

Lenin versus ‘Leninism’: for revolutionary experiments, not blueprints

Tom Walker

“Socialist democracy is not something which begins only in the promised land after the foundations of socialist economy are created. It does not come as some sort of Christmas present for the worthy people who, in the interim, have loyally supported a handful of socialist dictators.” – Rosa Luxemburg

Leninism is, if we’re honest, never the most popular of political concepts at the best of times. Much of the wider left, from experience as much as anything, treats Leninist groups with at least suspicion and often hostility. So it’s not surprising that the crisis in the Socialist Workers Party – still ever-escalating, thanks to the leadership’s intransigence – has produced a new round of obituaries for Leninism, seeking once more to bury it.

Perhaps their most helpful assistant in jamming on the coffin lid is one Alex Callinicos, the leading light of the SWP central committee who has appointed himself the patrician defender of ‘Leninism’ against such rogues. His article [‘Is Leninism finished?’](#) spends most of its time laying into everyone else on the left, not least Owen Jones who we are told is, shock, in the Labour Party. There is not a moment of reflection on how things went so disastrously wrong in the SWP. Callinicos’ article does not contain the word ‘rape’, speaking only of a ‘difficult’ case. (Difficult for who? You, Alex?) It only uses the word ‘victim’ once – to refer to the SWP.

You could summarise it as ‘Leninism means never having to say you’re sorry’.

But Callinicos is playing into a fear many SWP members and sympathisers hold. He is trying, albeit badly, to appeal to those who think the leadership’s handling of this has been pretty awful all round but are desperate to see the party survive – he wants to scare them into silence by pointing to the wilderness we will all surely find ourselves in without his very particular conception of a ‘Leninist party’. Reformism! Movementism! Never mind that he is the one willing to tear the party apart in order to protect one man.

Let’s try to allay some fears. We can keep hold of the best of where we’ve been while we try to scarp the worst. To do so means looking in more detail at ‘Leninism’ as a concept and as a narrative that has been much used and abused over the decades. It means recognising that Leninism is continuously contested, constructed and re-constructed in ways that usually have little to do with the actual Lenin who lived, and thinking in contrast about what our approach should be.

Will the real Lenin please stand up?

The opposition has already done well in unpicking the various lies and distortions in Callinicos' article, so I won't repeat [their collectively-written work](#). (On one level Callinicos has rapidly moved from 'big fish, small pond', to 'big fish, small barrel' – though the opposition still display good aim.) But their statement also goes further than answering his immediate argument by labelling the SWP's current practice 'Zinovievism'.

Their starting point is that the organisational model of the SWP today, which Callinicos claims is based on "the way the Bolsheviks organised under Lenin's leadership in the years leading up to the October Revolution", in fact deviates from that of the Bolsheviks in all sorts of ways. As the opposition says:

"[Callinicos'] manoeuvre assumes the following equivalences: that 'revolutionary party' means the model of democratic centralism adopted by the SWP in the 1970s; that this model replicates that of the Bolsheviks in 1917 and the decisions of the current leadership therefore embody the legitimacy of that revolution, which we can expect to be replicated in the conditions of the UK in the 21st century..."

The Bolshevik leadership of 1917 was elected individually [ie. not using the 'slate system' –TW]. There was no ban on factions. On the eve of the October Revolution, Zinoviev and Kamenev publicly opposed the insurrection in Maxim Gorky's newspaper (the 'dark side' of the printing press, perhaps) and resigned from the Bolshevik Central Committee. They were not expelled from the Party.

The model operated currently by the SWP is not that of the Bolshevik revolution. It is a version of the Zinovievite model adopted during the period of 'Bolshevisation' in the mid-1920s and then honed by ever smaller and more marginal groups."

This statement shows how brilliantly the opposition's analysis and discussion has developed over these weeks. They locate the historic break much further back than most criticism of the central committee so far, and gently suggest that the problems of democracy that have exploded now were unfortunately reintroduced into the IS tradition in the course of the 'turn to Lenin'.

Other critiques of Callinicos' article have come from various angles, from Paul LeBlanc to the different approach of Pham Binh), but all make a good case that the way the SWP works has very little to do with how the Bolsheviks were organised.

In particular, when it comes to one of the issues that gets central committee supporters most worked up – whether party members should be disagreeing with each other in public or not – the critics throw back the mountains of

evidence that the Bolsheviks did so constantly, in the middle of life-and-death struggles. On the horror of ‘factionalism’, the loyalists’ other great bugbear, we should [listen again to Trotsky](#) for a moment:

“The present doctrine that Bolshevism does not tolerate factions is a myth of the epoch of decline. In reality the history of Bolshevism is a history of the struggle of factions.”

Callinicos and co will not engage on this terrain of historical fact because they know they’re not onto a winner. For all the bluster about ‘defending Leninism’, they are well-read enough to be very well aware that the internal party regime they are defending is so much stricter than the Bolsheviks – despite conditions of 21st century legality! – that it is not even a caricature. It is, instead, a set of anti-democratic practices that has developed over time to defend the party bureaucracy.

(While we’re at it, the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) in France haven’t declined because they allowed factions – an analysis the central committee is putting forward to serve its own purposes. There are all sorts of political reasons for its decline, but the biggest is that the Front de Gauche has eaten the NPA’s support for lunch.)

But if Callinicos’ ‘Leninism’ is little more than whatever serves his current purposes, surely our task in opposing him is to uncover the ‘real Leninism’ by closely examining the Bolsheviks’ actual historical practice and drawing our conclusions from that?

Lenin the libertarian?

If we’re going down that road then the group who recently broke from the 1974 IS split Workers Power to focus on the Anticapitalist Initiative have done some of the work for us already. Simon Hardy’s widely-circulated recent article on the ‘forgotten legacies of Bolshevism’ is an account of the Bolsheviks’ history aimed squarely at the various cherished myths that most of the far left holds about Lenin’s theory and practice.

In these days of the hovering axe of expulsions, we might note his contention that throughout the history of the Bolsheviks “despite there being some very serious arguments between members in public, and breaches of agreed positions, very few people were actually expelled”. As well as the example of Zinoviev and Kamenev publicly opposing the insurrection (as referred to in the opposition statement above), there’s also the leaders who broke discipline and caused the ‘July Days’ not being expelled, and five CC members who went public with their opposition to a decision to suppress bourgeois newspapers also not being expelled. Hardy writes:

“What do these three examples, all from the most important year of the revolutionary struggle in Russia, show us? It shows that, whilst the

Bolsheviks strived for unity in practice on agreed political lines, there were many occasions when this was not achieved and people 'broke discipline', but no one was expelled for it."

All this should surely be a standing rebuke to any expulsion-happy central committee. And yet:

"Compare this to most Leninist-Trotskyist groups today where the CC is usually the main instigator of purges (what Lenin called an 'extreme measure' in post-revolutionary Russia has become normal practice for Leninist-Trotskyist groups in liberal democratic countries)."

Such contributions are certainly helpful when it comes to showing up the leaderships of all the various far left groups, and in starting to make the case against the left's sectarianism and in favour of a more pluralistic approach. It is worth reading in full and discussing further.

Hardy's argument in part draws on the efforts of Lars T Lih, whose weighty tome *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? In Context* represents a comprehensive effort to reassess Lenin on a historical basis. It makes a strong case that is still being debated across the international left.

But while Lih's work is an achievement that I would never want to do down, it does encourage a somewhat scriptural approach to Lenin. It's like we've got the 'King James Version' of Lenin, and now the task is to retranslate it and explain that Lenin didn't really mean what the left since has generally thought he meant. While we obviously care a lot about what Lenin really said, did and thought, such debates risk reinforcing the view that there is a 'true Leninist blueprint' to be uncovered, if only we could figure it out.

Lenin the disciplinarian?

Before we move on, one big limitation of such an approach is that, however many sources you pore over to build your case that Lenin was keener on democracy than generally thought (and he was), there'll always be someone waiting round the corner with a quote like this:

"the experience of the victorious dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia has clearly shown even to those who are incapable of thinking or have had no occasion to give thought to the matter that absolute centralisation and rigorous discipline of the proletariat are an essential condition of victory over the bourgeoisie."

or [this](#) (about the Zinoviev/Kamenev incident):

"I shall, at whatever cost, brand the blackleg Zinoviev as a blackleg. My answer to the threat of a split is to declare war to a finish, war for the expulsion of both blacklegs from the Party."

or even [this](#):

“Dictatorship, however, presupposes a revolutionary government that is really firm and ruthless in crushing both exploiters and hooligans, and our government is too mild. Obedience, and unquestioning obedience at that, during work to the one-man decisions of Soviet directors, of the dictators elected or appointed by Soviet institutions, vested with dictatorial powers (as is demanded, for example, by the railway decree), is far, very far from being guaranteed as yet. This is the effect of the influence of petty-bourgeois anarchy, the anarchy of small-proprietor habits, aspirations and sentiments, which fundamentally contradict proletarian discipline and socialism.”

And yet, and yet. Lenin also said this:

“Criticism within the limits of the principles of the Party Programme must be quite free ... not only at Party meetings, but also at public meetings... The principle of democratic centralism and autonomy for local Party organisations implies universal and full freedom to criticise, so long as this does not disturb the unity of a definite action.”

and [this](#):

“No democracy or centralism would ever tolerate a Central Committee elected at a Congress having the right to expel its members.”

and [this](#):

“The whole organisation is built from below upwards, on an elective basis. The Party Rules declare that the local organisations are independent (autonomous) in their local activities... Since the organisation is built from below upwards, interference in its composition from above would be a flagrant breach of democracy and of the Party Rules.”

The reality is that Lenin held all sorts of positions during his life, depending on the circumstances. He deliberately exaggerated depending on what he thought was the priority at that time, and argued tactically to try to win the argument of the day. He wrote an incredible amount of material, and we have verbatim accounts of a very large number of his speeches. This means the raw material is there to build almost any Lenin or ‘Leninism’ you want. I could have just supplied you with a grab-bag of quotes that support my own case and sent you on your way. But is that useful?

As Jim Higgins wrote:

“Such is the frequency with which some of the Lenin quotes are used that I would like to make a modest proposal that would save ink and paper – a vital consideration in these ecologically sensitive times. In

the logging camps of North America the lumberjacks were isolated for months on end and before long they had heard one another's jokes so often that they gave each one a number. Thus, just by calling out the number – so long as you avoided number 37, which was too disgusting even for lumberjacks – you could get the laugh even though you had forgotten the punch line. By the same token, why not give these Lenin quotations special codes? Using a modified Dewey system we could arrive at LC17/430/2/1-5, which would indicate a reference to Lenin's Collected Works, Vol 17, page 430, paragraph two, lines one to five. As it happens this is a very boring denunciation of the fake liberalism of the Cadet party in 1905, but it might have been an absolute cruncher like LC56/54/1/4-10. To which the only reply, and that a purely defensive one while you regroup, is LC24/623/1/1-4."

Frequently our exchanges of quotes really are that ritualistic. Let us draw an end to that long war of quotation.

Lenin the myth

To put it simply, Lenin was not always right, whatever Stalinist mythologising may say. No one can be. And when he was right, he was right in specific historical circumstances, not right for all time. As in any life, he contradicted himself frequently, and attempting to deny that will lead to spectacular contortions. Most of the 'Leninist' left agrees on this in its better moments, even as it ignores it in practice.

The many problems we have ended up with today, however, are not just down to misinterpretation and misuse of Lenin. Much of it goes back to when Lenin and the Bolsheviks, *after* they had been forced into all sorts of changes to their previous practice by the circumstances in which they found themselves after October 1917, attempted to 'distil' their experiences into a ready-made model for adoption for Communist Parties across the world.

Rosa Luxemburg in 1918:

"It would be demanding something superhuman from Lenin and his comrades if we should expect of them that under such circumstances [ie. the war] they should conjure forth the finest democracy, the most exemplary dictatorship of the proletariat and a flourishing socialist economy. By their determined revolutionary stand, their exemplary strength in action, and their unbreakable loyalty to international socialism, they have contributed whatever could possibly be contributed under such devilishly hard conditions. The danger begins only when they make a virtue of necessity and want to freeze into a complete theoretical system all the tactics forced upon them by these fatal circumstances, and want to recommend them to the international proletariat as a model of socialist tactics... they render a poor service to international socialism for the sake of which they have fought and

suffered; for they want to place in its storehouse as new discoveries all the distortions prescribed in Russia by necessity and compulsion.”

Nearly a century on, it's worse than she thought. As Luxemburg points out, there was already some distortion very soon after the revolution. By the time we get to 'Zinovievism', it has been distorted again – and that is where we ended up with a large part of 'democratic centralism' as we know it. But that's not the end of the story. Instead of thoroughly challenging this model, Trotskyists have tended to see it as 'pre-Stalinist' and therefore fine to adopt, with a few modifications, without accounting for how far the degeneration of the revolution had gone by the early 1920s. In 1921 Lenin was repeatedly referring to “the evils of bureaucracy” (at the same congress that infamously banned factions). As Trotsky later wrote:

“The very center of Lenin’s attention and that of his colleagues was occupied by a continual concern to protect the Bolshevik ranks from the vices of those in power. However, the extraordinary closeness and at times actual merging of the party with the state apparatus had already in those first years done indubitable harm to the freedom and elasticity of the party regime. Democracy had been narrowed in proportion as difficulties increased.”

When the SWP re-adopted a version of the 1920s model in the 1970s, Cliff would also have come to it through the prism of his own experiences in post-war Trotskyism. And, of course, that model has also been distorted many times before and since. How could it not be when you see what the Trotskyist left has been through during that time?

John Molyneux, who has sadly now turned himself into a staunch defender of the SWP leadership, wrote in 1978:

“Naturally the Leninist theory of the party, for so long defended by Trotsky, has not remained unscathed by this degeneration of Trotskyism. While all Trotskyist sects adhere to the letter of this theory, its 'spirit' has undergone two kinds of revision. The first could be characterised as extreme dogmatic sectarianism. In this variant the organisation, no matter how manifest its smallness and insignificance, proclaims and demands its right to the leadership of the working class. It defines itself as the revolutionary party not on the basis of its role in the class struggle but on the basis of its possession of the 'correct theory' and the 'correct line'. Essentially the party is seen as separate, not only from the working class as a whole but also from the advanced workers. If, for Lenin, the party was both educator and educated, in this version of Trotskyism the party attempts to play schoolmaster to the working class. Internally such organisations tend to authoritarianism and witch-hunting and even at times to the cult of the leader. Externally they exhibit gross delusions of grandeur, paranoia and above all an inability to look reality in the face.”

How unfortunate to become your own most damning critic, as you defend the

Nineteen Eighty-Four situation of people being expelled to ‘protect democracy’.

But this is not a new betrayal. If we look beyond our corner of the left in our corner of the world, internationally there are many thousand ‘Leninisms’, all claiming to be the one true interpretation – a ‘hall of mirrors’ of revolutionary parties.

Lenin the experimenter

Against the warring blueprints, we should assert that our task is not to go back and plunder history in a quest for the ‘correct’ model. If it were, presumably we would spend our days and nights poring over Lenin’s correspondence (preferably in the original Russian), until we had ‘fixed’ the party – until our conference looked exactly like that of the Bolsheviks, all our structures were precisely the same, our paper looked the same, and so on. It means thinking, like Callinicos, that revolutionary organisation works something like KFC, with its ‘secret blend of herbs and spices’. Most of the far left has gone far enough down that road already.

It will never work to attempt to condense any great revolutionary’s life and work into a particular set of universal organisational rules. This is certainly not our approach, for example, to Marxism. Instead we understand it as a philosophy, a set of tools and a method. And that was always the strong point of the International Socialist tradition – its rejection of fixed orthodoxies and products of historical circumstance in favour of using the Marxist method to look at the world anew.

So this is a call, above all, for *experimentation*. We will not take everyone with us at first, but we shouldn’t fear to go ahead and start making the path by walking. As Cliff wrote:

“If there are ten people in a group, one or two will be ready to experiment, to try new things; one or two are so conservative that even a successful experience will not convince them, while the majority will vacillate between the two extremes, and will learn through experience. The key is to be part of the one or two ready to experiment, to find new ways to take things forward, and if successful, to win the majority for the new direction.”

Lenin, after many years of trying, experimenting and refining, found a model for the time and place in which he lived, the mostly-agrarian Russia of the early twentieth century. In fact the Bolsheviks insisted, against the Marxist orthodoxy of the time, that there could be not just a bourgeois but a socialist revolution in a ‘backward’ country like Russia. (And of course, theirs wasn’t a perfect model – it was one that gave us a glimpse of the potential for socialism, not a socialist world.)

Discovering a model for our own circumstances – liberal, democratic capitalism in 2013 – will mean doing that level of systematic work again. We have a huge wealth of history to learn from, but it seems likely that what we come up with will look very different to what Lenin came up with, just as Lenin's model was different to that of previous generations of revolutionaries. And that's OK! Lenin was about learning from the best of the past and using it to fight for the future. That is the Leninism we need today.

There is hope on our side. Capitalism may be more entrenched, but the working class is far bigger now both in Britain and internationally than either Marx or Lenin could have dreamed of. We may have scattered, smaller workplaces instead of the Putilov Works, but we also have drastically better methods of communication. (Including, yes, the scary internet!) Saying Lenin found the one true way to socialism is like saying the sailors of history figured out everything we need to know to build a rocket. We will surely borrow some of their practices and terminology, and definitely build on their innovations in navigation, but we will need to come up with many ideas of our own.

If Marxism is a science then we need to experiment, learn, make modifications, and experiment again. We do not need a yearly schedule of doing the same thing over and over again, never learning from our mistakes, even the most awful ones. If we do that we will spend our whole lives 'building the party' but never see it grow, damaging the left as we chew up members and spit them out. Cliff once more: "the moment Marxism stops changing, it is dead."

If you have 'forty years of experience' of Leninism, and your organisation is about the same size now as it was when you started, *you're doing it wrong*.