

## About Marcel van der Linden's text, "Why Leninism and Bolshevism Are Not the Same"

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Marcel van der Linden's text, "Why Leninism and Bolshevism Are Not the Same"<sup>1</sup> does not match the widely accepted idea of the identity of Leninism and Bolshevism: precisely for this reason it is stimulating. He wants to place Lenin's thought in its materialistic-historical context by focusing on his "method of analysis" and on his theory of "proletarian consciousness" in order to show the "internal inconsistencies in Lenin's methodology and organisational theory", and to prove that "Bolshevik practice was in no way Leninist". The conclusions he draws are equally clear: "the Bolshevik party was not Leninist, but 'quasi-Leninist at most'".

### Revolutionary consciousness

The examination of the Leninist point of view on the acquisition of revolutionary consciousness by the proletariat is interesting for two reasons: 1. Lenin is disqualified as a Marxist author; 2. The class content of Leninism is revealed.

Lenin's theory is nothing but a quasi-integral restatement of Kautsky's positions. The class content of Leninism is limpid: it is the political doctrine of the layers of declassed bourgeois intellectuals posing as the self-proclaimed leadership of the working class and seeking in it a social basis for their ascent to political power. The reference to Marxism only serves to camouflage the political project of these social strata: Marxism serves them as an ideological alibi<sup>2</sup>. I think it is a profound error to say that "Lenin is contained in Marx". It is an oversimplification that handicaps any attempt to understand both Marxism and Leninism.

It must be made clear that in Marx there is nothing equivalent to the idea that the proletariat only gains revolutionary consciousness through bourgeois intellectuals... When he writes in the *Manifesto* that the communists "have over the rest of the proletariat [*I emphasize*] the advantage of a clear understanding of the conditions of the march and the general ends of the proletarian movement" and that among them there are bourgeois intellectuals who "by their labour have risen to the theoretical intelligence of the whole historical movement", Marx shows that Leninism is *totally outside the Marxist system of thought*. In fact, on this question, Marx and Bakunin are absolutely on the same position: For the Russian revolutionary, intellectuals only put into words the aspirations of the people,

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1 [https://pure.knaw.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/5751612/Russian\\_Revolution\\_EPW\\_4\\_11\\_17.pdf](https://pure.knaw.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/5751612/Russian_Revolution_EPW_4_11_17.pdf)

2 All this is not new: see the "Theses on bolshevism", December 1934, Raetekorrespondenz.

they are only the “midwives of the thought” of the working class, as he writes.

There is a break, ontological, one would say, between socialism and class struggle, which “do not engender each other” because they “arise from different premises”, says Kautsky, the inspirer of Lenin: “Today's socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge” and “the bearer of science is not the proletariat but the *bourgeois intellectuals*” [Kautsky's emphasis]: “It is indeed in the brains of certain individuals of this category that contemporary socialism was born, and it is through them that it was communicated to the most intellectually advanced proletarians.” Socialist consciousness is an externally imported element in the struggle of the proletariat. Lenin reproduces in *What is to be done?* Kautsky's “profoundly right and very significant words”.

For Lenin, the gap is unbridgeable: “There can be no question of an independent ideology, elaborated by the working masses themselves in the course of their movement”; therefore, there is no middle ground: bourgeois ideology or socialist ideology”. “Any diminution of the role of the ‘conscious element’, of the role of social democracy, means by this very fact (...) a reinforcement of bourgeois ideology on the workers.” (Lenin, *What is to be done?*)

What does Bakunin say? The labour movement must “seize this powerful weapon of science, without which it could well make revolutions, but would not be able to establish, on the ruins of bourgeois privilege, that equality, justice and freedom which constitute the very foundation of all political and social aspirations” (“Les Endormeurs”).

It quite another perspective!

Lenin's approach leaves no room for doubt: the revolutionary leader, the intellectual of bourgeois origin, elaborates the socialist doctrine and transmits it to the proletariat – to its most advanced elements. Bakunin's approach is quite different: social science (elaborated by these same social strata), “does nothing but develop and formulate popular instincts” (“Protestation de l'Alliance”). For “neither writers, nor philosophers, nor their works, nor socialist newspapers, constitute yet the living and powerful socialism. The latter only finds a real existence in the enlightened revolutionary instinct, in the collective will and in the organisation of the working masses themselves, – and when this instinct, this will and this organisation are lacking, the best books in the world are nothing but empty theories, impotent dreams.” (Bakounine, “Lettres à un Français sur la crise actuelle”, 1870, éd. Stock, Volume IV, p. 31).

In a letter to Liebknecht dated April 8, 1870, Bakunin points out that the majority of Russian students find themselves in the situation of “having absolutely no career, no assured means of existence ahead of them, so that above all they are revolutionary by position, and this is the most serious and real way, in my opinion, of being revolutionary”. It is significant that it is these same petty bourgeois intellectuals who will constitute the overwhelming majority of the cadres of the Bolshevik party thirty years later.

The Leninian approach is a dialectical aberration in that the problem is not whether socialism is a theoretical production of bourgeois intellectuals

brought to the proletariat, or an exclusive and spontaneous creation, in the Bakuninian sense, of the latter<sup>3</sup>. The correct approach to the problem is to discover the dialectical movement of creation and elaboration of socialism: then the questions of “precedence” no longer apply. Kropotkin, who hated the concept of dialectic but who practiced dialectical reasoning without knowing it, summed up the libertarian perspective perfectly:

“Socialism came from the very depths of the people. If a few thinkers, coming from the bourgeoisie, have come to give it the sanction of science and the support of philosophy, the substance of the ideas they have stated is nonetheless the product of the collective spirit of the working people. Was not the rational socialism of the International, which is our best strength today, developed in the workers' organizations under the direct influence of the masses? And did the few writers who helped in this work of elaboration do anything other than find the formula for the aspirations that were already emerging among the working people?” *eaux* n° 31, 1913).

Bakunin demands for intellectuals of bourgeois origin the right to associate with the proletariat in its struggle, which obviously implies, among other things, their contribution to theoretical elaboration. Social principles, he writes, “are nobody's property: they are more naturally represented by the workers than by the intelligence that has developed in the middle of the bourgeois class.... But as long as we have accepted these principles as much by our intelligence as by our sense of justice, to the point that they have become a vital condition for us, no one, neither from above nor from below, has the right to defend us from talking about them, from associating ourselves with them and from acting in the name of these principles – which are ours as much as they are the workers', even if they are in another way.” (“Protestation de l'Alliance”)

The Russian revolutionary is radically opposed to simplistic theories according to which the proletariat does not need intellectuals<sup>4</sup>. While he is lucid and has no illusions about them, he is also suspicious of the “half-literary, pretentious, ambitious workers” who “pose as leaders, as statesmen of workers' associations”, who fear “the competence of men who have come out of the bourgeoisie, often more committed, more modest and less ambitious than themselves”.

There is in the working class a “benevolent aristocracy”, an aristocracy “not of condition, but of conviction, of revolutionary feeling, of ardent, enlightened passion and will”. In their understanding of the social question, they bring together “all the advantages of free and independent thought, of knowledge, of science”. They could very well abandon their class and pass into the ranks of the bourgeoisie, but they have the “passion of solidarity”. If we add to this category of workers “that of the militants who have come out of the bourgeois class, who have broken all ties with it and who have

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3 For Bakunin, a social phenomenon is spontaneous when it occurs because of its internal determinisms without the intervention of external causes. In a way, social spontaneity is a form of determinism!

4 Some members of the IWA had tried – unsuccessfully – to have intellectuals excluded from the organisation,

devoted themselves body and soul to the great cause of the emancipation of the proletariat,” you will have, says Bakunin, “the useful and beneficent aristocracy of the international workers movement” (“L’Alliance révolutionnaire internationale de la social-démocratie” Oeuvres, Champ libre, VI, p. 319).

Two remarks can be made:

1. Bakunin's view of the genesis of socialist consciousness in the working class appears to be infinitely more “dialectical” than Lenin's, which is based on a perfectly mechanistic perception. Lenin's theory of revolutionary consciousness reveals the class interests of the intellectual petty-bourgeoisie with such clarity that one wonders how it could have deceived so many people for so long;

2. The question of the role of intellectuals, for Bakunin, does not arise, as we can see, in terms of *leadership* but in terms of *collaboration*. Moreover, it is totally devoid of illusion and complacency towards both bourgeois socialists and gentrified workers.

According to Bakunin, the question of the revolutionary consciousness of the working class does not arise in terms of internal production or external input. The “revolutionary disposition of the working masses,” he says, does not depend only on the greater or lesser degree of misery they suffer, but on the confidence they have in “justice and the necessity of the triumph of their cause”. This feeling is in the individual the effect of theoretical science, but also of his “practical experience of life” (*Lettres à un Français sur la crise actuelle*, Oeuvres, Champ libre, t.VII. ).

One of the factors contributing to workers' consciousness is the experience of strike action. “Strike is war,” says Bakunin: “it throws the ordinary worker out of his isolation, out of the monotony of his aimless existence,” it unites him with other workers, in the same passion and towards the same goal; it convinces all workers in the most striking and direct way of the need for rigorous organization to achieve victory.” (“L’Alliance révolutionnaire internationale de la social-démocratie”, *op. cit.*)

This opinion will be unreservedly taken up by the revolutionary syndicalists.

Lenin's main mistake was to consider the question of revolutionary consciousness in a dogmatic way, affirming that it manifests itself everywhere according to the same pattern. In fact, the debate on the acquisition of revolutionary consciousness is approached in the wrong way. It is not a question of whether the working class can achieve revolutionary consciousness on its own, but of who benefits from the supposed or real incapacity of the working class to acquire such consciousness. What is at stake is in fact vital. The question is: who can legitimately claim leadership of the working class. If the workers are not collectively capable of attaining political capacity on their own, that is to say, of attaining the consciousness of the need to overthrow the capitalist social order, then their legitimate leadership will belong to the group that will be able to reveal this consciousness to them.

Bakunin had answered Lenin by anticipation:

“The aristocracy of intelligence, this beloved child of modern doctrinarianism, this last refuge of the spirit of domination (...) could only be born in the bosom of the bourgeoisie (...). The partisans of modern doctrinarianism are opposed to the emancipation of the proletariat. All their economic, philosophical, political and social theories have basically no other purpose than to demonstrate the definitive incapacity of the working masses, and consequently also the mission of the bourgeoisie (...) to govern them until the end of the centuries <sup>5</sup>.”

What disqualifies Lenin is that his assertions are false, they have in any case no universal value, for at the same time that he was saying that the working class by itself could only achieve a reformist consciousness, the workers in most industrial countries had developed a movement, revolutionary syndicalism, which clearly affirmed that their emancipation would be their own achievement. To those who object that they didn't succeed, one might reply that the Bolsheviks didn't succeed either...

“Marx relied solely on the intellectual development of the working class, as it would necessarily result from joint action and discussion”, Engels wrote in 1890 in the preface to the German reprint of the *Manifesto*. *It is significant that Lenin cannot rely on any text by Marx to justify his thesis.*

It would be very interesting to know how many rank-and-file activists in the Bolshevik party had read *What is to be done?* and how many took its theses seriously.

### **Not the monolithic party**

Anti-Leninism on both the right and the left has constructed the threatening image of an authoritarian, repressive movement, says van der Linden By saying that “it is high time to abandon this chimera and to show what really happened”, we are tempted to believe that he wants a rehabilitation of Bolshevism as a revolutionary movement for today – but a Bolshevism that would have been cleansed of Leninism. He is right to call for an examination of “what really happened”, but in doing so one might discover things that do not precisely confirm his point of view.

The fact that the Bolshevik party was not, at least at the beginning, the monolithic party that the legend presents to us is well known, and finds several explanations. First of all, it was only a tendency of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Russia, founded shortly before, in 1898, and its mode of operation was not different from that of all the social democratic parties formed on the German model.

The unbridgeable divergences between the leaders of the two tendencies that had split in 1903 were undoubtedly not perceptible to the rank-and-file militants, all the more so because there was a strong “turnover”, as van der Linden rightly points out. In 1903, the Bolshevik Party was above all a party in desire by Lenin, a fantasized party more than a truly separate

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5 Bakounine, “Les Endormeurs”, in *L'Égalité* n° 27, 24 July 1869.

organization. In practice, for years the break-up was limited to the party's leading group, because the militants of the two fractions continued to work together: 351 party organizations remained common Bolshevik/Menshevik structures, often until the October 1917 coup d'état. The takeover of the party by Lenin and his close supporters took several more years to take effect. It was not until the 10th Congress in 1921 that Lenin was able to take control of the party, and for that he had to impose a ban on tendencies in the party, voted by the very activists who were going to be the victims of these measures...

It goes without saying that the publication of Lenin's "What is to be done?", which is to some extent the founding act of "Bolshevism", does not correspond to the foundation of practical Bolshevism as history has left us the model.

Secondly, the fact that the party's activists interpreted the party's rules in different ways is a sociological observation common to all human organizations. An organization that is even slightly complex can only function if its members do not respect the rules. The extreme case of this observation could be observed during strikes at Renault factories in the 1950s or 1960s when workshops were totally paralysed because the workers strictly observed the rules that governed the workshops...

So Marcel van der Linden is right to say that the Bolshevik party was able to have a certain efficiency at a time when there was a degree of vagueness in its organization because such situations allow for a certain creativity. Precisely, the party ceased to have the least efficiency and the least creativity from the moment it became sclerotic, that is to say very quickly. So the question is not to oppose "the Bolshevik party" as a positive element and "Lenin" as a negative element, but to highlight the dialectic existing between the two, which in my opinion Marcel van der Linden does not see.

If we look at the facts, as Marcel van der Linden proposes, we see that Lenin plays an essential role in the "monolithisation" of the party, and here again, a question arises: how could a single leader impose orientations that led to the sclerosis of a party that was supposed to be made up of seasoned activists? Marcel van der Linden provides part of the explanation when he writes that "the Bolsheviks had a great turnover":

"This was, by the way, one reason why Lenin, who himself partly represented the continuity of the organisation from the start, enjoyed such respect in the party. This picture of a rapidly changing membership has also been confirmed for later years."

As a result, whenever Lenin imposed measures that the party did not approve of, he had to resort to the argument of authority: pressure, threats, blackmail, insults and so on.

### **A Bolshevik Party cleansed of Leninism?**

Then another question arises: what kind of party accepts orientations decided by a leader without daring to oppose them? What kind of party is it that gives in to blackmail from a leader who threatens to resign if his point of view is not accepted? Is this the sort of party that Marcel van der Linden

seems to be striving for? van der Linden presents us with an idealized party with a rather sympathetic outline, but which is unable to say “No” to its leader. The question is therefore to know why this was so, and what is the value of a party that lets itself be imposed (rightly or wrongly) on tactical or strategic choices it doesn't approve of.

It seems to me that it is a mistake to see the evil Lenin on the one hand and the nice Bolshevik party on the other: they both participate in the same story, in the same process. They are inseparable.

As for who, the Bolshevik Party, Lenin, or both, are responsible for the rise of Stalinism, again that is a false problem. What is interesting is to highlight the process by which Stalinism emerged. And unless one believes in spontaneous generation, one is forced to note that all the measures put in place that encouraged Stalin's rise to power had previously been endorsed by the Bolshevik party.

If van der Linden's intention is to rehabilitate a party that was incapable of sending back to the base a leader who imposed decisions that its members contested, I do not think that this party can serve as a model of revolutionary organization for today.

◆ At the beginning of the revolution, all socialist forces, including the Bolsheviks, envisaged a strict application of Marx's historical materialism, or what they considered to be such, according to which one cannot pass from a still feudal society to socialism without first carrying out the bourgeois revolution. The programme of the socialists, of all tendencies, was therefore bourgeois revolution, and so was the programme of the Bolsheviks until the arrival of Lenin in April 1917.

◆ In March 1917, the Central Committee of the party composed of Shliapnikov, Molotov and Zalutsky was completely overtaken by events. It was content to contain the fervour of the most active militants. On 12 March Kamenev and Stalin returned from their Siberian exile and provoked a right-wing turn. For three weeks the positions of Stalin and Molotov were to dominate. Their positions reflected the assumption that we were at the beginning of a long period of bourgeois democratic government. A speaker at a party conference dared to talk about the realization of the dictatorship of the proletariat and was called to order by the chairman of the session, who added that this point was not on the agenda.

◆ When Lenin arrived on April 17 (April 4 according to the Russian calendar), his positions were clear: no support for the government; no rapprochement with the other parties; arming of the proletariat; all power to the soviets; land to the peasants. *Almost all Bolshevik leaders opposed Lenin's April theses.* His slogans were in total contradiction with everything the Bolsheviks had said until then. The party was then opposed to the idea of an exclusively Bolshevik power. Lozovski and Ryazanov denounced “the catastrophic policy of the Central Committee” and “the maintenance of a purely Bolshevik government by means of political terror”.

◆ Little by little, however, Lenin's theses were taken up by the party's militants. The leading vanguard of the proletariat was all the more eager to follow its leader because it had been particularly indecisive up to that point. As Kerenski said: “Wait until Lenin comes back!”

◆ At a meeting called by the Party Central Committee, the Bolsheviks decided to participate in a “Democratic Conference”, or “Preparliament” convened by the Revolutionary Socialist Party. Lenin, furious (he was in exile in Finland), demanded that the Bolsheviks leave the Preparliament: “You will be traitors and wretches if you do not send the Bolshevik group to the factories, to surround the Democratic Conference and put all this scum in prison.” The Bolsheviks were stunned and decided to destroy Lenin's letter and ignore the incident. “It is probably a unique case in the history of our party, that a Central Committee unanimously decided to burn a letter from Lenin,” Bukharin would later say <sup>6</sup> . .

◆ Lenin, in exile, urged the Bolshevik Central Committee to prepare to take power. Faced with the extreme reluctance of the Central committee, he threatened to resign: “I am obliged to offer my resignation to the Central Committee (...) which will give me freedom of propaganda at the base of the party and at the congress.”

◆ On 24 October, twelve of the twenty-one members of the Central Committee met to work out the details of the insurrection. One thing was certain: this had to be done before the Second Congress of the Soviets. The Bolsheviks were for the time being in the majority in the Soviets, but there was no guarantee that new elections would confirm this situation, and they could not afford to lose the majority. Lenin's intention was therefore to bypass the Congress of the Soviets and take power the day before it was convened. Lenin's correspondence at that time is full of hysterical letters to party leaders urging them to accept the idea of insurrection, calling them traitors if they did not. Only two men voted against: Zinoviev and Kamenev.

These examples, which I stop at the seizure of power but which could be continued until Lenin's death in 1924, show on the one hand that his relations with the party were permanently conflictual, on the other hand that he played an inescapable role in the creation of the party. So it seems obvious to me that it is not possible to disconnect Lenin from the party he shaped.

If, as van der Linden seems to wish, it is possible to envisage a Bolshevik party without Lenin, it is quite easy to extrapolate what it would have been: It would have constituted a vaguely left-wing fraction, completely overtaken by events. of a huge social-democratic party mechanically applying the “Marxist” thesis of bourgeois power as a necessary transition to socialism.

And more importantly, they would never have seized the power.

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6 N. Bukharin, « From the speech of Comrade Bukharin in a commemorative evening in 1921 », *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, no.10, 1922. Cité par Tony Cliff, *Lenin : All Power to the Soviets*, Volume 2 (Pluto Press, London, 1976), p. 339.