

A SECOND LOOK AT LENIN

SOLIDARITY (LONDON)
DISCUSSION BULLETIN

Dear Ken,

Many thanks for your note and the copy of Andy Brown's essay on Lenin. I would have replied earlier except I wanted to read it and send you some comments. If you think the authors would be interested perhaps you could forward them this letter - I enclose some spare copies.

I must admit to some disappointment on the treatment of Lenin. I'll try to indicate the main points, and just one or two of the secondary ones. You say you don't think the critique of Leninism is sharp enough - certainly true, but what is more important is that it isn't focused or deep enough as far as its explanations go. There is a serious problem of method here. Andy Brown's essential framework is that Lenin's thought and work (which he takes to be accurately represented in the Collected Works) forms an essential and harmonious unity, which shifted its emphasis in a gradual libertarian direction between 1902 and 1917, but which always consisted of some sort of blending of state socialism with libertarianism. And what is more he supposes that, in general, Lenin's utterances are made in good faith. Discrepancies, consequently, are assimilated as different facets of the many sides of Lenin, the Bolsheviks, the relation of party to class, and so on.

Obviously any biographical or intellectual treatment of Lenin must be, or entail, a view of the history and significance of Bolshevism. Andy Brown doesn't skirt this problem, but he has a view of it which he doesn't justify: Bolshevism represents a current of the workers/socialist movement which 'went wrong'. Thus what is in fact the rule as far as the economically collectivising revolutions of the twentieth century are concerned is presented as an exception, an aberration, a shocking diversion of the workers' movement. Essentially he falls into the same trap he correctly criticises the Trotskyists for on the (narrower) question of the degeneration of the Soviet state. What is not raised is the question of whether Leninism (and other currents of state socialism, perhaps even of socialism itself) represent social forces and interests distinct from, and alien to, the working class? It's a question which should be asked and examined before arriving at an answer.

I mentioned the methodological myopia of taking all utterances in good faith. Where we have to do with a party that explicitly distinguishes between the political elite and the mass, and deliberately organises itself with a secret internal life, and in such a way that political processes within the political elite are to be insulated from those within the mass, this problem is obviously acutely important. (It exists in the case of all ruling and all political minorities: it is a commonplace of bourgeois 'statesmanship' that lying is permissible for the greater good of the state. Are we to suppose that the most successful of state socialists were ignorant of, or wholly repudiated, this essential maxim of minority politics since time immemorial? It's more probable that political maturity consists in recognising that the essential art is to give temporary, partial, interests a universal and moral form - something which one cannot do without dissimulation.)

Because Andy Brown suffers from methodological generosity he is led to minimise both the internal contradictions of Leninism (the Postface points to the totally

self-contradictory character of Materialism and Empirio-criticism) and the extent of the shifts over time. It is just not true that Lenin gradually shifted his view of the state power, until arriving at State and Revolution in 1917. He opposed Bukharin on this in late 1916, and then, in trying to answer Bukharin, underwent his own 'crisis of conversion,' linking the potential for self-government of the working class with soviets in the form that eventually became State and Revolution. To his credit he arrived at this - a rejection of his Kautskyist view of the state earlier - before (only just - interesting question how far he was picking up sub-conscious 'vibrations') the February revolution and the re-emergence of the soviets (this is covered in an article by Marian Sawyer in Socialist Register, 1977, and also in Cohen's biography of Bukharin).

As you know I think Leninism is best examined from the point of view that it represents not a new class, but at least a new hierarchical and exploitative social order which forms itself politically. The idea that all forms of minority exploitation and oppression have to be those of a discrete class seems to me a hangover from Marxism, and a simplistic version of it at that. There is no reason in principle why both oppression and exploitation can't be organised for the benefit of a (differentiated and difficult to define) social minority through a hierarchy/bureaucracy, which sinks its roots right down into society, rather than being corralled within a definable and discrete social group. This idea is what is - for example - objective and fruitful in Bahro. And - although of course he doesn't draw this conclusion - it is precisely what is prefigured in Lenin's theory and practice of the party and (most of the time) the state.

On page 3, in particular, Andy Brown seems to me to be tilting at a straw man when he answers anarchists by the denial that early Bolsheviks were motivated by self-interest. Motives are always difficult to be sure about, and I doubt if all those who operated fruitfully in the European left social democracy (Parvus, for example?) were as pure as he allows. Even if it were so the rebuttal doesn't hold. Was 1789 not a bourgeois revolution simply because most of those who played a leading role from 1789 to 1793/4 were idealists rather than moneyed, luxury-loving bourgeois? Every revolutionary class and social order has to achieve an internal division of labour: the passionate, heroic and rational element make the revolution; their plump cousins benefit (frequently slaughtering the revolutionaries as they do so).

For similar reasons I wasn't really in agreement with Chapter 4. The chapter perhaps shows that Lenin thought he was constructing a social/economic order which was a logical extension, the extension to the limit, of trustified capitalism. This doesn't show that this was the eventual result, and that Russia is best analysed as a state capitalist country. I won't go into the arguments on state capitalism. But this connection of Lenin with it has an obvious internal relation to the view that Lenin and Bolshevism were 'wrong', 'mistaken' currents of the working class movement: to consider that they had the effect of creating a social order distinct from both capitalism and socialism would immediately raise the question whether they weren't the representatives/heralds of this before the revolution. In this, I think, the essay falls back into an (approximately Cliffite) version of Marxist unilinearism: Lenin (or Stalin) attempted a new social order, but circumstances and his own equipment

prevented him, and he/they fell back into being just the most advanced representative of the existing order. But the fundamental question remains: how does 'capital accumulation' explain the evolution of Soviet-type economies?

As you will gather I was more sympathetic to the Postface than the main text. Partly because it is more concerned about and realistic about Lenin's 'Machiavellianism', and partly because it is sensitive to the connection of this - or at least some elements of it - with Marx. The comments on philosophy I found particularly interesting. It is right that Lenin's mutilation of philosophical materialism isn't just arbitrary (though polemic imposes lots of arbitrary elements), but rather something given by the need to make knowledge (or the criteria for it) spring from a single rather than a mass source (one theory, one truth, one party - or as Thorez was to say, one nation, one army, one state!). If the successive approximation to material reality (which is the objective element in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism) has to take place sequentially, on the part of one 'subject' (the party, in political terms) then knowledge must necessarily be represented as individual - otherwise whose cognitions are being compared in the improving approximations? But isn't this localisation of knowledge (which cuts across the simultaneous, many-sided view of it which is predominant in Hegel and Marx) itself the expression of the world view of a social minority distinguished by education and intellect?

Even so, the Postface succumbs to criticising Lenin because he wasn't a philosophical Marxist. Marx may not have devised, but he certainly allowed Engels' 'dialectic of nature'. And isn't this the very basis of Materialism and Empirio-Criticism? I just don't think that philosophy (the abstractest form of the study of our own consciousness in action), can ever come to a halt, and die. But, throughout, Marx does want to write finis. And we are often tempted into thinking that he successfully did so. I often think there is a real analogy between the intellectual's wish for a father figure recent enough to be relevant but long enough ago to be dead and famous, and - for example - the peasant's attitude to the little father tzar, correcting the corrupt officials and false interpreters, fondly imagined as diligently reading and arbitrating on all the doleances of the downtrodden of the field (or library).

The most general question where both the main text and the Postface seemed to me flawed was in the picture of the working class as still (always?) the revolutionary class of modern society. Both assume this is in principle so, then go looking for the factors which explain why it is otherwise. But the track record/facts/accumulation of historical evidence don't do much to support this view. Workers don't often struggle for power, they even less often get it, when they get it they soon relinquish it, and those they relinquish it to treat them worse than the ones before. As a generalisation one can say that the modern working class preserves its moral qualities (which it does - it is not, by and large, actively engaged in corruption and hypocrisy) only by keeping its distance from politics. Given that the manual working class is a diminishing - and far less confident fraction of society, the picture of workers' self-management as the explanatory embryo latent within modern society at least needs arguing for. Neither really does it.

One last criticism: I thought Andy Brown should have taken far more account of

the secondary literature. I just don't any longer think it satisfactory to write about Lenin in detail without being immersed as far as possible in the (now very numerous and good) writings about Russian history. Lenin, for example, came from an essentially conspiratorial tradition - What is to be Done? did not spring from a tabula rasa.

Forgive me if these comments sound over-critical. I am sending them on only because the matter seems to me important and I wanted to let you have reactions.

Robin Blick has done a good deal more work on Lenin than I have, and quite a bit of what is above reflects this (though all the usual exonerations apply, of course!) Maybe you can get him to comment directly, too. Possibly he would even prepare a short critical comment for publication.

For my part, while I'm sure there is more historical work to be done on Lenin and Bolshevism, I feel reasonably clear as to the essential import. The more important and difficult question seems to me the social character of bureaucracy itself. Marx analysed the commodity/capital relation; can we not produce a comparably abstract and effective analysis of the 'official' relation? I've been reading Castoriades and a number of others on this, but they all seem to me to pause on the outside of descriptivism. A really difficult problem. Perhaps it can't be cracked by abstract thought at all?

Best wishes

Adam Westoby

Dear Adam,

Thanks for your comments on the Lenin pamphlet. So far as I can see there is an element of common ground in that neither of us likes Lenin but on the main question, which is to my mind 'What is the nature of Leninism and how can it best be attacked?' we differ.

Your main accusation would appear to be that I am naive in assuming that Lenin meant what he said and that this represents a form of methodological generosity. In a sense you're right. It may well be that to look at what Lenin said and to take him at his word does ignore the important possibility that he was lying. Yet what so far as I can see justifies the initial approach is the fact that Lenin did not lie in his serious works of theory such as State and Revolution. He actually openly advocated much of what he later proceeded to do. People simply didn't look carefully enough at what he said. Like the Leninists today he talked about workers' control etc., but when you look closely enough at the theory they say that workers' control will be possible someday but in the immediate post revolutionary period party 'guidance' is a must. And we all know what party 'guidance' means in practice. What I tried to show in the pamphlet is how very clearly Lenin said what he intended to do when his party took power and how closely the theory of Leninism resembles the practice.

There is a second reason why I consider it important to take Lenin's theories at face value. He has, as we know, an enormous number of followers all over the world. Many of them take his theories seriously and at face value. They do not believe he was lying and they try to put into practice his theory. What I was trying to do was convince a few modern day Leninists of where their theory will always lead them - to the dictatorship of the party. I cannot see how I could have persuaded anyone of the weakness of the theory they believe in if I simply selected only the actions and statements which presented Lenin in one light. They would simply say (as they have been saying in the secondary literature which you accuse me of not having read) that the libertarians have got it all wrong. A couple of quick quotes from the "real Lenin" and they can show that we have distorted the theory (even if we have correctly analysed the practice!). I therefore was indeed generous. I tried to take Lenin at his best and to show that when you look at what he actually wrote, instead of the evil straw man which most people want to argue against, his theories were themselves every bit as responsible for the failure of the Russian revolution as the 'material circumstances'.

There is also a third reason why what Lenin says should be taken seriously. His ideas were not the throw away one liners of a modern politician, delivered one minute and forgotten the next. They were the product of months of study of Marxism. Why should he have bothered with this tedious and sterile task if he merely wished to cynically manipulate the masses? There seems to me to be a resistance to the idea that well meaning people could do the things the Bolsheviks did. Yet this surely is the real danger of Leninists today. They do not noticeably belong to a different class to the libertarians or the social-democrats (though their personalities make a fascinating study). They are not all noticeably

unpleasant people. But they will, in the honest service of an idea, put you and me up against the wall and shoot us and tell themselves they are serving the working class. They would frighten me a lot less if they were liars and cheats who were only out to grab power for themselves and they would probably do a lot less damage to the socialist cause. Your example of Parvus is a good one. What danger has Parvus proved to be in the long run? And Lenin? The serious and sincere adherent of Marxism would appear to me to do more damage.

In this respect I was particularly interested in your comments on how far the Bolsheviks represented a new class. You are absolutely right to attack anyone who comes to the conclusion that all forms of minority exploitation and oppression have to be those of a discrete class but there are other possibilities besides the one you mention. A person can serve an idea just as they can serve a class, a group or their own self-interest (given the Thatcher/CBI divide over monetarism this is a particularly important point). It is this that makes the study of Lenin's ideas valuable. Ideas have an impact on history (even the ideas of historical materialists!) I set out in the pamphlet to document this. I wanted to show how Lenin and the Bolsheviks were motivated by a set of ideas which were perfectly consistent with Marxism and that these ideas had an enormous impact on their behaviour and were themselves a major cause (not the only one, but possibly the only one which could have been altered by the conscious efforts of human beings) of the failure of the revolution. In this respect I would have to plead guilty to one of your charges. I confess I do regard Leninism as a form of aberration since I still believe in the socialist movement. I have not yet abandoned my belief in socialism but I have abandoned my belief in Marxism and I have never adopted a belief in Leninism (and for this reason I would claim to be able to analyse it more objectively - I have no revolutionary father figures to hate!). I regard Leninism and Marxism as only one trend in a movement with a very long history. To analyse precisely and carefully where their ideas were in error is I believe an important task for those of us who continue to belong to this movement.

The way I see it is that Bolshevism is the logical extension of Marxism, and Marxism itself represents a current of the socialist movement which contained some good and some fundamentally mistaken ideas which in the end served the interests of certain strata in society. I was trying to trace the significance of some of those mistaken ideas via Chapter 4 of the pamphlet and that is why it is so long. The whole idea of that chapter is not to show that Russia is state capitalist (I did not go into this question in the pamphlet since I was not writing about Russia today but I essentially resist the idea of dragging societies kicking and screaming into pre-determined categories; terms like 'state capitalist' or indeed 'capitalist' can only be used as comparative devices not complete descriptions. The term 'state capitalist' is I believe a useful concept to use when looking at Russia just as it is when looking at the West but it is not a definition and one could gain just as many insights into the nature of Russia by looking at ancient Chinese bureaucracies). What I was trying to show in Chapter 4 was how Lenin took a theory from Marx, developed it in one of the few consistent directions possible and came to two important and quite wrong conclusions. One was that capitalism as a system is driven to collapse sooner rather than later and that it must be replaced by socialism. To my mind this is

a correct understanding of Marx and a complete misunderstanding of the dynamics of the evolution of social orders. There is no reason why capitalism should collapse of its own accord and in point of fact it has failed to do so; furthermore there is no reason why socialism must be the replacement rather than say barbarism or rule by an aristocratic elite. (On this question you seem to have thought I was putting forward my own views when I was trying to show what Lenin thought and how wrong he was. I myself do not believe that there are only two possibilities which are state capitalism or socialism. It is Lenin who believed this. I thoroughly agree with you that this idea is nonsense and I have never held it. One of the aims of Chapter 4 was to show what linear thinking like this can lead people to do). The second important conclusion was that what is bad under capitalism is good under socialism which is the reasoning which has driven countless honest socialists into the ranks of ruthless oppressors of the very people they claim to serve. I think an understanding of how crucial this particular piece of doublethink is to Marxist thinking is of central importance. Lenin thought that socialists must when they take power strive to build up the economy at all costs and that in the last analysis everything else should be subordinated to this end. When the capitalists made similar pleas he opposed them. When the genuine socialists opposed his own pleas he ruthlessly crushed them in the fond belief that he was helping to create socialism. The switch is not simply a matter of power corrupts - the notion that there is a positive side to capitalism and that social advance consists of building up a more advanced economy is a central component of Marxism the consequences of which only become clear in practice.

I also tried in the pamphlet to show exactly how Lenin fell short of libertarianism. I was somewhat worried that you came away with the idea that I regard Lenin's ideas as some sort of mixture of state socialism and libertarianism. I tried to show in the pamphlet that Lenin believed in libertarianism in the future while he believed in discipline and authority (tempered and moderated by workers' "accounting" or "checking" and gradually replacing them in practice). I wanted to show that contrary to what is written in a number of the secondary sources, Lenin never adopted either an anarchist or a fully libertarian position. I believe that he quite openly argued against full workers' self-management as an immediate practical measure before the revolution and afterwards proceeded to act in accordance with this belief to disastrous effect.

All in all I tried to accuse Lenin of 1). being incapable of recognising the divergence of interest between party and class and between party leader and party; 2). putting off the question of true democracy to the distant future. 3). identifying the expansion of the economy as itself progressive and all important; 4). believing that subordination and discipline were necessary to achieve this; 5). having acted throughout his life, and quite openly argued this way, against the principle of workers' self-management as a practical immediate measure; 6). having therefore had a profoundly oppressive impact on the course of the revolution; 7) having done so in complete accordance with the theories of Marxism. It should follow from this that I clearly do regard Leninism as representing interests quite distinct from and alien to the working class. I am led to the conclusion that revolutionaries should at all costs avoid making the same errors. It is important that we find ways of organising

which do not involve the inherent oppressiveness of the Leninist party structure. In this respect the idea of workers' councils is central to the way I see the revolutionary process. So far as I am concerned there is good strong evidence for the idea of workers' self-management as the embryo which is being strived for. Workers' councils are not some notion which I or anyone else has thought up as a 'nice idea'. They are the form of organisation which has been thrown up in a number of quite distinct revolutions and I see any divergence from a belief in this general type of organisation as highly dubious. I should stress here that when I talk of workers' councils I do not mean male manual unskilled proletarians have cornered the market on revolutionary aspirations (indeed you quite correctly point out the small size and the passivity of this group). I include, of course, women under the category of workers (be it in the home or at work) and white collar workers. I believe that workers' self-management is the only alternative to Leninism which does not drag us back into the morass of social democracy.

Besides the major issues there are a number of minor points which I'd like to clear up. I didn't quote from many of the secondary sources since most of them (and I've waded through enough of them) have to be treated with care. There is a tendency for one to repeat the utterances of another without checking back to the primary sources. Given the choice I prefer to deal with the primary sources and never to rely on secondary. This doesn't mean that I haven't read them - I simply don't regard quoting from a secondary source as very good proof.

As regards Lenin's attitude to Bukharin's views on the state things are much more complex than you make out. Lenin did disagree with Bukharin's 'Towards a theory of the Imperialist State' but his attitude towards it was not one of simple condemnation. He accused Bukharin of being absolutely incorrect on one issue which was the difference between the Marxists and the anarchists on the state. Lenin maintained that the state was important in the period after the revolution whilst Bukharin was more inclined to stress the need to 'blow it up' because the imperialist state had become so powerful. This is what Lenin objected to in his initial response to Bukharin and there is no sign of him withdrawing this objection in State and Revolution; in fact the first half of this book is devoted to a reaffirmation of traditional Marxist attitudes to the state which is largely intended as a response to Bukharin. On the other hand Lenin very quickly accepted most of Bukharin's position on the nature of the imperialist state since little of this was new (it came from Hilferding who Lenin had read and approved of earlier). It is just not true to talk of Lenin undergoing a crisis of conversion. He from the first was arguing that Bukharin's book had some good points in it and some bad points and he proceeded to write State and Revolution not as an admission that Bukharin was right all along but as an explanation of his own independent ideas. These views had been influenced by Bukharin yet they were, at least on my reading of the two books, quite different.

The extent to which Lenin's ideas shifted during his long period in Western Europe and the timing of any shift are complex questions. Essentially I would put the key date (and the only real occasion on which one can talk of Lenin undergoing a crisis of conversion may well be at this period) as the outbreak

of the First World War when Lenin broke with Kautsky (though whether I would agree with you on how far he succeeded in breaking free from the straightjacket of Kautsky's ideas is another matter). At this time he studied Hegel extensively and is reputed to have radically departed from the philosophical ideas expressed in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. Since I'm no expert at either Hegel or philosophy I've always shied clear of this area but I do think if we are examining Lenin's philosophy we need to take his work on Hegel into account not pretend it doesn't exist. I tried to present in the pamphlet a fairly large body of evidence of statements from Lenin which showed both the extent and the limits of the changes his ideas underwent and the gradual nature of the change. If anything I think I understated the number of different areas in which his ideas underwent extensive change in the period between 1902 and 1917 since I made no reference to his notebooks on Hegel.

As regards your assertion that Lenin comes from an essentially conspiratorial tradition, I think you need to prove your case. The line of argument which sees Lenin as a direct descendant of Nechaev and his like is not universally accepted by any means. (Harding for instance argues very strongly against it). It is possible to learn an awful lot about Lenin by reading Marx, Kautsky, Plekhanov, Hilferding and Bukharin since they are part of the same tradition. The populist terrorists are, in my opinion, not and to draw a direct line of conspiratorial descent is to ignore the sharp divergence which existed between the two traditions and was recognised by both sides at the time. Do we really have to see everything in terms of conspiracies? Or of Russian national characteristics? Why was authoritarian socialism so readily imported to Europe if it represented part of a Russian conspiratorial tradition? Isn't it more fruitful to look for the origins of Lenin's authoritarianism in Marx rather than in Chernyshevsky?

To sum up; it seems to me that you are trying to re-assert the standard libertarian critique of Lenin (and incidentally also the standard right wing critique). You seem to want to put Lenin's authoritarianism down to a combination of his debt to the Russian tradition of revolutionary conspiracy and his own desire to grab power for himself and his group. You also seem to see Lenin's ideas as basically unsubtle and contradictory. I see Lenin as a subtle complex and largely consistent Marxist and I would trace his authoritarianism, his blinkered economic theories and his conservative concept of the immediate post-revolutionary society to Marx. It is there, I think, where the blame lies and I am convinced that until we ditch Marxism and its legacy than all revolutionaries will remain. "part of the problem not part of the solution."

Finally could I just say that, whilst I disagree with you on a number of important points, most of what I have written is not meant as an attack on your ideas so much as an attempt to clear up misunderstandings about my own. I actually found your comments interesting and stimulating even where I disagreed with them.

Regards

Andy Brown.

LENIN, LENINISM AND SOCIALISM

AW's comments on Andy Brown's pamphlet on Lenin were most interesting and thought-provoking. As one of the authors of the postface, I feel the need to add my own comments, if only in the hope that this discussion will drive a few more nails into the coffin of Leninism.

Almost at once we encounter a problem of meaning - just what do we mean by that over worked word libertarian? Can't we find another, more exact, word to describe the kind of socialism we want? (Indeed, we may well have to find another word to describe the social system we want as in the minds of many people Socialism means something vastly different from, and often the exact opposite of, that which we envisage!) Maybe, a field of research more useful than past events would be today's use of language, in particular its use as a tool of mystification and self-mystification. Having said this, if we mean by libertarian socialism a society where both the means of production and life as a whole are collectively self-managed from the bottom up then Lenin was never an advocate of libertarian socialism, nor at any time did his ideas develop in that direction. To depict Lenin as a libertarian, even an unconscious one, can only hamper and not serve the process of demystification, a process which daily becomes ever more necessary.

Lenin's utterances were, I think, made in good faith. Indeed, the real tragedy is that Lenin really did think, as today's Leninists still think, that his authoritarian, hierarchical, centralist ideology was socialism, was the self-emancipation of the working class. Thus while it is wrong to call Leninism a current in the socialist movement which "went wrong", it would perhaps be right to say that Leninism was, given the situation in Russia in 1917 and the nature of Leninist ideology, a current which had very little chance of going right. Victor Serge, who had come to Leninism from Anarchism and ended his days in exile as a member of the POUM, made a valid point when he wrote that the "evils" of Leninism originated in an absolute sense of possession of the truth grafted on to a doctrinal rigidity. Lenin and today's Leninists are not the only ones possessing, or rather possessed by, this absolute sense. Such possession is not unknown in libertarian circles! Just as there is a tendency amongst the bourgeoisie to become a function of its property, to be enslaved by that which it has created, so there is a tendency among revolutionaries to become a function of, to be enslaved by, their ideology.

Such "successful" revolutions as there have been in this century have been based on the Leninist model, a model onto which local features, rural guerilla war in China for example, have been grafted. Such libertarian revolutions as there have been, have been crushed from without by superior military force. All these revolutions have taken place in areas (Mexico, Southern Ukraine, Spain) where the working class has been a minority of the population and their validity as examples/models for countries where the working class is a majority is at best questionable. There is also the question of the capture and use of state-power. The Zapatistas and Makhnovists ignored this question, the CNT-FAI sent its leaders to be ministers in a popular front government. From a libertarian viewpoint neither solution is satisfactory. But what is the libertarian solution?

Another question needing an answer is why do obviously intelligent folk, and the Leninoid sects are full of 'em, fall for such crap and believe it to be the last word in revolutionary thought? Following from this those of us who've been in the C.P., S.L.L. and co. must ask ourselves why we once fell for it and how did we come to realise that it was crap?

The point made in the final paragraph needs more discussion than there is space for here. So I'll just say that I think it underlines what I've concluded that Marxism is no longer an adequate tool for social analysis, that Marxism isn't the solution but a big part of the problem, that you can't be a Marxist (or any other name-ist) and a revolutionary!!

The Anarchist critique of Marxism and Bolshevism and the relationship between the Russian Anarchists and the Bolsheviks need to be looked at more closely than either A.B. or A.W. have done. In terms of practice, the activities of Bakunin, or the FAI or even of the Freedom Press group have been just as conspiratorial and elitist as that of the Leninists. Also, it is a reflection of Anarchism's failure that when Anarchists move towards "organisation" the organisational ideal is always Leninist. The ORA/AWA/LCG is a prime example. It needs to be emphasised that a formal commitment to libertarianism is no guarantee against bureaucratisation. An examination of bureaucratisation within both Marxist and Leninist groups needs to be undertaken. Maybe there is a "natural law" that whatever their ideology revolutionary groups take on the characteristics of the society in which they exist. If there is what can we do about it?

The argument as to what the USSR is or isn't is one that'll go on for ever. Surely, the point is that it isn't socialist nor is it in anyway better than Western capitalism. Maybe the whole argument is nowt more than an admission of failure and defeat. Maybe what we should be doing is not discussing what went wrong in the past, but what we can do today to ensure it goes right in the future. As a start we could agree that we need not to haggle about interpretations of past philosophers (Marx, Bakunin et al) but to contribute to tomorrow's philosophy of liberation which in its realisation will render redundant both the theory and practice of order giving and order taking.

I'm glad A.W. found the postface interesting. It wasn't the authors' intention to attack Lenin for abandoning Marx's philosophical materialism in favour of some mechanical variety. The philosophical dimension of the postface arose out of a discussion by the authors of philosophy in general and Anton Pannekoek's book "Lenin as Philosopher". It is true that despite his split with Lenin Pannekoek remained a Marxist, but perhaps because of his training as an astronomer he retained his critical faculties and was thus able to challenge many of the shibboleths of "orthodox" Marxism. The fact that today he is lionised by certain council communists whose communism is as sterile and locked in an idealised past of defeats and failures as the 56 other types, doesn't mean that his critique of Lenin's philosophy is of no use to those engaged on the work of total demystification. Maybe here we should ask why it is that revolutionaries, even those who pride themselves on their iconoclasm, feel a need for heroes, for prophets, for ideological mentors? Can't we think for ourselves? The desire of which A.W. writes for the "localisation of knowledge" the property of a minority whose capital is education, to write finis, to have a total system of ideas which will be good for all situations and all times is a symptom of the same ailment. Could it be that we

In countries where the working class is a minority, its economic and political aspirations have been expressed through reformist trade unions and political parties and look like being so expressed at least for the foreseeable future. Unless we are like the religious sectaries who cherish as an article of blind faith that one fine day by some mysterious process the millenium will arrive, the question of where this leaves us and what we can do about it (which is also the question of what is the role of groups like Solidarity) should be a matter of some urgency. All political activity is a compromise between reality and utopia and to me it seems that all Western revolutionaries, Leninist and libertarian alike, have erred on the side of utopia at the price of loss of contact with reality. Fantasies based on Petrograd in 1917 or Barcelona in 1936 may be a necessary solace, but they are still fantasies!

The question of what social force Leninism and other socialist currents represents is a very important one. AW tries to answer this and in so doing gives much food for thought. Until much more research has been done on the social make up of socialist organisations and the process by which they become bureaucratised, I don't think this question can properly be answered. Also, it will be necessary to look at the character structures of socialists, both those who remained loyal and those who became bureaucrats. A look at Reich's work might prove useful here. However, this leaves unanswered a very important question - if socialism doesn't represent the interests of the working class can that class ever develop a set of ideas which does?

While A.W.'s letter accurately describes the relationship between leaders and led (or order givers and order takers) in the Leninist party, a relationship which also exists between the party and the mass of non-party workers, it leaves aside the question of why this should be and how a revolutionary group can prevent such relationships developing within it. Even in libertarian organisations the hierarchical social relationships of capitalism are reproduced! Maybe, we should progress from a negative criticism of Leninism (manifested in obsessive "trot-bashing") to a positive discussion of how new non-hierarchical, egalitarian relationships can be built within libertarian groups. I'm aware that this could all too easily degenerate into the kind of breast-beating guilt tripping one sees amongst male sychophants of the "Femintern sexual Stalinists", but if it is true that a political group is the type of society it wants in microcosm then this must be done.

Certainly, any body of ideas which hasn't become fossilised will change with time. Likewise, because humans aren't perfect there'll be contradictions and mistakes. Where libertarians differ, or should differ, is that instead of claiming to be consistently right since 1848, 1903 or whenever we're willing to admit we're not always right, that our ideas can and do change.

A.W.'s point that maybe Lenin's move to his "State and Revolution" position was the result of his picking up "vibes" of the rebirth of the Soviets is a telling one. If this is true then it makes Lenin's life as a revolutionary even more tragic because it shows that while he was sensitive to what workers were doing for themselves, when their self-activity contradicted his fixed ideas he felt that it was this activity and not his ideas which were wrong.

Without doubt Lenin's followers have kept up this tradition - if the masses don't do it our way, they think, then it shouldn't be done.

need an all-embracing system of ideas because we are afraid of taking responsibility for our thoughts and actions? Is it easier to quote Marx or Lenin to prove you're right than to admit you're wrong?

A.W. asks is the working class the revolutionary class. Certainly, those who call themselves revolutionaries are a tiny minority which is overwhelmingly young, male, white-collar and college educated. I'd go farther than A.W. and say that the working class doesn't have any moral qualities distinct from those of the ruling class. Given a chance, many, if not most, workers will be just as corrupt and hypocritical as their bourgeois counterparts - just look at the union leaders who've risen up from the factory floor! The distance taken by most workers from politics stems not from a desire to preserve moral integrity, but from acceptance of the idea that politics is something done not by workers but by politicians. The workers' ability until very recently to improve wages by "pure and simple" trade unionism has reinforced this idea. Far from straining at the leash of right-wing leadership waiting only for the correct left leadership (or autonomous workers' group) to release their natural revolutionary instincts most workers are conservative, accepting the status quo or, when upset with it, convinced there is fuck all they can do about it. For why this is so see "The Irrational in Politics" - Solidarity's best ever pamphlet! For many workers Socialists are the Labour councils who've wrecked their communities, or the Labour governments they've voted in vain for, or social worker/ teacher types who patronise and coerce them and who are dismissed as middle class "wankers". I'm not saying the working class is beyond hope. I am saying that it is foolish to idealise it as both Leninists and libertarians have done. The working class does have the potential to change society in a revolutionary way, but it is still far away from realising that potential. That is the reality from which we must start.

I agree Lenin owes as much to Russia's conspiratorial tradition as he does to Marx or Kautsky. It seems to me Leninists have tried to apply this tradition wholesale to countries where political life has taken a different course. The result is the political absurdities of the sects. Britain has a different political tradition to Russia, a tradition which for all its shortcomings we can ignore only at the cost of a retreat from reality into a world of dreams fueled by wishful thinking.

Great contributions have been made to the demystification of Leninism. Much remains to be done before the task is completed. Meanwhile we can try to see to it that in fighting one form of mystification we don't replace it with another, but contribute towards the creation of a political/intellectual climate which in turn will contribute towards the liberation of humanity from all forms of bondage.

A.A. Raskolnikov.