

## Marxism versus Leninism

Marx's theory of socialist revolution is grounded on the fundamental principle that "the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself". Marx held to this view throughout his entire forty years of socialist political activity, and it distinguished his theory of social change from that of both those who appealed to the princes, governments and industrialists to change the world for the benefit of the working class (such as Robert Owen and Saint Simon) and of those who relied on the determined action of some enlightened minority of professional revolutionaries to liberate the working class (such as Buonarotti, Blanqui and Weitling).

### Conscious Self-emancipation

Marx saw that the very social position of the working class within capitalist society as a non-owning, exploited, wealth-producing class forced it to struggle against its capitalist conditions of existence. This "movement" of the working class could be said to be implicitly socialist since the struggle was ultimately over who should control the means of production: the minority capitalist class or the working class (i.e. society as a whole). At first the movement of the working class would be, Marx believed, unconscious and unorganised but in time, as the workers gained more experience of the class struggle and the workings of capitalism, it would become more consciously socialist and democratically organised by the workers themselves.

The emergence of socialist understanding out of the experience of the workers could thus be said to be "spontaneous" in the sense that it would require no intervention by people outside the working class to bring it about (not that such people could not take part in this process, but their participation was not essential or crucial). Socialist propaganda and agitation would indeed be necessary but would come to be carried out by workers themselves whose socialist ideas would have been derived from an interpretation of their class experience of capitalism. The end result would be an independent movement of the socialist-minded and democratically organised working class aimed at winning control of political power in order to abolish capitalism. As Marx and Engels put it in *The Communist Manifesto*, "the proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority".

This in fact was Marx's conception of "the workers' party". He did not see the party of the working class as a self-appointed elite of professional revolutionaries, as did the Blanquists, but as the mass democratic movement of the working class with a view to establishing Socialism, the common ownership and democratic control of the means of production.

### Lenin's Opposing View

This was Marx's view, but it wasn't Lenin's. Lenin in his pamphlet *What Is To Be Done?*, written in 1901-2, declared:

"The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own efforts, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals" (Foreign Languages Publishing House edition, Moscow, pp. 50-51).

"Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*, that is, only from outside of the economic struggle, from outside of the sphere of relations between workers and employers" (Lenin's emphasis, p.133).

“The spontaneous working class movement by itself is able to create (and inevitably creates) only trade unionism, and working class trade unionist politics are precisely working class bourgeois politics” (pp. 159-60) .

Lenin went on to argue that the people who would have to bring “socialist consciousness” to the working class “from without” would be “professional revolutionaries”, drawn at first mainly from the ranks of the bourgeois intelligentsia. In fact he argued that the Russian Social Democratic Party should be such an “organisation of professional revolutionaries”, acting as the vanguard of the working class. The task of this vanguard party to be composed of professional revolutionaries under strict central control was to “lead” the working class, offering them slogans to follow and struggle for. It is the very antithesis of Marx’s theory of working class self-emancipation.

### **The Bolshevik Coup**

The implication of Marx’s theory of working class self-emancipation is that the immense majority of the working class must be consciously involved in the socialist revolution against capitalism. “The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority in the interest of the immense majority”.

The Bolshevik coup in November, 1917, carried out under the guise of protecting the rights of the Congress of Soviets, did not enjoy conscious majority support, at least not for socialism, though their slogan “Peace, Bread and Land” was widely popular. For instance, elections to the Constituent Assembly, held after the Bolshevik coup and so under Bolshevik government, gave them only about 25 per cent of the votes.

John Reed, a sympathetic American journalist, whose famous account of the Bolshevik coup, *Ten Days That Shook The World*, was commended in a foreword by Lenin, quotes Lenin as replying to this kind of criticism in a speech he made to the Congress of Peasants’ Soviets on 27 November, 1917:

*“If Socialism can only be realized when the intellectual development of all the people permits it, then we shall not see Socialism for at least five hundred years...The Socialist political party - this is the vanguard of the working class; it must not allow itself to be halted by the lack of education of the mass average, but it must lead the masses, using the Soviets as organs of revolutionary initiative...”* (Reed’s emphasis and omissions, Modern Library edition, 1960, p.15).

Compare this with a passage from the utopian communist, Weitling: “to want to wait...until all are suitably enlightened would be to abandon the thing altogether!” Not, of course, that it is a question of “all” the workers needing to be socialists before there can be Socialism. Marx, in rejecting the view that Socialism could be established by some enlightened minority, was merely saying that a sufficient majority of workers would have to be socialists.

### **Lenin’s Legacy**

Having seized power *before* the working class (and, even less, the 80 per cent peasant majority of the population) had prepared themselves for Socialism, all the Bolshevik government could do, as Lenin himself openly admitted, was to establish state capitalism in Russia. Which is what they did, while at the same time imposing their own dictatorship over the working class.

Contempt for the intellectual abilities of the working class led to the claim that the vanguard party should rule on their behalf, even against their will. Lenin’s theory of the vanguard party became enshrined as a principle of government (“the leading role of the Party”) which has served to justify what has proved to be the world’s longest-lasting political dictatorship.

The self-emancipation of the working class, as advocated by Marx, remains on the agenda.  
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