WAS BOLSHEVISM ALWAYS ELITIST?

INTRODUCTION

In response to the arguments of the Workers Opposition at the tenth Bolshevik congress, Lenin upheld the explicitly elitist view that: “Marxism teaches.....that only the political party of the working class, i.e., the Communist party, is capable of uniting, training and organising a vanguard of the proletariat and of the whole mass of working people that alone will be capable of withstanding the inevitable petty bourgeois vacillations of this mass and the inevitable traditions and relapses of narrow craft unionism or craft prejudices among the proletariat, and of guiding all of the united activities of the whole of the proletariat, i.e., of leading it politically, and through it, the whole mass of the working people. Without this the dictatorship of the proletariat is impossible.”(1) This comment outlines in the most explicit terms how the actions and the views of the working class can be influenced by reactionary trends, and in order to overcome this problem it is necessary to generate the principled leadership of the party of the proletariat. The ideological and cultural limitations of the working class mean that it is not able to practice democratic forms of organisation without the guidance of the Communist party. In other words the point being made is that the Workers Opposition have not understood this approach, and instead they uphold the naïve view that the working class can by its own creative actions and interests realise what is necessary in order to advance the aim of the construction of communism, via the development of proletarian democracy within industry. Lenin is suggesting that this naïve view does not allow for the possibility that the working class will become influenced by sectional and petty bourgeois views that will undermine the possibility to advance the realisation of communism. Instead only the leadership of the revolutionary party will ensure that the working class acts in accordance with the objectives of promoting socialism and communism. Lenin predicts that the restoration of capitalism could occur if the leadership of the Communist party is weakened. (2)

The convincing element of Lenin's criticism of the Workers Opposition was expressed by his understanding that the situation was not favourable to the flourishing of industrial democracy. Society had been undermined by famine, and the economy was disorganised and was confronted with the tasks of industrialisation and the revival of the peasant production. The assumption was that only with the tight control of the party, combined with the role of experts, could these tasks be successfully realised. Hence the low level of the productive forces meant that it was not possible to realise genuine workers control of the economy. The unfavourable situation for the realisation of socialism meant the discipline of the party was indispensable. What could be an alternative policy was not the creative development of the economy by the working class, but instead the assertion of the forces of reaction and the impetus for the creation of pro-capitalist tendencies within society. Hence what was being assumed was that only the leading role of the party could ensure that the potential for capitalism was being overcome, and instead socialism was being generated by the party which had a dominant role within the state. In this context the Workers Opposition could be defined as a petty bourgeois deviation because it effectively denied the strategic importance of the party in relation to the tasks of the construction of socialism. The logic of Lenin's standpoint was that he considered the emphasis being made by the Workers Opposition on the crucial role of the working class in the promotion of socialism was at the expense of the leading role of the party. Hence they underestimated the significance of the reactionary trends that promoted the influence of capitalism within society. However, in contrast to Lenin's view, we can suggest that the major problem with the platform of the Workers Opposition was that they attempted to reconcile a democratic advance towards socialism, via the role of workers management of production, with the strict and elite influence of the party. This view was naïve, and this standpoint was criticised by Lenin. He suggested that only the domination of the party in the present situation was realistic. Lenin's approach was not to compromise about the leading importance of the party, but instead to define the Workers Opposition as an anti-party deviation.

The problem with Lenin's reasoning was that he created a demarcation between the apparently unreal and impractical policy of workers management – or socialism from below – with the more realistic and credible approach of socialism from above, via the importance of the leading role of the party. Consequently, it could be argued that in the period 1920-21 the Bolsheviks definitively justified an elitist understanding of the process of the realisation of socialism. This does not mean that the Bolsheviks adopted a different approach between 1918 and 1920. The profound disorganisation of the economy meant that workers control could not be effectively implemented, and the civil war led to the development of a centralised system of production and distribution. But the apparent assumption was that these measures were an expression of a temporary distortion that would be rectified in more favourable circumstances. However, the debate with the supporters of the Workers Opposition indicated that the experience of Bolshevik rule had made Lenin very sceptical about any possibility to develop industrial democracy, or socialism from below. Instead he argued that the forces of reaction could only be overcome in terms of the party ruling on behalf of the proletariat. Socialism from below was no longer feasible, and only socialism from above could create the conditions to defeat the forces supporting the restoration of capitalism.

Furthermore, this standpoint was based on the view that only a monolithic party could uphold the interests of the working class and socialism: “Clearly, in a country under the dictatorship of the proletariat, a split in the ranks of the proletariat, or between the proletarian party and the mass of the proletariat, is not just dangerous, it is extremely dangerous, especially within the proletariat constitutes a small minority of the population.”(3) Therefore even disputes within the party leadership were effectively undermining the achievement of socialism. The implication was that only the party leader could define what was meant by the tasks of the construction of socialism and the principled relationship of the proletariat and peasantry. This was why the tenth congress resulted in a resolution to end factions within the party, and to call upon the Workers Opposition to dissolve itself. In other words, it was not accepted that the Workers Opposition represented a democratic form of Bolshevism that was a principled and genuine alternative to the policies of the party leader concerning the construction of socialism. Instead it was 'socialism from above' which represented the principled understanding that only the actions of the party could generate the necessary transformation of society in favour of the development of a new social formation. This situation is not in contradiction to the requirements of the dictatorship of the proletariat, but is instead the only form it could take in the context of the disorganisation of industry and the pressures of the peasantry to restore capitalism.

Thus the increasing acceptance of elitism by the Bolsheviks was not the outcome of their history, which was contradictory and influenced by the mass and popular character of the revolutionary process. This meant the Bolsheviks in 1917 had a programme for the formation of a commune state in Russia which would organise and administer society in a participatory and democratic manner. However, the increasingly dis-functional nature of industry after the revolution, and the pressures of civil war, meant this conception of the administration of society by a commune state became undermined. The only alternative was the development of a conception of a society organised from above. It is argued by John A Kautsky that this situation meant a revolutionary intelligentsia was confronted with a project of modernisation, or industrialisation. (4) However, his reasoning used to justify this standpoint was to suggest that the prospect of socialism in Russia was always mythical, or unreal. (5) This understanding would imply that the revolution was effectively a cruel deception that was perpetuated in order to promote the formation of the rule of an elite. This situation would imply that the ideology of Marxism was nothing more than convenient tool for ensuring the realisation of the power of the intelligentsia. However what this argument ignores is that the October revolution would never have been possible without the involvement and mobilisation of the working class organised in Soviets. In this content a genuine proletarian revolution occurred in 1917. Hence it is not surprising that Bolshevik ideology was based on the importance of the Soviets, and that the revolution coincided with the second congress of the Petrograd Soviet. Hence John Kautsky's view may explain the role of the party under Stalin, but it cannot explain the period between 1918 and 1923. Lenin's increasing elitism was his response to increasing difficulties concerning the attempt to advance socialism in difficult national conditions.

THE VIEWS OF ALFRED MEYER

One of the most intelligent critics of Bolshevism is Alfred Meyer.(6) He argues in his book 'Leninism' that Lenin's elitism is originally indicated in his work 'What is to be Done'.(7) He argues that Lenin's understanding of class consciousness is different to Marx's which outlines the ability of the working class to become opponents of capitalism and to bring about their own emancipation: “Marx believed, thus, that the conditions under which capitalism compelled the working class to live were reawakening full rationality, consciousness, and purposiveness in that class. Moreover, he thought that the factory itself contributed towards welding the working class into a major force. Work in the machine shop is collective work, and Marx saw in the modern industrial enterprise a school for collectivism that was uniting the working class....The time was drawing close, thought Marx, when the workers would rise in revolt and expropriate the ruling classes.”(8) The assumption within this standpoint was the understanding that the party of the workers would effectively encourage and promote the increasing willingness of the workers to bring about the overthrow of capitalism and then create a socialist society. But Lenin was more cautious about the possibilities connected to the development of the consciousness of the working class. He considered that this consciousness was of a spontaneous character, and so would require its transformation via interaction with the party: “But whereas Marx had believed in the spontaneous growth of working class consciousness under the impact of capitalist realities, Lenin tended to assume that the working-man was forever doomed to insufficient consciousness, no matter how miserable his conditions.”(9)

Hence given this pessimistic understanding it seemed logical that Lenin concluded it was necessary for the intelligentsia organised in a revolutionary Marxist party to realise the task of providing an adequate socialist consciousness for the working class. This standpoint implied that the working class could only realise the tasks involved in the process of revolutionary change under the strict leadership of the party. However, what Meyer's view ignores is the importance of the context for the development of Lenin's views about class consciousness. Lenin considered the relationship of the working class and the party was based on opposition to the standpoint of the economists who suggested that trade union consciousness was sufficient in order to uphold the interests of the working class. In contrast, Lenin outlined how this perspective resulted in the accommodation of the working class to the aims of the bourgeoisie. Thus he argued: “Hence our task, the task of Social Democracy is to combat spontaneity, to divert the working class movement from this spontaneous, trade union striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy.”(10) The point is that ideological struggle is occurring between an opportunist and principled tendency within socialism in relation to the issue of how to relate the emerging consciousness of the working class to the tasks of revolution. This means the accommodation to spontaneity is not adequate concerning the aim of developing the necessary class consciousness within the working class in relation to the perspective of the revolutionary overthrow of Tsarism. Hence Lenin is arguing in principled terms that the role of the Marxist party is vital in order to influence the working class in a progressive manner, and to therefore oppose all opportunist trends that undermine the development of the ability of the working class to become effective opponents of the autocracy.

Lenin considers the role of the party as having a crucial role in the development of a principled class consciousness that is aware of what is necessary in order to undermine the dominant power of the autocracy. However, is this standpoint a distortion of Marxism, or does it indicate a necessary modification of Marx's conception of class consciousness which implied only the secondary role of the party? Lenin would suggest the answer to this question requires recognition of the necessity to oppose the influence of the opportunist trends of economism and revisionism within the working class. This means it is not anti-Marxist to conclude the correctness of the following comment: “We have said that there could not have been Social Democratic consciousness within the working class. It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, 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 elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals.”(11)

Lenin himself accepted that this approach became one-sided in relation to the ability of the class struggle to develop and pose the issue of political power and the possibility of the overthrow of capital. In this manner he accepted that the working class could spontaneously develop revolutionary consciousness. However, at periods of the decline of mass militancy the role of the Marxist party is vital for opposing the influence of bourgeois ideology within the working class. In these periods of defeat, the Marxist party can outline the limitations of the role of the trade unions and indicate the importance of the party if the class struggle is to revive and so promote the possibility of the overthrow of capitalism. Hence Lenin's approach is not necessarily elitist, and instead is realistic and able to recognise the limitations of spontaneity. However, as he acknowledged, his approach can become one-sided in periods of revolutionary upheaval. Thus spontaneity can have a dynamic role, as Rosa Luxemburg understood. (12) The point is that Lenin's comment is relevant and necessary depending on the level of development of the class struggle. For example, the role of a Marxist party could have had a vital role in the recent referendum on the EU in the UK in order to promote the perspective of the Socialist United States of Europe. In other words an effective Marxist party could have challenged the influence of reactionary nationalism within sections of the working class.

Consequently Meyer's view that Lenin is defending an elitist conception of the relationship of party to working class is not proved by reference to the ideas in 'What is to be Done'. The point is that the very experience of history has indicated that the working class is susceptible to the influence of bourgeois ideology, and often cannot overcome the limits of trade union consciousness. Therefore the role of a Marxist party is vital if this situation is to be overcome and the development of revolutionary consciousness is to occur. However, the problem has been that it has often been difficult to develop Marxist parties with popular support within the advanced capitalist countries. The result is that various forms of bourgeois ideology have been promoted as a reactionary alternative to the programme of socialism. But the importance of the party does not mean that it can replace the role of the working class within the revolutionary process. Meyer suggests that Leninism represents this development of substitutionism in terms of the character of class struggle: “The revolutionary situation, in which the working class can fight for the purpose of establishing itself (and the proletariat) in power, is the moment for which the party yearns, and for which it always keeps itself prepared. Lenin acted on the assumption that this revolutionary situation was itself an objective for which the party must fight, and fight a long battle – by weakening the enemy, by strengthening itself numerically, ideologically, organizationally, financially, and by gaining advantageous positions in any other way. This everyday struggle....is but a preparation for the final and decisive revolutionary battle.”(13)

This viewpoint is only elitist if the working class was not involved in the development of the struggle to overthrow Tsarism and capitalism. But Lenin envisages a simultaneous process of the combination of the increasing strength of the party and related effectiveness of the working class. Hence the issue of increasing working class strength for the struggle is about connecting their political training with support for the aims of the party.(14) The point being made is that there is not a contradiction between spontaneous consciousness and the role of Marxism, but instead they are reconciled in terms of the importance of organisation. Hence in a principled manner the Marxists have related to the mass movement in a principled manner, and without making any concessions to spontaneity have gained adherents for the party. This process has resulted in increasing support for the opposition to autocracy: “The reply is manifold: we Social Democrats will organise these nation-wide exposures; all questions raised by the agitation will be explained in a consistently Social Democratic spirit, without any concessions to deliberate or undeliberate distortions of Marxism, the all-rounded political agitation will be made by a party which unites into one inseparable whole the assault on the government in the name of the entire people, the revolutionary training of the proletariat, and the safeguarding of its political independence, the guidance of the economic struggle of the working class, and the utilisation of all its spontaneous conflicts with its exploiters which rouse and bring into our camp increasing numbers of the proletariat.”(15)

Lenin is replying to the view of the economists who contend that in order to make the message relevant to the workers it has to be diluted and based on concessions to opportunism. Instead he is suggesting that it is possible to propagate an intransigent policy and still make gains within the working class. In this manner the strength of the mass basis of the aim of revolution is promoted and advanced. Consequently Meyers view that the party is trying to continually establish its domination over the working class is one-sided. Instead the principled character of the party is proved by the effectiveness of its message, and the related ability to win support within the working class. However, this development does not imply compromise about the level of quality of theory, or its reduction to what is acceptable to the opportunist. Instead the crucial point being made by Lenin is that without making concessions concerning the quality of theory it is possible to win support within the working class. This standpoint is the opposite of elitism, because a genuine elitist considers that only by diluting the theory is it possible to obtain the adherence of the working class. Such is the approach of the Economists. They maintain that by concentrating on economic questions it is possible to obtain the support of workers. This implies that political questions are too difficult for them to contemplate. The result of this reasoning was a self-limitation of the objectives of some of the trends within Social Democracy: “Instead of sounding the call to go forward towards the consolidation of the revolutionary organisation and the expansion of political activity, the call was issued for a retreat to the purely trade union struggle.”(16)

Lenin is making the point that the policy of retreat is always expressed by the Economists because they cannot envisage the progress of the class consciousness of the workers. Instead they consider that the workers will always be on the defensive, and therefore this situation implies that they should adapt to this situation. In contrast, the genuine Marxists imply that the workers are capable of responding to the highest level of theory, and therefore this implies an ambitious and intransigent approach. It is possible to obtain the support of the workers without diluting the content of the message. This standpoint is not the justification of elitism, but is instead an expression of confidence that workers will be receptive to the most principled advocacy of the revolutionary message.

But Meyer maintains that there are problems with the organisational approach of the party defined as democratic centralism. He defines this conception in the following manner: “One of the basic rules of democratic centralism is that decisions reached by the party must be accepted unanimously by the membership. There may be a full discussion of what is to be done; perhaps there ought to be such a full discussion. There may even be sharp disagreements that are reconciled only with great difficulty. But, once a final decision has been made, it must be accepted by all, and not only on the surface. The agreement is expected to be wholehearted and sincere.”(17) Hence the process of discussion must be ended once the decision about practical activity has been taken. This understanding implies a restrictions and limitations on the rights of dissent, and what actually occurs is unanimity around the policies of the leadership, and the party is based on the imperatives of centralised leadership and restrictions on the rights of factional opposition. The result of this situation in practice was the development of an unaccountable leadership which was able to dictate policy to the membership. This meant not only that the party was constructed in elite terms, but so was its relationship to the working class: “How does a Leninist act? He acts by making the proletariat or the masses act for him, and in order to accomplish this he must first obtain influence over them. The medium of influence is the party. Hence a communist who wishes to verify his theories must have authority in a party through which his theory can take hold of the masses and be carried out successfully or unsuccessfully.”(18)

The turbulent history of the Bolshevik party would suggest that this view is a caricature. Alan Woods has described in intricate detail the many factional struggles within the Bolsheviks.(19) Study of the history of the Bolsheviks indicates that it is the proper application of democratic centralism which allows for the importance of inner party discussion and the ability to challenge the views of the leadership. However, the banning of factions in 1921, when combined with adverse conditions, created a situation in which it became increasingly difficult to oppose the omnipotent views of the Bolshevik leader. In contrast the principled application of majority rule, which allows for the intellectual freedom of the minority, does not necessarily generate a situation of elitism. Meyer can only suggest the Bolshevik implementation of democratic centralism is inherently authoritarian because he effectively conflates the pre-revolutionary situation with its aftermath. The Bolshevik party became increasingly intolerant about oppositional views because of the degeneration of the Soviet regime caused by the adverse material conditions and the civil war.

Meyer concludes from his analysis of the views of Lenin that: “What is even more remarkable is that the word consciousness was often used simply to denote the workers acceptance of the vanguard leadership and of their own humble role as rank and file soldiers of the revolution, regardless of how this acceptance had been generated.”(20) This view was absurd because the very development of the class struggle meant that the party had to respond to the importance of mass activity and so could not impose its own strategy upon the dynamism of spontaneity. Hence the Bolsheviks had to respond to the formation of Soviets in 1905 and 1917 even though its own approach was originally based on a different understanding that had emphasised an armed uprising, and in 1917 Lenin had to accept that his call for a party based insurrection in October was adventurist. Lenin outlined his understanding that a situation of revolution is connected to the role of mass struggle when he suggested: “Revolutions are locomotives of history, said Marx. Revolutions are festivals of the oppressed and exploited. At no other time are the mass of the people in a position to come forward so actively as creators of a new social order, as at a time of revolution. At such times people are capable of performing miracles, if judged by the limited, philistine yardstick of gradualist progress. But it is essential that leaders of the revolutionary parties, too, should advance their aims more comprehensively and boldly at such a time, so that their slogans shall always be in advance of the revolutionary initiative of the masses, serve as a beacon, reveal to them our democratic and socialist ideal in all its magnitude and splendour, and show them the shortest and most direct route to complete, absolute and decisive victory.......We shall be traitors, betrayers of the revolution, if we do not use this festive energy of the masses and their revolutionary ardour to wage a ruthless and self-sacrificing struggle for the direct and decisive path.....The workers do not expect to make deals; they are not striving for petty concessions. What they are striving towards is ruthlessly to crush the reactionary forces, i.e., to set up a revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.”(21)

As a result of revolutionary developments the emphasis of Lenin has changed. The task is no longer to primarily oppose the influence of economism and the illusions in the role of trade union consciousness. Instead the workers have entered into revolutionary struggle, and so the major task of the party is to provide a revolutionary strategy that can connect with the creative dynamism of the workers engaged in the struggle to overthrow the autocracy. Lenin is aware that it would not be possible to advocate a revolutionary strategy with any confidence if it were not connected to the actuality of mass struggle against the repressive system. It is the impulses and militancy of the workers and peasants which is providing the credibility and relevance of the revolutionary strategy of the party. In this context the strategy of the party is not counterposed to the dynamism of the mass struggle but is instead based on its logic and popular character. Hence the role of strategy is to articulate the very conclusions and lessons being made by the masses engaged in revolutionary action. The strategy attempts to outline what the masses are beginning to express, and it provides a guide to action that is already occurring. Hence the party does not dictate to the class, and it does not try to impose itself on the mass struggle. Instead it is an advisor to the working class, and therefore provides a strategy that aims to achieve the success of the revolutionary struggle that is already occurring.

The comment of Lenin indicates that it would be absurd to call him an elitist. Indeed elitism would undermine the attempts of the Bolsheviks to relate to the revolutionary activity of the working class. But despite the wise words of Lenin, some of the Bolsheviks in Russia refused to accept the importance of the Soviets. (22) Meyer, despite his approach of equating Lenin's views with elitism, is able to acknowledge the flexibility of Lenin in 1905 when he understood the importance of the struggle of the peasants, and supported the potential of the Soviets: “Lenin did not expect, either in 1905 or 1917 that the revolutionary masses would form Soviets or any other kind of organisation. Once, however, soviets had sprung up, Lenin proposed to use them as “organs of immediate mass warfare of the proletariat.””(23) Thus he did not contrast, unlike some of the Bolsheviks, the role of the party to the organisations of the working class, but instead advocated revolutionary leadership of the Soviets. The point being made is that he accepted that the dynamism of the revolutionary activity of the workers and peasants had created important opportunities to overthrow the autocracy. Instead of imposing the role of the party onto events he was eager to connect the strategy of the Bolsheviks to the very dynamism of the mass activity of a people engaged in struggle. This approach indicated that the conception of a party based revolution was not supported by Lenin.

What he was concerned about was to indicate that the party has a crucial importance in suggesting when the revolution should be transformed into an insurrection that attempts to seize power: “An insurrection – unprepared, spontaneous, and sporadic – has already begun. No one can positively vouch that it will develop into a fully fledged and integral insurrection of the people, for that depends on the state of the revolutionary forces (which can be fully gauged only in the course of the struggle itself)....What you must speak of, if you would be a partisan of revolution, is whether insurrection is necessary for the victory of the revolution, whether it is necessary to proclaim it vigorously, to advocate it and make immediate and energetic preparations for it.”(24) Hence based on the revolutionary dynamism of the masses, the party has a crucial role in suggesting when this popular unrest should be translated into the actual struggle for power. Obviously this task of insurrection would be a mere adventure if it was not connected to the creative dynamism of the masses engaged in a popular and revolutionary struggle. But it also the obligation of the party to indicate when the revolutionary unrest has become favourable for insurrection. In this manner the relationship between the spontaneity of the masses and the conscious role of the party is expressed at its highest level. Without any of these aspects the possibility for revolution is doubtful.

Thus Lenin has begun to elaborate a perspective that outlines why both the revolutionary activity of the working class, together with the principled role of the party, is vital if the overthrow of the repressive regime is to occur. This is not an elitist schema because without the role of the working class revolution could not take place, but the importance of the party is crucial in strategic terms. The party suggests what is the most favourable moment to overthrow the autocracy. In this sense the unity of spontaneity and consciousness occurs at its highest level, or in the most democratic manner. In contrast the Mensheviks have contempt for the revolutionary aspirations of the masses because they are primarily concerned with reaching agreements with the liberals and so are indifferent to the insurrectionary conclusion of revolutionary mass action. Only Trotsky shares the objectives of Lenin. Unfortunately the majority of the Bolsheviks within Russia do not understand the approach of Lenin because they are reluctant to recognise the potential of the mass movement. It is they who express aspects of elitism, and therefore fail to relate effectively with the revolutionary movement in Russia and elsewhere.

The onset of world war led Lenin to connect the issue of revolution in Russia with the crisis of capitalism caused by inter-imperialist war. This perspective meant that he was prepared for possible political tensions in any part of Europe. Hence he was not disorientated by the February revolution in Russia. Instead he began to develop a revolutionary strategy in order to relate to these developments. He outlines in his 'Tasks of Proletariat in Our Revolution' that the situation is expressed by dual power between the bourgeois Provisional government and the Soviets, who represent the interests of the working class. The strategic conclusions are expressed by the following comment: “The dual power merely expresses a transitional phase in the revolution's development, when it has gone farther than the ordinary bourgeois democratic revolution, but has not yet reached the “pure” dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.”(25) This means the task of the Bolsheviks is to persuade the workers and peasants that the bourgeois government will not act in their interests, and it is an opportunist mistake for the Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks to utilise the Soviets in order to support the new administration. The Soviets have the potential to become a commune state, but at present they are undermined and restricted by the opportunist policy of their leadership, which is to support the Provisional government. But he is confident that this situation can be changed because the interests and aspirations of the workers and peasants correspond to the policy of the Bolsheviks and in opposition to the political approach of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries: “The working masses constitute the vast majority of the population, they control the Soviets, they are aware of their power as a majority, they see everywhere the promise of a “democratised” life, they know that democracy is the rule of the majority over the minority (and not the reverse – which is what the capitalists want).....therefore they cannot but aspire towards supreme rule by the people, i.e., the majority of the population, towards affairs being managed according to the will of the worker majority as opposed to the capitalist minority, and not according to an “agreement” between the majority and minority.”(26)

The strength of the Bolshevik policy is that it relates to the working class aspiration to establish a government that would be able to begin to tackle the economic crisis. The workers spontaneously strive to realise the political power of the Soviets. Hence the Bolsheviks are developing a strategy that relates to this situation of mass political ferment and striving to achieve a better future. They are calling for 'All Power to the Soviets'. This is a democratic approach because the Bolsheviks cannot realise this aim by means of an elite insurrection and rejection of the wishes of the working people. Instead they can only attempt to realise the democratic correspondence of their revolutionary approach with the aspirations of the masses by establishing a majority within the Soviets. (27) Meyer caricatures Lenin's standpoint in 1917 and suggests: “Quite obviously he was carried away by the glorious opportunity to act and to seize power. On the one hand, this made him impatient with theory; on the other hand, it caused him to surrender to the most fanciful notions about the coming world revolution and the immediate dawn of a Golden Age.”(28) But Meyer accepts that Lenin was prepared to accept the present situation of Menshevik control of the Soviets, and to call for a tactic of patiently explaining the necessity of calling for “All Power to the Soviets”.(29) However, Lenin's apparent readiness to reject this perspective and to call for an effective party based insurrection in early October 1917 leads Meyer to conclude that: “Only his preoccupation with the transfer of power can explain Lenin's confusion of slogans during the year 1917, a confusion that shows how impatient he was with theory and how determined on political action.....He cared only for the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship to be carried out by his party.”(30)

However, Lenin was still fully committed to the approach of realising a new principled form of Soviet power as the basis of the justification of revolution in late September 1917.(31) Indeed he outlines the merits of revolution carried out by the Soviets in the following terms: “If the Soviets now take full state power exclusively into their own hands for the purpose of carrying out the programme set forth above, they will not only obtain the support of nine-tenths of the population of Russia, the working class and an overwhelming majority of the peasantry, they will also be assured of the greatest revolutionary enthusiasm on the part of the army and the majority of the people, an enthusiasm without which victory over famine and war is impossible.”(32) In other words in terms of democratic credibility the ascent to power by the Soviets is preferable and will ensure a process of peaceful change. In contrast, if this opportunity is missed the result could be bitter civil war between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. (33) This is obviously not the preferred policy.

But by September 29th Lenin has changed his mind and argues that it would be a mistake to wait for the convening of the Soviet congress in order to formalise the realisation of political power. Instead he argues: “The Bolsheviks are now guaranteed the success of the insurrection: (1) we can (if we do not wait for the Soviet congress) launch a surprise attack from three points – from Petrograd, from Moscow and the Baltic fleet; (2) we have the slogans that guarantee us support – down with the government that is suppressing the revolt of the peasants against the landowners! (3) we have a majority in the country (4) the disorganisation among the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries is complete; (5) we are technically in a position to take power in Moscow.... (6) we have thousands of armed workers and soldiers in Petrograd who could at once seize the Winter Palace, the General Staff building, the telephone exchange and the large printing presses.”(34)

This was not a considered policy, but instead an expression of panic and impatience. Thankfully Trotsky diplomatically ignored Lenin's advice and continued with the development of the overall policy of relating Bolshevik aims with the role of the Soviet, via the activity of the Military Revolutionary Committee. Consequently, Lenin's views from the end of September to late October 1917 were not consistent with his overall approach which was to ensure that the revolutionary process was based on the realisation of the political power of the Soviets. Indeed, it was because the Bolshevik party supported Lenin's principled approach meant they ignored his impatient advice for the development of a party based revolution. Lenin became reconciled to the fact that his advice had been rebuffed, and when the second Soviet congress voted in favour of the act of insurrection he happily accepted this situation and the effective rejection of his advice of early October. He wrote: “What is the significance of this workers and peasants revolution? Its significance is, first of all, we shall have a Soviet government, our own organ of power, in which the bourgeoisie will have no share whatsoever. The oppressed masses will themselves create a power. The old state apparatus will be shattered to its foundations and a new administrative apparatus set up in the form of the Soviet organisations.”(35)

Hence the question of the success of the role of the Bolsheviks was related to whether they could develop an efficient and participatory Soviet administration, and solve the problem of land reform, war and peace, and bring about economic advance in a situation of chaos. According to Meyer the optimistic period, when there was confidence that the role of the Soviet state combined with workers control of production would begin the development of socialism, was soon replaced by a realistic understanding that state centralisation combined with terror expressed the practical requirements of civil war. This situation was followed by the retreat of the New Economic Policy. Meyer describes the policy changes in the following terms: “The immediate causes for deserting socialist dreams were the exigencies of the civil war and the economic ruin following in its wake. The former required the abandonment of democratic ideals and the imposition in their stead of strict military discipline, not only on the population at large but also within the party itself by means of the most ruthless terror. Workers control, democratic centralism, and the people's state – all these ideals and institutions were scrapped in the grim fight for survival.”(36)

This situation meant that the importance of Soviet democracy, as the basis to establish the rule of the working class and develop socialism, was quickly ended: “As early as 1918, sovietism was well on the road of turning into a democratic facade, concealing the leadership of the party behind the form of local autonomy, popular initiative and control, the right of recall and similar devices. Party control over soviet activities was first exerted at first through the manipulation of all Bolshevik party members within these popular institutions, in other words by means of party discipline; later means external to the soviet system were also used, the secret police, the Red Army, federal commissars, and mass organizations. On paper the soviet system....was an institution of mass democracy. In practice, as Lenin was ready to acknowledge, it was but the form in which the party exerted its control over the masses.”(37) This development went alongside the promotion of forms of coercion within the economic process, and the elitist supervision of one man management. Hence what had occurred was the creation of a dictatorship of the party over the proletariat. This was because the party could not ensure the generation of the economic conditions for socialism in any other manner.

However what is problematical about this analysis is that Meyers assumes that this development was a logical result of Lenin's elitism and adventurism which was unable to accept that Russia was unsuitable for transition to socialism. But the process that Meyer described was related to the significance of increasing unfavourable conditions in which it was not possible to realise Soviet democracy, but this development was not the original intention of the Soviet government. It was initially believed that on the basis of this new political system it would be possible to promote the following policies: “That is why the Soviet republic in Russia has taken the shape of a fully socialist republic which has taken away the land from the landowners, established workers control in industry, and put the banks in the hands of socialist workers organisations, giving people access to the immense wealth accumulated and stockpiled by the capitalists to manage and use for the greater welfare and cultural growth for working people and not for their oppression.”(38) This comment indicates that Lenin underestimated the difficulty involved in trying to promote socialism in internal terms. It was the seriousness of the situation, which led to the Brest Litovsk treaty, which indicated that the regime may be isolated for a lengthy period of time. Thus Lenin's optimism about the ability to promote socialism was replaced with a more sober assessment: “It goes without saying that we shall be able to render effective assistance to the socialist revolution in the West, which has been delayed for a number of reasons, only to the extent that we are able to fulfil the task of organisation confronting us.”(39)

But the question of organisation becomes inextricably connected to the necessity of strict labour discipline. This implies that workers control would be ended because it has not proved to be compatible with the aims of realising economic efficiency: “The decisive thing is the organisation of the strictest and country-wide accounting and control of production and distribution of goods. And yet we have not introduced accounting and control in those enterprises and in those branches and fields of economy which we have taken away from the bourgeoisie; and without this there can be no thought of achieving the second and equally essential material condition for introducing socialism, namely raising the productivity of labour on a national scale.”(40) Thus it is not surprising that the role of bourgeois specialists is defined as representing the organisation of the economy, whilst workers control has meant the undermining of this principle in the name of crude and often counter-productive forms of economic activity: “We have introduced workers control as a law, but this law is only just beginning to operate and is only just beginning to penetrate the minds of broad sections of the proletariat. In our agitation we did not sufficiently explain that lack of accounting and control in the production and distribution of goods means the death of the rudiments of socialism, means the embezzlement of state funds (for all property belongs to the state and the state is the Soviet state in which power belongs to the majority of the working people).”(41)

In other words the failure of workers control means that the Soviet state imposes strict forms of economic organisation within the factories. This means the state becomes a political power that imposes its dictate onto the relations of production. The limitations of the working class in relation to its ability to organise production means that the state becomes an organ of economic compulsion that directs the process of work: “The Russian is a bad worker compared with people in advanced countries. It could not be otherwise under the Tsarist regime and the in view of the persistence of the hangover from serfdom. The task that the Soviet government must set the people in all its scope is - learn to work.”(42) The economic compulsion imposed by the Soviet state means that the democratic and participatory character of this state is undermined. Lenin justifies the dictatorship of the party, and the importance of the individual in relation to the expression of the party state: “If we are not anarchists, we must admit that the state, that is coercion, is necessary for the transition from capitalism to socialism. The form of coercion is determined by the degree of development of the revolutionary class, and also by special circumstances, such as, for example, the legacy of a long and reactionary war and the forms of resistance put up by the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie. There is, therefore, absolutely no contradiction in principle between Soviet (that is, socialist) democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals. The difference between proletarian dictatorship and bourgeois dictatorship is that the former strikes at the exploiting minority in the interests of the exploited majority, and that it is exercised - also through individuals – not only by the working and exploited people, but also by organisations which are built in such a way as to rouse these people in history-making activity; (the Soviet organisations are organisations of this kind.”(43) In economic terms the political development of the dictatorship of the individual on behalf of the working class is expressed by one man management. Consequently the generation of an elite form of the dictatorship of the proletariat is expressed in the hierarchical forms of decision making in both the economic and political levels.

To suggest that this situation is what Lenin actually wanted would be an example of crudely cynical thinking. Instead it was the failure of workers control, and the degeneration of Soviet democracy, which combined with the delay of the international revolution, led to the party ruling on behalf of the proletariat. Lenin outlined the unavoidable character of the development of rule of the party in the following manner: “And our whole task, the task of the Communist party (Bolsheviks), which is the class conscious spokesman for the strivings of the exploited for emancipation, is to appreciate the change, to understand that it is necessary, to stand at the head of the exhausted people who are wearily seeking a way out and lead them along the true path, along the path of labour discipline, along the path of co-ordinating the task of arguing at mass meetings about the conditions of work with the task of unquestioningly obeying the will of the Soviet leader, the dictator, during the work.”(44) So even before the onset of civil war, the party state was in formation. However Lenin still believed that genuine Soviet democracy could undermine the process of degeneration that was caused by the elite organisation of the economy. He argued: “It is the closeness of the Soviets to the “people”, to the working people that creates the special forms of recall and other means of control from below which must be most zealously developed now.....Nothing could be sillier than to transform the Soviets into something congealed and self-contained. The more resolutely we have to stand for a ruthlessly firm government, for the dictatorship of individuals in definite processes of work, in definite aspects of purely executive functions, the more varied must be the forms and methods of control from below in order to counteract every shadow of a possibility of distorting the principles of Soviet government, in order repeatedly and tirelessly to weed out bureaucracy.”(45)

The problem with this perspective of maintaining the role of a Commune and Soviet state was that the economic changes undermined the integrity and effectiveness of political democracy. Instead the role of hierarchy within industry became reproduced within the Soviet state. It was not tenable to uphold participatory democracy when the principle of individual dictatorship became credible within industry. Instead the conception of the democratic character of the Soviets became illusory. In the name of efficiency both the economy and state became dominated by the role of individuals. This situation was reproduced in the organisation of the Red Army which was led by Trotsky. This situation was an expression of the inability to promote political and industrial democracy in conditions that were increasingly unfavourable for the realisation of the original aims of Lenin concerning transition to socialism. Meyer contends that this situation was unavoidable, Lenin had to be an elitist because he had to introduce draconian measures in order to advance the industrialisation of Russian society: “The industrialization of backward areas, once they have revolted against the West, must be brought at the expense of the people's welfare.”(46) Hence: “With Lenin, the revolution turns into an era of undetermined length, in which the breakdown of capitalism is a long process of disintegration, and the proletarian dictatorship, a painful period of construction and transformation during which “socialism” remains confined to a group of countries within a hostile world.”(47)

However, the introduction of the New Economic Policy indicates that this view represents a caricature of Lenin's approach. In 1921 Lenin carried out a contradictory policy. On the one hand he admitted that Soviet democracy had been replaced by monolithic one party rule, and this situation required the banning of factions. Thus the state had definitively become bureaucratic and opposed to the principles of Soviet democracy. On the other hand he introduced the New Economic Policy which suggested that socialism could be advanced via the development of the worker-peasant alliance. The reason for his confidence in his New Economic Policy was that Lenin had the illusion that the state was capable of promoting socialism. He contends: “With enormous difficulty, and in the course of desperate struggles, the Bolsheviks have trained a proletarian vanguard that is capable of governing; they have created and successfully defended the dictatorship of the proletariat.”(48) With this understanding he is confident that an elite state can introduce the economic measures required to promote socialism: “In the sea of people we are but a drop in the ocean, and we can administer only when we express correctly what the people are conscious of. Unless we do this the Communist Party will not lead the masses and the whole machine will collapse. The chief thing the people, all the working people, want today is nothing but help in their desperate hunger and need; they want to be able shown that the improvements needed by the peasants is really taking place in the form they are accustomed to. The peasant knows and is accustomed to the market and trade. We are unable to introduce direct communist distribution. We lacked the factories and their equipment for this. That being the case we must provide the peasants with what they need through the medium of trade, and provide it as well as the capitalist did, otherwise the people will not tolerate such an administration.”(49)

Thus the credibility of the workers state is represented by its ability to promote measures that uphold the welfare and material interests of the people. In the last analysis, the state is accountable to the people in terms of its economic efficiency, and this possibility is indicated by the success in consolidating the worker-peasant alliance. However this advance could be undermined by the increasing bureaucratisation of the state. This is why Lenin proposes that: “We must reduce our state apparatus to the utmost degree of economy. We must banish from it all traces of extravagance, of which so much has been left over from tsarist Russia, from its bureaucratic capitalist regime.”(50) But this was precisely what was not carried out. The state did not become more accountable and democratic, and so its commitment to the NEP became more tenuous. This situation meant that Stalin emerged as the personification of the bureaucratic state. Hence Meyer's view of Stalin's close relationship to Leninism is a caricature of Lenin's approach: “Still, Stalinism can and must be defined as a pattern of thought that flows directly from Leninism” (51) This ignores the fact that what was lacking in Stalin was Lenin's integrity and genuine support for the aim of international revolution and the building of socialism in Russia. Stalin was a creature of the bureaucratic machine; in contrast Lenin understood that the state had become the most important problem in relation to the task of promoting the necessary policy to facilitate the realisation of the economic tasks which were crucial if the workers and peasants were to continue to support the party regime. This is why Lenin in his last years urged the overcoming of the problem of bureaucracy if the state was to continue to advocate policies that upheld the aim of socialism. Stalin was indifferent to these concerns. Instead to him the character of the state was defined by socialism, and he did not recognise any tension between the importance of the state bureaucracy and the aim of creating a new society. This understanding meant Stalin continued the elitist policies of 1921. Bolshevism became truly and consistently elitist with the development of Stalinism.

WAS LENIN AN ELITIST?

We can accept that Lenin's regime was often repressive and even authoritarian. He was the founder of the single party state, and defence of his system often involved repression and terror. The rejection of effective democracy and the elite rule of the Bolsheviks are described by John Plamenatz as the outcome of the adverse economic and political conditions in Russia: “Though Lenin did not know it, the course he chose for his country in 1905 was impossible. There could be no 'dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry' among an illiterate people unaccustomed to all the processes of organized power. Neither the workers nor peasantry could rule in alliance or separately. The ignorance which put it out of their power to rule the country also made it impossible for any political party to act for them. In a large country, no class can rule except through deputies; and there cannot be deputies unless institutions exist to ensure that persons responsible to others really are so; and these institutions cannot function properly except where there is freedom. There can be no freedom unless the people – and more particularly that part of them active in public affairs – have acquired the habits and prejudices of democrats. Lenin spoke of his party and of the class to whose service the party was bound as if they were so intimately related that the rule of the party was to all intents and purposes the rule of the class. It did not suit him to understand that so intimate a relationship could not bind political leaders to their followers in a country like Russia, precisely because there existed neither the institutions nor the habits that make up democracy. No party can justly claim to speak for a class except in a democracy; and no modern democracy has known for more than a few years what properly be called a 'party of the class'. (52)

Plamenatz is suggesting that the relations between the Bolsheviks and the working class were always tenuous, and this was indicated by the fact that they aspired to power in a country that was not conducive to proletarian revolution. Instead of being a party of the proletariat they were primarily motivated by power, and it is this aspect that defines Lenin as an elitist. To some extent this comment by Plamenatz has some validity because it was difficult to advance socialism in a country of adverse economic conditions and the low cultural level of the workers and peasants. However, Lenin believed that these limitations could be overcome with the creation of a participatory commune state that could involve the population in the administration of society. This point is connected to the existence of the Soviets which can act in this manner: “If the creative enthusiasm of the revolutionary classes had not given rise to the Soviets, the proletarian revolution in Russia would have been a helpless cause, the proletariat could certainly had not retain power with the old state apparatus, and it is impossible to create a new apparatus immediately.”(53) The importance of the Soviets in order to administer society after the revolution is connected to workers control: “When we say “workers control”, always juxtaposing this slogan to the dictatorship of the proletariat, always putting it immediately after the latter, we immediately explain what kind of state we mean. The state is the organ of the class domination. Of what class?....If it is of the proletariat, if we are speaking of the proletarian state, that is of the proletarian dictatorship, then workers control can become the country-wide, all-embracing, omnipresent, more precise and conscientious accounting of the production and distribution of goods.”(50)

The problem was that workers control was not effective, and so the economic aspect of proletarian democracy was undermined. In these circumstances it proved difficult to promote the credibility of Soviet democracy. Only after these failures did the party-state emerge. Thus Plamenatz's contention that Lenin and the Bolsheviks were only motivated by the aim of realising power for themselves is false. Only after the failure of the important economic and political aspects of how they understood socialism to be generated did the development of a party state emerge. Thus the Bolsheviks were not originally elitist. Instead we can criticise them for being possibly utopian, and having unrealistic expectations about the potentialities of Russian society for advancing the features of socialism. Only after the failure of this utopian project did elitism emerge. Workers control failed not because of the role of the Bolsheviks, but instead because the factories did not receive vital raw materials in order to create goods. This situation could only be tackled by the introduction of one man management. But the failure of workers control meant that the popular character of Soviet democracy could not be sustained. Instead it degenerated and became an expression of one party rule. In these circumstances the other parties were banned in order that they did not challenge the rule of the Bolsheviks. The establishment of what was a degenerated workers state meant that the political conditions became receptive to the emergence of a form of Bonapartist domination that would stabilise the situation in term of the intensification of political repression and the modernisation of the country. Genuine and consistent elitism, rather than the inconsistent elitism of the latter period of Lenin, was realised by Stalinism.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Lenin, Draft Resolution of the Tenth party congress on the Anarchist and Syndicalist deviation, Collected Works volume 31 p246

(2) ibid p248

(3)Lenin: Once More Again on the Trade Unions ibid p75

(4)John A Kautsky: Communism and the Politics of Development, New York 1962

(5) ibid p69-82

(6)Alfred Meyer: Leninism Frederick and Praeger, New York 1962

(7) ibid p29-31

(8) ibid p24-25

(9) ibid p31

(10)Lenin: What is to be Done, Collected Works Volume 5, Progress Publishers Moscow 1964 p384-385

(11) ibid p375

(12)Rosa Luxemburg: The Mass Strike, Merlin Press, London, no date

(13)Meyer op cit p85-86

(14)Lenin op cit, volume 5 p433

(15) ibid p432

(16) ibid p380

(17)Meyer op cit p93

(18) ibid p101

(19)Alan Woods, Bolshevism Wellred, London 1999 p330-337

(20)Meyer op cit p47

(21)Lenin: Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution, volume 9 p113

(22)Woods op cit p192-196

(23)Meyer op cit p138

(24)Lenin op cit, volume 9 p69

(25)Lenin: Tactics of Proletariat in our Revolution, in Collected Works volume 24 p61

(26)Lenin: Has Dual Power Disappeared volume 24 p446

(27)Woods op cit p546-553

(28)Meyer op cit p165

(29) ibid p171

(30) ibid p180

(31)Lenin the Tasks of The Revolution, Collected Works volume 26 p61

(32) ibid p67

(33) ibid p67-68

(34)Lenin: The Crisis has Matured, volume 26 p83-84

(35)Lenin: Meeting of the Petrograd Soviet volume 26 p239

(36)Meyer op cit p196

(37) ibid p202

(38)Lenin Extraordinary All Russian Railwaymen Congress, volume 26 p491-492

(39)Lenin: The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet government, volume 27 p238

(40) ibid p245

(41) ibid p254

(42) ibid p259

(43) ibid p268

(44) ibid p270

(45) ibid p274-275

(46)Meyer op cit p272

(47) ibid p273

(48)Lenin: The Tax in Kind Volume 32 p360

(49)No page reference

(50)Lenin Better Fewer, But Better, Volume 33 p501

(51)Meyer op cit p282

(52)John Plamenatz German Marxism and Russian Communism, Longmans, London 1954 p324

(53)Lenin Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power, volume 26 p104

(54) ibid p105