



Richard Pipes on Young Lenin

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Richard Pipes on Young Lenin

Comment on Richard Pipes, 'The Origins of Bolshevism: The Intellectual Evolution of Young Lenin', in Richard Pipes (ed.), *Revolutionary Russia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1968: Harvard University Press), 52–9



V. I. Lenin, 1895 (police photo)

I SHOULD like to begin by saying that I am not a 'Leninologist'. I do not know a great many facts about him, and therefore what I say is not likely to be of very great importance. I should like to begin by thanking Mr Pipes for his extremely lucid and interesting chronological exposition, in particular for his discoveries about Lenin's populist phase before 1892, namely the fact that Lenin belonged to various circles.

To begin with, I accept Mr Pipes's periodisation of Lenin's evolution to the beginning of the twentieth century. It seems to me extremely clear and convincing. Also I am grateful to him – I think we all should be – for the discrimination of the four types of

Marxism about which he speaks. It sheds a great deal of light on that rather vague term. It could be made to recrystallise a little.

I think it is perfectly true to say that the Marxism that came to Russia earlier than to almost any other non-German-reading country did, at the beginning, simply mean some kind of economic doctrine that did not necessarily affect political opinions. Mr Pipes quoted the case [53] of a monarchist economist. Even Ziber, who, I suppose, was as devoted to spreading Marx's economic doctrines as anybody else, by translating, by lecturing, and by writing on them, was a fanatical liberal during the whole of his life, and never showed the slightest inclination to accept Marxist class theories or the Marxist theory of revolution. Marxism entered into all kinds of amalgams in the thought of people like Chernyshevsky, Mikhailovsky, Lavrov and others, without necessarily converting them to Marxism. Marx was regarded by some Russians simply as an able economic analyst, by others as a proponent of an interesting theory of historical materialism, which some students of his work accepted in part, some people rejected in part, but which did not immediately produce converts. The real penetration of Marxism into Russia begins with the conversion to Marxism of Narodniks like Akselrod, Plekhanov and others.

Why did Lenin say nothing about belonging to these early circles? Mr Pipes says that possibly he did not want it known that he had ever been a Narodnik. I do not know. It seems to me there would have been nothing shaming in admitting this, even for Lenin. After all, all the prominent Russian Marxists had gone through this corridor. Plekhanov did not conceal his past. Akselrod did not conceal it. Nobody else concealed it. Why should Lenin be so particularly reticent? I think – and I am going to make this purely as a tentative suggestion – that perhaps, while the others who belonged to these circles (which was no doubt dangerous) got into a certain amount of trouble, he did not. He may have anticipated trouble at the university, but he was not expelled for this, and did not regard what he did in these circles as of sufficient weight or importance. He was not a full participant in the kind of systematic revolutionary activity that made him think about himself retrospectively as an active and prominent member of an organised movement. But when he became a Marxist, Lenin did become precisely this, and early saw himself as a leader. He was in no sense a leader at the age of seventeen, eighteen or nineteen. I think this is a possible

explanation. At any rate he was, as Mr Pipes says, in general rather reticent about his past and perhaps not very anxious to reveal it.

Now the next point I want to come to is Lenin's view that Russia was already in a capitalist phase. I mean his extraordinary view in the early 1890s that Russia was not merely facing the probability of capitalism, as the Marxists in Geneva were saying, but were already plunged into a capitalist phase. His position is extraordinary and extravagant. Where does it come from? I think it comes from two sources, one factual, the other psychological. The psychological source is obviously a certain reluctance, during his entire life, to accept any kind of mechan[53]ical gradualism: the view that although you can help a process on and encourage it, stimulate it, men, even revolutionaries, are nevertheless rigidly confined to some kind of unalterable timetable, and what must inevitably happen may happen at a very distant date – at best, the movement can be helped, can be brought nearer, but its course cannot be dramatically altered. Lenin was an activist. Everyone knows that. I think what have been called the voluntarist aspects of his character derive from his early Narodnik days, and from his own character. I think that this volitional – *volevoi* – desire to mould events is probably characteristic of him at all times.

As to ideological tactics, Mr Pipes describes the impression that V. E. Postnikov's survey made on Lenin in the early 1890s. I expect it did. At the same time, I think Lenin could have derived these ideas earlier from his reading of the early works of Plekhanov. If one looks at Plekhanov's works written in exile in the 1880s – essays like *Socialism and the Political Struggle* and *Our Differences* – one finds that in these works Plekhanov emphasises, though not in the highly dramatised, exaggerated form in which Lenin later states it, the doom of the peasant commune, declares that it is disintegrating, and even gives a specific analysis of the disintegration into the three familiar elements – the rich, the middling, and the poor peasants. He then attributes this process to the entrance of the money economy into the villages, leading to the emergence of rich peasants as in some sense exploiting capitalists, and the corresponding classification of the poor peasants as a landless proletariat, or something very like it. Only people who might want to hold on to the communes, to whom they may still promise something economically and socially, are the third element – the middle peasants. I cannot remember whether or not Plekhanov talks about

kulaks, serednyaks, bednyaks as such, but the distinction is already there. And since Plekhanov was presumably read by persons like Lenin in the late 1880s and early 1890s, he could certainly have obtained that original impulsion from him. No doubt it was much strengthened and invigorated by Postnikov's actual figures about the Russian village organisation in southern Russia.

As a result of this, Lenin certainly began to reflect on the possibilities of an early revolution in Russia on Marxist lines. Mr Pipes very plausibly says that his Marxism was still, at this period at any rate, mixed with some kind of Jacobinism. Lenin's Marxism is closer to the views and temper of the activist Jacobin wing of what is called the populist movement than to, say, the legal populists: there is the Blanquist strain that is always recognisable in Lenin. I wonder whether his Marxism need be called Jacobin? I think it is clear that sometime during this period he became a Marxist. But we must not confound various Marxist [55] doctrines with each other. Not only are there inconsistencies, but there are 'periods' in Marx's views too: all Lenin needed to do in order to hold the views that he did in fact hold was to go to the earlier writings of Marx.

It seems fairly clear that Marx's writings from 1847 to about 1852 are genuinely different in tone and content from some of his later works. In this earlier period Marx supposes that what is necessary is some kind of organisation of determined persons, needed for the purpose of pushing, harrying the bourgeoisie into the particular historical phase which it has to enact. Certainly in the famous address to the Communist League, the references to the dictatorship of the proletariat are clear indications that his thought was, at that time, directed toward the formation of a small, coherent party of revolutionary intellectuals that had to play the part of a 'ginger group'. If the party was to be mentor, it was not exactly to use the methods of kindness – but rather whips and scorpions. In any event, these persons were to prod, to force, the development of the bourgeoisie in a direction not likely to be agreeable to the bourgeoisie in the end. That is to say, this has to be the beginning of the period of dual control in which there were to be two kinds of person riding the horse of society, the bourgeois democrats, who would have to make their bourgeois revolution, and, seated behind them, a small group of revolutionaries quietly sabotaging them in order, ultimately, to throw them out. To change the metaphor, it is

a theory of the cuckoo in the nest which, I think, marks this phase in Marx's thought in 1847–52.

Now, if one looked at the Russian political, economic and social scene in the 1880s or 1890s, and if one were convinced of the validity of Marx's general schema, what could one possibly do? After all, Marx himself changed his tactics and his tone simply because after 1851 the possibility of revolution in Germany appeared to recede; the economic and social picture changed sufficiently to convince him that the party of the proletariat must wait; it must educate, must build up majorities, must not engage in putsches, must not be Blanquist. Nothing is worse, as Engels afterwards said, than to have a premature revolution, that is, for a socialist party to come into power before the time is ripe, before industrialism is developed properly. Revolution requires a preliminary phase of development in which the bourgeoisie is performing its historic task. As Engels wrote to Marx, 'now [...] Bismarck is doing a bit of our work'.¹ Bismarck was uniting, centralising, concentrating, organising, accelerating the pace of all the various economic and social forces that in the end would bring about a situation in which the revolutionary transformation of society was bound to occur. But it was very clear that the same thing was not happening in Russia. Supposing [56] one wanted to have a social democratic party, founded upon the admired model of the German Social Democratic Party, even the kind and degree of political liberty in which Lassalle could function in Germany in the mid nineteenth century was obviously excluded in Russia in the 1890s by the nature of the political regime. One could not begin to do what Lassalle did. One could not even do what the socialists did under Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Laws.

The only way in which one could prepare, agitate, organise in Russia, and presumably indoctrinate the proletariat or any other revolutionary forces at hand, was not possible under legal conditions. Therefore the formation of some kind of revolutionary elite would inevitably be required, presumably working from outside, or working wherever it could, and would inject its ideas and

¹ Letter of 15 August 1870. [Cf. Engels to Philipp Pauli, 30 July 1878 ('Were the worthy fellow in our pay, he could not work better on our behalf'), and to Petr Lavrov, 10 August 1878 ('Mr Bismarck [...], who, for 7 years, has been working for us as if he was in our pay'.)]

its organisational methods by illegal methods into this very difficult, political and economically 'backward' situation. This may not have been the orthodox Marxism of the 1870s and 1880s – it certainly was not – but it seems to be perfectly orthodox Marxism of, say, 1847–52.

As for Lenin and social democracy: let us consider his original espousal of German Social Democratic policies and his later rejection of them. The reasons are a matter of conjecture. But I should be inclined to agree with something I think is suggested in Professor Pipes's thesis – that it was not simply a question of his agreement with Struve or with anybody else about the precise timetable, about the scientific evidence concerning the exact pace at which capitalism was developing in Russia, but an overwhelming desire to believe that Russia was already in the full bloom of capitalism, so that all that was needed now was the 'classical' anti-capitalist revolution according to the orthodox Marxist prescription. Lenin's thesis that Russia already possessed millions of capitalists – namely the peasants – is, as I said, an extraordinary, view (I mean his bold denial of the equation of developed capitalism – in Marx's sense – with industrialisation), and it is, to say the least, open to question. His discovery of many millions of capitalists in Russia surely springs from an extreme anxiety to see the Russian situation of his day as one that would make revolutionary action legitimate according to Marxist rules. And because Lenin was always very anxious to act, the advocacy of an alliance of socialism and democracy was, I think, simply a more or less mechanical adoption of German Social Democratic doctrine in its orthodox form, in the belief that this could lead to action. Perhaps he hoped, perhaps he believed, that it was possible to collaborate with the liberal bourgeoisie at this period, or possible to collaborate with the semi-legal organisations of the workers and to drive them on to drastic action of some sort. This hope was doomed to disappointment. [57] Hence 1899 was probably a relief to him, in the sense that his temperament asserted itself much more genuinely when he was able to find reasons for shedding his allies and, as Mr Pipes suggests, go forward on his own, without one leg being tied to someone else's.

Why did he rebel in 1899? I think Mr Pipes is probably quite right in the reasons he gives. I think that if Lenin feared anything, it was a lowering of tension, a lowering of the revolutionary initiative. Kuskova's 'Credo' was perhaps a symptom of the fact that the

workers might be easily lured into some kind of Bernsteinian path, into pure trade-unionist economic activity: this he condemned. The one thesis that I think Lenin held to all his life was that any kind of diversion of the energies of the workers into daily bread-and-butter, trade-unionist activities would necessarily delay the revolution and lower the possibility of the change which he desired and anticipated. I am sure this is so.

Lenin's treatment of the question of democracy and anti-democracy seems to me largely tactical. I do not know that Lenin did much more than Marx did with the Commune, for example. It is well known that the Paris Commune was made largely by non-Marxists, indeed that it was made against Marx's advice and took a form which was certainly not compatible with what could be regarded as Marxist orthodoxy or even that of the International – the orthodoxy of the Workingmen's International of 1871. Nevertheless, Marx saw quite correctly that it was necessary to bless this workers' movement as the first rising of workers as workers, and that it therefore had to be assimilated, integrated into what might be called revolutionary hagiography. In the same sort of way, Lenin adopted the democratic standpoint simply from a need for a framework, for historical solidarity – because it was then the standpoint of the admired German Social Democratic Party, which was the universal model for organising, for creating a sensible party with firm intellectual foundations and some kind of clear organisational programme. However, as soon as this programme began to flow into what might be called peace-loving channels in Russia, and began, as he thought, to divert the energies of the workers from the revolutionary task before them, or from political struggle, or from anything dynamic at all into some kind of self-help, some kind of trade-unionist activity of which he accused the economists and revisionists, he rebelled against it and took the path with which we are all familiar.

Now about Chernyshevsky. I think that Valentinov was perfectly right in supposing that Chernyshevsky had a dominant influence on Lenin, not simply in acquainting him with Hegel (if he did), or with revolutionary theories, or with the materialist conception of history, but in [58] having a dominant influence on him by the very tone and the very nature of his work. Chernyshevsky was a very rigid, serious, industrious, erudite man, dedicated to dry facts and statistics. He detested every form of liberalism, every form of the

attitude that Herzen at that time represented, particularly the gradualism Herzen developed towards the end of the 1860s, including his regret for the kind of older humane civilisation that the new life was likely to overthrow. Chernyshevsky's enormous emphasis on the 'new men', on the fact that the new world could be created only by grimly dedicated revolutionaries, Jacobin in temper if not in ideas, detached from the world in which they lived, with all their energies directed to its overthrow, with no moral bonds uniting them to the mass of philistines by whom they were surrounded, which was Chernyshevsky's fundamental doctrine, and what he captured young men with – this was, I think, extremely consonant with Lenin's temperament; and so was the loss of all possible hope of reform from above and the denunciation of it as a fatal delusion, ideas that became Chernyshevsky's passionate refrain. Hatred of liberals, hatred of compromises, hatred of alliances of any kind, especially with the bourgeoisie, the harsh tone not only of the polemic, but of his whole attitude, the emphasis on the need for unswerving heroic figures probably made a greater impression on Lenin than anything else written in Russian. That is what he meant when, according to Valentinov, he said about Chernyshevsky: 'On menya vsego perepakhal', 'He ploughed me over', 'He wholly transformed me.' Every turn from gradualism and a united front with liberals or other moderates throughout Lenin's life stems from this stern puritan.

There is one further point which I should like to make. I do not believe that even Lenin supposed at any period before 1905 that the Russian Revolution would be the first revolution to set off the world conflagration. Of course, he believed with Marx, that is, according to Marx's letters to the Narodniks, that the Russian timetable was not to be adjusted to the general European timetable. He held this view and believed – almost to the end of his life – in the proposition that the Russian Revolution would not be a success unless there also broke out a world, or at least a European, revolution to carry it on its shoulders. But I do not believe that Lenin supposed that the Russian Revolution would be the first event in this particular series – the first spark to ignite the world fire. The 'weakest link' doctrine seems to me to have been supplied by Parvus and Trotsky, and never to have been fully adopted by Lenin; at any rate, I think that this is where he obtained it. Nor is there any touch of *ouvrierisme*, in Lenin at any rate: no wish to follow the workers' movement, to learn

from workers, to identify [59] himself with their actual aspirations. At all periods – and this is a consistent strain – he was convinced that there must exist a small group of leaders who formulate the programme and push the others on. In this respect he is very consistent, and probably from the earliest beginnings.

The only real point of issue between myself and Mr Pipes is whether one needs to assume a Jacobin (or populist) strain in the Lenin of the early years in order to account for his anti-democratic, elitist behaviour and beliefs after 1901. What I should like to suggest is simply that there were at least two Marxes, if not more, and that Lenin was appealing to the earlier Marx because conditions in Russia in the early twentieth century were far more similar to conditions in Germany in Marx's youth than they were to conditions in Western Europe in later years of the century. I believe there was in him a psychological strain of a kind that took him originally toward Narodnik groups – a desire for activism, militancy, an elite of men of action; a craving for revolution, soon not late. But one should remember that the Jacobins, whether the French Jacobins of the eighteenth century or the Russian Jacobins of the nineteenth, had no sense of timetables, of inexorable historical stages. The whole notion of a cosmic timetable which leads men to ask themselves whether conditions are ripe or not ripe, whether the Mensheviks are correct about the stage reached or not, what constitutes ripeness, what kind of capitalism is needed, how far advanced it should be in order to certify the revolution as both probable and of the correct kind – this whole historicist notion of stages, of looking at the calendar of history and considering a particular date for the revolution when the times are fulfilled – this is absent from the thought of Russian Jacobins as much as it is from those of the French Jacobins. In this respect I think Lenin is truly Marxist and dissimilar from the Jacobins. I do not think Mr Pipes will disagree. He speaks only of a combination of Marxism and Jacobinism. But I should like to repeat again that Lenin's faithful and, I think, orthodox adoption of Marx's earlier views, whether conscious or not, stemmed from his perception that conditions in Russia resembled the condition of early capitalism in Germany much more than they resembled conditions of developed capitalism in Europe in his, Lenin's, lifetime. There is no need to look for other sources.

DISCUSSION

Replying to Mr Berlin, Mr Pipes expressed doubts that Lenin's unwillingness to reveal his early associations stemmed from his failure to consider them sufficiently serious. The deliberate effort to cover up these connections [60] indicates that more was involved. After Lenin seized power in 1917 he was charged with being un-Marxist, an anarchist and a Jacobin. To admit his earlier anarchist-Jacobin associations would have fed the anti-Bolshevik accusations and given ammunition to the Mensheviks who had been making this charge all along.

Mr Kennan inquired how the Bund's views on party organisation affected Lenin.

Mr Pipes replied that he had encountered no evidence of any interest of Lenin in the Bund at this time.

Mr Schapiro commented that a recently published document, Lenin's marginal comments on Chernyshevsky, bore out Mr Berlin's statements about the influence of Chernyshevsky on Lenin. In regard to what is sometimes referred to as Lenin's 'Menshevik phase' after 1895, Mr Schapiro disagreed with Mr Pipes's suggestion that it might have been a tactical manoeuvre. He also thought that the impact of Bernsteinianism on Lenin's crisis of 1899 was greater than Mr Pipes allowed, because it meant the end of revolutionary hopes.

Mr Pipes answered that although he did not deny totally the genuineness of Lenin's psychological conversion to Social Democracy in the summer of 1895, he found it inexplicable. The sudden conversion is so unlike Lenin at any other phase that the possibility of its being a tactical manoeuvre must be considered. In regard to the importance of Bernstein, Mr Pipes maintained that in the late 1890s Lenin worried less about revisionism than about the threat of economism or the defection of the working class from Social Democracy. After all, Struve said many of the same things in 1894–6, and yet Lenin cooperated with him; in fact, as late as 1900 Lenin worked hard and against Plekhanov's wishes to secure Struve's cooperation on *Iskra*. Revisionism became significant only in the light of the possibility of the detachment of labour from the Social Democrats – that is, after the publication of Kuskova's 'Credo'.

Mr Keep suggested that if the 'Credo' was this important in the formation of Lenin's thought, one would expect Lenin to have checked whether the information it contained was accurate. He does not seem to have done that. According to Mr Keep, revisionism was probably at least as dangerous as economism in Lenin's view, and the change in his attitude towards it depended on his personal relations with Struve and the acute psychological shock of their sudden change. Personal relations were more important than the other influences.

Mr Katkov said that Mr Pipes's presentation did not answer clearly the question of whether Lenin was made revolutionary by Marx, or Marxism made revolutionary by Lenin. Why should Lenin deny being a revolutionary before becoming a Marxist? The answer must be that he felt it necessary to show a scientific basis for the conversion to a revolutionary attitude in order to create an atmosphere of charisma.

Mr Wolfe suggested that Paul Avrich's new book on anarchism casts [61] some light on Lenin's detestation of the trade union leaders by pointing out the degree of anti-intellectualism that was felt by anarchists and syndicalists in the 1890s. The same attitude on the part of the workers' leaders no doubt contributed to Lenin's view of them as tools to be exploited. Mr Wolfe also suggested that Lenin's total rejection of the world into which he was born and of all his teachers along the way makes this side of his character important for his historians. Last, Mr Wolfe pointed out Lenin's extreme sense of mission.

Mr Thompson inquired at what point, and how, Lenin came to change his views about the nature of Russia's economic and social structure.

Mr Pipes answered that the party programme prepared by Lenin in 1896 no longer referred to Russia as a fully capitalistic country. This interpretation was probably given not because Lenin had changed his mind but in order to gain the broadest acceptance as the Social Democratic Party platform. It is particularly in the programmatic statements that he is found to abandon his earlier – and later – stand that Russia was already fully capitalistic, and speaks of it as rapidly 'becoming' capitalistic.

Mr Avineri suggested, qualifying Mr Berlin's statement that Lenin's last phase of development was a rejection of German Social-Democratic Marxism, that Lenin's attempts to organise the party in

the 1890s were markedly different from Marx's views of an elite pushing the bourgeoisie. This distinction makes the populist or Jacobin elements in Lenin's background more important.

Mr Berlin agreed that Lenin's conception of the party owed a great debt to the populists. The need for a dedicated nucleus, however, was due to the repressive regime in Russia, not to a conscious adoption of the ideas of 1793. It was his Marxist conviction that made him turn to Narodnik tactics as the only way to achieve revolution in Russia. In regard to the change of Lenin in 1899 and his great fear of economism, Mr Berlin suggested that perhaps the death of Engels was a factor in Lenin's total rejection of gradualism.

Mr Seton-Watson maintained that, although logical, Mr Katkov's argument that the desire for a charisma founded on scientific study caused Lenin to deny his populist past would apply equally to Plekhanov. Since Plekhanov did not feel it necessary to deny his past, and Lenin admired him, some other explanation must be sought. Mr Seton-Watson inquired into the extent of Tkachev's influence, particularly in regard to imparting the sense of urgency of action.

Mr Pipes called attention to the fact that Lenin's Narodnik period was in the late 1880s and early 1890s, when there was a Russian Social Democratic movement, whereas Plekhanov's populist phase had occurred earlier, in the 1870s, and therefore involved no rejection of Social Democracy. Their populist episodes, therefore, could not be regarded or treated similarly. This difference might explain why Plekhanov acknowledged it and Lenin did not. Mr Pipes said that he had found no direct evidence of Lenin's having been [62] influenced by Tkachev in the 1890s. At the time, however, he was surrounded by Social Revolutionary Jacobins: he absorbed their ideas and thus no doubt was indirectly influenced by Tkachev.

Miss Arendt suggested that in tracing the intellectual biography of Lenin, the important consideration was not what men or movements his changes echoed, but that everything he did reflected the moves of one determined for action, who would dictate or reject something on the basis of whether or not it permitted him to do something. In this sense he was not a Marxist. For Marx, circumstances determined whether he would be a revolutionary, but Lenin would be nothing if not an activist. Lenin used the scientific aspect of Marxism for charisma, but Marx took it more seriously.

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Mr Berlin remarked in reply to Miss Arendt that most of the activists did not become Marxists but Social Revolutionaries or terrorists.

Mr Epstein commented that we still know very little about the intellectual climate in which Lenin lived in the years he attended populist circles. We do not know what was discussed in those circles.

Mr Pipes agreed that this subject deserves intensive study. One of the main occupations of the circles such as those to which Lenin belonged was drawing up reading lists. These lists provide a clue to a given group's political complexion. Indeed, the Sklyarenko group originally split into its two wings over the issue of a reading list, Lenin and a few incipient Social Democrats demanding that the list be based on Marxist literature.

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