

# Lenin Reads Marx on Socialism

## A Brief Note

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What Lenin presents as socialism is far removed from what Marx meant by it. Lenin's "socialism" is really state capitalism.

Socialism as a theoretical category rarely appears in Lenin's work before 1917. Four years earlier, in an encyclopaedia article on Karl Marx, he had a section on "socialism". However, his image of socialism is laid bare in his speeches and writings mainly between April and October 1917, most of all in his *State and Revolution*. It is on the basis of the relevant writings of Marx (and Engels) that Lenin professedly proceeded to depict his image of socialism and the conditions for its advent. In what follows we are going to try to find out what Lenin got out of his reading of Marx (and Engels) on socialism.

### On the Paris Commune

An important part of Lenin's reading of Marx on socialism concerns his reading of Marx's writings on the 1871 Paris Commune. He denounced the so-called "revisionists" like Kautsky and Plekhanov, among others, for having forgotten or perverted Marx's teaching on the Commune. He did not refer to any of their specific texts on how these "revisionists" had read Marx on the Commune. On the eve of his party's seizure of power in 1917 Lenin wrote:

Marx basing himself on the experience of the Paris Commune, taught that the proletariat cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state-machine for its own purposes, that the proletariat must smash this machine and substitute a new one for it. This new state machine was created by the Paris Commune (emphasis ours).

Let us see what Marx had exactly said in this respect. In his *Civil War in France* (Section III) Marx wrote: "The working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes", and in his letter to Kugelmann he wrote:

If you look at the last chapter of my *Eighteenth Brumaire* you will find that I declare that the

next attempt of the French Revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another, but to *smash* it, and this is the preliminary condition of every real people's revolution on the Continent.

These lines were fully cited by Lenin in his *State and Revolution* written little more than a month earlier than his text cited above. In the same year, even earlier, Lenin had stated: "our attitude towards the state and our demand (is) for a 'commune state', that is a state of which Paris commune was the prototype". Referring to this type of state, Lenin asserted that "Marx described (this) as the 'political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour'."

It appears that Lenin correctly reproduced most of the things that Marx had said; however, he added things attributing to Marx which Marx had never said or written. And to that extent Lenin *revised* Marx in the specific sense in which he used the term against the "revisionists". Let us have a closer look at Marx's texts. In the very first quotation from Lenin, compared with the two texts from Marx given above, the italicised words in the Lenin quotation do not appear in either of the Marx texts quoted above. Secondly, Marx nowhere considers the Commune to be a new form of *state* which replaced the old state. Thus in the first outline of the *Civil War in France* Marx speaks of "displacing the state machinery, the governmental machinery of the ruling classes by a governmental machinery of their own" [that is of the communards, *pc*]. So it is the governmental, and not state machinery in the case of the communards. Throughout his work on the Commune Marx speaks of the government or the administration in regard to the communards, not in terms of state. The two terms obviously do not mean the same thing. What we are saying is confirmed by what Marx himself wrote in the very same "First Outline" where he emphasised that the Parisian revolution "was a Revolution not against this or that form of state power. It was a revolution against the *State* itself, of this supernaturalist abortion of society" (emphasis in text).

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Again, Marx's phrase, correctly cited by Lenin, "the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour" appears in Marx's discourse on the *Civil War in France* (Section III) as the last words of a sentence where there is no mention of state, or of a "commune state" (Lenin's expression) at all. Thus the sentence in question in full is (referring to the Commune):

It was essentially a working class government, the produce of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour.

And the term "commune-state" is Lenin's own and nowhere appears in Marx's texts (including the drafts) on the Commune.

Lenin, on the whole, correctly summed up the central features of the Commune: (1) the source of power was the initiative from below, (2) replacement of the police and the army by the direct arming of the whole people, (3) bureaucracy replaced by direct rule of the people themselves through elected officials subject to recall. And he denounced, as mentioned earlier, people like Plekhanov and Kautsky for having "forgotten or perverted this *essence* of the Paris Commune" (emphasis in text). Now, there is an irony in Lenin's position. Plekhanovs and Kautskys might have forgotten and perverted the three-dimensional essence of the Commune. However, their "betrayal" remained within the confines of their own discourses as a verbal exercise. But never having gained political power, they could not in the field of practice/action cause any extensive damage to the revolutionary movement. The case is very different with Lenin.

### Lenin in Action

Here one has the opportunity to see Lenin in action – what did he do *after* gaining power in light of what he had said about the "essence" of the Commune shortly before coming to power. To what extent did he implement the three features of the Commune? The fact is, almost immediately after the seizure of power, the Leninist vision of the Commune completely evaporated. He had to admit not long before his death that the Bolsheviks

effectively took over the old state apparatus, which was a "misfortune".

Indeed, instead of all officials being elected and subject to recall, the body of officials, all party nominees, hierarchically organised, increased in gigantic strides. Similarly, there arose a special police apparatus of which the core – the security police – grew by hundreds of thousands by 1921. As regards the army, with the creation of the Red Army the principle of election of officers was abolished, the rights of soldiers' committees were clipped, and the erstwhile tsarist officers were placed in responsible positions in increasing numbers. As regards the source of power, whatever the support – initially massive – of the Russian working people for the Bolshevik power, it was certainly not the source of that power in the same sense that it was for the Commune. Here is Marx on this question:

That the Revolution is made *in the name* of and confessedly *for* the popular masses is a feature this Revolution has in common with all its predecessors. The new feature is that the people, after the first rise, have not disarmed themselves and surrendered their power...that they have taken the actual management of their Revolution into their own hands ("First Outline", emphasis in original).

It was in fact the opposite in the Russian case. It may not be out of place to recall that in a 1921 polemic with Trotsky one of the "revisionists", Kautsky, supposed to have betrayed the Commune, returned the compliment:

The Commune and Marx prescribed the abolition of the old army and its replacement by a militia. The soviet government started by dissolving the old army. But it has created the red army, a permanent army the strongest in Europe. The Commune and Marx prescribed the dissolution of the State police. The soviet republic limited itself to the dissolution of the old police in order to create the police apparatus of the Tcheka, a political police, provided with more power, more unlimited and more discretionary than those of the French Bonapartism and the Russian Tsars. The Commune and Marx prescribed the substitution of the old state bureaucracy with the administrators elected by the people by universal suffrage. The soviet republic has destroyed the old Tsarist bureaucracy, but in its place has installed a new bureaucracy equally centralised and disposing of powers more extensive than the precedent ("From Democracy to State Slavery" free translation from the German).

In October 1917, the fate of over 170 million people was decided by a handful of non-proletarian individuals – far removed from the real process of production and exploitation and not subject to free election and recall by the labouring people. Through the substitution of a whole class by a single party, power was seized – under the slogan "all power to the soviets" – not from the provisional government but really from the soviets themselves, the authentic organs of labouring people's self-rule created by the self-emancipatory countrywide spontaneous popular uprising in February. Content-wise a bourgeois democratic revolution in process, the February uprising, given its spontaneous mass character, had, it seems, the potential to go over, at a later phase – given appropriate material conditions – to an authentic socialist revolution, in Marx's sense, if the labouring masses had been allowed unfettered freedom to continue, through their self-administering organs, their march forward. The Bolsheviks, putting a brake on the process, destroyed this great possibility, the greatest in the 20th century.

This pre-emptive strike was perpetrated independently of and behind the back of the Congress of Soviets depriving, by this singular operation, the Congress of the right of maternity regarding the founding act of the new order. A great authority on the soviets writes:

The usurpation of power on the eve of the meeting of the highest soviet organ signified at the same time the break of the Bolsheviks with soviet democracy. On the day of their highest triumph began the deprivation of the power of the soviets (Oskar Anweiler, "The Council Movement in Russia, 1905-1921", 1958, in German).

An eminent American historian wrote:

'All power to the soviets' appeared to be a reality on the 26th of October, 1917, but it was mostly power to the Bolsheviks in those soviets....The whole system of soviets and executive committees was reduced to an administrative and propaganda auxiliary of the party...Deprived of power in the soviets and in the factories the Russian proletariat.. found that the triumph of the dictatorship in its name was a very hollow victory (R Daniels, "The Red October", 1967).

Following a process of radioactive decay, the soviets as the *independent organs of self-rule* virtually evaporated

beginning with the summer of 1918. There was also another important set of workers' self-governing organs created in workplaces before October 1917: factory committees with their own soviets (M Ferro, "From Soviets to Bureaucratic Communism", 1980, in French). After having seized power from the Congress of Soviets, the Bolsheviks turned their eyes to the factory committees who were exercising workers' democracy in their workplaces and asserting control over the management. "The Bolsheviks saw for the first time the danger of radical democracy confronting them, following literally Lenin's words on the sovereignty of the soviets" (Anweiler op cit). The Bolsheviks now asked the trade unions where they had a majority to help them subdue these self-governing organs of the workers. The trade unions obliged by simply annexing them as their lowest level (J Bunyan and H Fisher, "The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1918: Documents and Materials", 1934).

Let us add that from this point there is only a straight line that leads to the mass massacre of the Kronstadt toilers and sailors – under completely false charges as admitted by Lenin himself at the tenth congress of the Party – by the Bolsheviks. In his book, meticulously researched, *Kronstadt* (1983), the eminent Israeli historian Israel Getzler wrote:

The Kronstadters' attempt to solve the problems of power and democracy which bedevilled Russia in the 1917 revolution produced a bustling, self-governing, egalitarian and highly politicised Soviet democracy, the like of which had not been seen in Europe since the days of the Paris Commune.

### Interpreting Marx Again

Coming back to Lenin's reading of Marx on socialism, the most innovative part of this reading concerned Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1875. Regarding this work's two phase temporal division of communist society into a lower and a higher phase, Lenin called the first one "socialism" and the second one "communism". He did not seem to have invented this "nomenclature". But he is the one whose use of these terms was accepted and widely used first by the international communist movement and then even by the anti-Marxists all over the world. For

Lenin there are two transitions, one from capitalism to socialism, and another from socialism to communism.

Now, it so happens that Marx considered socialism meaning exactly the same thing as communism, simply as an alternative, equivalent term, like "Republic of Labour", a "society of free and equal individuals", "cooperative society" "(Re) union of free individuals", "Association of free individuals" or simply "Association" (most frequently used) – based on the "Associated mode of production" (AMP) as opposed to the capitalist mode of production (CMP). Particularly, there are at least three texts spread over four places in Marx's work where he only mentions "socialism" as the society after capital and does not speak even once of "communism". And it is known that he speaks of only one society after capital bearing any of those names given above (mostly "Association").

Thus in an 1844 polemic (against Ruge) Marx writes:

Generally a revolution – overthrow of the existing power and the dissolution of the old relations – is a political act. Without revolution socialism cannot be viable. It needs this political act to the extent that it needs destruction and dissolution. However, where its organising activity begins, where its aim and soul stand out, socialism throws away its political cover.

The second and the third texts are almost identical, appearing – in Marx's own English – respectively in his 1861-63 notebooks (second notebook among 33) and in the so-called "main manuscript" for *Capital III*. Here is the 1861-63 text (without any alteration):

Capitalist production...is a greater spendthrift than any other mode of production of man, of living labour, spendthrift not only of flesh and blood and muscles, but of brains and nerves. It is, in fact, at the greatest waste of individual development that the development of general men is secured in those epochs of history which prelude to a socialist constitution of mankind.

This text is repeated almost word for word in the "main manuscript" for the third volume of *Capital*. In his edition of the manuscript, published as *Capital III*, Engels translates this passage into German, but not quite literally. Finally, in the course of correcting and improving the text of a book by a worker (Johann

Most), meant for popularising *Capital*, Marx inserted:

The capitalist mode of production is really a transitional form which by its own organism must lead to a higher, to a co-operative mode of production, to socialism (1876).

This was just one year after his *Gothacritique*. As regards socialism being the transition to communism, Marx nowhere says this. For Marx this distinction is non-existent. For him socialism is neither the transition to communism, nor the lower phase of communism. As we just saw, it is communism tout court. In fact Marx calls capitalism itself the "transitional point" or "transitional phase" to communism. Socialism and communism being identical, one could as well speak of the lower and the higher phases of socialism.

The Leninist distinction between socialism and communism, although apparently merely terminological and innocent looking, had far-reaching consequences which were far from innocent and far from what Lenin himself presumably might have anticipated. It became a convenient instrument for legitimising and justifying every oppressive and repressive act of the Party-States from 1917 onwards in the name of socialism, which, it was maintained, was only a transitional phase towards communism, thus shelving all the vital aspects of Marx's immense emancipatory project to the Greek calends, thereby metamorphosing Marx's project of communist society into an unalloyed utopia never to be realised.

### Socialism in Juridical Terms

Lenin speaks of socialism basically in juridical terms, not in terms of a complex of social relations of production. For him socialism is "social ownership" of the means of production which he further specifies as "ownership by the working class state". Of course, Marx also speaks of the ownership of the means of production in the new society as "social" where society itself and not the state – which is absent from the new society – is the owner, but for Lenin it is the working class state which is the new owner. Here Lenin has successfully stood Marx on his head. For Marx socialism – even in Lenin's revised sense of the first phase of

communism – is already a *classless* society, a “union of free individuals” coming into existence after the working class along with the last form of state – the dictatorship of the proletariat – has vanished. The proletariat (wage labourers) have been transformed into simple producers as free individuals, and it is their society (the collectivity of free individuals) – and not any state – which possesses the means of production.

Lenin speaks not only of the working-class state but also of what he considers to be its equivalent, the “socialist state”. Needless to say, this last expression is nowhere to be found in Marx. Earlier we referred to Marx’s texts showing that there can be no state in socialism. Lenin tries to smuggle “state” into Marx’s text of the *Gothacritique* by brazenly revising it. This he does by connecting two independent ideas in two analytically separate places of Marx’s text: Marx’s discussion of the continuation of “bourgeois right” in the first phase of communism and Marx’s speculation about the future of the “present day functions of the state”. Lenin emphasises the need for

the existence of the “bourgeois state” to enforce “bourgeois right” in the first phase of the new society.

His logic is baffling. For Marx this first phase is inaugurated after the disappearance of the proletarian rule – the last form of state. From Lenin’s position it follows that in the absence of the bourgeoisie (by assumption), the producers themselves – no longer proletarians – would have to recreate, not even their old state, but the bourgeois state to enforce bourgeois right. For Marx, from the start of the new society there are no classes and hence there is no state and no politics. Whatever bourgeois right remains in the area of distribution does not require a particular political apparatus to enforce it. It is now society itself which is in charge. One could read this textually in the *Gothacritique*.

### State Capitalism

Similarly, for the first phase of communism (Lenin’s socialism) Lenin envisages the economy as one “state syndicate” or one “single factory” where “all citizens” are transformed into “hired employees of

the state” with “equality of labour, equality of wages” (emphasis added). What a contrast with Marx who in his “Inaugural Address” (1864) had clearly distinguished between “hired labour” (of capitalism) and “associated labour” (of socialism)! For Marx what Lenin is talking about is simply the “state itself as capitalist, in so far as it employs wage labour” (in 1877 manuscript V of *Capital* II; in 1880 “Marginal Notes on A Wagner”).

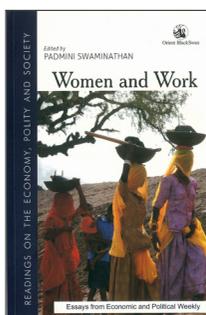
So, what Lenin presents as socialism is really state capitalism which with a “single state syndicate” or a “single factory”, as Lenin puts it, will be – in Marx’s terms, as we find in *Capital*’s French version – the “total national capital constituting a single capital in the hands of a single capitalist”. In this regard, there is a striking similarity between what Lenin is saying here and what Marx calls “crude”, “vulgar” communism in his 1844 Paris manuscripts (manuscript 3). In this latter type of communism, the “condition of the labourer is not abolished, it is extended to all individuals. It is a simple community of labour where prevails equality of wage paid by the universal capitalist”.

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## Women and Work

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The notion of ‘work and employment’ for women is complex. In India, fewer women participate in employment compared to men. While economic factors determine men’s participation in employment, women’s participation depends on diverse reasons and is often rooted in a complex interplay of economic, cultural, social and personal factors.

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