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Book Review

Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism, A Critical Study

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Review: *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism, A Critical Study*, Kevin Anderson, University of Illinois Press, 1995, pp. 344.

Very few university professors today choose to begin scholarly works on political philosophy with such comments as these: *The critics of Hegelian and Marxist thought often suggest that we need to accept the “permanence” of capitalism and its world economy, working within it through multiparty democracy or in small-scale social movements that would avoid the dangers of a “totalizing” perspective. I think that such critiques are in large part misplaced and represent more the capitulation of some radical intellectuals to the status quo than an accurate reading either of the history of Marxism or of the theoretical needs of the present moment. These arguments grew out of the retrogressive Reagan-Bush-Thatcher social agenda, which persisted for over a decade in the industrially developed countries, a development that was very discouraging to leftist intellectuals of all types. They also flowed out of the failure of either the Eastern European upheavals of 1989 or the Third World revolutions of the 1970s to create a viable “third way” between totalitarian Communism and free-market capitalism. Thus, many grudgingly accepted that the Reagan-Bush agenda would prevail for many years to come.*

*By the early 1990s, however, as the fires of Los Angeles went off like a loud alarm clock in the American psyche, the Bush-Reagan mandate melted away overnight, as Blacks, Latinos, gay and lesbian activists, and above all, women found their voices. Communism and the Third World were not alone in facing crisis; Western capitalism was in the deepest crisis it had ever seen since the Great Depression, with unemployment at catastrophic levels once again, especially in Europe. Along with this came the rise of neofascist movements in Central Western Europe and outright genocide in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda...In Latin America the year 1994 opened with an uprising by indigenous peasants in Chiapas, Mexico, just as the Mexican government was celebrating its free-trade agreements in the United States. In 1994 the United States seemed to veer once again to the right. In the light of these deep crises, most of which are connected to the persistently intractable world economic crisis, I believe it is only a matter of time before...radical intellectuals begin to return to some form of the perspectives of Hegel and Marx.*

The author is Kevin Anderson, who argues the contemporary relevance of the political thought of someone who is portrayed as a dead dog by innumerable capitalist boosters and discouraged leftists: Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Anderson's book, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism, A Critical Study*, despite certain limitations, makes a substantial contribution to

the scholarship on Marxism, on Lenin, and on the interrelationship of philosophy and revolutionary theory. Specifically, this is the first book-length examination of Lenin's own 1914-15 studies of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Lenin took up these studies at what would seem an odd historical moment: the eruption of the First World War, the collapse of the Socialist International, and the quickening of a revolutionary upsurge that would yield both a new wave of anti-colonial national liberation struggles and the Russian Revolution of 1917. Anderson demonstrates - far more thoroughly than preceding scholars who have argued the point (such as Michael Lowy, one of several whom Anderson approvingly cites) - that these in-depth studies of Hegel's dialectical philosophy influenced the Russian revolutionary in a manner that culminated in: (1) a powerful Marxist critique of the so-called "orthodox Marxism" of the Second International, (2) a penetrating analysis of the imperialist origins of the catastrophic World War, (3) an original analysis of nationalism and national liberation struggles, and (4) an innovative and radically democratic approach to the questions of the state and revolution.

The philosophical conception of dialectics was seen by many in the Second International as being simply another way of expressing naturalist Charles Darwin's notion of evolution, but Anderson notes that for Hegel's, Marx, and the mature Lenin, it is far more dynamic than that: reality evolves through the interaction and interpenetration of various and often conflicting components. Through such dynamic self-development, aspects of reality can - often with a revolutionary suddenness - turn into something qualitatively different from what they first seemed to be. The dialectical notion "negation of the negation" involves a set of transformations and counter-transformations in which realities can be at the same time preserved and transcended in ways that seem to defy logic - unless one's logic is dialectical. Dismissed metaphysical hocus-pocus by many grounded in Anglo-American philosophical traditions (including such one-time Marxists as Sidney Hook and Max Eastman), dialectics is shown in Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism to be a vital intellectual tool for grasping realities and potentialities of our time.

This is not a perfect book: we will see that aspects of Anderson's research leave something to be desired. But much of it reveals a capacity for thoroughness, an attention to scholarly detail, and an intellectual clarity - all animated by the passion suggested in the above excerpt - that are immensely refreshing in a period when scholarly fashions dictate the "Lenin-as-dead-dog" motif. An obvious source that Anderson has drawn from is a subterranean current that took such things seriously fifty years ago: the Johnson-Forest tendency, a tiny grouping inside that U.S. Trotskyist movement, viewed harshly by some people as a bizarre little cult wrapped within an only slightly larger sect. At first blush, this seems as strange as Lenin immersing himself in Hegel studies in 1914. Yet the Johnson-Forest tendency distinguished itself not only by a passionate engagement with the ideas of such people as Trotsky, Lenin, Luxemburg and Marx, but also with an incredibly serious concern over the philosophical dimensions of revolutionary Marxism. Because of this, they produced the first English translations of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Notebooks* of 1844 and of Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* of 1914-15, and they launched the first serious discussions on the political implications of all this.

“Johnson” was, in fact, C.L.R. James, the great Marxist historian, culture critic, and Pan-Africanist whose contributions have recently excited considerable enthusiasm among substantial sectors of what remains of the left-wing intelligentsia. “Forest” was the formidable Raya Dunayevskaya, who inspired feminist theorist Adrienne Rich to comment recently: “We can be sure that Marxism is no more dead than the women’s liberation movement is dead, that the ways of reading Marx that Raya mapped for us are more challenge than ever in our time.” The third leader of this current was Grace Lee Boggs, a trained philosopher who with her husband James Boggs was to advance influential analyses in the pages of *Monthly Review* in the 1960s and after. Anderson comments on “how unusual the Johnson-Forest Tendency theorists - a Black man and analysis - or to engage with critical but positive analyses of the early Lenin by such authors he cites as David-Hillel Ruben or Helena Sheehan. Nor does he rise to the challenge of such scholarship as Joseph Ferraro’s *Freedom and Determinism in History According to Marx and Engels*, which throws into question the alleged theoretical split of Engels from Marx.

On the other hand, Anderson’s analyses of Lenin’s post-1914 writing, especially *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* and the various pieces on nationalism and national liberation struggles, are serious and constitute an important contribution. And his connection of these theoretical advances to Lenin’s deeper reading of Hegel - which undoubtedly did lead, as Anderson shows, to shifts in the quality of Lenin’s Marxism - is persuasive:

Lenin connects dialectics to the creative application of Marxism in a revolutionary situation. He makes this specific for an issue that the West European social democrats had ignored or played down: the revolutionary potential of what is today termed the Third World. Most important here is that Lenin has outlined fairly explicitly his concept of dialectic and his concept of imperialism and national liberation.

More than this, Lenin “seems” to view the national revolutions as an independent revolutionary subject (if not alongside the working class, then certainly “one of the bacilli”) that helps to bring on the socialist revolution. Lenin’s theory of imperialism has become dialectical in the sense of pointing not only to the economic side of imperialism but also a new revolutionary subject arising from within global imperialism: national liberation movements. “The implications of this for other” revolutionary subjects” (i.e., those rising up against other forms of oppression - such as oppression related to gender and sexuality) are not clearly developed here, but Anderson’s line of thought - and Lenin’s - appears to open the way. The interconnections of oppression around class, race/nationality, and gender are beyond the scope of Anderson’s study. But his analysis suggests that such further theoretical work is central to the kind of penetrating Marxist analysis that Lenin initiated in 1914.

Another strength of Anderson’s work is the serious attention he gives to a number of influential and philosophically-oriented theorists who focused on the Hegel-Marx-Lenin problematic, such as Georg Lukacs, Henri Lefebvre, Herbert Marcuse, Leszek Kolakowski, Lucio Colletti, Louis Althusser. While sharply challenging the assaults on

Hegel and/or Marx of the last three theorists, he is appreciative of Marcuse, Lukacs, and Lefebvre - although by no means uncritical. "Even such important Hegelian Marxists as Lukacs and Lefebvre played down the break in Lenin's thought in his 1914 encounter with Hegel," he complains. "In their readings of the Hegel Notebooks, they gave primacy to Lenin's ideas about practice rather than to this engagement with Hegel's idealistic categories such as subjectivity, self-movement, and consciousness, categories that have been so important in debates within Western Marxism as well as in feminist and Black"thought from the 1960s onward."For all of its strengths, however, this work of political philosophy suffers from a disconcerting abstractness. Lenin is treated as a philosopher more than as a practical revolutionary leader, and this introduces odd distortions. Diverse writers who emphasize Lenin's role as such a leader are accused by Anderson of "treating Lenin's theoretical work as being primarily political or organizational in an immediate sense,"and as failing to see Lenin"as an original political and social theorist whose ideas affected his political practice."In this manner the author unpersuasively lumps together the Cold War anti-Communist Leonard Schapiro (who deserves the criticism) with the British left-wing socialist Tony Cliff. Whatever Cliff's imperfections, he has an active appreciation for Lenin as a serious Marxist theorist who was committed to building a revolutionary party capable of rallying vanguard sectors of the working class around a Marxist political program. The problem is that Anderson rejects Lenin's perspectives on the revolutionary party, seeing them as related to the "vulgar Marxist" views that he complains Lenin held in 1908.

The problem manifests itself again in Anderson's mostly excellent discussion of Lenin's 1917 classic *The State and Revolution*, in which he effectively defends its libertarian content from trendy bourgeois critics as A.J. Polan. He demonstrates that for Lenin "the dictatorship of the proletariat" represents a radical working-class democracy. "Creative activity at the grass roots is the basic factor of the new public life," Lenin wrote in yet another 1917 writing. "Socialism cannot be decreed from above. Its spirit rejects the mechanical bureaucratic approach; living, creative socialism is the product of the masses themselves." But Anderson is not happy with Lenin's continued adherence to the concept of a revolutionary party, which is characterized as the negative element in "Lenin's paradoxical legacy." So intent is he on separating the "bad" Lenin from the good, that Anderson claims "in 1917 the notion of the party almost disappeared from his writings" - which tells us more about the author's tunnel vision than it does about Lenin in 1917. While *State and Revolution* has little to say about the question of the revolutionary party, Lenin was writing, saying, and doing much else in 1917 that directly involved the role of such party in a revolutionary situation. *Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?* is the tell-tale title of one pamphlet from this period.

Anderson states that after writing *What Is To be Done?* in 1902, "Lenin never worked out a newer, more dialectical concept of organization." But this flies in the face of so much else that he has demonstrated. How could Lenin's conception of the party (in stark contrast to his thinking on so many other vital questions) not become more dialectical with the accumulation of study, reflection, and political experience? Why would the study of Hegel fail to influence this central component of Lenin's thinking? This is especially problematical since there exist lengthy and well-documented accounts arguing that the

conception of the revolutionary party - like Lenin's thought on many questions even before 1914 - had a profoundly dialectical quality. "The Leninist theory of organization represents, broadly speaking, the deepening of Marxism, applied to the basic problems of the social superstructure (the state, class consciousness, ideology, the party)," Ernest Mandel wrote in such a study some years ago, adding: "Together with the parallel contributions of Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky (and, in a more limited sense of Lukacs and Gramsci) it constitutes the Marxist science of the subjective factor" ("The Leninist Theory of Organization," in Ernest Mandel, *Revolutionary Marxism and Social Reality in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Collected Essays [Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1994], p. 80). It is conceivable the Mandel is wrong, but Anderson doesn't show this to be the case.

One of Anderson's most substantial sources on all of this is a quote from Raya Dunayevskaya: "Unfortunately, the great transformation in Lenin, both on philosophy and on the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat, did not extend to Lenin's concept of the party, which, despite all modifications in actual revolutions, remained essentially what it was in 1903." Interesting as is Dunayevskaya's assertion, it does not make up for the lack of the careful textual analysis of which Anderson is quite clearly capable, not to mention the absence of any serious historical analysis of the 1917 revolution. Lenin made mistakes, it can be argued, that undermined the radical socialist democracy that was his goal (disastrous mistakes can be found especially in the Civil War period of 1918-1921, as he himself pointed out). Nor was Lenin's earlier political thought free of blind spots. Such problems could be fruitfully explored by a critical scholar such as Anderson if he was not diverted from such explorations by taking the easier but less fruitful path of vanguard-bashing.

Such limitations should not blind us to the book's genuine qualities. "This study attempts to open up debate about Lenin's Marxism," Anderson tells us, adding: "The discussion of Lenin's thought needs to break away from the confines of either Marxist-Leninist canonization or dismissively hostile Western critiques, something that happened long ago with Marx and even with Lenin's fellow revolutionary leaders who were also theorists, such as Luxemburg or Trotsky." Hannah Arendt once referred to "the grandeur and powerful attraction" of Lenin's perspectives, Anderson observes, but more than this, there are the crises we face today, generating searching discussion among increasing numbers of people over what is happening and what must do. Anderson insists that "a rereading of Lenin's work on the dialectic proper and on the dialectics of revolution can make some contributions to these discussions." Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism shows this to be true.

The foregoing analysis of this arrangement, we hope, has made clear that it was based on a shaky foundation from the beginning and that it had no chance of surviving without the special conditions that give rise to it. In the event the fatal blow turned out to be the end of the economic boom that began shortly after the war and petered out in the recession of 1974-75. Both capital and labor were hit hard, but neither had a plan or strategy for coping with the new situation. The immediate result was several years of confusion and fumbling. But by the end of the decade capital in the two bellwether countries - the United States and Britain - had got its act together, electing extreme right-wing

governments and openly declaring all-out war on labor. The crucial battles of course were the coalminers' strike of 1984 in Britain and the PATCO strike in the United States. These two events ushered in the period of the heavy preponderance of the power of capital which is still with us.

Since then the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War have greatly increased the relative power of capital on a global scale. At the same time signs that capital has an intention, let alone plans, for using its power constructively are totally lacking. Similarly, there are no indications anywhere on the horizon that the globalized capitalist system is capable of spontaneous upsurges of a kind that might ease the burdens of the crises generated by its multifarious contradictions.

In these circumstances, it seems to us that to talk, as Hobsbawm does, about the future of the European left (or any other left for that matter depending on center-left government to find a viable mix of private and public interests is to trivialize history and refuse to look at the stark realities of the crisis imposed by capitalism on all of us.

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