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**Did the Bolshevik  
seizure of power  
inaugurate a socialist  
revolution? A Marxian  
inquiry**

In the eyes of the overwhelming majority on the left – certainly in South Asia – the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia in 1917 signalled the victory of socialist revolution or at least started the socialist revolution in that country. Those who accept this position hold it more or less axiomatically. The present essay is an attempt at examining this position by going back to the significance of socialist revolution in the original sense of Marx. All the principal (theoretical) categories used in the following lines are Marxian. We say ‘Marxian’ and not ‘Marxist’ in order to stress that we are taking the categories as they appear in Marx’s own texts and not as they are interpreted by people claiming to be his followers.

We are no historian, and the paper naturally in no way claims to be a contribution in history. Ours is rather an essay in (critical) analysis, from a Marxian point of view, based on the events that are already well-known.[1](#)

I

As is well known Russia, around the time of the Bolshevik seizure of power, was a backward (capitalist) country. On the eve of the first World War, according to one authority, “after three decades of swift industrialisation the urban population still accounted for less than one fifth of the total, and workers in mining and manufacturing (excluding the artisan sector) less than 2 percent. Some 80 percent of the population still derived its livelihood from agriculture.” [2](#) Given this situation in Russia there seems to be a quasi-consensus shared by the Marxists and the non-Marxists – that what is generally known as “October Revolution” – supposed to be proletarian – was contrary to the Marxian contention that a proletarian revolution could take place only in an advanced capitalist country. This idea could be seen summed up in the laconic statement of the young Antonio Gramsci: “The revolution of the Bolsheviks is the revolution against Karl Marx’s *Capital*.” [3](#)

Abstracting for the moment from the question of the character of the October event in Russia, the general theoretical stand underlying the view given above, is, we submit, an oversimplification – bordering on a superficial reading of the Marxian position. [4](#) To start with, in Marx’s

perspective of future revolution, it is not the proletarian revolution or – what is equivalent in this case – socialist (communist) revolution breaking out in an advanced capitalist country that alone finds a place. In this perspective there could also be outside of this so-called ‘classic’ case, a situation occurring in a relatively backward society where, unlike what had happened in earlier revolutions, the proletariat would play an active (including the leading) role. Such a situation could arise in two types of circumstances. First, this could be a non-proletarian revolution that would directly interest the proletariat. Secondly, this could be a proletarian revolution without yet being a communist (socialist) revolution.

As regards the first case the *Communist Manifesto* (Section IV) specifically discusses the role of the communists in the coming “bourgeois revolution” in (backward) Germany. Again, in Marx’s “address” on “revolution in permanence” delivered two years later the immediate perspective for the German proletariat is still held as the completion of the bourgeois revolution to be only followed by the proletarian revolution. Similarly, in the preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto* – jointly signed by Marx and Engels one year before the former’s death – we read about the possibility

of a (non-proletarian) “Russian revolution giving a signal to the proletarian revolution in the West” and leading to a “communist form of collective ownership” in Russia mediated by the existing communal form of property in land.

As to the second case Marx envisages, with regard to backward Germany, a “proletarian revolution backed by some second edition of the Peasant war.”<sup>5</sup> In the same way, Marx in his polemic with Bakunin about two decades later, speaks of the possibility of the proletariat coming to power in the “states of Western European Continent (that is, outside of England P.C.) where the mass of peasants form a more or less important majority of the population,” and where (naturally) the proletariat has to “win the peasantry for the revolution.”<sup>6</sup> Thus a proletarian revolution breaking out in a backward capitalist country is certainly not, in principle, outside of the Marxian framework.

In a famous passage which has been subject to numerous misinterpretations and misuses Marx writes: “No social formation ever disappears before all the productive forces, for which it is large enough, have developed.”<sup>7</sup> It goes without saying that in a backward capitalist country the forces of production have far from developed to the

full. But Marx speaks of revolution in such a country taking place under the leadership of the proletariat, as we saw above. Can these two positions be reconciled? Now, in a situation of backwardness the *immediate* task of the proletariat leading the revolution is not to effect a transition to socialism by eliminating (the partially-existing) capitalism. Its immediate task is to destroy the pre-capitalist relations, that is, complete the “historic” tasks of the bourgeois revolution. In the ‘classical’ case this would be the work of the bourgeoisie itself. But in a situation where the bourgeoisie is weak and no longer revolutionary vis-a-vis the pre-bourgeois dominant classes it is the proletariat in alliance with the rest of the immediate producers that must accomplish the work. In the process of completion of the tasks of the bourgeois revolution the proletariat, at the same time, creates (consciously) “the material conditions of existence of the higher relations of production”, to use the words of the same passage cited above. Here a proletarian revolution is not directly a socialist revolution (yet) in the sense that its task is not yet to prepare – at least not directly – the transition to the society of free and associated labour. To try the latter without creating its “material conditions of existence” would simply be “Don Quixotism”<sup>8</sup>. After all, “a society cannot go over the natural (naturgemasse)

phases of its development either by leaps or by decrees.”[9](#)

Given, however, that Marx’s principal preoccupation is with the “(economic) law of motion” of the capitalist society (its birth, growth, decay and death) the revolution that occupies most of his attention is the revolution against capital by its “grave diggers”, that is, communist or socialist revolution (they are equivalent in Marx). Here the proletarian revolution – pre-supposing the completion of the historic task of the bourgeois revolution – is the same as socialist revolution.

Let us be clear about the Marxian conception of ‘revolution’. By (social) revolution Marx means, as he already emphasises in his polemic with Ruge (1844), the “dissolution of the old relations” of society[10](#) or equivalently, as he says fifteen years later, a “change” in society’s “economic basis” constituted by the (social) “relations of production.”[11](#) An immediate consequence of this conception is that a social revolution is not a momentary event coinciding with the so-called ‘seizure of power’[12](#). It is *epochal*. Particularly for the proletariat the “epoch of social revolution begins” – the famous phrase of Marx’s 1859 ‘Preface’ (referred to earlier) – with the establishment of its political power (though the

destruction of the bourgeois state apparatus), it being only the “first step in the workers revolution” as the *Communist Manifesto* declared. The old relations of production do not disappear and the new relations do not arise on the morrow of the proletarian seizure of power and the establishment of the juridically ordained “public ownership” of the means of production in as much as the working class has to go “through long struggles, through series of historical processes transforming circumstances and men” – as Marx emphasises referring to the first proletarian dictatorship in history [13](#) – in short, through a whole “period of revolutionary transformation” to which corresponds the proletarian rule.[14](#) Thus the “epoch of social revolution” for the working class comprises a whole period – the period of “prolonged birth pangs” in Marx’s celebrated metaphor of 1875 – from the installation of the proletarian political rule to the advent of the new society, the “first phase of communism.” The entire process is of course based – in the Marxian conceptual framework – on the central *postulate* enshrined in Marx’s whole life work, namely, that the emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers *themselves*. The proletarian revolution is indeed summed up in what Marx called (in 1850) the battle cry of the working class: “The Revolution in permanence.”

As a consistent materialist Marx, it is well-known, did not leave any 'blueprint' for the future society. In the same way, it should go without saying, there is no unique 'model' of socialist revolution in Marx's writings – the "German model" as Lenin would say in his polemic with the Mensheviks. There could indeed be innumerable kinds of historical situations with corresponding correlations of social forces in which a socialist revolution could break out and proceed. (Marx himself learnt a lot about the proletarian revolution from the Parisian workers in 1871). But what remains *invariant* amidst all these permutations and combinations is that his revolution must involve a radical transformation in the social relations of production and must be self-emancipatory act of the immediate producers themselves beginning with the establishment of their absolute rule as a class (That is, not by an individual or a group in its name and standing outside of their direct control). Otherwise we are not speaking of socialist revolution within a Marxian framework.

A radical transformation in the social relations of production would mean, in this connection, (re) union – at a higher level – of the producers with their conditions of production – in real and not formal judicial terms of course – away from separation (opposition) between the

two characterising capitalism. This would signify a complete inversion of the principle under capitalism: “The means of production employ the workers, the workers do not employ the means of production”, in Marx’s striking paraphrase of Ricardo. [15](#)

## II-1

It is for the first time in April 1917, upon his arrival in Petrograd, that Lenin called for a socialist revolution in Russia.<sup>16</sup> He knew perfectly well that in the Marxian scheme socialist revolution is supposed to follow the bourgeois-democratic revolution. Indeed he himself had, in 1905, clearly distinguished between these two phases of the Russian revolution. Following Lenin, the Bolsheviks had hitherto argued that the socialist revolution in Russia starting with the proletarian dictatorship would usher in after the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution were, at least in the main, completed under the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry, given the incapacity of the Russian bourgeoisie to accomplish its “historical mission.” When, however, Lenin called for a socialist revolution in Russia bourgeois-democratic revolution was very very far from completed in the country. In support of his call Lenin advanced the surprising argument that “the state power in Russia has passed into the hands of a new class, namely the bourgeoisie and the landlord turned bourgeois. *To this extent* the bourgeois democratic revolution in Russia is completed.” <sup>17</sup>

We would, on the other hand, suggest that to the extent that Lenin predicated the completion (even partial) of the bourgeois democratic revolution simply on the passage to political power of the Russian bourgeoisie, Lenin was *revising* the concept of social revolution in Marx in as much as a social revolution in Marx, as we saw above, means nothing less than a transformation of the social relations of production and not simply a change in the political “superstructure”, to use Marx’s language of 1859.

Lenin’s defence of his position against his opponents is, to say the least, ambiguous. Thus one year before his death he wrote against N. Sukhanov that, contrary to a pre-established “model” of revolutionary sequence, a people “faced with a revolutionary situation” might have to “throw itself” into it *before* creating the conditions for “socialism.”<sup>18</sup> Now as a general proposition this is unexceptionable. But why and in what sense the revolution referred to has to be precisely a socialist revolution in a semi-feudal society with the proletariat constituting a tiny minority of the total population? Why cannot this be a bourgeois-democratic revolution under the leadership of the proletariat – in alliance with the rest of the exploited – towards completing the so-called “historic task” of the bourgeoisie in order to advance

uninterruptedly to a socialist revolution. In fact, this latter position was defended against Lenin by the much maligned Bolshevik Kamenev in April 1917. Kamenev and his partisans went further. In as much as Lenin's call for "socialist revolution", bereft of theory, meant in practice merciless struggle against all the non-Bolshevik socialist currents in Russia (not accepting Lenin's point of view) leading to the exclusive political power of the Bolsheviks Kamenev and his partisans, who wanted a "party of revolutionary proletarian masses", warned against the danger of the seizure of power by a "small group of communist propagandists" incapable of holding the power excepting through terror. [19](#)

The spontaneous rise of the Soviets – at first of workers and soldiers' deputies – in Russia in February 1917, surprised all the existing political parties in the country as it had done twelve years earlier. The workers had gone far beyond their so-called "trade-union consciousness" and on their own gained full *political* class consciousness – independently of the political parties. In a way the soviet phenomenon largely invalidated Lenin's 1902 thesis that on their own the workers could only acquire "Trade Union consciousness" and that the revolutionary consciousness had to be imported to them from outside by the revolutionary intelligentsia. On the other hand the

soviet phenomenon fully corroborated what the young Marx and Engels had written: “The consciousness of the necessity of a profound revolution” would arise from the (working) class (itself),<sup>20</sup> or what Lenin’s great contemporary said in 1906: “revolutions do not allow any school master.”<sup>21</sup> The great Paris Commune had shown the same tendency in 1871 just as the splendid Spanish workers were to show in their fight against Fascism in the thirties only to be shamelessly crushed by Stalin’s “Internationalists.”

Unprepared for and surprised by the rise of the Soviets the different socialist parties increasingly tried to control them by gaining majority in them. At the first Pan-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers and Soldiers deputies in June the Bolsheviks constituted less than one-seventh of the delegates. However, in spite of some setbacks in July-August, the Bolsheviks increasingly won influence in the Soviets and the beginning of autumn they made great progress, gaining clear majority in Petrograd, Moscow and other big industrial centres. However, in the vast rural regions (among the peasantry), that is, among the immense majority of the country’s working population, it is the Socialist Revolutionaries that held a marked majority (in October the Socialist Revolutionaries split and the minority of the

party came out and formed an independent party, the so-called Left Socialist Revolutions, which often helped the Bolsheviks obtain majority in different Soviets). The Mensheviks had majority only in a handful of regions. The anarchists and the so-called 'Maximalists' also gained not a little, supported the Bolsheviks very often and contributed considerably to the increasing radicalisation of the masses. This was the situation in October.

Though "all power to the Soviets" was the great mobilizing slogan propagated by Lenin and his Party (dropped for a while during summer in view of the "reactionary character" of the Soviets) Lenin in fact wanted 'power' to be exclusively in the hands of his Party. This is clearly seen, for example, when in the first Congress of Soviets of Workers and Soldiers' Deputies where the Bolsheviks constituted a small minority Lenin declared that his Party was ready to assume power. (This declaration, moreover, was made by the "democratic centralist" without consulting anybody in the Party). This is seen, again, when in September, on the strength of his Party's majority in the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets alone, Lenin insisted that "the Bolsheviks can and *must* take state power into their own hands (*v svoi ruki*)" and that "it would be naive to wait for a 'formal'

majority for the Bolsheviks”[22](#) (presumably in the country as a whole). Lenin gave vent to his obsession for exclusive power for his Party when he vehemently denounced “a trend in the Central Committee of the Party” that disapproved of the Party “taking power immediately” and wanted to “wait for the Congress of the Soviets.” To wait for the Congress of the Soviets, he declared, “is idiocy, because the Congress *will give nothing and can give nothing*. ..... First defeat Kerensky, then call the Congress.”[23](#)

In the event the Bolsheviks together with their allies, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, did obtain a majority in the Second Congress of Soviets held on October 25-26 (November 7-8 according to new Calendar). One should observe that a large number of Soviets in the country including many from the army – opposed to convening the Congress before the Constituent Assembly had met – did not send delegates to the Second Congress. Thus the second congress was less representative than the first. Moreover, and what is perhaps even more important, the immense majority of the peasantry was not represented at the Congress. Even then, even though the Bolsheviks and their allies would have a clear majority in the Congress Lenin, unsure of the outcome of the normal democratic process, wanted to forestall all uncertainties

about his Party's domination and insisted on the seizure of power by armed uprising before the Congress could met. "It would be ruinous or a formality to wait for the wavering vote of October 25. The people have the right and the duty to resolve such questions not by vote, but by force," he wrote to the Central Committee.

[24](#) (Presumably it is Lenin who decided this "right" and this "duty" for the people).

Thus the Congress of the Soviets when it met was placed before the seizure of power (through insurrection) as a *fait accompli*. Not only that. The 'Provisional Government' was dismissed not by the Congress of Soviets, not even by the Petrograd Soviet but by the so-called 'Military Revolutionary Committee' of the Petrograd Soviet – completely dominated by the Bolsheviks – by a decree drawn up by Lenin himself. This singular operation, writes a noted French historian, "deprived simultaneously the Congress of Soviets and the Petrograd Soviet of all right to paternity regarding the founding act of the new order and in fact deprived them of any claim to legitimacy."[25](#) The day after the Congress closed Maxim Gorky's journal *Novaya zhizn* (New Life) wrote "The Congress of the Soviets was deprived of the possibility of freely deciding the question of the hour, that of military conspiracy, at the moment when it

assembled, the seizure of power being placed before it as a *fait accompli*. The creation of a new power (the Soviet Republic) and its political programme were similarly fixed in advance.... The Congressists saw themselves being proposed, for pure form, the adoption without debate of these same theses proclaimed in a solemn declaration to the people. This is how the parliament of 'revolutionary democracy' was transformed into a machine to stamp mechanically the mark of approval on all the directives of the Bolshevik Central Committee." [26](#) While addressing the Congress of Soviets Leon Trotsky declared: "They tell us: you did not await the Congress with your uprising.... we as a party considered this our task to make it genuinely possible for the Congress of Soviets to seize the power.....In order to achieve this task a party was needed which would wrench the power from the hands of the counter-revolution and say to you: 'Here is the power and you've got to take it'." [27](#)

The ultimate act of consolidation of the Bolshevik road to power was the "final solution" of the problem of the Constituent Assembly. The Constituent Assembly was the supreme objective of all the liberal (bourgeois) and socialist tendencies in Russia from the start of the revolutionary movement. Simultaneously the symbol and crowning point of decades of struggle against the

autocracy the Assembly in fact became a revolutionary demand of the country's working people – including the vast peasant masses. The Bolsheviks were throughout the most vociferous advocate for convening the Assembly and insisted that only they would ensure its summoning and prevent the 'Provisional Government' from frustrating this great event in Russian history. While announcing the victory (of the seizure of power) in October the quasi Bolshevik 'Military Revolutionary Committee' promised to convene the Assembly without delay. The next day Lenin, introducing before the Congress of Soviets the decree on peace, spoke of "submitting all peace proposals to the Constituent Assembly for decision", [28](#) and introduced the decree on Land (taking over textually what was earlier drawn up by the Socialist Revolutionaries) as "expressing the absolute will of the vast majority of the conscious peasants of all Russia" which in its preamble declared that "the land problems in its full extent can be solved only by the Constituent Assembly." Lenin even went so far as to say that "even if the peasants give the Socialist Revolutionary Party a majority we will still say: so be it.... We must leave full creative freedom to the masses of the people." [29](#)

In the elections that took place about three weeks after the seizure of power – the freest elections in the history

of Russia.<sup>30</sup> The Bolsheviks received less than a quarter of the total votes cast. Already apprehensive that the outcome of a country-wide free election would not be in favour of the Bolsheviks – “it is senseless (for the Party) to wait for the Constituent Assembly that evidently will not be with us” he had argued at a meeting of the Central Committee two weeks before the seizure of power <sup>31</sup> – Lenin now came out *openly* against the Constituent Assembly contradicting his own position expressed only a few days earlier. “When the overwhelming majority of the people could not yet know the full extent and significance of the October proletarian peasant revolution”, he wrote, “every attempt to consider the question of the Constituent Assembly from a formal or legal point of view... would be a betrayal of the proletarian cause, and a going over to the bourgeois point of view.”<sup>32</sup>

When the Assembly did open on January 8, 1918, the Bolsheviks presented it with a ‘Declaration of the Rights of the Toiling and Exploited Peoples’ – drafted by Lenin – that incorporated the legislation of the Second Congress of Soviets on land, peace and workers’ control of industry. Unexceptionable in itself the ‘Declaration,’ however, wanted the Assembly to “consider that it would be basically wrong, even formally, to oppose the

Soviet power and therefore to consider that supporting the Soviet power and the decrees of the Council of Peoples Commissars its task is limited to establishing the fundamentals of a socialist reorganisation of society.”

[33](#) This clearly amounted to an act of abdication of power by the Constituent Assembly dictated by the Bolsheviks in the name of the Soviets. By a vote of 237 to 140 the Assembly rejected it.[34](#) Needless to add, this act of the Assembly sealed its fate and it was dispersed by the Red Guards the next morning.

It was natural that the opponents of the Bolsheviks would seize upon the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly as an example, among others, of the ‘anti democratic’ character of the new regime. As is well known K. Kautsky was one of the most vociferous among these opponents. In his celebrated reply to Kautsky Lenin justified the dissolution of the Assembly on the plea (mainly) that the dictatorship of the proletariat was superior to bourgeois democracy and Soviet Republic was superior to bourgeois Republic. This he did by *axiomatically* holding a series of equalities: Bolshevik power=Soviet Power=Paris Commune type rule=Proletarian Dictatorship (Correspondingly, the power that the Bolsheviks suspended was supposed to be bourgeois democratic). This chain of reasoning,

however, completely obscures and mystifies the *real process* of the Bolshevik seizure of power and the way that power was sought to be maintained.

However, the opposition to the Bolshevik action did not emanate from the 'renegades' alone. The great contemporary of Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, with her impeccable revolutionary credentials and a lot of sympathy for the revolutionary position of the Bolsheviks vis-a-vis the reformists of the Second International also sharply criticised the Bolshevik action. Very interestingly she found a curious convergence of the Bolshevik and the Kautskyian approaches to the question of democracy and dictatorship which she thought was opposed to the Marxian approach. "The fundamental error of the Lenin-Trotsky theory" she wrote "is that they like Kautsky, oppose dictatorship to democracy. The formulation of the question for the Bolsheviks as well as for Kautsky is 'dictatorship' or 'democracy'? The latter (Kautsky) naturally opts for democracy, indeed for bourgeois democracy, because it constitutes the alternative to the socialist revolution. Lenin-Trotsky opts on the contrary, for the dictatorship in opposition to democracy and thereby for the dictatorship of a handful of persons, that is, for the dictatorship after the bourgeoisie model." [35](#)

## II-2

On the morrow of the seizure of power Lenin claimed that the “Soviets are following the same road as that of the Paris Commune.”[36](#) That the “Soviet Republic is a continuation of Paris Commune.”[37](#) But to what extent did these words correspond to the reality?

Now when Lenin spoke of “Soviet Power” as “nothing but an organisational form of the dictatorship of the proletariat” he had no confusion in his mind about the reality of this power inasmuch as he had already equated the “proletarian power” with the “Bolshevik Power.”[38](#) Thus six months after the seizure of power Lenin wrote: “We, the Party of the Bolsheviks *conquered (otvoevali)* Russia from the rich for the poor, from the exploiters for the labouring people. We must now govern Russia... We must now consolidate what we ourselves have decreed, legislated, discussed, charted”[39](#), and this is the “Soviet Power” — conquered, held and exercised not by the labouring people themselves but by the Bolsheviks in their name which Lenin axiomatically equates with the proletarian dictatorship. Inasmuch as “till now we have not reached the stage where the labouring masses could participate in government ... the Soviets, as a matter of fact are organs of government *for*

*the labouring masses* by the advanced section of the proletariat (read: The Party P.C.) and not by Labouring Masses,” Lenin told the eighth Congress of the Party [40](#), “Naturally no political or organisational question is settled by any state institution in our republic without the guidelines of the Party’s Central Committee.” Writing against “a purely liberal idea of the march of the revolution” Trotsky in his turn observed that “the revolutionary domination of the proletariat supposes the domination of the Party in the proletariat itself.....The substitution of the power of the party for the power of the working class is, fundamentally, no substitution at all.” No doubt the “general direction of affairs is concentrated in the hands of the Party.... The last word belongs to the Central Committee of the Party.”[41](#) How very different is Marx’s account of the practice of the Parisian workers constituting the Commune of 1871, the first dictatorship of the proletariat! “Workmen govern the Paris Commune,” Marx wrote, “they have” not only “taken the initiative of the present Revolution” but “they have also taken the management of their Revolution into their own hands.”[42](#)

Before proceeding further let us note another organ of workers self-rule that arose in 1917 by the side of the Soviets, namely the factory committees. Contrary to the

Soviets which represented the workers, soldiers and ultimately the peasants, the factory committees represented the industrial workers only. Secondly, while the Soviets in course of their growing institutionalisation were, little by little, losing direct contact with the masses at the base, the factory committees were in daily contact with the workers at the shop floor and to that extent these committees directly reflected the changing temper and growing revolutionary aspirations of the labouring masses. Already by the middle of April 1917, the 'Provisional Government' was obliged to accept these committees as workers' representatives facing the enterprise management on the question of wages, hours and general conditions of labour as well as for claiming from the government various state and social services for the workers. The Bolsheviks found them an ideal instrument of propaganda and, as a matter of fact, they became a Bolshevik stronghold fairly rapidly. As champions of "workers' control" the Bolsheviks quickly gained majorities in these committees. By October, these committees had successfully pushed the trade unions to the background and, independently of any law, they were directly intervening not only in the question of day to day production but also in those of enterprise management, frequently bringing the factories under the collective possession of the workers after expelling their

legal owners. However, after the Bolshevik seizure of power the way the factory committees continued to function as organs of self-administration for workers increasingly clashed with the inherent centralising tendency of the Bolshevik power. Within a very short period the trade unions, by now dominated by the ruling Party, succeeded in annexing them and transforming them as their own organs at the lowest level thus ending the direct sovereignty of these committees.<sup>43</sup> On his side Lenin now discovered that the “Russian is a bad worker in comparison with the advanced nations”<sup>44</sup>. Therefore, instead of collectively administering the affairs of work places, through their own elected organs – a practice earlier championed by the Bolsheviks but now denounced as “petty bourgeois spontaneity”<sup>45</sup> – the masses must “*unquestionably obey the single will of the leaders of labour process,*”<sup>46</sup>....and must accept “unquestioning subordination during work to the one-man decisions *of Soviet Directors, of the Dictators (diktatorov)* elected or appointed by the Soviet institutions, vested with dictatorial powers (*diktatorskimi polnomochyami*).” At the same time Lenin underlined that “particular significance now attached to measures for raising labour discipline and labour productivity through such typical bourgeois measures as the introduction of Taylor system and piece work.”<sup>47</sup>

At another level a logical consequence of equating the proletarian dictatorship with the Bolshevik rule was not only the elimination of the monarchist and the bourgeois political parties but also the effacement of the two (other) socialist parties, the Socialist Revolutionaries (first the “Right” and ultimately the Left) and the Mensheviks. Opposition to the Bolshevik seizure of power instantly made the Mensheviks and the “Right” Socialist Revolutionaries “counter-revolutionary.” However, if by counter-revolution is meant the restoration of the old regime in Russia then they were certainly not counter-revolutionaries. As a noted authority has remarked, “the reverse was the case: each of these parties threw away the opportunities which it had to rally effective opposition to the Communist rule for fear that this would play into the hands of the reactionary side in the Civil War,” and the historian adds that this was probably why “so long as the Civil War raged the Communists while constantly harassing the two socialist parties by arrests and administrative repression, nevertheless suffered their continued existence.”<sup>48</sup> The end of the Civil War and the beginning of the New Economic Policy (NEP) practically spelt the end of overt political activities of these two parties. Their free activities were massively suppressed of course much earlier, immediately after the seizure of power through the very first decree of the

newly established Council of People's Commissars (*Sovnarkom*), the 'decree on the press' which — contradicting the Bolshevik Party's old programme guaranteeing press freedom — instituted censorship and prohibited the publication of newspapers and journals that would question the new regime.<sup>49</sup> It should also be mentioned that the Anarchists, close allies of the Bolsheviks in their rise to power, were, in their turn, also severely persecuted in the post-seizure period. Finally, the Bolshevik leadership, not satisfied with the suppression of the other parties, wanted to arrest the "syndicalist and anarchist deviation in the Party" which was a "complete rupture with Marxism and Communism" <sup>50</sup> — as interpreted, it goes without saying, by Lenin — and prohibited, starting with 1921, the existence of groups with separate platforms within the Party.

### III

In his different writings in 1917 before the seizure of power Lenin, closely following the analysis of the Paris Commune by Marx and Engels, had particularly stressed, as the characteristics of proletarian dictatorship the destruction of the old state machine with its police, standing army and bureaucracy and their replacement, under the new dispensation, not by another type of autonomised state apparatus but by freely elected and revocable officials at all levels, earning working persons' wages, and the universally armed workers, and had accused "the Plekhanovs and the Kautskys" of having "forgotten and perverted" this "essence of the Paris Commune," (and we saw above that the new regime was of the Paris Commune type). However, here again, the reality contradicted his words. He himself had to admit, shortly before his death, that "we effectively took over the old state apparatus from the Tsar and the bourgeoisie... wholly"[51](#). Indeed, the bureaucratic machine organically linked with the new central establishments, increased with gigantic strides, particularly in the absence of any veritable political opposition. Alexandra Kollontai, much to her glory, observed perspicaciously in 1921 that "we are afraid of the autonomous activity of the masses. We are afraid to

leave a free domain to their creative spirit. We fear criticism. We have ceased to have confidence in the masses. That is the cause of our bureaucratism (People's initiative is weakening, (their) will to act disappearing .... In this way one extremely harmful division is appearing: 'we' — that is the workers — and 'they' — that is, the Soviet functionaries on whom depends everything. The evil has no other origin." [52](#) The same year, after the prohibition of the existence of different platforms within the Bolshevik Party another Bolshevik, G. Miasnikov, a worker-founder of the Workers' Group (wholly proletarian in its composition) wrote to the Central Committee of the Party: "Now that we have crushed the resistance of the exploiters and that we have constituted ourselves into a unique power in the country we must proclaim liberty of expression and press (for everybody) from the monarchists to the anarchists — a liberty such as no one has ever experienced in the world." [53](#)

According to Lenin's often repeated pre-seizure declaration one of the vital conditions of "transforming bourgeois democracy into proletarian democracy" is the abolition of the standing army and its substitution by the armed workers, and he had precisely accused the "Socialist Revolutions and the Mensheviks" for not "carrying out this demand after the February revolution."

However, after the seizure of power not only a standing army – however “Red” – was created but even the earlier promise – made a few hours after the power was seized – of “full democracy within the army” was completely violated. On the other hand, the initially self armed workers – the “red guards” – were completely disarmed, in many cases simply integrated into the standing army.

A similar development could be seen in the rise and consolidation of a special police apparatus, separated from the labouring masses, of which the core, the dreaded security police – *Vecheka* or *Cheka* – established five weeks after the seizure of power rapidly grew to over a quarter of a million by mid 1921. [54](#)

Thus the state, established through the October seizure of power, with its own bureaucracy, standing army and police, kind of an ever increasing series with no tendency to converge to a limit completely belied Lenin’s repeated affirmation that this state was of the Paris Commune type, a “Commune-State.” As an American historian has observed, “deprived of power in the Soviets and in the factories the Russian Proletariat... found that the triumph of the dictatorship in its name was a very hollow victory.”[55](#)

Lenin (and the other Bolsheviks) always claimed that the October seizure of power had inaugurated socialist revolution in Russia and that the state issued from the act was the embodiment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This assertion became kind of a self-evident truth with the immense majority of the (revolutionary) Left. However, from a materialist point of view and paraphrasing Marx's words from his 1859 "Preface" referred to earlier – we cannot judge the Bolshevik power by what it thought of itself, "by its own consciousness" (for itself), we have to look at it objectively, on the basis of the "contradictions of the material life." From this standpoint Lenin's affirmation could be called simply *ideological*. That is, a case of "false consciousness" in the original Marxian sense of the term. Indeed, it is easy to see that judging by the way power was seized or by the way it was held and allowed to develop one would be hard put to claim that October signalled the beginning of the process of the "emancipation of the working class by the workers themselves."

Carried away by the Leninist position that socialist revolution would break out in the "weakest link" in the chain of the uneven development of world capitalism people on the Left, by and large, have not only

uncritically accepted the character of the October seizure of power as “socialist” but have also explained or rather justified the measures undertaken by the new regime on the score of Russia’s backwardness and its hostile environment – “unforeseen” by the founders of scientific socialism. Now undoubtedly the reconstruction of a socialist society in a state of backwardness and in a hostile international environment – particularly in the absence of much expected revolutions in Western Europe – required desperate measures. But the basic question remains: who decided on these measures and who enforced them? If they were not the workers as a *class* but, in their name, an *autonomised*, self-designated “vanguard” (of the working class), then one would be hard put to claim that those were the revolutionary measures undertaken by the “proletariat organised as the ruling class”, in the words of the *Communist Manifesto*. Undoubtedly, again, the proletarian dictatorship is not a free society. Even apart from the need for suppressing the old exploiting classes, just evicted from political power, the newly established proletarian regime cannot be marked by absence of all constraints. That is why the “revolutionary transformation period” is a period of “prolonged birth pangs,” in Marx’s 1875 metaphor. But, again, whatever

constraint and coercion remained would be self-inflicted, would be the work of the “coerced” themselves.

If what Lenin was saying about the “backward” Russian workers, incapable of exercising power on *their own* (as we saw earlier) were true, then one has to admit that they were also not prepared for socialism, at least not in its Marxian sense of a “society of free and associated producers,” and, consequently, the revolution undertaken in their name cannot be accepted as a “socialist revolution.”

On the other hand, if one takes Lenin’s 1902 position as the point of departure, namely, that the proletariat on its own is incapable of achieving the proletarian revolution unless it is led by a group of “professional revolutionaries” whose constitution, programme and political practice are completely outside the control of the proletariat then one has to admit that the basic Marxian proposition that “the emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves” is completely wrong.

However, fortunately, history – “the greatest of all Marxists”, as Hilferding used to say – has not proved the Leninist position. We would submit that by the time of the seizure of power the vast majority of the immediate

producers – including the peasantry – in Russia was prepared to do away with the pre-capitalist relations of production and certainly with the Provisional Government which was unfit for the task – as well as for achieving peace – but not ready for a socialist revolution – understood in the original Marxian (and not “Marxist-Leninist”) sense of the expression – a revolution that would be their own creation and not sought to be forcibly imposed on them by a self-appointed “vanguard” hermetically sanitized from any outside contamination and claiming to know the interest of the workers better than the workers themselves. However, there are reasons to believe that the great movement for self-emancipation of the immediate producers that started with the Soviets and the factory committees, if allowed to continue unimpeded, would have, after completing the bourgeois-democratic tasks, uninterruptedly passed on to the new stage and inaugurated the revolution for building a “society of free and associated labour.” Unfortunately the movement was not allowed to continue on its own, was hampered and ultimately destroyed mostly by the “proletarian vanguard.”

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Taken from the [Bataille Socialiste](#) blog.

- 1.In the following lines citations from non-English sources are given in our own translation. However, for the convenience of readers we have, wherever possible, referred to their English version side by side. In that case the first page reference stands for the original language version, the second for the English language version. This is particularly the case with Lenin's texts.
- 2.G. Grossman – 'The Industrialisation of Russia and the Soviet Union' in C. M. Cipolla (ed.) – *The Fontana Economic History of Europe* Vol. 4. part 2. Glasgow, 1973: p. 493 of also P. Bairoch – 'The Level of Economic Development from 1810 to 1919' in *Annales* 1965 November – December (in French) where the author finds Russia to be the most backward among the world's important countries at the beginning of the twentieth century.
- 3.*Political Writings* (In Italian, Rome, 1973: p. 130).
- 4.For an eminent example see E. H. Carr – *The Bolshevik Revolution*, London. 1964, Ch. 2, specially pp. 43-44.
- 5.'Letter to F. Engels' 1856, April 6 in K. Marx, F. Engels – *Selected Works* II (in German) Berlin 1964; p. 424. The line cited here appears in English.
- 6. Conspectus of Bakunin's book 'Statehood and Anarchy' in Marx-Engels – *Works* XVIII (in German) Berlin 1973: p. 630

- 7. *Towards a Critique of Political Economy*: Preface (in German) Berlin 1958: p. 14; Marx-Engels – *Selected Works* (in one volume) Moscow 1970: p. 182.
- 8. *Marx Manuscripts 1857-1858*, so called *Grundrisse* (in German) Berlin 1953: p. 77.
- 9. Marx – *Capital I* (in German) Berlin 1962; pp. 15-16; *Capital I*, Moscow, 1978: p. 20.
- 10. “Critical Remarks...” in Marx Engels *Works* (in German) Berlin 1976: p. 409.
- 11. *Towards a Critique op. cit.* p. 13.
- 12. Cf. the wrong common place statements in the Left about the “victory of socialist revolution” in Russia in 1917.
- 13. “The Civil War in France” in Marx Engels – *On the Paris Commune*, Moscow, 1971; p. 76.
- 14. “Critique of the Gotha Programme” in Marx-Engels – *Selected Works II* (in German) Berlin 1964, p. 24. *Selected Works* (in one volume) Moscow, 1970: p. 327.
- 15. Cf. *Results of the Immediate Process of Production* (in German) Frankfurt 1969; p. 35
- 16. E. H. Carr – *The Bolshevik Revolution (1917-1923) I*, London 1964: p. 78.
- 17. *Selected Works II* (in Russian) Moscow 1982; p. 19, *Selected Works II*, (in English) Moscow 1975; p. 37.
- 18. *Selected Works II* (in Russian) Moscow 1982: p. 719, *Selected Works M* (in English) Moscow 1971: p. 768.

- [19.](#) O. Anweiler – *The Soviet Movement in Russia (1905-1921)* (in German) Leiden 1958: p. 195.
- [20.](#) “The German Ideology “ in Marx-Engels – *Works III*, Berlin 1973: p. 69.
- [21.](#) R. Luxemburg – “Mass strike, Party and Trade Unions” in *Selected Political Works II* (in German) Frankfurt am Main 1971, p. 65.
- [22.](#) *Selected Works II* p. 325-26; p. 328-29. The first emphasis is in the text. The second is ours.
- [23.](#) Ibid. p. 345-46, p. 348-49.
- [24.](#) Ibid. p. 413; p. 416
- [25.](#) M. Ferro – *From the Soviets to Bureaucratic Communism* (in French) Paris 1980: p. 182
- [26.](#) In Anweiler op. cit. p. 246. , .
- [27.](#) Trotsky – *History of the Russian Revolution III* ch 10 (in Marx Eastman’s translation) New York, 1932.
- [28.](#) *Selected Works 1* p. 421; p. 424.
- [29.](#) Ibid. p. 426; p. 428
- [30.](#) M. Heler, A. Nekrish – *The Utopia in Power* (in French from the Russian manuscript) Paris, 1982, p. 37.
- [31.](#) *Selected Works* lip. 400; p. 401. These minutes were published five years later.
- [32.](#) Ibid. pp. 456, 458; pp. 457,459. In what (Marxian) sense, one wonders it is a “socialist revolution” or a “proletarian peasant revolution” – When the “overwhelming majority” of the society (that is

precisely the proletariat and the peasantry) knew neither the extent nor the significance of such a revolution.

- [33](#).Ibid. pp. 478-79; pp. 476-77.
- [34](#).L. Schapiro – *The Russian Revolutions of 1917*, New York, 1984; p. 148.
- [35](#). “Russian Revolution” (1918) in *Political Writings II* (in German) Frankfurt am Main 1968; p. 138.
- [36](#).*Selected Works II* p. 474; p. 473.
- [37](#).Ibid. p. 567; p. 563.
- [38](#).Ibid. p. 615; p. 60S.
- [39](#).Ibid. pp. 596, 620, pp. 589,613.
- [40](#).Selected Works III, p. 115, pp. 182.
- [41](#).‘Terrorism and Communism’ in *Textes* (in French translation) Paris 1984: pp. 197, 198.
- [42](#).The Civil War in France (First Outline) pp. 164-65.
- [43](#).Anweiler – op. cit. p. 279.
- [44](#).*Selected Works II*. p. 610; p. 603.
- [45](#).Ibid. p. 630; p. 622.
- [46](#).Ibid. p. 618, p. 611; emphasis in the text.
- [47](#).Ibid. p. 630, p. 622.
- [48](#).L. Schapiro – *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union*. New York, 1960: p. 193.
- [49](#).Heller, Nekrish – op. cit. p. 52.
- [50](#).Lenin – *Selected Works III*, p. 526, p. 586.
- [51](#).ibid. pp. 695, 717, pp. 742, 766.

- [52](#). Reproduced in Translation in *Socialism or Barbarism* (in French) 1964 Jan-March.
- [53](#). in Heller, Nekrish op. cit. p. 136.
- [54](#). L. Schapiro – *The Russian Revolutions*, p. 186.
- [55](#). R. V. Daniels – *The Red October*, New York 1967. p. 224.