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SANTA BARBARA · SANTA CRUZ

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90024  
March 12, 1968

Miss Raya Dunayevskaya  
8146 Ward  
Detroit, Michigan 48228

Dear Miss Dunayevskaya:

I held off replying to your note and the enclosed chapter until I had a chance to look through several of Trotsky's works again. As it turns out, I probably could have spared myself that effort and you some time I had simply read through the essay when I received it. For, my position is so far from yours that I have grave doubts that you will regard my comments as helpful.

Basically, if I am correct in my reading, your argument seems to be this:

Lenin and Trotsky are distinguishable as theoreticians--even when they are in agreement on specific tactics---because (a) Lenin read Hegel and discovered a new understanding of Marxist theory through the dialectic (p.2); (b) Lenin regarded the masses as self-developing and a revolutionary force (p.8); and, (c) Trotsky departed from Lenin---and from the Marxist position (p.14)---on the peasant question, with the view that the peasants were not fundamentally revolutionary and therefore had to be led by the vanguard, i.e., the industrial proletariat (pp. 7,8,12,13ff.).

On the first point (a), I would certainly agree that Lenin regarded Hegel as crucial to an understanding of Marx, and that he looked down on those Marxists who lacked that understanding. But that really is not the point you wish to make. Rather, you assert that there was a "break" in Lenin's thought, which signified "a total change in all his former political concepts." (p.16) There are really two separable assertions here. The first is that such a radical change as you describe actually took place in Lenin's thinking, and with that I would disagree entirely--but I will respond to that in my comments on your second and third points (b&c). However, even granting that such a change did occur, which I don't, it still remains to be shown that the change is in any real sense traceable to his reading of Hegel. And that case simply is not made here. There is nothing in Lenin's writings to support the view that he saw any change in his political views as being related to his reading of Hegel. What he says is that Hegel's Logic is crucial to an understanding of Capital, and that certainly is true. One might reasonably extrapolate on this to say that an understanding of Hegel is vital to an understanding of Marx. But that is as far as Lenin goes. It is true, of course, that Lenin believes that no one could be a skilled

*To  
Challenged  
news*

(2)

*My  
objection  
is to  
Michels  
8/13/68*

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tactician or a good political leader who did not have a firm grasp of Marxist theory. In that sense, a knowledge of Hegel and party tactics are relatable, but so are many other things (an understanding of political economy, e.g., Smith, Ricardo, etc., for example). In short, it seems to me that a great deal more would have to be done to establish the degree and the kind of importance you attribute to Hegel in accounting for any change in Lenin's political thought, much less the "total change" you describe. And, in any case, one would still have to ask why, from the point of view of competing causal explanations, a reading of Hegel is rated over the political events of the same period, i.e., the start of the War, in accounting for any change in Lenin's political attitudes. In fact, your own statements on this point are ambiguous, because on p. 11 you do attribute the "complete change in Lenin's concepts" to "two world-shaking events," the Russian Revolution, and the colonial revolutions. (The War is not even mentioned) This is rather surprising since Lenin explicitly attributes a change in tactics, if not in theory, to the War). Doubtless, one would like to say that theory and practice are merged, and you mean that a reading of Hegel and the two world-shaking events go together to account for the "total change" in Lenin's thought. I do not find this at all a compelling argument. And, to mention just one minor point, what does one do with the three-year hiatus between the discovery of Hegel and the first world-shaking event?

(b) I find your statement that for Lenin "the masses were Reason" extraordinary in light of his ~~xxx~~ thoroughgoing and relentless criticisms of the "backwardness," "ignorance," "short-sightedness," and "instinctual spontaneity" of the masses. None of these frequently-used terms connote Reason to me. The masses, Lenin argues, do not develop any ideological position; that is, they do not consciously articulate and express the revolutionary class struggle. Rather, the "spontaneous (self) development of the labor movement leads to its becoming subordinated to bourgeois ideology." Hence, "our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is to combat spontaneity, to divert the labor movement, with its spontaneous trade-unionist striving, from under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social-Democracy." (What is to be Done? (International Publishers), p. 41) cf. p. 71 note. It is specifically the Party's "duty" to "stimulate" the minds of the masses, to emphasize the Party's leadership, to train Party members to become leaders of the masses, and to "dictate" proposals to the masses. (Ibid, p. 82.)

The masses "instinctively rush" into action, and the Party, which possesses "knowledge and understanding" must "guide" the masses. (Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution, IP, p.10-11) The task of the Party, as the keeper of the ideology, is "to elevate" the masses to the level of consciousness. (Collected Works, vol. V, p.316-7) The masses are not "able to assimilate the general idea of economic struggle; it is an idea that can be absorbed by a few educated workers

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whom the masses will follow, guided by their instincts and their direct immediate interests." (Collected Works, vol. IV, p. 291-2) Time after time, Lenin argues that Party leaders "must not sink to the level of the masses, to the level of the backward strata of the class." Thus, speaking about the role of a Socialist newspaper, Lenin observes:

The average worker will not understand some of the articles in a newspaper that aims to be the organ of the Party, he will not be able to get a full grasp of an intricate theoretical or practical problem. This does not ~~at~~ at all mean that the newspaper must lower itself to the level of the mass of its readers."

On the contrary, Lenin argues, the paper must remain on the level of the "intelligentsia," not catering to the "backward" workers. (CW, vol. IV, p. 281; cf. WTBD?, p. 100) "Therefore, attention must be devoted principally to the task of raising the workers to the level of revolutionists, but without, in doing so, necessarily degrading ourselves to the level of the 'laboring masses'...to the level of the average worker." (WTBD?, p. 122) The Platonic dichotomy between leaders and masses is not particularly disturbing to Lenin. He defends his view of the Party, and concedes the point. (WTBD, p. 116) In the debate with Trotsky & Martov who advocated broadening the base of the Party, Lenin complains that to let the masses in would "open the door for all elements of confusion, vacillation, and opportunism." The masses, far from representing any self-developing revolutionary force, much less Reason, symbolize to Lenin "unstable elements" which threaten "the purity of the Party's principles." The objective, according to Lenin, should be "to raise the calling and the significance of a Party member higher, higher, and still higher." In utter disbelief, Lenin exclaims that Trotsky's proposal would "make all and sundry members of the Party." And, by the way, contrast Lenin's position with Trotsky's belief in the masses. Trotsky asserts that the "chief danger" lies, not in the unguided spontaneity of the masses, as Lenin believed, but rather, in the "growing tendency to counterpose a few thousand comrades, who form the leading cadres, to the rest of the mass whom they look upon only as an object of action." (Compare this with your statement on p. 8) The issue, Trotsky said, is less concern for the "purity" of the Party's leadership or principles and more that of shifting "the center of Party activity toward the masses of the party." (These citations are from my lecture notes, for which I am unable at the moment to track down the specific references)

This represents but a small sampling of the total number of such statements in Lenin's writings. (All of the above are pre-1914, and I have grouped them in this way in order to indicate that we are not speaking of some off-hand attitude on Lenin's part, lightly to be dismissed, as I believe it is in your essay. (If there is a radical change, as you maintain, the force of that change is going to have to bear some proportion to the tremendous evidence for Lenin's 'old' attitude. In other words, while I agree that it is not a matter of the number of citations, but how

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one reads Lenin, still, one is not likely to be convinced of a person's "total" change of mind by five or six references---some of which relate to very specific circumstances, rather than reflecting any general change of attitude, but I don't have time to go into that---as compared to many times that number on the other side.

What about Lenin's views after 1914? If before the Revolution, the masses did not understand the "general idea of economic struggle" nor were they able to articulate any "conscious" ideological position, after the Revolution, they are still unable to understand what has been accomplished. "The workers did not understand what the new system was." Moreover, the "danger" in a revolution is that "the struggle will be so precipitous that the minds of the masses of the workers will not be able to keep pace with the rapid development. Even now the significance of the Soviet system is not clear to large masses of the politically educated German workers" (Selected Works, vol. VII, p. 238) Or again, Lenin complains that the workers and peasants "are accustomed to waiting for orders from above." (Ibid, p. 279) They do not even understand that the proletariat is the ruling class! Where is this self-developing Reason? It "waits for orders from above." Thus, Lenin declares, we have to "fight to instill into the minds of the masses" what the Revolution has accomplished. Those accomplishments are "only just barely beginning to penetrate the minds of the broad masses of the proletariat." (Ibid, p. 328)

If, prior to the Revolution, the Party had to "guide" direct, and control the masses, after the Revolution, Lenin argues that the Party must "rouse" and "lead" the masses. (Ibid, p. 342-3) It again must "raise" them from a state of backwardness (Ibid, p. 344) The problem now, as it always was for Lenin, is still "a struggle against ignorance, against lack of class consciousness, against the lack of organization of the broad masses." (Ibid, p. 420) And the solution and the instrument for carrying on the struggle is, as it always was, the principle of organization, realized by the institutional apparatus of the Party. The masses are "turbulent, surging, overflowing," i.e., instinctually spontaneous; what they require is "iron discipline" and "unquestioning obedience to the will of a single person, the Soviet leader." (Ibid, p. 345)

Why is "centralization and discipline" necessary to the party? Because, Lenin argues, without that discipline, the Party cannot "influence the mood of the masses." (Selected Works, vol. X, p. 84) Replying to his critics, Lenin brushes aside the whole question of leaders and masses (which is certainly a convenient tactic if one is a leader) with the comment, "there have always been attacks upon the 'dictatorship of leaders' in our Party." Nevertheless, "more than ever," the Party must "educate and guide" the masses. (SW, X, p. 91) Lenin warns, "you must not sink to the level of the masses, to the level of the backward strata of the class." (Ibid, p. 99) Even after the Revolution, Lenin can maintain that one cannot depend upon the "revolutionary mood" of the masses. (Ibid, pp. 104, 122) Both the tactics

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and the ideology of the class struggle are still in the hands of the Party. The vanguard has "to resort to maneuvers and compromises" in order "to raise and not lower the general ~~high~~ level of proletarian class consciousness." (Ibid, p. 116) The great failure of the Second International was "its inability, or incapacity to create a really centralized, really leading center that would be capable of guiding the international tactics of the revolutionary proletariat." (Ibid, p. 135), "The immediate task that confronts the class-conscious vanguard of the international labor movement, i.e., the Communist Parties, groups and trends, is to be able to lead the broad masses (now, for the most part, slumbering, apathetic, hidebound, inert and dormant) to their new position..." (Ibid, p. 136) And on and on. In performing "organizing work among the masses," Lenin writes, Party leaders must "direct their (the masses) consciousness towards socialism." They must make use of organization to raise the masses, but, he warns, "under all conditions and circumstances, and in every possible situation, they (the party leaders) will carry on a Party policy, they will influence their environment (the masses) in the spirit of the Party and will not allow their environment to engulf them." (this also is from my notes, but it occurs in Lenin's later writings, most probably, (SW IX)) I have gone on too long on this point, and will stop here.

*Peasants* I will comment only briefly on the third point (c). Here is Lenin on the peasants as a revolutionary force: "it would be senseless to make the peasantry the vehicle of the revolutionary movement... a party would be insane to condition the revolutionary character of its movement upon the revolutionary mood of the peasantry." (Collected Works, IV, p. 244) That was Lenin in 1899. Fourteen years later, he declares in a statement which he is particularly fond of repeating: "The Marxists champion the interests of the masses and say to the peasants: there is no salvation for you except by joining in the proletarian struggle." (Selected Works, XI, pp. 287, 288, 294) In this same period (1913), Lenin argues: "the peasants, in the main, have up to now remained aloof from the socialist movement of the workers and have joined the various reactionary and bourgeois parties. Only an independent organization of the wage workers, which ~~must~~ conducts a consistent class struggle can wrest the peasantry from the influence of the bourgeoisie..." (Ibid, p. 297) After the Revolution, Lenin's position is unchanged. "If the peasantry of Russia want to socialize the land in alliance with the workers who will nationalize the banks and establish workers' control, then they are our loyal colleagues." (SW, VII, p. 267) If the peasants come over to the side of the workers, then they are our revolutionary allies. The reason that the "if" is necessary is precisely because Trotsky is right in assuming that the peasants are not fundamentally or dependably revolutionary. The peasants are, and were always for Lenin, the class of the petty-bourgeoisie, which is by its nature a vacillating class between the "consistently revolutionary" workers and the established bourgeoisie. ~~That~~ That Lenin believed---and I agree---that he was following Marx in this view, see SW, XI, pp. 302-3.

Obviously, this 'commentary' has exceeded my original intentions, and

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since enough has been said to indicate the general range of our differences, it would be pointless to continue. I did not even get around to saying anything about Trotsky as such, but the dichotomy between Lenin and Trotsky, which you make central to your argument, seemed to me to take priority. As a consequence, I omitted from the discussion some of the other interesting points in your essay.

As I said at the outset, all of this may seem to you overly contentious and not at all helpful. I am sorry if that is the case; it certainly was not my intention. If it had been, I would not have considered it worthwhile to spend the time and care I have in trying to indicate not just a difference in our conclusions, but the reasons, as I find them, for my position.

After all this has been said, I hope that our common stance within the Marxist tradition will not be put aside by whatever differences we may have on certain intellectual interpretations of the writings of that tradition. Differences in 'interpretations' have always and will, no doubt, in the future provide some occupational security for philosophers; the point, however, as Marx said, is to change the world. And, on that, I trust, we are in essential agreement.

With my best regards.

Sincerely yours,

*Richard Ashcraft*  
Richard Ashcraft

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