

Revisiting Lenin's theory of socialist revolution on the 150th anniversary of his birth



Today is the 150th anniversary of the birth of Lenin. To mark the occasion, [David Lane](#) presents an assessment of Lenin's theory of socialist revolution. He writes that while Lenin was correct in his appraisal of the social forces in support of a bourgeois revolution, he provided an incomplete and erroneous analysis of advanced imperial monopoly capitalism. Consequently, the October Revolution of 1917 was a local and regional achievement, but did not have the global revolutionary consequences that he anticipated.

It is 150 years since the birth, on 22 April 1870 in Simbirsk (now Ulyanovsk, Russia), of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov: known universally as Lenin. He came from a wealthy family in the social estate of the nobility. His father was an inspector of schools and able to finance the education of his two sons at university. 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 in the tradition of opposition to the autocracy and was expelled from Kazan university for dissident activity and later, in 1897, exiled for three years to Shushenskoye in Siberia.

He became an active social-democrat in the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party and was a founder and leader of its Bolshevik wing. Lenin was a leading Marxist theorist of monopoly capitalism and is best known for devising the tactics and strategy for 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.

Views about Lenin

Lenin is a controversial political leader who aroused deep feelings of loyalty among his followers, not only Bolsheviks in the former USSR but also among the leaders of communist parties, such as Mao Tse Tung and Fidel Castro. Concurrently, the memory of Lenin is subjected to intense hostility by his opponents both in the former socialist countries, and by politicians, the mass media and academics in western countries.

[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. . . . By 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 one-man tyranny' (pp. 383, 489).

Marxists have been divided about Lenin. He has been the subject of abuse from many communists and ex-communists alike who have considered Lenin's thought, or the doctrine of Leninism, to be an unacceptable development or extension of Marxist thought. This has a long history going back before the October Revolution with criticisms by Rosa Luxemburg of Lenin's call for a centralised and organised political party.

Marxists sympathetic to the socialist states, however, have a more positive view of Lenin's work. Georgy Lukacs, the eminent Hungarian philosopher, as early as 1924, [described Lenin as](#) 'the greatest thinker to have been produced by the revolutionary working-class movement since Marx'. (p. 9). Even after the dismantling of the European communist states, in the twenty-first century, writers such [Lars T Lih](#), and [Alan Shandro](#), provide positive appraisals of Lenin's leadership and political analysis. Slavoj Zizek, the Slovenian philosopher and political critic, [has called 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'. (p.11)

The ambiguity of these conflicting interpretations lies in the lumping together of quite distinctive phases and dimensions of Lenin's political philosophy and action. Lenin's thought has to be deconstructed from the ideology and practice of Marxism-Leninism. We need to distinguish between Lenin's thought (his conception of the conditions and tactics for socialist revolution); the legitimating doctrine of Leninism devised 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, and in China under Mao Zedong.

Whereas Marx and Engels used western Europe as their chief empirical referent, Lenin's approach was based on his observation of Russian society in the late nineteenth century which he embedded in the evolution of capitalism as a world economic system. Such contradictions could only be resolved, he contended, by a movement to socialism. By extending Marx's method and linking it in this way explicitly to Russian problems, Marxism as it developed in Russia became differentiated from the Marxism of western Europe.

Socialist revolution

Lenin followed conventional nineteenth century Marxist reasoning: socialism could only arise out of modern bourgeois capitalism. He developed an understanding of capitalism as applied to Russia in three substantive ways. These three elements should be seen in combination and may be regarded as Lenin's theory of socialist revolution. There is first, based on Marxist laws of historical materialism, the idea of the uneven development of capitalism; second, a theory of leadership and mobilisation embodied in a political party promoting revolution; and third, a theory of imperialism which describes the stage of monopoly capitalism in the early twentieth century. Lenin went beyond Marx and Engels by combining political economy, a sociological understanding of the social structure, and political action.

The first major shift in Marxist orientation in Lenin's thinking is that the developing and exploited countries (Russia being the paradigmatic case) have moved them to the vanguard of socialist revolution. This was legitimated by the theory of combined and uneven development and of imperialism (see Lenin's [Development of Capitalism in Russia](#)). As an integral part of Lenin's thought, it links the socialist revolution in the East to consequences of capitalism in the West.

Europe in 1917 [gave rise](#) to a situation which 'offered us the opportunity to create the fundamental requisites of civilisation in a different way from that of the Western European countries'. Lenin's theory of revolution involved an important shift in emphasis. For European Marxists, the socialist revolution would arise out of the most developed forms of capitalism where the contradictions and the strength of the working class would be greatest. For Lenin, capitalism was international: the socialist revolution would take place at the weakest link in the capitalist chain and this was to be found in countries undergoing the transition to capitalism. The contradictions of capitalism were greatest in the semi-peripheries of world capitalism. Lenin also anticipated revolution spreading to Asian countries such as China. In this respect, Lenin was correct: world history took a different turn. The focus of socialist revolution moved to the East. But that was not all.

Revolution in the West

Lenin's idea was that a Russian revolution led by the Bolsheviks would be paralleled in western Europe. During the 1905 Revolution [he said](#): '...[I]f we succeed ...the revolutionary conflagration will spread to Europe: the European worker languishing under bourgeois reaction, will rise in his turn and show us "how it is done", then the revolutionary upsurge in Europe will have a repercussive effect upon Russia and will convert an epoch in a few revolutionary years into an era of several revolutionary decades'. In the socialist revolution, the ally of the Russian working class (here he included the rural poor peasants) would be the international working class.



Painting of Lenin by Isaak Brodsky ([Public Domain](#))

Lenin's theory linked empirically the rise of capitalism in a post-feudal country (Russia) to the imperialist nature of capitalism and its effects on the class structure of the 'core' and 'peripheral' countries. There were major implications. First, imperialism exploits the developing countries which leads concurrently to the development of capitalism in the dependent host countries and improvements to living standards of the workers in the dominant home countries. Consequently, the working classes in the advanced countries support their governments in their claims for colonies and areas of influence.

Second, the class struggle had to be understood in an international perspective. Exploitation on a world scale transcends national boundaries. The collapse of the world system of capitalism would snap first at its weakest link. Russia was the paradigmatic case. The revolution in Russia would be the spark which would lead to the proletarian revolution in the West. These three factors provided the material foundation for a socialist revolution in Russia.

The role of the party

Marx and Engels were principally concerned with the anatomy and dynamics of capitalism. The political praxis of the move to socialism, the vehicle of change, was undeveloped in their thinking. It was assumed that workers' parties, the social-democratic party in particular, would be the instrument of change. However, Russia lacked a civil society in which political parties could form and challenge for political power.

Lenin called for a centralised party of committed socialist revolutionaries. In his path breaking pamphlet, [What is to be done?](#), he contended that, 'Class consciousness can be brought to the workers only from outside. The history of all countries shows that the working class exclusively by its own effort is able to develop 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'. Lenin here called for the formation of a revolutionary Marxist party to lead the working class.

The most innovative feature of Lenin's approach is the way he combined theory and praxis on national and international levels. Lenin was primarily concerned with 'changing the world' rather than interpreting it. As the influential French philosopher, 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'.

An evaluation

The political conditions in Russia revised traditional Marxism in three ways. First, the class structure of countries as they moved from feudalism to capitalism differed from the developed capitalist countries: Russia lacked a politically confident domestic capitalist class, the peasantry was differentiated and included layers of labourers and poor peasants who were allied to the working class.

Second, the geographical spread of capitalism in the form of imperialism gave class conflict an international scope though it retained a national focus; its uneven development led to severe contradictions in the semi-peripheral economies. Third, the political conditions in the dependent colonial countries were autocratic and lacked parliamentary forms of participation. A revolutionary party was required and it should be organised and composed only of socialists supporting a course of revolutionary action initially to bring about a democratic republic, to be followed by a socialist revolution.

Socialist revolution in Russia

Lenin made a decisive shift in Marxist analysis. In the traditional Marxist prognosis, only at the most advanced stage of capitalism would the contradictions lead to its collapse followed by the transition to a communist mode of production. For Lenin, capitalism was formed from different interconnected state formations with uneven and hybrid levels of capitalist development.

Lenin concluded that world capitalism was most vulnerable at its weakest link (or links), not at its most advanced and developed formation. But a new social formation would not spontaneously grow out of capitalism. Human action in the form of a Marxist political party was necessary to move society on from capitalism to socialism. Lenin shifted attention away from the system contradictions of capitalism to the social class contradictions. He added a sociological critique to Marx's economic analysis.

What did Lenin get right, and in what respects has history shown his thinking to be wrong or incomplete? Lenin's analysis of the social structure of development in Russia, as an exemplar of developing colonial countries, was correct. He detected the weakness of the domestic bourgeoisie as a revolutionary force. He fittingly widened the definition of the working class from the proletariat to include all the working population (*trudnyashchiysya*) in the democratic revolution.

The problem of the peasantry

While he considered the rich and middle peasantry to be class groups which would support the overthrow of the autocracy and the institution of a property-owning bourgeoisie, he misjudged the middle and poor peasants' adverse disposition towards a collectivist economic structure. The October Revolution led not only to the consolidation of peasant lands but to a considerable growth in the number of middle and poor peasants. The middle peasants had more to lose than their chains. They would not accept a collectivist form of economic coordination and land reform. In the period of revolutionary consolidation, after 1917, class interests diverged and later led to open conflict between town and country.

However, in China (and also in the eastern European socialist states after the Second World War) the move to collectivisation was much less violent and generally more successful. As Nolan [has put it](#): '...the process of collectivization was carried through in fundamentally different ways in China and the Soviet Union, and with sharply contrasting results. In China, collectivization was achieved with far less social disruption, without widespread bloodshed and loss of human life, and without drastic economic losses' (p. 194).

In China, the Communist Party had a base in the countryside whereas in the USSR it was an urban party composed of manual and non-manual workers. In the circumstances of Russia in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the leadership had to 'extract' grain from the peasants, whereas in China the process was one of increasing production by moving to more efficient units. In Russia, the largest group in the countryside were 'middle peasants' producing primarily for themselves (and selling surplus) on their individual plots – granted to them by the October Revolution. Their attachment to land ownership was much greater than their support for a new form of collective ownership. Consequently, the Bolsheviks, when in power, faced opposition from the villages which led to violence between the peasantry and Soviet leadership.

Party organisation

Lenin's analysis of the need for political organisation, which was necessary to further the interests of the opposition to the Tsarist autocracy, was correct. Under the conditions of police surveillance, a 'party of a new type' with a democratic form of policy making and centralised organisation and control was a practical necessity in Tsarist Russia. The role of the media in the form of an all-Russian newspaper as an educative instrument as well as a coordinating one was also right.

Where Lenin was incomplete was in his failure fully to understand the autocratic effects of bureaucratic control which became apparent in the period after the seizure of power in Russia. While organisational forms, similar to democratic centralism, had also been adopted by other social-democratic parties (such as the SPD in Germany), after 1917, in Russia, it became a process of centralised economic development and modernisation. The political forms of Tsarist Russia were reconstituted as a socialist political bureaucracy. Applying democratic centralism as a form of organisation to all associations in society led to forms of political domination incompatible with socialism.

Geopolitical and economic analysis

Lenin's geopolitical analysis of capitalism as imperial monopoly capitalism correctly drew attention to the inherent conflict between hegemonic capitalist and dependent states. He saw the contradictions between the positive effects of economic development concurrent with the economic exploitation of the dependent countries.

Lenin's political focus, on capitalism's 'weakest links' and the successful seizure of power in 1917, shifted the national and socialist revolutions to the colonial world. Lenin showed immense courage and political leadership in carrying out a successful national revolution. This was his greatest achievement. Lenin noted the dislocating effects of the First World War on the capitalist powers. It was a decisive factor in disrupting the Russian economy and society and created a wide range of political strata predisposed to revolution.

But he was mistaken to believe that it would break world capitalism. Moreover, Lenin misjudged the national political and social relationships between classes in the developed capitalist states. On 20 October 1920, in [a 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'. (p. 100) Despite significant demonstrations and strike activity, the idea that a working-class rebellion would take place then in England was grossly mistaken.

Imperial capitalism could be likened not to a continuous chain, but to a large tree – cutting off new thin and old decayed branches does not kill it. Capitalism continued to expand and grow. Eventually in the late twentieth century, it overpowered the Soviet Union as well as the eastern European socialist states. Lenin erred in his understanding of the working classes in the advanced capitalist states. Despite systemic economic crises, capitalist societies have maintained high levels of social and political integration. Even in the early twentieth 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.

Lenin creatively fused Marx's economic analysis of capitalism to a sociology of Russia, to a geo-economics of capitalism and to a politics of leadership and action. Lenin regarded the October Revolution in Russia as a success for the socialist cause. However, his approach was incomplete and he provided an erroneous analysis of the disintegration of advanced imperial capitalism. Social and political integration has remained much higher than he anticipated and in this he is not alone. Capitalism in the West was threatened by the October Revolution but not defeated by it. Slavoj Žižek's [appeal to 'reinvent' Lenin's call to revolution](#), 'in the conditions of imperialism and colonialism', remains even more challenging now than it did in October 1917. What is lacking is an analysis not of the 'weakest' links in capitalism, but of the hegemonic core.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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