

Revolutionary syndicalism & leninism

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After the First World War, the Russian revolution of February and October 1917, the victory of the Entente over the Central Empires and the various revolutionary attempts in Northern Germany, Bavaria and Hungary in the years that followed, revolutionary syndicalism was confronted with a new revolutionary socialist model. This was the political and organisational concept of Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov, known as Lenin, the master thinker and main leader of one of the two tendencies of the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party, whose victory in the former Tsarist Empire completely renewed the debate on organisational structures, the road to socialism and the means to achieve it.

Like its pre-war competitor – the parliamentary socialism of the Second International –, revolutionary syndicalism had not succeeded in preventing the war; moreover, many of those who had recognised themselves in it called for or collaborated in the “sacred union”¹, including the majority of the C.G.T. leadership: “... the turnaround of the C.G.T. in July 1914 was not an isolated and unexpected event; [...] it is important to make it clear that this development did not imply a renunciation of the struggle against war, or even of the tactic of the general strike: on condition, however, that it was international; now, the syndicalists, since Griffuelhes’ trip to Berlin (1906), and the socialists, since the Stuttgart Congress (1907), had the most serious doubts about the Germans’ resolve. From then on, both Jaurès and the C.G.T. were *bluffing*”, writes Jacques Julliard in his book *Autonomie ouvrière, études sur le syndicalisme d’action directe* (Workers’ autonomy, studies on direct action trade unionism), quoting a statement made by Yvetot at the Toulouse Congress in 1910.

The C.G.T, he continues, “has always evaded the decisive question: would it go on a general strike if France were attacked? [...] This decisive problem was evaded by the trade union leaders in the years leading up to the war; they hoped that time would work in their favour. [...] In the end, it is quite true that the C.G.T. not only failed, but that at the last moment it capitulated to the outburst of nationalism. Was this, as is often said, the

1 “Jules Guesde became Minister of State and Marcel Sembat Minister of Public Works.” (Jean Ellenstein, *Histoire mondiale des socialismes*, Armand Collin éditeur, t. III, p. 13.) Léon Jouhaux, the General Secretary of the C.G.T., managed not to leave for the army and actively supported the war effort. In September 1914, at Guesde’s request, he accepted the mandate of commissioner to the nation, in a personal capacity and without committing the CGT.

death knell of revolutionary trade syndicalism? – The answer is no, but resorting to arms was a defeat for the entire workers' movement, for socialism as a whole"².

Resistance to the war and the attempt to re-establish internationalist links between workers and socialist militants in the belligerent countries – an attitude which demanded real heroism for those who ventured it at a time of exacerbated chauvinism – only brought together a small minority in the early stages of the conflict. In the C.G.T., Merrheim and Monatte began a very minority opposition among the confederal leaders. In November 1914, Merrheim, on behalf of the Metalworkers, proposed that the C.G.T. attend a conference of socialists from neutral countries in Copenhagen; the proposal was rejected. Monatte then decided to resign in order to express the confederation's opposition to the war. He was mobilised and sent to the front.

“The conscious workers of the belligerent nations cannot accept the slightest responsibility in this war; it falls entirely on the shoulders of the leaders of their countries. And, far from finding in it reasons to draw closer to them, they can only reinforce their hatred of capitalism and the States. Today, more than ever, we must jealously guard our independence, resolutely hold on to our own ideas, which are our *raison d'être*.³

“It would be almost a year before the first timid symptoms of the anti-war effort appeared. It was under the auspices of the Committee for the Resumption of International Relations, to which Merrheim, Bourderon, Chaverot, Sirolle, Souvarine, etc. belonged, and where Trotsky, still in Paris, played a leading role, that action against the war was organised.”⁴

Later, a Syndicalist Defence Committee was set up.

Anti-war conferences were held in Switzerland. The first was in Zimmerwald, in September 1915, where a declaration calling for peace and stressing that “this war is not our war” was drafted by the French delegation, made up of the trade unionists Merrheim and Bourderon, the latter from the Barrel Federation, and the German delegation, made up of two social-democrat MPs, Ledebourg and Hoffman⁵. During the exchange of views, Lenin proposed the immediate formation of a new International. A second conference was then held in Kienthal in April 1916, with forty participants (French, Italian, Russian, Polish, Serbian, Portuguese, German, English and Swiss), and adopted a manifesto against “this criminal war”.

With the irruption of the Russian popular masses in History, these demonstrations of resistance, initiated by small groups of militants and then relayed by the pacifist minorities of the European countries who confronted each other, suddenly found themselves, supported, approved, even magnified by the millions of people who were disgusted by the massacres of

2 J. Julliard, *op. cit.*, p. 110 et 111.

3 Extracts from Monatte's letter of resignation, quoted by E. Dolléans, *op. cit.*, p. 227 et 228.

4 Art. C.G.T. in *l'Encyclopédie anarchiste*.

5 The English are absent because the British government refused them a passport.

the war and who aspired to a world of peace: the wave of enthusiastic patriotism of the first months of the conflict had long since disappeared with the restrictions and immense human losses.

It is worth noting that it is not so common in human history for such courage and fidelity to humanist and internationalist principles to be approved, ratified by social facts, so strongly and especially so fast, that it is not worth pointing out. However, it is important to realise that this return, for a few years, of a large part of the European population to the idea of social revolution, after the craze for national defence in August 1914, is the result, rather than of the war itself, of the example of the victorious Russian revolution, the consequence of the inability of the Tsarist state to organise, during the conflict, minimum conditions of survival both in civil society and in its armed forces.

Joining forces, showing solidarity with this revolution, supporting it against all odds, “appeared as the first duty to the militants who had refused to join and chauvinism. In France, this support took a particular and passionate turn, in reaction to the “social-chauvinist” commitment of both the C.G.T. and the S.F.I.O. Pierre Monatte and the *Vie ouvrière* publishing group – Charbit, Hasfeld, Martinet, Monmousseau, Rosmer, Sémard, etc. – are representative of the evolution of this part of the revolutionary syndicalists.

Fritz Brupbacher, a friend of the revolutionary syndicalists and a convinced internationalist, summed up this period as follows:

“This was the period when, out of enthusiasm for the Russian revolution, revolutionary syndicalism accomplished its own suicide. The October Revolution had plunged us into such joy that all of us forgot what we had always known: that the Bolsheviks would have nothing more urgent than to suffocate us as soon as they had, with our help, crushed the bourgeoisie. Many of us then followed the same path as Pierre Monatte. [...] He had accepted the idea of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, of which revolutionary syndicalism had been the anticipation. Likewise, it had adopted the idea of the State as defined by Lenin in his book *The State and Revolution*. [...] We wanted the organisation resulting from the dictatorship and the existence of the proletarian state to be broader, more democratic, freer, more in keeping with the very principles of the soviets. In our view, it was not a central apparatus constituted in such a way that should form the basis of organisation in the new society, but rather the mass of individuals themselves. Revolutionary syndicalism has always proclaimed that a leading minority must lead the masses. In 1921, Monatte thought that the Communist Party was perhaps capable of being this leading minority.”⁶

In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin claimed to have reformulated the true Marxist doctrine of the state, which had been distorted by opportunist and

6 F. Brupbacher, *op. cit.* p. 264: it is worth noting that Brupbacher wrote “leading”: minority and not “active”: minority; Leninism was already in people’s minds. It should also be pointed out that Monatte never accepted the idea of the union’s submission to the party and was expelled from the party in 1924.

reformist social democracy, in particular on two points, the specific character of the “proletarian state” of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”, and the theory of the “decline of the state”. To carry out this reconstruction, the Bolshevik leader selected various extracts from the writings of Marx and Engels to justify his own doctrine and place it under the authority of the creators of so-called scientific socialism.

Since the book was written in August and September 1917, in other words during a period of great revolutionary agitation in Russia, Lenin did not forget to condemn the Second International and its parliamentary strategy, the criticism of which, he regretted, had unfortunately been left to the anarchists alone, and to point out that the proletarian revolution would have to – as the Paris Commune had shown, he said – destroy the bourgeois state and replace it with a new form of public organisation. It will be, Lenin asserts, a new kind of State⁷, a State which, from the moment it is constituted, will have begun to wither away⁸ since one of its first initiatives will be, as Marx says, “to wrest little by little all kinds of capital from the bourgeoisie, in order to centralise all the instruments of production in the hands of the State – of the proletariat organised as a ruling class”⁹, that is to say, to have undertaken the task which, once completed, will render the State useless, since the social classes will have disappeared with the higher phase of communism.

Lenin continues, quoting Marx:

“Between capitalist society and communist society lies the period of revolutionary transformation of the former into the latter. To this corresponds a period of political transition in which the State can be nothing other than the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.” This dictatorship, “a period of transition to communism, [...] will establish for the first time a democracy for the people, for the majority, alongside the necessary repression of a minority of exploiters”; this necessary repression, “the people” will exercise it “with a very simple machine, almost without any machine, without any special apparatus, by the *simple organisation of the masses* (like, we might say in anticipation, the soviets of workers’ and soldiers’ deputies).”¹⁰

This organisation of the masses will be centralised:

“... if the proletariat and the poor peasantry take State power into their own hands, organise themselves in complete freedom within the communes and unite the action of all the communes

7 “The proletariat only needs the State for a short time. We are not in the least in disagreement with the anarchists as to the abolition of the State as an aim”, V. Lénine, *l’Etat et la Révolution*, Editions en langues étrangères, Moscou, p. 72.

8 “The proletariat needs the State – all the opportunists, the social-chauvinists and the Kautskists repeat this, assuring us that this is Marx’s doctrine – but they ‘forget’ to add [...] that according to Marx the proletariat only needs a State in the process of extinction, that is to say, constituted in such a way that it immediately begins to extinguish itself and cannot fail to extinguish itself”, V. Lénine, *op. cit.*, p. 28 et 29.

9 K. Marx, *Manifeste communiste*, Œuvres complètes, la Pléiade, Economie, t. I^{er}, p. 182 et 183.

10 V. Lénine, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

to strike at Capital, crush the resistance of the capitalists, hand over to the whole nation, to the whole of society, the private ownership of railways, factories, land, etc., will not that be centralism? Would this not be the most consistent democratic centralism and, what is more, a proletarian centralism? “¹¹

“The proletariat,” he continues, “needs state power, a centralised organisation of force, an organisation of violence, both to suppress the resistance of the exploiters and to *direct* (Lenin’s emphasis) the great mass of the population – peasantry, petty bourgeoisie, semi-proletarians – in the ‘setting up’ of the socialist economy.

By educating the workers’ party,” he concludes, “Marxism educates a vanguard of the proletariat capable of seizing power and *leading the whole people* (Lenin’s emphasis again) to socialism, of directing and organising a new regime, of being the educator, guide and leader of all the workers and exploited in the organisation of their social life, without the bourgeoisie and against the bourgeoisie.”¹²

It is not our intention to dwell on the question of whether or not Lenin restored the Marxist doctrine of the State to its authentic character. But to insist on two points: firstly, the thesis that Lenin develops in his text is torn apart by an insurmountable contradiction; secondly, his argument is based on a serious historical falsification.

1. Two logics clash in *The State and the Revolution*, before they clash on the field of class struggle: the logic of councils and of “democracy for the people”, what Lenin calls the organisation of the masses, and the logic of the party educated by Marxism.

The first of these logics implies the power of the people in revolution as a whole, i.e. the plurality of opinions and political groups, the pluralist organisation of defence, the search for solutions to conflicts through debate, the reciprocal exchange between the councils of the towns and those of the countryside for production and consumption. In this logic, the people justify their sovereignty over themselves and over society because they are the sum of all individuals, with the exception of a few former exploiters.

The second logic implies the party’s power over the great mass of the population through the organisation of violence, as Lenin himself puts it (“the peasants, the petty bourgeois, the semi-proletarians”, not forgetting the workers who have not been properly educated by Marxism, that’s a lot of people against whom it will be necessary to use force...), i.e. the establishment of a kind of party despotism which proclaims itself enlightened and progressive and whose ultimate reason, like other powers before it, will be cannons. In this logic, sovereignty belongs to the party, which justifies this exorbitant claim because it has assembled a “vanguard” educated by Marxism and capable, by the very fact that it is educated, of “leading the entire people towards socialism, of directing and organising a new regime, of being the educator”, and so on. As we shall see later, this

11 V. Lénine, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

12 V. Lénine, *op. cit.*, p. 31

conception of man, or of the group, the bearer, through his knowledge, of historical science is not an exception in Marxism.

The conflict between these two logics – each represented, in 1917, by different social groups: on the one hand, the peasants, greedy for land; the workers and labourers in general, eager to control their work and improve their lives; the city dwellers, wishing to participate in the management of the place where they live; on the other hand, the intellectuals, whose skills and knowledge had never found application under Tsarism, and who became enraptured by the new atheistic messianism – whether characterised as a class struggle between the producing people and a bureaucracy that had quickly become exploitative, or as a conflict between democratic modernity and a quasi-theocratic archaism – the conflict got the better of the social form born from the Russian revolution, after seventy years of an existence which caused immense damage to the very idea of socialism. .

2. Lenin operated an almost complete falsification of the political orientations of the Paris Commune – he had to do this in order to justify theoretically, on the basis of Marx’s texts, the necessity, quite controversial for most Marxists of his time, of a violent, armed revolution, which would break the “bureaucratic and military machine” of the bourgeois state in order to build something else in its place, namely, for Lenin, his proletarian state: by analysing the Commune in his own way, he had to justify in advance the seizure of power he envisaged before the Constituent Assembly and the dictatorship of the party which would follow it.

What is piquant is that he had to reconstruct a statist, “centralist” political message on the basis of a text, no doubt written by his teacher, but completely heterodox, even contradictory, to the main themes of Marxism. A few brief examples will suffice to show this. The Paris Commune, we read in *Civil War in France*¹³, a text Marx wrote for the General Council of the International Working Men’s Association in May 1871, advocated cooperative production: a coordination of “united cooperative associations [was] to regulate national production on a common plan”. “What would this be, if not communism, very ‘possible’ communism?” asked Marx¹⁴ about this economic structure. The Constitution of France was to be communalist, and this organisation of the communes of France “was to become a reality,” says *The Civil War*, “through the destruction of state power.”¹⁵

The Paris Commune did not wait for a “higher phase of production” to begin destroying the centralised state; as for the organisation it advocates, it is based on “united” cooperatives, initiated by workers’ associations. These political orientations are in complete contradiction with the essential message of Marx, Engels and others, who advocated:

13 Bakunin wrote, in the Brussels newspaper *La Liberté*, about the Civil War: “... the Marxians, whose ideas had all been overturned by this insurrection, were obliged to take off their hats in front of it. They did more: against the simplest logic and their true feelings, they proclaimed that its programme and its aim were their own. It was a truly buffoonish travesty, but they had to do it, or risk being overwhelmed and abandoned by everyone”. Quoted in A. Lehning, *Anarchisme et marxisme dans la révolution russe*, Spartacus éditeur, p. 36.

14 K. Marx, *la Guerre civile en France*, les Editions sociales, p. 57.

15 *Ibidem*, p. 53.

1. The conquest of State power, not its disarticulation into communal structures;
2. The centralisation of all the instruments of production in the hands of the State, not the taking of possession of these instruments by the producers' associations;
3. In a more or less distant future, class differences having been abolished because of this state collectivism, the state will die out. By its declaration to the Communes of France and its decisions concerning the permanent army, which will be replaced by armed citizens, and the bureaucracy, whose some useful functions will be ensured by elected and revocable municipal representatives, the Commune tried to break, as the first founding act, the centralization of the State.

Franz Mehring, undoubtedly one of Marx's most famous biographers, wrote of *The Civil War in France*:

“The way in which the Address dealt with these details was brilliant, but there was a certain contradiction between them and the opinions previously held by Marx and Engels for a quarter century and set down in *The Communist Manifesto*. They had held that one of the final results of the future proletarian revolution would certainly be the dissolution of that political institution known as the State, but this dissolution was to have been gradual. The main aim of such an institution was always to protect by force of arms the economic oppression of the working majority of the population by a minority in exclusive possession of the wealth of society. With the disappearance of this minority of wealthy persons the necessity for an armed repressive institution such as the State would also disappear. At the same time, however, they had pointed out that to achieve this and other still more important aims of the future social revolution, the working class must first of all seize the organized political power of the State and use it to crush the resistance of the capitalists and reorganize society. These opinions of *The Communist Manifesto* could not be reconciled with the praise lavished by the Address of the General Council on the Paris Commune for the vigorous fashion in which it had begun to exterminate the parasitic State.”¹⁶

Lenin, moreover, recalled with indignation, in *The State and the Revolution*, that Bernstein, the *revisionist*, considered that the programme set out by Marx in *The Civil War*; “by its political content, bears, in all its essential details, a striking resemblance to the federalism of Proudhon”.¹⁷

This falsification is not just a minor anecdote in political history – if that were all it was, it would be of little interest. Lenin's falsification of the political orientation of the Paris Commune marked the beginning of a long series of forgeries and fakery – both in the field of ideas, in history, science and sociology, and in practical activity, for example, with regard to the

16 Quoted by A. Lehning, *op. cit.*, p. 45

17 V. Lénine, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

democracy of the soviets or the labour camps¹⁸ – which gradually built up a completely distorted image of the reality of the Russian revolution. This reconstruction, both of the image of the reality of the Bolshevik revolution and of the political arguments that justified its course, thus gave rise to a new emancipatory myth, catchy and demagogic, which established a supposed filiation between the heroic Communards, who had been massacred by the bourgeoisie, and the Soviet Commune-State, which had been able to resist its enemies, both from outside and from within, and which was asserting itself as the headquarters and spearhead of a dynamic, generous and liberating proletarian revolution. Had not Lenin and his party succeeded where revolutionary syndicalism and parliamentary socialism had failed?

Hundreds of thousands of workers adhered to this image. Because of this image, and out of a hatred of bourgeois society that was amply justified by the massacres of the world war, many militants decided to take the Bolsheviks as their model; they went on to form the backbone of the Communist parties. And it was this image which, for at least half a century, almost completely hypnotised progressive world opinion.

As far as the revolutionary syndicalists are concerned, we can discover and understand additional reasons for their adherence to Bolshevism. First of all, in the 1920s, the Leninists drew up a harsh indictment of parliamentarianism, to which they contrasted the soviet system¹⁹, which was presented as more democratic – and, for a moment, during the ascendant phase of the Russian revolution, it represented an increase in the real power of the population. Moreover, the Soviet structure seemed to be a structure which allowed for reciprocal information between the “vanguard” and the masses, between the active minorities and the workers, as revolutionary syndicalism had tried to construct before the World War. Finally, it could offer a guarantee against the risks of drift. In particular, against the most dangerous one, that which risked transforming the radical change in the economic and political system, begun in February 1917, into a simple permutation of the leading personnel of the state, in other words transforming a social revolution into a political revolution.

Later, Leon Trotsky, one of whose aims was to bring the revolutionary syndicalists into the “party”, with his science of the formula, developed the idea that a relationship analogous to that between the rough draft and the

18 As for the forced labour camps, known today as the Gulag, the so-called Communists first denied their existence and then, when too many testimonies forced them to retract, claimed that they were humanitarian re-education establishments. In his book *The Great Terror (La Grande Terreur)*, Robert Laffont – Bouquins, p. 981), one of the British historians of Stalinist terror, Robert Conquest, quotes the following extract from an article by Pierre Daix, then editor-in-chief of *Les Lettres françaises*: “The re-education camps of the Soviet Union have succeeded in totally eliminating the exploitation of man by man. They are a decisive sign of the efforts made by victorious socialism to free man from this exploitation by freeing even the oppressors, slaves of their own oppression.”

19 The veterans of the nucleus of the *Révolution prolétarienne* recount that, during the twenties and thirties, one of the slogans of the of the Communist Party activists was: “Soviets everywhere!” This reminder shows the extent to which the illusion of the effective power of the soviets had persisted, against the evidence. The R.P. comrades added, shouting very loudly, as a bitter joke, but not only: “Even in Russia!”

finished product would be perceived between revolutionary syndicalism and Bolshevik communism:

“The theory of the active minority was, in essence, an incomplete theory of a proletarian party. In all its practice, revolutionary syndicalism was an embryo of a revolutionary party as against opportunism, that is, it was a remarkable draft outline of revolutionary Communism.

“The weakness of anarcho-syndicalism, even in its classic period, was the absence of a correct theoretical foundation, and, as a result a wrong understanding of the nature of the state and its role in the class struggle; an incomplete, not fully developed and, consequently, a wrong conception of the role of the revolutionary minority, that is, the party. Thence the mistakes in tactics, such as the fetishism of the general strike, the ignoring of the connection between the uprising and the seizure of power, etc.

“After the war, French syndicalism found not only its refutation but also its development and its completion in Communism. Attempts to revive revolutionary syndicalism now would be to try and turn back history. For the labour movement, such attempts can have only reactionary significance.”²⁰

This argument, of course, could only be based on a few superficial analogies between what the revolutionary syndicalists called the “active minority” and the Leninists the “avant-garde”; a superficial analogy because the two types of militants did not emanate from the same population group: the revolutionary syndicalist “party of labour” recruited only wage earners, from the most recent union member to the general secretary, while its militancia, the backbone of the unions and federations, was made up only of the most active, dedicated and determined union members²¹. There was no different structure between the “revolutionaries”, who were not paid professionals but militants, and the “workers”.

On the contrary, the Leninist party, “the organisation of the revolutionaries must consist first and foremost of people who make revolutionary activity their profession. [...] In view of this common characteristic of the members of such an organisation, *all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals*, not to speak of distinctions of trade and profession, in both categories, must be *effaced*”, can we read in *What is to be done?*²² This absence of distinction meant in practice the monopolisation of party leadership by intellectuals – for example, at the congress of the Russian Social Democratic Party held in Brussels in 1902, there were only four workers among the fifty delegates²³. Moreover, Leninist theory juxtaposed, or rather hierarchized, two organisations, that of the professional

20 L. Trotsky, “Communism and Syndicalism”, october 1929.

21 In an attempt to solve the problem of the place where members of the ruling classes who, having broken with their original class, rallied to the revolutionary workers’ movement could be integrated and militate, the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists had set up, within the C.N.T., unions of the liberal professions.

22 V. Lénine, *Que faire ?* Editions sociales, p. 113. The parts in italics are underlined by Lenin.

23 Quoted by J. Julliard, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

revolutionaries and that of the workers, with the former directing the latter through the practice of *infiltration* [“noyautage” in French].

The definition of infiltration, as given in “*Left-Wing*” *Communism: an Infantile Disorder*, is in every respect in conformity with the resolution of the Ninth Party Congress (April 1919) [...] :

“The party exerts its influence on the broad strata of workers remaining outside the party through communist fractions and cells in all other workers’ organisations, above all in the trade unions.

“The dictatorship of the proletariat and the building of socialism are assured only as long as the trade unions, while officially remaining outside the party, become communist in essence and follow the policy of the communist party.

“That is why every trade union must have a disciplined, organised Communist fraction. Every fraction of the party is a part of the local organisation subordinate to the party committee. The fraction of the National Central Council of Trade Unions is subordinate to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Russia. All decisions of the N.C.C. of the trade unions concerning the conditions and organisation of work are binding on the party members who militate there, and cannot be abrogated by any party body other than the central committee of the party. The local committees, while fully directing the ideological action of the trade unions, must in no way have recourse to meticulous tutelage over the latter.”²⁴

This rigorous dirigism is completely foreign to the tradition of revolutionary syndicalists.

During the revolution, this centralism was to become even more pronounced. Leon Trotsky, for example, during the debate on the unions which took place in 1919 and 1920, over-exaggerated Lenin’s position and proposed that the unions and labour be “militarised”:

“We are now heading towards the type of labour that is socially regulated on the basis of an economic plan, obligatory for the whole country, compulsory for every worker. This is the basis of socialism... The militarisation of labour, in this fundamental meaning of which I have spoken, is the indispensable, basic method for the organisation of our labour forces... If our new form of organisation of labour were to result in lower productivity, then, *ipso facto*, we would be heading for disaster... But is it true that compulsory labour is always unproductive? ... This is the most wretched and miserable liberal prejudice: chattel-slavery, too, was productive. Its productivity was higher than that of slave-labour, and in so far as serfdom and feudal lordship guaranteed the security of the towns... and of peasant labour, in so far it was a progressive form of labour. Compulsory serf-labour did not grow out of the feudal lords’ ill-will. It was a progressive phenomenon...”²⁵

24 J. Julliard, *op. cit.*, p. 158 et 159.

The differences between revolutionary syndicalism and Leninism did not stop there.

For the revolutionary syndicalists, as we have seen, it was a question of using direct economic action against the employers and the state up to and including the general strike.

As far as the “party” was concerned, with the exception of periods of intense social unrest when it prepared for insurrection – a situation which was nevertheless quite rare – it did not have, in capitalist countries where democratic freedoms existed, a policy substantially different from that of other social-democratic parties (preparing elections and carrying out propaganda; trying to control, by means of infiltration, trade unions or other mass organisations in order to increase its influence and strengthen itself).

When Trotsky spoke of fighting opportunism [in the socialist parties], he did not mean the same thing as the revolutionary syndicalists. The latter rejected parliamentarianism, the source of this opportunism; the former believed that it was possible to conduct a non-opportunist, “class” parliamentary policy. The experience of the workers’ movement in all countries shows that the “workers” or socialist parties which adopted parliamentarianism as their main or secondary strategy ended up considering their parliamentary group and the elections as more important than the social struggles, and soon became a grouping which, in practice, accommodated itself to the class society whose subversion they were supposed to be preparing.

But it is by examining and comparing the methods of organisation that we can see the root of the differences between the two revolutionary theories.

Revolutionary syndicalism was organised federally, meaning that the constituent part, in this case the trade union, retained control over its orientation; there was no statutory or organic obligation for it to apply the instructions of the local union, the federation or the confederation. If he rallied to a position or joined in an action, it was of his own free will. This federalism was accompanied by a real ideological and political plurality: some were Marxists or Blanquists, others referred to anarchism, and still others proclaimed themselves to be syndicalists.

The Leninist party, on the other hand, wanted to be rigorously centralised; the parts had to be aligned with the whole, and the constitutive unit was the whole party – the beehive was the reference image: the cell, the ray, the whole. It was the leadership that determined the orientation of the whole party, of all its organisations, of all its militants, who were professional revolutionaries; this orientation was determined by the leadership on the basis of Marxism, or rather the version of Marxism judged to be correct by the said leadership, i.e. by Vladimir Ilitch himself and, after him, by Joseph Stalin...

In Lenin’s mind, these two elements – the fact, centralisation, and the philosophy, Marxism – were linked together like consequence and cause. The consequence was centralisation; the cause was the analyses that the theory made available to those who could understand it.

25 *Third All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions, Moscow, 1920*, cf. J. Julliard, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

And Lenin had built his vision of Marxism on the interpretations made of it by German social democracy, in particular Karl Kautsky. Here is the most important part, taken from *What is to be done?*

“Of course, socialism, as a doctrine, has its roots in modern economic relationships just as the class struggle of the proletariat has, and, like the latter, emerges from the struggle against the capitalist-created poverty and misery of the masses. But socialism and the class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other; each arises under different conditions. Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. Indeed, modern economic science is as much a condition for socialist production as, say, modern technology, and the proletariat can create neither the one nor the other, no matter how much it may desire to do so; both arise out of the modern social process. The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the bourgeois intelligentsia: it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated it to the more intellectually developed proletarians who, in their turn, introduce it into the proletarian class struggle where conditions allow that to be done. Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without [*von Aussen Hineingetragen*] and not something that arose within it spontaneously [*urwüchsig*].”²⁶

As a first consequence, Lenin affirmed: *op. cit.*

“We have said that there could not have been Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. By their social status the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. In the very same way, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working-class movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia.”²⁷

The inventors of socialism were educated “bourgeois” intellectuals, and the result of their cogitations was “science”, and this socialist science, which

26 V. Lenin, *What is to be done?*

27 *Ibidem.*

could no doubt be likened to mathematics or biology, had to be imported among the workers by one means or another.

But Lenin's theory implies another consequence:

“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. There is no middle course (for mankind has not created a “third” ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or an above-class ideology). Hence, to belittle the socialist ideology in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree means to strengthen bourgeois ideology. There is much talk of spontaneity. But the spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology, to its development along the lines of the Credo programme; for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade-unionism, is *Nur-Gewerkschaftlerei*, and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie.”²⁸

(...)

“...all worship of the spontaneity of the working class movement, all belittling of the role of “the conscious element”, of the role of Social-Democracy, means, quite independently of whether he who belittles that role desires it or not, a strengthening of the influence of bourgeois ideology upon the workers. All those who talk about “overrating the importance of ideology.”²⁹

Not only must the workers be educated, but they must be protected from their natural inclination to take refuge under the wing of the bourgeoisie – for this they must be led by the “educated”, united in the vanguard, and they can only be led in a rigorously centralised manner, if we take into account the numerical relationship between the class and its vanguard, as well as the propagandist weight of the means of communication of the bourgeoisie and the reformists.

This theory of organisation was, of course, “to justify the *de facto* dictatorship of the party theoreticians who should have supreme power in the party”.³⁰

In terms of political development, it implied a generalised practice of substitution: the working class was replaced by its supposed representation, described as the vanguard, and by leadership: the intellectuals of the leadership commanded the working class population. A sort of hierarchical pyramid was formed, with the workers, the population in general, at the base and the most competent interpreter of socialist science at the top.

Between the two, there were intermediate levels – the party apparatus – which ensured that the decisions taken by the latter were implemented by the former. In practice, from the very first days of the Bolshevik Party's seizure of power, the party, or rather its leadership, imposed its will on the

28 *Ibidem*, p. 42.

29 *Ibidem*, P. 40.

30 Martov, *in le dossier de Que faire ?* dans l'édition du Seuil, p. 287.

workers and inhabitants of Russia, without any means of appeal or procedure for debate or challenge. The party's policies, i.e. those determined by its leadership, had to be applied, including through the use of force and mass terrorism.

Leon Trotsky, who had criticised Lenin's position as a young militant, later fanatically endorsed it: "We must be aware of the "historic mission of the party. The party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship, without taking account of temporary vacillations in the spontaneous reaction of the masses, or even the spontaneous hesitations of the working class. [...] The dictatorship does not rest, at every moment, on the formal principle of workers' democracy..."", he said at the Xth Party Congress, held during the Kronstadt uprising³¹.

"The crisis erupted in February 1921, when a wave of strikes and demonstrations swept through Petrograd, culminating in March with the insurrection of the sailors at the Kronstadt naval base.

"This insurrection definitively set the party against the people. Even the centralists and the Workers' Opposition aligned themselves against the workers and sailors. In the end, loyalty to the party proved more powerful than any other consideration.

"War was openly declared on the idea of radical libertarian socialism and proletarian democracy. Only the idea of the party remained. Isolated from its *raison d'être*, the party now rested solely on dogma. It had become a sect and symbolised fanaticism in its most classic form."³²

Nevertheless, during the first years of the revolution, there was scope for debate on political orientation within the party and only within its ranks. But soon, from the end of the civil war, the principle of substitution applied to the party itself: the party was replaced by its leadership.

"At the Tenth Party Congress, Lenin suddenly introduced two resolutions banning the formation of groups or 'fractions' [...] within the party. From then on the secret police began systematically suppressing opposition groups that refused to disband.

"But its leader, Dzerzhinsky, realised that many party members regarded them as comrades and refused to testify against them. He applied to the Politburo for an official decree stipulating that party members had a duty to denounce their colleagues engaged in action against the leaders. Trotsky pointed out that denouncing hostile elements was an 'elementary obligation'."³³

With the struggle for power that followed Lenin's death, a dictator took the place of the party leadership....

31 Quoted by J. Julliard, *op. cit.*, p. 166. Julliard notes in the same passage that "the dictatorship of the party is thus by 'historical right' as the French monarchy was by 'divine right'".

32 R. Conquest, *op. cit.*, p. 384.

33 *Ibidem*, p. 382 et 383.

“By destroying the ’democratic’ tendency within the Communist Party, Lenin left the field open to manipulators. The bureaucratic apparatus was henceforth to be the most powerful and, subsequently, the only force in the party. The question ’Who will rule Russia?’ became ’Who will win in a factional struggle confined to a narrow section of the government?’ Candidates for power had already emerged. While the dying Lenin waited for the end of his long agony, they were already in the arena for the first round of the battle that was to end in the great purge.”

Without dwelling too much on the results of this “factional struggle” for total power over the party, the Soviet Union and the international communist movement, which was a consequence of the absence of proletarian democracy within these three entities and of the principle of substitution which applied to them, it is nevertheless important to recall its numerical reality:

“Post-Soviet Russia refers to the victims of Stalinism as the ’Twenty Millions’, an expression which obviously cannot claim to give an exact estimate; but the order of magnitude is likely³⁴.”

“At the Communist Party trial [held in Russia in March 1992], the final indictment cited [the figure of] “nineteen million eight hundred and forty thousand enemies of the people [who] had been arrested between 1 January 1935 and 22 June 1941. Of these, seven million were executed in prison, and the majority of the others perished in the camps.”³⁵

“General Volkogonov, head of the parliamentary commission on rehabilitation, stated on the basis of KGB documents that ’between 1929 and 1953 [...] repression affected twenty-one and a half million people. One third of this number were executed, the others were sentenced to detention, during which many died [...]. There is no doubt that the worst period was the Great Terror of 1937-1938. An estimate of the number of arrests made in those two years alone was made [...] on the basis of prisoners’ file numbers and other counts carried out in prisons. The figure obtained was in the region of seven million.” Various studies suggest that there were “two or three million internees in labour camps during this period” and the figure for victims of execution “cannot be less than three million, and was probably higher”.

“As for those who were sent to the camps, very few survived – Soviet written sources have long established a survival rate of around 5%.”³⁶

Lenin and all the parties that claimed to be his followers – Stalinist, post-Stalinist, Trotskyist, Bordigist, Titist, Stalinist-Maoist, Castroist – never questioned the organisational principle developed by Lenin in *What is to be done?* and its practical application: the leading role of the party, i.e. its leadership, over the workers and their organisations.

34 *Ibidem*, p. III de la preface to the French edition.

35 *Ibidem*, p. 994.

36 *Ibidem*, p. 995.

Lenin's ideological assessment remained unchanged throughout the years in which he led the construction of the Soviet Union, even though, as Jacques Julliard reminds us, "the working masses were not always *spontaneously trade unionists*; in revolutionary periods, they were even spontaneously anarcho-syndicalists".³⁷

One might think that Lenin's condemnation of the theses of the Workers' Opposition stemmed from the same ideological presupposition which demanded that the so-called proletarian state, i.e., in application of the principle of substitution, the central economic apparatus based in Moscow, should organise production; Lenin may have thought that the state's taking control of production was the *sine qua non* condition of its future disappearance – whereas the proposal of Shliapnikov and Kollontai was based on one of the principles of anarchosyndicalism.

Even after his first heart attack, when he returned to office in the last months of 1922, Lenin did not question his political vision, although he began to realise "with astonishment the progress of bureaucratic arbitrariness, particularly in the Georgian affair, for which Stalin was responsible."³⁸

Many political commentators felt that Lenin had broken with Marxism with his method: "...by proclaiming the inability of the workers to overcome bourgeois ideas on their own, by making socialism an external intellectual contribution, Lenin breaks definitively with Marx's materialism, which makes consciousness the product of economic and social conditions."

"If this is so, then the emancipation of the workers cannot be the work of the workers themselves [...]. We are in the midst of idealism. [...] *What is to be done?* theoretically establishes the right of an intellectual class³⁹ of bureaucrats and technocrats to exercise power in the name of the proletariat. *What is to be done?* is the manual of imposture which legitimises, for generations of brutal and authoritarian apparatchiks, the power they arrogate to themselves over the people outside any democratic control."⁴⁰

Yet there is a filiation between Marx's positions, those of Kautsky and Lenin's "substitutionist" party. Is it not true that Marx's communists claim, "*over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general*

37 J. Julliard, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

38 *Ibidem*, p. 168. "It is possible," added Julliard, "that if Lenin had lived, he would have tried to prevent the course of the revolution from being completely cut off from its proletarian and democratic source."

39 The Russian communist anarchist Pyotr Arshinov, a companion of Nestor Makhno, expressed the same idea about the origins of Bolshevism: "Bolshevism is the direct heir and powerful spokesman, not of the revolutionary aspirations of the workers and peasants, but of the political struggle which was waged for a whole century by the layer of Russian democratic intellectuals (the democratic intelligentsia) against the political system of tsarism, with a view to conquering certain political rights for itself. [...] Having succeeded, in the revolution, in establishing this position of master, [Bolshevism] returned to its starting point and restored the edifice of class domination, on the basis of the forced enslavement and enforced exploitation of the working masses. See the article "Bolshevism" in *l'Encyclopédie anarchiste*, p. 258 à 262.

40 J. Julliard, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

results of the proletarian movement.” and, among them, is there not that category of bourgeois intellectuals who “*have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole.*”⁴¹?

This primacy of the intellectual, which would gradually lead the intelligentsia to claim power for itself, was severely criticised by Arturo Labriola, an Italian Marxist theoretician close to revolutionary syndicalism:

“In fact, if the truth is known only to the revolutionary thinker, he acquires a power over the masses and over the course of history that one would never have suspected. Over and above unconscious historical development, he emerges as the conscious driver of the chariot of history, which he steers towards a destiny that is certain and foreseen. Is not a new yoke thus prepared for the masses? Does not the tyrannical power of social democracy lie in the Marxist doctrine of economic categories? When we consider the importance which this party has assumed in the socialist movement and remember that it is led by a certain number of men, we cannot help reflecting that the remote source of this deviation lies in the role which Marxism attributes to the ‘revolutionary thinker’. A vicious element has infiltrated Marxism through Hegelian idealism. This element is the role assigned to the Ideologue.”⁴²

Similarly, Edouard Berth writes:

“In the revolutionary syndicalist conception, the proletariat is, on the contrary, regarded as an adult and perfectly autonomous person, who has no ready-made utopias to realise by decree, but who intends to perfect his emancipation by himself and to his idea.”⁴³

This was the fundamental difference between revolutionary syndicalism and Leninism: it was a divergence on the origin of the socialist idea which implied a disagreement on the path to emancipation. The revolutionary syndicalists, whatever the nuances of their thinking, all shared the view expressed by Kropotkin: “Socialism springs from the very depths of the people. Although a few thinkers from the bourgeoisie have come to give it the sanction of science and the support of philosophy, the substance of the ideas they have enunciated is no less a product of the collective spirit of the working people. Was not this rational socialism of the International, which is our greatest strength today, developed in the workers’ organisations, under the direct influence of the masses? And have the few writers who have contributed to this work of elaboration done anything other than find the formula for the aspirations which were already emerging among the workers?”⁴⁴

41 Michel Collinet, *la Tragédie du marxisme*, Calmann-Lévy éditeurs, p. 101. The quotations from Marx are taken from the *Manifesto*.

42 Arturo Labriola, *Karl Marx*, quoted by E. Berth, *Du “Capital” aux “Réflexions sur la violence”*, Rivière éditeur, p. 110.

43 E. Berth, *op. cit.*, p. 112 et 113.

44 P. Kropotkin, *les Temps nouveaux*, 1913.

“The other big difference between the revolutionary syndicalists and the Bolsheviks is linked to the nature of the means used. While Lenin, deeply skeptical of the resources of civil society, and suspicious of worker spontaneity, which he suspected of inveterate reformism, rallied to the Blanquist techniques of minority and clandestine action as well as the coup d’état, revolutionary syndicalists were in some way forced by the democratic nature of society to act in broad daylight. Furthermore, distrustful of the risk of confiscation of the revolution inherent in all political action, they intended to confine it to the economic domain. Convinced that the results of collective action are determined by the nature of the means used, they intended to make their action the foreshadowing of the society they sought to establish. They were the only ones to attempt to apply to the letter the old maxim of the First International, for which the emancipation of the proletariat could only be the achievement of the proletariat itself.”⁴⁵

Revolutionary syndicalists, like many other socialists and humanists, believed that socialism, communism, anarchism, syndicalism, whatever the name given to the human aspiration to an egalitarian and free society, was, is and will be a collective creation of all humanity, and especially of the working population. It has been a dream, and it will remain so for a long time to come; it is a hope and a will that have been shared by millions of people, perhaps ever since class societies existed...

Is it scientific⁴⁶? What is scientific? The aspiration for equality? What is the “scientific” explanation for the bloody and despotic drift of the Russian Revolution? The Secretary General’s desire for domination is an unmistakable fact: what is the “scientific” answer to such a problem? A first approach, if not scientific but common sense, suggests that the necessary, assured and certain result of dictatorship is not freedom – and we have known this since Greek and Roman antiquity, at least.

The Russian revolution proves that dictatorship cannot be controlled; the dictatorship devoured the revolution and the revolutionaries, all the revolutionaries, including the “dictators” themselves, with the exception of one, and his courtiers. What were Bukharin, Kamenev, Zinoviev thinking a few minutes before the executioner’s bullet destroyed their brains?

Leninism proved to be, during the two generations in which it was dynamic, the doctrine of a combat group adapted to conquest, terror and war both against the population it dominated and between States.

In its fight against the Romanov Empire, it inherited some of the characteristics of tsarism, its police Machiavellianism, its cynicism and its

45 J. Julliard, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

46 Georges Sorel felt that “socialism is a moral question, in the sense that it brings to the world a new way of judging all human acts and, to use Nietzsche’s famous expression, a new evaluation of all values... It stands before the bourgeois world as an irreconcilable adversary, threatening it with a moral catastrophe even more than with a material catastrophe”. Socialism, Sorel continued, quoting the libertarian socialist Saverio Merlino, is “an acquisition of human consciousness” which must not be deduced from “particular scientific doctrines but from observation of the needs and tendencies of the society in which we live”. G. Sorel *la Décomposition du marxisme*, recueils de textes réunis par Thierry Paquot, P.U.F., p. 35, 44 et 45.

contempt for *barins*, its taste for secrecy and above all its propensity to resolve all problems by force. What has punctuated its history are battles won – the civil war, Stalingrad, Kursk – or lost, Poland, Afghanistan.

The victories it won on the battlefields it later lost in peace. Because socialism is peace; real, direct democracy; legality; respect for human beings; the higher form of humanism; and nothing lastingly human, that is to say free, can be built with the means of war.

However, it will remain in the history of socialism that the Bolsheviks were able to resist for more than seventy years the pressures and aggressions of the capitalist world, before allowing themselves to be dissolved and losing in peace what they had gained by the use of weapons.

Could they have, in the territory that their armies controlled, according to the time-honored phrase, turned their swords into ploughshares? And why didn't they?

The Bolsheviks, like Marx himself, had not sufficiently explored the exact meaning of the question that Bakunin posed during the debates of the International:

“What does it mean when *the proletariat is elevated to the position of the ruling class*? Would it be the entire proletariat that would put itself at the head of the government? [...] The whole people will govern and there will be none governed. But then there will be no government, there will be no slaves; whereas if there is a State, there will be those governed, there will be slaves.”⁴⁷

“It will be a provisional state”, we were told. And Lenin added: “A State which immediately begins to die out, which cannot fail to die out...”

But this state, supposedly proletarian and Soviet, has grown ever stronger, with an ever-increasing bureaucracy, police force and standing armed forces. Dictatorship, the rule of force without rights, without guarantees and without recourse for citizens, has given rise to social behaviour more reminiscent of the Asian despotism of bygone days than of modern states, even capitalist ones. For dictatorship means arbitrariness and cruelty, abuse, privilege and corruption, tears and blood.

In a letter to a Belgian Trotskyist newspaper called *Lutte ouvrière*, Victor Serge recalled that, around 1938, he had put the following question to Trotsky: “When and how did Bolshevism begin to degenerate?” Completing the question with the following assessment:

“Has the moment not come to note that the day in the glorious year 1918 when the Central Committee of the party decided to allow extraordinary commissions to apply the death penalty by secret procedure, without hearing the defendants who could not defend themselves, is a dark day? On that day, the Central Committee may or may not have reinstated an inquisitional procedure forgotten by European civilisation. In any case, it made a mistake. It was not necessarily for a victorious socialist party to make such a mistake. The revolution could have

47 M. Bakounine, *Étatisme et anarchie*, quoted by Gaston Leval in *Bakounine et l'Etat marxiste*, les Cahiers de *Contre-courant*, p. 17.

defended itself internally – and even ruthlessly – without it. It would have defended itself better without it.”⁴⁸

Victor Serge might have added that in 1921 the Cheka (the acronym for the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Sabotage and Counter-Revolution), created on 7 December 1917 and directly attached to the Council of People’s Commissars, the Sovnarkom, numbered around 250,000 men. During its four years of existence, before being replaced by the Gepeou, the Cheka executed around 140,000 people, to which must be added 140,000 deaths during the repression of the various uprisings.

There were several attempts at legislation to transfer some of the Cheka’s powers to revolutionary courts, but the Cheka was never more than nominally subject to the law. As Lenin openly admitted, the Cheka had constantly executed its victims and practised mass repression since at least February 1918. As Lenin openly admitted, it had been constantly executing its victims and practising mass repression since at least February 1918. The Cheka also administered the forced labour camps. These camps were instituted on 15 April 1919, but imprisonment by the Cheka existed long before the legislation. “In October 1922, there were 132 camps in which around 60,000 people were detained”⁴⁹.

This sheds light on the real conditions of the dictatorship of Lenin and his companions, “almost without machinery, without any special apparatus”.

Today, almost eighty years after the October Revolution, when the human, economic, ecological and ethical results of “Soviet socialism” are being exposed by all the world’s media, we are beginning to take stock, to measure the regression suffered by the ideas of workers’ emancipation and social transformation as a result of the hegemony over the working class of the conceptions developed by Lenin at the beginning of the century.

48 This letter was published as an appendix to a book by Rocker, *La Faillite du communisme d’État* (The Bankruptcy of State Communism), published by Spartacus. Trotsky replied that “Victor Serge himself is going through ‘a crisis’, that his ideas are hopelessly confused, that is obvious. But Victor Serge’s crisis is not the crisis of Marxism”.

49 L. Schapiro, *les Révolutions russes de 1917*, Flammarion, p. 271 et 272.