Lenin & Kautsky

Based on three lectures by Canadian historian Lars T Lih, delivered at Communist University 2009 and first published in the Weekly Worker

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£2.00
VI Lenin and the influence of Karl Kautsky

In the first article, Canadian historian Lars T Lih discusses the relationship between the two great Marxists in the period 1894-1914

Picture the situation. It is Vladimir Ilych Lenin’s 50th birthday in April 1920. The Bolsheviks have been fighting the civil war and, although they are in a pretty desperate situation in the spring, they can see victory as pretty much assured, and they are celebrating the occasion with their great hero and great leader, Lenin. He rather reluctantly comes out onto the stage and says that he would like to read out a rather long quotation by Karl Kautsky from a 1902 work, ‘Slavs and revolution’. Lenin also inserted the same page-and-a-half-long quote into Leftwing communism: an infantile disorder.

He introduced it in this way: “I’d like to say a few words about the present position of the Bolshevik Party, and was led to these thoughts by a passage from a certain writer written by him 18 years ago in 1902. This writer is Karl Kautsky, who we have at present had to break away from and fight in an exceptionally sharp form [which is putting it rather politely!], but who earlier was one of the vozhdünst, the leaders of the proletarian party in the fight against German opportunism, and with whom we once collaborated. There were no Bolsheviks back then [before the 1903 congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party], but all future Bolsheviks who collaborated with him valued him highly.”

So, on this great occasion, Lenin tells the audience that the person they had been fighting and whom they had all been looking down upon really was a great guy. He read out the quotation which still thrilled him. That for me is significant. I wonder how shocked some of the people must have been.

A couple of weeks later the Second Congress of the Communist International met and Lenin did the same thing. He referred again to the same long quote in Leftwing communism and repeated his appreciation of Kautsky: “When he was a Marxist, how well he wrote!” I imagine a lot of the people in both audiences - those at his birthday and those present at the Second Congress - were surprised to hear anything like that.

After all, following 1914 you could read tremendous polemics against Kautsky, where Lenin seemed unable to think of enough bad names for him. But it is clear that Lenin still had a soft spot for him - in his heart and also in his thinking. People on the left have all grown up with the idea of the “renegade Kautsky” - indeed, I gather many actually think “renegade” is his first name, as they have never heard him called anything else! And there is a long list of other things we have learnt about him - ie, that he was a passive and mechanical determinist, not very revolutionary, Darwinist, and so on and so forth.

We are told that in 1914 Lenin managed to see through not only Kautsky, the person (which he clearly did), but also what he stood for. Then we are told that this led Lenin to finally settle accounts with Kautskyism root and branch, that there was a massive rethinking of Marxism. Kautsky was associated with the Second International and so that was also bad. That is how the Kautsky-Lenin relationship is generally thought of. And, of course, there are people on the other side of the political spectrum who have the same idea of Kautsky versus Lenin - except that they like Kautsky!

Well, lately there has been a sort of Kautsky revival going on. Mike Macnair’s book Revolutionary strategy is one example of it, and there are a lot of other articles I could cite. There is another huge book in the Historical Materialism series called Witness to permanent revolution, which has several hundred pages of Kautsky documents from the 1904-06 period, which I will quote from later on.

I am proud to be part of this little revival and I think I can describe myself as probably the most extreme member of it, as I have probably gone further than anyone else in saying that Lenin’s view on Kautsky was highly positive, never changed and continued to play an important role in all points of his career, including in the last decade. My little epigram for the relationship is this: ‘After 1914 Lenin hated Kautsky because he loved Kautsky’s books’. This is what I am going to try and convey.

One reason I am confident about what I am saying is that after publishing my book Lenin rediscovered, the reviews by some people on the left were complimentary, but a couple of them highlighted what they thought was a weak point: that is, I saw the Lenin-Kautsky relationship as closer than it was - although Lenin might have considered the relationship close before 1914, he did not realise the real issues involved, that he actually disagreed with Kautsky, but in 1914 the scales fell from his eyes.

That was a valid criticism, as I did not talk in the book about the later period. So I thought I would do some research on this. I compiled a rather odd little database which I refer to as ‘Kautsky as Marxist’. I went through Lenin’s works and pulled out all the references I could find about Kautsky’s writings up to 1909, when Road to power came out. Lenin considered this the cut-off point. Kautsky might not have become a full traitor until 1914, but after 1909 he is not so good.

The first surprise is that there is a lot of it. The second is the picture that arose from this, which was almost entirely positive and also had a wide range of issues and a lot of references to specific writings and so forth. I am still working out the whole picture and trying to get all the facts that came out of it.

But I am going to make a modest claim here: I am not giving you Lars Lih’s view of the Lenin-Kautsky relationship, I am giving you Lenin’s view of the Lenin-Kautsky relationship. He may be wrong, but this is what he thought. I have a summary here that I wrote out of that guide. It is my guide, but it is an attempt to paraphrase what Lenin says about Kautsky after 1914. This is the picture you would get of Kautsky, if you were listening to Lenin:

“Karl Kautsky was an outstanding Marxist who is the most authoritative theoretician in the Second International and teacher to a generation of Marxists. His popularisation of Das Kapital back in the 1890s has canonical status. He was one of the first to refute opportunism in detail, although personally he somewhat hesitated before launching his attack, and he continued to fight energetically against it, asserting even that a split would be necessary if opportunism ever became the official tendency of the German party. Marxists of Lenin’s generation learned a dialectical approach to tactics from him. Only vis-à-vis the state
do we observe a tendency to restrict himself to general truths and evade a concrete discussion.

"Kautsky was also a reliable guide to the revolutionary developments of the early 20th century. His great work on the agrarian question is still valid. He correctly diagnosed the national problem, as opposed to Rosa Luxemburg. He insisted that western Europe was ripe for socialist revolution and foretold the connection between war and revolution.

"Kautsky had a special relation to Russia and to Bolshevism. On the one hand, he himself took great interest in Russian developments and endorsed the basic Bolshevist view of the 1905 revolution and the peasant strategy which emerged from it. On the other hand, the Russian revolutionary workers read him eagerly and his writings enjoyed greater influence in Russia than anywhere else. This enthusiastic interest in the latest word of European Marxism is one of the main reasons for Bolshevism's later revolutionary prowess."

That, as I say, is Lenin's view of the Lenin-Kautsky relationship. Of course, I have left out the angry irony of 'Look at him now!', 'Look at what happened!' and how Kautsky had become a traitor or renegade in 1914 and so forth.

I want first to give the big picture and then proceed to the first two decades of their relationship (1894-1904 and 1904-14). I will talk about the third decade in the next sessions. The first decade I summarise under the title 'Lenin, the social democrat' and the second under 'Lenin, the Bolshevist'. 'Lenin, the communist' comes in the third decade. I have chosen these titles merely in order to identify the central theme of the particular decade - I am convinced of the continuity in Lenin's thought and do not think he changed that much at all.

'Lenin, the social democrat' refers to his desire to initiate a social democratic party in Russia. 'Lenin, the Bolshevist' is so called as I regard Bolshevism as a Russian answer to a Russian question of how to defeat the tsar. You can call this classic Bolshevism, old Bolshevism or whatever, but that is what people meant when the word was invented. 'Lenin, the communist' obviously refers to the Lenin of 1917 and the socialist revolution.

By using this framework, the point I wanted to make about the Lenin-Kautsky relationship is the following: Kautsky's influence is continuing, complex and central. It is complex because it has different facets that are more important at particular times - not just one or another issue. It is central because in the central concerns of each decade of Lenin's life you will find Kautsky.

In the first decade, Kautsky was the authoritative spokesman of 'Erfurtianism' - the term I introduced in Lenin rediscovered. It is my word, referring to the Erfurt programme, for the image of the German party that inspired the Russians in this decade. In addition, it refers to Kautsky's polemics against opportunism, such as his book against Bernstein.

It is true that at the start of the second decade - ie, when the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks split in 1904 - Kautsky sided with the Mensheviks. But this was just temporary. Actually on the more substantive issues and for most of the time from 1906 on, Kautsky was associated with the Bolsheviks, and he more or less endorsed the Bolshevik strategy. In fact both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks saw Kautsky as a sort of honorary Bolshevik. This seems to have been forgotten, but it does have to be said.

I would like to go into more detail on these points: Firstly the role of Kautsky as a mentor - the historical fact of the role that Kautsky played in the history of Russian social democracy. Secondly, Kautsky as an exponent of the logic of the party and the Russian underground (which is mainly what my book is about). And, thirdly, Kautsky's support for the explicitly Bolshevik strategy of hegemony.

Kautsky as mentor

The best account of this is given by Lenin in State and revolution, which, as you know, is in many ways a polemic against Kautsky. But before he begins the polemic, Lenin gives the following generous and accurate account of Kautsky's relationship to Bolshevism and the Russian movement (I should say, by the way, that if you read State and revolution you will find a great deal of praise even in this highly polemical pamphlet):

"Undoubtedly, an immeasurably larger number of Kautsky's works have been translated into Russian than into any other language. It is not without justification that some German social democrats sometimes say jokingly that Kautsky is read more in Russia than in Germany. (We may say, in parentheses, that there is a deeper historical significance to this joke than those who made it first suspected. For the Russian workers, having manifested in 1905 an unusually strong and unprecedented demand for the best works of the best social democratic literature in the world, and having been supplied with editions and translations of these works in quantities unheard of in other countries, thereby transplanted, so to speak, with an accelerated tempo, the immense experience of a neighbouring, more advanced country into the almost virgin soil of our proletarian movement)."

A somewhat similar comment can be found in Leftwing communism. What Lenin is saying is that Kautsky was the main reference point of the Russian movement and Russian workers, and that this continued not only during the underground period, but almost throughout the 1920s - at least until 1929. For example, I have a long Bolshevik reading list for study and propaganda circles in the underground. This one is from 1908. The first thing to be said is that it is an extremely impressive reading list - if I had read all this stuff, then I would know a lot more than I do! I counted 23 works by Karl Kautsky, who dominates the list. Nobody else comes even close. There are only four articles by Lenin - none of the famous books such as What is to be done? or Two tactics.

But this continues for a long time. The classic Bolshevist textbook published in 1919, The ABC of communism, also has a reading list, from which you get the same picture - Kautsky is by far the leading author. Of Lenin's pre-1909 works, the only ones that are included are those on agrarian development. Again, no trace of What is to be done? or Two tactics. So workers and Bolsheviks looking to educate and develop themselves are reading Kautsky! That is a historical fact.

Kautsky himself had more interest in Russia than any other non-Russian writer (ie, not Rosa Luxemburg, who was Russian in the sense that she grew up in the Russian empire). He gives specific support to Iskra and later to the Bolsheviks, and he told German and European readers about the heroic struggles going on in Russia and their immense significance. I would just like to quote from the article 'Slavs and revolution' from 1902, which was read out by Lenin at his 50th birthday. You can see why he was so inspired by it. This is what Kautsky said about the Russian workers:

"We are entering a new epoch of revolutionary struggle in Russia, a struggle that is developing on a much wider basis than a quarter of a century ago, but also one that in terms of the zeal of its fighters, in terms of the meanness and cruelty of the oppressors, and in terms of the heroism and devoted self-sacrifice of the revolutionaries is just as impressive as the Russian struggle of earlier periods, and involves more than physics in pitting force against force. The revolutionising of minds advances alongside the revolution of fists. The now awakening strata of the people are being seized by a passionate thirst for knowledge and are attempting to clarify for themselves their historical tasks, so that they might attempt to solve the most complex political problems, rising above the small daily struggle to the great historical goals that it serves."

He then goes on to argue that in Marx's day the Slavs were often seen as the force of reaction against the revolution, but per-
For Lenin, Karl Kautsky might not have become a full traitor until 1914, but 1909 already marked a turning point for the leader of the Bolsheviks.

haps now we can rather see them as the spark that sets off western socialism, which is becoming rather philistine.

Kautsky wrote a lot about Russia and it is always in this vein - ie, that in terms of their development the Russian workers are far above and beyond the English workers, etc.

The merger formula

I now want to discuss the logic of the party in Kautsky and Lenin. I refer to this as the ‘merger formula’ and it comes up a lot in my book because it is essential to this first decade - you do not read it much after that because the issues have basically been resolved.

The merger formula is this: social democracy is the merger of socialism and the worker movement. Lenin quotes this in the early 1890s and writes that this is how Kautsky sums up the essential message of the Communist manifesto - I do not think you can find higher praise than that. He also thought that it summed up the logic of German social democracy - the SPD. So the merger formula is the definition of ‘Erfuritianism’. It is seen as the prediction of the Communist manifesto, which, according to Lenin, is being confirmed before our eyes by the German SPD. So we have Kautsky formulating the link between the Communist manifesto and the party. Not only Lenin thought this - a whole generation of Marxists and activists of the 1890s did too.

What was this party logic? First of all, it is both a vanguard and a mass party - those are not opposed, because first of all bringing what Kautsky called the “good news” of socialism to the workers requires a vanguard who know about socialism, because the masses do not yet know about it. At the same time it requires a mass party, because you are trying to attract as many people as possible to this message and because the party is a large and open organisation that is going to argue for this message day and night. That is one aspect that results from this formula.

The second is what I call ‘campaignism’, which is the large array of jewels that the SPD came up with for getting the message across. This was very innovative stuff back then. I do not think we can appreciate all the things that - although familiar to us - were pioneered by the SPD: rallies, petition campaigns, a huge press, a large range of societies. These are all the things that the Soviet system based itself on and which all groups on the left use to some extent. This is due to the idea of merging. The workers will protest, but, if socialism is the real and final answer, then the only way to get socialism is to merge the two: the workers’ movement must adopt socialism as its goal.

Finally, the third implication of this is ‘political freedom’. That was the term used back then which is not used so much any more. It might be referred to today as ‘civil liberties’ perhaps, but this was the term that referred to the freedom of the press, freedom of association, strikes - ie, a basic array of organisational freedoms that allow this kind of party to exist. Particularly, of course, political freedom is needed in order to get the papers out, to hold rallies and to organise meetings in order to get the message across.

Most explicitly in his commentary on the Erfurt programme, Kautsky argues that anybody who does not want political freedom is an objective enemy of the proletariat - even if they are sincere in their desire to help the workers. Back then of course, a lot of socialists were either dubious on the question of political freedom or even hostile towards it, because they saw it as a sort of bourgeois-liberal toy. The best news for political freedom as a cause in the 19th century was the fact that the logic of Marxism meant arguing for political freedoms for the party.

That is what the merger formula meant. Let us now look at it from the point of view of what I call the ‘social democratic wannabes’ in the 1890s - these young activists either in Petersburg or in some isolated town in Russia. In illegal literature they read about this great party which is both popular and revolutionary and is run by the workers themselves. What an inspiring party! But, they asked, what does it mean for us today? We cannot do anything like that at all because we will be hauled off for speaking out in public.

So what could be done? First of all, they could adopt political freedom as their goal. This was not an obvious choice for revolutionaries in Russia because first of all they had to go through a long period of internal development in order to understand the importance of political freedom. The assassination of the tsar in 1881, for example, was a step forward towards this understanding. Whereas they previously rejected its significance, they now realised it was important.

This brings me to the next problem - is it possible to have something like political freedom under absolutism? Some people said that they were for political freedom, but that the only way to get it was the old terrorist way - ie, to throw bombs and force the government to do what they wanted because it was simply not possible to use newspapers and rallies, etc. That made a lot of sense. Others thought that the liberals would do it for them.

There was, however, another view held by people who had read Kautsky (in this sense Kautsky must be seen as the father, or godfather, of Russian social democracy). These people who had read Kautsky turned to the German party and started experimenting to see whether it was possible to carry out agitation and campaigns amongst the workers without getting arrested. The Russian word for this is konspiratsia, which does not mean ‘conspiracy’ (the word for that is zagovor). Konspiratsia has a specific meaning (or at least it did back in those days) of a set of operating rules which I call the fine art of not getting arrested. I did not use this phrase in Lenin rediscovered, but I now refer to this as the ‘konspiratsia underground’ - a new type of underground. Not one where you sit in a small room and plot to throw a bomb which will overthrow the tsar, but an underground that manages to keep its members safe from arrest. They form a national
party with local roots, trying to get the word out to the workers à la SPD.

*What is to be done?* is therefore not Lenin saying, ‘Here is my great idea of a party - go and do likewise’. It was the summation and codification of what had been worked out by this underground. For that reason I would make the further argument that a lot, if not most, of what he is saying there became the common property of the underground - not just the Bolshevists. For example, the term and actuality of 'professional revolutionary' were common to all parties - not at all a Bolshevist trick. The Mensheviks, the Socialist Revolutionaries and even the Liberals (to the extent that they were underground) had professional revolutionaries.

I therefore sum up Lenin's slogan for this period as: 'Let us build a party as much like the German party as possible under tsarist conditions. Then we can overthrow the tsar and build a party which is even more like the German one.'

**Kautsky and Bolshevik strategy**

I now wish to discuss Kautsky and the Bolshevist strategy that developed and became clear after the 1905 revolution.

Let us put it like this. You have a goal: political freedom. You have an institution in the form of the underground. But what about strategy? What sort of reading of class forces do you have that will achieve this political freedom? The Bolshevik strategy is one of hegemony.

Now the word 'hegemony' is a very famous one for a variety of reasons. What it meant back then was that the peasants were not only a discontented or destructive force, but by this time they were genuinely radical democrats whose interest it was to have a democratic, anti-tsarist revolution - partly because they wanted the land, but for other reasons too. They also needed leadership, so they had to choose between the main classes. One of these was the liberal bourgeoisie, who were anti-tsarist for their own reasons, and the other was the proletariat. The bourgeois liberals were already becoming counterrevolutionary because they were afraid of revolution, and they could more or less put up with what they got in 1905. Therefore the proletariat should aim to win, and has a very good chance of winning, class leadership over the peasants by promising them land and by being an uncompromising revolutionary force.

The way I summarise it is that the bourgeoisie is too important to be left to the bourgeoisie - in fact the bourgeoisie is not going to carry out the bourgeoisie revolution. What follows from this is that the proletariat has a duty to lead the revolution and the mass of the people as a whole - ie, in the first instance the peasantry. Where did this hegemony strategy come from?

One common view is that Lenin invented it in 1905 when he realised that orthodox Marxism was insufficient, because it says that the bourgeoisie will lead the bourgeois revolution. So this view bases itself on Lenin repudiating German textbooks. But actually this is not so.

After 1905 Lenin wrote that the Bolshevists had always been in favour of the hegemony scenario and it was the Mensheviks who were falling away from it. It is hard to locate just when the term 'hegemony' came about, but he was arguing that the Bolshevists had always fought for it and that they still were. The idea goes back to Plekhanov in the 1880s, when he said that the Russian revolution can only succeed as a worker revolution. What he meant by revolution was a democratic and anti-tsarist revolution.

From the very beginning, Kautsky was again an influence, a conduit, for the hegemony strategy. The logic of it can be traced back to his writings in the 1890s, and it is based on three things. Firstly, that the bourgeoisie is unreliable. Marx and Engels realised this as soon as the ink was dry on the Communist Manifesto in 1848. Another thing Kautsky says is that the bourgeoisie becomes weaker and feeble the further east we get, something which was picked up on by other writers. Then the idea of social democracy as the leader of the people - das Volk in German or narod in Russian. This means that the social democrats were not merely leading the workers, but were also the consistent champions of the wide masses of the non-proletarians and could also count on their support - the peasants above all, but the urban petty bourgeoisie too.

Finally, there is what I sometimes call the Kautsky hypothesis or theory. He says at one point that the social democrats are better defenders of democracy than the democrats, and what he means by that is that - in Germany especially - the democrats are to the left of the liberals, but they are starting to compromise, so the force that was really fighting for democracy was the workers' party.

I read an American writer from this period who drew a comparison between the US and Germany. When something happened to the workers in the US then it would be ignored, but in Germany the party would kick off a big fuss about it in the Reichstag. This is the background to the hegemony strategy.

When applied to Russia, Kautsky specifically endorsed Bolshevik strategy - something that came out of a logic of Kautsky's particular way of looking at social democracy (I will not say that this is something coming from social democracy in general - this is Kautsky individually - but he and Lenin were on the same wave length on this vital question). To sum up, we have to understand that political freedom as a goal really was the central theme of Lenin's first two decades - why it was important and how to get it. Political freedom also has a political logic - both in the ideal party that would be possible when political freedom was achieved and in the underground as a sort of ray of political freedom in the gloom of absolutism. Finally the strategy for winning political freedom was to get the peasants on board and to win leadership and hegemony over the peasants away from the liberals.

At each step we find Kautsky is a central influence and active mentor and educator. If I were speaking merely as a Russian historian I would have to say that Kautsky was a very important figure in Russian social democracy. He was a figure in Russian history.

The Kautsky-Lenin relationship is, for me, one of the most fascinating individual relationships in Lenin's life. It is full of a passion and emotion that is hard to find elsewhere, but also it tells us about Lenin's relationship to the Marxism of his day and to the Second International.
We all know the famous anecdote about Lenin when he received the news that the Germany Social Democratic Party’s delegation to the Reichstag had voted for war credits - he initially believed it was a forgery put out by the bourgeoisie in order to whip up support for the war. I would like to put this and other such shocks into a more exact context.

On August 1 1914 Germany declared war on Russia, and at that time Lenin was living in a village in Poland which was under Austrian control. It was on August 5 that he discovered the SPD delegation had voted for war credits. They could have abstained, but they did not even do this and that completely floored him.

But then he had another problem to deal with, because the Austrian authorities were wondering about this suspicious character who spoke Russian, had French money and went for walks in the hills. Lenin was jailed on suspicion of spying and held from August 8 to August 19. One of the reasons he managed to get out so quickly (as opposed to his arrest 10 years earlier) was that he now had friends in high places: namely Victor Adler, the leader of Austrian Social Democracy, who called on the minister of the interior to release Lenin, who was, after all, one of the biggest opponents of the tsar.

But before he finally got out he received yet another shock: a French leaflet had been issued under the title, ‘Declaration of Russian socialists joining the French army as volunteers’. The war fervour was such that even some Bolsheviks had become swept up in it. I would like to emphasise just how tough these weeks were for Lenin - he had all this to think about combined with the ill-health of his mother-in-law, who was dying.

He arrived in Bern on September 5 for a meeting with the local Bolsheviks and presented to them the principles of his programme for the next two to three years. Either he had managed to undertake some sort of rethink in this short time or he did not have to do so. By outlining these dates and details I am trying to suggest that it was the latter.

But actually the shocks were not over. The most personally upsetting one related to Karl Kautsky - the mentor whose writings Lenin had unreservedly admired. Kautsky was now writing articles that wobbled, wobbled and wavered and did not live up to what Lenin thought he should be saying. Lenin was devastated.

In September 1914 but before these Kautsky articles came out, Lenin had written that the dangers of opportunism had long been pointed out by the greatest representatives of the workers’ movement of all countries, and it is pretty clear that it was predominantly Kautsky and Luxemburg he had in mind. But now one of these two finest representatives was writing articles that essentially justified what the Reichstag deputys did. A famous account in a letter to one of his comrades says: ‘I hate more than anybody else this dirty, vile, self-satisfied, smug hypocrisy of Kautsky’.

Another of Lenin’s letters to the same addressee, Shlatnikov, a week later contained the line: ‘Obtain without fail and re-read Kautsky’s The road to power and see what he says there about the tasks of our time. And now how he acts the toady and disavows all that!’

The reason he is so angry and upset is because this book, along with Kautsky’s views, were so right. What was in that book and what did it mean to talk about “the tasks of our times”?

Aggressive unoriginality

There are two ways of looking at this. The traditional way on the left is to say that the Reichstag vote and other shocks led Lenin to a process of rethinking Marxism - he came to understand the fallacious nature of the Second International’s version and either returned to the roots of Marxism or came up with new theories.

One story is that he read Hegel, discovered the dialectic, and then applied that to the tasks of his time (he did, of course, read Hegel, but that was not the reason for his platform at the time). Another story is that Nikolai Bukharin was a big influence on him, and so on. I refer to this as the re-thinking’ way of looking at Lenin in 1914.

I have my term for what I think is happening, and that is aggressive unoriginality.

Why? If you read Lenin’s writings in the period between 1914 and 1916 he sort of grabs you by the throat and says, ‘I am not original, OK? I am just saying what everybody else was saying. This was the educated Marxist consensus which is now being betrayed.’ Now, this could just be rhetoric, but it could also neatly express what is going on. And I think it could also lead us to Lenin’s platform, outlook and definition of the situation in these years and, secondly, to a closer look at the ideological background and historical context of those ideas.

I refer to 1914-1916 as the ‘Left Zimmerwald’ years. Zimmerwald is the little village in Switzerland, where in September 1915 a three-day conference was held of the movement’s representatives from various countries who opposed the war. ‘Left Zimmerwald’ came to be known as the faction that Lenin led within that movement. It was more revolutionary and wanted a more radical, defeatist and non-pacifist position, which marked them out from many of the others. This is significant in that it marks the first time that Lenin was a leader on a European scale, staking a leadership claim over a very small but well-known grouping.

Lenin made the point that all left Zimmerwaldians were saying what Kautsky had been saying before 1914: namely that revolution will come from war and that we will be faced with a new revolutionary situation - an example of this ‘aggressive unoriginality’. Lenin insisted that it was his grouping that had the strongest connections with what Kautsky had been saying in The road to power.

So let me say a few words about this book, which is not very long - more like a pamphlet of 80-90 pages. It came out in 1909 and it is the end part of a development that began in 1902 with a book called The social revolution. Against the revisionists, both these books were adamant that not only is revolution necessary, but that it is becoming more necessary - the contradictions are sharpening and we are entering into a revolutionary era.

Actually, the experience of trying to get this book published told Kautsky that something was wrong with the party, because the leadership said that they would not produce it under the party name - under the pretext that this would risk prosecution for high treason. This excuse was not quite plucked out of thin air, but its basis was pretty thin.

So Kautsky had to fight behind closed doors and the compromise was that the book would be published if he would agree to change the odd word or two. He did not change anything significant though.

Almost before it was published in Germany under the auspices of the party, it was already being translated and published elsewhere - including in Russia. Oddly enough,
there is no record of Lenin commenting on it until 1914, when he started making these pleas to reread it. I think he took his own advice to Shlapnikov, because he wrote an article in which he literally went through *The road to power* pulling out quotes along the way, pointing out what Kautsky had said before.

He began: “For decades, German social democracy was a model to the social democrats of Russia - even more so than for any other country in the world. It is therefore clear that there can be no intelligent attitude towards the new social chauvinism without a precise definition of one’s attitude towards German social democracy. What was it in the past? What is it today? What will it be in the future? Part of the first of these questions can be found in *The road to power* - a pamphlet written by Kautsky in 1909 and translated into many different languages [a point made in order to highlight just how authoritative this international work is] containing a most complete exposition of the tasks of our times. I am going to go into this in some detail, since it now these ideals are so barefacedly cast aside.”

Lenin concludes by arguing: “This is German social democracy at its finest. This is the German social democracy that had promise and this is the German social democracy that one can and must respect.” I am trying to get across not only how strongly he felt, but his belief that this “social democracy at its finest” was still valid.

Neither did Lenin change his mind on this. He kept repeating the same things throughout this period - I think the last such reference is in 1918 or 1919. In *State and revolution* he criticises *The road to power* for not mentioning the state, but still says that it is the best of Kautsky’s books. He does not actually criticise anything that Kautsky says: merely what he does not say on the state. Even then he still agrees with the arguments.

**Summary**

I am going to do a little summary of the book to clarify things. This summary will only consist of quotes that Lenin himself pulled out when reading it again. So in a sense this is Lenin’s summary of the book.

“We are entering a new age of revolutions”. “In particular ... a world war is imminent and war also means revolution.” “This revolutionary situation will lead to an acceleration of social polarisation”, since “the rate of advance becomes very rapid as soon as the time of revolutionary fervour comes”. “For one thing, petty bourgeois forces such as the peasantry are capable of coming over to our side en masse”. “Western Europe is ripe for socialism ... therefore the proletariat can no longer speak of a premature revolution.” “In fact, the long-awaited dictatorship of the proletariat is a real possibility in the near future.” The duty of the socialist party is therefore to remain “consistent, unshakeable and irreconcilable”.

I should also mention that there is a scenario of global revolution in this book which was picked up and used by Lenin.

In good dialectical fashion I am going to move from the abstract to the concrete. The most abstract thing concerns the idea of a revolutionary situation: we alternate between periods of peaceful development and periods that are revolutionary - utterly dissimilar. Peaceful and revolutionary situations are different in their logic and everything about them - including the tactics that are called forth. One such difference relates to the tempo of development. This is what Kautsky said (I think this is interesting because it helps to explain why Lenin and many other revolutionaries admired Kautsky):

> “When times of revolutionary ferment come, the tempo of development at once becomes rapid. It is quite incredible how quickly the masses of the population learn in such times and achieve clarity about their own class interests - not only their courage and their desire to fight, but also their political interest is spurred on in the most powerful way by the consciousness that the time has arisen for them to rise by their efforts out of the darkest night into the bright glory of the sun. Even the most sluggish become industrious, even the most cowardly bold, even the most intellectually limited acquire a wider mental grasp. In such times, political education of the masses that would otherwise require generations takes place in years.”

Lenin also picks up on this idea that you learn more in months in a revolutionary situation than you would in decades of peaceful development many times in his writings. By the way, I think that this idea comes from the Marxist notion that revolutionary situations are not created by the party. The party is revolutionary, but it is objective forces that prepare the way for revolution - you just have to be ready. Therefore you need new tactics.

At the time of writing *The road to power* Kautsky had been engaged in a polemic with Rosa Luxemburg. He argued that a mass strike is fine for a revolutionary situation, but we are not in one now so let us not use it just yet.

I am not going to evaluate the situation that was actually faced, but will merely highlight how the idea of a revolutionary situation affects the context of the party’s response. That is the most abstract idea. Next we are going to progress to another fairly abstract set of necessary and sufficient conditions for recognising a revolutionary situation. There is a fairly well known Lenin quote on this, and what is interesting is that it bears a very strong resemblance to the one presented by Kautsky.

Kautsky offers four conditions: 1. a regime hostile to the people; 2. a party of irreconcilable opposition; 3. mass support given to the party; 4. a regime crisis of confidence.

Lenin’s own definition also contains four parts, and the ‘aggressive unoriginality’ rhetoric can once more be seen when Lenin states: “Such are the Marxist views on revolution - views that have been developed many, many times, have been accepted as indisputable by all Marxists and for us Russians were corroborated - a particularly striking fashion by the experience of 1905.”

So again he his disclaiming any originality for his own definition.

Kautsky was one of the first to have the idea of moving into one of three periods - 1. a revolutionary period up until 1871; 2. a peaceful period of development between 1871 and 1905; and then 3. 1905 onwards - a new era of revolutions, unrest and accelerated revolutionary development. Lenin adopted this idea, and it is part of his explanation for what happened to the Second International - i.e., that during the time of peace it degenerated.

Turning to the concrete, let us look at what Kautsky said and what Lenin picked up on in terms of the expected revolutionary situation in Europe. In western Europe, there were sharpening class contradictions - not the softening of them, as the revisionists around those like Bernstein maintained. The framework and the prerequisites of socialism are in place and therefore it is impossible to speak of a premature revolution. At one point Lenin said of this: “There is no need for us to prove that the objective conditions in western Europe are ripe for socialist revolution. This was admitted before the war by all influential socialists in all advanced countries.”

That quote brings out two things. Firstly, whilst Kautsky was the main guy, Lenin is clearly talking of all influential socialists in the advanced countries. Secondly, the statement, “There is no need for us to prove ...”, in my opinion shows the rhetorical use of this aggressive unoriginality. He is saying that not just some radical Russian is telling you this - it is the informed consensus of the experts, so you had better believe it! And, by the way, Kautsky himself had said that there was nothing new in *The road to power*, but that it was merely a summation of what he had been arguing for the previous seven or eight years.

Then there was what I call the ‘global interactive revolutionary scenario’. This is an aspect of Kautsky which I think has not been fully explored. And he was also highly interested in colonial policy - the first attack on Edward Bernstein, which led to the famous debates of the 1890s, was over colonial policy, because Bernstein fought for
Lenin made the point that all left Zimmerwaldians were saying what Kautsky had been saying before 1914: namely that revolution will come from war and that we will be faced with a new revolutionary situation.

Kautsky’s ‘ultra-imperialism’ theory argued that war was not going to break out. This is not quite correct - for two reasons. The first is that super-imperialism is a new theory that Kautsky consciously and explicitly developed in a move away from what he had himself been saying earlier. So, it is Kautsky who is rethinkin here and exploring a new concept. And it is once again Lenin who is defending the old orthodoxy. So when Lenin says that he is getting his definition of the tasks of the times from Kautsky, he was including imperialism. He was infuriated at the new concept of ultra-imperialism.

The second thing to be said on this is that Kautsky was not quite saying that ultra-imperialism is occurring right now, but that it is a possibility - and a strong one - because at some point the imperialists will wonder why they are shooting each other when they could easily get together and exploit everyone as a team. So it was not exactly a prophecy - more of a future possibility.

However, it was exactly this implication that made Lenin so furious. He argued that if you think peace is possible with imperialism then you are letting down the side and it is untrue anyway. But I do not want to get into this debate now, and so will return to our current topic.

We find in Kautsky’s The road to power the following ideas: firstly, that imperialism is the “last refuge of capitalism”. What he meant is that people are desperate; they see capitalism as a blind alley, but there is one possible great rallying idea - imperialism, where the country will go forth, make it in the world, bring benefits to humanity and do well for itself. But he says that, once this obviously nonsensical idea is blown apart, then that is it. He is also saying that the world is being completely divided up, and in this respect imperialism has reached its limits in that it has divided up the world.

an ethical or ‘nice’ colonialism. As I mentioned in my last talk, Kautsky was particularly interested in and knowledgeable about Russia, and the Bolsheviks were picking up on this global scenario even before the outbreak of war.

What are the features of this? Firstly, the ‘interactive’ formula generally means that events in one country have a strong influence on those in other countries, and Kautsky stresses that as something we have to understand. How does he fill this picture out? Firstly, there are all sorts of linkages between the class struggles in various countries. One is that people can read and know about them - particularly the case for Russia, where everybody has been influenced by events in western Europe. Any class struggle today will be different to those of yesterday because people can know about and be influenced by them.

Secondly, bourgeois revolutions can no longer be the same because there is a new need to fight external domination, which there was not previously. Thirdly, there is the possibility of what you might call synced development - ie, backwardness can actually be an advantage because you move faster. One example he gives of this is Japan, which he argues was able to leap forward. But a very real force.

Of course, there was also Russia. Russia plays a big role in this ‘interactive’ formula, because it was a generally accepted idea that Russia’s democratic revolution might well spark of a socialist revolution in western Europe. But Kautsky also says that should this happen then you might well have accelerated development in Russia: because it is backward, it might proceed faster in the context of a socialist Europe than one of the more hidebound western European countries.

Finally, he talks a great deal about nationalist revolutions. He wants to make clear that countries such as China, Turkey and Russia represent a new development that is going to upset things, and he insists that the leaders of the movements in these countries are generally not nice people! But for Kautsky this does not alter the fact that they are weakening capitalism and are bringing an element of political unrest to the whole world - ie, he almost cheers on these movements because they are fighting against national oppression and also making life more difficult for the European powers.

When Kautsky polemises against Bernstein and the ‘ethical’ colonialists, he says: “Colonial policy is based on the idea that only the European countries are capable of development - the men of other races are children of idiots or beasts of burden - and even socialists proceed on this assumption as soon as they want to pursue a policy of ethical colonial expansionism. But reality soon teaches them that our party’s tenet that ‘All men are equal’ is no mere figure of speech, but a very real force.”

Kautsky is arguing that people are perfectly capable of fighting back and that they are actually doing so. He says: “When Marx and Engels wrote the Communist manifesto, they regarded only western Europe as the field of battle of the proletarian revolution, but today it has become the whole world. Today, the battles and the liberation struggle of the whole of labour and exploited humanity is being fought not only on the banks of the Spree and the Seine, but also on the Hudson and the Mississippi, the Neva and the Dardanelles, the Ganges and the Huangho.”

Here I call attention to the Neva - the Russian river near Petersburg. Kautsky was including Russia in this idea of global unrest.

I want now to move on to the subject of imperialism, war and revolution. In this context I disagree with the idea that
Secondly, imperialism leads to war. He thinks that, even though we are in a situation where the ruling classes are afraid of war because they are afraid of revolution, guns will fire of themselves.

Another idea - and this links back to the idea of the bourgeois workers’ party concept - is that England has avoided social revolution because of the profits brought by India. As far as I can see, he does not mention the labour aristocracy, although I think he does discuss that elsewhere. But what he is saying here is that England is exploiting India to make concessions, so that if India rebels that will mean crisis for England. This even leads him on to suggest that if the English workers do not rebel even after India has broken free, then they really are hopeless!

I am not going to try to evaluate these ideas written in about 1904. I merely wish to point out that Lenin’s ideas about imperialism as a reason why the revolution has not yet broken out is not a particularly new one. Further, both Lenin and Kautsky are looking to limit the damage and to find a reason why the English workers are not rising up.

To sum up all of what I have said, then, the prediction based on the growing class contradictions at home and abroad is that there is a period of upheaval and unrest coming up and it will probably end with the dictatorship of the proletariat in Europe. This is what Kautsky says in 1906 (I think he is talking about the Russian revolution): “What it promises to inaugurate is an era of new European revolutions that will lead to the dictatorship of the proletariat, paving the way for the establishment of a socialist society.”

Tactics and the ‘new Lenin’

The reason that I have emphasised these themes in Kautsky is because Lenin emphasises them. But I now wish to discuss the tactical conclusions. The two main tactical conclusions which Lenin draws from this era of upheaval are also contained in Kautsky, even if they are somewhat more ambiguous.

By the two tactics I mean the ones he is already going for in September 1914 - ie, turn the imperialist war into a civil war and get rid of opportunism in the new international.

For the first of these tactics, I wish to bring your attention to something which was very important to Lenin, and which he referred to on numerous occasions - the Basel manifesto of 1912. It was the last in a series of manifestos at Socialist International congresses. This was a special one called because of a diplomatic crisis. This manifesto is important for Lenin, who refers to it many times, and the reason I think he does so is that it was a solemn document which everybody signed up to, but few actually carried out.

Representatives of European social democracy at the Basel congress repeated their 1907 pledge to resolve to “use the political and economic crisis created by the war to rouse the masses and thereby hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule.”

It is a little more evasive than maybe Lenin realised. Note how it says “to rouse the masses and thereby hasten the downfall of capitalist rule”. What he understood it to mean was that the parties were under the obligation of their own manifesto to turn the imperialist war into a civil war: ie, turn an unjust war into revolution. So he insists that this was a solemn, binding obligation which Kautsky had also signed up to. Furthermore, he believed that the Basel manifesto was squarely within the socialist tradition - another piece of “aggressive unoriginality”.

For Lenin it was “the summation of millions and millions of proclamations, articles, books and speeches of the socialists of all countries in the entire epoch of the Socialist International. To brush aside the manifesto means to brush aside the whole history of socialism”. Because he thought they were brushing this aside, he accused them of being traitors.

So that leads to the next tactical conclusion, which is to get rid of opportunism from the international parties. One of the things Lenin wanted to achieve by this was to get rid of Kautsky! So it is very ironic that he practically quotes Kautsky to explain his reasoning.

Firstly, he gives Kautsky full credit for developing and fighting the concept of opportunism. Even in 1920 Lenin is still saying that, although Kautsky becomes a traitor and an opportunist in 1914, he did yeoman work in fighting opportunism. Secondly, for Lenin the new social chauvinism - ie, people defending the national interest - is just the old opportunism reborn. (By the way, there is a slight problem with this assertion, in that the people who were the most rabid social patriots and social chauvinists tended to have been on the left in France, Germany and Russia.)

Lenin is saying that he understands what is going on in 1914 in terms of how he and Kautsky understood the old Second International - ie, opportunism versus orthodoxy. Lenin actually quotes Kautsky in underlining the need to split if opportunism becomes too dominant - Kautsky advised a split if opportunism became not just a mood or danger, but a tendency that threatened to take over. And then - this is quite amazing - he quotes Kautsky talking about changing the name of the party from ‘Social Democratic’ to ‘Communist’ in order to justify doing so himself. Kautsky had never called for a Third International and would never have wanted it, but the idea of it was inspired by things that Lenin got from Kautsky!

What I have tried to show is that between 1914 and 1916 Lenin operated on the basis of a revolutionary situation and global unrest that had certain features requiring new tactics. He got his understanding of these, and the assurance that it was the truth, from both the old international and Karl Kautsky.

I also pointed out that Lenin had rhetorical reasons for making this kind of assumption. If he had gone and rethought Marxism and said that everyone had been wrong for the last 30 years and people should follow him on that basis, then he would not have got very far. He did not - what he did was state that he was the one standing up for what all the others used to say.

Again I am not giving you my opinion, but Lenin’s - he might be right or he might be wrong. I happen to think he was right, but even if he was wrong, even if it was all just rhetorical and he did not really mean it, we should definitely take it very seriously when Lenin says that Kautsky and his The road to power is the most precise definition of the tasks of our times.

In Lenin’s mind, the job of a political leader was to take the broad definition of the historical situation and work out tactics that are both true to the principles and applied to the situation, which I think is what he meant when he talked about dialectics. At one point he says that Kautsky had taught us dialectics, but he completely failed to apply them himself when it came to 1914.

So did 1914 lead to a new Lenin? I think it did in one way. It led to Lenin putting himself on the line on a European scale. He was now thinking in terms of being a European leader with a European programme. To overstate it perhaps, ‘Lenin had to become Kautsky because Kautsky was not being Kautsky’.

Notes

1. Paraphrasing from Lenin’s letter to Shlapnikov, October 27 1914.
2. October 31 1914.
3. www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/dec/12.htm
4. Ibid.
5. Quoted by Lenin in ‘Dead chauvinism and living socialism’: www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/dec/12.htm
6. marx.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/csi/ii.htm
7. www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/Nov/20.htm
8. www.marx.org/archive/kautsky/1909/power/ch09.htm
9. Ibid.
10. www.marx.org/archive/kautsky/1909/power/ch09.htm
12. www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/1912/basel-manifesto.htm
13. VI Lenin Imperialist war: the struggle against social chauvinism and social pacifism.
The four wagers of Lenin in 1917

The Bolshevik decision to make revolution was based on four key predictions, or ‘wagers’, says Lars T Lih: international revolution, soviet democracy, peasant followership and progress towards socialism.

I am going to talk about the fate of the ‘four wagers’ made by Lenin in 1917. They are: the wagers on international revolution, on soviet democracy, on steps toward socialism, and on what I call ‘peasant followership’.

First I will look at them in 1917, and then assess how Lenin thought they were turning out. By late 1918–early 1919 he is still very confident that most of them are paying off, but then he begins to realise in several ways that they are not. Then I will move ahead to 1922–23 and Lenin’s final writings, where I think he achieves a shaky synthesis of sorts.

I should say that the term ‘wager’ which I use is not meant to imply in any way something adventurous or risky. It comes from Pyotr Stolypin’s peasant policy, known as a wager, or betting, on the strong. In other words, it refers to a policy intended to produce certain results, based on the prediction that events will turn out in a certain way.

I will not speak much about Kautsky in this talk, but I will begin with a Kautsky quote from 1904: “The practical politician, if he wishes to be successful, must attempt to see into the future much like the theoretical socialist. Whether this foresight takes the form of a prophecy will depend on his temperament. But he must at the same time always be prepared for the appearance of unexpected factors which will frustrate his plans and impart a new direction to developments, and he must always be ready to change his tactic accordingly.”

And that is how I am approaching this subject: Lenin is making predictions and when he sees they are not working he tries to deal with the new situation.

My source for all this - since Lenin wrote little in terms of lengthy texts during this period - is his speeches. That wasos a big element of Lenin’s role in power: he made speeches to mainly party or sympathising audiences, where he would pound home the big message about what was happening. I think he was sincere in what he was saying, so when he started to recognise things were changing this was reflected in his speeches. There is a human drama in this: you can see his painful disappointment coming right to the surface.

A lot of this will be somewhat familiar - I am not going to be revisionist in this talk - and there is one familiar framework I am polemicising against. A lot of people believe that in 1917 and especially 1918 the regime starts off in a moderate, realistic way, but then during the civil war the Bolsheviks become more and more radical. They are forced to be by the civil war, but they do not realise this is happening, so by 1920 they see themselves in the position of taking a leap or short cut to communism - a kind of insanity. Then Kronstadt gives them a slap in the face, for which they are grateful, and they are able to turn back to the sober moderation of the New Economic Policy.

I see it in a different way. In 1917 there was a lack of reality and even demagogy on the part of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, but afterwards a steady sobering up, so that in 1920 they are glum and pessimistic - far from ‘euphoric’, as, unbelievably, many writers claim. Arthur Ransome, the English writer, was in Russia and knew the Bolshevik leaders and talked to them a lot. He wrote two very good books describing the atmosphere at the time: Russia in 1919 and The crisis in Russia. Both were pre-Nep and so very valuable in this way.

He used this expression: “The Bolsheviks had illusisn after illusion scrapped from them by the pumice stone of experience.” I think that is what happened. I partially agree with the theory that the Bolsheviks overtheorised their problems, but I have a somewhat different picture of what that theory was.

‘October thesis’?

Let me now go back to October 1915, to a crucial comment made by Lenin. Most of his writings at this time were about the European situation, but on this occasion he sets out a policy for Russia. How does he combine this left Zimmerwald message - international revolution, socialism in Europe - with his desire for democratic revolution in Russia? In October 1915 he said: “The task of the proletariat in Russia is to carry out the bourgeois democratic revolution in Russia to the end.” He meant the most thoroughgoing democratic revolution possible - not one that went on to socialism, but simply won as many democratic gains as possible from the beginning, in order to initiate the socialist revolution in Europe.

Lenin then sketches out a scenario which connects the two. He was against an anti-syndicalist revolution that would bring to power revolutionary chauvinists: ie, those who wish to remove the tsar only because he is bungling the war effort. He is against the chauvinists even if they are revolutionaries and republicans. The Bolsheviks were to strive for a second stage to the revolution led by the proletariat and supported by the petty bourgeois peasantry, which has been pushed to the left under the strain of the war. This second stage would resurrect the soviets of 1905, acting now as the heart of a new power (vlast) and this revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry would carry out the full minimum programme and propose a just peace.

The Bolsheviks did not expect the imperialists would accept the proposal, but this would now put the Bolsheviks in the position to wage a just, revolutionary war aimed at socialist revolution in Europe and anti-colonial revolutions across the world. In Lenin’s words, “There is no doubt the victory of the proletariat in Russia would create extraordinarily favourable conditions for the development of revolution in Asia and Europe - even 1905 proved that.”

So what we see here in 1915 is pretty much his 1917 platform - perhaps, instead of talking about the April thesis, we should talk of the ‘October (1915) thesis’. Lenin himself wrote to friends in 1917, saying the Bolsheviks had predicted the 1917 events in 1915 - “We were absolutely right”.

However, there was one change, a change he made without great fanfare right before he left for Russia, and that what I call the inclusion of “steps toward socialism”. That was the careful way in which Lenin described the programme for Russia - he used that metaphor of moving toward...
socialism, and that occurred on the eve of his return to Russia in April 1917. This is the first time we have the notion of not just the democratic revolution until the socialist revolution in Europe: now Russia is moving toward socialism regardless. In 1917 he continued to express the three wagers of 1915, plus this new wager.

I will now look at some of the arguments Lenin made in support of this in 1917. *State and revolution*, whilst written in 1917, was not published until 1918, and is often emphasised in assessing Lenin's platform of 1917. In *State and revolution* he aimed to address the European audience, although he could not help at times reverting to Russian examples.

The two books upon which I am basing my summary are written in September 1917: *The impending catastrophe and how to deal with it* and *Can the Bolsheviks retain state power?* This is where Lenin talks about Russia and explains his logic. He is not calling on workers and peasants to make a socialist revolution, but to take the power. This is based on the assumption that the nature of the class that holds the vlast - Russian for 'power' or 'governmental authority' - decides everything. The Bolsheviks explained that, as long as the vlast was held by their enemies - the landowners, the capitalists, the bourgeoisie in any form - the imperialist war would continue, the economic collapse would continue, radical land reform would continue to be postponed. This would cease only when the workers as a class took power and fulfilled their historic mission of leading the whole of the narod (people) to revolutionary victory.

So let us see how these four wagers turned out.

I am not going to say much about the wager on international revolution - not because it is not important, but because I do not have a lot new to say. Soviet democracy is also fundamental, but I do not think I am going to change your mind on that one. I do, however, want to say something about the other two, the steps toward socialism and 'peasant followership'.

Lenin's rhetoric at this time was a new version of 'aggressive unoriginality', in that he said that everybody knew what measures must be taken: the Mensheviks, the liberals and even the monarchists are aware that we need a degree of economic regulation, land reform and strong governmental power, but are afraid to do these things because of their class position. This is summed up by a section title in *The impending catastrophe*: 'Control measures are easy to take and known to all' ('control' meaning 'regulation'). So there is no ambiguity or difficulty in solving the crisis, if you have the will. The only way, of course, is to take power. The logic here is partly what I call a ‘Wumba of the people'. ‘Wumba’ is a German acronym for *Waffen und Munitionsbeschaffungsamt*. That was the weapons and supply bureaucracy in Germany - everybody was amazed at just how organised it was.

So, talking about Europe in 1916, Lenin said: “If, for instance, Germany can direct the economic life of 66 million people from a single centre and strain the energies of the narod in order to wage a predatory war in the interests of 100 or 200 financial magnates or aristocrats, the monarchy, etc, then the same can be done in the interests of ninetenths of the people - ie, the non-proportional masses - if their struggle is directed by the conscious or purposive workers liberated from social-imperialist and social-pacifist influence.”

So his programme for Europe was: expropriate the banks, and, relying on the masses, carry out in their interests what occurred in Germany. That is why I call it ‘Wumba for the people'. Can this be applied to Russia? Lenin thought so - there is enough of an economic regulatory apparatus, there is enough of a banking system, there are enough governmental trusts and so forth. He says it is possible to solve the crisis if we apply determined, revolutionary-democratic measures.

**Steps toward socialism**

I would like to make three points about the wager on steps towards socialism. First, there has been quite a debate about smashing (in Marx *zer brechen*) the state, as opposed to using it ready-made. On this Lenin says explicitly: 'We will smash the state' - ie, what he meant by that in the Marxist framework was the bureaucracy, the army and the police: that is to say, the repressive and undemocratic apparatus - but we will preserve the economic apparatus. However, much of that apparatus is part of the state. So he is still saying at this point that we are going to preserve what I would call the 'economic state apparatus'.

Secondly, when you read the rhetoric of Lenin and other Bolsheviks, they are promising an easy way out. They are saying, 'If you let us, comrades, we will get you out of this crisis pretty quickly and painlessly.' So I think that there is a certain unrealism bordering on demagogy here.

And finally, Lenin is somewhat ambiguous about whether the result will be socialism and what exactly that is. For example, there is another section entitled: 'Can we go forward if we fear to go towards socialism?' So they are moving forward and are not afraid of socialism, but he is not quite saying that it is going to be socialism. As I said earlier, the heart of the message in 1917 was not 'Create a socialist revolution', but rather 'Take over the vlast'.

Looking ahead, what actually happened is that the economic apparatus was smashed by events and therefore, precisely because it was smashed, the repressive apparatus was not smashed and had to be strengthened.

What do I mean by ‘peasant followership'? Basically the old Bolshevik idea that you are going to rely on the peasants to follow you and try to be their leader. I use the word ‘followership', as opposed to 'leadership', not as an insult, but much more of a compliment - the Bolsheviks are optimistic about the ability of the peasants and are prepared to make this wager on their followership. It is a question of understanding their interests: if we give them their demands around land then they will support us against the counterrevolution. When you look at the record of the peasants in western Europe you see that this was a gamble, a wager.

It is one half of this wager - the old Bolshevik view that we are going to complete the democratic revolution. We have only had a half-assed revolution because we are yet to destroy class power and the rule of the gentry. We are going to remove this class from history and get the peasants on board - they will support us against a counterrevolution. This is a somewhat re-adjusted old Bolshevism, but definitely taken from it.

But there was a new stage which was not so emphasised - this is something I saw only when I looked at the speeches and offhand comments. Lenin hoped that the peasants would move to socialism on their own - now. Of course, if the peasants started moving towards collectivised forms of production, then you could solve the problems.

This also brings a new twist to the idea of whether socialism was possible in Russia alone. This is an approach to the idea of socialism in Russia from a non-Trotskyist, non-permanent revolution logic. Trotsky never said - and in fact his whole argument is premised on it - that the peasants would be moving towards socialism on their own, whereas Lenin is banking on this as a possibility: if they are obliged by the emergency of the war and the prospect of ruin, they might see that it is good to get together and cooperate with each other.

So let us jump ahead one year to the end of 1918 and look at the book *The renegade Kautsky*. I am not going to talk about anything Lenin says about Kautsky here (one half abuse and the other half praise of 'the old Kautsky'). I want to look at what Lenin wrote in response to Kautsky's criticisms of the revolution. Lenin looks at the accomplishments of the revolution on its first anniversary, taking account of everything against Kautsky's criticisms. He says, soviet democracy is fine - everybody says that
we are coming along nicely.

He writes: “In Russia, however, the bureaucratic machine has been completely smashed, razed to the ground; the old judges have all been sent packing, the bourgeois parliament has been dispersed - and far more accessible representation has been given to the workers and peasants; their soviets have replaced the bureaucrats, their soviets have been put in control of the bureaucrats, and their soviets have been authorised to elect the judges. This fact alone is enough for all the oppressed classes to recognise that soviet power - ie, the present form of the dictatorship of the proletariat - is a million times more democratic than the most democratic bourgeois republic”.

**Defiant**

So at this point Lenin is still saying defiantly that Russia is unambiguously democratic. On the peasant question he says, rather strikingly: “Things have turned out just as we said they would. The course taken by the revolution has confirmed the correctness of our reasoning.”

First of all, says Lenin, the Bolsheviks gained the loyalty of the whole peasantry by fulfilling their desire for land. We carried the bourgeois revolution to its end. Then he made an argument which we tend to forget about, because it did not pan out this way - the next ‘steps towards socialism’ phase: “The peasants themselves will see the inadequacy of bourgeois democratic solutions and the necessity of proceeding beyond their limits and passing on to socialism.”

Lenin argues that Kautsky himself had said much the same in his 1899 Agrarian question about the means at the disposal of the proletarian state for bringing about the transition of the small peasants to socialism. Lenin hoped to see the peasantry moving towards socialism and is encouraged by a policy called ‘class war in the villages’ - although even as he was writing The renegade Kautsky, the policy was being pulled back.

The economy is the one area over which Lenin is a little defensive. The reason obviously being that the crisis had not been solved by the Bolshevik revolution, but had spiralled further out of control. He writes: “All the flunkeys of the bourgeoisie in Russia argue in this way: ‘Show us after nine months your general well-being!’ And this after four years of devastating civil war and foreign capital giving all-round to the sabotage and rebellions of the bourgeoisie in Russia.” And he is absolutely right - that is one of the basic reasons why there was such a crisis.

The fourth wager is international revolution, and here Lenin is absolutely confident because the German revolution has just broken out. Alexander Rabinovitch’s new book ends with celebration of the revolution which is on the march in Germany.

This is something Zinoviev said in September 1918 as a tribute to Lenin: “Scheidemann [a rightwing German social democrat] knows that if he ends up hanging from a lamp post (and I bet that he does!) to a large degree comrade Lenin would be to blame. We comrades will live to see the moment when our proletariat through its vozhd, Lenin, will dictate its will to all of old Europe - and comrade Lenin will agree treaties with the government of Karl Liebknecht, and the same Lenin will help the German workers compose their first socialist decrees.”

In the final part of The renegade Kautsky, Lenin writes: “Kautsky’s above lines were written on November 9 1918. The very same night, news was received from Germany announcing the beginning of the victorious revolution - first in Kiel and other towns and ports, where power passed into the hands of the soviets - and then in Berlin. The conclusion which still remained to be written for my pamphlet on Kautsky is now superfluous.”

Now I am going to deal with the phase where Lenin is having to start to acknowledge that things are not going right, although I must stress that I do not see any fundamental change - there are some very disappointing empirical realities that he has to handle. The euphoria around the international revolution continues up until the summer of 1919 - and I think ‘euphoria’ is the best way to describe this. In Krupskaya’s memoirs she writes how Lenin was happier than she had ever seen him around November 1918.

I also get this impression from his speeches - he thought the wages were paying off and things were going OK. So when addressing an audience facing many economic difficulties he says: “This is the last difficult half year, because the international situation has never been so good.”
Lenin is confident that within six months the situation will be much better because Russia will no longer be blockaded and the international revolution will bail them out. Then in March 1919 the Hungarian revolution broke out and this is a very indicative reaction from Lenin, who is particularly pleased: “As a more cultured country than Russia, Hungary will show the socialist revolution in a better light - without the violence, without the bloodshed, that was forced upon us by the Kerenskys and the imperialists”.13

So you see that this is really from the heart, showing the wariness he held about some of the things he had to do. He also talks on numerous occasions about how previous generations of Russian revolutionaries lived and died, but we are the generation which is going to see it happen: “No matter the great misfortunes that may be brought upon us by that dying beast, imperialism, it will perish and socialism will triumph throughout the world.”14

This is the most amazing quote from July 1919: “We say with confidence - taking all our experience, all that has happened this past year, into account - that we shall surmount all difficulties and that this July will be the last difficult July and that next July we will welcome the victory of the world socialist republic - and that this victory will be full and complete.”15 Again, this comes from a public speech - Lenin is really putting himself out on a limb.

But this kind of rhetoric comes to a sudden halt around August with the defeat of the Hungarian revolution. It never really comes back. I read through Lenin’s speeches in 1919 and, although the content does not really change much throughout, you do notice that on the question of the international revolution he is very confident in the first half of the year, but much less so in the second half.

In an interview with Arthur Ransome, Lenin confidently predicts the revolution in England. When Ransome questions this, Lenin tells him of how he once had typhoid in the 1890s, but he had been carrying this a long time before he actually knew about it. Then suddenly he was struck down. This is how he saw England - it has got the disease, is still walking around, but is going to collapse. However, a year later he is interviewed by Bertrand Russell and by then has already given up on a revolution in England. By this point the Bolsheviks were saying that they were no longer in a revolutionary situation.

This is confirmed at the Second Congress of the Communist International - as opposed to the first one. Zinoviev says: “Soviets only make sense in a revolutionary situation, since soviets without such a situation will only turn into a parody of soviets”.16 So he is pointing out that in the next historical period we will have soviets, but now it was propaganda for them which was the only appropriate thing.

But this is the dilemma. You have developed a new party model over the years based on the premise of there being a revolutionary situation - so all sorts of things are pertinent to that: the purging of opportunists, the underground and certain other things were argued for on the basis of the existence of this situation. What party model should be put forward now? I think that is a major dilemma and has implications for the “over-theorisation” problem we have discussed elsewhere - with the Bolsheviks making virtues out of the necessities imposed on them. They never really did solve this problem.

The Polish war of 1920 represented a brief re-ignition of the hopes for international revolution but they were pushed back very quickly and soon forgotten. Starting from about mid-1919, foreign policy is increasingly orientated to trade treaties and economic concessions.

The big point I want to make about the wager on Soviet democracy is that the Bolsheviks were aware and openly acknowledged that things were not turning out so well. And at the end of 1920 there was a debate in the party about elitism, which was called ‘The highers vs the lowerers’. What is interesting is the attitude of some of the ‘highers’ in admitting just how bad things were. I am going to quote what Zinoviev said.

The soviets of 1917 are described as “organs in which the creativity of the masses finds for itself the most free and most organised path. Soviets are organs that guarantee a constant stream of forces from below. The soviets are organs in which the masses learn to legislate and, at the same time, carry out their own laws. This is not paying off at present. The most elementary demands of democracy are being ignored.”17

He gives some excuses for why this is so, however: “The pressures of the modern administrative state, the necessity to put extreme pressure on the population during the civil war, the exceptional discipline imposed by wartime necessities, the need to often side with bourgeois specialists against the workers, and the overload of work and responsibility based on a thin party elite”.18

Steps

Regarding the wager on steps towards socialism I would like to quote Leon Trotsky. Here is what he said in 1920 at the third anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution to a popular audience:

“We went into this struggle with magnificent ideals, with magnificent enthusiasm, and it seemed to many people that the promised land of communist fraternity - the flowering of not only material but spiritual life - was much closer than it actually turned out to be. That promised land - the new kingdom of justice, freedom, contentment and cultural uplift was so near, it could be touched.

“If three years ago we were given the opportunity of looking ahead we would not have believed our eyes - we would not have believed that three years after the proletarian revolution it would be so hard for us to live on this earth. Our task has not been accomplished - each one of us knows this. The new order for which we have fought and are fighting still does not exist.”

So this very eloquent statement underlines how the Bolsheviks are certainly not claiming that they have achieved socialism.

At this point in 1920, Nikolai Bukharin comes up with a theory to explain this - it is a sort of ‘crisis’ theory: “A revolution requires a deep, long and abiding crisis”, which is the precondition for workers’ power. And when workers’ power gets underway, the first thing to do is to deal with this crisis, which will accelerate, even though the workers have taken power, meaning that it is necessary to go through a period of what he calls “expanded negative reproduction” - i.e., a collapse. And then only later can we really start to progress.19

This is Bukharin’s understanding of smashing the state - you have to smash not only the political, but the economic and the military aspects of the state and you have to accept that it is going to break apart - a tragic breakdown in society, which can only be put back together again slowly. So socialism is only possible when this has happened - which certainly was not the case by 1920. But all the coercion and the militarisation that the Bolsheviks had organised was justified because in the long run it was necessary for workers’ power, which in turn was necessary for socialism.

By following these speeches I think I have discovered something on peasant followership which, as far as I know, has not been pointed out by anybody.

A lot of people say that there are two different Lenins when it comes to the peasants: the hard-line Lenin of 1919 and the ‘good’ Lenin of the NEP period; and that Stalin reverted to the ‘bad’ Lenin of 1919. The plausibility behind this comes from the fact that they were putting extreme pressure on the peasants both for their grain and for recruits for the army, so that there were a lot of rebellions and so forth.

But we are not dealing with this. We are dealing with the change in a whole mode of production, and therefore a whole way of life. For starters, as I say, Lenin hoped that the peasants would move forward by them-
were right to laugh at them. 
an embarrassment and that the peasants 
the state farms - there are many quotes show-
he says in 1919: “The communists 
violence. The absurd-
ity of this was so obvious that the Soviet 
the commune and really share everything 
its attractions towards the peasants were a forerun-
This was a point remembered by dis-
sident Bolshevism when forced collectivi-
On the question of whether Lenin’s poli-
cies towards the peasants were a forerun-
And, by the way, this is why Lenin 
he thought that by bringing electricity to the 
side it would help bring the peas-
Now I would like to quickly discuss Len-
in’s writings in 1922-23. On international 
revolution he has what I call a ‘hold-out 
In Better fewer but better he 
talks of the revolution ‘holding out’ on nu-
merous occasions. On soviet power there 
is a kind of sad irony where the word ‘so-
viet’ - which initially meant ‘council’ - 
comes to mean the government as opposed to the 
the bureaucracy - but this mainly con-
sisted of bourgeois spetsy and officials from the 
old tsarist order and so on which the 
the leading Bolsheviks, the word ‘soviet’ 
started to acquire quite negative connota-
ions. I saw this in Stalin’s letters from the 
mid-1920s and it took me quite a while to 
figure out. Why was ‘soviet’ such a nega-
tive word? It was because it began to mean 
‘government’. This was the ironic twist to 
all of this.

What Lenin did in 1922-23 was attempt 
to come up with a scheme to remake the 
soviets from above by using the party, but 
also to bring in the workers and peasants - 
not from below but siphoned to the top. That 
was his special idea for the workers and 
peasants which he took a lot of thought 
and time to develop in his last articles.

‘Peasant followership’ now became the 
link - we have to lead the peasants to 
socialism, so that the kulaks and the bourgeoi-
se do not lead them in their direction. The 
famous phrase ‘Who, whom?’, which is 
supposed to be Lenin’s favourite, is only 
mentioned two or three times towards the 
end of his life. Zinoviev and others picked 
up on it, which is why we know Lenin used 
it. What he meant by it was that the peas-
ants will follow either us or the bourgeoisie 
it is old Bolshevism transformed into the 
new situation. So we are going to remake the 
pasantry via electrification and keep 
them on our side in the meantime.

In terms of steps towards socialism, 
things again were not that great, because 
they were just clamouring out of the crisis 
and there was a huge famine in 1921-22. 
Here is what Lenin says about it - he is so 
angry that the attractiveness of socialism 
was not able to reveal itself: “They failed to 
overthrow the new system created by the 
revolution, but they did prevent it from at 
least that we were going to make them 
find it hard to laugh at.
that inter-capitalist squabbles will allow awakening of the east, whilst praying future: then take courage in the inevitable transformation in Europe at any time in the foreseeable change in Marxism.

create the kind of culture necessary for so-
did—it was a life-or-death situation. He ques-
right. But, he says, we had to do what we
the situation was ripe for socialism we re
who criticised the Bolsheviks for saying that
situation in particular had caused severe
socialist critics were right in that Russia was
advancing industrial technology.

Do all these faded hopes mean that our socialist critics were right in that Russia was not ready for socialism? Yes, but who is to
say that a proletarian vlast cannot pull itself up by its own bootstraps by creating the cultural prerequisites for socialism?"

**Notes**

2. VI Lenin CW Vol 21, pp401-04

**Synthesis**

You can see from this that Lenin still believed in socialism but that the international situation in particular had caused severe problems. In one of his very last articles called ‘Our revolution’, he admits that those who criticised the Bolsheviks for saying that the situation was ripe for socialism were right. But, he says, we had to do what we did—it was a life-or-death situation. He questions why it was not possible for them to create the kind of culture necessary for socialism once in power. I think this is quite a change in Marxism.

Now I am going to just read out what I think his final synthesis was on the wagers: “Hopes have faded for the socialist revolution in Europe at any time in the foreseeable future: then take courage in the inevitable awakening of the east, whilst praying that inter-capitalist squabbles will allow socialist Russia to hold out. Hopes have faded so that soviet-style democracy from below will transform the state: then use the party to remake the inherited state apparatus from above. Hopes have faded that the peasants would move towards socialist transformation on their own initiative: then take the old Bolshevik scenario of class leadership, which had vindicated itself during the civil war, and apply it to the task of overcoming the market by using the market (i.e., NEP). Hopes have faded that the measures needed to solve Russia’s economic crisis will also be at the same time steps towards socialism; then build up industry to the point where Russia can move ahead into socialism—not at the slow pace of a peasant nag but at the high speed of advanced industrial technology.

“Do all these faded hopes mean that our socialist critics were right in that Russia was not ready for socialism? Yes, but who is to say that a proletarian vlast cannot pull itself up by its own bootstraps by creating the cultural prerequisites for socialism?”

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