

Bukharin, Ossinski, Radek, Smirnov: The Revue *Kommunist* (Moscow 1918)

The left communists against state capitalism ⁽¹⁾

Extracts of the preface (2011)

The theoretical roots of the left communists

The disagreements within the Bolshevik party have formally manifested themselves in the wake of the divergences on the signature of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty but, in fact, they crystallized essential and more general questions that the international communist movement unfortunately has not had the time to deepen and resolve in order to draw all out their political implications:

- On the character of the period opened up by the First World War:

In the way of Rosa Luxemburg, the future left communists thought that capitalism had become historically obsolete, and they set out to distinguish all the implications. Certainly, the idea of the historical invalidity of the capitalist mode of production was largely shared within the communist movement, but enormous divergences subsisted regarding its foundations and consequences. For instance, whereas the left communists were convinced of the “*world wide decline of the productive forces*”, ⁽²⁾ Lenin thought that “*on the whole, capitalism develops infinitely more rapid than before.*” ⁽³⁾ Such divergent appreciations could not help leading to very different analyses and positions on the character of State capitalism as well as on imperialism or the national question.

- On the implications that are derived from the characterization of the invalidity of capitalism at the level of the immediate struggles of the working class and the tasks of the communists, namely: whether or not to maintain the necessity of a minimum program. Like Rosa Luxemburg who thought that “*when the development of industry will have reached its apogee and for capitalism will begin the descendant phase on the world market, the syndicalist struggle will become difficult [...] At this stage the struggle is necessarily ever more reduced to the simple defense of acquired rights, and even this becomes ever more difficult. Such is the general tendency of the evolution of which the counterpart must be the development of the political and social class struggle*” ⁽⁴⁾, the left communists estimated that the task of the hour was to struggle everywhere for the international communist revolution, and that the party should no longer perpetuate the distinction between the minimum and the maximum program. Lenin, by contrast, estimated that “*it is ridicule to abandon the minimum program, which is essential as long as we live in the framework of a bourgeois order...*” ⁽⁵⁾

1 Editorial collective Smolny, December 2011, ISBN: 978-2-9528276-3-8, French, 20 Euros.

2 Theses on the actual situation, *Kommunist* no. 1

3 “*...it would be erroneous to believe that this tendency toward putrefaction excludes the rapid growth of capitalism... [...] On the whole capitalism develops infinitely faster than before, but this development becomes more unequal in general, the inequality of development manifesting itself in particular by the putrefaction of the countries that are most rich in capital (England).*” Lenin, Imperialism, highest stage of capitalism, Collected Works, part 22: 324.

4 R. Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution?*

5 Lenin, in Shapiro: *The Bolsheviks and the Opposition: 167*

- On the implications of this characterization of the capitalist mode of production as an obsolete system regarding the historical necessity to abolish the bourgeois state from top to bottom and to engage on the road of the withering away of the new state that came into being after the seizure of power: before October 1917 Bukharin disagreed with Lenin on this question. Subsequently the latter published his work *The State and the Revolution*, in which he globally joined the theses that had already been developed by Bukharin. But the divergences on this question came back after the revolution (cf. *Infra*)

- On the immediate necessity to arrive at the greatest possible homogeneity within the international communist movement: In March 1918 the left communists defended the need to elaborate a unified program in order to constitute an international proletarian party, whereas Lenin considered that this eventuality could not become reality “*as long as the proletarian revolution will not have conquered at least one country.*”⁽⁶⁾ This appreciation can only surprise those who believe that, for Lenin, the proletarian revolution would already have arrived by the simple fact of the seizure of power in October 1917!

- On the analysis of imperialism and the position on the national question:

In 1915, Piatakov and Bukharin defended theses that were likewise very close to those of Rosa Luxemburg and very far from those defended by Lenin, as they thought that “*the slogan of 'self determination of the nations' is utopian before anything else...*” and even “*harmful because it is a slogan that sows illusions.*”⁽⁷⁾

Many other questions who were equally fundamental were objects of diverging analyses within the international communist movement. Unfortunately, all these debates have not been resolved at the time and have fallen into oblivion, whereas this period belongs to the theoretically most rich ones.⁽⁸⁾ To this extent, all these fundamental questions that the communist movement has not succeeded to discuss rebound during the first half of the year 1918 in Russia and are put forward by the left fraction of the Bolshevik party in the four editions of the revue *Kommunist*.

The disagreements

As the question of the peace signed at Brest-Litovsk and its consequences has still largely been dealt with, the debates are going to extend themselves to the politics to engage in Russia: the economic measures to take, the reorganization of the Red Army into a traditional army, the future of the unitary organs of the working class, like the soviets or the factory committees, etc. On all those themes the left communists would oppose to the politics of Lenin, who wants to install a State capitalism by substituting “*an iron discipline*” on the work place for the workers' control that is still being exercised by the workers in the enterprises, by appealing to the old specialists in order to relaunch production and by envisaging agreements with the former proprietors of the big capitalist firms in order to obtain their cooperation: “*Our real discords ... concern the dividing line between state capitalism and the socialist Commune state. It will not be difficult to show that the present concept to abandon collective decision taking, based on a defiance against the strength of the workers' absolutely contradicts the fine slogan that comrade Lenin put forward yesterday: "To instruct all the kitchen maids in*

6 Ibidem

7 Piatakov, Bosch, Bukharin: *Theses on the right of the nations to self determination*, an article published in *Kommunist* no.1-2, Geneva 1915. This journal with a single issue has to be distinguished from that which appeared in 1918 at *Saint Petersburg* (ten issues), and subsequently at *Moscow* (four issues).

8 In his work on *The Bolsheviks and the Opposition (1917 -1922)* Shapiro signals the existence of a series of pamphlets published in 1917 who restore the animated debates between Lenin and the Moscow group, many of which would become left communists in 1918. These debates rebounded a year later and following the VIIth party congress. Notably, they appear in two text bundles with regards to the revision of the program of the Bolshevik party, and in two periodicals. Unfortunately, to our knowledge, these documents have never been translated.

leading the state.” It will not be difficult to show as well that “the organizers of the trusts” (not the technical staff, but the capitalists as such) have nothing to do with the old slogans to elevate the activity of the proletariat.”⁽⁹⁾

Beyond the question of knowing whether the left communists have been right or wrong in one or another of these issues, what matters is – and the reader will be struck by this – the fact that this fraction of the party has had the merit to try to reply by basing themselves on the essential principles that found the socialist character of the revolution (...).

So, on the question of the signature of a separate peace, making an end to the war with Germany (Brest-Litovsk), the left communists maintained and amplified their critiques in face of its lethal consequences, both at the exterior and the interior level. Radek reminded of the profoundly internationalist sense of their positioning: “*The European revolution was a question of life or death for the Russian revolution (...) In February 1918 the revolutionary forces in Europe were insufficient to protect the Russian revolution from the violent robbery by German imperialism. But by henceforth ceasing to put its cards on the European revolution the Russian revolution has signed its death warrant. One cannot realize socialism in one country, moreover in a backward country.*” He judged that with the signing of this separate peace with Germany, the Soviet power ceases to put its cards on the European revolution and at the same occasion signs its death warrant. Therefore, faced with the right-wing policies waged by Lenin and the bolshevik party, saying: “*Yes, we have hoped for a European revolution and we still do so. But for the moment it has not taken place. This is why we are obliged to have affairs with the imperialist camps. We are forced to maneuver between them.*” the left communists reply: “*There are very precise limits that cannot be trespassed with regards to the maneuverings that the soviet power envisages to undertake. If it were the bourgeois state or a bourgeois commander maneuvering, it would only have to follow the rules of military art. For him there would be no interdiction. He could conclude alliances with all possible adversaries of his enemy. But we have only one ally, the international proletariat that begins to mobilize its forces. All states between whom we are obliged to maneuver are our class enemies. That is what defines the limits of our manoeuvrings. If to put our cards on the European revolution is not an empty phrase, an icon in front of which one prays in the morning and in the evening, and that does not exercise any influence on our daily activity, then let us not maneuver, if that must weaken the growing forces of the European revolution. The international solidarity of the proletariat is the indispensable condition for the European revolution. Every maneuver that undermines the confidence of the European proletariat in the international proletarian solidarity delays the development of the European revolution and thereby empties the sense of our politics, whose aim is exactly to maintain ourselves until the European revolution, and thus to precipitate the latter.*”⁽¹⁰⁾

Concerning the character of the power that came out of October 1917, it is true that the left communists did not put into question the leading role of the Bolshevik party and its substitution to the power of the workers' councils – a politics to which they themselves had contributed. Nevertheless, more than the rest of the party, they would defend the necessity for the working class to preserve the organs through which it exercises its self activity. By consequence they are convinced that the politics pursued by the Bolshevik party “*favors the decline of the activity of the proletariat and of its consciousness*”: “*The introduction of discipline at the work place in correlation with the restoration of the capitalist direction of production does not increase labor productivity; by contrast, it reduces the autonomy of the class, the activity and the degree of organization of the proletariat. It threatens to suffocate the working class... [...] The bureaucratic centralization of the soviet Republic and the return of bourgeois business plotters and of petty bourgeois, can only favor the decline of the activity of the proletariat and its class consciousness and, finally, favor the distancing of the party from the workers*” [...] *The form of control by the state of the enterprises will develop in the sense of the bureaucratic centralization and of the reign of commissars of all kinds, toward the suppression of the independence of the loc-*

9 Bukharin, *Kommunist* no.3

10 The three quotations in this paragraph are from Radek in *Kommunist* no.2

al councils and the rejection, in practice, of the principle of "the Commune State administered by the base." (11)

Concerning the politics to adopt with regards to the post-revolutionary state, Bukharin proposes to add a clause to the program of the Bolshevik party on the withering away of the State at its VIIIth congress in March 1918. Lenin opposes himself against it by arguing that *"For the moment we are, without any doubt, partisans of the State [...] One can always ask oneself at what moment the State begins to perish... But by proclaiming this perishing in advance one goes against the historical perspective."* (12) Well, thinking that the historical perspective is towards the reinforcement of the State only some months after having edited *State and Revolution* shows, if any need may be, the existing theoretical lacuna and the terrible pressure of the events on the position of Lenin and the majority of the Bolshevik party.

This question of the attitude towards the post-revolutionary State – the latter's withering away versus its strengthening – determined the politics of agreements with regards to the old bosses. Faced with this politics the left communists replied that: *"Instead of passing on from nationalizations to the general socialization of the large industry, the agreements with the 'captains of industry' will lead to the formation of big trusts, directed by them, and encompassing the principal branches of industry who will have the appearance of state enterprises. Such a system of organization of the production provides the social basis for the evolution toward State capitalism and is only a transitory stage toward the latter."* (13) It is the same with the workers' control: the left communists opposed themselves to the decree of Lenin to abolish it. On the contrary they pleaded for *"the autonomous activity of the working class"* where *"there has to be a conductor of the orchestra, but this has to be the working class itself."* (14)

The left communists were equally lucid on the *"extremely dangerous [consequences] for the cause of the Russian and the international proletariat"* of the orientation taken up by the Bolsheviks, an orientation that *"weakens the international revolutionary significance of the Soviet power and of the Russian revolution ever more."* Their diagnostic is without appeal and particularly premonitory on the future that awaits for the Russian revolution: *"The political line thus defined can only strengthen, against Russia, the influence of external and internal counter-revolutionary forces, destroy the revolutionary capacity of the working class and cut off the Russian revolution from the international revolution; it would result in effects that are harmful to the common interests of both."* (15) They even foresaw what would arrive shortly afterward: the compromising and secret agreements with German imperialism during the signing of the Rapallo treaty on April 16, 1922; agreements that permit the German army to reorganize its forces on soviet territory in order to escape from the clauses of the Versailles treaty: *"In foreign policies the offensive tactics of openly denouncing imperialism will be replaced by diplomatic dealings of the Russian State with the imperialist powers. The soviet Republic will not only sign trade agreements with them, but will equally be able to forge organic economical and political ties with them by using their military and political support."* (16)

An alternative orientation

Faced with all these critiques, what alternative orientation have the left communists proposed? It is striking to take notice that what guides the reflexion of this fraction of the Bolshevik party was not the contingency of events but, by taking into account reality and by replying concretely to the prob-

11 Theses on the actual situation, *Kommunist* no.1.

12 Lenin, *Report on the debates at the VIIIth congress*, quoted by Schapiro, p. 168.

13 Theses on the actual situation, *Kommunist* no.1.

14 Lenin, *Collected Works*, part 27 : 494

15 Theses on the actual situation, *Kommunist* no.1.

16 Theses on the actual situation, *Kommunist* no.1.

lems posed by the revolution, the search for solutions in the framework of the respect to the inherent principles of a socialist revolution: *“The proletarian communists consider as essential to take a different political direction. They do not agree with preserving an oasis of workers’ councils in the north of Russia by making concessions that transform it into a petty bourgeois State. [...] Once the bourgeoisie has been crushed and is no longer capable of waging an open combat, the “military” methods are essentially no longer necessary [...] ... three things are necessary: an internationalist and determined class policy, combining propaganda and international revolutionary action, and a strengthening of organic ties with international socialism (and not with the international bourgeoisie) ... [...] ... the refusal of political and military agreements that would turn the Republic of the soviets into an instrument of imperialist camps. [...] The nationalization of the banks has to be combined with the socialization of industrial production and the complete liquidation of the capitalist vestiges and the remnants of feudalism in the relations of production that handicap the big planned organizations. The direction of the enterprises has to be transferred to a mixed body of workers and technical personnel, under control and leadership of the local economic councils. The whole of economic life has to be submitted to the organized control by these councils elected by the workers, without participation of the “qualified elements” but with the participation of the trade unions and of the technical personnel of the enterprises. [...] ...organization of consumer communes, restriction of consumption by the prosperous classes and confiscation of their goods in excess. In the campaigns, organization of the pressure by the poor peasants against the rich, large scale development of socialized agriculture and support for forms of agricultural labor, by the poor peasants, that go in the direction of socialized agriculture. [...] Refusal of piece-wage and of the augmentation of the working time, which does not make sense under conditions of development of joblessness; by contrast, putting into place of local economic councils and industry standard trades unions; and shortening of the working time due to the increase of the number of teams and to the large scale organization of social works. Large independence of the local Councils and rejection of every limitation to their activities by commissars sent by the central power. The soviet power and the party of the proletariat have to look for the autonomy of the class and the large masses; all efforts have to be directed toward its development.”* (17)

This extract as well as the reading of the issues of *Kommunist* sufficiently show that this fraction of left communists had nothing to do with a purely theoretical opposition but that it translated all its political orientations in practice as well, a translation that became relatively easy as its principal animators occupied high responsibilities and were very to the point of the realities and concrete difficulties that beset the revolution.

Retreat in order to better leap forward?

Finally, the idea has often been put forward that the Bolshevik parties’ politics of concessions was but a temporary and tactical retreat, waiting for the international revolution. In other words, that the left communists were just utopians incapable to adapt themselves to reality in order to safeguard the essence. The argument is all the stronger as it has been put forward by Lenin himself in order to justify the modifications of his political line, and that the signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty has not signified a brutal halt to the international revolution, as the left communists feared, as the revolutionary movements in Germany culminated between the end of 1918 and the beginning of 1919, the Hungarian revolution burst out between March and August 1919 and an insurrection developed in Bulgaria in September 1918.

It cannot be contested that Lenin, like the left communists, shared the idea that one had to work for the international revolution. However, the *realpolitik* of the former – as the left communists called it – does not limit itself to being ‘tactical’ and ‘temporary’ but turned more and more into a principle and became definite. Thus, the argument developed by Lenin corresponded ever less to reality and to the principles of a proletarian revolution, but was written on the schema of the bourgeois re-

17 Theses on the actual situation, *Kommunist* no.1.

volution of the 19th Century. This is the case with the whole of his historical argument comparing the defeat suffered by Russia at Brest-Litovsk to the humiliation of Prussia by Napoleon I. and to the capacity of the same Prussia to “*get on its feet again in the course of some years and to throw off the yoke of Napoleon in a liberating war.*” Lenin thought that, following the example of the German population, the Russian proletariat could, thanks to the peace, regain its forces after some years and then again set out on the revolutionary assault of the world. Therefore, as “... *history marches forward, from feudalism to free capitalism*” in the age of “*the imperialist wars of Napoleon (that) lasted for long years*”, Lenin thought that under the yoke of German imperialism, “*the socialist revolution ripens within all advanced countries*” and that “... *the people crushed by the ferocious and cruel victors have known to redress themselves and to resume life.*”⁽¹⁸⁾ It is striking to notice here that Lenin, like many revolutionaries at the time, esteemed valid to base themselves upon the lessons they could draw from analogies with the bourgeois revolutions, whereas the workers’ movement needed to understand the differences of principle, of character and of dynamic in the case of a proletarian revolution, as the left communists did. Effectively, Lenin’s analogy is hardly persistent because the proletariat cannot reconstitute its economical and military forces in order to resume its assault at the example of the German bourgeoisie. Partly because, even as the proletariat is politically dominant after the seizure of power, it remains an economically exploited class. Partly because the extension of its revolutionary dynamic cannot be achieved at the points of bayonets, at the image of the bourgeoisie in the 19th Century.

A debate on *principles*

A debate on *principles*, this is what all the discussions conducted by the left communists are about, notably that the criticisms they address to the young revolution and the solutions they propose base themselves upon the principled foundations that characterize a society and a *socialist* revolution, and distinguish themselves from the logic of *capitalism* and the *bourgeois revolution*. In this distinction lies their whole interest.

In this sense, the theoretical foundations of the left communists distinguish themselves from the bases on which the *Left Opposition*, animated by Trotsky, would later develop its criticisms. Effectively, the latter only appears some years later and its actors never departed from the counter-revolution they have contributed to put into place. Trotsky would never come back on *Terrorism and Communism*, neither on his implication in the repression of the Kronstadt uprising, nor on other hardly glorious episodes of his political trajectory. Worse, Trotsky would consider that certain economical foundations of state capitalism that have been put into place in Russia, represent the socket for the socialist character of the Stalinist regime, even if he characterized it as being “*degenerated*” at the political level. On this title, the *International Left Opposition* animated by Trotsky would never depart from an indefatigable support (even if critical) of the Soviet Union. In the light of these principled differences one understands better why these two oppositional currents (the *Communist Left* and the *Opposition*) never came to establish a common political balance sheet of the counter-revolution and never came to work together, despite certain efforts in the period between the two world wars.

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¹⁸ Lenin, *An unhappy peace: Pravda*, no. 34, 24-02-1918.