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Marxism

Lenin and the Politics of Broken Time

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -



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This essay by Daniel Bensaïd remains one of the sharpest engagements with Lenin's political thought from within the revolutionary Marxist tradition. Bensaïd identifies Lenin's enduring contribution not as an organisational technique or a party model, but as a philosophy of political time: an understanding of history as fractured, uneven, and shot through with crises that open and close with brutal speed. Against the linear temporality of social-democratic evolutionism, Bensaïd's Lenin is a thinker of rupture, conjuncture, and the irreducible specificity of the political. The essay weaves together the theory of the party, the distinction between class and politics, the meaning of the revolutionary crisis, and the demands of strategic decision --- culminating in an account of October 1917 as the paradigm of politics lived in broken time. [AN]

(This translation is of "Lénine ou la politique du temps brisé," first published in *Critique communiste* no. 150, autumn 1997, and collected in the posthumous volume *Octobre 17* (Éditions Lignes, 2017). It is not the same text as [""Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!": Lenin and Politics](#)," which was first published in English in *International Socialism* 95 in July 2002 and will already be familiar to readers.

Both texts share a preoccupation with Lenin's conception of political time against the homogeneous, empty time of Kautskyan orthodoxy, and both draw on overlapping material — the analysis of the party as strategic operator, the critique of the reduction of politics to the social, the reading of the revolutionary crisis as a rupture in normal temporality. Readers will recognise the passages on Tucholsky's "be ready," on the September and October 1917 letters to the Central Committee, and on the distinction between principles of organisation and systems of organisation.

This 1997 text is substantially longer than its 2002 successor. The section on plurality and representation — Lenin's halting movement towards acknowledging that a single class may express itself through multiple parties — is considerably fuller here and constitutes a genuine argument rather than an aside. The analysis of Rosa Luxemburg's relationship to bureaucratic conservatism is more extended.

The two texts end differently: where the 2002 article builds to its climax through the Hegelian "Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!" passage, the 1997 text closes on the figure of "broken time" itself — the bureaucrat who expects the announced and the revolutionary who watches for the event latent in crisis. That conclusion gives this earlier text its title and its distinctive register.[AN])

The party as gearbox

The term "Leninism" is now used loosely and carelessly, without even recalling that it was originally codified by Zinoviev at the Fifth Congress of the Communist International to justify bringing the young Communist parties to heel under cover of bolshevisation. Yet far more than a form of discipline and centralisation, Lenin's guiding idea targets what he calls the "disorganising" confusion between party and class. The distinction thus introduced between class and party was part of the major debates of the socialist movement of the period and, more specifically in Russia, against the populist, "economist", and Menshevik currents. On fundamental questions such as the provisional government or alliances, in those formative years of Russian social democracy, the Mensheviks and "economists" sometimes jointly defended positions that appeared more uncompromising in appearance --- more in keeping with the idea of a "pure socialism" --- than the Bolsheviks. This orthodoxy in fact derived from a vision of the democratic

"bourgeois" revolution against despotism as a necessary and inevitable stage, during which the nascent workers' movement should remain an auxiliary force without compromising itself with any power, while awaiting a capitalist modernisation of society.

In neighbouring Germany, Kautsky was advancing the parallel idea of a "passive accumulation" of forces and non-participation in government, until the proletariat's electoral majority, catching up with its social majority, allowed it to govern alone. This kind of socialism of the march to power, trusting in the logic of progress, has been termed "socialism outside time." It was more precisely a socialism abandoned to the flow of time: a flattening of properly political struggle in favour of sociological determinism.

Lenin's opposition to this reduction of politics to the social was entirely original for the period. Like a psychoanalyst attentive to the "displacements" and "condensations" at work in neuroses, he understood that economic and social contradictions do not express themselves directly, but in the specific, deformed, and transformed shape of politics. This is why one of the party's tasks is to listen closely, to decipher within the political field the often unexpected ways in which these contradictions manifest themselves --- a student struggle, the Dreyfus Affair, an electoral question, an international incident. Their untimely irruption at an unforeseen point becomes a symptom. It condenses and reveals a latent global crisis of social relations. That is the miracle of what constitutes, as distinct from the ordinary news item, the political event proper.

It is also why Lenin's conception of the revolutionary militant is not that of the combative trade unionist but that of the "tribune of the people," intervening "in all strata of the population" to grasp the concrete way in which a multiplicity of contradictions are knotted together. This question is at the heart of the famous debate on party rules, minutely analysed in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*. The definition of party membership --- whether the member simply identifies with the party, assists it, or sympathises... or whether they actively participate in one of its bodies, pay dues, and hold themselves responsible for decisions taken collectively --- is not a formal or administrative quarrel. What is at stake in this apparently minor difference is the demarcation of the party from the class. It is precisely the party form that makes it possible to intervene in the political field, to act on the possible, not passively to submit to the ebbs and flows of the class struggle.

This is the essential core of the "revolution within the revolution" according to Lenin. Through this distinction between party and class, between the political and the social, it becomes possible to think the relationship between the two --- "the representation of the social in the political" --- which Badiou identifies as "the key point." It may be that in 1902 the thesis was stated too forcefully in the heat of internal polemic; its excesses were corrected by Lenin himself. The controversial question of "democratic centralism," deformed by the practice of real bureaucratic centralism installed after 1924, derives in large part from this demarcation of party and class. It logically implies the selection of militants and the concentration of forces, alongside a democracy permitting the assimilation of all the party's social experiences. Democracy serves reflection and decision; centralism serves action aimed at shifting the lines, at displacing the balance of forces. These are general necessities. They are irreducible to any particular technique of organisation.

In his discussion with Rosa Luxemburg about *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, Lenin explicitly distinguishes the "principles of organisation," linked to the general conditions of struggle under capital's rule, from the "system of organisation," which varies with the concrete conditions of legality, repression, and development. [\[1\]](#) In the light of the 1905 experience, Lenin insists in his collected writings *Twelve Years* that the party, however sharply delineated, lives in continuous exchange and dialogue with the experiences of the class --- notably the unforeseen innovation of the soviets. What persists, through all these nuances and variations, is that the party is not one organisational form among others --- trade union or associative --- but the specific form in which the class struggle inscribes itself in the political field. This idea of the specificity of the political reappears in the notion of revolutionary crisis, which is not the result of a simple social movement but of a "national crisis" --- a general crisis of the reciprocal relations between all classes of society. What Lenin wrote on this from *What Is to Be Done?* onwards is very clear: "the self-knowledge of

the working class is indissolubly bound up, not solely with a fully clear theoretical understanding --- or rather, not so much with the theoretical, as with the practical, understanding --- of the relationships between all the various classes of modern society, acquired through the experience of political life." [2] It is through the experience of political life that this knowledge of reciprocal relations is acquired. It is a matter of following "the pulsations of the whole of political life." [3] This is why "our revolution is that of the entire people."

The party is the privileged vehicle of this specifically political experience. Its mediation links strategy and tactics within a kairotic time [4] --- no longer the homogeneous and empty time of progress and electoral patience, but a dense, knotted time, rhythmised by struggle and punctured by crises: "Revolution itself must not be conceived as a single act, but as a rapid succession of more or less violent explosions, alternating with phases of relative calm. The essential activity of our party, the essential focus of its activity, must therefore be work that is possible and necessary both in the most violent periods of explosion and in those of calm, namely unified political agitation throughout Russia." [5]

The party is thus the element of continuity within the fluctuations of collective consciousness. History is not the triumphal march of some quiet force towards a guaranteed historical resolution but a tissue of struggles, crises, and fractures. The party does not simply illuminate an organic and natural process of social emancipation. It is constitutive of relations of forces, a generator of initiatives, an organiser of politics not in the simple future tense ["will do"] but in the future perfect ["will have done"]. It is, in other words, an organiser of multiple durations, the condition of strategic thought that surpasses the immediate horizon of day-to-day, case-by-case, thoroughly unprincipled politicking. This approach, original in relation to the dominant culture of the Second International, makes conceivable the choices and attitudes adopted during the crucial July Days of 1917: the party is called on to engage in an action it had not sought in order to limit its negative effects, absorb its lessons, stem the retreat, and prepare the counter-offensive.

The principal reproach addressed, less to "Leninism under Lenin" --- to Lenin's real ideas --- than to the vulgate of Stalinised "Leninism," bears on the conviction held after the fact that the notion of a vanguard party contained in germ, from the outset, all the degrees of the substitution of apparatus for the real social movement, and all the circles of bureaucratic hell. It would be indecent to minimise this aspect of the question, which demands a more thorough discussion than the usual settling of accounts. But this very real dimension of the problem generally masks another, no less important one --- all the more effectively because Lenin himself gropes his way and does not always grasp the scope of his own innovations. Thus, believing he is paraphrasing a canonical text by Kautsky, he modifies it essentially. Where Kautsky writes that "science" comes to the proletarians "from outside the class struggle," carried by "bourgeois intellectuals," Lenin translates that "political consciousness" (not science) comes "from outside the economic struggle" (not the class struggle, which is as much political as social), carried not by intellectuals as a sociological category but by the party as a specifically political actor. The difference is significant.

Once again, it bears on the specificity of the political.

This thought breaks with the dominant tradition of the socialist movement of the period. In his commentary for the anniversary of the *Communist Manifesto*, Antonio Labriola flatly asserts in 1898 that "the desired conjunction of communists and proletarians is henceforth an accomplished fact." With the entry onto the scene of the "worker mass," the movement had become slower, and the mass party appeared as a kind of political incarnation of the class. The idea drew on formulations of Marx according to which the progressive organisation of the proletariat into a political party and into a class are synonymous, its social being and its political being converging in the party.

Lenin, on the contrary, emphasises the discontinuity between the immediate "economic" conflict and the mediated political conflict. He refuses still more explicitly to "mix the problem of classes with that of parties," to confuse social content with its political expression. The class struggle is not reducible to the conflict of the worker against a

particular employer, "but against the capitalist class as a whole." Thus, revolutionary social democracy as a political party "represents" the working class in its relations not only with a given group of employers but also with "all classes of modern society and to the state as an organised political force." [6] The task is to fuse into an indissoluble whole this spontaneous movement with the activity of the revolutionary party; hence the decisive role of the press as collective organiser in unifying struggles and inscribing them within an overall vision. Politics is therefore no longer the simple extension and reflection of the economic struggle, but a particular art of initiative and movement, of delimitation and combination of forces. It means demarcating before uniting, and in order to unite --- "making use of all manifestations of discontent and elaborating even the smallest elements of a protest, however embryonic" --- conceiving political struggle as "much broader and more complex than the workers' struggle against employers and government." [7]

When *Rabocheye Dyelo* [8] deduces political objectives from the economic struggle, Lenin charges it with "lowering the level of the multifarious political activity of the proletariat." He considers it illusory to believe that the "purely workers' movement" is by itself capable of elaborating an independent ideology. The spontaneous development of the workers' movement alone leads "to its subordination to bourgeois ideology." The dominant ideology is not a matter of manipulation of consciousness but an objective effect of the commodity fetish. The only way out of the iron circle of fetishism and its involuntary servitude is through the elaboration of categories of rupture, crisis, and revolution, and through the political struggle of parties.

The distinction between the political and the social

All of this leads, in Lenin, to the understanding that politics has its own grammar and syntax. It is the site of an elaboration, an appearance, a representation, where the task is to present what is absent: "The division into classes is certainly, in the last analysis, the deepest foundation of political grouping," but this "last analysis" is established "by political struggle alone." [9] Thus "communism surges literally from every point of social life; it clearly breaks out everywhere. When a particular exit is blocked with particular care, the contagion finds another, sometimes the most unforeseeable one." [10] This is why "we do not know and cannot know which spark will kindle the fire." Hence the watchword that summarises, for Tucholsky, [11] the full political attitude of Lenin: "Be prepared!"

Be prepared for the unforeseeable, the improbable, the event!

If politics is sometimes defined as "the concentrated expression of economics," it can only "have primacy over economics." By "advocating the fusion of the economic and political standpoints," Bukharin had "slid into eclecticism." This is also why, in 1921, even the name of the Workers' Opposition is criticised as "an ugly name" that once again reduces the political to the social, and claims that the management of the national economy falls directly to the "producers grouped in a union of producers."

For Lenin, the history of revolutions is "always richer in content, more varied, more multiform, more lively and ingenious than is imagined by even the best parties, the most conscious vanguards of the most advanced classes." [12] There is a profound reason for this: "The best vanguards express the consciousness, will, passion, imagination of tens of thousands of men, while revolution is --- in moments of particular exaltation and tension of all human faculties --- the work of the consciousness, will, passion, imagination of tens of millions spurred on by the sharpest class struggle."

From this he draws two practical conclusions of great importance: that the revolutionary class must be able to master all forms and aspects of social activity, and must know how, "with the maximum rapidity, to supplement one form with

another, to substitute one for another, and to adapt our tactics to any such change." [13]

Within this problematic, political language has its revealing slips of the tongue. It permits a non-sociological interpretation of the role of students and intellectuals in social struggles. This is why "the most rigorous, most complete, and most clearly defined expression of the political class struggle is the struggle of parties." [14] In the 1915 debate on the question of ultra-imperialism, Lenin perceives the danger of a new, apolitical economism, according to which the maturity of capitalist relations and their worldwide centralisation would make certain political forms impossible and would usher in a quasi-natural collapse of the system. For Lenin, the resolution plays out in the specific terms of political struggle. The same concern reappears, against every reduction of the political to the social or to history, in the discussions with Trotsky on the characterisation of the Soviet state. Trotsky speaks of a workers' state, "but this state, Lenin corrects, is not quite a workers' state --- that is the trouble." [15] To grasp its singularity, sociological categories are less appropriate than properly political categories. His formula is then more descriptive and more complex, reducible in any case to no unilateral social content: it is a workers' and peasants' state with "bureaucratic deformations," and "that is the transition in all its reality."

The implications of this vision of the political are confirmed in almost all the major controversies of the period. In the debate on the trade unions --- where Trotsky, in the name of war communism, defends the militarisation of the unions --- Lenin takes an original position. [16] Because they are not a political organ of power, the trade unions cannot be transformed into a "coercive state organisation." They stand in the system "between the Party and the State," Lenin notes, "if one can put it that way." [17] In the early years of the revolution there was no restriction on the right to strike, and the Council of People's Commissars even established a strike fund. [18] Similarly, the national question is approached in its political specificity, as a democratic question, outside any abstract sociological schema. One must allow for psychology. If the slightest compulsion enters into this question, it "soils, mars, and reduces to nothing the indisputable progressive significance of centralisation."

A breakthrough towards the plurality of representation

Such constant insistence by Lenin on the distinction between party and class, on the particularity of political struggle and its own language, logically opens towards the thought of plurality and representation. If the party is not the class, it follows that one and the same class can represent itself politically through several different parties. It also follows that "the representation of the social in the political" must be governed by an elaboration of rules and institutions. Lenin does not go that far; none the less he opens an original space of the political and begins to explore its paths.

He thus submits representation to rules inspired by the experience of the Commune, aimed at limiting the professionalisation of politics: wages identical to those of a skilled worker, vigilance against privileges of function, accountability to the represented. Contrary to a persistent legend, he does not advocate the binding mandate. Not within the party: "The powers of delegates must not be limited by binding mandates"; in the exercise of their powers "they are completely free and independent." Nor at the level of state organs, where the "right of recall of deputies" must not be confused with a binding mandate that would reduce representation to the simple corporatist reflection of particular interests and local visions, without possible synthesis, emptying democratic deliberation of all substance and all stakes.

As for plurality, Lenin consistently affirms that "the struggle of nuances" within the party is "inevitable and necessary," so long as it takes place within limits "approved by common accord." He also upholds "the necessity of securing, in the party statutes, the rights of every minority, so as to divert from the habitual philistine course of scandal and petty quarrels the continuous and inexhaustible sources of discontent, irritation, and conflict, and to bring them into the still unfamiliar channel of a regular and dignified struggle for the defence of one's convictions. Among these absolute

guarantees we include the granting to the minority of one (or more) literary groups, with the right of representation at the congress and the right of complete expression." [\[19\]](#) More generally, he does not hesitate to advocate a referendum within the party on important questions.

Even the famous discipline in action is less inviolable than legend would have it. One recalls the supreme indiscipline of Zinoviev and Kamenev, who publicly took a position in September 1917 against the insurrectionary plan without being lastingly removed from their responsibilities. Lenin himself, in these extreme circumstances, claimed a personal right to disobedience. He contemplated resigning his responsibilities in order to recover his "freedom of agitation" in the party's ranks, and wrote to the Central Committee at the critical moment: "I have gone to the place you do not wish me to go [to Smolny]. Farewell."

Pushed by his own logic to elaborate the plurality of representation, Lenin none the less does not go so far as to lay the theoretical foundations of a principled pluralism. There are at least two reasons for this. First, he inherits from the French Revolution the illusion that, once the oppressors are overthrown, the process of homogenisation of the class is only a matter of time. No contradictions within the people are conceivable. It would take Trotsky and the 1930s for pluralism to be grounded in principle on the recognition of the durable heterogeneity of social forces in a determinate international context: because a class remains "torn by internal antagonisms," it can form "several parties." [\[20\]](#) Second, the distinction between the social and the political does not prevent an inversion of the traditional thesis according to which the political dissolves into the social. With the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the symmetrical risk of the absorption of the social into the political now appeared. Did Lenin himself not take up the ambiguity of the extinction of politics and the state, forecasting "the extinction of the struggle of parties within the soviets"? [\[21\]](#)

Marcel Liebman notes that in *The State and Revolution*, parties lose their function to the benefit of a direct democracy that is no longer quite a separate state. Contrary to the initial revolutionary hopes, with the bureaucratic counter-revolution, the statisation of society would prevail over the socialisation of the state. It was Trotsky who drew the most striking conclusion: "'L'État c'est moi' is an almost liberal formula compared with the realities of Stalin's totalitarian regime... Unlike the Sun King, Stalin can justly say: Society, c'est moi!" [\[22\]](#)

Paradoxically, Lenin like Marx is undone as much by his libertarian tendencies as by his authoritarian side. That is their weakness. The question is tragically complicated. It is a matter of founding a new legitimacy, irreducible to the ordinary game of parties and parliamentarism, of inventing a form of representation reconciling man and citizen, representative and represented. Confronted with the exhaustion of the "incredibly thin" layer of advanced workers, decimated by civil war and famine, Lenin resigns himself to a party dictatorship, to an inversion of the pyramid of power, which is not his original project. Henceforth the revolution rests on its tip, in a catastrophic equilibrium, pathetically illustrated by his last struggle. [\[23\]](#)

The narrow gate of the revolutionary crisis

Whether it is representation, organisation, or strategy, Lenin's political thought is throughout an elaboration of a specific temporality. It culminates in the understanding of crises, wars, and revolutions, and of the decisive insurrectionary moment.

From the majority reformist point of view within the Second International, war is not a founding event in its own right but a parenthesis to be closed as quickly as possible in the unfolding of human progress. It must therefore cease as soon as possible so that things can return to their normal course. This pacifism differs strikingly from the revolutionary defeatism advocated by Lenin at the time. For him, the point is not to restore class struggle, through

peace, to a supposed normality. War is part of the struggle, and it is a matter of seizing the unprecedented nature of this agonistic form of conflict in order to open a revolutionary situation. Two opposed visions of the world, of history, and of political temporality are here expressed in contradictory practical orientations.

Karl Kautsky is the most prestigious representative of the classic reformist position, then dominant in international social democracy. In his celebrated *The Road to Power*, he affirms that the socialist goal can certainly be achieved only through revolution, but "it does not depend on us to make a revolution." The party contents itself with accompanying and enlightening, in a pedagogical spirit, the struggles of the exploited. This thesis has, of course, its share of truth. Struggles cannot be decreed. They erupt: "it" happens, "it" occurs. But in Kautsky the objective phenomenon detaches itself from revolutionary subjectivity. When he speaks of strategy and war of attrition, it is with the concern never to have to give battle.

This orthodoxy of before 1914 claims the legacy of Marx and Engels. In 1851, in a context of revolutionary ebb, the latter defined revolution as "a purely natural phenomenon, governed by physical laws." Class consciousness appears then as a kind of natural product of historical development and the sociological growth of the proletariat. It is through the tendential fusion between the class and its party that the inextricable contradiction between its revolutionary vocation and its subjection to commodity fetishism and workplace despotism seemed to be resolved: "For the final victory of the propositions set out in the Manifesto, Marx relied solely on the intellectual development of the working class, which had to result from common action and discussion." [\[24\]](#) If its struggle against the bourgeoisie "begins with its very existence," the proletariat passes "through different phases of evolution." With industrial development, "the strength of the proletarians grows and they become more conscious of it." The solution to the strategic enigma is thus found in "the gradual and spontaneous organisation of the proletariat into a class." Thus "the proletariat of each country must first of all conquer political power, establish itself as the leading class of the nation, constitute itself as the nation." Yet this "organisation of the proletariat into a class, and therefore into a political party, is ceaselessly broken up again by the competition among workers."

Vicious circle. No solution within a uniform temporality.

Rosa Luxemburg was among the first to understand, from the controversies of 1901-02, what was at stake in this discourse of orthodoxy. Linear time of progress seemed to play in favour of social democracy, which nibbled at terrain and won institutional positions, but simultaneously secreted a heavy conservative bureaucracy whose fate became dependent on that of the state. Rosa Luxemburg was best prepared to understand the deep springs of the disconcerting capitulation of August 1914. This is why she was also attentive to the ruptures and innovations that arose from the struggle itself. 1905 in Russia opened, in her eyes, "a new epoch in the history of the workers' movement," and brought to light a new element: "the manifestation of proletarian struggle in the revolution."

Under what conditions can the proletariat break the stranglehold of oppression and alienation? The general strike is the irruptive form that makes strategy thinkable. A sudden liberation of accumulated energy then allows a rapid modification of the balance of forces and displaces the pieces on the chessboard.

Slower to become aware of bureaucratic conservatism and its relation to a uniform conception of historical time, Lenin none the less draws more radical consequences. The state constitutes a decisive strategic node of revolutionary struggle. But it cannot be changed at any moment. To harp on this objective outside of time would amount simply to opposing an arbitrary will to an inert passivity, an absolute subjectivity to a dead objectivity, as if the question of power were permanently posed in its paroxysmic form. Both approaches rest on a dualist metaphysics of subject and object. This is why parliamentary routine and leftist posturing are complementary.

Lenin instead disengages, with greater clarity than any predecessor, the strategic notion of "revolutionary crisis." In certain particular and exceptional circumstances, the state becomes vulnerable, the balance of forces becomes

critical. Not at just any moment: in every struggle there is a rhythm, pulsations, and beats that the notion of crisis makes it possible to think: "Every disruption of rhythms produces conflictual effects. It throws out of kilter and disturbs. It can also produce a hole in time, to be filled by an invention, a creation. Which happens, individually and socially, only by passing through a crisis." [25]

While parliamentary politics knows only one temporal dimension --- the monotonous succession of sessions and legislatures --- the time of revolutions is concentrated, coiled in upon itself. It happens that "months of revolution accomplish better and more completely the education of the citizens than decades of political stagnation." [26] In 1905, Lenin joins Sun Tzu in praise of swiftness. One must then "begin at once," "on the spot": "Form, immediately, everywhere, combat groups."

The revolutionary crisis is pluri-temporal. Several times mix and combine within it. The revolution in Russia is not the simple prolongation or delayed outcome of the bourgeois revolution but "an entanglement" of two revolutions. This idea summarises the spirit of the famous April Theses of 1917. It follows logically from the uneven and combined development of the space-time of an epoch.

Politics then appears moulded on rhythms and reliefs. The art of the slogan is an art of conjuncture. Whether catastrophe can be averted depends on this sharp sense of the moment. A given watchword, valid yesterday, is no longer so today, but will be again tomorrow: "Up to 4 July [1917], the slogan of transferring the whole of power to the soviets was correct." After that, it was no longer so. Likewise: "At this moment, and at this moment only, perhaps for a few days at the most, or for a week or two, such a government could..." [27]

A few days, a week!

On 29 September 1917, Lenin writes to the Central Committee, which is wavering: "The crisis is ripe," waiting has become a crime. On 1 October he urges it "to take power at once," to "pass at once to insurrection." A few days later: "I am writing these lines on 8 October... The success of the Russian revolution depends on two or three days of fighting." And again: "I am writing these lines on the evening of the 24th; the situation is critical to the last degree. It is now clear that to delay the insurrection is death. Everything hangs by a thread."

One must act "this evening, tonight."

It is striking to note how much the elaboration of this problematic in the years of war, and the now conscious opposition to reigning orthodoxy, are linked in Lenin to a rereading of Hegel's *Logic*, which Marx too had reread "by chance" at the moment of the economic crisis of 1857-58. [28] From 1915 onwards, he systematises the idea of revolutionary crisis that obsesses him throughout the decisive year of 1917. It is this idea that makes conceivable the improbable conquest of power by a class ordinarily subjected to the iron circle of exploitation and alienation.

It is the key to the vertiginous question: how to pass from nothing to everything?

But what exactly is the crisis? Lenin gives no precise definition. He rather enumerates its algebraic general conditions: when those above can no longer...; when those below no longer want...; when those in the middle hesitate and can tip... The three conditions are inseparable and combined. What is at stake, then, is not a social movement that deepens, but specifically a political crisis of domination, a general crisis of social relations, whose form is that of a "national crisis." This last expression appears frequently in his writings.

Why "national crisis" and not simply "revolutionary crisis"? For Lenin, it is necessary to destroy the bourgeois state as a separate body. But with what to replace it? This is where the "national crisis" enters. Practically, the duality of power inherent in the revolutionary situation can resolve itself victoriously only if certain vital functions of the old, paralysed or partially dislocated state apparatus --- provisioning, transport, security --- are performed by new, more democratic and more effective organs: the Paris Commune, the soviets of 1905, the workers' councils of Turin... These organs are original creations of the struggle itself, without predetermined norms or models.

But for the crisis to lead to victory, three conditions must be supplemented by a fourth element combining all three: a political project and will capable of deciding, at the critical instant, between several possibles. The political party thus does not have, for Lenin, the almost exclusively pedagogical function Kautsky assigns to it. It is neither the simple reflection of the social movement nor a modest carrier of ideas, but a central piece of the strategic apparatus. Strategy implies decision, project, relations of forces. Education is part of this. But strategy also implies battles, trials in which time no longer flows uniformly, where it counts double, triple. If the revolution is social and political, its fate, in the final analysis, is settled militarily --- specifically in the insurrectional action of October, which seizes the occasion by its hair, in the precariousness of the instant.

Experience is eloquent. The choice of the moment is absolutely crucial, as attested by Lenin's entreaties to the reluctant Central Committee during September and October. Now is the moment! A decision must be made! Now. Not tomorrow, not the day after. Today. Because, precisely, time is not uniform. The opportune moment must be seized.

And in this, Lenin does politics and elaborates its proper temporality.

That of a broken time.

The bureaucrat dreams of holding the event in his grip. He awaits, without surprise, the coming of what has been announced, and cannot conceive that what has been announced might fail to arrive. The revolutionary watches for the latent event within the crisis. At the moment of decision, judgement manifests the present of a presence. This irrevocable event-character inaugurates radically new situations where "our inheritance was preceded by no testament," [29] for the event itself illuminates the conditions of its appearance. This is why revolution constitutes, for Hannah Arendt, "the true event, whose significance does not depend on victory or defeat."

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Source: "[Lénine ou la politique du temps brisé](#)," **Contretemps**, 21 January 2019 (originally published in *Critique communiste*, no. 150, autumn 1997).

Translated from the French and notes for [ESSF](#) by Adam Novak.

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[1] On Bensaïd's earlier elaboration of these questions alongside Alain Naïr, see Daniel Bensaïd and Alain Naïr, "À propos de la question de

l'organisation : Lénine et Rosa Luxemburg", *Partisans*, no. 45, December 1968/January 1969, with a 2008 preface by Bensaïd. Available at: <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article10230>

[2] Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?", *Collected Works*, vol. V, pp. 337–343 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961). Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/iii.htm>

[3] Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. IX, p. 119 and vol. XV, p. 298 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961).

[4] From the Greek *kairos*: the opportune or decisive moment, as distinct from *chronos*, undifferentiated clock-time. For Bensaïd, kairotic time is political time --- dense, uneven, punctuated by crises that open and close the horizon of action.

[5] Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. VIII (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962).

[6] Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?", *Collected Works*, vol. V (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961). Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/iii.htm>

[7] Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. V, pp. 440–463 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961).

[8] *Rabocheye Dyelo (Worker's Cause)*: journal of the Union of Russian Social-Democrats Abroad, published 1899–1902, associated with the "economist" tendency that Lenin polemicised against in *What Is to Be Done?*

[9] Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. VII, p. 41 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961).

[10] Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. XXXI (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966).

[11] Kurt Tucholsky (1890–1935): German satirist, journalist, and pacifist, associated with the left of the Weimar Republic.

[12] Lenin, "Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder (1920), *Collected Works*, vol. XXXI, pp. 17–118 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), chapter "Several Conclusions". Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch10.htm>

[13] Lenin, "Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder (1920), *Collected Works*, vol. XXXI (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), chapter "Several Conclusions". Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch10.htm>

[14] Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. X, p. 15 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962).

[15] Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. XXXII, p. 16 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965).

[16] See Pierre Broué, *Trotsky* (Paris: Fayard); see also Ernest Mandel's writings on the trade union debate.

[17] Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. XXXII, p. 12 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965).

[18] See Marcel Liebman, *Le Léninisme sous Lénine* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), vol. II, p. 198.

[19] Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. VII, p. 470 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961).

[20] Leon Trotsky, *La Révolution trahie* (1936); English edition: *The Revolution Betrayed* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1937). Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/>

[21] Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. XXV, p. 335 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964).

[22] Leon Trotsky, *Stalin* (Paris: Grasset, 1948).

[23] See Moshe Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle* (Paris: Minuit, 1967).

[24] Friedrich Engels, preface of 1890 to the *Communist Manifesto*.

[25] Henri Lefebvre, *Éléments de rythmanalyse* (Paris: Syllepse, 1992), p. 63.

[26] Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. VIII, p. 572 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962).

[27] Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. XXV, pp. 17, 277 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964).

[28] On this question, see Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*, *Collected Works*, vol. XXXVIII (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976). Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/cw/volume38.htm>; also Michael Löwy, "De la grande logique de Hegel à la gare finlandaise de Petrograd" (1970), in *Dialectique et révolution : essais de sociologie et d'histoire du marxisme* (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1973). Available at: <https://fourth.international/en/europe/595>; and Daniel Bensaïd, *Stratégie et parti* (Montreuil: Presse Édition Communication-La Brèche, 1987; revised edition Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2016). A partial English translation of the core text was published as "Strategy and Politics: From Marx to the Third International," trans. Darren Roso, *Historical Materialism* 28:3 (2020), pp. 230–266, with an introduction by Darren Roso, "Introduction to 'Strategy and Politics'," *Historical Materialism* 28:3 (2020), pp. 197–229.

[29] The phrase is René Char's: "Notre héritage n'est précédé d'aucun testament" (from *Feuillets d'Hypnos*, 1946), used by Bensaïd and others in the Marxist tradition to evoke the rupture with inherited categories that revolution demands.