Anti-capitalist decision becomes effective only where subjectivity is at its strongest, where it is able to build a “civil war” against the Empire. (305)

Presumably this means that because modern capital is entirely dependant upon the social engagement, initiative, and autonomous action of the worker, that capital would find itself uniquely vulnerable to the active assaults of workers possessing powers of innovation and articulation *inside* the system incomparably greater than the *externality* of the mass strike and the barricade. With this thought Negri provides us with the glimpse of an extremely interesting idea, but what it has to do with *reloading* Lenin is not entirely clear. Perhaps, Negri is merely taking Frederick Jameson at his word: “. . . if one wants to imitate Lenin, one must do something completely different.” (72)

**T**his approach certainly has more appeal than Slavoj Zizek’s essay (*A Leninist Gesture Today*) where he concludes that, “*Nothing* should be accepted as inviolable in this new foundation, neither the need for economic “modernization” nor the most sacred liberal and democratic fetishes.” (95) *Of course, we must have some extra-judicial killings . . . What*

© Don Milligan,

‘Lenin Reloaded: the comic repetition of a tragic history’,  
26<sup>th</sup> February 2008. Posted on *Reflections of a Renegade* at  
[www.donmilligan.net](http://www.donmilligan.net) on 29th February 2008.

*kind of revolution would it be without heaps of murdered bankers, their wives and children, and renegades (don't forget the renegades) buried in substantial pits? We have got to have arbitrary imprisonment . . . oh, and a spot of revolutionary torture, too. "Bring it on!" I say . . .*

Zizek evidently enjoys inserting Robespierre and Lenin into his *Tale of Two Cities*; it has made him positively dizzy at the prospect of so much blood. This desire to emulate Lenin also leads Zizek to note Lenin's gift of land, by proclamation, in 1921 to the community of Old Believers.<sup>6</sup> Lenin, we are told wanted to kill two birds with one stone: to increase food production and also to study the potential of pre-capitalist forms of common property.<sup>7</sup> This example of Leninist open-mindedness leads Zizek to close his article with a striking appeal for the "The Left" to "display the same openness today, even with regard to the most "sectarian" fundamentalists." (96)

Somehow, I think this is an example of Zizek taking a leaf out of George Galloway's<sup>8</sup> book rather than an appeal for the left to display tolerance and sympathy towards the prejudices of Southern Baptists or the Hindu the nationalists of the BJP. In this Zizek

---

<sup>6</sup> The Old Believers were communities of Orthodox Christians who insisted upon observing the rites and liturgical practices in use before the reforms enacted during the Patriarchate of Nikon, 1652-58; they split from the official church around and 1666-7, and were persecuted and oppressed thereafter.

<sup>7</sup> Stalin, was of course, to engage in much larger experiments in pre-capitalist forms of property six years later by his introduction of a modern form of serfdom, in which newly dispossessed peasants were subject to internal passports and residence restrictions which tied them to particular farms, villages, and localities; he also resorted to the institution of slave labour upon a large scale.

<sup>8</sup> George Galloway is a British radical politician who has won substantial electoral support in inner city Muslim neighbourhoods by associating himself with support for the Ummah against the war, which the West is said to be fighting against the 'community of believers. See my article, 'The Division of Respect' in *Reflections of a Renegade* at [www.donmilligan.net](http://www.donmilligan.net).

succeeds in emulating Lenin's opportunism without exhibiting any explicit commitment to the organizational or disciplinary rigours of Leninism.

**F**or Alain Badiou (*One Divides Itself into Two*), the short twentieth century<sup>9</sup> was quintessentially Leninist because it was characterised by a passion for the real; it was marked by a passion for what was immediately practicable in the here and now. The century of total war was a century of total victories:

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 of 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 the Paris Commune. (9)

Badiou, who believes that the Chinese Cultural Revolution, brought "entirely unheard-of freedom of expression and of movement", (12) does not venture to tell us whether the *Leninian* epoch of the defeat of

---

<sup>9</sup> This is a reference to Eric Hobsbawm's periodisation in his book, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, Michael Joseph: London, 1994.

defeats are compensation for the Great Leap Forward<sup>10</sup> or the massacres of Pol Pot, but he, like Lenin, is certainly a tough, no-nonsense, realistic sort of chap: he knows that extreme violence is the reciprocal partner of extreme enthusiasm and that the Leninist passion for the real knows no morality. (13-14) This is because when one is engaged in the construction of a politics of freedom,

“ . . . [Y]ou 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.”  
(13)

In Badiou’s revolutionary lexicon words like “freedom” evidently have the a similar status to that which the word “democracy” had for Erich Honecker:<sup>11</sup> they were talisman’s of an *objective moving towards* or *becoming*, rather than a bourgeois aspiration for a determinate political and legal practice.

The editors have wisely chosen to meet the question of terror, head on, by placing Alain Badiou’s paean of praise to Lenin and Mao’s passion for Jacobin audacity, as the very first essay in the collection. It has enabled them to open up the volume by making it clear

---

<sup>10</sup> During the famines provoked by the Great Leap Forward, 1958 to 1960, somewhere between 14 and 43 million people perished. See Roderick MacFarquhar, *The great Leap Forward, 1958-1960*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983; Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: Mao’s Secret Famine*, London: John Murray, 1996; Judith Banister, *China’s Changing Population*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> Erich Honecker headed the Eastern German state known as the DDR, Deutsche Demokratische Republik (German Democratic Republic), from 1971 until the collapse of the dictatorship in 1989.

© Don Milligan,

‘Lenin Reloaded: the comic repetition of a tragic history’,  
26<sup>th</sup> February 2008. Posted on *Reflections of a Renegade* at  
[www.donmilligan.net](http://www.donmilligan.net) on 29th February 2008.

that *Lenin Reloaded* is a work that radically challenges the contemporary obsession with family, stability, and citizenship, with the fiery process of revolutionary purification. Reading this book it is difficult to avoid being tantalised by the thought of the editors and their pals rattling through the streets in a tumbrel towards the final act of purification before the Guillotine attended by Madame Defarge<sup>12</sup> and the *tricoteuse*. Indeed, we learn that during 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 collectivised, 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.” (14)

---

<sup>12</sup> Madame Lefarge was, of course, the entirely fictional *femme fatale* in Charles Dicken’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, published in 1858. However, imaginary or not, she’s *just the ticket* when confronted by the daydreams of those who think of the Chinese Cultural Revolution as an exercise in freedom of thought, speech and movement.

Alex Callinicos's essay (*Leninism in the Twenty-First Century? Lenin, Weber, and the Politics of Responsibility*) follows Badiou's and he, somewhat shamefaced about terror, has written a rather more conventional defence of Lenin in which the great man is rescued from the inaccuracies of Orlando Figes and his ilk.<sup>13</sup> But unlike a wretched bourgeois historian, Callinicos is more than ready to pay his dues. First, he does this by quoting Žižek at length in order to identify in Leninism "what one might call the politics of responsibility." (20)

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. (Žižek cited 20)

That the price to be paid is only in the *guise* of cruel measures, and that those cruelties are themselves in

---

<sup>13</sup> Orlando Figes is a distinguished historian of Russian political, social, and cultural life. He is the author of *Peasant Russia, civil war: the Volga countryside in revolution (1917-21)*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989; *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1996; *Natasha's Dance: a cultural history of Russia*, London, Allen Lane, 2002; and *The Whisperers: private life in Stalin's Russia*, London: Allan Lane, 2007.



quotation marks, is I suppose meant to be reassuring. At any rate Callinicos is more interested in Zizek's identification of Lenin's politics of responsibility rather than in his cruelties. He is, however, uneasy in case Zizek should extend his characterisation of leftist irresponsibility to include the genuine opponents of global capitalism extending the charge of liberal leftist irresponsibility to embrace even those who, like Callinicos, stand in the Trotskyist tradition. In response to these fears Callinicos associates Zizek's decisionism with that of Weber in his lecture of 1919, 'Politics as a Vocation'; Weber distinguishes clearly between an *ethic of conviction* where actions are rooted in belief, and an *ethic of responsibility*, where one has to answer for the consequences of one's actions.<sup>14</sup>

Callinicos refuses this contrast, not least because of Weber's attempt to indict the leaders of the German revolution with having *convictions* but a lack of *responsibility*. He also refuses Zizek's employment of this contrast because it takes little account of Lenin's practice of tracking *this-way-and-that* from theory to the necessity of political intervention and back again within the complex and radically unpredictable conditions unfolding within the revolution:

The revolutionaries intervene on the basis of the best available analysis: it is only by thus intervening – seizing what seems to them the key link in the chain – that they discover whether or not this analysis is true. Thus, for example, Lenin was right in predicting a revolution in Germany comparable to the February Revolution,

---

<sup>14</sup> Max Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', in Max Weber, *Political Writings*, ed. P. Lassman and Ronald Speirs, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; see a copy of the lecture from York University, Ontario, Canada, posted on the 'Documents' page of Studies in Anti-Capitalism at [www.studiesinanti-capitalism.net](http://www.studiesinanti-capitalism.net).

but, in the event, it did not lead to the emergence of a socialist republic in an advanced country that could come to the aid of Soviet Russia. (27)

The retreat, represented by the restoration of market forces in the production and distribution of agricultural products in 1921,<sup>15</sup> was the consequence of this turn of events.

These observations lead Callinicos into a discussion of the ethics of revolution; he considers the consequentialism of Merleau-Ponty's *Humanism and Terror*<sup>16</sup> in which the meaning of an action is determined by its results, and the debate between Trotsky and Dewey in which Dewey argued that Trotsky had failed to distinguish between two senses of the term "end": the *objective consequences* of certain actions on the one hand, and the *end-in-view* with which they are performed.

Callinicos evidently finds this distinction useful in consideration of Lenin's political practice, which he regards as distinct from Stalinism, despite having made a contribution to its formation. The Stalinist system, he argues, was not the *end-in-view* of Lenin, or of the Bolshevik Party, or of Stalin himself, yet the practice of the party during the Civil War years of 1918-1921 "materially contributed" to the formation of the tyranny, which "took shape during the 1930s." (33)

---

<sup>15</sup> NEP, the New Economic Policy of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) restored the rights of small enterprises and farms to operate essentially as private businesses and to trade more or less freely. It was introduced following widespread riots, demonstrations, and disturbances among the urban working class in Petrograd and elsewhere who were demanding the right to engage in trade with peasants in order to obtain food and fuel.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanisme et Terreur: Essai sur le problème communiste*, Paris, 1947; *Humanism and Terror: an essay on the Communist problem*, translated by John O'Neill (1969), Westport Conn: Greenwood Press, 1980.

Callinicos believes that Stalinism was not the *end-in-view* of Leninist politics or Bolshevik politicians; it

[. . .] was a contingent outcome of the circumstances in which the Bolsheviks found themselves, particularly as a result of the final defeat of the German Revolution in October 1923. (34)

From this Callinicos concludes that in avoiding a form of decisionism that seems to focus simply upon the intentions with which actions are performed, and which can in principle defend more or less any actions as “unpleasant” but “necessary”, it is vital to apply critical judgment and some general normative principles in order to determine how to proceed:

[. . .] political action unavoidably brings together the calculation of consequences and the invocation of norms. In challenging the liberal humanitarian rhetoric that has provided such a convenient cover for contemporary imperial designs it is important to insist on the ineliminable role played by the realistic analysis of context and consequences in a serious politics of the Left; but, equally, when seeking to motivate the critique of global capitalism implicit in such a challenge, it is essential that universal ethical principles are articulated and defended. (36)

Callinicos has placed himself and his co-authors in some difficulty, because without straying into the quicksand of counter-factual historical conjecture it is evident that a revolutionary seizure of power by those committed to the abolition of private property and a free market in labour is inconceivable

without something very much like the abandonment of normative values and a reign of lawless terror; something like the conditions which Bolsheviks confronted in the years 1918-1921 are probably unavoidable.

Lenin in August 1917 certainly believed in the necessity of violent revolution as the route not merely to working class power, but also to the disappearance of the state altogether:

The supersession of the bourgeois state by the proletarian state is impossible without a violent revolution. Doing away with the proletarian state, i.e., with the state in general, is impossible except through “withering away.”<sup>17</sup>

This, as a result of the doctrine of the irreconcilability of classes, is the crux of Lenin’s *scientific* venture into a utopian scheme. The bourgeois state must be uprooted and smashed in order for the proletarian state, which replaces it, to wither away as society comes to represent itself. But first there must be violent revolution; it is the *precondition* for advance. The legitimacy of the existing state must be denied, its institutions and legal code must be destroyed, and its leading personalities must become the subject of extra-judicial killings, of arbitrary imprisonment and exile. This is the meaning of phrase, “violent revolution”; it can have no other.

However, consideration of the experience of the insurgent artisans of Paris in 1871, or of the Spanish working class in the nineteen thirties reveals that before any talk of Red Terror (or indeed of the Gulag), must come consideration of what is to be done about the black or brown or white terror? This is because we

---

<sup>17</sup> V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, written in August 1917, prepared for the press by end of November 1917 and published in 1918; Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976, p.27.

can be reasonably certain that the propertied sections of any society – the millions of people with substantial consumption goods: grand houses and luxurious apartments, superb cars and boats, and sumptuous clothes, will not go quietly or willingly down the egalitarian road. These millions, together with the very numerous class of persons who possess capital goods in the form of substantial business assets and shares, can be relied upon to contemplate and to ratify *any* horror rather than the ultimate horror of losing their property.

What is more, as the German working class learned in 1933, the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965, and the labour movement in Chile discovered in September 1973, *the mere threat, the remote possibility* of a loss of property to the egalitarian movement is enough to set the counter-revolutionary terror in motion. Neither borders nor national jurisdictions are likely to protect the working class movement once the propertied become anxious for the fate of their property.<sup>18</sup> These realities have, not unnaturally, often called forth a fearful and bloody response.

Red Terror is, after all, at least in part, always a response to the fear of actions of the propertied classes to any attempt to seize control of their private property. So, the calculation that has to be made by any constellation of revolutionary forces needs to involve a series of close judgments concerning how to avoid provoking the propertied classes into unleashing counter-revolutionary terror. Because we have every reason to suppose that the provocation of such a terror will result either in wholesale massacres and the enrolment of death squads, which will break up the labour movement for at least a generation or two, or our military victory against the propertied classes will

---

<sup>18</sup> See Alexei Barrionuevo's article on the activities of 'Operation Condor', *International Herald Tribune*, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2008.

arise from our institution of a reign of red terror and lawlessness from which recovery will be nigh-on impossible.

Evidently, Lenin did not make this kind of calculation. From August 1917 onwards he had swung behind the notion that the Bolsheviks must seize power *in order to avoid catastrophe*.<sup>19</sup> The catastrophe he had in mind was the defeat of the revolutionary forces and the restitution of the *ancien regime* in some form. In the event, as a consequence of his seizure of power, all the revolutionary parties were *liquidated* as the saying went, their members exiled or imprisoned and/or biding their time until their eventual execution in one of the many waves of terror with which Bolshevik power was both sustained and undone.

It is indeed pointless to ruminate on what would have happened if the Bolsheviks had instituted the revolutionary coalition government demanded by the railway workers;<sup>20</sup> it is indeed pointless to speculate upon what would have happened had Lenin and his comrades not insisted upon founding a one-party state. We might just as well speculate upon what would have happened if Nicholas had been a wise, liberal, and thoughtful man, or indeed had refused to enter the First World War. Lenin could not, any more than the Tsar, have avoided the revolution; he did what he did.

---

<sup>19</sup> See V. I. Lenin, 'The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It', published at the end of October 1917 in pamphlet form by Priboi Publishers; in *Lenin Collected Works*, Progress Publishers, 1977 Moscow, Volume 25, pages 323-369.

<sup>20</sup> Vikzhel, was the All-Russia Central Committee of the railwaymen's trade union. It resisted the establishment of the Bolshevik dictatorship by refusing to transport Bolshevik troops to Moscow and by demanding a coalition government composed of all the parties committed to the democratic revolution. See Lenin's speech demanding the "overthrow" of Vikzhel made at the meeting of the Central Committee of the RSDLP(B), October 16<sup>th</sup> 1917, *Lenin's Collected Works*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, Volume 26, 1972, p.276.

However, if we are to use his name as a way of asserting the need for commitment to revolutionary politics it is surely necessary to reflect upon the nature and quality of his judgment and more broadly upon the nature of the judgments made by those who actually instituted the Bolshevik reign of lawlessness and terror in the cities, towns and villages of Revolutionary Russia and its dependant territories.

Alex Callinicos acknowledges that this terror, “materially contributed” to the institution of Stalinist tyranny. Presumably, what he means by this is that the voluntarism and arbitrary behaviour of the agents of the Council of Peoples’ Commissars, their management of the economy, their imposition of labour discipline, and their regulation of social and cultural life, and military affairs by decree: by on-the-spot decisions taken without right of appeal, by leather coated commissars armed with plenipotentiary powers and revolvers.

Callinicos is broadly correct about this, although of course as a revolutionary himself, he figures Lenin’s errors in broadly sympathetic terms. At any rate, it is undeniable that Lenin’s attempt, within the context of a war against foreign powers, against the Whites, against the Nationalists, and against numerous peasant jacqueries, to run the economy by decree, enabled the Bolshevik party to win the war, and destroyed Russian society in the process.

It is equally clear that the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War by 1921 occurred well before it would have been reasonable to expect any concrete assistance either military, technical or economic, to have issued from a successful revolution in Germany or Western Europe. In the autumn of 1917 it would have been a serious error of Lenin’s to predicate the immediate survival of a Bolshevik regime on the success of the German Revolution. Indeed he did not do so. He and his comrades insisted upon seizing and retaining power

with their own resources and against most, if not all, of the democratic parties in the Russian Revolution.<sup>21</sup>

Lenin, as Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, imposed the rule of the Soviet government by decree; he imposed his rule by fiat, by arbitrary administrative measures. Decisions were made on the assumption that they would be carried out, and that compliance with the edicts, would in some automatic sense result in the achievement of the purpose, which had given rise to the initial order. There was, of course, recognition that this means of proceeding was particularly vulnerable to error and abuse, but this vulnerability was attributed to the low level of the country's culture and to a lack of technical expertise, rather than to anything inherent within the administrative process of ruling by decree.

Lenin, who famously hated bureaucracy, nevertheless instituted a procedure of government, which sought to overcome all social, technical, and economic problems by administrative means. It was not simply the institution of terror in imprisoning or murdering Anarchists, Mensheviks, princesses or Archdukes, but its use in the management of labour, and as a means of ensuring grain deliveries, that foretold a future in which Stalin would violently alienate the peasantry from their land and possessions, establish slave labour as a key component of Soviet

---

<sup>21</sup> Initially, the Bolshevik seizure of power had the support of left Social Revolutionaries, who joined the Military Revolutionary Committee when it was formed and subsequently entered the Council of People's Commissars. However, although they had participated in extra-judicial killings by Dzerzhinsky's Commission (Cheka or VCheka), they opposed the restoration of the death penalty and the suppression of the newspapers of non- or anti-Bolshevik organizations. They were out of the government by March 1918 and, like all the other parties, were driven entirely out of existence by the early twenties.



industrialisation, and massacre all opponents, real and imaginary.

Lenin instituted government by administrative means. The *market in labour* was replaced by the *direction of labour* and by the state determination of wages. Markets of all kinds were replaced by the state determination of prices and by state control of supply.

Lenin, assumed that both the capitalist state and the capitalist economy was largely run by administrative means exemplified by what he imagined modern management systems achieved in their regulation of big corporations and of institutions like the post office. As far as Lenin was concerned, once the social composition of the state and the big business organisation was transformed by the proletarian dictatorship and by workers' domination of the production process, modern methods of accounting and administration would do the rest:

Capitalist culture has *created* large-scale production, factories, railways, the postal service, telephones, etc., and *on this basis* most of the functions of the old "state power" have become so simplified and can be reduced to such exceedingly simple operations of registration, recording and checking that they can be easily performed by every literate person, can quite easily be performed for ordinary "workmen's wages," and that these functions can (and must) be stripped of every shadow of privilege, or "official grandeur."

All officials, without exception, elected and subject to recall *at any time*, their salaries reduced to the level of ordinary "workmen's wages" – these simple and "self-evident" democratic

measures, while completely uniting the interests of the workers and the majority of the peasants, at the same time serve as a bridge leading from capitalism to socialism. These measures concern the reconstruction of the state, the purely political reconstruction of society; but of course, they acquire their full meaning and significance only in connection with the “expropriation of the expropriators” either being accomplished or in preparation, i.e., with the transformation of capitalist private ownership of the means of production into social ownership.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the enormous problems, which beset the Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars, he and his fellow commissars, actually set out to achieve something like this state of affairs. They were beaten back by the ruinous disintegration of the economy in something under three years; they were defeated by a process of dilapidation and ruin, which they attributed more or less entirely to the war rather than their own use of police actions to destroy commerce and their own bureaucratic mismanagement of agriculture and industry.

Consequently, at the Tenth Party Congress, apart from imposing tougher discipline on their own members and ordering the crushing of the mutiny at Kronstadt, the Congress endorsed the NEP and a return to the operation of market relations in agriculture and small business. This, however, was a *tactical* retreat necessitated by severe shortages of food and fuel which was undermining the foundations of the

---

<sup>22</sup> *The State and Revolution*, p.54,

Bolshevik power in Petrograd and elsewhere;<sup>23</sup> NEP did not represent a move away from the principles that wedded the Bolsheviks first and foremost to the direct political management of the economy by administrative means. These means were to return with a vengeance within little more than six years.

Lenin had given little thought to the problem of economic calculation. Solzhenitsyn was surely right when he lampooned<sup>24</sup> Lenin's distance from engagement in practical affairs; Solzhenitsyn accurately notes Lenin's concrete ignorance of, or engagement with, the real political, economic and military affairs of his own or any other society. Except for the last five years of his life Lenin was for the most part an émigré politician, a political prisoner or refugee; until he plunged himself and Russia into the maelstrom of Bolshevik rule Lenin had no experience whatsoever of engaging with or running a large organisation or institution.

Lenin was a theoretician and a man committed to taking decisive political action, he was not, however, a practical man. He was not capable of employing judgment in two vitally important and closely related areas. Firstly, he did not reflect sufficiently on what the consequences of the imposition of lawlessness and terror would be for the future of the revolution, whether that terror and lawlessness issued from the revolution or the counter-revolution. Secondly, he does not appear to have seriously grappled with the problems raised by, replacing the market in labour,

---

<sup>23</sup> The strikes, riots and disorders during 1920 and 1921 in Petrograd and other cities have tended to be diminished in importance by the attention showered on the debate on factions at the Tenth Party Congress and upon the Kronstadt Mutiny and its suppression. In fact the struggle of workers to be able to journey into the surrounding countryside to gather fuel and barter or buy essential food items was probably more important in prompting the retreat signalled by the NEP than anything else.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Lenin in Zürich*, (1975) London: Penguin, 1980.

consumption goods, and production equipment, with a vast bureaucracy that could only grow in administrative weight, social presence and political power.

In not giving much consideration to these issues before the Revolution and Civil War Lenin was conforming pretty closely to communist tradition of refusing to speculate on the precise form or shape of working class power.<sup>25</sup> As Lenin says approvingly of *The Communist Manifesto*:

Not indulging in utopias, Marx expected the *experience* of the mass movement to provide the answer to the question as to what specific forms this organization of the proletariat as the ruling class will assume and as to the exact manner in this organization will be combined with the most complete, most consistent “winning of the battle for democracy.”<sup>26</sup>

In the event, Lenin proceeded with the construction of proletarian democracy by the suppression of all political parties other than his own and the closing of all newspapers and periodicals other than those endorsed by the institutions of his own party, by the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in February 1918, and finally by the suppression of debate and disagreement within his own party at the Tenth Congress in 1921; all this occurred before Joseph Stalin was appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1922, and was evidently

---

<sup>25</sup> See Frederick Engels, *Anti-During: Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science* (1878), translated by Emile Burns, Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1934; and the pamphlet by Frederick Engels: *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* together with the 'Special Introduction to the English Edition of 1892', Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1954.

<sup>26</sup> *The State and Revolution* p.50

connected with Lenin's political discovery, noted by Balibar (212), of the revolutionary subject vested in the *Bolshevik proletariat*, without regard to the political consciousness and interests of socio-economic category which might be said to have constituted the *actual* working class.

These developments may of course be attributed to contingency, to historical necessity, to the circumstances in which Lenin and his comrades found themselves. However, the two questions remains: why did he not *before seizing power* pay much closer attention to the corrosive role of terror, *theirs* and *ours*? Why did he not grasp *before seizing power* that both terror and rule by fiat or decree would both produce and enhance the social weight and political power of the bureaucracy? Why did he not understand *before the revolution* that the failure successfully to attend to these questions would result in the unravelling of the revolution, and of its aspirations for enhanced social solidarity, egalitarianism, and prosperity?

It is upon these questions that the name of Lenin, *the name for socialist revolution*, is found wanting. The *reloaders* of Lenin, who, it appears, would welcome *one . . . two . . . three . . . many revolutions*, do not attempt to answer these two questions: how to avoid terror and lawlessness, how to avoid rule by decree and its attendant bureaucracy and economic disorder? Their refusal to confront the crisis in revolutionary socialist thought posed by the global victory of the counter-revolution with anything other than the clarion call: *Back to Lenin, Back to Basics*, is merely the comic repetition of a tragic history.

***Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth***

Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis,  
and Slavoj Zizek, editors  
Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

**CONTENTS**

**INTRODUCTION:**

Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Zizek  
*Repeating Lenin*

**PART I. RETRIEVING LENIN**

1. Alain Badiou, *One Divides Itself into Two*
2. Alex Callinicos, *Leninism in the Twenty-first Century?: Lenin, Weber, and the Politics of Responsibility*
3. Terry Eagleton, *Lenin in the Postmodern Age*
4. Frederic Jameson, *Lenin and Revisionism*
5. Slavoj Zizek, *A Leninist Gesture Today: Against the Populist Temptation*

**PART II. LENIN IN PHILOSOPHY**

6. Savas Michael-Matsas, *Lenin and the Path of Dialectics*
7. Kevin B. Anderson, *The Rediscovery and Persistence of the Dialectic in Philosophy and in World Politics*
8. Daniel Bensaïd, "Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!"
9. Stathis Kouvelakis, *Lenin as Reader of Hegel: Hypotheses for a Reading of Lenin's Notebooks on Hegel's The Science of Logic.*

**PART III. WAR AND IMPERIALISM**

10. Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophical Moment in Politics Determined by War: Lenin 1914-1916*
11. George Labica, *From Imperialism to Globalization*
12. Domenico Losurdo, *Lenin and Herrenvolk Democracy*

**PART IV. POLITICS AND ITS SUBJECT**

13. Sylvain Lazarus, *Lenin and the Party, 1902 – November 1917*
14. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Lenin the Just, or Marxism Unrecycled*
15. Lars T Lih, *Lenin and the Great Awakening*
16. Antonio Negri, *What to Do Today with What Is to Be Done?, or Rather: The Body of the General Intellect*
17. Alan Shandro, *Lenin and Hegemony: The Soviets the Working Class, and the Party in the Revolution of 1905.*