

V.I. Lenin's Theory of Socialist Revolution

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Abstract

Lenin transposed Marx's analysis of capitalism from the advanced capitalist economies to the dependent colonial countries. He combined political economy, geopolitics, political organisation and a sociology of social structure to form an innovative revolutionary praxis. The expansion of Western capitalism shifted the social and political contradictions to countries moving from feudalism to capitalism. Lenin was correct in his appraisal of the social forces in support of a bourgeois revolution. But he provided an over-optimistic prediction for the disintegration of monopoly capitalism and only a partial analysis of the working classes in the advanced capitalist countries. His political approach requires a redefinition of countervailing forces and class alliances and a shift of focus from the semi-periphery to the 'strongest links' in the capitalist chain. A 'return to Lenin' is not to adopt his policies but a prompt to reinvent a socialist sociological vision derived from the expectations of the Enlightenment and Marx's analysis of capitalism.

Keywords

Lenin, permanent revolution, Russian Revolution, imperialism, vanguard Party, working class, socialist democracy, dictatorship of the proletariat

Introduction

One hundred and fifty years ago, on 22 April 1870 in Simbirsk, Russia, Vladimir Il'ich Ulyanov (universally known as Lenin) was born. He came from a wealthy middle-class family in the estate of the nobility. His father was an inspector of schools and able to finance his two sons' university education. A formative event in Lenin's life was the execution by hanging of his brother for plotting the assassination of the Tsar in 1887. Lenin himself followed his brother's example of opposition to the autocracy: he was expelled from Kazan University for dissident activity and later, in 1897, exiled for three years to Shushenskoe in Siberia. He became an active social-democrat in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and a founder and leader of its Bolshevik wing. Lenin

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was a leading Marxist theorist of monopoly capitalism and is best known for tactical leadership of the successful Bolshevik insurrection against the Provisional government in October 1917. He consequently became the head of the government of Soviet Russia and later the Soviet Union (Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars) until he died in 1924.

This paper examines his understanding of the development of capitalism and the ways in which he adapted a Marxist position to legitimate a socialist revolution in Russia. It demonstrates how Lenin's praxis grew out of, and was predicated on, conditions in Russia and its geopolitical position in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Existing interpretations of Lenin are political, philosophical and psychological. Without his sociological understanding, there would not have been an October revolution in Russia or it would have taken a very different form. His theory of revolution is explained, evaluated and, finally, the relevance today of his approach is discussed.

The Image of Lenin

Lenin is a controversial political leader who aroused deep feelings of loyalty among his followers and distrust from his opponents. Richard Pipes and his Russian co-authors are said to lay 'bare Lenin the man and the politician, leaving little doubt that he was a ruthless and manipulative leader. . .' (Pipes, 1996: publisher's blurb). In Western academia, Neil Harding (1977, 1980) and Christopher Read (2004) have provided balanced accounts of him, but the general tone is to consider Lenin as a revolutionary activist rather than a social theorist (Conquest, 1972; Figes, 1996; Service, 2000). Leszek Kolakowski has set the tone for contemporary Western interpretations. 'To Lenin . . . all theoretical questions were merely instruments of a single aim, the revolution; and the meaning of all human affairs, ideas, institutions and values resided exclusively in their bearing in the class struggle. . . [B]y a natural progression, the dictatorship first exercised over society, in the name of the working class and then over the working class, in the name of the party, was now applied to the party itself, creating the basis for a-man tyranny' (Kolakowski, 1978, vol. 2: 383, 489). This evaluation is also shared by some Marxists, notably by Rosa Luxemburg (1904, 1961). Tom Rockmore (2018: 208–209) condemns Lenin as the precursor, and his theories to be the legitimation, of Stalin's dominant rule, which extended to the Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong. Leninism is faulted because it endorses the dictatorship of the Party over the working class (Rockmore, 2018: 204–205). Others consider that Lenin related Marxism to the conditions of the 20th century though many have reservations about consequent policies (Althusser, 1971; Garaudy, 1970; Liebman, 1975; Trotsky, 1970); contributors to Budgen et al., (2007). More positively, Georg Lukacs, as early as 1924, described Lenin as 'the greatest thinker to have been produced by the revolutionary working-class movement since Marx' (Lukacs, 1970: 9). Even after the dismantling of the European communist states, in the 21st century, writers such Lars T. Lih (2011, 2005, 2007), Alan Shandro (2014), contributors to Hjalmar Joffe-Eichhorn et al. (2020) and Michael Brie (2019) provide critical appraisals of Lenin's leadership. Slavoj Zizek calls for a 'return to Lenin', to 'repeating, in the present worldwide conditions, the Leninist gesture of reinventing the revolutionary project in the conditions of imperialism and colonialism. . .' (Zizek, 2002: 11 (italics in original)). The conclusion of writers like Zizek is that Lenin took responsibility for, and carried out, the first socialist revolution (Budgen et al., 2007). Despite their differences, all commentators believe that there is something to be learned from Lenin's thoughts and actions.

The ambiguity of these conflicting interpretations results from conflating distinct phases in, and dimensions of, Lenin's political philosophy and action. One might distinguish between Lenin's thought – his conception of the conditions and tactics for socialist revolution, the policies of Lenin in the USSR after the Bolshevik seizure of power and the continuation of the revolution after Lenin's death under the leadership of Joseph Stalin in the USSR.

Lenin's Approach

Marx and Engels proposed no theory of transition from capitalism to communism. As Rockmore puts it, Marx 'offers no more than a very rudimentary, unsatisfactory account of the political process leading from capitalism to communism' (Rockmore, 2018: 193). Lenin combined Marxist political economy with political action. Whereas Marx and Engels used England and Germany as their chief empirical referents, Lenin's approach was based on his observation of Russian society before the First World War, which he embedded in the evolution of capitalism as an international system. By extending Marx's method and linking it explicitly to Russian economic development, Marxism in Russia (and later in other colonial dependencies) became differentiated from the Marxism of Western Europe.

Lenin recognised the importance of the detail of history and the need to generalise on the basis of empirically verifiable facts rather than on a priori reasoning. In discussing the nature of warfare, for example, Lenin points out that 'Marxist dialectics call for a concrete analysis of each specific historical situation' (*The Junius Pamphlet* (1916), Lenin, *Collected Works* (hereafter CW) vol. 22: 316). He was a serious student of public voting behaviour and strike statistics (The Results of the Elections in the Worker's Curia in Petersburg, CW12: 86–7; Strike Statistics in Russia, CW16: 395; The Historical Meaning of the Inner-Party Struggle in Russia, CW16: 381). He also measured the influence and popularity of parties (Narodniks, Mensheviks, and Bolsheviks) by a study of the density of their respective newspaper circulation and from which he was able to estimate the working-class support for the Narodniks (How Strong is the Left-Narodnik Trend Among the Workers (28 June 1914), CW: 20).

Lenin looked to historical materialism to provide both the goals of, and the means to, action. His approach is teleological in the sense that political praxis is designed to bring about a socialist society. This involves knowledge of the world and interpretation of it as a preliminary to action. For Western scholars, such as Max Weber, the notion of 'ethical neutrality' gives a role to social scientists to classify, to explain, to show the likely effects of action under different conditions. The Weberian type of analysis takes the form of a 'classification of types of action as tools for the explanation of actual courses of action' (Eldridge, 1971: 227). Lenin requires that actors should have a political commitment to bring about a socialist society based on an understanding of the dynamics of history. Any particular form of praxis has only limited application: it becomes redundant and useless knowledge in the face of historical change, of new insights, of new knowledge; theories have to be replaced when their predictions turn out to be wrong. Lenin attempted to devise a praxis to advance the historic mission of the working class: 'without a revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement' (*What Is to be Done?:* CW:5, Chapter on, Dogmatism and 'Freedom of Criticism' (1902)). His theories had a teleological prescience: human action was predicated on bringing about a socialist society. As Louis Althusser has cogently put it: in Lenin's political and economic works, 'we can study Marxist philosophy at work . . . in the "practical" state, Marxist philosophy which has become politics, political action, analysis and decision' (Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 76n). Lenin creatively fused Marx's economic analysis of capitalism to a sociology of Russia, to a geopolitics of capitalism and to a politics of leadership and action.

The Shift in Revolutionary Focus to the Semi-Peripheral Countries

Lenin interpreted the development of capitalism with four substantive elements, which should be understood in combination and constitute Lenin's theory of socialist revolution. First, based on Marxist laws of historical materialism, is the idea of the combined and uneven development of

capitalism; second, a process of leadership and mobilisation embodied in a political party making socialist revolution; third, a theory of imperialism which describes the stage of capitalism in the early 20th century; fourth, a means to enforce the conquest of political power through the dictatorship of the proletariat. Each of these components was developed by Lenin in sequence and one does not find in Lenin's works any synthesis of these elements. He went beyond Marx and Engels by combining political economy with geopolitics and a sociological understanding of the social structure of imperial Russia. He was an innovative historical and comparative sociologist. He pointed out that facts have to be considered not in isolation, not as individual 'instances' but in their interconnectedness (Statistics and Sociology, CW 23: 272). He also added a political action dimension: socialist parties did not only advocate revolution, they were revolution-making parties.

In the traditional Marxist prognosis, only at the most advanced stage of capitalism would the economic contradictions lead to its collapse followed by, or concurrent with, the transition to a communist mode of production. For Lenin, the imperialist stage of capitalism was formed from different interconnected state formations with uneven and hybrid levels of capitalist development. 'The order of the links [in the capitalist chain], their form, the manner in which they are linked together, their difference from each other in the historical chain of events are not as simple and not as senseless as those in an ordinary chain made by a smith' (The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government, April 1918. CW27: 235–277, quotation in chapter: The Development of Soviet Organisation). He concluded that world capitalism was most vulnerable at its weakest link (or links) not in its most advanced economic form. He contended that as a new mode of production would not spontaneously grow out of capitalism, human action through a political party was necessary to move Russian society forward from a pre-capitalist level of production: first to capitalism, then to socialism. Lenin shifted the emphasis from the systemic economic contradictions of capitalism to the social class contradictions in the movement from feudalism to capitalism. He added a sociological critique: from his analysis of the stratification of the working class and peasantry, he deduced that under the right leadership they could be motive forces in both the bourgeois democratic and the socialist revolutions.

Lenin's views constitute a major shift in Marxist orientation about developing pre-capitalist and colonised countries (Russia being the paradigmatic case). The initiation of socialist revolution moved from industrialised Western Europe to what we would now call semi-peripheral states. This was legitimated by the theory of combined and uneven development, on the one side, and imperialism, on the other. In this way, Lenin predicated the socialist revolution in the East on the consequences of capitalism in the West. He contended that while history follows general laws it does not prejudice the form or sequence of development. For conventional Marxism, the socialist revolution would arise out of the most developed forms of capitalism where the economic contradictions and the exploitation of the working class would be greatest. For Lenin, capitalism was transnational: the socialist revolution could take place first at the weakest link in the capitalist chain and this was to be found in countries undergoing the transition to capitalism. The *political* contradictions of capitalism were greatest in the semi-peripheries of world capitalism. The level of exploitation of wage labour in the economy was still objectively more pronounced in the advanced countries where the working class was larger, and the extraction of surplus was much greater. Lenin, however, saw the potential of the peasantry as a revolutionary class: those peasant proprietors producing an economic surplus would be a driving force in the bourgeois democratic revolution, and the poor landless peasants would be an ally of the proletariat in the struggle for socialism. The empirical justification to this conclusion is that advanced forms of capitalist economy and a proletariat (workers producing surplus value) arise in a country with a weak national commercial and industrial bourgeoisie dependent on an autocratic pre-capitalist political formation (The Development of Capitalism in Russia (written in 1899) CW:3).

The Uneven Development of Capitalism

Capitalist development was progressive: it led to an 'increase in the productive forces of social labour' (Development of Capitalism. . ., CW3: 595) and, consequently, the liberation of labour. Russia in the late 19th century was suffering from two forms of oppression: that to which capitalism gives rise and that derived from relations of personal bondage remaining from feudalism. From the latter stemmed the 'abundant survival of ancient institutions that are incompatible with capitalism. . . [and which] immeasurably worsen the condition of the producers, who (to quote Marx), "suffer not only from capitalist production but also from the incompleteness of its development"' (CW3: 599). The development of capitalism, under the Tsars, had to be promoted for it paved the way for the growth of the working class and (consequently) for a socialist society. Lenin identified three levels of contradiction: between the autocracy and the ascendant bourgeoisie; between the autocracy and the labouring classes (peasantry and proletariat); and between the proletariat allied to the poor peasants, and the bourgeoisie. These class forces defined the possibilities and limits of revolutionary change.

The development of capitalism differed in Russia from that in Western Europe in other ways. The form of industrialisation occurring under the Tsarist bureaucracy consisted, on the one hand, of enterprises directly owned and controlled by the state and, on the other, of foreign capitalist investment. L. Trotsky described the Russian government in the late 19th century as 'a colossal military-bureaucratic and fiscal-stock-exchange organisation of invincible power' (Trotsky, 1931: chapter 1). Consequently, capitalism in Russia developed with a relatively small indigenous capitalist class. Foreign and domestic companies depended on the autocracy to maintain their security through repressive state institutions. The autocracy counted on foreign entrepreneurs to provide an industrial infrastructure for Russia's economic development and defence needs and, concurrently, the autocracy secured the rights of the landed aristocracy to property.

Lenin realised that maintaining the legal rights of the nobility to landed property locked the autocracy into conflict with the peasantry. The economic differentiation of the peasantry became for Lenin (and here he followed the reasoning of Georgy Plekhanov (1885)) a major dynamic of social development. By the mid-1890s, Lenin identified three groups: half of the peasants were in the 'poor' category having land inadequate for their needs, 20 per cent were 'rich' (producing a marketable surplus of products) and 30 per cent were middle peasants (CW3: 128). He contended that the 'small and medium peasants' should be differentiated between [those who] . . . either sell or buy labour-power, either hire themselves out or hire labour' (The Left Narodniks Whitewash the Bourgeoisie (6 April 1914), CW20: 213–216). The implication here had crucial political consequences: for Lenin, the poor landless peasants were the allies of the urban working class, they shared in common the sale of labour power. The socialist ascendant class was composed of the urban proletariat plus the poor village peasants. In showing the extent of the penetration of capitalism in Russia, Lenin effectively demolished the Narodnik version of development on the basis of the village commune (the *obshchina*). An 'agrarian' form of socialism, as advocated by the Socialist Revolutionaries, based on the village commune was not only utopian but undesirable and unrealisable. The crucial class cleavage within the agricultural work force was between the evolving stratum of peasants producing for the market (a rural bourgeoisie) and the poor peasants. The middle peasants had an ambiguous class position.

Lenin considered that the national bourgeoisie was a very weak political actor unable to complete the bourgeois democratic revolution. He concluded that, in a country experiencing imperialist capitalist development with an insubstantial national bourgeoisie, it was the mission of the proletariat to lead the *bourgeois* democratic revolution to secure the best possible outcome for the working class. In the early 20th century, it was not the objective of the Bolsheviks to instigate a socialist revolution: 'If

Social-Democracy sought to make the socialist revolution its immediate aim, it would assuredly discredit itself. . . . Social-Democracy has constantly stressed the bourgeois nature of the impending revolution in Russia and insisted on a clear line of demarcation between the democratic minimum programme and the socialist maximum programme' (The Revolutionary-Democratic Dictatorship of the Proletariat and the Peasantry (March 1905) CW8: 293–303). Alexandr Martynov is criticised by Lenin for assuming that the social democrats would introduce socialism in a 'provisional revolutionary government', which would come to power after replacing the Tsarist government (CW8: 293). However, there was another alternative: permanent revolution.

Permanent Revolution

Leon Trotsky in *Results and Prospects* (1931, written in 1906) and later in *Permanent Revolution* (1962, written in 1929) contended that the democratic revolution would 'grow over into the socialist revolution' (Trotsky, 1962: 58). The revolutionary process enacted by the working class, and the rural and urban bourgeoisie, would instigate an 'uninterrupted revolution'. The bourgeois revolution could not be contained because the interests of the national bourgeoisie (including capitalist strata among the peasantry) would be challenged by the working class. As Trotsky put it in *Permanent Revolution: The Russian [bourgeois] revolution* '... does not stop at the democratic stage, which goes over to socialist measures and to war against reaction from without. . .' (1962, Introduction to the First Russian Edition).

In 1905, Lenin did not foresee such a 'merging' of bourgeois and socialist revolutions; he disagreed with Trotsky's position at this time. He saw the two as distinct: the socialist revolution would follow the capitalist revolution – each revolution had a different constellations of class forces. In 'The Stages, the Trend and the Prospects of the Revolution' (written December 1905–January 1906, CW10: 89–92), Lenin envisages the socialist revolution following the '*democratic* revolution' which 'broke the power of the landlords'. Following this, moreover, a 'second victory will be the *socialist revolution in Europe*'. Here 'the Russian proletariat *plus* the European proletariat organise revolution'. 'The European workers will show us "how to do it" and then together with them we shall bring about the socialist revolution' (The Stages, The Trends and the Prospect. . . CW 10: 89–92. All italics in original).

By 1915, Lenin considered that the time was ripe for the Bolsheviks to move to the socialist stage, and he reiterated that a socialist revolution in Russia could only be completed together with the 'proletarians of Europe' (On the Two Lines in the Revolution (Nov 1915) CW21: 419–420). 'For the task [of carrying out the democratic revolution in Russia] our ally is the petty-bourgeois peasantry of Russia; for the task [of moving to the socialist revolution] it is the proletariat of other countries' (Several Theses (October 1915), CW21). Lenin considered that the First World War had had a decisive effect on the political disposition of the Western European working class. It had transformed their subjective consciousness. In 1915, he believed that 'the objective conditions for socialism have fully matured'. 'The imperialist war is ushering in the era of social revolution' (Draft Resolution at Zimmerwald (August 1915) CW21: 347). Later, in reflecting on 'Our Revolution' (written 16 January 1923, CW33: 476–480), he made clear his view that the Russian revolution had been precipitated by the 'imperialist world war'.

Imperialism

Lenin's concept of socialist revolution is informed by an understanding of capitalism in its imperialist form, which entailed a geopolitical shift in the locus of political initiative. Lenin's treatise on imperialism was written only in 1916 and was influenced by Rudolf Hilferding's

Finance Capital (1910) and Nikolai Bukharin's *Imperialism and the World Economy* (1915, with an introduction by Lenin, London: 2003). Lenin defines imperialism as 'capitalism in that stage of development in which the domination of monopoly and finance capital has taken shape; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of the world by international trusts has begun; and in which the partition of all territory of the earth by the greatest capitalist countries has been completed' (*Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (written 1916, published 1917): CW22, Chapter 7). The imperial nature of capitalism and its spread to semi-peripheral countries, like Russia and China, were due to the falling rate of profit in the home countries, to the rise of joint stock companies and to the crucial role of banks as sources of capital and finance. Imperialism presents a higher stage of capitalism than free competition. For Lenin, it increased the frequency and intensity of economic crises. The contradictions of capitalism become international, leading to wars consequent on capitalist competition between countries. While Lenin believed that the monopolisation and financialisation of capitalism would lead to escalating crises others, such as Karl Kautsky and Rudolf Hilferding, considered that they would be stabilising influences on capitalism (see discussion in Anderson, 1995: chapter 5).

One important consequence for these writers was that the revolution of the working class was suspended in the advanced countries for many interdependent reasons. The gains from imperialism counter the tendency of the rate of profit to fall; the rich capitalist countries expand at the expense of the colonised areas, which provide them with cheap materials, markets for commodities and places for capital investment as well as a source of low-wage labour. Imperialism provides a material base for the identification of the Western working class with capitalism and both benefits, if only indirectly, from imperialism. Consequently, revolutionary political conflict moves to the dependent semi-peripheral countries. Lenin and other writers on imperialism were generally correct to highlight these developments. However, he underestimated the importance of trade and investment between the developed capitalist states (Britain, France, Germany, the United States and Japan) and overstated dependence on colonies (See *Imperialism*, CW 22, chapter 8).

Lenin's theory linked empirically the rise of capitalism in a semi-peripheral country (Russia) to the imperialist nature of capitalism and its effects on the class structure of the 'core' and 'semi-peripheral' countries. There were four major implications. First, imperialism exploits the developing countries, which leads concurrently to the development of capitalism in them and increases profits in the home countries. Second, the working class in the advanced countries benefits from the exploitation in the colonies and supports their governments' claims for areas of imperial influence; consequently, social and political attachment by the working class to the imperialist nation-state increases. Third, the class struggle had to be understood in an international perspective. Exploitation on a world scale transcends national boundaries. Lenin's conclusion was that the collapse of the world system of capitalism could occur first at its weakest link. Russia was the paradigmatic case. Fourth, a revolution in Russia, precipitated by the First World War, would be the spark which would lead to the proletarian revolution in the West. The First World War was the crucial development which resolved the apparent inconsistency between the political attitudes described in points two and four above. These four factors provided, for Lenin, the economic foundation and political legitimacy for a socialist revolution in Russia. It is important here to point out that while Marx assumed that the economic contradictions in the advanced capitalist countries would concurrently lead to political contradictions, Lenin recognised that the *political* contradictions would be greatest outside of the hegemonic economic core. However, conscious political intervention was necessary to bring about a socialist revolution, it would not happen spontaneously.

A Political Party of a New Type

Marx and Engels were principally concerned with the historical trajectory, the anatomy and the dynamics of capitalism. The inherent contradictions of capitalism would lead to its collapse concurrent with the rise in class consciousness of the urban working class. The political praxis of the move to socialism, the vehicle of change, was undeveloped in their thinking. As Tom Rockmore puts it, Marx 'provides no sustained account of this political process, no vision other than the generic idea of revolution, of how, when, and through what means the proletariat will wrest control of private property from the capitalist class' (Rockmore, 2018: 193). It was assumed that workers' parties, the social democratic party in particular, would be the instrument of change. It was not that Karl Kautsky (the leader of German social democracy) and other Marxists were simply waiting for capitalism to develop and destroy itself, they contended that the full development of capitalism was necessary to create the conditions for a successful socialist revolution. Of course, the social democratic party had to promote revolutionary socialist measures, but it could only do so within the political practicalities allowed by the level of productive forces. They also emphasised that systemic contradictions within capitalism would be resolved by the socialist party rather than the socialist party 'making' the revolution.

At the centre of Lenin's analysis of society is to be found the two-sided nature of the working class's political outlook. The actual subjective consciousness of the working class is a conditioned consciousness and is not the same as objective class interest. Social democratic consciousness [objective class interest] 'would have to be brought to the workers 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. That is, the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and strive to compel the government to pass necessary legislation, etc. . . The theory of socialism, however', Lenin continues, 'grew out of the philosophical, 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' (*What Is to be Done?* Lenin 1902, CW5. Section on The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social Democrats).

Lenin concluded that there would be no spontaneous socialist revolution; a socialist revolution could only be achieved through the political leadership of social democracy. Controversially, he called for a closed and centralised Party of committed socialists, which would be the instrument to lead the working class. Such a revolutionary party would bring 'consciousness' to the working classes. But how was this to be done in a country with no civil society and closely controlled media of communication? In 1901/1902, when *What Is to be Done?* was written, the social democrats in Russia had to be vigilant to exclude provocateurs and government agents. Party members would have to be carefully vetted. The newspaper was to have a special place in the formation of the socialist revolutionary movement. The role of the newspaper would be to educate the party membership and the wider population, it would also be a mechanism by which the isolated groups of party members and supporters could be brought into a national movement. Lenin came to grips with the ways in which a dominant ideology can capture the masses. The socialist newspaper would articulate and spread a socialist alternative. Moreover, the party adopted the principle of 'democratic centralism' (*What Is to be Done?* Lenin, STET SW1: 200). Democratic centralism reconciled democracy and leadership: it gave members the right to participation in the formation of policy and it gave a decisive role to the leadership to put such policies into effect (A Tactical Platform for the Unity Congress

of the RSDLP (1906), CW10: 163). Lenin's views here have to be contextualised in the process of economic and political conflict in Tsarist Russia.

The vanguard party, both at that time and since, has been widely criticised. Rosa Luxemburg contended that Lenin's ideas would lead to the 'blind subordination . . . of all party organs to the centre' and would restrict the revolutionary potential of the masses (Luxemburg, 1961: 88, 102). Lenin's opposition to 'spontaneity' was that it would divert activity away from significant structural changes to short-term improvements. Uncoordinated strikes and elemental (spontaneous) uprisings would lead to the arrest and removal of leaders (*What Is to be Done?* SW1: 178). Lenin made it clear that the ideas of *What Is to be Done?* had to be read in the context of the time. 'The basic mistake made by those who now criticise *What Is to be Done?* is to treat the pamphlet apart from its connection with the concrete historical situation of a definite, and now long past, period in the development of our Party' (Preface to the *Collection Twelve Years* (September 1907) CW13). Lenin claimed that in the period 1905–1906, when Russia was more open, the Bolsheviks were in practice more democratic than either the Constitutional Democratic Party (the Cadets) or the Socialist Revolutionaries (ibid). In *The State and Revolution* (SW2), there is a vision of popular participation and a high level of democracy. Lenin regarded the Party as 'the vanguard of the proletariat capable of assuming power and of leading the whole people to socialism, of directing and organising the new order, of being teacher, guide, leader of all the working and exploited people in organising their social life without the bourgeoisie and against the bourgeoisie' (SW2: 255). Lenin did not preclude 'autonomy and federation', but he considered that only when socialism had arrived would initiative and inventiveness come from below (Immediate Tasks (March–April 1918) CW27).

Lenin's proposals for developing revolutionary action in the form of an organised, professionally led and centralised party were undoubtedly fitting for a country like Russia governed, until February 1917, by a feudal autocracy. Only a political organisation organised on an all-Russian basis could provide an effective political opposition. Lenin was correct to reject assassination and individual anarchistic acts of violence as a political strategy against the governing powers. He also advocated participation in elections to government bodies, insofar as they existed. The centralisation of organisation and the relatively closed nature of the revolutionary socialist party were also necessary in Tsarist conditions of political control and distinguished the Bolsheviks from other leading European socialist parties, which, although embedded in autocratic societies, were nevertheless more open than in Russia at this time.

Lenin was innovative with respect to the significance of media in his call for an all-Russian newspaper as a channel of political organisation and education. The role of the Party was to provide leadership for the working class and conduct political education. While the centralisation of decision-making was criticised by Lenin's opponents, it was not unlike other late 19th century European socialist parties. Lars T. Lih (2005: 470–474) draws attention to the centralised and bureaucratic nature of the German Social Democratic Party, which became a model for Robert Michels's critique of bureaucratisation (*Political Parties*, 1915, written in 1911). The tendencies in political parties towards bureaucratisation which give power to the leadership at the expense of members were (and are) not limited to the Bolsheviks and we return to this topic below.

Lenin and the October Revolution

These were the theoretical assumptions that led Lenin to believe that social democracy could be a revolutionary force in Russia. The dislocation caused by the First World War exacerbated the existing contradictions in Russia: the contradiction between the ruling autocracy and the bourgeoisie and peasantry; that between the working class and the government and bourgeoisie and that between the masses of the population and the government. The combination of these factors Lenin

regarded as the precipitating conditions for a revolutionary seizure of power. The Bolshevik slogans – Peace, Bread and Land – were not solely socialist in character but expressed popular sentiments quite compatible with a democratic bourgeois revolution. Lenin showed immense courage and political leadership in seizing the moment for armed socialist uprising. As Callinicos has put it, Lenin took responsibility ‘for all the consequences, unpleasant as they may be, of realising his political project’ (Callinicos, 2007: 20) – a successful national revolution. This was his greatest achievement which had global ramifications in the twentieth century.

But he was mistaken to believe that it would break world capitalism. Capitalism experiences crises; it has not collapsed but has continued to expand and grow. Where Lenin erred was in his analysis of the resolution of capitalism’s contradictions in the advanced states. The October Revolution was indeed a spark, but it did not bring fire in the form of reciprocal revolutions in Europe: the uprisings in Germany, Italy and Hungary all failed. The forces of nationalism and levels of social integration into capitalism proved much stronger than Lenin and other European socialists had anticipated before the First World War. Despite the horrors, slaughter and devastation of the war, the West European social democrats still identified with their national governments and relied on reform to undermine capitalism. Lenin underestimated the readiness of the leaders of Western social democratic parties to participate in the war, and he misjudged the likelihood of mobilising the working class against the war (and their own governments).

Lenin believed that appealing over the heads of the leaders of the International to the ‘working masses’ would revive their ‘revolutionary consciousness’ as they carried the ‘burden of the war and in most cases [were] hostile to opportunism and chauvinism’ (The Tasks of Revolutionary Social-democracy in the European War (6 September 1914) CW21: 15–19 (thesis 7)). In October 1920, in the Report to the Central Committee at the Ninth All-Russian Conference of the Communist Party, he reiterated his belief that ‘in Germany and England we have created a new zone of the proletarian revolution against worldwide imperialism’ (Document 59, Reprinted in Pipes, 1996: 100). He contended that the ‘English proletariat has raised itself to an entirely new revolutionary level’; and he was confident that Britain would fall to the ‘English Bolsheviks’ (Pipes, 1996: 104, 105–106). In April 1920, he had ‘no doubt’ that workers in Britain would carry out a ‘proletarian revolution’ (‘Left-Wing’ Communism, CW31: 17–118, Section on ‘Left-wing’ communism in Great Britain). Here was one of Lenin’s most fundamental mistakes: he grossly misjudged the political and social relationships between classes and national/patriotic sentiments in the developed European capitalist states. He had a tendency to dismiss or underestimate developments of which he disapproved which led to misunderstanding the extent to which the working class in Western Europe had been assimilated into, and benefitted from, capitalism. He often adopted a one-sided one-dimensional approach and ridiculed his opponents who were ‘opportunistic and spineless’, Kautsky was a ‘renegade’, his socialist opponents were ‘associates in banditry’, the British Independent Labour Party was engaged in ‘treachery and betrayal’ (‘*Left wing*’ Communism: *An Infantile Disorder* (April–May 1920), CW31: 17–118. Chapter on, ‘The struggle against which enemies. . .’). Many of his opponents, however, were the popular leaders of Western social democratic parties, which had a large following among the working class. Lenin’s single-mindedness precluded making alliances with possible allies and after seizing power in October 1917 he broke with the socialist revolutionaries (the party of the peasantry) and the Mensheviks.

Lenin assumed that a revolutionary seizure of power in dependent countries, such as Russia, would deepen contradictions in the imperialist countries where socialist revolutions would follow. Despite systemic economic crises, capitalist societies have maintained high levels of social and political integration. In the early 20th century, the Western working classes remained integrated into capitalist society and this attachment was neither broken by the suffering endured during the First World War nor by the victory of the Bolsheviks in Russia. The predisposition of the English

working class was for the improvement of conditions; the crises of war, economic recession and the Bolshevik seizure of power did not establish a socialist consciousness. Lenin's understanding of the Western working class was incomplete and he grossly misjudged the preconditions for socialist revolutions in Western Europe on which the fulfilment of a socialist revolution in Russia was predicated. In the absence of anticipated revolutions in the West, a socialist revolution in October 1917, in terms of Marxist understanding, was premature. Consequently, the October Revolution was a significant regional event which had crucial impacts in the countries of the dependent colonial periphery, but it did not have the revolutionary geopolitical consequences that Lenin predicted. Both at a theoretical level and in terms of political action, major divisions of opinion have arisen on the validity of Lenin's analysis.

The Dilemma of the Transition to Socialism

Following the successful seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in October 1917, the Soviet government consequently was faced with the dilemma of building socialism under conditions unanticipated by Lenin. Revolutions have to be evaluated not only by the intentions of their leaders and their initial success in attaining power but also by the extent to which their objectives are achieved. The crux of the dilemma after 1917 was that economically, politically and culturally Russia did not have the preconditions to introduce socialism. Lenin was aware that Russia was well behind the standards of 'an ordinary West-European civilised country' and its peoples suffered from 'semi-Asiatic ignorance . . .' (Lenin, Pages from a Diary, 15 December 1922, CW33: 463). The Bolshevik government, to maintain itself in power, had to confront the accumulated problems of the Tsarist regime: undeveloped capitalism, a disenfranchised bourgeoisie, a discontented peasantry, the destabilising economic effects of the First World War, which exacerbated the supply of food and materials, and opposition by foreign powers (blockade, military intervention). Under these circumstances, the 'dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry' became much more, and lasted longer, than what one might expect of a transitional form of power. It became, as Michael Brie has put it, 'an instance decoupled from the will of the members of the proletariat and their actions' (Brie, 2019: 123).

The Bolshevik government had a legitimacy deficit. In the elections to the Constituent Assembly in November 1917, the Bolsheviks received only 25% of the vote (9.02 million) compared to 62% (22.62 million), which was obtained by the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, the Cadets polled only 1.87 million votes (See The Constituent Assembly Elections and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat CW:30: 253–275, election results p. 253). Lenin correctly interpreted the results as showing that the Bolsheviks had greater support than the Socialist Revolutionaries in the major working-class areas as well as among the troops in Petrograd and Moscow, but the Bolsheviks did not command an overall majority of the electorate in any of Russia's electoral regions. The urban working class constituted a powerful minority with a significant demographic mass, thus making a seizure of power a realistic possibility. But it was not the universal class defined by Marxists as the bearer of socialism.

After the receipt of land redistributed under the Bolshevik government (Lenin had adopted the programme of the Socialist Revolutionaries), the middle peasants withdrew support from the Bolshevik government. The reality of the transitional period after October 1917 was one of civil war. Rather than being a relatively short transitional period, as anticipated by Marx and Engels, in which the working class had to repress counter-revolution, the Bolsheviks to maintain themselves in power exercised a 'dictatorship of the proletariat and poor peasantry' which reestablished some of the political practices of the Tsarist autocracy. The formulation of a 'Leninist' ideology legitimated a one-party state defining internal and external enemies, and promoting a state-led policy of industrialisation and modernisation.

From Lenin's point of view, developments in the workers' movement in Western Europe were depressing. In his final written document, he referred to the blunting of class consciousness as a 'class truce' in Western European countries (Better Fewer, But better, CW33). He did not, however, recognise the October Revolution as a failure. The future lay to the East,¹ in the semi-periphery. The situation in Europe in 1917 'offered us the opportunity to create the fundamental requisites of civilisation in a different way from that of the Western European countries' (Our Revolution (written 16 January 1923) CW33: 476–80). The East, he argued, has been 'definitely drawn' into the 'world revolutionary movement', passing into a period 'that must give rise to a world socialist revolution'. This was Lenin's vision. The 'outcome of the struggle will be determined by the fact that Russia, India, China, etc., account for the overwhelming majority of the population of the globe. And during the past few years, it is this majority that has been drawn into the struggle for emancipation with extraordinary rapidity, so that in this respect there cannot be the slightest doubt what the final outcome of the world struggle will be. In this sense, the complete victory of socialism is fully and absolutely assured' (Better Fewer, But Better. CW33: 487–502. 2 March 1922). Soviet economic and political development became a model, a beacon, for socialist and people's parties of liberation in Asia and Africa.

Lenin's worldview shifted the revolutionary socialist struggle to the semi-peripheral countries of the East. In the Political Report to the Ninth All-Russian Conference of the Communist Party on 20 September 1920, he pointed out that, when account is taken of the population of the colonial areas, 'seven-tenths of the [world] population, given a correct policy, would back Soviet Russia' (See Pipes, Document 59: 103). He anticipated revolution spreading to oriental countries such as China. '[S]ubsequent revolutions in Oriental countries, which possess much vaster populations in a much vaster diversity of social conditions, will undoubtedly display even greater distinctions than the Russian Revolution' (Our Revolution (16/17 January 1923) CW33: 476–480). In this respect, Lenin was correct: the October Revolution inspired political and social change in the East, including not only socialist revolutions but also anticolonial nationalist liberation movements, which broke away from the tutelage of the Western capitalist countries. Concurrently, however, Lenin had misjudged the position in the hegemonic countries, where strikes, demonstrations and risings took place, but attempted revolutions failed.

If we evaluate the aftermath of the October Revolution from the standpoint of economic and social development, policies have had considerable success. All the societies in which Communist parties have come to power have secured economic advance without a capitalist class and market relations. The Soviet Union, under the leadership of the Communist Party, constructed an urban-industrial society, and advances were made in the development of the productive forces. The communist societies, through central economic planning, utilised economic surplus for industrial and social development and secured high levels of employment, and comprehensive provision of education and health; the working classes gained considerably from these developments. The policy of *korenizatsiya* prioritised the inclusion of the peoples of the republics and regions of the USSR in leading positions. In the cultural sphere, a secular civilisation was built – there was no place for God or religion. The Bolsheviks when in power developed a Soviet modernising social formation – a planned economy operating without either markets or a capitalist class and providing a full-employment welfare state – a form of economy qualitatively different from, and an alternative in many ways superior to, capitalism. They promoted a successful cultural scientific revolution. Consequently, the Soviet form of socialism became a beacon for rising post-colonial states. It did not, however, defeat capitalism as a world system.

The success of the October Revolution in Russia in 1917 shifted the focus of the transition to socialism from the advanced Western countries to the dependent countries of the semi-periphery. Lenin's analysis of the differentiation of the peasantry and its inclusion in the socialist

revolutionary movement has been followed in Asian countries, notably, with great success in China led by Mao Zedong. Socialist parties were now charged with playing a leading role not only in the transition from capitalism to socialism but also in the national–liberation movements to shape the transition from the post-feudal semi-periphery to capitalism, often with a large public sector. Stalin stipulated that Leninism was applicable not only to Russia but to all international socialist developments (Stalin, 1939: 9–19). In the advanced economies, however, Leninism had little success and, by the beginning of the 21st century, the East European socialist countries and the USSR had dismantled their planned economies, rejected the communist political order and returned to the capitalist world system. Lenin had been overturned.

‘Reinventing’ Lenin?

How do we respond to Slavoj Žižek’s call ‘to return to Lenin’ to ‘reinvent’ the Leninist ‘revolutionary project’? To ‘reinvent’ his project one has to avoid reconstructing the steam engine when technology already has produced jet engines. We should not dwell on whether Lenin’s policies and tactics can be further ‘applied’ to solve contemporary political problems. Lenin in 1905 cautioned against ‘blindly’ copying the activities of the Paris Commune (*The Paris Commune and the Tasks of the Democratic Dictatorship*, CW9: 141). The question to be answered here is whether or not there is anything in Lenin’s theoretical and practical approach that can be updated, that can contribute to political strategy and politics. The intellectual, political, economic and social structures of world capitalism today are far removed from the mainly agrarian countries of Eastern Europe and Asia in which Lenin’s theory and approach were rooted. Moreover, in the light of these developments, we need to address what has to be modified, and rejected, in Lenin’s approach. His own opinion was that ‘new views’ should be substituted for old when the latter are no longer true (*What Is to be Done?* SW1: 97). His prognoses and policies are not exempt from the lessons of history and have to take into account the intellectual and social developments under global capitalism.

Lenin addressed the evolution of capitalism in an historical context as an evolving mode of production; he sought to define the social forces propelling political change and the role of human action. One should distinguish between what is fundamental to his approach from specific policy applicable to particular historical and geographical circumstances. Account has to be taken of the successes and failures of over seventy years of Communist Party rule in the Soviet Union as well as the experience of the Communist Party-led government in China. By the late 20th century, transnational capitalism had overturned, from within and without, the Soviet Union as well as the East European socialist states. Lenin’s vision of socialism for Russia has been destroyed. The institutions forming the basis of the USSR no longer exist. These developments cast in doubt the Leninist assumption that societies could transit to communism without passing through the capitalist mode of production (or whether such a transition is possible at all). Leninist ideology has been discredited. How far do these fundamental reversals nullify Lenin’s theories, strategy and practice?

Lenin’s instrument of transformation, the Party, was initially devised as the political instrument to challenge and replace the Russian autocracy. The centralised political party of a ‘new type’ can no longer achieve power in the way anticipated by Lenin. The conjuncture of world war, internal political and economic collapse in a geopolitical vacuum is unlikely to be repeated in the same way as in October 1917. Even a successful socialist seizure of power in one state would not defeat globalised capitalism as the utilisation of soft power (civilisational values) and hard power (military invasion, economic sanctions) make sustaining the consequences of a socialist revolution, on the lines of the October Revolution, all but impossible. Ironically, perhaps, a Leninist form of political organisation has been adapted by ‘coloured revolution’ movements in the former socialist states of Eastern Europe to promote revolutionary coups d’état (Lane, 2008).

After 1917, democratic centralism governed the processes of economic development and modernisation. As originally formulated democratic centralism was a form for reconciling the need for centralised organisation and popular participation. As Lars Lih has pointed out (see above), it was also the formula for European social democratic parties in the late 19th century. In practice, in the conditions of pre-revolutionary Russia and the Party's illegality, the leadership had considerable power. In Soviet Russia, unintended by Lenin, the political forms of Tsarist Russia were reconstituted and centralism prevailed. Moreover, in the Soviet period of transformation, the Party attempted to orchestrate the activities of all organisations and associations and effectively reduced the level of personal freedom. This widespread application (whether Lenin's intention or not) has to be rejected as unacceptable in the pluralistic cultures of Western society.

Moreover, Lenin's theory of organisation did not anticipate the power of bureaucratic position. Lenin advocated the benefits of specialisation, hierarchy, professionalism and administration under socialism. These forms have been denounced by the European left as noted by Callinicos (2007) and Hardt and Negri (2017: chapter 16). Lenin saw 'bureaucracy' as a 'dysfunction' in the popular sense caused by the wrong people being in command, or by pig-headedness, lack of education and other such traits inherited from the Tsarist order. As Lenin put it, 'defects are rooted in the past', workers 'lack culture'. He relied on raising levels of education and culture and also on learning from Western countries to improve the state apparatus (Better Fewer, But Better. 2 March 1923; CW33: 487–502). He followed the Marxist analysis of emphasising economic exploitation derived from the ownership of the means of production, rather than from administrative position giving bureaucratic power of control (another form of political domination). But the concurrence of democratic centralism and the inherited Tsarist autocratic structures led to a vast bureaucratic machine. Lenin relied excessively on an assessment of power based on economic exploitation and the class relationships to which it gives rise. The experience of the European state socialist societies shows that economic exploitation is not the only form of domination. Lenin needs to be revised not only by analysis of the ways in which economic exploitation takes place but also in the context of bureaucracy, personal authority, patriarchy, ethnicity and credentialism which create their own distinctive forms of power relations. These issues did not wither away in the socialist states modelled on the USSR. The democratic components of democratic centralism, as a means to control political power, have to be 'reinvented'. The extent of state power has also to be addressed, and space is necessary in civil society for associations and organisations to exist autonomously.

Lenin's political strategy was to break the weakest links in the capitalist chain. In the early 20th century, capturing state power was a feasible and practical political objective and the vanguard party here had a vital role. But the weakest link in the capitalist chain, broken in 1917 to form a new autonomous socialist 'link' in the Soviet Union, has been re-forged – Russia is back in the capitalist loop. Imperialist capitalism should not be likened to a continuous chain with weak and strong links. Global capitalism is a large tree: cutting off new thin and old decayed branches does not kill it, but even stimulates growth. By the late 20th century, the trunk had grown stronger. In the 21st century, the transnational character of economic, commercial and media corporations and political/military organisations severely limits the sovereignty of states. A socialist alternative to be effective has to be organised on a multinational scale. Any revision of Lenin has to address what holds contemporary global chains together. Reinventing Lenin calls for a strategy to break the strongest links in the capitalist chain.

In the 21st century, Lenin's vanguard party has no appeal in the advanced societies. It has to be replaced by different kinds of instruments and strategies and/or applied in a significantly different way. Karl Kautsky (1909) suggested in *The Road to Power* that to achieve socialism a revolutionary party is necessary, but it was not to be in the form of a 'revolution-making' party as proposed by Lenin. He envisioned a more organic metamorphosis of the transition from capitalism to socialism.

The conditions for revolution, he contended, 'are being constantly created by the development of the capitalist methods of production and the class struggle between capitalists and laborers growing therefrom. So it is that just as the continuous expansion of capitalism necessarily and inevitably goes on, so the inevitable antithesis to this expansion, the proletarian revolution, proceeds equally inevitably and irresistibly' (Kautsky, 1909: chapter on The Conquest of Political Power).

What would be a Leninist strategy in the 21st century in the developed core of the world capitalist system? Lenin addressed the problem when (in discussing Britain in 1920) he said: 'The fundamental law of revolution, which has been confirmed by all revolutions and especially by all three Russian revolutions in the twentieth century, is as follows: It is only when the "lower classes" *do not want* to live in the old way and the "upper classes" *cannot carry on in the old way* that the revolution can triumph' (Italics in the original. *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* CW31: Chapter on 'Left-Wing' Communism in Great Britain). In a geopolitical context, capitalism has not dug its own grave: the ruling classes have not only been able to manage the adverse effects of competitive capitalism but also concurrently continue to entrench themselves and project their power. Since the early 20th century, capitalism has suffered regular economic crises, but there has been no surrender by the governing classes: the hegemonic power of the West, particularly the United States, has matured; the post-socialist societies of Eastern Europe and the USSR have rejoined the capitalist world economic system.

As to the 'lower classes', in his last article, 'Better Fewer, But Better' (CW33: 487–502, 2 March 1923), Lenin referred to the 'class truce' in the advanced capitalist states. The last 100 years has witnessed the movement from a 'class truce' to a class peace. The reasons for this cannot be considered here. They include ideological and coercive measures by the ruling classes: direct military and police oppression (including regime change); indirect containment of competing forces through law and media (the 'third face' of power); faulty leadership of countervailing movements and parties; and significant improvements in material and cultural living standards – a consequence of the continual development of the level of productive forces. The 'lower classes' have not rejected capitalism but have sought to enjoy it.

Critical social movements currently seek social equality within the boundaries of a capitalist system. Revolutionary and reformist social democratic movements have dwindled in membership and influence. Identity and cultural politics have replaced class politics. But dissident movements such as 'Occupy Wall Street', 'White Supremacy', 'Black Lives Matter', 'Extinction Rebellion' lack a sociologically informed vision comparable to historical materialism. These are boats with very large rhetorical sails and light theoretical ballast. Lenin acknowledged and supported the emancipation of dependent and underprivileged nations and groups within states, such as in Ireland (before partition) and the former slave population in the United States; he saw such movements as part of the process of democratic liberation (See Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions, CW31: 144–151). The demands for civil rights and justice by contemporary social movements are not calls for the installation of socialism but for a more acceptable liberal democratic version of capitalism: a 'leftist' critique, not a socialist one. There is no vision of living in a new post-capitalist way.

Renewing Lenin?

The first renewal of Lenin would be to reinvent class politics. Lenin would rise above the current emphasis on identity politics which promote the rights of minority and marginalised groups. The focus of cultural and income inequalities between people would move to inequities between classes. Such an approach would include an analysis of countervailing forces and class alliances, taking account of the different and often conflicting interests of the creatariat, the self-employed, industrial workers, service employees, employees in the public and private sectors, military and

security personnel, the precariat and the under- and un-employed. A second revision of Lenin lies in taking account of the territorial re-division of class space by adopting a geopolitical frame of reference. No longer are the dominant classes located in single nation states, ruling classes are transnational. The character of the working classes is also stratified by geographical area. The third challenge is to reinvent ways to change people's political dispositions (consciousness) to shift away from cultural identity politics to renew socialist ideas. Electronic social media are the equivalent of the early 20th century newspaper.

If we 'return' to Lenin then the nature of the transition to socialism must be revised. The current economic and political preconditions of the economically advanced countries lead us to contemplate whether cumulative socialist reforms can lead to revolutionary change. As Lenin pointed out in 1921: 'The greatest, perhaps the only danger to the genuine revolutionary is that of exaggerated revolutionism, ignoring the limits and conditions in which revolutionary methods are appropriate and can be successfully employed' (*The Importance of Gold Now and after the Complete Victory of Socialism*, 5 November 1921, CW33: 109–116, quote p. 109). Global interdependence calls for an analysis of the contradictions of an increasingly coordinated global capitalism with strongly integrated economic, media, ideological and political elites. On the one side, the transnational coordination of capitalism – by corporations, international Bretton Woods type institutions, and a dominant transnational capitalist class – supersedes the imperialist national forms of competitive monopoly capitalism. On the other, the re-territorialisation and greater differentiation of the working classes severely weaken the development of class consciousness in countries of the economic and political core. Over a hundred years ago, Lenin addressed what is now the wrong question: the problem is not how to break capitalism at its weakest link but how it might be transformed at its strongest links, where it is most highly developed.

The political mechanism of democratic parliamentary struggles and a piecemeal democratic transition to socialism have to be addressed. Already in 1909, Kautsky presented an alternative position to Lenin. He contended that socialism could only be obtained through a revolution. But he argued that the military force of the ruling classes would 'doom the revolution [in the sense of a seizure of state power] to failure'. Today one might add to military force the political and economic consensus of the ruling elites. Kautsky saw the means of revolutionary change to come from 'economic, political and moral resistance', from a fundamental change in the nature of the capitalist system (Kautsky, 1909: chapter V). He agreed that socialism is not possible within a capitalist democracy. But he condemned Lenin's proposals for the introduction of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Democracy and dictatorship, he contended, are 'irreconcilable' (Kautsky, 1918: 4). The goal of socialism is 'the abolition of every kind of exploitation and oppression, be it directed against a class, a party, a sex or a race' (p. 5). The dictatorship of the proletariat 'is not only thoroughly false, it is in the highest degree destructive. If generally accepted, it would paralyse the propaganda strength of our party to the outmost, for. . . the entire German [and] the whole proletariat of the world [are] attached to the principle of general democracy. The proletariat would angrily repudiate every thought of beginning this rule [i.e. of a proletarian dictatorship] with a new privileged class and a new disenfranchised class. It would repudiate every suggestion of coupling its demand for general rights for the whole people with a mental reservation, and in reality only strive for privileges for itself. And not less would it repudiate the comic insinuation of solemnly declaring now that its demand for democracy is a mere deceit' (Kautsky, 1918: 112).

Democratic procedures have become universally accepted and entrenched since Kautsky's time. The Chinese Communist leadership has moved forward: on 29 September 1949, it was declared that the 'People's Republic of China is a New Democratic or a People's Democratic State' (Common Programme of the Chinese Political Consultative Conference). Lenin's idea of advancing to socialism through the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' led by the vanguard party has no resonance in the

advanced capitalist societies of the 21st century. The class groupings, economic and political structures and cultural levels are totally different from those of Russia in 1919. On such a stage, the transition to socialism takes place under quite different and more challenging conditions than those known to Lenin. To avoid the complete collapse of the economic system, any move to socialism would require a recognition that many of the economic institutions of capitalism will have to continue during the transitional period (Brie, 2019). One has to avoid a situation in which the costs of transition greatly outweigh the expected benefits. However, capitalism will not spontaneously collapse, socialist parties have to formulate policies to transcend capitalism in order to achieve socialism. A revision of Lenin calls for a sociology of global capitalism and a geopolitics of international conflict. In this context, what has to be reinvented is a political strategy of class alliances and political policies to win the battle for socialist democracy on a transnational scale. As Kautsky has contended, democracy can exist without socialism, but socialism cannot succeed without democracy (Kautsky, 1918: 7).

Lenin's relevance today is to be found in his method of analysis of class forces and alliances as movers of social change, in the role of media to influence and change people's political awareness, and in the territorial divisions of classes. His theories on the role of the party and the dictatorship of the proletariat have to be replaced. Under capitalism, state apparatuses continue to employ institutions of coercion but equally important are the ideological apparatuses of socialisation. Lenin needs to be revised to consider a much wider set of dominant institutions: the ideological apparatuses of the state, the mass media and the educational system (the universities, and institutions promoting economic, political and social policy). Lenin had a conviction, born of the Enlightenment, that human action could bring progress and lead to a fully democratic socialist society without human exploitation. This is a vision which has been lost. A 'return to Lenin' is not to adopt his policies but to renew his sociological vision derived from the expectations of the Enlightenment and Marx's prescient analysis of capitalism.

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Note

1. By 'East', he did not mean a geographical area but a geopolitical contrast to the 'West' – colonial countries in the semi-periphery.

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