Humor

Lenin and Geology

by Jonathan Crewe

The cherry tree, like almost all fruit trees, was, as is well known, only a few centuries ago transplanted by commerce into our zone...

[Marx, *The German Ideology*]

Lenin, we know, was no geologist. The reason why we know this is incredibly simple: at no point in any of his works does he evince the slightest interest in constituting as a science the radically idealist problematic of Sir Charles Lyell—nor to speak of the epigoni whom Engels dismissed in a trenchant phrase as 'Victorian geologists'. We are confronted in Lenin's texts by a massive silence, to which, without exception, bourgeois geologists have responded with their own 'silence'. Let us be very frank: Marxist geology has itself abandoned the field as 'untenable', and compromised itself in a thousand 'rear-guard actions' defending Lenin's so-called revolutionary leadership, contribution to Marxist dialectics, etc. Not one single 'Marxist' has yet attempted to situate Lenin's silence within the theoretical space in which it loses its abstract character, and (taking a phrase from the unfailingly alert proletarian militant), 'speaks louder than words'.

Even of we do not 'know' it already, the vacuous silence of bourgeois commentaries will tell us that Lenin 'was not trained geologists', and that consequently we are entitled to expect from him no more than 'amateur' natural history, or pre-scientific (ideological) ruminations. Bourgeois geology will, of course, ignore Lenin's work in its entirety. Employing its habitual mystifications, it will conceal—even if only from itself—the truth that it lacks its own object, and that its function is nothing but the production of surplus value (oil wells, gold deposits, etc.). It does not recognise Lenin's epochal intervention because it cannot afford to. As a preliminary step, any future Marxist geology must constitute itself by reading Lenin's works at least six times, and it must then think Lenin's silence and not merely reproduce it. It must, in any event, draw an absolute line of demarcation between the silent vacuity which is the product of contemplative idealism and the terribly concrete silence which mercilessly opposes it.

With due respect to my English readers, I must pause briefly to offer some advice on reading Lenin. This advice, which I should perhaps characterise as mandatory, must be followed exactly and without the slightest deviation or the reading of Lenin's texts will be found impossible.

1. Open the book.

2. Read from left to right, and from top to bottom.

I guarantee that any reader who follows this advice will advance rapidly, on condition that he or she is not confronted by a Chinese text. In the latter case enormous mystification is unavoidable, and can only be dispelled by the most rigorous and sustained application.

We are now in a position—seventy years post festum!—to pose the question of 'Lenin's geology'. Krupskaya tells us that, on an afternoon walk on Lake Geneva, Lenin turned to a group of mill-hands drawn by his magnetism, and asked: "Can anyone see the summit of Mont Blanc?" Chuckling richly at the workers on whom this question had fallen like a thunderbolt, Lenin added: "I'll bet you can all see the base!" In a single luminous sentence, Lenin settles accounts once and for
all with ‘geological science’. The ‘mountain as such’, with its horizontal strata, ‘naturally’ established from ‘time immemorial’, is revealed in its true essence as the reflection in the superstructure of the class interests of the Swiss bourgeoisie. And not only this: it is the militant workers alone who cannot ‘see’ the permanently clouded summit, which constitutes at once the illusion and sole object of bourgeois aesthetics and technology. It is the workers who live the base, as Lenin thinks the base, and, in thinking it, appropriates it for Marxist science.

It remains, then, for Marxist geology to write the unwritten volumes of Leninist silence, which authentically extends the silence of Marx and Engels. Lenin’s silence is to be understood symptomatically as the pure negation of bourgeois ‘geology’ (i.e., ‘theology’), and as the absolute precondition to the discourse in which Lenin confronts the militant Swiss with their historic interests. It is not in the imaginary science of ‘natural formations’, but in the real science of social formations that a Marxist geology must conduct its theoretical practice.


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5 Ibid.
7 Dobb, p. 310.
8 Ibid., p. 312.
16 Sweezy, p. 54.
19 Sweezy, p. 198.
20 Ibid.
21 Quoted in Bernstein, p. 80.
22 Ibid., p. 59.
23 Wasyly Leontiev, quoted in Colletti, p. 53.
24 Bernstein, p. 50.
25 Ibid., p. 103.
26 Ibid., p. 50.
27 Ibid., pp. 82-3.
29 Bernstein, p. 87.
30 Ibid., p. 15.
31 Ibid., p. 96.
32 Ibid., pp. 142-4.
33 Ibid., p. 144.
34 Ibid., p. 149.
35 Ibid., p. 163.
37 Ibid., p. 82.
38 Ibid., p. 18.
39 Ibid., p. 53.
40 As noted earlier, this is not the only possible origin of revisionist thought and practice.

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Grasping the specificity of class struggle, political practice and the rising tide of militarism under socialism is a task which will require an enormous amount of theoretical study and political struggle. Just as important, and just as difficult, will be the effort to begin to explain our emerging understanding of the socialist countries in a new and popular way. If the “military road to socialism” has done anything it has made more urgent these tasks. By forcing us to confront this problem squarely, we will be that much more urgently compelled to take up the struggle to revitalize Marxist theory and redefine socialist politics and goals. If the crisis of the East provides the impetus, certainly the crisis in the West is daily providing us with the opportunities to create and practice a new vision of socialism.

1 Robin Blackburn in Eric Hobsbawn, ed., The Forward March of Labour Halts? (Vermo, 1981), pp. 160-61. The phrase “stalinism” has been changed to “Stalinist Marxism” for publication in the TR.
3 “The Historic Significance of the 22nd Congress,” in Bakhur, The Dictatorship of the Proletariat (LNB, 1977), p. 204, emphasis in the original.
4 Theoretical Review, No. 19.