

KARL VON HCLDT argues that Lenin's conception of democracy is dangerously empty. In Stalin's hands this weakness became a weapon to justify despotism.

# Marxism, Leninism, and Stalin .....

**W**hat is the relation of Leninism to Stalinism? All of the participants in the debate started by Joe Slovo with his paper *Has socialism failed?* point towards this question. But none confront it head-on.

Slovo argues that the "fundamental distortions which emerged in the practice of existing socialism cannot be traced to the essential tenets of Marxist revolutionary science. If we are looking for culprits, we must look at ourselves, not at the founders of Marxism." This point is asserted rather than demonstrated. But surely the crisis of the socialist world is so great that we must ask whether some of the reasons might be found in classical theory?

Pallo Jordan asks whether Stalinism "flows logically from Leninism and Marxist theory", but does not attempt to answer the question. However, he argues that several events in the early years of the Soviet Union put the country decisively on the road to dictatorship: the crushing of the Kronstadt rebellion, the ban-

ning of party factions, the disbanding of the workers committees in the factories, the diminishing power of the Soviets. This all happened *under the leadership of Lenin.*

Michael Burawoy bases his critique of state socialism in Eastern Europe on Lenin's vision of radical democracy in *State and Revolution*. However, in his conclusion, he argues that the institutions of bourgeois democracy are essential for a democratic socialism. This seems to contradict Lenin, who attacks all forms of bourgeois democracy in *State and Revolution*.

Habib and Andrews regard Stalinism as a betrayal of Bolshevism, and urge a return to the "classical Marxist-Leninist tradition". On this issue, therefore, their views are not completely different from Slovo's.

It is clear that none of these articles deals directly with the relation of Lenin's theory and practice to Stalinism. Did Stalin make a complete break with Leninism, as Trotskyists and many communists now

argue? Or was Stalin simply continuing in a direction already set by Lenin, as many social democrats argue?

In this brief article I will consider this question from the angle of Lenin's political thought and action. I will not examine the material conditions under which his thinking developed, crucial as this would be for any full analysis of Leninism.

## Vanguard party

In *What is to be done?* Lenin set out his argument for a vanguard party of professional underground revolutionaries. In this booklet he adopted a very dismissive attitude to the need for democracy, both in the vanguard party and in the trade unions. He viewed trade unions as an important vehicle for spreading the influence of the party, rather than as a means for empowering the workers.

*What is to be done?* was a polemical argument at a specific time in Tsarist Russia. It is important to understand the context in which Lenin was

writing. Both the trade unions and the party were illegal, which meant secrecy was paramount.

Secondly, Lenin saw a professional vanguard as a way of overcoming the problem of many scattered local circles of amateur revolutionaries, which were often smashed by the police. Thirdly, Lenin was arguing against the 'economistic' trend in the socialist movement, which believed that the primary task was to build the trade unions, rather than engage in political agitation.

These factors all influence Lenin's argument. One must note, though, that in this booklet Lenin did not ascribe any political importance to democracy (Rosa Luxemburg pointed this out in her polemics with Lenin).

### The 1905 revolution contradicts

#### *What is to be done?*

Two years later the 1905 revolution erupted in Russia, with huge demonstrations, marches and strikes. The Petrograd Soviet was formed as an organ of worker power elected by all factories in the city. The Soviet - democratic, embodying the initiative of the masses, not submitting to any party programme - went against most of *What is to be done?*.

Many Bolshevik leaders opposed the Soviet. They argued that "elections will not guarantee class consciousness," that the Soviet should "be compelled to accept the Bolshevik programme and the authority of the Central Committee", and



that it should be "boycotted" or "exploded from within". (Liebmann: p 87)

Many Bolsheviks were suspicious of the initiative of the masses. Lenin however responded that the party had stagnated underground, and that thousands of fresh revolutionary workers should be recruited: "See to it that all higher-standing bodies are elected, accountable and subject to recall... The autonomy of every party organisation, which hitherto has been largely a dead letter, must become a reality." (Harding: pp 231-2)

When many Bolshevik cadres opposed these views by quoting *What is to be done?*, Lenin replied: "All those schemes, all those plans, create the impression of red tape... Do not demand any formalities and for heaven's sake forget all those schemes, and send all 'functions, rights and privileges' to the devil." (Liebmann: p 86)

Thus Lenin in practice criticised many of the formulations of *What is to be done?* Lenin himself later said of the booklet that it "controversially

corrects economism, but it would be wrong to study its contents outside this task."

(Ramsay et al: p 167) Unfortunately, *What is to be done?* has been taken out of its specific context (by both communists and Trotskyists) and elevated into the key text on the nature and role of the party.

### The Russian revolution

During the revolutionary year of 1917 workers committees emerged in many factories. During 1918 they developed into organs for worker control of production, and even worker self-management. But Lenin argued that 'one-man' management was more efficient, and that democracy in the workplace was unnecessary: "Democracy is a category proper *only* to the political sphere... Industry is indispensable, democracy is not." (Sirianni: p 211)

But even in the political sphere Lenin's attitude to democracy was somewhat limited. He wrote *State and Revolution* in August 1917, inspired by the experience of the Soviets. In this work he argues that the dictatorship of the proletariat is the most democratic form of state.

### Democracy equals administration

Yet he reduces the problem of democracy to the problem of administration: "Accounting and control - that is *mainly* what is needed for the smooth working, for the proper func-

tioning, of the *first phase* of communist society. All citizens are transformed into the hired employees of the state, which consists of the armed workers... The accounting and control necessary for this have been *simplified* by capitalism to the utmost and reduced to the extraordinarily simple operations - which any literate person can perform - of supervising and recording, knowledge of the four rules of arithmetic, and issuing appropriate certificates... From the moment... the vast majority have learned to administer the state *themselves*... have organised control over the insignificant capitalist minority, over the gentry who wish to preserve their capitalist habits and over the workers who have been thoroughly corrupted by capitalism - from this moment the need for government of any kind begins to disappear altogether."

The problem of democratic control by the workers is reduced to the problem of administering the state and the economy. Lenin does not mention how citizens can participate in forming the economic, social and political *policy* of the country. He does not mention *the role of political parties*, including the Communist Party.

And he does not acknowledge there may be *different interests* in society - whether within the working class or between different classes. This means that there is no need for a *democratic forum* - such as *parliament*, a national assembly, or even the soviets - where

those interests can be expressed and mediated. It is not that Lenin argues against such a forum - it is just that he does not once mention it at all in *State and Revolution!* This is a glaring absence in the key Leninist text on democracy and the state.

If it was this theory of politics and democracy which informed the practice of the Bolsheviks, it is not surprising that, under difficult conditions, they allowed the Soviets to wither away, and elevated the role of the party to 'the vanguard of society'. If the task was simply to administer, control and do arithmetic, then the party was surely more efficient than democratic organs such as the soviets or the factory committees.

The party was seen to embody the interests of the working class, and could best manage society in their interests. This choice blocked off the ability of citizens to express their needs or participate in the formulation of policy.

### Weaknesses in Marxism, Leninism

I do not wish to argue that Leninism led necessarily to Stalinism. I wish to argue that Marxism and Leninism had theoretical weaknesses. Marx did not develop a theory of the state and politics, since his main project was theorising the capitalist mode of production.

Neither did Lenin develop a theory of the state, politics and democracy, although he enriched Marxism with a theory and practice of revolutionary

struggle in specific national circumstances. Indeed, his conception of democracy was dangerously empty.

When these weaknesses combined with material conditions - the backward nature of Russia, the isolation of the Soviet revolution - the weaknesses were accentuated. Under the leadership of Stalin Marxism-Leninism was turned into an iron dogma in which the theoretical weaknesses of Marxism and Leninism became weapons to crush democracy and justify despotism.

If this is true, there is an urgent need for Marxists to undertake two tasks. Firstly, to analyse the enormous damage done to theory by Stalinism and Soviet-style Marxism-Leninism, in order to free Marxism and Leninism from this burden.

Secondly, to critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of the writings of Marx and Lenin (as well as the works of the later Marxists mentioned by Jordan, and others such as Antonio Gramsci and Rosa Luxemburg) in order to re-invigorate the theory and practice of social transformation.

### Bibliography:

Lenin, *What is to be done, State and revolution*; A Harding, *Lenin's political thought*; M Liebmann, *Leninism under Lenin* (Merlin Press, London, 1975) Ramsay, Corregan and Sayer, *Socialist Construction and Marxist Theory* (Monthly Review Press, London and New York, 1978); Sirianni, *Workers control and socialist democracy* (Verso, London, 1972).