

LENIN RELOADED AGAIN: A CRITICAL BOOK REVIEW
OF TAMAS KRAUSZ'S *RECONSTRUCTING LENIN:
AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY*

“ Lenin’s tradition of Marxism (...) alone made a breach in the walls of capitalism, even if today that breach seems mended”.

Tamasz Krausz¹

The 100th year anniversary of the October Revolution has seen an upsurge in new biographies and histories, from Slavoj Žižek’s new book on Lenin to RT.com’s “twitter” feed re-playing events as they occurred in 1917. In this context of a general upsurge in interest both in Lenin and the Russian Revolution itself, Tamas Krausz’s recent and magisterial intellectual biography of Lenin marks a significant intervention on a number of different levels, which will be engaged in this review.

October, 1917 was *the event* which marked a bifurcation in the overall unfolding of capitalism. Like a thunderbolt, the contours of a possibility of a *new human becoming* had forced itself into political space and on a global scale. The liberal political imaginary was overcome and displaced in this moment. The imaginary had been freed of the horizons set by liberal parliamentary politics and their social democratic allies, dating back to the 19th century. Liberal hegemony had suddenly encountered an existential threat to its reproduction and theoretical coherence. Its obsolescence, and that of the capitalist social formation, became suddenly obvious.

Lenin’s tradition of Marxism inaugurated a rupture. It is a central virtue of Krausz’s book that he places Lenin within this context of what could be called the *strategic political level*, in which systemic capitalist reproduction and hegemony encountered a strategic threat, which was capable of decisively interrupting (or at the very least fundamentally interfering with) the reproduction of capitalist reproduction and hegemony itself. Krausz engages with this fundamental aspect of Lenin’s struggles by noting how Lenin understood that the revolution had become *possible*, amidst the events of the

¹ Krausz, p. 356.

actual. But Lenin's insight went beyond detecting the *possibility* of a social revolution amidst the imperialist world war, through materially evoking that the revolution opened a possibility for a fundamental rupture with the actual, for a movement beyond capitalism itself. Even if only as a slim possibility, a road perhaps impossible for the revolution to cross, the opening to step onto this road was indeed present.² Gyorgy Lukacs also anticipated this strategic aspect of Lenin's interventions across 1917 and thereafter. In his *Lenin: A Study of the Unity of His Thought*,³ Lukacs emphasized that even rear-guard actions such as the "New Economic Policy" were viewed by Lenin as a means to an end, as another step in the struggle for a transition out of the capitalist actuality, uncovering yet another layer towards the unfolding of a radically different social possibility.

While placing this monumental event in a broader historical context, *three critical moments* emerge in response to the political rupture precipitated by Lenin's central presence in the events of 1917. The first moment of capitalist reaction was US President Woodrow Wilson's hurried announcement of his Fourteen Points at Versailles, 1918, to counter the explosive anti-imperialist potential of Lenin's support for national self-determination. Wilson understood the danger posed by the possibility of imminent spread of the October insurrection outside the confines of the old Russian Empire. The revolutionary processes that Lenin's state and tradition of Marxism were starting to unfold (and even worse, that *could* unfold further in the future) remained vulnerable to the possibility of an early strategic defeat, such as the Paris Commune, perhaps, even if bloodier. This was the window of opportunity seen by Wilson and other imperialists in 1918. But the early (and easy) extinguishing of the uprising of October 1917 was not to be. Although the German, Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Chinese anti-capitalist insurrections all failed within a decade after 1917, so did the immediate liberal reaction: the newly-formed Red Army decisively defeated the combined armies of capitalist invaders and their local reactionary collaborators in the civil war that engulfed the political spaces of the former Russian Empire.

This defeat necessitated a second moment of capitalist reaction, a moment most clearly illustrated by the rise of Hitler's Germany and its hidden allies across Europe. This moment was the most aggressive manifestation of organized anti-communism, the now-second iteration of the liberal order's attempt to extinguish the event of October, 1917. Today, it is conveniently

² Krausz, p. 356-357.

³ Lukacs, Chapter 6 (Revolutionary Realpolitik).

“lost in translation”, that the ascension of Hitler’s party to power (with a wide base of support and admiration from the German, European, and U.S. power blocs, and not insignificant numbers from other social formations, including the proletariat) was tied to the fact that the Nazis expressed the clearest possible totalizing anti-communist program in the 1920s and 1930s European politics, and had the means to achieve this goal. The Nazi project attempted a trans-valuation of the entire liberal project, but from a theoretical practice that was opposite to that of Lenin’s. Their approach to politics was an attempt to mimic and harness the energy released by the Soviet state and society as a way of retooling its ability to wage war against it, on the strategic level of politics. War communism showed that Lenin and the revolutionary Soviet state already understood total war as an unavoidable-at-times necessity for *struggle* on the strategic level against forces of capitalist power in the age of “technical reproduction”. And by the end of the civil war they had a basic *capacity* to wage it, if necessary yet again. Ernst Junger’s concept of total mobilization came a decade later, just in time to be synthesized in the various planning and coordination bodies of Hitler’s state (though to be sure, without Junger’s political support).

In this context, the Soviet victory in World War II was a monumental event, blocking this second attempt at closing the breach in the capitalist wall. The victory, at an unimaginable human cost,⁴ in turn opened the possibility for an even wider breach, making possible (among other events) the anti-colonial struggles that followed the end of the war, yet again fundamentally redrawing the global political geography.⁵

⁴ The human cost of the war on the Eastern Front is not comprehended in the West to this very day. Even limiting the discussion to the number of war dead and wounded as total percentages of the population, the casualties suffered by the Soviet Union were surpassed only by the losses and suffering incurred by the North Korean people as a result of U.S. military action during the Korean War.

North Korea lost roughly at least twenty percent of its population during the few years of that war (Hahn 1993, and Armstrong).

⁵ A point often overlooked by anti-leftist interpreters of the war, was the unimaginable will to resist that emerged on part of Soviet society as a whole. Even with the massive forces arrayed against them, even including large number of collaborators from occupied Soviet territory, the will of the Red Army and Soviet society in general could not be broken. This is perhaps the best example of the levels of legitimacy that the October Revolution still held across Soviet society in the early 1940s. This was despite Stalin’s purges, the authoritarian turn of the party fusing with the state, and the generally difficult conditions of everyday life for the vast majority. Consider, in contrast, the overall performance of the Russian Imperial Army during WW I, or the near total lack of will to resist the Nazis displayed by French society in general (where again, revolutionary militants formed the core of the Resistance, but whose total numbers of active participants were very low relative the total French population. The historian Robert Paxton puts the number of the resistance at 300,000 to 500,000 people (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/02/25/truth-about-french-resistance/> (also Paxton 2001).), a small minority of the total French population.

The third moment emerged in the decades of the fifties and sixties. In a time of anti-colonial struggles and new successful breaches in the capitalist hegemonic order, the culmination came on the techno-scientific front, with Yuri Gagarin's ascent into space.

Shortly thereafter, the breach was indeed sealed. The reasons are complex and still waiting to be uncovered in detail or given meaning. The Soviet state, and especially anything creatively Soviet, disappeared almost as suddenly as they had emerged. However, this event was certainly not a blimp on the screen in terms of historical temporality.

THE GHOST OF LENIN AND THE PHANTASM OF THE FUTURE

Despite the disappearance of much of the meaning of the Soviet experiment, Lenin's ghost has reappeared to unsettled and insecure liberal minds. For example, on April 9th, 2015, the Ukrainian Rada passed a new law, No. 2558, "On the condemnation of the communist and national-socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes in the Ukraine, and the ban on propagandizing their symbology".⁶ In the most egregious of post-1991 European anti-communism,⁷ the law bans and criminalizes the display of any and all Soviet regalia, from waving the red flag, to talking about the virtues of the 1917 October Revolution. Sympathetic discussion of the Soviet past, in any form—in a society which was a hotbed of revolutionary activity before, during and after 1917—now carries criminal penalties. In many ways this was a logical continuation of the frenzied mobs who have toppled (and continue to topple) statues of Lenin all over the Ukraine, an event accompanying the ascension of the new, proudly right-wing, neoliberal, and Nazi-admiring post-Maidan regime in Kiev.⁸ Clearly, the ghost of Lenin is alive, and with it, the phantasm of a new possible rupture away from the bleak mediocrity that characterizes everyday life in post-Soviet space.

⁶ See, in Russian: <http://twower.livejournal.com/1637232.html> . And the original legislation in Ukrainian: <http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc41?pf3511=54670>

⁷ For the ideological predecessors of this legislation, see the *European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism*, passed by the European Parliament in 2008. The full resolution is available here: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2008-0439+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>, retrieved on 7/13/15.

⁸ Subsequently, after the passage of this legislation, the Ukrainian Rada has passed another law legislating the renaming of Soviet street names to names commemorating Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists (including Nazi collaborators) and religious reactionary figures.

How are we to read Krausz's magisterial socio-theoretical⁹ reconstruction of Lenin's life?¹⁰ In one immediate sense, Krausz's book is a devastating broadside and an overcoming of the heaps of recent manuscripts published on Lenin from the vantage point of rabid anti-communism. Krausz's biography is a powerful corrective to narratives posed by Richard Pipes or Robert Conquest, and others of their ilk. Such a reading becomes even more powerful when combined with the recent (and ongoing) work on Lenin by historians such as Vladlen Loginov, whose three volumes on Lenin's life and politics offer numerous corrections to arguments posed by the likes of Pipes and Conquest.¹¹

On a different and related register, it is implicit in Krausz's argument that as a figure of totalizing theoretical practice geared for the production and projection of new revolutionary subjectivity—whether on the level of concrete action (exemplified by the decision to push hard for the decisive October uprising), or on the level of abstract concept formation (as a master of strategic and operational political practice)¹²— Lenin *continues to fuel the revolutionary imaginary*. In the figure of Lenin one finds the synthesis (deployed in a moment of systemic political crisis) of the extreme will to power in service of a decisive political rupture away from capitalism, with the carefully cultivated ability to *think* politically, and to do so in the sense of an immediate and constant political *practice* (with everything this entails: attention to the importance of *organizational structures*, emphasis on a comprehensive knowledge of the situation at hand, and the understanding that decisive action at moments of great flux are of essential importance in revolutionary political struggle).

⁹ "A socio-theoretical reconstruction" is the subtitle in the Russian edition of the book, which seems more satisfying to me than the English version's: "an intellectual biography".

¹⁰ Here we should also highlight Monthly Review Press's equally important and bold intervention in publishing this English translation, and the enormous intellectual labor performed by the translators.

¹¹ For a good example of the distortions present in Richard Pipes' work on Lenin see his *The Unknown Lenin. From the secret archive* (Yale University Press, 1996). Soviet-Russian historian Vladlen Loginov comprehensively dismantles Pipes' arguments and exposes their ideological overdetermination in a number of writings, including *Posleslovie k sborniku "V.I. Lenin. Unknown Documents. 1891-1922."* (Afterword to the collection "V.I. Lenin. Unknown Documents. 1891-1922."). Article accessed at <http://scepis.net/library/id1577.html> on July 25, 2015, in Russian.

¹² The operational level of political struggle can be said to denote those struggles that directly affect and shape the patterns of everyday life. This level of struggle can be thought of as an *intermediary* level between *tactics* (the most specific, isolated, local events in the struggle, which are however unable to affect the patterns of everyday life), and strategy (political goals whose achievement leads to epochal (systemic) change in a particular social formation).

Or, put in terms of Antonio Gramsci's concepts, the operational level of the class struggle is where hegemony is produced and projected across allies and class enemies. The functioning of the hegemonic apparatus, and the integral state itself, can only be assured by controlling the general flows, ideas and events of everyday life. Such control can be exerted most effectively and durably on the intermediary level of struggle, which includes long-duration, specific campaigns against class enemies, in specific areas of everyday life (education, at work, the repressive state apparatuses and their areas of social focus, the general process of proletarianization, etc.).

In short, in Lenin's approach to theoretical practice (even if not so much in its details), we (still) find the possibility of an effective counter-hegemonic political strategy; the ghost of Lenin remains at the root of future revolutionary theoretical practice.

THE REVOLUTIONARY OBJECTIVES: THE TRANSFORMATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE

It is one of Krausz's strongest virtues, that his book clarifies the overarching focus of Lenin's politics: the need to change the patterns of everyday life, combined with the ability to project political force on all levels of the class struggle, but especially on the level most directly shaping ideological space (what I am calling a general descriptor of the patterns of everyday life shaped by the effects of hegemony).

To think of the patterns of daily life means to think politics in terms of the flows of time and space, and their connection to political force (power). In terms of the everyday, Henri Lefebvre very incisively wrote that, to not have power means to live "inside a narrow time scale, with no understanding of what time is, not because they (the proletariat) are stupid, but because they are unaware. They do not understand time (because they are immersed in it)".¹³

Political oppression extends over social space and time, and thus actualized across class lines, casting profound effects on the temporal dimension of our lives.

This narrowing of time can be experienced in different ways, but the common thread is *the general limiting of the temporal horizon of the imaginary*: less time and emphasis in abstract concept formation, less formed knowledge on daily events in their political totality (due to lack of ability and practice for/in abstract thought), less thinking about the future, a narrowing of historical sense to that which is now immediately in front of me. The reduction of life, in other words, to its bare, most immediate functions necessary for physical reproduction. The reduction of thinking from the rich complexities inherent in our abilities as humans, to simplistic, mechanical mutterings, internalized from the oppressor and its technologies of subject-formation. To think

¹³ Lefebvre 2014, p. 347-348.

requires time, as many have written since Aristotle, and this specific use of time is what is most restricted for the proletariat.¹⁴

Here, Krausz excels in his clarification of Lenin's often-discussed and criticized emphasis on the practical need to expand the political horizon of the proletariat "from without". Contrary to worn-out critiques, "from without" does not mean the importing of revolutionary politics "from outside the proletariat", as an expression of snobbish political elitism by a self-chosen "few", but an intervention aiming to disrupt the closed loop of narrow time as the temporal experience of everyday life on the level of thought. Lenin's emphasis on "from without" means from outside the narrow time and space of internalized bourgeois ideology, optimized (i.e. simplified and dumbed down) for the proletariat, and consigning it to living with less knowledge of the present (to follow Lefebvre again), and less thinking about the future.¹⁵

PARALLEL TO THIS IS KRAUSZ'S PARAPHRASE OF LENIN:

the working class is subject to bourgeois society not only in its generality, but also concretely, since all preconceived notions associated with the capitalist system find their way into the deepest consciousness of workers. The working class is unable to spontaneously rid itself of these preconceived notions.¹⁶

What do "exits" have to do with the ability to influence historical (social) memory, a key factor for the temporal reproduction (continuity) on the strategic level of the political struggle? Here Krausz makes a crucial observation, noting how much emphasis Lenin placed on the need to build monuments to revolutionary heroes and events (from Marx and Engels, through figures like Gogol, Dostoyevsky and the like).¹⁷ We can extend Krausz by noting that this practice of Lenin's extended beyond Marx, Engels and the pantheon of revolutionary writers in the Russian Empire, to include the renaming of streets after revolutionary events and heroes, as well as cities. The goal was to *redraw the geography of ideological space*, with the aim of preventing the origins

¹⁴ Here I'm following Bernard Stiegler (2010), who writes of the proletariat as the oppressed, and thus the dependent, the stunted by virtue of their (forced) loss of fundamental knowledge about the everyday: the knowledge of *how to make*, and of *how to think*, thus living life from a position of total dependency on the oppressor (the capitalists as a class, who have both retained and cultivated their ability to think, and do as a class).

¹⁵ Lefebvre 2014, p. 348.

¹⁶ Krausz, p. 114.

¹⁷ Krausz, p. 68.

of the revolutionary movement from being lost “in the fog” of continuous long-term class struggle. Or to put it differently, to prevent the temporal and spatial decay from within the patterns of ideological space of those who are subject to the narrow time scale of daily life.

Antithetically one can sense the “wide”, long, temporal sense of the bourgeoisie: their monuments to themselves and to their class via statues, philanthropic efforts, the naming of buildings. A recent example of this is the Steven A. Schwartzman Building of the New York City Public Library, or (a century or so prior) Carnegie Mellon University, or the constant presence of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation across media, social or otherwise. In this sense, Lenin’s call to build monuments to revolutions past (1917 and the Paris Commune, etc.) and their participants, should be seen as part of this operational¹⁸ struggle to *widen the time horizon* of the proletariat specifically, and revolutionary forces in general, as an attempt to redefine the social perception (to shape ideological space) of daily life on the level of time and space. It is about *meaning* transferred via generations, and about space, of daily routines, that are controlled (symbolically and physically) by the proletariat (and the revolutionary power bloc in general).

And also, in this sense, the destruction of Lenin statues in the Ukraine today is a crucial and necessary act of operational planning on part of the capitalist power bloc, aiming to once again narrow the time and space horizons of the proletariat. Today in the Ukraine of fast-purged Soviet imagery, as before 1917, most time-space inhabited by the proletariat is either filled by bourgeois abstractions (ads, street names, statues and monuments glorifying capitalists and their corporations), or will be replaced by a short-time focus on primary survival, minimization of abstract thought, of ghettos devoid of any symbolic presence, just post-Soviet ruins existing in a state of slow collapse and disappearance.

An important series of questions arises from destructions of monuments and what they signify. How is “Leninopad” in the Ukraine of today akin to the

¹⁸ Distinct from the higher level of strategic politics, the level of operations—similar to its meaning in military practice—is the level of struggle that directly influences possibilities on the strategic level of politics. I am making this distinction to differentiate it from *tactics*, which is what most on the Left thinks about when erroneously referring to “strategy”. In actuality, the tactical level of political struggle represents the most immediate, concrete aspects of a struggle, which cannot by themselves exert strategic effects. It is clear that Lenin understood these distinct level of politics, each with their own temporal and spatial components, along with different levels of theoretical abstractions and logic.

ongoing struggles in the southern United States centered on calls for removal of Confederate monuments? What is the difference between keeping the monuments of the victors, versus that of the defeated? One suggestive answer is that history belongs to the victors, and it is their prerogative to maintain hegemony over historical (political) memory, over what is visible (and invisible) in the everyday. But here again, Lenin's ghost unveils deep contradictions. In the Ukraine, the removal of Soviet memory is (at least) partially filled with Nazi symbology. There are night-time torch marches down the central boulevard in Kiev. A number of volunteer battalions active in the civil war in the Donbass Region openly proclaim their allegiance to memory of the Third Reich and its various state formations. This rings odd in the Europe of 2017; there are no Nazi regalia publicly and officially displayed in the center of Berlin. The Nazi are (so far) a part of the vanquished past, its politics subject to state suppression. Yet, when it comes to confronting Lenin and the state he helped create, the Nazi past is allowed to be re-activated precisely in the political spaces of Nazism's greatest crimes (and possibly its most decisive defeat).

ON THE QUESTION OF ORGANIZATION

Bourgeois professors attempted to use the concept of equality as grounds for accusing us of wanting all men to be alike ... But in their ignorance they did not know that the socialists...had said: equality is an empty phrase if it does not imply the abolition of classes... A society in which the class distinction between workers and peasants still exists is neither a communist society nor a socialist society.

— *Lenin: Constitutional Illusions, First All-Russia Congress on Adult Education*¹⁹

It is here within the framework on the question of organization that Krausz's work begins to take on a new significance. Lars Lih, among others, has argued that in fundamental ways Lenin's party was a continuation of the practices of the German Social Democratic Party, with adjustments necessitated by Russian conditions.²⁰ The general sentiment is that Lenin advocated for a "party of professional revolutionaries", implying a rigorous selection process, expectations of dedication, motivation and selflessness in political work. The clandestine nature of the party, it is said, was made necessary by the repressive nature of

¹⁹ Lenin (1974), p. 358-359.

²⁰ Lih (2008).

the czarist regime, where in the absence of liberal parliamentarism, lack of clandestine capabilities would be tantamount to political and physical suicide.

Both of these general descriptions capture important elements of Lenin's organizational approach, but they are also incomplete in significant ways. The professional and secrecy aspects of revolutionary organization were already implemented by previous generations of revolutionaries active in the Russian Empire. For example, Aleksandr Herzen's secret revolutionary movement *Liberty and Land* launched the Narodnik movement in the period immediately before Lenin's birth. To this could be added various anarchist groups, for whom absolute dedication to the cause, and a strict dedication to conspiracy were defining features of their revolutionary approach. Lenin's approach on this question was thus not a deviation from the norm.

Krausz's reading is significant in so far that it enriches this conversation in important ways. He points out, for example, that Lenin thought of the party as a:

... broad, horizontally and vertically segmented social resistance, the "moving force of which is the proletariat"(...) the party, as part of the social class' "most revolutionary part", becomes an independent actor with a vested interest in the conscious, revolutionary transformation of society.²¹

This is a crucial intervention that Krausz makes in his biography of Lenin, shedding light on ways in which Lenin's approach was indeed a fundamental breakthrough on the question of revolutionary organization. Lenin's view on the party question retains its importance, Krausz argues, because Lenin saw the party a way of building "social counter-power". Not simply an opposition party (under bourgeois hegemony), the way the German Social Democratic Party had become by the first decade of the twentieth century, but *an independent political force*, whose goal was to build *a sustained presence throughout ideological space*, to project counter-hegemonic force. The party, in other words, aimed to prepare for the revolutionary insurrection by struggling to shape the patterns of everyday life:

...a political and cultural leader of a network of civil society organizations, the "workers' party"— which never exclusively signified the party of manual laborers.²²

²¹ Krausz, p. 360-361.

²² Krausz, p. 360.

Here it should also be noted that Lenin was concerned with producing *capacities for struggle* on the operational level of the class struggle,²³ where ideological space can be most directly affected. Conspiracy was fundamental, but only as means to an end (as shown in the flexibility displayed by the Bolshevik participation in parliamentary politics whenever it became possible before 1917, but only to subvert parliamentarism, rather than to “fight for the people” through it).

Another aspect which sets Lenin apart from anarchists, Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries is Lenin’s focus on the political of the intermediary spaces of the struggle. The Mensheviks, in general, assumed the role of the opposition (especially in the crucial year of 1917), while the SRs contained the full spectrum of conspiratorial anarchist-like terrorism (direct action), with both approaches remaining on the level of the immediately-simple *concrete*—or tactical— unable to decisively revolutionize (and thus re-shape) ideological space.

In other words, Lenin’s understanding, as Krausz notes, was much broader and inclusive than Karl Kautsky’s notion of the party importing “class consciousness into the proletariat from the outside”, an idea which Lenin accepted as only a starting point.

In this context, Krausz also offers a critical commentary, referring to what Gyorgy Lukacs, later in his thought found to be problematic in Lenin’s approach on the question of organization. In Lukacs’ view, Lenin focused overwhelmingly on radicalizing ideology, at the expense of truly radicalizing the movement beyond the practices set by the capitalist economy. In other words, Lenin failed to understand the *qualitative* changes that capitalism, even in 1917, had brought to the Western proletariat:

Lenin’s general thinking (...) placed too much emphasis on revolutionizing the ideology. Hence he did not direct this ideology specifically on the object to be revolutionized, the capitalist economy.²⁴

²³ As previously mentioned, this is the space (level) of political struggle between the tactics of the immediate, short-duration political event, and the strategic space where systems of social formation are reproduced (or, in turn, replaced by new social formations).

²⁴ Krausz, p. 362.

This is reminiscent of the persistent “state capitalist” critique of the Soviet project, with the presence of wage labor, authoritarian work relations, accumulation of capital (even if called something different), and the continuous glorification of the production process as the foundational “socialist” moment. Krausz adds that the actual political effect of this was for Lenin to become the theoretician of a new type of *realpolitik*, setting up the trajectory of the party, from a coordinating mechanism of revolutionary presence in ideological space, to a post-revolution evolution into a party-state, whose objective was “no longer to locate the rights to power in the working class but to preserve the power of an isolated elite”.

This presents a very difficult question for praxis, especially when mapping out the evolution of the Soviet system after Lenin’s death, and it remains as one of the fundamental tasks of radical critical thought to write a fully developed “critique of Soviet political economy”. Still, the first part of Krausz’s discussion of Lenin’s approach to the party question remains directly relevant for our times, given that we are still facing the (seemingly impossible) task of figuring out an organizational approach that can begin to project counter-hegemonic effects under present conditions (or said differently: of shaping ideological space by projecting political force on the crucial intermediary, operational, level of politics).

Krausz also notes that this incorrect generalization of Lenin’s “party of professional revolutionaries” continues to plague Western scholars in particular, who continue to “locate the roots of Lenin’s conception of social organization and socialism in *What Is To Be Done*”, just one work in his forty-eight volumes of written output, penned more than a decade old before the crucial tests of 1917.²⁵

For Krausz, one of his significant contributions in this biography is to engage Lenin’s work in its *totality*, and to show that it was not only the specifics of revolutionary struggle that contained the core of his political thought. For Krausz, taking Lenin’s work in its totality (and especially in the period between 1904 and 1918) means to re-cast what Lenin thought about the party and revolutionary organizing in terms of the creation of a massive “network of agents”, permeating across ideological space (“every factory must be our fortress”), with emphasis on education, on the “significance of enlightenment and education”, and the point that “day-to-day struggle serves at least as much of a ‘self-educating’ purpose as “teaching and learning””.²⁶

²⁵ Krausz, p. 115.

²⁶ Krausz, p. 115.

Another element of Lenin's approach to the question of organization was, as Krausz points out, the problematic of the party as a "structured political institution with a military and bureaucratic hierarchy".²⁷ This was pointed out by Leon Trotsky in his 1904 critical essay, written in response to Lenin's *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*. Trotsky was critical of the authoritarian tendencies he read in Lenin's polemics of the time, tendencies which mirrored the general authoritarian structure of the class enemy itself. In addition, "Trotsky also rejected the notion that the revolutionary intelligentsia was called upon to import class consciousness into the proletariat from the outside."²⁸

But there is an unappreciated dialectical tension that Trotsky's critique missed, and Krausz's analysis demands to be uncovered. Lenin's view of the party was not simply (and only) one of a centralized hierarchy arranged along military lines. His approach also contained an understanding of the party as a *network*, which presupposed decentralization and autonomy in its daily functioning. A contemporary Soviet-Russian leftist sociologist and philosopher offers an assessment of Lenin's party that explicates this dialectical tension. In an article titled *Orgvopros (The Question of Organization)* Aleksandr Tarasov²⁹ writes that by 1917, the Bolshevik Party was a party of a new type, a new form of revolutionary organization: the *armed party*, or put slightly differently, the party-army.³⁰ Joined by the similarly-structured party of the Socialist Revolutionaries (whose left wing, must be remembered, formed the junior partner in the first Soviet government), the Bolsheviks' organizational innovation was instrumental in *its ability to execute and sustain a successful revolutionary insurrection*. Tracing its roots in the experience of the 19th century *Narodnik* movement, Tarasov defines the armed party as:

...a political party of a non-parliamentary type, fusing armed struggle with agitational-propagandistic activity, mass (popular) mobilizations and the idea-political leadership of "sister" mass and non-mass organizations.³¹

²⁷ Krausz, p. 123.

²⁸ Krausz, p. 123.

²⁹ Tarasov was that rare political phenomenon in the 1970s and 1980s, a radical leftist, communist dissident in the Soviet Union. The best biographical information in English is available on his Wikipedia page: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Tarasov

³⁰ The article is available on the website of the Russian leftist online journal *Scepsis*: <http://scepsis.net/library/id3610.html>

³¹ All quotes related to Tarasov's article here and onward are obtained from <http://scepsis.net/library/id3610.html>

Tarasov offers the clearest expression of the Bolshevik party I have encountered as of yet, and thus deserves an extended explication. Note how his conception captures the orientation of Lenin's organization towards *participation on the intermediary, operational level of the class struggle*. First, the party is a complex, *multi-faceted* structure designed to project political force across various areas of operational space. On another level, it is a formalized political organization, with rules and expectations, a party in the literal political sense of the term (an organization optimized for bringing together politically likeminded people with the intent to participate directly in political struggle). At the same time, this was not a parliamentary party of the bourgeois or social-democratic type. Even if it participated in parliamentary politics (whenever it legally could), its structure was *resistant by design* to the general tendencies embedded in all parliamentary parties: the tendency towards reform, accommodation with the class enemy, and non-revolutionary politics in general:

The Bolshevik Party, though it named itself social-democratic, was active—in contrast with western social democratic parties—underground, meaning, as a secret organization. Thus, in the course of political struggle, it could more or less successfully weed out that human floatsam, which populated the legal social-democratic parties. Being an underground organization, existing outside the law from the very beginning (to the extent that until 1905 generally speaking, all parties in the Russian Empire were banned), the party of the Bolsheviks could calmly ignore (in contrast with parliamentary parties) the ACTIVE laws, without the need to adapt to the existing legal structure. This allowed it to resist opportunism.

The party-army (or, the armed party) was comfortable in virtually all manifestations of the class struggle, from parliamentary elections, to clandestine actions, trade union politics, to the production and projection of revolutionary ideology on the level of theoretical thought. It was, thus, *active throughout ideological space*. When the revolutionary rupture emerged as a possibility, the armed party was perfectly placed—having survived repeated attempts at its destruction by the state and related hegemonic apparatuses—to directly challenge the hegemony of the then-ruling power bloc.

In addition, as an illegal political organization, the Bolsheviks did not, as a general rule, encounter internal tendencies that were anti-revolutionary. Given its charter and organizational program, by definition opportunists did not flock to its ranks (at least not in large numbers, as in the case of social democratic reformist parties).

Interestingly, Tarasov notes that the Bolsheviks were generally seen by other revolutionaries as part of the international social-democratic movement, a correct sentiment, which at the same time prevented outsiders from understanding that Lenin's party represented a new form of a revolutionary organization.

In summary, then, the strength of the armed party was derived from its autonomous structures, relative to the class enemy. As Tarasov puts it:

...from not being transparent for the enemy, meaning it was a structure that was autonomous from the opponent. By becoming a legal parliamentary party, the communist party lost this advantage.

The key points revealed by Krausz's emphasis on the networked approach envisioned by Lenin and Tarasov's focus on the armed party concern once again the central role of ideological space, and the importance of sustaining revolutionary politics over long temporal and spatial durations, of sustaining struggles—in the way Lenin's organization managed—on the intermediary (operational) level of the struggle, where the projection of counter-hegemonic political force can lead to changes in everyday life.

POLITICS AS WAR

Revolutionary insurrection continues to appear in subversive texts, such as those published by the Invisible Committee, Alain Badiou,³² and is often discussed among contemporary anarchists. Yet, it is accurate to state that in general terms (and with obvious exceptions such as Badiou), the insurrection as a method of realizing the revolutionary rupture is often discussed as anachronistic, an indicator of why the revolutions of yesterday "failed".

But the political truth, of course, is that no revolution in the epoch of capitalist social formation thus far, has been even remotely possible without a deliberate and successfully executed revolutionary insurrection.³³ An inability or unwillingness to engage in an insurrection that can reshape ideological space and force the dissolution of the capitalist-led state and its various apparatuses (even if it does not abolish them afterwards, but replaces

³² The Invisible Committee (2009), Badiou (2012).

³³ In the twentieth century, this much is clear from the Mexican Revolution to the Sandinistas' struggle in the 1980s, and the ongoing events in Venezuela.

them with a regime dominated by a different class composition), or at least severely *degrade* the hegemonic apparatuses of the bourgeoisie, predetermines the failure of such a political project.

In this context, many thinkers on the left are forceful in their opposition to the question of the insurrection as an armed struggle and the deployment of direct political force. John Holloway has even written about “changing the world without taking power”.³⁴

Krausz clearly elucidates how Lenin (but also the anarchists of his day struggling during the Russian Revolution), did not muddle their politics with such dead-end exercises in “screaming” against our political predicament. They were not interested as, as Michael Leibowitz put it in his critical review of Holloway’s book, involving themselves in a political situation where “(i)n the beginning is the scream; in the end, the silent fart.”³⁵

Krausz shows how anarchists, for example, across the Russian Empire, but especially so in the Ukraine, were very much attuned to and building toward a massive “popular revolt”, as an absolutely indispensable *pre-condition* for political freedom. He emphasizes that what was interesting in the overall anarchist approach is the fact that they forced an awakening within ideological space by shaking “a relatively wide social strata out of their lethargic state”.³⁶ Juxtaposed to this awakening is the more traditional focus on the peasantry (though with presence among industrial workers as well), and their overwhelming focus on the tactical level of the class struggle.³⁷

Lenin thought in a similar vein and fit well in this general tendency towards insurrectionary politics. What he added to the anarchist impulse was a dedication to preparation for the insurrection that was much more rigorous in its approach, scope and scale. Krausz calls this the “Sisyphian organizational-intellectual groundwork” that the upcoming revolution was sensed by Lenin to require. Schematically put, Lenin’s was a conception which accepted the strengths of the best anarchists: reliance upon spontaneity backed by personal bravery and integrity, with long-term planning, theoretical sophistication among the cadres, military discipline, all backed by a centralized command and control structure. Krausz puts the Lenin of *State and Revolution* between

³⁴ Holloway (2010).

³⁵ Leibowitz (2005), p. 231.

³⁶ Krausz, p. 191.

³⁷ Krausz, p. 191.

the social democrats and the anarchists, in terms of his positions on the revolutionary insurrection and how to approach the question of the state. It is easy to see in his discussion here, the accuracy of Tarasov's labeling of the Bolsheviks as the party-army.

The overarching, strategic consideration for Lenin remained the question of *autonomy*, as a presupposition for what he called "self-rule". Autonomy in this context is a synonym for political force. Only those who have sufficient political force in the class struggle can be autonomous, to have broken the relations of oppressive domination that locked them in their previous condition marked by the *lack* of autonomy. To this end, only a victorious uprising can create the necessary pre-conditions for self-rule. Any talk of autonomy and self-rule before the revolution (a view held by social democrats across Europe at the time) in any form, as Krausz shows, is to a large extent a premature discussion for Lenin.³⁸ The carving of spaces of autonomy, of occupied locales for the people, from Zuccotti Park to the squares of Madrid and Athens, for instance, is not a revolutionary act by itself. Though important as the initial outbursts of a potential insurrection, they cannot be an end in themselves. Nor can the notion of worker-owned enterprises by their very existence mark the extent of an anti-capitalist struggle.

The worker-controlled enterprise and the occupation of public space even when they manage to actualize, remain directly subject to the repressive apparatus of the capitalist-led state, and the targeted flows and drives of the capitalist libidinal economy (i.e. the hegemonic apparatus in general). Political freedom presupposes a movement towards proletarian autonomy (along the autonomy of its non-proletarian political allies), but the reverse is not possible in a capitalist social formation.

And as far as the question of the insurrection went, Lenin was clear that he was talking about a class war, about an armed uprising, a decisive struggle through political force.³⁹

For Lenin, the revolutionary uprising was an art, similar to military art, but also, we could add, to what ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle

³⁸ Krausz, p. 189.

³⁹ For Lenin, the class struggle was indeed a war. This is how he described the most fundamental mistake of the Paris Commune (Krausz, p.189):

> ... instead of destroying its enemies it sought to exert moral influence on them; it underestimated the significance of direct military operations in civil war.

called *techne* (the ability to make, to engage in a purposeful knowing action). Importantly, a conspiracy was absolutely an important element of an uprising, but it was definitely insufficient by itself. The converse was however also true, no effective revolutionary uprising was possible in the absence of conspiracy.

In addition, the insurrection must rely on the politically advanced section of the revolutionary movement, but also include spontaneously-formed organizations, *without relying exclusively on any single political party*. This point is of crucial importance! The temporal element is of critical importance. Events should happen at the most politically opportune moment, not before, or after. The flows of the class struggle must be intimately understood by revolutionaries and their organizations, and the timing to act must be sensed by the organized forces, in the context of the ongoing upsurge in struggle. The rupture must be executed, and Krausz quotes Lenin:

...when the activity of the advanced ranks of the people is at its height, and when the vacillations in the ranks of the enemy and in the ranks of the weak, half-hearted and irresolute friends of the revolution are strongest.⁴⁰

This line of thinking on politics as war by Lenin also sheds light on how we could approach the concept of “politically advanced”, often used by Lenin in his writings and polemics.

As recent upsurges in the struggle showed once again, from *Occupy* through the uprising in Ferguson, in any given instance of political struggle, there are those who actually decide to participate in the flows of struggle, and those who do not. *The politically advanced are those for whom explicit political activity is part of everyday life*. They have knowledge and *techne*, having studied, trained, and prepared for the class struggle, while in the process of *doing* the class struggle. The politically advanced are more than activists, they are the militants who engage in a theoretical practice aiming for a rupture, a transformation in ideological space. They are subversives who dig daily (in varied, but persistent ways) at the foundations of capitalist-controlled everyday life with the goal of its overcoming, of its transvaluation. It is not a “lifestyle”, but consciously-directed life *posture*, and it is open-ended, for no-one can predict certainties related to such ruptures; in other words, a proper Leninist approach to political struggle is a way of everyday life, not an exceptional crisis which brings one to “the streets”.

⁴⁰ Krausz, p. 206.

In this context, Aleksandr Tarasov makes the interesting assertion that the starting point for the re-formation of such a politically advanced section on the left today must be in the establishment of *study groups* (as it was, he notes, in Lenin's time). Before anything else, and certainly before entertaining any ideas about the insurrection, *techne* must be developed, along with deep levels of political knowledge.⁴¹

There are two significant quotes by Lenin, that serve as a powerful summary of the importance placed by Lenin on the processes of *becoming*, the urge to precipitate the rupture in hegemony, as *fundamental*⁴² building blocks in the *techne* of anti-capitalist revolutionary politics-as-war. The first is written in the beginning of October, 1917 and answers the question "Will the Bolsheviks dare take over full state power alone?" Lenin answers with a clear "Yes":

I still maintain that a political party—and the party of the advanced class in particular—would have no right to exist, would be unworthy of the name of party, would be a nonentity in any sense, if it refused to take power when opportunity offers.⁴³

Note Lenin's point here: an organization that refuses to seize power when it *actually can*, should not exist!

The second quote is equally profound in its implications. It is about the importance of "diving into the abyss", of trying, when the moment presents itself, to go for the revolutionary *rupture*. It is about the revolution as a rupture, as the most profound moment of human creativity and freedom, beyond the unknown—fearing it—but through a full embrace:

We do not know whether our victory will come tomorrow or a little later (I personally am inclined to think that it will be tomorrow—I am writing this on October 7, 1917 (...)) We do not know how soon after our victory revolution will sweep in the West. We do not know whether or not our victory will be followed by temporary periods of reaction and the victory of the counterrevolution—there is nothing impossible in that—and therefore, after our victory, we shall build a "triple line of trenches" against such a contingency.⁴⁴

⁴¹ As previously mentioned, it is precisely knowledge in general (how to think, and how to do) that is the operational goal of the power bloc in its daily struggle against the proletariat. This profound advantage held by the power bloc must be neutralized.

⁴² We emphasize: fundamental, and not foundational.

⁴³ Krausz, p. 503, fn. 87.

⁴⁴ Krausz, p. 503, fn. 88.

ON THE TRANSITION

Krausz emphasizes that Lenin's understanding of the need for a transition is connected to his understanding of the very nature of the class struggle itself. To engage in a transition induced by the revolutionary process is to attempt to introduce a sustained rupture in the patterns of everyday life, to engage with questions of space and time, it signals a direct attempt at shaping ideological space.

And indeed, rigid, dogmatic minds would point immediately to the contradictions inherent in Lenin's description of the transitional period as "a bourgeois state without the bourgeoisie".⁴⁵

But contradictions need not be approached as signs of trouble, as signifiers of errors, marking the end of a specific intervention in the struggle. Nor are they to be approached solely through some variation of the Hegelian dialectical synthesis (whether in its Feuerbachian or even Marxian iterations), where the contradiction is now sublated in a new synthesis, which itself spawns a new contradictory pair, etc. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in their great text on the crisis of the Left post-1968 (*A Thousand Plateaus*)⁴⁶ noted that their theoretical practice was articulated through the concept of flows, while renouncing ideology, and especially, the concept of contradiction. Here, political struggle is a dynamic field, consisting of disparate elements: "lines of articulation,... strata and territories, but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification".⁴⁷ The rate of movement and change of these various elements constitute *flows*, which in turn produce political "phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture."⁴⁸ Thinking through contradictions could indeed be problematic, noted Deleuze and Guattari, and if interpreted dogmatically and mechanically, it could limit radical thought and its imaginative horizons.

The goal of revolutionary politics, argued Deleuze and Guattari, is to undo all of the codes of hegemony (the state, the specific concept of justice, of liberal morality, fetishization of private property, its ideological frameworks and repressive apparatuses), which formed the structures of everyday life by shaping ideological space, and insured its long-term reproduction.

⁴⁵ Krausz, p. 336.

⁴⁶ Deleuze and Guattari (1987).

⁴⁷ Deleuze and Guattari (1987), p. 3.

⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari (1987), p. 4.

The Bolshevik efforts during the period following 1917 which they themselves called “the transition” was a deliberate attempt at accomplishing such undoings in the flows of hegemonic politics. That first decade unleashed the extraordinary dynamic of the Soviet twenties, characterized by profound outbursts of *creativity* which were channeled across a number of flows in the newly emerging Soviet ideological space. The goal was the dismantling of liberal and pre-liberal ideological space. Examples abound, but in brief, highlights included: the mass democratization of education, decriminalization of gay people, new property relations, the general radicalization in every sphere of artistic thought (from cinematography to architecture and literature), as well as innovations in military theory and the law.⁴⁹

Enmeshed in the dynamism of these flows, Lenin maintained his ability to think on the strategic level of the political struggle. “The practical objectives were always of primary importance” writes Krausz,⁵⁰ even if the immediate effect deepened political contradictions. For Lenin seemed to have been absolutely clear on the fact that any potential transition beyond capitalism would require decades (at the very least) of working through its inherent contradictions:

Even if this regulation is completely successful, the antagonism between class interests between labour and capital would remain.⁵¹

In other words, triple lines of trenches would have to be constructed and defended if the transition was to have any chance of actualizing over time.

Lenin is raising here the fundamental question about the nature of change in ideological space, shortly *after* the revolutionary rupture has been sustained (and the initial wave of counter-revolutionary violence defeated).

What happens in such political space and time? The inherited routines of capitalist everyday life, and the totality of its inertia— including the trauma of daily violence against the proletariat (differentially experienced, but universally present), of the profoundly crippling effects of proletarianization—

⁴⁹ For the last two, one should mention the emergence of Soviet military theory in the aftermath of the Civil War, and specifically its most innovative contribution: the articulation of a new level of war, the operational level located between tactics and strategy. In its mature form, it was codified in the works of Soviet military theoretician Georgii Isserson (2013, 2016). In the sphere of legal theory, there were the creative interventions of Evgeny Pashukanis (2001).

⁵⁰ Krausz, p. 330.

⁵¹ Krausz, p. 331.

these structural factors of lived life cannot be wished or legislated away (similar to liberal dogmas about ending racism by simply passing laws). They require deliberate counter-action, working through new terrain seeking the new possibilities inherently made possible by the revolution.

To change the general patterns of ideological space under conditions of mass proletarianization, one must begin by changing the individual, particular patterns that make up the totality. In other words, new flows have to be introduced, new directions of movement, new articulations in everyday life have to be made. Crucially, as Lenin understood clearly, *time*, a long temporal duration was required to enmesh the future into the present, displacing the undesired parts of the past from ideological space, but also a *will* to act. Krausz makes this crucial observation by noting that “(Lenin) repeatedly said the originality of the Russian Revolution was that the prerequisites of socialism came into existence not before it—but after”.⁵² Or, in Lenin’s own words:

If a definite level of culture is required for the building of socialism... why cannot we begin by first achieving the prerequisites for that definite level of culture in a revolutionary way, and then, with the aid of the workers’ and peasants’ government and Soviet system, proceed to overtake the other nations?⁵³

This is a call for a politics of becoming, for the active formation of a new political *subjectivity*, and Krausz is absolutely correct in implying that our reading of the Soviet revolutionary event must be read through our understanding of the seemingly odd “contradictions” introduced in the early twenties, for they represented attempts at introducing new flows in the midst of everyday life, acts of deterritorialization and active formation of a desired new configuration of ideological space, away from past imaginaries, and existing political configurations. Thus, on the question of “state capitalism” that emerged with the introduction of the “New Economic Policy” (NEP), Lenin cautioned other revolutionaries in getting stuck in literal interpretations of the phrase “state capitalism”. Rather than intellectual laziness and the retreat into already-formulated understandings of what state capitalism signifies, Lenin appealed for a trans-valuation of the concept, a newly invented meaning, spawned by the newly invented realities of Soviet life:

⁵² Krausz, p. 337.

⁵³ Krausz, p. 337.

On the question of state capitalism... we philosophise about how state capitalism is to be interpreted, and look into old books. But... not a single book has been written about state capitalism under communism.⁵⁴

Krausz makes another very important clarification here, in noting that Lenin's point was to highlight how his political opponents (the Mensheviks, liberals, and Western social democrats) remained "insensitive" (in Krausz's words) to the uniqueness of the Soviet project. This is how, Krausz argues, we should understand Lenin's use of the word "communism" in this context. Communism meant "political socialism" for Lenin, which:

...describes the phase when socialism becomes a state objective and task that represents the interests of the working class, but is not yet economically feasible.⁵⁵

In practicing what was essentially a politics of flows, Lenin appealed to his revolutionary comrades to *think* beyond the present, beyond the already-understood or mapped out. In doing so, he offered an approach to how revolutionary thinking needs to evolve *after the rupture* and the initial conquest of political force, but in *the absence of hegemony at the hands of the revolutionary forces*.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The figure of Lenin and the politics he inspired stands out against the generalized mediocrity that constitutes the liberal political imaginary today. Contemporary capitalist hegemony offers a narrow horizon, a non-future based on trivialities connected to the libidinal economy and related exercises in endless production and consumption of commodities. As such, it can continue to reproduce for the foreseeable future, such is the strength of its inertia, and the weakness of the political forces opposing it; the future as the infinite re-iteration of the present. The radical imagination of Lenin, that is, his emphasis on creativity-in-action, and his will to power, remain core markers for the reconstitution of the revolutionary imaginary. What Krausz's brilliant book has demonstrated is that Lenin needs not to be repeated, or "cloned" in the particularities of his politics, but rather rethought in his generalized approach to political struggle aiming at the rupture away from capitalism.

⁵⁴ Krausz. p. 337.

⁵⁴ Krausz. p. 337.

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