

## Lenin in Essen

*Towards a Politics of Truth: The Retrieval of Lenin*

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Essen, home of Krupps and other behemoths of German industry, is where Slavoj Žižek has spent the past year at an interdisciplinary research college sponsoring his million-mark research prize for a project on ‘The Antinomies of Postmodern Reason’. The German title for this conference was more tentative than its English equivalent: ‘Gibt es eine Politik der Wahrheit – nach Lenin?’ (Is there a politics of truth – after Lenin?) No German was tempted to respond. Assembled on Žižek’s platform were, in the main, French, British and North American male academics debating Lenin as philosopher, as political theorist and ‘after Seattle’.

From the off, Lenin was wielded like a talisman against bourgeois thought. Where Marx has been recuperated – as a ‘poet of commodities’, the Marx of cultural studies – Lenin remains inadmissible in polite and scholarly circles, absent from book lists and syllabuses, named only as dogmatist, powermonger or catastrophe. Žižek delights in mentioning the unmentionable, relishing the ‘whiff of scandal’ that accompanied the conference and perturbed the Institute. Such ‘offensiveness’ shatters a consensus, which, he insists, has been foisted on discourse. This consensus promotes endless choice, but it is deaf to one thing: the real choice that would make a difference, the choice to abolish the market, which is the absolute difference – the ‘other thinking’ that Lenin represents.

But newly Leninist Žižek must also bouleverse Left expectations. For him, to retrieve Lenin does not involve Leninist precepts such as the vanguard party. It means to retrieve one moment of Lenin – not steely Lenin but Lenin rattled, Lenin facing the collapse of a world into war and, as a consequence, a collapse of his world-view. Žižek, Eustache Kouvelakis and Kevin Anderson all spoke of Lenin in Zurich in 1914. Confronted with the disintegration of the socialist Second International into warring nations, Lenin withdrew from active politics to study Hegel. He had to re-ground Marxism theoretically. This Leninist gesture reverses the famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. It must be repeated now, amidst the catastrophe of globalization and the end of the Eastern bloc. According to Žižek, our moment demands not intervention but close analysis of the ‘new hegemonic co-ordinates’ – what is indispensable is not a Leninist party but a Leninist gesture of rethinking everything.

Kevin Anderson agreed that Lenin’s recourse to Hegel resulted in a break with evolutionist thought. This break generated a new theory of imperialism with a differentiated approach to the progressive nationalism of the oppressed and the reactionary nationalism of the oppressors. Daniel Bensaid presented Lenin as an almost Benjaminian figure – overturning automaticist Second International Marxism and its faith in economic development towards socialism. Lenin recognizes the heterogeneity of the oppressed, which, for Bensaid, necessitated tailored and expert intervention into ideological and political struggle. It was this sense of Lenin as intervenor that rang through Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s paper. He wanted to take from Lenin a non-Chomskyan materialist theory of language. Using ‘Nature and Choice of Slogan’, a pamphlet from July 1917, which analyses the elements of a good slogan (timely, succinct, condensing and embodying concrete analysis), Lecercle sketched a performative theory of language. The right slogan possesses a concrete force, reflecting and modifying its object.

Alex Callinicos tried to put back together what Žižek had split asunder: for Lenin, analysis and intervention are bound to each other – only by acting do you find if the analysis is true, while analysis occurs only in conjunction with practice. But Fredric Jameson was bothered by Lenin’s ‘dominant code’ of politics, noting that this had set the tone for much twentieth-century Marxism, with its concentration on institutions, such as the state. Marxism, however, must rely on economics as a determining instance, in the same way as sexuality is central for Freud, and happily today, it is easier to move back to economic analysis, for everything appears blatantly economic in this globalized post-monetarist age. Lenin adopted a spectral form in Jameson’s paper. Introduced through a dream Trotsky had in June 1935, Lenin was presented as the man who is dead but does not yet know it. For Jameson, this illusion must be sustained, for to keep Lenin alive keeps alive the possibility of revolution. Domenico Losurdo discharged a more traditional Leninist spleen, arraigning the liberal tradition for inventing the concentration camp and its modern version, the trade embargo, and specifying the characteristics of the new (economic) imperialism (via globalization) as ‘*Herrenvolk* democracy’. Lars L. Tih, in contrast, compared Lenin to an evangelist, opening the way for Sebastian Budgen’s reflection on the ‘torn halves’ of recent Lenin biographies and histories of the Russian Revolution, calling for a synthesis of the two approaches, a social history from below which also understands – in Lenin’s own sense – the importance of tactics and intervention.

A key issue percolating through the conference was whether new political movements will be able to avoid Lenin’s organizational form. Doug Henwood alleged the utter irrelevancy of Lenin to the ‘anarchist’ anti-corporate/anti-globalization (US terms) / anti-capitalist (UK term) movements. Robert Pfaller and Charity Schribner spoke neither



of Lenin nor of the anti-capitalist movement. Pfaller analysed the ‘hegemonic co-ordinates’ of present-day Austria, quite differently to Žižek, insisting that the masses are treated to a diet of punishing repressions and – *horribile dictu* – they embrace their own slavery with pleasure. Schribner spoke melancholically of loss, of the end of the Eastern bloc and the consequent deletion of ‘collective memory’. Nowadays, she claimed, the memory and past of the GDR were being deleted – because delegitimated – with all the ease and swiftness of a computer command. Perhaps she was

nostalgic for the bulky Stasi databanks.

The final paper of the conference was a shocker of Nietzschean Maoism from Alain Badiou, read in his absence by a comrade. The paper began with a left-wing definition of dialectics (one becomes two) and a right-wing one (two becomes one). Badiou’s is the left variety with division, and where division is at work so too is struggle, as in China during the Cultural Revolution, when mass slaughter divided the working class in two. And those who felt queasy at the thought of violence and persecution were comforted with Maoist and common-or-garden clichés: ‘the revolution is not a formal dinner party’ and ‘you cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs’. But that was then, and this is now and sadly, *pace* Badiou, the youth of today just don’t want rebellion – they love their mums and dads too much. Resurrected in Badiou was the hardcore Leninist revolutionary as distanced bloodlusting dogmatist, so artfully overturned by those who had argued for contemplative Lenin, the Hegelian philosopher or listening Lenin, the (possibly unbidden but definitely enthused) spirit of ‘Seattle’ who refuses to go away and wants to bring his Party to the street party too.

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