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## Liebman and Leninism

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**Leninism Under Lenin [1]** is a serious and useful work. Based upon sound documentation and drawing upon an impressive quantity of facts and quotations, it is devoted to the systematic demolition of two myths – the myth of Lenin as an unscrupulous politician, greedy for power and the legitimate forerunner of Stalin's dictatorship, and the myth of Lenin as the “genius-leader” of the working-class movement who never made a mistake and never changed his line.

The function of the first of these myths, dear to the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie (including the Social-Democratic ideologists) is to discredit Bolshevism and, therewith, the proletarian revolution, by means of Stalin's crimes. The second myth, dear to the bureaucracy, serves the function of making Lenin's prestige serve as apologia for the rulers of Moscow and Peking. Both of these myths strive

to misrepresent the truth, and for this reason – though not only for this reason – constitute obstacles to raising the class-consciousness of the international proletariat and to the struggle for socialism. By dismantling these myths Liebman renders a service to the cause of historical truth, and, consequently, to the cause of the emancipation of the working people.

At the beginning of **State and Revolution** Lenin points out how, after great revolutionaries have died, “attempts are made to convert them into harmless icons, to canonise them, so to say, and to hallow their *names* to a certain extent for the ‘consolation’ of the oppressed classes and with the object of duping the latter, while at the same time robbing the revolutionary theory of its *substance*, blunting its revolutionary edge and vulgarising it.” [2]

This is, to a large extent, what has happened to Lenin’s own work. From **Leninism Under Lenin** there emerges, however, a living and eminently revolutionary Lenin, not a “blunted” one – that is, a Lenin who sometimes hesitates and makes mistakes, who seeks his way forward with the help of a theory which is not a readymade answer to every problem, in the midst of unexpected occurrences, precisely because he is inspired by an iron will to lead his class to victory in practice. This Lenin, more complex and contradictory than the maleficent devil of some and the flawless hero of others, is closer to reality and also, it must be added, markedly more human and attractive than the legendary figures who are so often presented to us as substitutes.

There is no room to list all the points on which Liebman endeavours to establish the truth, by scrupulously examining the sources, applying in his study of them a definite sense of history, of the social and economic context, and of the political and ideological traditions of the persons

involved – in other words, using as it deserves to be used that fine tool of historical explanation, the theory of the class struggle. Generally speaking, this task is carried out with success.

But there is something else: this is not the only task which Liebman has set himself in writing **Leninism Under Lenin**. Like every other self-respecting Marxist historian, he does not merely seek to decipher the true interconnexion of significant facts and destroy legends and falsifications. He tries to *explain*, as well, and in so doing he comes up against the entanglement of history with theory, as is inevitable for anyone who aims to deal with Lenin and Leninism from the Marxist standpoint.

### Unanswered questions

Is Lenin's theory of organisation responsible (or does it share responsibility) for new forms of alienation of the proletariat? Was Lenin for the exercise of power by the proletariat or for the exercise of power by the Party? Was there in Lenin – but only during a revolution – a "libertarian" side that conflicted with another side of his theory which was Jacobin, or squarely authoritarian? Does Lenin thereby bear, if not *the* responsibility, at least a *certain degree* of responsibility, for the bureaucratic degeneration of the Party and of the state? Was this degeneration, moreover, inevitably "written" in the objective elements of Russian society at the beginning of the 1920s, having regard to the disintegration that the

proletariat had undergone – first politically, then economically, numerically and even socially? Could the Russian proletariat have kept hold of the direct exercise of power even if the revolution did not quickly prove victorious in the West? Was victory for the proletarian revolution – in Germany, say – objectively possible? Was the Communist International capable of becoming a leading revolutionary force in the proletariat of the West and the East? Did it, in the end, weaken or strengthen the political armament of the international proletariat? In the light of all these factors, was the socialist revolution of October 1917, *as a proletarian and socialist revolution*, a realistic undertaking; or was Lenin, having been suddenly carried away by “Trotskyist” sinfulness, *doomed* to found a state and a society contrary to what he had intended to create, as the Mensheviks have steadily asserted ever since 1917, and as so many neo-Mensheviks (who sometimes turn up in the most unexpected quarters) continue to repeat today?

All these questions are either formulated explicitly by Liebman or else are implicit in the successive chapters of his book. The least one can say is that he does not offer clear answers to any of them. More often than not, he offers no answers at all. Thus there is a striking similarity between the masterly biography of Trotsky by Isaac Deutscher and the present work, written by an author who feels himself to be, in some ways, a disciple and successor of Deutscher. Both Deutscher and Liebman are excellent historians. Both of

them stumble when they come up against theoretical problems of decisive importance. The source of these inadequacies, not to say of this failure, of Liebman's analysis lies, above all, in his reluctance to bring together in unity theoretical contributions which, though apparently contradictory, often constitute different aspects of a single totality. At the end of his book, Liebman stresses the eminently dialectical quality of Lenin's thinking. He is right, of course, though it must be added (and this only serves to reinforce what he says), that the quality in question cannot be seen as having been acquired once and for all in Lenin's youth: it was won in a progressive and continual process.

Nevertheless, Liebman seems to have a rather simplified conception of dialectics, which he reduces, essentially, to the unity and conflict of opposites, and the transcending of them. Accordingly, his final judgment on Lenin's theory of organisation is framed thus:

And if the 'first term' in the dialectical contradiction and transcendence can be represented, in the great debate between the supporters of organisation and those of spontaneity, by a Luxemburgism carried to extremes, identified with absolute faith in the self-emancipation of the masses—a line that Rosa Luxemburg herself never fully espoused—and the 'second term' by a purely elitist conception of the Party such as Blanquism incarnates better than even the earliest form of Leninism, is not the 'third term' to be found in the Bolshevik Party as it developed in the rising phase of the revolution of 1917, before and after October? At that time the Party appears as a synthesis in which we see, merged and interacting, features from the original Bolshevism — with its discipline, will to coherence, tendency to centralism, concern for efficiency — and the characteristics that accompany great popular movements, defying all organisation from without, instructions from the top, and even the forecasts of the most revolutionary of strategists. [3]

What is wrong with this “synthesis” is that, by trying to explain too much, it explains very little. The “characteristics that accompany great popular movements” are not merely features of the Russian revolution but also and equally of the German and Spanish revolutions, to mention only those. Why were these revolutions not successful? Were, then, the “features retained from the original Bolshevism” a condition *sine qua non* of the victory of the revolution in Russia, of this “synthesis”? In order that they might be merged in a “transcendence”, however, they must have had a previous existence. Was Lenin right, then, against the Mensheviks and against Rosa Luxemburg in the debate of 1903-1904? If so, why bring against him the Mensheviks’ accusation of Blanquism? And if this accusation was proved right, after all, by the “extreme sectarianism” of the Lenin of 1908-1912 – that is, if he was wrong to have imprinted its “features” upon Bolshevism – did the fact of his being wrong in 1903, or in 1910, become a condition for his being right in 1917; in other words, a pre-condition for the victory of the revolution? It will be seen that this “dialectics” of Leibman’s obscures more than it clarifies.

Actually, as Marx observed in his critique of Ricardo, and as Hegel had emphasised already, thinking becomes effectively dialectical only when it learns to *discover the mediations* – the intermediate links – which *articulate the contradictions*, instead of juxtaposing them and

“transcending” them by virtue of this juxtaposition. The weakness in Liebman’s analysis is the absence of these intermediate links from his explanation of Leninism and of the process whereby the Russian revolution first rose and then declined into degeneracy. These intermediate links alone make possible a *coherent* interpretation of what otherwise is liable to look like a fortuitous mosaic of “contradictory factors”. When these mediations have been found, the “unity of opposites”, the conflict between them and their transcendence cease to be mere matters of observation – they become *comprehensible*, as corresponding to the internal logic of the totality being studied.

**Why did Lenin go over from the  
“democratic dictatorship of the  
proletariat and the peasantry” to the *April  
Theses*, that is, to the theory of permanent  
revolution?**

I will illustrate what I have said with four examples, related to four major aspects of the “problematic” of Leninism and to four essential questions that Liebman raises.

Liebman correctly states that the strategy upheld by Lenin in **Two Tactics of Social-Democracy**, in opposition both to the Mensheviks and to Trotsky, consisted in bringing about in Russia a bourgeois-democratic revolution, against the bourgeoisie, through a revolutionary alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry, leading to *bourgeois* democracy, that is, a bourgeois state, and to the development of a *capitalist* economy. [4] He is wrong,



however, in supposing that this idea of trying to bring about a bourgeois revolution against the bourgeoisie was somehow surprising from the Marxist standpoint. Engels had, in fact, explained in exactly the same way the victory of the French revolution of 1789, in which the revolutionary dictatorship of the Jacobin petty-bourgeoisie against the big bourgeoisie was *necessary* in order that the bourgeois-democratic revolution might be carried through to completion. Indeed, Lenin refers explicitly to this historical precedent.

But what were the “key” mediations in this argument of Lenin’s? First, that the rural petty-bourgeoisie was capable of forming an independent political force which could *ally itself as such* with the party of the proletariat. It was this factor, and this alone, that dictated, on the political plane, the retention of *bourgeois* democracy. Secondly, that the agrarian revolution would lead to the rise of modern capitalism in country and town alike: that there was room in the world market for a Russian large-scale capitalist industry in full expansion, developing organically in the same way as in Britain, Belgium, France and Germany.

Actually, Lenin’s expectations were based, down to the eve of the First World War, upon a choice between capitalist agricultural development on the “Prussian” model (with large-scale landownership as its foundation) and capitalist agricultural development on the “American” model (with ownership by small and medium farmers as its foundation). Clearly, only the second line of development would ensure an internal market large enough for capitalist industry to expand organically. When we appreciate these intermediate links in Lenin’s analysis, the *April Theses* no longer appear as a stroke of genius or a mere result of “pressure” from the masses or from events, but can be seen as the result of a changed analysis which is coherent with the entire evolution of Lenin’s thinking. On the one hand, by deepening his study

of imperialism, Lenin came to the conclusion that, in the setting of a world market which had reached the stage of monopoly capitalism, Russian capitalism was doomed to remain under the domination of international finance-capital, and therefore could not but continue to be cramped, maimed and underdeveloped, with a state power that was reactionary and barbarous. On the other, by studying the political role played by the peasantry in *all modern revolutions*, he came to the conclusion that there had never been and never would be any really independent peasant parties—that the peasantry’s lot was always to follow the leadership of one of the fundamental classes of urban society:

”We know from our own experience – and revolutions all over the world confirm it if we take the modern epoch of, say, a hundred and fifty years that the result has always been the same everywhere: the petty-bourgeoisie in general, and the peasants in particular, have failed in all their attempts to realise their strength, and to direct economics and politics their own way. They have had to follow the leadership either of the proletariat, or the capitalists – there is no middle way open to them. Anyone who thinks of a middle way is an empty dreamer. There is much politics, economics and history to prove it ... Whenever the proletariat was unable to lead the revolution, this force always followed the leadership of the bourgeoisie.” [5]

Be it said in passing, this “dialectical synthesis” proceeding through necessary mediations (the class nature of the state to which the worker-peasant alliance leads, the nature of the party leading the revolution) was not understood by Mao Tse-tung, either, when he strove, in his article on *New Democracy*, written in January 1940, to defend the

concept of a state, described as one of “new democracy”, which would be neither bourgeois nor working-class, but would represent “the joint dictatorship of several revolutionary classes.” [6] In practice, this thesis had no influence on the course taken by the Chinese revolution: but it caused the unfortunate Aidit to see the *bourgeois* republic of Sukarno, with its *bourgeois* state and *bourgeois* army, as the incarnation of a “new democracy” such as “Mao Tse-tung Thought” preached. This disastrous illusion, worthy of an “empty dreamer”, as Lenin put it, cost him his life, along with the lives of five hundred thousand other Indonesian Communists. It would have been better if he had grasped, once and for all, the turn made by Lenin in 1917, and understood the profound theoretical reasons for this turn.

As soon as analysis has modified these two intermediate links, the conclusion follows easily. In order to be victorious, the Russian revolution must not take the form of an alliance between a proletarian party and a peasant party, but of the conquest of power by the proletariat, relying upon the poor peasantry and neutralising the middle peasantry. Conquest of power by the proletariat means dictatorship of the proletariat, Soviet (proletarian) democracy, and no longer bourgeois democracy. The solving of the bourgeois-democratic tasks and of the socialist tasks of the Russian revolution turn out to be indissolubly bound up together.

It is impossible for an advanced, liberal, democratic capitalism to develop in Russia. Either there will be a revolutionary victory of the proletariat leading to a development in the direction of socialism, with the help of

the international revolution, or there will be a victory of the counter-revolution, resulting in continued underdevelopment and backwardness, with denial of agrarian revolution, and an industrial veneer the thickness of which will depend on the correlation of national and international forces.

The transition from Lenin's first to his second "strategy" therefore did not result from any "synthesis" between "contradictory elements" but from a change in his analysis. Intermediate links prove to have been decisive in accounting for this change-which has, moreover, shown itself fully justified in the light of world history since 1914.

### **The vanguard organisation and the working class: another intermediate link**

Something similar is seen when we endeavour to understand the "evolution" of Lenin's conception of organisation. Liebman, following the critiques made by Plekhanov, Axelrod, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg in 1903-1904, makes the mistake of seeing the centralisation advocated by Lenin as merely a function of the "underground" conditions and police repression that prevailed in Russia at that time. [7]

This means forgetting, first and foremost, that the historical roots of Lenin's theory of organisation were not Russian at all, but German-or, more precisely, Austro-German: that they went back to the Heinfeld programme of the Austrian Social-Democratic Party, to Viktor Adler, and to Kautsky himself. It seems to me beyond doubt that his reading of an article by Kautsky which was

published in **Die Neue Zeit** shortly before Lenin wrote **What Is To Be Done?** had a profound influence upon the Russian leader.

Further, this means forgetting the essentially *political*, and not organisational, character of the centralisation advocated by Lenin, and misunderstanding its deep theoretical significance. The spontaneous activity of the working-class masses always revolves around immediate problems. *In normal times*, these immediate problems are concerned with aspects of socio-economic and political reality which do not directly challenge the very nature of the capitalist regime ("immediate demands"). Moreover, these spontaneous movements arise, almost inevitably, in fragmented form, determined by the special features of a particular workplace, branch of industry, town or district. Now, the masses become conscious through their experience in action. Fragmented action can engender only fragmented consciousness. But *class-consciousness* results, precisely, from the transcending of everything that is corporatist, narrow, partial and fragmentary in the consciousness of the working people. The purpose of political centralisation is thus, above all, to make possible the *confluence and integratzon* of the workers' scattered and fragmentary experiences of action, so as to form a totalised experience such as alone can enable the widest circles of the working class to acquire *classconsciousness* in the deepest sense of the term. It is not a matter of "stifling" spontaneity but of unifying spontaneous activities into a total revolutionary enterprise.

While the immediate, elemental and spontaneous activity of the workers is inevitably marked by fragmentary features (of which "economism" is only one aspect), resulting in a fragmentary consciousness ("trade-union consciousness", as Lenin put it), this is true only of *normal times*. A

revolutionary period is characterised precisely by the fact that, now, collective action against the regime becomes an immediate aim for the masses. In these conditions, the consciousness of the masses, nourished by this experience of stormy collective action, can quickly become classconsciousness on a very high level. When this “mediation” has been grasped, we realise that there is no real contradiction between the point made by the Lenin of **What Is To Be Done?** that the workers can arrive spontaneously only at trade-union consciousness and the amazed exclamation of Lenin during the 1905 revolution, that “the workers are spontaneously Social- Democratic” (i.e. anti-capitalist). These are only two aspects of the same totality, which is understood when the “intermediate link” has been grasped.

It was thus only the *form* of the centralisation of the Party advocated by Lenin in 1902 that was influenced by “underground” conditions, the nature of Tsardorn, and so forth. [8] Its *content* is political, and is closely linked with the problem of the formation of the workers’ class-consciousness. Actually, Leninism in its entirety is, to a great extent, an attempt to resolve the “paradox of Marxism” which was left largely unanswered by Marx and Engels: how, under conditions of capitalism and the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie, does the class-consciousness of the proletariat take shape, develop and become perfected, in concrete reality?

The concept of a vanguard organisation corresponds, moreover, to a materialist analysis of the structure of the working class and the course followed by its struggles. The modern proletariat is homogeneous neither in its origins nor in its functions, nor in its remuneration (standard of living), nor in the degree to which it is permeated by bourgeois ideology. This stratification of the working class cannot but

have a bearing on the rapidity and the form of its development of consciousness. Nor do workers' struggles, the essential sources of class-consciousness, proceed in straight-line fashion. They have their ups and downs (at least, where struggles of a certain scale are concerned), the cyclical nature of these being verifiable empirically, though it has not yet been adequately studied by Marxists.

It follows from this that the activity of the proletariat, and especially its political activity, will also be cyclical in character. This is, indeed, one of the principal conclusions to be drawn from Liebman's book, in relation to the Russian proletariat in the quarter-century between the foundation of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party and the death of Lenin.

Consequently, a party based upon a mere "paper" membership of dues-payers (the only alternative to the Leninist model) will for long periods of its existence be a *party of passive members*. All who have had experience of "mass parties" of this sort know that they are much more apt to be manipulated by leaders, and more easily bureaucratised, than are vanguard organisations in which insistence on active commitment by the membership, and a stricter ideological selection of the latter, greatly reduce the gap between "the leaders" and "the rank and file", create more conditions for an equality which is not merely formal but effectual between all the party members, and thus make possible a greater degree of internal democracy. It should logically be concluded from this that the Leninist type of organisation is at bottom more democratic and better immunised against bureaucratisation or demagoguery than the Social-Democratic or Anarchist type of organisation – which does not mean, of course, that it is *wholly* immune. Does not historical experience confirm this apparently unexpected conclusion?

The synthesis forced upon us is thus more highly “articulated” than that which Liebman proposes. Yes, proletarian class-consciousness at its highest level, that is, Marxist theory which has integrated all the experiences of two centuries of class struggle, cannot, in normal times, find embodiment outside a vanguard minority. To deny this means to idealise excessively the realities of proletarian life and, thereby, the realities of the capitalism which produces it. The vanguard organisation’s essential function is to help the broadest masses to undertake a collective struggle for emancipation, which can come to a head only in revolutionary crises. In those circumstances the masses become for the most part “accessible” to revolutionary class-consciousness. The bulk of them can then join the vanguard party.

But this does not happen automatically or under any old conditions. It requires a *previous* implantation of the cadres of the vanguard party among the workers: this, alone, can make that party a *potential* leadership for the class. It requires a correct strategy and tactics, such as can politically convince the majority of the workers. It requires a tradition of political initiatives and actions preparing the masses for the revolutionary assault, and rendering the vanguard organisation credible as the proletariat’s potential leadership. We now see why the “characteristics of Bolshevism” *were able* to fuse with the spontaneous revolutionary ardour of the Russian masses in 1917: because all these elements of analysis are parts of the Leninist conception of organisation and had already been put into practice; because they are its intermediate links, without which this conception could not have produced the party that led the Russian proletariat to victory, but would have produced instead an impotent sect.



More than that, we can grasp another “intermediate link”, which provides the theoretical foundation for this conception of organisation. The stratification of the proletariat is not only “sociological”, it is also intellectual, moral and political. In the factories and offices the workers who form the vanguard are the outcome of a process of “natural selection”. They are the ones who are the first to go into battle, those who best appreciate the conditions for victory, who have the greatest ability to act as “leaders of men”, and who emerge as the moving spirits in strikes and demonstrations. Their ideological evolution reflects the *totality* of the contradictory conditions determining the formation of the classconsciousness of the proletariat. Sometimes they may confine themselves to the limited concerns of the enterprise where they work. At other times their interest in the class struggle as a whole (national and international) may greatly expand and develop. Sometimes they become politically narrow, at other times they show themselves politically clear-sighted. The building of a vanguard *party of the working class* means, essentially, the fusion of the programme, and the cadres who embody the programme, with this stratum of the workers. It was here that Lenin achieved his greatest successes, especially in 1905-1907 and in 1912-1914. It was thanks to these successes that the *Bolshevik workers* were able to play a decisive part in the factories so early as the revolution of February 1917. This was why Lenin was able to get his *April Theses* adopted so easily, despite the resistance of the “Old Bolsheviks”: he was actually only giving clear expression to what these *Bolshevik workers* had been demanding ever since the February revolution. And it was because this “intermediate link” had disappeared in 1922-1923 that Lenin’s last struggle, waged against bureaucracy and against Stalin,

ended in defeat. [9]

## **Impossibility of, or delay in, the world revolution**

Liebman shows clearly [10] how alien to Lenin was the idea of “socialism in a single country,” and this is not the least of the merits of his book. He also shows how the birth of the Communist International was not due to the “dreams of world revolution” cherished by a few romantic Russian leaders, prisoners of their own revolutionary projects, but, on the contrary, reflected a deep-going political differentiation which had come about since 1914 (I should say that it had existed embryonically from 1905-1906 onward) in the entire labour movement, in the working class throughout the world. But then he quickly plunges into an analysis which does no more than juxtapose the contradictory elements in the evolution of events between 1917 and 1923, so that he is unable to provide any real explanation of what happened. Indeed, when he concludes that the “Russification” of the Communist International resulted from “the isolation of the Russian revolution,” that this “Russification” determined its failure, and that all that Leninism could have done to correct it would have been to “keep it in check” (by means of “internationalist vigilance”) “while waiting for the only event that could really put

a stop to it, namely, the ending of revolutionary Russia's isolation through a spreading of the movement which constituted the very *raison d'être* of the Communist International" [11], he fails to answer the essential question: *why* did that movement not spread?

Two fundamentally different answers to this question have been offered. One, framed in 1917 by the Social-Democrats alone, but taken up from 1920-1921 onward by practically all the trends in the labour movement apart from the Leninists, asserts that the notion of a "world revolution", forecast to take place at the end of the First World War, was objectively unrealistic and therefore utopian. Underlying the more serious and "Marxistic" variant of this answer is the thesis that the objective conditions for the socialist revolution were not yet ripe; that capitalism still possessed huge reserves, resources and capacity for expansion on the world scale; that only a world-wide economic collapse of capitalism could have created the preconditions for a victorious international proletarian revolution; that the international working class was far from having attained the degree of organisation, culture and technical preparation needed in order to take over the leadership of society, and so on.

The other answer, put forward in 1920-1921 by the leaders of the Communist International, with Lenin and Trotsky at their head, and improved upon subsequently by Trotsky and the Fourth International, distinguishes between the *epoch* opened by the First World War, marked by the beginning of the historical decline of the capitalist mode of production, which makes the international socialist revolution objectively possible and necessary, and the revolutionary *situations* which are not permanently present as such in

every continent or every country after 1914, but do occur *periodically* in one country or another. According to this conception, the socialist revolution has been “on the agenda” in the West (and in the East) since 1914 *in the same sense* as revolution was “on the agenda” in Tsarist Russia from the end of the 19th century onward – that is, potentially and intermittently. *But it was precisely this projection on the scale of Europe and of the world of “the actuality of the revolution”* (the basis of Lenin’s entire political outlook) *that underlay and theoretically justified the creation of the Communist International*. In the absence of a revolutionary prospect, and without the implication of tenacious and constant work to prepare the vanguard and the masses for such an eventuality, the creation of Communist Parties and a Communist International would have been an unjustifiable adventure.

“We [the revolutionary Marxists] are now faced with the following alternative,” wrote Lenin in 1915: “either we are really and truly convinced that the war is creating a revolutionary situation in Europe, and that all the economic and socio-political circumstances of the imperialist period are leading up to a revolution of the proletariat-in which case we are in duty bound to explain to the masses the need for revolution, call for it, create the necessary organisations, and speak fearlessly and most concretely of the various methods of the forcible struggle and its ‘technique’. This duty of ours does not depend upon whether the revolution will be strong enough, or whether it will arrive with a first or a second imperialist war, etc. Or else we are not convinced that the situation is revolutionary, in which case there is no sense in our just talking about a war against war. In that case we are, in fact, national liberal-labour politicians of the Südekum-Plekhanov or Kautsky variety.” [\[12\]](#)

An analysis like this obviously does not lead to passive “waiting” for revolutions but to the building of parties

which work persistently to prepare for them, to make them more effective and to increase their chances of success. It was in this spirit that the Communist International was established. The difference between Stalinism, withdrawing into “defence of the Soviet bastion” (“socialism in a single country”) and Leninism is thus not quantitative (between a slight withdrawal and a big one), but qualitative. To work doggedly and steadily in favour of the socialist revolution, *regardless* of immediate results (not to try to “provoke” it artificially, or to “export” it – such nonsense was never advocated by Lenin or Trotsky); to seize every real possibility that arises in order to promote the coming of the revolution and its victory; that was Leninism on the international plane. It could co-exist with diplomatic activity by the Soviet *state* which made use of all possibilities for “dividing the enemy forces.” It could never mean *subordination* of the Communist International and of the building of *revolutionary* parties throughout the world to the needs (real or, more often, imaginary) of this diplomatic activity. The radical break between Leninism and Stalinism, as regards “failure”, in this context, is therefore quite inadequate.

In reality, today as in 1914, a Marxist like Liebman is still faced with a limited number of possibilities. Either (1) capitalism cannot be (or does not deserve to be) overthrown in the West, it is still too strong, etc.; or (2) capitalism can be got rid of in the West only gradually, by means of reforms;

or (3) capitalism periodically experiences revolutionary crises which enable it to be overthrown. If the third possibility has not yet been realised, this is for subjective reasons. The “splitting of the labour movement” by Leninism, or Leninist “sectarianism”, or the “stifling of the spontaneity of the masses by Leninism”, should be included among the subjective causes of the defeats suffered by proletarian revolutions in the West. But, in that case, we ask ourselves how it was that the Spanish proletariat, ablaze with spontaneity, failed to take power in July-August 1936, at a time when both the real Leninists and those who disguised themselves as such (the Communists) possessed quite negligible influence among them. Or could it be that (4) the delay in the coming of proletarian revolutions in the West is indeed due to subjective causes, meaning, very largely, the *delay in the application of Leninism*, through the degeneration of the Communist International? History has not yet given its verdict on the capacity of revolutionary Marxists to build Leninist parties independent of the Soviet bureaucracy and in opposition to it. I find it strange that Liebman can manage to avoid coming down in favour of any one of these four possible answers. I doubt whether he would choose any of the first three. Does his refusal to choose the fourth serve as justification for a refusal to commit himself?

### **The workers’ state and bureaucratic degeneration**

Can the reversal in the role played by the Communist Parties be explained by the needs of the defence of the USSR? Did Stalin sacrifice the interests of the

international revolution to those of the Soviet state? This thesis may look attractive, but it will not stand up to critical examination. Hitler's accession to power, Franco's victory, the defeat suffered by the working class of France when it was so close to success in 1936 – how and why could these events serve the interests of the Soviet State? Did they not rather enable its enemies to unite all the economic and military resources of Europe for the attack in 1941 which brought the Soviet State to the brink of collapse?

Explaining this course of events by the evil genius of one man, or by the aberrations of a political system – let alone explaining it by the “germs of totalitarianism” allegedly present in the Leninist conception of organisation – is just as incompatible with Marxism as explaining it by the “personality cult” and its results. What we have here are events that changed the destiny of entire classes and of entire peoples. How can we avoid seeking a *social* explanation for upheavals that were big with such consequences?

However, the very structure that Liebman has given to the second volume of his book (i.e. Parts III and IV) makes such an explanation difficult if not impossible. He begins by analysing the state, then proceeds to the party, and ends with an analysis of society in the USSR, before he goes on to examine Soviet foreign policy and the Communist International. It would have been more consistent with the Marxist method to begin with society, thereby putting at the centre of the explanation that social phenomenon which is the determining factor in all the processes analysed by Liebman, namely, the rise of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Liebman does mention this in passing. He refers to the stubborn, almost desperate struggle that Lenin waged against it in the last years of his life. Nor does he fail to draw attention to the definition of the Soviet state that Lenin formulated as early as 1921: a workers' state with bureaucratic distortions. There, however, in the main, he ends discussion of what should have been the essential subject-matter of this part of his book, namely, the explanation of the changes that took place in the USSR on the eve and on the morrow of Lenin's death.

And yet it is enough to read the writings of Lenin himself, without even considering Trotsky's analysis, in order to appreciate the social character of this phenomenon. The bureaucracy was made up (capitalist ownership having been abolished) of all the professional administrators of the state and of the economy: *professional* administrators, in other words, administrators separated from the mass of the producers, who did not play (or had ceased to play) any administrative role. A workers' state with bureaucratic distortions was thus one in which the administration of the state and of the economy was gradually passing out of the hands of the proletariat into those of the bureaucracy. A bureaucratically degenerated workers' state means a state in which the working class has been institutionally excluded from administration, one where a *de facto* monopoly of administration is ensured for the bureaucracy through a set of institutions and rules. Given the socio-economic context of Russia (the country's backwardness, its isolation amid the capitalist world, the underdevelopment of its productive forces, the shortage of consumer-goods, the low standard of living, etc.), it was inevitable that privileges in the sphere of the exercise of power and material privileges in the sphere of consumption should feed upon each other, strengthening and determining one another.



Liebman would not reject this definition. Nor would he reject the traditional Marxist definition of the bureaucracy: it is not a new class (and certainly not a new bourgeoisie) but a *privileged social stratum of the proletariat* (or, if one cares to use this horrible barbarism, a “petty-bourgeoisified” stratum) – which explains why it remains, in spite of everything, attached to the collective ownership of the means of production and to the planned economy, even while it undermines their foundations through its tyranny, which is free from any social control. The history of the USSR since Lenin’s death is largely explicable in terms of this contradictory nature of the bureaucracy.

Nevertheless, by bringing in this social factor only half-way through his second volume [13], Liebman sets it, so to speak, in the margin of his analysis, instead of setting it squarely in the centre thereof. Instead of showing what was happening to the Soviet State as a result of the rise of this bureaucracy, he is content with a passing mention [14] of the “increasing fusion” of the apparatus of the Party with that of the State. The whole argument is thus stood on its head the gradual weakening of the proletariat leads to its increased political passivity, which in turn leads to the wielding of power by the bureaucracy.

Once again, the intermediate link is missing. The enfeeblement of the proletariat in 1920-1921 doubtless made inevitable the bureaucratic *distortion* of the workers’ state mentioned by Lenin. [15] But all that ensued does not follow inevitably from this initial situation. At most one can say that this situation was pregnant with danger – as Lenin perceived almost at once. It was not inevitable that the decline of the proletariat in numbers and economic importance should continue. The number of wage-earners actually increased by 50 per cent between 1922-1923 and 1925-1926, and could have been made to increase even more

rapidly. It was not inevitable that this numerical increase should be accompanied by persistent unemployment.

It was not inevitable that it should fail to lead to a resumption of political activity. In other words, the transformation of “bureaucratic distortion” into “bureaucratic degeneration” was not the inevitable consequence of the objective conditions existing in Russia in 1920-1921. It resulted from the interaction between these conditions and *the role played by the subjective factor*, that is, by the Bolshevik leadership and the Party.

A correct intervention by this subjective factor could have altered the course of events. It would have been perfectly possible to speed up gradually the pace of industrialisation, and thereby the growth in the numbers of the proletariat and the level of employment, from 1923-1924 onward – if the proposals of the Left Opposition had been followed. This could have been done at the expense of the Nepmen and the kulaks; that is, without reducing the standard of living of the workers and poor peasants but, on the contrary, raising it. Such an economic policy could quite well have been combined with concrete political measures tending to revive the self-activity of the proletariat and impart a real content to Soviet democracy. The state apparatus could certainly have been separated from that of the Party, and the latter subjected to the fresh breezes of the working class and student youth. The Communist International could likewise have been kept at its role of working to promote the victory of the proletarian revolution as and when revolutionary situations occurred in one country or another. Such a concatenation of factors would have avoided the rise of Stalin and Stalinism, the degeneration of the USSR and the victory of Hitler – perhaps even the Second World War. All that happened was not the inevitable consequence of the

weakness of the Soviet proletariat on the morrow of the civil war.

Lenin sensed most of these dangerous possibilities in the course of his last struggle, but he did not have at his command the only instrument by means of which he could have conquered in this struggle, namely, a Leninist Party equal to its task. His theory of organisation was proved correct once again, though now in a negative way: without a revolutionary vanguard party, the proletariat cannot accomplish any of its fundamental historical tasks, including the task of preventing bureaucratic degeneration of its own state.

Why was the Bolshevik Party in 1923 no longer this revolutionary party? The fusion of the Party apparatus with the State apparatus – that is, the transformation of the Party into an expression of the special interests of the bureaucracy instead of an expression of the interests of the proletariat generally – together with the disappearance of the stratum of advanced workers, undoubtedly provide the basic social explanation. But a subjective factor of capital importance needs to be added. The Bolshevik cadres had been trained in a period and within a problematic in which only a tiny place was accorded to “the occupational risks of power”, to use Christian Rakovsky’s striking phrase. The problem of the bureaucratisation of a workers’ state was a new problem, presenting itself for the first time in history. Whenever the working class and its parties are faced with historically new problems, differentiation and regrouping inevitably occur within them. The tragedy of the Bolshevik Party was that only a minority of its leaders and cadres appreciated the acuteness of the danger at the beginning of the 1920s. The greatness of the Bolshevik Party was shown – and this says much for the remarkable school of Marxism that it constituted – in the fact that most of its leaders did

eventually become aware of what had gone wrong, though too late and separately.

Liebman asks this question: did the measures taken in 1920-1921 – the banning of other Soviet parties (mainly the Mensheviks and Anarchists) and then the suppression of the right to form factions in the Bolshevik Party itself – contribute to the process that resulted in the complete stifling of Soviet democracy, and, what amounts to the same thing, the concentration of a monopoly of power in the hands of the bureaucracy? If by “contribute” we mean “facilitate to some extent”, a convinced Leninist would today be obliged to answer, without hesitation: yes. Trotsky certainly drew the historical conclusion from this experience by calling for the right to establish a variety of Soviet parties and declaring that the prohibition of factions could only result in the strangling of inner-Party democracy. Even though he projected these proposals into the future, without ever showing readiness to condemn explicitly the measures which he himself had helped to introduce in 1920-1921, this shade of difference in the way he expressed his idea became so slight towards the end of his life that the conclusion becomes unavoidable, at any rate so far as the ban on factions is concerned. [16]

But it is one thing to say that Lenin and Trotsky erred in 1920-1921 and another to claim that, by taking these exceptional measures (which were largely inevitable, and the consequences of which were *at that time* unpredictable), they caused the entire subsequent series of events. For, let it be repeated, despite what happened in 1920-1921, a political recovery would have been all the easier to bring about from 1923 onward because the fundamental objective cause of the “ebb-tide” had ceased to operate. In 1920-1921 the proletariat was still in a state of complete disintegration – numerical, economic and social: by 1923 recovery had been

energetically begun, and could have been carried through, if the Party had deliberately intervened in this sense.

What, at bottom, was the mistake made by the Bolshevik leaders in 1920-1921? The circumstance that he does not set the category “bureaucracy” in the centre of his analysis prevents Liebman from being able to answer this question with all the clarity needed. The mistake made by Lenin and Trotsky in 1920-1921 lay in their estimation of the comparative seriousness of the different dangers threatening Soviet society as it emerged, exhausted, from the civil war. The Party leaders thought that the principal immediate danger was the political use that petty-bourgeois and middle-bourgeois elements, strengthened by the New Economic Policy, might make of their increased social and material power. Hence the need proclaimed by Lenin for redoubling discipline and closing the ranks during the retreat on the economic front.

The danger to which he pointed, and which Trotsky appreciated similarly, was not an imaginary one. But its immediate acuteness was exaggerated: and, above all, the optimal conditions for combating it were misunderstood. Today, with our knowledge of the subsequent development of events, we realise that the most serious immediate danger threatening Soviet society and the Soviet state at that time was the de-politicising and passivity of the proletariat, which would facilitate *both* the bureaucratic degeneration of the ruling authority and the increased danger of a restoration of capitalism, leaving the way open, in the last resort, only to an administrative-repressive struggle against this latter danger – in other words, that calamity for the Soviet people, the forced collectivisation of agriculture by means of terror.

I am firmly convinced that Lenin had already modified his views by the end of 1921, and certainly saw things differently in 1922: that he had already understood that the

bureaucracy had become the Enemy Number One that had to be forced back at any cost, that a fight for Soviet democracy was urgently needed. And if the great majority of the Party leaders did not follow him in this, it was not because of the mistakes of 1920-1921 but because of the social and political factors mentioned earlier.

At the end of his book Liebman attempts to give a concise definition of Stalinism. This is the most disappointing part of the book, the one in which all the shortcomings I have tried to bring out, so to speak, come together. Stalinism is said to be Leninism perverted by nationalism, Leninism plus administrative tyranny and bureaucratic terror, Leninism minus dialectics. [17] This is like saying that socialism is liberalism minus belief in private property or that communism is Social-Democratic reformism plus revolutionary conviction and vigour ...

The chronological filiation of currents of thought (including a large element of negation and transcendence) in no way justifies such unwarranted formulations. By reducing the transition of the USSR towards the dictatorship of the bureaucracy to an interplay of political concepts, ideas and practices, on the grounds that there is no *complete* discontinuity between 1920-1921 and 1936, one shuts one's eyes to the *determining social direction* of this evolution (which was actually a bloody political counterrevolution) and fails to grasp the *conflict* between continuity and discontinuity in the transformation that took place.

No, Stalinism is not "Leninism minus dialectics". Leninism is the theory and practice of the revolutionary conquest and wielding of power by the proletariat in the epoch of imperialism. As realised for the first time in a backward country, in extremely unfavourable circumstances, spoilt by many defects, suffering from the lack of precedents and historical experiences, dragged down

by some mistakes, Leninism does not represent, and never represented in the eyes of its founder, a “model” of what workers’ power should be like, everywhere and always. Basing ourselves on the experience of history we can today define better than could be done in 1917 what the institutional, economic, political and cultural conditions are for the proletariat to keep hold, to the greatest extent possible, of the direct exercise of power.

Stalinism, however, is the ideology of a privileged bureaucratic stratum whose very existence requires exclusion of the proletariat from direct exercise of power. No matter what the continuity of the historical process may be, discontinuity is absolute in this matter. It is the essential weakness of Liebman’s book that he has not clearly said so.

**[Top of the page](#)**

## Notes

- 1.** Marcel Liebman, **Leninisme sous Lenine**, 2 vols., Paris, Seuil, 1973. English translation, **Leninism Under Lenin**, London, Jonathan Cape, 1975.
- 2.** Lenin, **Collected Works**, 4th edition, English version, Vol.25, p.385.
- 3.** Liebman, Vol.2, pp.354-355: Eng. trans., p.447.
- 4.** **Ibid.**, Vol.1, p.99: Eng. trans., p.80.
- 5.** Lenin, **op. cit.**, Vol.32, pp.277-278. The quotation comes from his speech at the All-Russia Congress of Transport Workers, 27 March 1921. Earlier expressions of the same idea are found, e.g. in **Ibid.**, Vol.25, p.200 (*Constitutional Illusions*, 8 August 1917) and p.277 (*From A Publicist’s Diary: Peasants and Workers*, 11 September 1917).

6. Mao Tse-tung, **Selected Works**, Vol.III, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1954, p.119.

7. Liebman, Vol.I, pp.26-27, 36, 44: Eng. trans., pp.33, 39, 45.

8. To be complete, and to be fair to Lenin, it should be added: (1) that in **What Is To Be Done?** he had said that, in his view, an underground organisation of professional revolutionaries was in no way opposed to the spontaneity of the masses, but would, on the contrary, stimulate this spontaneity, that it would not “diminish” but would rather “increase” and “enhance” the latter (**op. cit.**, Vol.5, pp.465-466); and (2) that in **What Is To Be Done?** he had already allowed the breeze of that “libertarian democratism” of which Liebman speaks to be felt, when, looking forward to the moment when the movement would emerge from clandestinity, he wrote that this would entail not only the strict application of the “principle of election” but also the subjection of “every act” of every Party cadre to “control” by the entire Party and the proletariat as a whole (**Ibid.**, p.478). If extreme formulations were undoubtedly employed by Lenin in this polemic, that was because it was necessary to “bend the stick” in a certain direction, as he himself declared later. Essentially, however, Lenin’s theory of organisation embraced from the start all these constituent elements, even though it certainly became enriched and matured during the two decades separating **What Is To Be Done?** from **‘Left-Wing’ Communism: An Infantile Disorder**.

9. It could be concluded from this that “Leninist” organisation, taken by itself, is neither a *sufficient* guarantee of revolutionary victory nor a guarantee of a high level of activity on the part of the proletariat, including the vanguard workers. This seems to me beyond dispute. That a revolutionary *working-class* party cannot attain a high level of effectiveness in a period when the revolution is *on the ebb* and the masses are passive is almost self-evident. But this does not mean in the least that such a party is not a *necessary* condition for the proletariat’s victory in a phase when the revolution is *rising*, nor that it cannot “absorb” the long-term effects of retreats and defeats, by safeguarding the continuity of the theoretical assets of the movement and of a certain minimum



of cadres who embody these assets – which greatly facilitates the subsequent upturn in the revolution.

10. Liebman, **op. cit.**, Vol.2, pp.225-231: Eng. trans., pp.359-363.

11. **Ibid.**, Vol.2, p.309: Eng. trans., p.416.

12. Lenin, **op. cit.**, Vol.21, p.390 (*Revolutionary Marxists at the International Socialist Conference, 5-8 September 1915*).

13. See, especially, Liebman, **op. cit.**, Vol.2, pp.170-173, 220-222: Eng. trans., pp.322-325, 355-356.

14. **Ibid.**, Vol.2, p.110: Eng. trans., p.280.

15. It is quite self-contradictory to state, on the one hand, that the objective weakening of the proletariat caused by the civil war was the essential reason for the changes undergone by the dictatorship of the proletariat during the civil war, and, on the other, that the Bolsheviks were guilty of contributing to these changes by the terror, “militarisation”, and so on, which were merely countermeasures and means of gaining the upper hand during this same civil war. Liebman acknowledges that at the end of the civil war, and after all these distortions, there was a sort of fresh outburst of free discussion and challenge from below in 1920-1921, especially during the “trade-union discussion”. The subjective resources of the proletariat’s self-activity had thus *not* been destroyed by the Bolsheviks: far from it.

16. In an article written on 15 July 1939, devoted to the French centrist party called the PSOP, Trotsky wrote these words: “Whoever prohibits factions thereby liquidates party democracy and takes the first step toward a totalitarian regime ... It is true that the Bolshevik Party forbade factions at the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921, a time of mortal danger. One can argue whether or not this was correct. The subsequent course of development has in any case proved that this prohibition served as one of the starting points of the Party’s degeneration. The bureaucracy presently made a bogey of the concept of ‘faction’, so as not to permit the Party either to think or breathe. Thus was formed the totalitarian regime which killed Bolshevism” (**Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1938-1939**, New York, Merit Publishers, pp.130-131).

**17.** Liebman, **op. cit.**, Vol.2, pp.355-356: Eng. trans., p.448.

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