

Lenin Reloaded...

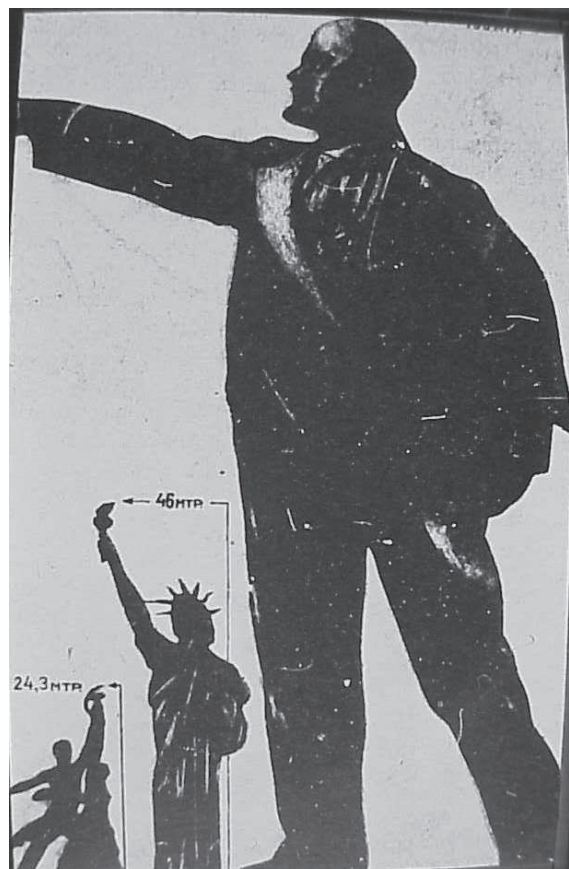
and engaged in friendly fire?

Benjamin Franks

Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis and Slavoj Žižek, eds, *Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth* (Durham and London, Duke University Press 2007).

Lenin Reloaded is largely constructed from papers delivered at a conference held in Essen in February 2001. Collections of essays drawn from academic presentations are often neglected by reviewers. There are a number of reasons for this marginalisation, many of which relate to the lack of cohesion and complexity that results from having diverse expert contributors. The chapters tend to be hard to digest, as they reproduce many of the vices of contemporary academe, in which the aim is to demonstrate the paper-giver's theoretical superiority to his (and it is usually a 'he') small audience, rather than engage and promote critical discourses to aid collaborative projects. Thus, such edited volumes of traditional scholarship, whilst demonstrating the virtues of rigour, frequently lack the sparkle of readability to appeal to a larger audience or the provocative tension required to maintain a reviewer's interest. *Lenin Reloaded* however, attempts to be more challenging than the usual collections of conference proceedings. It deliberately seeks to shake what the editors believe is a moribund academic community out of its stupor.

There are a number of differences between standard repackaged conference proceedings and this volume. First there is the title's eye-catching attempt to play with popular culture, with its allusion to near-contemporary movies (in particular *The Matrix Reloaded*). A cinematic pun as the film *Reloaded* was followed by *Revolutions*, and the introduction, along with many of the essays, expresses an overt insurrectionary intent that this Reloaded will be followed by revolutions also. The filmic conceit was no doubt inspired by the contribution of Slavoj Žižek, who amongst other claims to fame was the presenter of *The Pervert's Guide to the Cinema* (Channel 4, 2006).



More important distinctions lie in the sheer quality of the contributors that include Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar, Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson and Antonio Negri, which might not constitute 'big names' when compared to the worldwide recognition of Laurence Fishburne, Keanu Reeves or even Carrie-Anne Moss, but in the world of political philosophy and cultural theory they are amongst the superstar elite.

It is the subtitle of the volume that provokes a stronger reaction, with its claims to assist the project of a "politics of truth". This is a claim, repeated in the introduction, that against the messy "postmodern sophists" of contemporary academic fashion (p.2), that there is not only a singular reality whose ultimate end is liberation, but that Lenin's interpretation of Marx is the unique voice able to articulate this truth. Lenin is capable of "dispelling all opportunistic compromises" and reasserting the "revolutionary project" (p.3). However, such ambitions are hugely problematic: first, because the ideal of a singular revolutionary truth is epistemologically suspect; second, because Lenin appears an unsuitable totem to use to advance some of these goals; and finally, because the papers themselves contradict one another on how far Lenin, and his model of praxis, is an adequate counter to the social problems of postmodernity.

Thus Negri's contribution outlines some of the problems of advancing and clarifying the 'revolutionary project' through the application of Leninist principles. The mechanisms of emancipatory social change have substantially changed since the era of industrial capitalism (pp.303-04). The development of post-Fordist global capitalism, argues Negri, has produced a completely different range of revolutionary agencies. These diverse and fluid agents of change Negri calls the 'multitude', and they are distinct from the singular revolutionary subject of Leninism, namely the proletariat (pp.301-03 and p.306). The altered economic terrain no longer permits the same sorts of strategic intervention long associated with the Leninist party (pp.304-05). At best, Negri argues, Lenin provides an example of a theorist analysing the particularity of the historical-specific terrain of struggle to generate transformative practice. This is echoed by Savas Michael-Mauss, who considers Lenin's personal commitment, the heroism of continuing resistance in the face of monumental oppressions, rather than his strategic pronouncements, that is most important for the current situation (pp.102-03). However, the question then arises, why choose Lenin? There are other figures that can inspire collective liberatory practices without the connotations of dogmatism that are associated with the oppressive, instrumentalist methods defended in Lenin's name.

If Lenin is chosen because he is viewed, as the editors maintain, as a forthright figure unyielding in the face of class hierarchies, then this too is deeply problematic. As even Lenin was aware, in class society there are no 'pure' spaces in which revolutionary practices exist in a 'compromised' state. There are always concessions to the apparatuses of the capitalist social order in whatever activities radicals undertake, whether it is selling their intellectual labour for employers to profit, or producing revolutionary texts as commodities for sale by multinational organisations (in the case of this volume, £50

for the hardback). Indeed, Lenin seems a remarkable figure to pick on as an inspiration to those rejecting concessions. Lenin was often making settlements with oppressive social orders, such as conducting negotiations with imperial powers; or, as Alex Callinicos acknowledges in his contribution, reintroducing bureaucratic management to post-revolutionary Russia, an economic response, Callinicos argues, that was the result of the civil war, discontent from the peasantry and failure of the German revolution to provide much-needed support (pp.25-26). Yet as libertarian-left critics such as Maurice Brinton describe, the response to these events need not have taken the officious turn approved by the Bolshevik-leader.¹ Lenin's responses to the economic problems that arose in the post-revolutionary period were not necessarily the only credible alternative, despite Callinicos's assertion. More autonomous modes of organisation and production arose but these would have reduced the role of the Party – and for this reason they were deliberately crushed.

Finally, is Lenin a sufficient counter to the postmodern malaise regretted by the editors? The eloquent essay by Terry Eagleton suggests that rather than being a counterpoint to postmodernity, Lenin embraces some of its key features. For Eagleton makes the surprising assertion, all the more astonishing given the overt purpose of the book, that Lenin is a postmodernist 'suspicious of teleologies', viewing historical developments as 'fractured and multi-layered', 'allergic to political purity [...] and favouring the hybrid and the ambiguous over the glare of absolute certainty' (p.42), a man who was every much an avant-gardeist as James Joyce (p.51). Eagleton's Lenin is not the 'steel hardened vanguardist' (p.44), but one who sees knowledge as being context-specific and provisional. This specialist, revolutionary know-how is neither universal nor innate, and thus Eagleton rightly defends the idea



that within a particular domain some will have greater facility to assess appropriate action, and to act. In a liberatory context this is more likely to be generated by a 'bus driver' than a 'banker' or academic (pp.45-46), though plenty of academics and precious few bus drivers seem to have contributed to this textual attempt at revitalising the revolutionary tradition.

The logic of this position would be to regard all authority to be dependent on context-specific knowledge, not social status, and this knowledge is provisional, meaning no group is privileged as the universal vanguard, a seeming rejection of Leninist views on the proletariat. Indeed, Eagleton regards Lenin as rejecting a particular singular revolutionary subject, that of the proletariat, for a constellation of arising subjects whose collectivity creates revolutionary change (p.54). This Lenin does not 'lead' the working classes, but recognises that no conscious collective predicts the myriad desires and actions of subjects resisting oppression (p.53). Eagleton's Lenin is, therefore, far from the hectoring Leninist bureaucrat, who swamps autonomous initiatives with their programmatic strategies, and justifies paternalist intervention through spurious appeals to the science of revolution. The postmodern Lenin is guilty only of embracing modernity too much, as opposed to contemporary activists' apparent readiness to reject it (pp.57-58).

Instead of a singular revolutionary truth emerging from the analyses of Lenin, the book becomes deeply complex, as there seems to be so many different Lenins to reload. With so much rearming going on there is a danger of being caught in the crossfire. There is a bloody history of conflict between the various groups claiming to be the true inheritors of Leninist thought, whether it is the sectarian rivalries of the minor revolutionary parties of the European left or, more dramatically, the murderous conflicts between Stalin and the Trotskyists throughout the 1930s or the full-blown civil war between Eritrea People's Liberation Front and the Ethiopian regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in the 1980s.

By contrast to Eagleton's postmodern Lenin, Lars T. Lih's evangelical Lenin knows the absolute truth and seeks a programme and vehicle to awaken the masses to it (pp.283-94). Lih's Lenin is, perhaps, stereotypical, as Alan Shandro indicates (308), but one which captures many of the features of contemporary Leninist parties. Lih's Lenin is not only in conflict with Eagleton, but also diverges from Callinicos. Though Lih and Callinicos both maintain the importance of the proletarian-party to their Lenin, for Lih Lenin is a Messianic figure (p.294), whilst for Callinicos, the representations of Lenin as a man ruled by charismatic rage is a historical distortion (pp.18-19): rather, he is a moral rational figure whose philosophy is best exemplified by his follower Trotsky (pp.29-30).

Callinicos' Lenin is roughed up Kevin Anderson, as this Lenin is theoretically weak concerning



the role of the revolutionary party, and the undermining of revolutionary democracy (pp.120-21) – a subject also opened up to critique by Sylvain Lazarus (pp.257-60). Yet Anderson's and Callinicos' Lenin have similarities as both view this moral, scientific strategist as being distinct from the failures of state socialism and the totalitarianism of Stalin, a view also shared by Daniel Bensaïd in his pluralist account of Lenin (pp.154-55). Yet this division of Stalin from Lenin (and Trotsky) is in turn rejected by Žižek (p.76), who regards Stalin as the necessary outcome of Lenin's October Revolution (p.74). Badiou is even more explicit than Žižek, in his high regard of state-socialist dictators. The two agree that Lenin is best exemplified through his rigorous instrumentalism of totalitarianism, although Badiou selects Mao Tse-Tung's cultural revolution as the key to creating a new epoch (pp.11-12, p.16). Consequently, the myriad perspectives illustrate not just the complexity of identifying Lenin, but in drawing out relevant features to guide radical practice. This confusion jumble of Leninisms is partly the result of the evolution, or – as Etienne Balibar proposes – 'contradiction' within Lenin's thought (p.207).

Thus, rather than showing the particular pertinence of a reinvented Lenin to guide us in the current climate of capitalist ascendancy, his proponents, on the contrary, show that more-or-less anything can be justified by reference to him. He is both the father of totalitarianism and distinct from it; the key strategist and the fatally-flawed tactician permanently tied to the monolithic revolutionary party; he identifies the universal agent of change, but also outdated with regards to his analysis of where resistance to capitalism is generated; he is the charismatic champion,

but also the rational, composed everyman. To repeat Žižek's comment concerning his own commentators, "with defenders like these who needs attackers".²

It is rare to come across a book with so many papers one disagrees with, to find the project, as described in the editors' terms, so uncomfortable and problematic, yet also to welcome the volume nonetheless. First, many of the papers, especially those by Matsas, Anderson, Bensaïd and Stathis Kouvelakis provide informed interpretations of Hegelian philosophy through the engagement of Lenin, though this often shows the magnitude (and enigmatic nature) of Hegel's thought, rather than the relevance and importance of Lenin.

Second, many of the papers present a challenge to those who identify with different political movements, by presenting alternative versions of Leninism that run counter to the stereotypes adopted by his main opponents: anarchists, liberals and social democrats. Often criticisms of Lenin concentrate on just a few texts (*"Left Wing" Communism: An infantile disorder, What is to be Done?, Materialism and Empirio-criticism*) or questionable, liberal biographical histories. Anderson and Eagleton's versions of Lenin stand out as providing alternative, pluralist accounts that could be critically and constructively engaged with.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, whilst these alternative Lenins might not be convincing, they at least open up some of the key concepts for greater consideration and wider use, in particular, the return of the concept of 'revolution', which as Jameson has pointed out, has been lost in the hurry to ditch political engagement for more fashionable concerns (p.67). This is not to say that there are not terrible problems in viewing revolution as a singular event, which predetermines the lines of conflict and becomes the unique moment of rupture (pp.67-68). This singular account of revolution leads to a dangerous consequentialism, in which any manner of oppressive, hierarchical tactics can be justified to bring about the rapture of social realignment. Nonetheless, by reaffirming the importance of revolution the editors and contributors make a vital point: without this concept we lose the possibility of conceiving of transformative social practices and the construction of a more humane ethic.

Benjamin Franks is a Lecturer in Social and Political Philosophy, Glasgow University in Dumfries

Notes

1. M. Brinton (2005), 'The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control' in *For Workers' Power*, (Edinburgh AK Press).
2. S. Žižek (2007), 'Afterward: With defenders like these who needs attackers', P. Bowman and R. Stamp, *The Truth of Žižek* (London, Continuum).