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Marxism

Leninism in the 21st century

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -

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Daniel Bensaïd central leader of the French Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR - French section of the Fourth International) spoke on 'Leninism in the 21st century' at the June 'Marxism 2001' event organised by the British Socialist Workers Party. IV spoke to him afterwards.

Q. Lenin made important contributions to Marxist thinking about imperialism, the national question, revolutionary strategy and socialist democracy. But when organisations call themselves 'Leninist' they are generally referring to organisational forms. Yet the modern experience of such organisations has shown they have quite diverse organisational practices. What is special about 'Leninism' as an organisational form?

A. We have to start by remembering that the very term Leninism only appeared after the death of Lenin, notably in the speech by Zinoviev to the Fifth Congress of the Communist International (1924). It corresponds to the codification of an organisational model then associated with the 'Bolshevisation' of the Comintern, which allowed the Kremlin to brutally subjugate the young Communist parties to its own tutelage, in the name of combating social democracy - which had been corrupted by parliamentarism.

The invention of 'Leninism' as a religiously mummified orthodoxy, was part of the process of bureaucratisation of the Comintern and the Soviet Union. That's why, as far as possible, I personally avoid utilising this 'ism'. However, if you attempt to summarise what appears essential in Lenin's own organisational ideas, I would highlight two ideas which seem to me essential revolutionary conceptions for this epoch, and which retain their validity today.

The first, which was at the centre of the polemic in *What is to Be Done*, and in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, is the distinction between the (revolutionary) party and the (working) class, which rejects all confusionist attempts to conflate or identify the two. This distinction, elementary from the point of view of the Marxism of the Second International, implies thinking through the specificity of the political field, its relationship of forces, and its own concepts.

This terrain is not simply a reflection or an extension of the social relationship of forces. It expresses the transformation of the social relations (and class struggle) into political terms, with its own - as the psychoanalysts say - displacements and condensations. I would above all highlight that this distinction between the social and the political, between parties and classes, paradoxically opens up the possibility of thinking through the idea of pluralism; if the party is not simply the incarnation of the class, not simply a one-to-one expression of its social substance, then it becomes thinkable that the class can be represented by a plurality of parties.

As a corollary the class can build instruments of resistance independent of parties. Thus it doesn't seem to me accidental that Lenin had the most correct position during the early 1920s debate in Russia on the role of the trade unions.

The second essential idea is in relation to what appears to be one of the most debatable characteristics of Leninism, democratic centralism. To the extent that this idea became associated with the bureaucratic centralism of the Stalinist period, what one remembers above all is centralism and the image of a semi-military discipline.

Thus, for us the democratic aspect is fundamental. If, after free discussion, there doesn't exist a collective effort and a mutual involvement in putting all the decisions to the test of practice, the democracy of an organisation remains

purely formal and 'parliamentary'. It becomes reduced to an exchange of opinions without real consequences, everyone can participate in the debate with their own convictions, without a common practice to test the validity of a political orientation.

Q. *How has the LCR's conception of Leninism evolved since its founding conference in 1969?*

A. Because of the strong spontaneist illusions that the May 1968 movement in France engendered among the youth, the foundation of the Ligue Communiste as a section of the Fourth International in 1969 was the result of a lively debate, notably on the question of organisation. With more than 30 years of hindsight, this founding debate seems to me decisive. It permitted us to create an organisation that resisted the retreat after 1968, and survived the test of subsequent defeats.

However, a critical review of that period is necessary. In the context of the period, we had a tendency to fetishise the party as the direct and immediate adversary of the state (inspired by a questionable reading of Poulantzas), and gave our 'Leninism' a slightly 'militarist' twist ('ultra-left' if you prefer). In this you can see the influence of Guevara, his voluntarism and the role attributed to 'exemplary' actions. In that sense, our interpretation partially created a sort of 'Leninism in a hurry', criticised by Regis Debray in his book *A Critique of Arms*.

Q. *For more than a decade we have seen groups which refer to Leninism operating inside quite broad formations like the PT in Brazil, the PRC in Italy and now we have the experience of the Scottish Socialist Party. Isn't there a danger that prolonged immersion in these parties will atrophy the political independence of such Leninist groups, and adversely affect their ability to operate as a coherent striking force in times of political crisis?*

A. The examples mentioned in the question represent different experiences of party construction, each one different in its context, each one specific - from the birth of a mass workers party (Brazil), to the conflicts within the old Communist parties (Italy), to regroupments of radical currents. Beyond that, despite this diversity, these experiences are embedded in a situation of redefinition and political recomposition, opened by the end of the 'short 20th century' since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This is only the beginning of a long period of mutation and redefinition of the forces within the progressive social movements.

The idea of a 'prolonged immersion' doesn't seem to me appropriate for talking about these experiences, to the extent that it seems to evoke the experiences of 'entrism' in the mass workers parties, in the 1930s or after the second world war. There's nothing 'entrism' about the presence of revolutionary currents in the Brazilian Workers Party (PT). They participate in a process of pluralist party construction, rather similar to the mass workers parties before the first world war (where the notion of entrism also had no sense).

Within these experiences there are contradictions that we must recognise and engage. A party like the Brazilian PT is subject to strong pressures, because of its presence in parliament and role in local and regional governments. At the same time, this enables the accumulation of social experiences on a grand scale. Does this mean that a revolutionary current risks blunting its cutting edge and losing its revolutionary spirit? Without doubt. But on the other hand, if a revolutionary current remains separate it also risks losing its revolutionary soul, and becoming simply a sect which denounces, without getting its hands dirty.

Between the two risks it is necessary to choose, looking for the best solutions to the dangers (like the education of militants) knowing there are no absolute guarantees.

In any case, every organisation creates conservative tendencies (including the Bolshevik party in 1917) and nobody can be sure of being up to the job if there is a revolutionary crisis; the crisis itself is a test of the validity of a

construction project, and the verdict is not known in advance.

Q. *Why, in principle, should capitalism not be overthrown by an alliance of mass social movements, each of which is organised around partial emancipatory projects - especially if they all see capitalism as the enemy?*

A. The question doesn't seem to me to be the best way to approach it. From a certain point of view, capitalism will indeed be overthrown by an alliance, or a convergence, of mass social movements. But even if these movements, because of their liberatory projects, perceive capitalism to be their enemy (which perhaps is the case for the women's movement or the environmental movement, not just the workers movement), I don't think these movements all play an equivalent role. And all are traversed by differences and contradictions that reflect their position, in the face of capital as a global mode of domination.

There is a 'naturalist' feminism and a revolutionary feminism, a profoundly anti-humanist environmentalism and a humanist and social environmentalism.

In discussing this, one could perhaps integrate the sociological contributions of Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu on the growing social differentiation of modern society and the diversity of its social arenas.

If you consider these arenas are not structured in a hierarchy, but simply juxtaposed, then perhaps you could devise a tactic of putting together changing coalitions ('rainbow coalitions' on immediate questions). But there would be no solid strategic convergence in such an approach. I think, on the contrary, that within a particular mode of production (capitalism), relations of exploitation and class conflict constitute an overarching framework that cuts across and unifies the other contradictions. Capital itself is the great unifier that subordinates every aspect of social production and reproduction, remodelling the function of the family, determining the social division of labour and submitting humanity's conditions of social reproduction to the law of value. If that is indeed the case, a party, and not simply the sum of social movements, is the best agent of conscious unification,.

Q. *The foundation of Lenin's post-1914 strategy was that imperialism was in its 'death agony', and was by definition a period of capitalist decline. How does this stand up after nine decades?*

A. I don't interpret that characterisation of the epoch, an epoch of wars and revolutions, as a conjunctural judgement, or a mechanical judgement about the inevitable collapse of the system. Retrospectively, the 20th century does indeed appear to have been the century of wars and revolutions. And the 21st century, alas, won't be any different from that point of view. The forms of imperialist domination change but they don't disappear. The relevance of the heritage of Lenin and Trotsky, understood in a critical and non-dogmatic way, resides in the contemporary reality of capital and imperialism itself.

Q. *Several revolutionary organisations outside the Fourth International (for example LO, the SWP and the Democratic Socialist Party of Australia) tend to argue that the French LCR is badly organised and lacks political centralisation. Do you agree that the LCR's deep and permanent involvement in diverse mass movements and united fronts has reduced its capacity for rapid mobilisation around central campaigns? And if so, is this an inevitable choice in modern conditions?*

A. There's an element of truth in that. The LCR was able to resist the defeats of the 1980s and 90s essentially thanks to its activity in the mass movement - in the trade unions and in the mass social movements (unemployed, women and anti-racist). Everyone recognises in France that the renewal of fighting trade unionism, or that of AC! and Ras le Front, [1] couldn't have seen the same level of development without the militants of the LCR.

But the framework of a weakening in workers' resistance, the usefulness of the mass social movements seemed more obvious than that of a political organisation like ours, which could appear at a certain point just as a network and a forum for discussing ideas.

This certainly led to an organisational loosening, which we regret and have been trying to correct for several years, say since 1995-7. But we prefer that problem to being a 'besieged citadel'. Lutte Ouvriere has certainly maintained a higher level of party patriotism, but the price has been exorbitant; a sectarian petrification and an incomprehension of the social movements.

Then again, there is always a tension between the building of a political party and intervention in united fronts, between the risk of a sectarian response and that of dilution of your political profile. One can't resist that double temptation by a magic formula, you have to work your way though it concretely in each case.

In a demonstration LO (if it participates) can have a contingent numerically bigger than the Ligue's, but the militants of the Ligue are also present in the contingents of their trade unions, Attac, Ras L'Front etc. I think we do more to develop the 'real movement for the abolition of the existing order', which is the very definition of communism.

Q. *The recent well-attended SWP school 'Marxism 2001' showed again that the age profile of far left organisations in Europe is not so good (the majority more than 30, with a high proportion more than 40). Why? What can be done about it?*

A. What strikes me and seems most important, more than the age profile than summer schools and meetings like the Marx conferences in France, is the renewal of interest in the Marxist critique of modern society and capitalist globalisation. Certainly, we would prefer a younger attendance, but the fact that a part of the 1960s generation has politically survived the 'Thatcher years' or the 'Mitterrand years' is something of a bonus for the future; there's the possibility of a continuity and a transmission of experiences. Basing ourselves on that we have to make an effort to find the way to access the present forms of politicisation of young people. For these certainly exist.

In the present mobilisations against globalisations we can see parallels with the struggles that generated the radicalisation before 1968 - like over Vietnam or the Algerian war. We shouldn't mythologise or exaggerate that pre-1968 radicalisation, by the way.

We can also see the present radicalisation in musical or cultural phenomena. On the other hand, if organisations like the SWP and LCR are a bit 'hollowed out' as regards the 1980s generation, they seem to understand the beginning of a new perspective among the youth.

Q. *It was an axiom for Trotskyist organisations in the 60s, 70s and 80s that Leninism means a permanently high level of activity from all members. Often this involved moralistic and even quasi-religious overtones. Is it realistic to expect large number of activists to sustain high levels of activity for decades? Irrespective of the political situation?*

A. A (voluntary) involvement in revolutionary struggle certainly isn't a hobby for the weekend. It seems normal that it implies a commitment to activity, career sacrifices and financial effort. That does not mean it's necessary to have a self-sacrificing mystique or the religious spirit of missionaries. Moreover the organisations that practice such ideological doping are often revealed as the most vulnerable to demoralisation; the disillusionment and discouragement are then proportional to the euphoric exaggeration of its motivation. Without doubt the kind of activism often used in the 1970s was often linked to an exaggerated appreciation of the chances for socialists, but also linked to the availability of members who in were in their overwhelming majority young, and did not yet have stable work or family situations. We say that we have matured and that our militancy has been 'normalised' in its

pace and needs. The risk could be from now on the reverse: to fall into routinism.

Q. *Is democratic centralism a realisable objective on an international level? Are we ever going to see a new mass International organised like the Comintern? In the light of modern experience, is it really true that revolutionary organisations inevitably suffer 'national communist' deviations from being outside an International?*

A. We saw earlier that the notion of democratic centralism is difficult to define. This is all the more so at an international level. The Fourth International was defined at its inception as a world party. This engendered confusion in allowing the view that it was possible to operate with the degree of centralisation of a national party. That permitted misadventures like that of 1952, when the elected leadership of the French section was suspended by the International Secretariat. Such a thing is unimaginable today. The Statutes adopted in 1974 recognised the sovereignty of national leaderships. The 1985 Congress made explicit that the International is composed of sections and not individual adherents, and that implies a very federal structure.

It is necessary to continue the reflection about the type of democracy possible at an international level. If it is possible to adopt common positions about great international events, it is however absurd for European delegates to vote on electoral tactics in Peru or trade union tactics in Brazil. Rather than discuss a formula (world party, democratic centralism), it would perhaps be better now to discuss a calm and objective balance sheet of experiences and practices, to look for the right balance between a destructive over-centralisation and a simple network for discussion, without any common commitment or involvement. It is necessary also to follow attentively the experiences of internationalist renewal, notably in the movement against capitalist globalisation, taking up the discussion of past experiences. I remain personally very attached to the necessity of an International, and I don't think that it is necessary solely during periods of impetuous revolutionary advance. However I don't think the Comintern any longer is a model for this.

Q. *The tiny groups fighting to build Leninist parties made their first breakthroughs in the mid-late 1960s. After more than 30 years effort it could be argued that the results are quite modest. Doubtless much of the reason for this is rooted in deep objective factors - defeats of the working class, neo-liberalism, the collapse of 'communism' etc. In retrospect, were major mistakes made? Could the results have been better?*

A. The results could no doubt have been better. One could review the history of the 1930s and make an inventory of the mistakes. In fact it's not a useless thing to do at all, because these experiences, these treasures of intelligence, of devotion and of sacrifice were not at all pointless.

But if you consider that the results were limited, with so many avenues explored, so many theoretical interpretations attempted, then without doubt the circumstances were very hard. I say the circumstances and not the objective conditions because there is a problem in the counterposition between objective and subjective conditions. The two are obviously linked.

If you completely dissociate them, you fall into paradoxes which have often had disastrous consequences in the Trotskyist movement. If the objective circumstances were as excellent as one thinks, and if the revolutionary movement couldn't capitalise on them, then it was the organisations, their leaderships, their militants who failed; or else there were internal traitors. That type of paranoia does nobody any good.

Interview by Phil Hearse

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[1] Respectively, an anti-unemployment network and an anti-fascist group.