

Lessons from Lenin

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As we consider the character of contemporary empire and the question of what is to be done, I believe that there is still a good deal that we can learn from a reading of Lenin. In the course of a recent seminar on Marx and Marxist theory I had occasion to read several of the theoretical works of Lenin. In these works Lenin is both an interpreter of Marx who struggles against some of the ways in which Marxist thought is already being interpreted in ways that, in his view, tend to distort Marxist thought and, as well, one who creatively adapts Marx's insights to the emerging situation of Russia on the eve of the revolution he was to lead.

While there have been numerous attempts to relate a certain Marxism to Christian and even Wesleyan perspectives I am unaware of an attempt to mine the "essential" works of Lenin for what they may have to teach us concerning a Wesleyan contribution to the analysis of empire, economics and ethics. Accordingly I want to share certain Leninist perspectives that may be helpful to our deliberations.

I am aware that Lenin, as the founder of the Soviet Union might still be regarded with some suspicion. Accordingly I want to first indicate certain points of connection. We are aware of the way in which Marx regarded religion as the opiate of the people. Perhaps fewer are aware of the way in which Engels rather strongly endorsed the radical impulses of primitive Christianity, especially Paul, and the author of the Apocalypse as forerunners of socialism, not to mention the place of Thomas Muntzer in his reflections.¹ Engels cites Renan with approval as indicating the parallel between Paul's work and the work in which he and Marx had been engaged in organizing groups of socialists in Europe. Lenin also draws a certain parallel between the growing temptation of certain socialists to conform to the bourgeois state in Russia "just as the Christians, after Christianity had attained the position of a state religion 'forgot' the 'naiveté' of primitive Christianity with its democratic revolutionary spirit" (**The State and the Revolution** 302).² That is, Lenin, like Engels, saw important parallels between revolutionary socialism and early Christianity and would no doubt have endorsed Wesley's own view that the darkest day in Christian history was the day that Constantine called himself a Christian.

But Lenin went even further than this in his defense of a certain Christianity, no longer one from the remote past but rather the dissident Christianity that was marginalized within Czarist Russia.

Lenin grew up in the austere and dedicated home in which his father was an educator and reformer and his mother a Lutheran. His father died the year before Lenin's brother was executed for a role in an attempt to assassinate the Czar and it was Lenin's mother who

¹ On the History of Early Christianity" in **Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels On Religion** (Scholars Press, Atlanta 1982 (originally 1884-5), pp 316-347.

² in **Essential Works of Lenin**.

was the decisive influence on, and nurturer of, the young Lenin during the years of his imprisonment and internal exile, as well as the years in which he pursued a law degree.

Thus it should come as no surprise that in the very influential book in which he laid out the direction for socialist revolution in Russia he makes clear that it is the business of the party to protect the rights of the “sects”, as the protestants were known. Thus in “**What is to be Done**” (1902) he indicates the importance of agitating against “the persecution of religious sects (97) and of making an alliance with and on behalf of “the discontented religious sects” 117 and laments that the social democratic press has been silent about, among other things, ecclesiastical affairs and malpractices (169).

I mention this to indicate that Lenin need not be regarded as the sworn enemy of all religion, especially of that which seeks to recover the radical impulses of early Christianity. It is thus no accident that contemporary Marxist intellectuals like Badiou and Zizek among others have taken to reading Paul in the search for a replacement for the party militant that Lenin had offered as the agent for the transformation of history. As we contemplate the magnitude of the Empire that we now face and think about ways in which not only primitive but also contemporary Christianity may be helpfully engaged in the contestation of empire I think we can return the favor as it were and learn something from Lenin.

1. The first lesson comes from the context in which Lenin has encouraged the party to defend the rights of dissident Christian groups or ‘sects’ among which we may number ourselves, to the extent to which we overcome the Constantine temptation. Lenin is arguing against an exclusive attention to the struggle of the proletariat in Russia and arguing in favor of a broad solidarity with all struggles against the forces of domination and despotism.

If we return the references to the “religious sects” cited above to their context we can get an idea of the range of struggles with which Lenin encourages his party to be in solidarity. He writes:

All and sundry manifestations of police tyranny and autocratic outrage, in addition to the evils connected with the economic struggle, are equally ‘widely applicable’ as a ‘means of drawing in the masses. The tyranny of the Zemsky Nachalniks, the flogging of the peasantry, the corruption of the officials, the conduct of the police toward the ‘common people’ in the cities, the fight against the famine-stricken and the suppression of the popular striving towards enlightenment and knowledge, the extortion of taxes, the persecution of the religious sects, the harsh discipline in the army, the militarist conduct towards the students and the liberal intelligentsia – all these and a thousand other similar manifestations of tyranny, though not directly connected to the ‘economic struggle’, do they in general, represent a *less* ‘widely applicable’ method and subject for political agitation and for drawing the masses into the political struggle? The very opposite is the case. (97)

The lesson for us from this is that we need to find ways to get outside a narrow preoccupation with our own 'base' of church and be in solidarity with all movements that resist the military hegemony and capitalist domination of the planet. To the extent to which our vision of the coming transformation includes the deliverance of all people and the planet from systems of domination, of violence and avarice then we need consistently to take on the struggles of others, of whatever class or station, indeed of whatever religion (or absence thereof) wherever these struggles give promise of exposing the dynamics of domination that oppress the earth.

2. A second lesson from Lenin has to do with his insistence that the movement of radical transformation be guided by a clearly thought out and applied theory of fundamental analysis of the situation and of the goal and instrumentalities of struggle. In Lenin's case the defense of theory was necessitated by the temptation to engage in a simple minded activism that focused on the rights of workers, on the one hand, and a "terrorism" that blindly struck at the leaders of the system without an analysis of the system itself. The first he calls "economism" the second by a name familiar to us now: "terrorism". In Lenin's view what both lack is careful analysis of the situation and of change. "Without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement (69)³

The call for adequate theory in the case of Lenin and the social-democratic party that he advised is, for us, a call for an adequate theology: one that enables us to diagnose the ways in which avarice and violence rule our world, the ways in which the blind egoism of persons and systems produce suffering and destitution for many and growing capacity for domination for the few.

Just as Lenin was wary of a mere trade unionism that simply improved the conditions under which laborers sold themselves to the capitalists so also we need a theological reflection that seeks not a mere improvement in "living standards" but that aims at the end of exploitation and domination as such.

And this must also mean a clear economic analysis, one that enables us to speak clearly and persuasively about the economic realities of empire in our day.

3. It is here that we encounter perhaps the greatest help from Lenin, in his analysis of "imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism". Even though Lenin was writing 90 years ago he was already able to see some of the most important dynamics of the globalization of capital.

Lenin notes first that the ideology of free competition as essential to capitalism in fact produces cartel and monopoly as weaker or smaller firms are absorbed or driven out of business. Thus there is a clear trend toward the agglomeration of capital in fewer and fewer firms, and the major firms, where they do not merge, tend to collaborate (as

³ It is the context of advocating for theory that Lenin makes a remark that is all too pertinent to the contemporary situation in the US: "freedom is a grand word, but under the banner of free trade the most predatory wars were conducted, under the banner of free labor, the toilers were robbed (56-57).

cartels). We may think of the oil industry or of major pharmaceutical houses as illustrations of this point.

But this tendency toward monopoly is all the more evident in terms of the emerging domination of Finance capital (as distinct from manufacturing or resource exploitation capital.) Lenin provides clear statistical evidence for this trend in terms of the emergence of a few very powerful banks that tend more and more to dominate the availability of finance credit in ways that make finance capital actually dominant over “productive capital” And of course there are ways in which the interests of these distinct forms of capital may come into collision with one another.

Finance capital seeks profit and this leads it to seek profit producing investment opportunities away from more mature (and national) industries (with a declining rate of profit) and look to opportunities outside the national territory. As the dominance of finance capital has grown over the last several decades it becomes less and less connected to actual production.

In order to find profitable outlet finance capital must look outside the national territory both for the necessary raw materials and for major new forms of investment. Both of these motives initially fuel the search for colonies whose economies can be controlled for the benefit of such investors. One of the earliest of these forms of colonial expansion and control was the British East Indies Company against whose policies Wesley so vigorously protested. The control of raw materials and of markets seemed to serve the interests of national capital and thus of national wealth. By the time of Lenin the whole globe had been partitioned in this way with only the prospect of juggling the control of such colonial territories among the major players seeming to lie ahead.

Thus far more than Lenin was able to see in his own day we have witnessed the explosion of opportunities for speculative capital to dominate the economy. Today close to 90% of all international “trade” is speculative: betting on currencies or stock markets or “futures”. Thus finance capital itself has come to divide itself between finance capital strictly speaking (that seeks to invest in profit producing projects in the “third world” and speculative capital with ever more tenuous connection to any actual production. Conflict between speculative capital and producing capital becomes acute, for example in the Asian financial crisis of 1991 in which speculative and finance capital fled Asian markets in ways that actually destroyed the real economy of production of goods.

Lenin also notes that finance capital in imperial markets guarantees itself a profit by loaning money to other nations that are required to use the money to purchase goods and services from those industries controlled by the same finance capital. Thus there is not only the profit from sale but also from interest on the loans. Since these are often transactions made with government entities the banks are guaranteed their often extraordinary profits so long as the countries do not declare bankruptcy. We all can think of many examples in which, for example the arms industries or construction industries or petroleum industries have assured themselves of huge profits in this way. And of the

many nations that have been pauperized by being persuaded to accept such loans with such conditions.

Moreover the very success of these endeavors means that there is that much more financial and speculative capital (from profit) that must seek additional avenues for profit thereby increasing the incentive for such chicanery.

At the time Lenin was writing Karl Kautsky, another Marxist intellectual, was maintaining that the internationalization of finance capital would overcome the national conflicts over empire that even then were plunging Europe into the madness of the first world war. Lenin maintained that whether or not national conflict might be avoided in this way the essential dynamics of capital would not be altered by this prospect. In this Lenin seems to have been proven right. For although the aftermath of conflict in Europe has seen the merger of the transnational interests of finance and speculative capital, and the emergence of transnational institutions that oversee this process (the IMF or GATT for example), there has been no abatement in the exploitive and indeed rapacious effects of these forms of capital.

Already Lenin could see that whole nations had lost meaningful sovereignty to institutions of financial capital. But the list of such nations has only grown. Even rather developed economies like that of Korea have been made to accept economic blueprints that violate national sovereignty and cultural integrity. This is even true of the world's second largest economy: that of Japan, which has had to adopt a number of "neo-liberal" policies that are in direct violation of its own previously very successful economic culture.

Of course all this now happens without the need to directly control the "colonies". In that sense the age of colonialism is over. The job is much more efficiently done by instruments of economic control. This of course does not seem to preclude the extension of military presence, especially of the United States in many nations around the globe; a form of insurance against any attempt at meaningful economic autonomy on the part of any nation unwise enough to insist on real sovereignty.

One of the great tragedies of 20th century theology is the way in which theology and the churches, especially in the US have become utterly silent concerning the economic-military mechanisms by which the whole planet is brought into subservience to the interests of plutocratic powers. We could learn a lot from seriously engaging the insights of Lenin in this respect.

We might also have much to learn from Lenin's great contemporary Marxist theorist: Rosa Luxemburg.⁴ While Lenin placed the emphasis on the needs of financial capital,

⁴ Rosa Luxemburg **The Accumulation of Capital** (1913) translated by Agnes Schwarzschild (London, Routledge, 2003). Of particular interest is Section 3 "The Historical Conditions of Accumulation" pp 307-447. At the time Lenin views and those of Luxemburg were set up as rival explanations of the relation of capital to colonialism and militarism but in retrospect they seem more like complementary analyses.

Luxemburg placed much of the blame for imperialism on the quest for markets for goods and the control of raw materials as the basis of colonial adventure. The insights generated in this way are also invaluable for seeing the ways in which capital and empire are intertwined. Luxemburg shows how in order to expand markets for commodity production it is necessary for capital to invade and destroy subsistence economies. If such traditional societies in China, India, Egypt or South Africa (only a few of the case studies she supplies), are to need consumer goods then traditional village economies (and the cultures they foster), must be broken up. Thus notions of land ownership must be introduced which permit the buying and selling of land, its consolidation into large landholdings that reduce peasant or villager to wage labor on other persons' land. The introduction of mono-culture prevents people from being self sufficient so that they must enter the economy of commodity. Moreover those who are thrown off the land become available as a reserve of proto-proletarian labor.

Colonialism is generally marked by the introduction of huge projects that sustain trade: ports, harbors, and especially railroads make penetration into the interior both to acquire raw materials and to sell commodities possible.

The capital for such projects is offered in terms of loans with appropriate inducements offered to local governments to accept such loans and projects. The money is then to be spent on goods and machinery from the loaning country thereby increasing demand for those industries. And the loans are repaid generally by forced or hyper-exploited labor of those who have been forced off the land, out of subsistence economy, away from the villages and into the cities.

Of course where the former villagers rebel against this treatment, force must be supplied, initially by the European powers directly, later by native elites. Gun-boat diplomacy" is simply the way in which societies open up new territory for commodity markets. In this process a considerable militarization of the industrial powers is required. They tax their own workers in order to invest in armaments which then can be used to ensure the hegemony of capital.

If we combine the pictures offered by Lenin and Luxemburg we can see that colonialism and militarism are the necessary products of Capital growth or expansion. Moreover there is a direct connection between the exigencies of capital accumulation and the destruction of village and subsistence economies and thus of the cultures that have grown up upon that economic base.

Thus we can begin to understand how what is today called globalization is irresistibly connected with the destruction of local cultures, a process that only accelerates in our contemporary context of hyper capitalism.

4. We might also learn that mere denunciation is not enough, and indeed is seldom pertinent. The growth of capitalism is not, for Marx or for Lenin, a sheer unmitigated horror. First for Marx and then also for Lenin a far more "dialectical" understanding is essential. In the case of Marx this has three foci. First the notion that the emergence of

capitalism upon the body of moribund feudalism is a decided advance for humanity. To this we may add that denunciation of individual “capitalists” is not at all what is called for. For a capitalist is as much the captive of the inherent logic of capital as anyone else, his personal ethics or desires cannot affect this logic in any substantial way. But, most dramatically, in essays written for the New York Daily Tribune in 1853 Marx commented at length on the progress of colonialism in India (denounced several decades earlier by Wesley), as the necessary prelude to the participation of India in a world wide socialist transformation. The secular “theodicy” that Marx provides unfortunately may seem to “justify” the horrific toll taken upon the peoples of India in this process of colonial domination.

For his part Lenin undertakes a justification of the growth of capitalism in Russia both to insist (against Marx’s own doubts on this score) that Russia was passing through the necessary emergence of capitalism in order to make it ripe for the sort of revolution that had failed to take hold in western Europe, and to argue against those who might have wished for a return to a simpler era of tranquil serfdom.⁵

Without endorsing the specifics of the argument of Marx or of Lenin on this score we might still learn from them in our new era of globalization and “Empire”, that it is necessary to read the signs of the times through a more dialectical lens than we may be accustomed to using.

Thus a great variety of things tend to be lumped together under globalization, some of which may actually be better than others.

On the plus side we have the spread of ideas concerning human rights, a growing protest against the use of torture or the death penalty, a growing affirmation of the rights of women and children, international responses to human affliction whether caused by ‘natural disaster’ or human made catastrophe, and a growing awareness of the biocide (3 plant and animal species become extinct every hour, we are told) and looming disaster of ‘global warming’⁶.

On the other hand we have the economic enslavement of whole regions, staggering chasms separating the impoverished from those the economic arrangements enrich, the trashing of cultural traditions that are part of the inherited diversity of humankind and the accumulated wisdom of millennia. Although there is talk of the spread of democracy the earth’s peoples have less and less leverage over the arrangements that determine the conditions of their lives. Even the most powerful nations become captive to an international plutocracy.

As Christians we are inheritors of a certain vision of globalism: the catholic vision of a universal reign of justice and mercy, the divine reign that contrasts absolutely with all

⁵ In this respect I admit that I find more congenial the tone adopted by Rosa Luxemburg who details the mechanisms of imperialism without seeking to justify them within a Hegelian theodicy.

⁶ Frederick Jameson is reported to have quipped that today it is easier to imagine the extinction of the planet than to imagine an end to capitalism.

forms of division and domination; that seeks not the defilement of the earth but its restoration. And we are also heirs to a tradition that is able to discern the power of evil that currently governs the world.

What we need is a way of discerning how the good and the bad of globalization are in a certain sense co-dependent. In this way we will neither offer legitimations for the infliction of suffering nor simply retreat into platitudinous denunciation. But be able to offer helpful analysis that has in mind a genuinely global ‘common good’.

5. There is more that we can learn from Lenin in this regard. He understood the Party as a vanguard that would function as a tribune for the people in all their just grievances against the dominion of avarice and arrogance. And he also saw the need for the training of persons who would be the carriers of this theory and practice, who would be trained as propagandists who exposed the horrors of the system and as agitators who would organize militant resistance among the sectors of the population that were suffering from this domination.

To be sure Lenin supposed that secrecy and even deception as well as violence would be necessary to overcome these structures. And while one can certainly understand the logic of that supposition in the context of czarist Russia (and many other contexts besides) it has become all too clear that one cannot achieve a transparent society by means of falsehood, nor a democratic socialism by means of violence. Here I think we may have good reason to believe that the transformation we seek can only be achieved by other means that are even more arduous than those proposed for the party militant. And it is precisely here that contemporary Marxist intellectuals like Badiou and Žižek, as well as Agamben and others have had renewed reason to reflect upon the establishment of communities that embody an anti-imperial polity within the context of lethal empire.

We may also join with Lenin in imagining an end to the state and indeed that the aim of radical transformative action is not the capture of the mechanisms of the state but the abolition of these mechanisms. While Lenin supposed that the transitional stage would entail the “dictatorship of the proletariat” we may have the harder work of imagining the deployment of a completely different sort of power, perhaps what St Paul imagined as the power/weakness of the cross.

I will not at this point seek to elaborate the lessons that we can learn from Paul (or even Wesley). That is a subject for another discussion. But I will suggest that we who are heirs of that tradition can and must learn from Marx and Engels, Lenin and Luxemburg ways of both understanding and transforming our own context of empire. Above all this will mean escaping from our ecclesial ghettos of self preoccupation to take up the cause of all who labor and are heavily laden, of all who suffer from the globalization of greed and arrogance. To announce to them the advent of a very different Empire: that of justice and generosity and joy in which all the peoples of the earth and the earth itself will find rest and restoration. It will mean that we accept responsibility for understanding and exposing the mechanisms by which the principalities and powers maintain their domination by attending to the concrete structures by which human relations with one another and with the earth, are arranged (this is what political economy is after all) and

by fostering cells of militant messianic community that awaken hope, enable resistance, effect a counter sociality governed not by statist legality but by the messianic law of love and unrestricted hospitality.