

The Democratic Revolutionary: Reviving Lenin

Bryan D. Palmer – Trent University

Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin: Revolution, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Pluto Press, 2008)

Lenin isn't much liked these days. Not that, in certain circles, he ever was. But the prejudice animating much anti-Leninism today, with the revolutionary left in decline and disarray, is perhaps one reason why the current capitalist downturn is not being effectively challenged. The crisis of humanity, Trotsky wrote in the 1930s, with Lenin's legacy in tatters within the now no-longer revolutionary Soviet Union, is not inseparable from the crisis in the leadership of the international workers' movement. For all the antagonism to Lenin, his contribution to the living body of revolutionary thought is undeniably immense.

With the implosion of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of Stalinist 'actually existing socialism,' there has been a tendency among many left activists and academics to collapse Leninism into Stalinism. Stress is placed on Lenin's ostensible brutality in suppressing opposition during the years of War Communism immediately following the consolidation of the 1917 Revolution. Such an interpretation, of course, has long been a staple of the anti-communist forces of the right and the social-democratic and anarchist left. The notion that terror was a fundamental feature of Bolshevism, whether led by Lenin and Trotsky or, later, by Stalin, is an old one. The indiscriminate lumping of Lenin and Stalin into an unappetizing sameness, while always a part of the conventional wisdom of the mainstream, is nonetheless wrong-headed, both intellectually and politically.

Paul Le Blanc is well-situated to counter this interpretive and political dead-end. A lifelong socialist, with years of active struggle in the revolutionary left under his belt, and a prolific scholar whose published works include a history of the American working class and a sophisticated discussion of Lenin and the nature, meaning, and importance of the revolutionary party, Le Blanc is both a thinker and doer, a versatile leftist animated by a non-dogmatic antagonism to capitalism's acquisitive individualism and resolute repudiation of its imperialist aggressions. His *Lenin: Revolution, Democracy, Socialism* is a direct challenge to those who would equate Lenin and Stalin. The book resurrects the revolutionary, socialist, and democratic Lenin, and it does so convincingly and with impressive learnedness.

Indeed, there is almost certainly no better short introduction to Lenin, through his own words, than this rigorously disciplined anthology. For those unable to wade through all 45 volumes of Lenin's collected works, Le Blanc has assembled key writings on pivotal themes, abridging the original texts expertly so

as to make them and their political points more accessible. In addition, Le Blanc provides an impressive introduction to Lenin, outlining his historical development in a brief but insightful biography, and contextualizes the selection of Lenin's writing in introductions that also reference major works of relevance. Set against the cavalier social construction of Lenin so prominent in the dismissive caricatures of many commentators, past and present, Le Blanc's text is refreshingly fair-minded, embodying criticism and acknowledging error in Lenin's experience, all the while accenting his overall achievement in charting a revolutionary course for Russian Marxists and subsequent generations committed to the revolutionary ideal. In both its politics and its scholarship, Le Blanc's *Lenin* sets a standard for the discussion of its subject that, in different ways, parallels the rich and detailed excavation of Lenin and his pamphlet *What Is To Be Done?* in Lars T. Lih's monumental *Lenin Rediscovered*.¹

Reading Le Blanc and his Lenin anthology establishes that there is, in actuality, little to recommend the Lenin = Stalin = totalitarianism equation that is accepted uncritically by so many, including a good number of self-proclaimed leftists. This book is a reminder that those who have turned their backs on the significance of what the Bolsheviks accomplished in 1917, and what was lost, from the mid-1920s on, as this experiment in workers democracy was slowly but surely extinguished, miss a great deal. They do so in ways that are quite flawed, all the more so if they insist on equating Lenin and Stalin. Such a perspective relies on a fundamentally ahistorical congealing of highly different experiences and orientations, and this suppresses important political issues. A major failing in this reductionist enterprise is appreciation of the different context in which Lenin reluctantly turned to limited coercive measures to preserve a Revolution under siege, in contrast to Stalin embracing widespread terror as a fundamental feature of his regime. Moreover, such a perspective actually diminishes our capacities to grasp how different were the purposes of Lenin and Stalin. The former never abandoned a commitment to internationalism and world revolution, while the latter turned inward in a parochial defensiveness that spelled the political defeat of the revolutionary process. Trotsky referred to Stalin as 'The Great Organizer of Defeats' precisely because the politics of 'socialism in one country' spelled disaster for the World Revolution. The lives lost in struggles compromised, curtailed, and worse, from China in the 1920s to Spain in the 1930s to Indonesia in the 1960s, are bloodied proof of this sorry record.

In the first part of his book, Le Blanc provides a succinct biography of Lenin, who grew up in an educated family. A formative moment in Lenin's development was the arrest and execution of his beloved elder brother, Alexander, who had been involved in a plot to assassinate the Tsar. Lenin himself became a revolutionary, influenced by the Marxism of Georgi Plekhanov. He studied capitalist development in the Russian countryside, authoring a major book on the subject in

1899. Driven into exile, Lenin distinguished himself at the time of the 1905 Revolution by insisting that a “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry” was the necessary foundation of advancing social democracy in Russia. In the years leading up to World War I, Lenin charted the path of the Bolsheviks within the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party.

It was in 1917, however, that Lenin’s capacities of revolutionary leadership were brilliantly revealed: his “April theses” catapulted the Bolsheviks into the leadership of those forces challenging Kerensky’s Provisional Government; where others vacillated, Lenin advocated the insurrection that would culminate in a relatively bloodless seizure of power that proclaimed the world’s first workers’ state under the slogan “all power to the soviets.” More than any other single individual in the history of modern revolutionary movements, then, Lenin had both seen and advocated a path to the possibility of building the prerequisites of socialism.

He did this, of course, in the most inauspicious of circumstances. As a Marxist, Lenin had been schooled in the theory that socialism would emerge out of the contradictions of advanced, urban capitalist societies, in which the proletariat was the dominant class. Instead, the path to socialism first presented itself amidst the different contradictions of Russian capitalism, where an unevenly developed economy was characterized by massive concentrations of capital floating like islands amidst a landed sea of peasant-based rural agrarianism. Lenin also had to confront not only the internal civil war waged by domestic opponents of the new regime. He also had to conduct a war on external fronts as well, in which the necessity of beating back the armies of foreign powers amassed on Russia’s borders during World War I was complicated by the hostility of global capitalism, whose nation states betrayed little sympathy for the revolutionary experiment associated with Bolshevism’s 1917 victory. To sustain this experiment, Lenin, Trotsky, and others understood that Revolution must also break out in Europe, most pivotally in Germany, for the beginnings of socialism in Russia were too precarious and weak to survive without new bastions of revolutionary achievement and hope appearing on the horizon.

No such breakthroughs beyond Russia materialized. Lenin, Trotsky, and the Bolsheviks were forced into a variety of retrenchments. They struggled to preserve what they could of the gains and aspirations of their 1917 revolution, but they adopted measures that they themselves would, in better circumstances, certainly have avoided.

Lenin’s accomplishment was thus also his tragedy. Faced with the concrete prospects of taking state power in the name of a future socialism that was in some sense already compromised by the backward realities of Russia’s complex political economy, Lenin had no choice but to seize the prospects of the moment. He could do little more than gamble that revolutionary initiatives elsewhere would break open the future advance of socialism on more than a limited, national scale. To have refused to advance the world revolution in Russia when the opportunities

so obviously presented themselves in 1917, as some of Lenin's counterparts advocated, would only have further mired the worker-peasant masses in worsening immiseration and straightjacketed the political possibilities of the country's producers for decades to come. It would also inevitably have weakened the prospects of the European Revolution. Lenin's brilliance was his realization that a necessary daring and defiance of the odds was humanity's only hope. His failure, over determined by so many of the objective conditions and developments of his times, would leave socialism at the mercy of Stalinism's defeatist distortions, which would be anything but tender.

Le Blanc's outline of these developments in his lengthy introduction is masterful. It provides a patient pedagogical survey of how so many writings on Lenin, from conservative critics to socialist activists, get their understandings of Lenin fundamentally wrong. His sardonic list of ten reasons for not reading Lenin conveys well that those who think the world is as it should be will always find ways of deriding both the experience of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the figure who did the most to bring it to fruition. Le Blanc works his way through the main themes of a wide variety of anti-Leninist writing, pointing out the flaws, contradictions, and myth-making that lay at the core of early, contemporary conservative and socialist attacks on Lenin, as well as more recent historical and left activist dismissals. Against Sheila Rowbotham's influential socialist-feminist critique of Leninism as an elevation of the vanguard Party above the self-activity and development of broader forces, for instance, Le Blanc provides examples from the history of United States labour struggles that he claims repudiate a kind of "iron law of Leninist manipulation." Cognizant of the complexity of the issues he has raised, Le Blanc offers an extremely useful guide to further reading for those who want to explore the controversy over Lenin in more detail.

The substance of this volume, however, is its collection of Lenin statements that further confirm Le Blanc's view of Lenin as a revolutionary socialist committed to democratic principles. Le Blanc has adroitly excerpted passages from Lenin's voluminous body of writing, organizing these selections in a largely chronological but also thematic compilation. Understandings of continuity and progression, as well as historical context, are presented. Chapters of these selected writings are organized around Lenin's early 1895-1899 concern with Marxist program and revolutionary organization; the birth of Bolshevism (1900-1904); the 1905 Revolution; the creation of the Bolshevik Party (1906-1914); imperialism, war, and national liberation (1913-1917); the 1917 Revolution; World Revolution (1918-1921); and the struggle for socialism and against bureaucracy (1919-1923). What Le Blanc has done with this ordering and selection of Lenin's writings is provide a wonderfully succinct and accessible account of Lenin's perspectives on the revolutionary process.

The chapters on Lenin's attentiveness to the necessity of building a revolutionary party are cogent reminders, in our own age of anti-organizational poli-

tics, that without *institutions* of revolutionary resolve the challenge to capital is necessarily fundamentally weakened, if not reduced to ephemeral outbursts of protest, however militant. Lenin's interpretive insights into socialism, war, and imperialism, culminating in his 1917 pamphlet *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, are refreshingly current, an indication of how struggles of a century ago could animate analysis that remains centrally important to understanding our own world. The democratic Lenin, a Lenin so many want to deny and bury under the rubble of unfortunate historical contingency, emerges vibrantly in Le Blanc's selections addressing the 1917 Revolution. Arguably Lenin's most hopeful and utopian of writings, *The State and Revolution* was not by accident produced at the very point that the Bolshevik leader perceived the many problems that were going to inhibit the state erected to protect workers' interests and soviet power, turning it ever against the boundless freedom that was itself the only ultimate guarantor of 'lasting peace' and the end of exploitation. Lenin's 1917 'Letters on Tactics' understood that, "Theory, my friend, is grey, but green is the eternal tree of life."

Unfortunately for Lenin, his tree of life would see a foliage of problems in the 1917-1923 years, and through these leaves of difficulty no theory could triumphantly proclaim socialism into being. In the last years of his life, Lenin was pressured aplenty to adapt to what Le Blanc acknowledges was a "tragic authoritarianism." But he also struggled to keep alive what had been a life-long commitment to revolutionary democracy.

Lenin, a tactician who addressed realities, often offered guidance that had a certain timeless ring to it: "Control over a bank, the merging of all banks into one, is *not yet* socialism," he wrote in a 1917 Letter on Tactics, "but it is a *step towards* socialism."² This kind of elementary socialist vocabulary needs to be resurrected. So, too, does Lenin's boundless internationalism, his belief in the triumph of world revolution that alone could abolish the regime of capitalist accumulation premised on the exploitation of the many by the few, a social order destined to reproduce an ongoing orgy of oppression.

With the carnage of global war impressed on the popular mind, Lenin wrote to the American worker in 1918: "We are now, as it were, in a besieged fortress, waiting for the other detachments of the world socialist revolution to come to relief. These detachments *exist*, they are *more numerous* than ours, they are maturing, growing, gaining more strength the longer the brutalities of imperialism continue. ... Slowly but surely," Lenin insisted, "the workers are adopting communist, Bolshevik tactics and are marching towards the proletarian revolution, which alone is capable of saving dying culture and dying mankind."³

Culture continued to succumb in the years after Lenin's 1923 death. Mankind proliferated, but failed to turn back the death march of capital, which would, in short order, give rise to fascism, yet another world war, the threat of nuclear holocaust and, in our own times, the scourge of still further imperialist car-

174 Palmer

nage (from Vietnam to Afghanistan) and the unprecedented global reach of ecological destruction. Capitalism, increasingly unable to restrain its appetite for accumulation, has, of late, been precipitated into a free-fall of meltdowns. Yet it has arguably never been as ideologically secure in its world-wide hegemony.

We desperately need the resurrection and revival of the kind of strategic thinking and principled commitment that Lenin epitomized in the era of 1917, and all that it promised. For those interested in this rebirth of the politics of alternative to capitalism, Paul Le Blanc's account of the democratic, socialist, and revolutionary Lenin will prove indispensable. Reading it is a reminder that what is, need not be, and that what has, seemingly, failed, can be reconstituted anew.

NOTES

¹ Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? In Context* (Leiden: Brill Press, 2006).

² V.I. Lenin, "Letters on Tactics," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 4th edition, ed. Bernard Isaacs (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964).

³ V.I. Lenin, "Letter to American Workers," 20 August 1918, V.I. Lenin Internet Archive, accessed November 2010, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/aug/20.htm>.