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Reconsidering Leninism

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Presentation

In this study, Marcel van der Linden gives a fresh look at the history of Leninism and Bolshevism. Questioning common assumptions, he sharply differentiates Leninist theory from Bolshevik practice and reflects on their relationship.

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Historically, in the debate on Leninism three controversial positions have usually been taken up. Some claim that Leninism proved its usefulness in the Russian October Revolution and that the same model should therefore also be applied elsewhere; others propose that Leninism was suited to the Russian circumstances at the beginning of this century, but not to present day conditions in other countries; finally, yet another group thinks that, as early as in the prerevolutionary situation, Leninism carried within itself the seeds of the later Stalinist degeneration and should therefore be rejected in all circumstances.

These three positions appear to differ widely from each other. Even so, they have two assumptions in common, for they assume that: (i) Leninist theory is a more or less consistent whole, which must be accepted or rejected in its entirety; and that (ii) Bolshevik policy under Czarism was the direct result of Leninist theory (Bolshevism and Leninism as synonyms). In this paper I want to make a closer investigation of both of these assumptions. To do so, I shall try to determine the position of Lenin’s theory (concentrating on his method of analysis and his theories of proletarian consciousness and the revolutionary party) in its historical-materialist context. After that I hope to deduce some important internal inconsistencies in Lenin’s methodology and organizational theory and finally I shall attempt to prove that Bolshevik practice was in no way Leninist. Having thus criticized the two premises of the contemporary Leninism debate I shall briefly formulate some consequences.

The historical position of Leninism

In order to understand the birth and development of Leninism it is necessary to analyze the historical context in which this theory flourished.

Historians do not agree on the extent to which Czarian social relations can be characterized as feudalism in the (West-)European sense. There is agreement on the proposition that traditional Russian society with its many different development stages since the Mongolian period, cannot be regarded as just another type of “normal” feudalism. This is because of a number of important deviations. At the same time it is clear that the state was strongly developed and had a despotic (“Asiatic”) tinge.

From the seventeenth century onwards there was a growing need for the state to be able to compete on the world market. The first symptom of this pressure were the absolutist reform policies of Peter the Great, who on the one hand could only obtain the necessary financial means and goods through the increased serfdom of the peasants, but on the other used these means to build towns, canals, harbours and roads, stimulated mining, set up manufactures especially for the army and imported labour.

This absolutist policy was continued after Peter the Great, but it became clear that it did not result in any great success on the world market. The industrialization of England from the eighteenth century onwards, and of France, Germany and the United States from the nineteenth century made the low labour productivity of Russia painfully visible. If the Czarist state was not reduced to colonial status, only one possibility remained: a drastic increase of labour productivity through forced industrialization.

From the very start it was clear that because of the high rate of capital accumulation in Western Europe and North America the “English road” (i.e., a broad and varied industrialization with relatively little state intervention and without competition of higher developed countries on the world market) could not be followed by Russia. The “Prussian road” (i.e., industrialization through the slow transformation of feudal to capitalist land ownership and a carefully calculated process of expropriation of peasant land, in accordance with the demands of capitalist industry and closely controlled by the state) was the Czarist state’s point of orientation when it freed the peasants from 1861 onwards. The two central elements of this model - liberation of the peasants and state intervention - turned out to function differently in Russian society. Thus the “Prussian road” turned out not to be a practicable one for Czarist Russia, either. The contradiction between the industrial and agricultural sectors deepened. Through the inductive industrialization method - meaning the import of forms of developed capital relations - a technologically advanced industrial complex could be established in Russia, but the proper social and economic conditions were absent. On the contrary, Czarist industrialization policy increased the backwardness of the social sector financing the process: agriculture. Because agriculture had the exclusive function of financing the import of industrial installations from which it drew hardly any benefits, its inferiority on the world market was bound to increase.

The enforced industrialization took place at the expense of both workers and peasants. And as the economic process began to show more signs of stagnation the common destiny of both classes became clearer. This is the essential root of the 1917 revolution.

The Russian revolutionary movement was born against this summarily sketched socio-economic background. The relatively economic and social backwardness of Russia and its simultaneous integration in the capitalist world market resulted in a colourful mixture of different cultural levels, leading to what Engels referred to as the "most peculiar and impossible combinations of ideas". The revolutionary movement was at first based almost exclusively on the intelligentsia,
which found itself in an ambiguous position in the period after 1861. Old certainties were disappearing, but the troublesome economic development gave few new guarantees to replace them. Large groups of intellectuals began to grasp the importance of the societal stagnation and radicalized.

The debates amongst the revolutionary intelligentsia about the development possibilities of Russian society were for a large part determined by the semi-"European" and semi-"Asiatic" nature of Czarism: should Russia follow the West-European road (as the "Westernizers" wanted) or did it have its own historical path to follow, based on the specifically Russian collective agrarian form of society, the obshchina (according to the "Slavophiles")? In 1862 Zemlya i Volya, an organization of intellectuals, was set up. Its members wanted to mingle with "the people" (so-called Narodniki) but at the same time this organization was isolated from the lower classes and therefore wanted to act in their place. As a result of increasing state repression in the 'seventies the Narodniki split into factions in 1879: Narodnaya Volya (The Will of the People) and Cherny Peredel (Black Partition). The last-mentioned was "one of the seeds-beds of Russian social democracy".4

In the 'eighties the terrorist currents collapsed after Narodnaya Volya had been rounded up by the Czarist police. At the same time the intense, forced pace of industrialization, which was accompanied by much misery, as well as the increasing combative of the workers, blew new life into the debates of the revolutionary intelligentsia. Marxist-tinged theories became popular. In 1872 the first part of Das Kapital had already appeared in Russian. However, the Narodniki read the work in a very special way: as a moral indictment of capitalism and not as an attempt at scientific analysis. Another interpretation made its appearance only in the 'eighties and 'nineties, under the influence of the Paris Commune, the dock strikes in Great Britain, the destruction of Narodnaya Volya and the electoral success of German social democracy, among others. Part of the intelligentsia now no longer regarded the peasant community (obshchina) as the foundation of future society. Instead, they thought that socialism would only be possible after a period of capitalist development. This shift in their position made it possible for these intellectuals to move closer to the social-democratic programme of the Second International. The new type of Russian Marxism which was created in this way was made up of a mixture of traditions from the Russian intelligentsia and German social democracy. The most typical representative of the new Russian Marxism under German influence was Plekhanov, who at an earlier stage had belonged to the Narodniki and who had "educated an entire generation of Russian Marxists" (Lenin). Plekhanov regarded Marx's theory as an "ingenious idea" and not as the historic product of social developments. More in general it was his opinion that people's ideas exist next to history, as it were, and more or less reflect it. "From the point of view of Marx it turns out [...] that ideals are of all kinds: base and lofty, true and false. That ideal is true which corresponds to economic reality", he wrote.5 For Plekhanov Marxism was the most perfect reflection of reality - a general development model of the forces of production, a Kautskyist Social Darwinism. This basic pattern of Plekhanov's interpretation of Marxism can be found at different levels.

1. Plekhanov thought that all societies must pass through the same stages. He did not observe a combined and unequal development on a world scale.

2. Plekhanov did not understand the dialectic of form and content any better than did Kautsky. This was expressed in the fact that he did not recognize the double nature of productive labour in capitalism: abstract, value-creating labour and concrete, use value-creating labour.

3. Because he did not understand the difference between concrete and abstract labour, Plekhanov also lost sight of the specific nature of the transition from capitalism to socialism. According to his view only the property relations would change. For this reason Plekhanov thought that a proletarian class consciousness could not be born at grass roots level in the factories but only could be brought in from the outside, through "education". Here too, he saw revolutionary theory as something standing next to history, to class struggle.

4. Plekhanov considered the revolutionary intelligentsia as the bearer of socialist theory, who must lead the working class and educate it about its situation and the need for political struggle.

Plekhanov's views determined the thinking of all wings of Russian social democracy. Even those taking up partially different positions (like Bukharin, for example) supported Plekhanov's undialectical Marxism in its fundamental approach.6

Methodological weaknesses in Lenin's theory

Lenin never hesitated in changing his positions whenever he deemed it necessary. Between 1893 and 1924 he changed his theoretical thoughts on the agrarian question, the tactic of the proletarian party, the state and the dictatorship of the proletariat in capitalist underdeveloped countries. Despite these corrections Lenin maintained his specific interpretation of Marxism, which he basically derived from Plekhanov. As late as 1921 he thought that "nothing better has been written on Marxism anywhere in the world" than Plekhanov's contributions to philosophy.7 Lenin therefore shared a number of Plekhanov's methodological mistakes.8 Lenin too, saw Marxism as a natural science of society. Lenin too, did not understand the dialectic of form and content, nor the difference between abstract and concrete labour. And Lenin also saw scientific socialism as an independent product of revolutionary intellectuals, separate from the "spontaneous" labour struggle.9

Because of these methodological faults Lenin's thoughts contained a number of important misconceptions.

1. For Lenin the founding of socialism was a purely political question. Because just like Plekhanov and Kautsky Lenin did not distinguish between the sociali-
zation of capitalist and socialist society, socialism in his eyes was not the liberation of labour from its capitalist forms. Instead, Lenin considered socialism to be the adjustment of the political superstructure to the highly developed capitalist basis. "Is it not clear", he wrote, "that the form of production comes into irreconcilable contradiction with the the form of appropriation? Is it not evident that the latter must adapt itself to the former and must become social, that is, socialist?" The political sphere of developed capitalism must be adjusted to the basis, which is already socialist - that is the foundation of socialism according to Lenin. (This determination clarifies the fact that Lenin's embracing of the Taylorist organization of labour after 1917 was not a coincidence, but a direct consequence of his theory, which was implicitly based on the political neutrality of labour processes.)

2. Because the socialist revolution was a purely political question for Lenin he saw no possibility for the working class to gain political insights into society from the sphere of production. This was why scientific socialism had to be brought in from the outside by revolutionary intellectuals. According to Lenin the bourgeoisie and radical social democracy were involved in a struggle for the contents of the consciousness of the working class. "Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the only choice is - either bourgeois or socialist ideology," The special task of the socialist intelligentsia would be to reverse the influence of bourgeois ideology. If the revolutionaries leave the propaganda to the bourgeoisie, then this will lead to a "subordination to bourgeois ideology" of the working class. In capitalism, therefore, the working class itself has the tendency to be bourgeois. "Isolated from Social-Democracy, the working-class movement becomes petty and inevitably becomes bourgeois. In waging only the economic struggle, the working class loses its political independence; it becomes the tool of other parties and betrays the great principle: The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves." Two issues mentioned in these sentences are noteworthy. In the first place the contradiction in which Lenin entangles himself when he says that the working class can only liberate itself if it subordinates itself to a radical bourgeois intelligentsia. In the second place the lack of materialism (that is: the voluntarism) in the reasoning: the success or failure of revolutionary plans is not so much dependent on material developments in society as on the will and dedication of revolutionary intellectuals. The revolution is reduced to a technical matter, based on the moral responsibility of non-workers.

3. Lenin's view of history as a linear process is also expressed in the fact that he regarded Marx's economic analysis in Das Kapital as a chronology of capitalism: the logical levels distinguished by Marx (simple commodity production, extended reproduction, etc.) were incorrectly regarded by Lenin as historical stages which necessarily followed each other in reality. It did not occur to Lenin that these stages can exist simultaneously in one and the same country and in fact did.

While Plekhanov had still, following Marx, considered the possibility of "non-linear" developments in world history like the supposedly stagnant Asiatic mode of production, Lenin was a staunch unilinealist in this respect too. In his lecture on "The State", given in 1919, he presented a view of history which would become Stalinist orthodoxy a few years later. "The development of all human societies for thousands of years, in all countries without exception, reveals a general conformity to law, a regularity and consistency, so that at first we had a society without classes [...] then we had a society based on slavery [...]. This form was followed in history by another - feudalism. [...] Further, with the development of trade, the appearance of the world market and the development of money circulation, a new class arose within feudal society - the capitalist class."

Lenin's methodological mistakes naturally had far-reaching consequences for his analyses of society. This is clearly shown by his widely-praised study on The Development of Capitalism in Russia (1899, second edition 1908). In this book, which is an attack on the Narodnik, Lenin wanted to show that capitalism was already well developed in Russia. In order to prove this, Lenin made a study of the internal Russian market. Because he thought that every country must go through the same stages and that sense stands by itself he emphatically neglected the world market as well as the Czarist state. We have, however, seen above that such an abstraction is impossible, precisely because the industrialization of Russia took place under the influence of the world market as well as the absolutist state. The dynamics of Russian economic development therefore necessarily eluded Lenin. Furthermore, because he considered the logical levels of Marx's analysis as actual historical stages he could not recognize that his Russia was made up of a varied and patchwork combination of all kinds of transitional economic modes between the old pre-capitalist and the new oncoming capitalist economy. On the basis of his schematic approach Lenin threw together all kinds of temporary and transitional modes with the manifestations of developed capitalism. Thus he concluded that the capitalist mode of production had been present in Russia since the freeing of the peasants in 1861. He regarded well over half (63.7 mln.) of the total population (125.6 mln.) as being proletarian or semi-proletarian. Lenin's conclusion was therefore that Russia was a capitalist country well before 1914. It is clear to anyone with some knowledge of economic history that this was an excessive distortion of real Russian social relations.

It is understandable that for a long time Lenin did not draw any conclusion from his obviously incorrect analysis. For the direct consequence of the capitalist nature of Russian society would have been that the proletarian revolution should have been the order of the day. But right up to 1917 Lenin stated no such thing. All that time there was a chasm, a contradiction between his class analysis and his strategic opinions. It was only after the beginning of the First World War that Lenin could no longer deny the international character of economy and politics and started to appreciate the importance of the world market. The result of this learning process is to be found in his well-known work Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism. However, because
of his continued incorrect interpretation of Marx Lenin did not regard imperialism as an historically specific phase of the capitalist mode of production, but as a new "stage", succeeding that of "normal" capitalism as Marx had analyzed it.

A new fourth and highest stage was added to the schematic series of the natural, primitive and capitalist economy: imperialism. At the same time Lenin continued to think that the fusion of industrial trusts, bank capital and state formed the direct economic preparation for socialism. Although imperialism was still functioning in the interests of the monopolies, there was an objective basis for a direct transition to socialism. "When a big enterprise assumes gigantic proportions, and, on the basis of an exact computation of mass data, organizes according to plan the supply of primary raw materials [...] for tens of millions of people; when the raw materials are transported in a systematic and organized manner [...] then it becomes evident that we have socialization of production [...] that private economic and private property relations constitute a shell which no longer fits its contents [...]." Here too Lenin still does not see the difference between capitalist and socialist socialization. As far as he is concerned the hierarchy in the factories, the dull labour processes etc. would also be maintained under socialism.

The consequences of this apolitical concept of socialization surface in a curious fashion in Lenin's book on State and Revolution. In this work the bourgeois state is split into two parts: political-repressive and economic-administrative. The political-repressive part (army, police, etc.) must be destroyed by the working class and its political expression: the councils movement. The economic part (state bank, etc.), however, is kept for after the revolution and comes under workers' control. Hence the entire country ultimately becomes one big company: "The whole of society will have become a single office and a single factory, with equality of labour and pay." The connection between the economic and repressive aspect of the bourgeois state remained unclear for Lenin. This was facilitated by the circumstance that Lenin never clearly understood the hierarchic and bureaucratic structure of the bourgeois state. (When Lenin attacked bureaucratism, he was not referring to bureaucratic structures as such, but to the fact that certain bureaucrats were lazy or corrupt.)

Contradictions in Lenin's theory of organization

What consequences did these more generalized opinions have for Lenin's theory of organization? He developed the major lines of his position on the tasks and organization of social democracy through polemics with the "economist" faction, with the Mensheviks and also partially in discussions with Trotsky and Luxemburg. Although he did make some later changes, the most important assumptions of Lenin's theory of organization had already been stated in a number of works published immediately after the turn of the century, especially Where to begin?, What is to be done? and A letter to a comrade on our organizational tasks. In all these writings we again see the return of the Kautskyst idea that theory forms an independent whole above the class movement. Quite rightly Lenin states that the economic struggle of the working class must merge with revolutionary political theory, but he sees this merging as the combination of two completely independent elements. The connection with the economic struggle is for Lenin simply a means of winning the trust of the working class; it is an attempt to join the dynamics of the economic struggle in order to further organically develop it into a political struggle. The task of the revolutionary party is technical, propagandistic. The central question for Lenin is how to spread social-democratic ideas as effectively as possible. The publication of economic and political disclosures in a much-read All-Russian organ is the best way of increasing the political consciousness of the working class. Lenin therefore characterized the exemplary revolutionary by emphasizing: "the Social-Democrat's ideal should not be the trade-union secretary, but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalize all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth before all his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for all and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat." 18

The party embodies the interests of the working class and, therefore, may act in its place. In 1917 Lenin expressed this lumping together of the "class" and "party" levels quite clearly, when he stated: "Our Party, like any other political party, is striving after political domination for itself. Our aim is the dictatorship of the revolutionary proletariat." 19 The party's task consists of creating optimum conditions for the people's tribunes. For this a well-oiled and exceedingly efficient apparatus is needed which Lenin, logically enough, often refers to as a machine. The party uses all forms of bourgeois rationality, such as specialization, division of labour and hierarchy. The central committee at the top holds on to all the strings and makes sure that "all the cogs and wheels of the Party machine" 20 fit properly together. For Lenin the fact that as a result of Czarist repression the democratic election of the leadership and the complete informing of all the members was impossible, was not important. To him the "strictest secrecy, the strictest selection of members, and the training of professional revolutionaries" was a "greater thing" than "democratism"; it was the "complete, comradely, mutual confidence among revolutionaries." Should the central leadership prove to be incompetent then it would have to be removed through "comradely influence" - or else overthrown as the most extreme measure. 21

In accordance with these views Lenin interpreted class struggle as a war and the party as a military leadership. At numerous occasions he explicitly addressed this analogy. Two citations may suffice here. In 1915
Lenin said: "[The army] is a good example of organisation. This organization is good only because it is flexible and is able at the same time to give millions of people a single will. Today these millions are living in their homes in various parts of the country; tomorrow mobilization is ordered, and they report for duty. Today they lie in the trenches, and this may go on for months; tomorrow they are led to the attack in another order. Today they perform miracles in sheltering from bullets and shrapnel; tomorrow they perform miracles in hand-to-hand combat. Today their advance detachments lay minefields; tomorrow they advance scores of miles guided by airmen flying overhead. When, in the pursuit of a single aim and animated by a single will, millions alter the forms of their communication and their behaviour, change their tools and weapons in accordance with the changing conditions and the requirements of the struggle - all this is genuine organization. The same holds true for the working-class struggle against the bourgeoisie."23 And in 1920 Lenin wrote: "One will readily agree that any army which does not train to use all the weapons, all the means and methods of warfare that the enemy possesses, or may possess, is behaving in an unwise or even criminal manner. This applies to politics even more than it does to the art of war. [...] If we learn to use all the methods of struggle, victory will be certain, because we represent the interests of the really foremost and really revolutionary class".24

Such opinions confirm our proposition that the Kautskyist and Narodnik traditions were being mingled. The German-Marxist idea of bringing in revolutionary ideas from the outside were combined with the Russian concept of a conspiratorial elite organization.25 The Narodnik's basic attitude is perfectly reflected in Lenin's exclamation: "Give us an organization of revolutionaries, and we will overturn Russia!"26 or when he claims: "The thing we need is a military organization of agents."27 It need therefore not surprise anyone that Lenin considered it the duty of social democrats "of creating as good an organization of revolutionaries as Zemlya i Volya had, or, indeed, an incomparably better one." According to Lenin the only big mistake made by the Narodniki was that they relied "on a theory that was not a revolutionary theory at all".28 Because Lenin did not derive ideas from material relations but saw them as standing by themselves, he saw no problem in rejecting the ideas of the Narodniki while at the same time copying their organizational model. In so doing he ignored the fact that there was a direct link between the military organization concept of Zemlya i Volya and its conspirative-terrorist ideas.

After 1902 Lenin modified a few aspects of his party theory. As early as the second congress of the SDRP (1903) Lenin changed an element in his reasoning as a result of the voting behaviour of the delegates, which according to him was determined by their class position. In his view the proletarian-revolutionary wing had voted Bolshevik, while the intellectual-opportunist wing had chosen for the Menshevik position. In fact, this was a conflict "between the mentality of the unstable intellectual and that of the staunch proletarian, between intellectualist individualism and proletarian solidarity".29 Since Lenin maintained his theory about the intelligentsia as the bearer of scientific socialism, he ended up in a new contradiction: the working class could not develop a revolutionary consciousness on its own, but at the same guaranteed that the party took up revolutionary positions.

A second important change took place when Lenin - on account of the experiences during the failed revolution of 1905 and the sectarian behaviour of many Bolsheviks towards the workers' councils which were rising - began to take these workers' councils into account. Although Lenin regarded the soviets as bourgeois organs,30 certainly in the first years, he nevertheless believed it necessary to make a connection between the party and the council movement. This also had consequences for the internal structure of the party. Lenin now became, among other things, a proponent of democratic centralism with freedom of debate and unity in action.31 In a later period Lenin also admitted that he had exaggerated certain issues in What is to be done?. Even so he maintained the idea that revolutionary consciousness has to be brought in from the outside. To that extent the acceptance of the principle of democratic socialism was not a principled review of his positions on the party, but purely a means of preventing the party from being alienated from the class and thus being unable to fulfill its political leadership role.

Differences between Bolshevik practice and Leninist theory

There is a growing consensus among historians that Bolshevism and Leninism were never identical, for "Bolshevism from the start was a collection of personalities, in exile and in Russia, whose views were often in conflict with Lenin's and the Marxist orthodoxy he claimed to defend.32

There was a deep chasm between Lenin's ideas about organization and the Bolsheviks' organizational practice. Let us list a few findings.

1. According to Lenin's view the intelligentsia should play a decisive role in the learning process of the working class. In his opinion the party had to be a league of intellectuals which had to attract workers and politically educate them. Historical experience, however, shows that the relation between workers and intellectuals in Russia was far more complicated. Numerous sources, among them the memoirs of party officials, show that the nucleus of the party was always made up of workers. Intellectuals joined in periods of increasing struggle and left the movement when a downward stage started. Some quotations from the memoirs of the old Bolshevik Alexandr Shlyapnikov (published in 1923) can illustrate this:

- "A typical feature of the pre-war period of party work was its lack of intellectuals. The exodus of intellectuals that had begun in 1906 and 1907 meant that party workers, full-time staff and so on were workers. There was so little of the intelligentsia left that it barely sufficed to meet the needs of the Duma faction and the daily paper."

- "Instead of the student youth and intellectuals
of 1903-5, only workers were in evidence in the war years [at meetings and suchlike - MvdL]. [...] Intellectuals were a rare exception. Of the old party intelligentsia there remained very few left who had maintained their ties with the workers."

- From 1916 this changed again: "The turning-point in the mood of the people and the growth of opposition among even the bourgeoisie drove into our ranks no small number of student activists."

The pattern is clear: in the years 1903-5 and 1916-7 there was an influx of intellectuals because the movement was on the rise. In the intermediate period of reaction and counter-revolution they stayed on the side. The success of the Bolshevik party was not due to the intellectuals (except for a few, specifically Lenin himself) but to the politically educated workers, described by Shlyapnikov as the "intellectual workers".

2. To what extent was the Bolshevik party a group of "steelied militiants"? Historical research has shown that there was a large-scale "circulation" of members in the Bolshevik wing of the social democrats. A study of the period up to 1907 concluded: "In terms of organization, the Mensheviks had a larger permanent core of personnel. The Bolsheviks had a great turnover." (This was, by the way, one reason why Lenin, who himself partly represented the continuity of the organization from the start, enjoyed such respect in the party). This picture of a rapidly changing membership has also been confirmed for later years by memoirs, etc.

The idea of a small, tightly-knit organization of extremely experienced militants was definitely undermined in practice by the events of 1917. Membership growth was extremely impressive and swift. Following Anikeev's data, the membership of the Petrograd committee increased from 2,000 at the beginning of March to 49,478 in early October; in Moscow the figures were 600 in March and 15,000 at the end of July; in Ivanovo-Voznesensk membership even increased from 10 in early March to 5,871 at the beginning of December! It seems obvious that Leninist structures - which after all require much training and discipline - could not exist under these circumstances.

3. Was the Bolshevik party indeed a party machine, with well-oiled parts working in close harmony under the leadership of the central committee? This question too must be answered negatively. Orders from the top leadership were regularly ignored by lower echelons. When in 1917 the central leadership ordered the setting up of regional organizations, opposition against this measure arose in different regions. In Kiev and the surrounding area an important group under Pyatakov refused to join the new regional committee. In the lower Volga region it was not possible to form a regional committee because of the enormous rivalry between the Saratov and Samara committees. Something similar happened in Moscow when the town committee and the regional bureau refused to combine. The result: in several regions there were two parallel Bolshevik leaderships.

Even the central committee was not very punctual and disciplined. A large number of members did not even come to meetings. The sixth congress, for example, had chosen 21 members in the leadership. At various meetings following these appointments between 6 and 16 members were present, with an average of 10 per session. The historically vital meeting of 10 October 1917, which decided on rebellion, was held by 11 members! The central committee did not carry out its own decisions either. According to the minutes of the meeting of 10 October 1917 the following was discussed: "Comrade Dzerzhinsky proposes that out of the Central Committee a Political Bureau be set up to take up the leadership the coming days. After an exchange of views the proposal was accepted. A Political Bureau of 7 members was formed: Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Trotsky, Stalin, Sokolnikov, Bubnov." However, this political bureau, which was supposed to lead the revolt, never met. The decision seems to have been forgotten.

The Bolshevik organization as a whole was never as disciplined, well-oiled party machine which many for a long time supposed it to be. Alexander Rabinovitch attributes the Bolshevik success in Petrograd 1917 "in no small measure" to the flexible nature of the party, emphasizing "the party's internally relatively democratic, tolerant, and decentralized structure and method of operation, as well as its essentially open and mass character - in striking contrast to the traditional Leninist model."

Conclusion

Ernest Mandel has argued many times that, in the field of the Marxist theory of the subjective factor, one of Lenin's most important contributions is his stressing of the need to centralize experience and knowledge. This is undoubtedly true. Centralization in this sense is at the heart of any collective revolutionary effort. The point is, however, that Lenin interpreted centralization as an hierarchical, army-like, process, wherein the officers of the revolutionary party digest the lessons of the struggle and then explain these lessons to the soldiers, that is the broad layers of the working class. This is, I believe, the central contradiction of Lenin's organizational theory: it seeks to promote self-activity of the working class by subordinating it to an elevated hierarchical organization. If the party is the teacher of the proletariat, then the workers are the children in need of education. The other internal contradictions in Lenin's thought which I have pointed out are related directly to this benevolent-authoritarian pedagogical view.

The Russian experience 1903-1924 showed, however, that this approach worked only partly. Once more history proved that reality is stronger than theory. Paul LeBlanc, a sophisticated Leninist who admits that there did exist a "tension between diversity and discipline, between local or individual initiative and centralism", has emphasized that this should not lead us to "harmonizing a rather amorphous 'anything-goes' organizational practice with a sentimental attachment to the Bolshevik tradition." Correct as this warning is, it should not make us forget that Lenin considered "discipline" and "centralism" as much more important than "diversity"
and "local or individual initiative". In that sense the Bolshevist party was not Leninist, but "quasi-Leninist" at most.\textsuperscript{40} Even in 1917 there did not exist, as LeBlanc believes, a "common commitment to the revolutionary program" in all segments of the party - unless we consider a revolutionary sentiment already as such a commitment. (To give just one example: even after the October events not all local party organizations had separated from the Mensheviks.) In some important respects the Bolshevist party was more similar to the PT in today's Brazil, than to Lenin's model.

The conclusion of all this can only be that Leninism not only contained some essential weaknesses and contradictions, but also was the mere theoretical shell of a revolutionary organization which in practice functioned differently and, in all probability, owed much of its success in 1917 to this "deviation".

After Lenin's death a powerful myth has been created. The Stalinists reformulated Lenin's theory into an apparently coherent "world view", stressing one-sidedly its conservative part. They also rewrote the history of the Bolshevist party in such a way that one does indeed get the impression of a monolithic block, led in infallible fashion by Lenin. It is therefore not surprising, that the official history of 1938 characterized the Bolshevist party as an indivisible war machine, "intimately united by unity of purpose, unity of action and unity of discipline", with "one party discipline for all, with at its head a leading organ", etc.\textsuperscript{41} Anti-Leninists from the Left and the Right were quite happy with these ideological "innovations", for it enabled them to construct the threatening image of Leninism-Bolshevism as an authoritarian, thoroughly repressive, movement-cum-theory.

The Trotskyists defended of course a different interpretation of Lenin's thought and Bolshevist practice, but - being eager to prove that they and not the Stalinists were "true" Leninists - did not dispute the fundamental assumptions about the internal consistency and Bolshevist nature of Leninism as such. It is high time that revolutionary socialists start applying rigorously the Marxist method to their own history.
Footnotes

1. In this paper I am using the concept of "Leninism" only in the literal sense, as "Lenin's teachings". All theories which refer to themselves as Leninist but do not come directly from Lenin, are therefore excluded. I am employing this strictly delineated boundary because I believe it to be extremely doubtful whether the views which Zinoviev described in his book Leninism (1925) or the later "Leninist" discourses by Stalin do indeed correspond with Lenin's teachings.

2. Perry Anderson regards czarism before industrialisation as a pure type of feudalism, although accompanied by an exceptionally well-developed (atypical) absolutist state (Lineages of the Absolutist State (London, 1974), pp. 328-360). Hans-Heribert Nolte sees a special type of feudalism, without a developed class structure ("Zur Stellung Russlands im europäischen Feudalismus", Das Argument, Sonderheft 32, 1978). Carsten Goehrke goes even further and proposes that the concept of feudalism does nothing but evoke wrong associations (Goehrke et al., Russland (Frankfurt, 1972), p. 120).

3. Friedrich Engels: letter to Plekhanov dated 25 February 1895. The entire relevant passage is as follows: "In a country such as yours, where modern large-scale industry is propped up against the original peasant community and in which all the intermediate stages of civilization exist next to each other, a country which furthermore is surrounded by a more or less effective intellectual Chinese Wall, set up by despotism; in such a country one should not be surprised if the most peculiar and impossible combinations of ideas are born". (Marx/Engels, Werke, vol. 39, p. 417).


7. "Once again on the trade unions, the current situation and the mistakes of Trotsky and Bukharin" (1921), Lenin Collected Works [hereafter: LCW], vol. 32, p. 94.

8. It will be clear that I do not agree with Neil Harding, whose "points of reference in considering Lenin's degree of orthodoxy are not so much the texts of Marx and Engels as those of his Russian Marxist predecessors and contemporaries considered by the Russian movement to be unimpeachably orthodox." See his Lenin's Political Thought, vol. 1 (London and Basingstoke, 1977), p. 30.


10. "What the 'Friends of the People' are and how they fight the Social-Democrats" (1894), LCW, vol. 1, p. 177.


12. Ibid., p. 396.


15. Lenin attempted "to examine the whole process of the development of capitalism in Russia", but introduced some limitations: "Firstly [...] we treat the problem of the development of capitalism in Russia exclusively from the standpoint of the home market, leaving aside the problem of the foreign market [...] Fourthly, we limit ourselves exclusively to the economic aspect of the process." "The development of capitalism in Russia" (2nd edn, 1908), LCW, vol. 3, p. 25. Although Lenin's book contains an impressive number of facts and some real insights, it remains unclear why some scholars consider it rather uncritically as "the fullest, best-documented and best-argued examination of the crucial period of the evolution of capitalism out of feudalism in the literature of Marxism." Harding, Lenin's Political Thought, vol. 1, p. 107.


17. "Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism" (1916), LCW, vol. 22, pp. 302-303.


19. "What is to be done", p. 423.


25. In the scholarly literature, two views can be found. On the one hand, a relatively small group of experts believes that the "historical roots of Lenin's theory of organization were not Russian at all, but German - or, more precisely, Austro-German." (Ernest Mandel, "Liehman and Leninism", The Socialist Register 1975, p. 100.) On the other hand, the majority of researchers interpretes Leninism mainly as a modernized version of narodnichesvo. See for instance Astrid von Borcke, Die Ursprünge des Bolschewisismus. Die jacobinische Tradition in Rußland und die Theorie der revolutionären
Diktatur (Munich, 1977), esp. pp. 459-577. In my view both these approaches are one-sided.

26. "What is to be done?", p. 467.

27. Ibid., p. 515, note.

28. Ibid., pp. 474-475.

29. "One step forward, two steps back" (1904), LCW, vol. 7, p. 402.


31. See for example "Report on the unity congress of the R.S.D.L.P." (1906), LCW, vol. 10, p. 380. In "A tactical platform for the unity congress" (1906) Lenin had also stated that the principle of elections from the bottom to the top should be carried through in the party organization (LCW, vol. 10, p. 163).


36. These details (and others) may be found in chapter 8 of Tony Cliff, Lenin, vol. II: All Power to the Soviets (London, 1976). Also see Paul LeBlanc, Lenin and the Revolutionary Party (New Jersey and London, 1990), pp. 270-273.

37. Alexander Rabinowitch, The Bolsheviks Come to Power. The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd (New York, 1976), p. 311. According to Rabinowitch, "Probably the clearest example of the importance and value of the party's relatively free and flexible structure, and the responsiveness of its tactics to the prevailing mass mood, came during the second of September [1917], when party leaders in Petrograd turned a deaf ear to the ill-timed appeals of Lenin, then still in hiding in Finland, for an immediate insurrection." (p. 313.)


39. LeBlanc, Lenin and the revolutionary party, pp. 273


41. Istoriya vesovyaznoi kommunistitsheskoj partii (bol'shevikov). Kratkii kurs (Moscow, 1938), pp. 45f.