

Willy Huhn (1948): 'Lenin as a Utopian'

Posted on by A Free Retriever

Documents of the historical communist Left

» The first characteristic of Utopian socialism resides in the *superstition of the power of science*. A rational system is supposed to change the social world in such a decisive way that something ethically better and socially sound will be effected. The practical consequence from this conviction is that the scholars have to take the fate of humanity into their hands, or rather onto their heads.

With the first Utopian of Western history, Plato, the philosophers are at the helm of the State, and the island "Utopia" of Thomas More is governed by a "*class of scholars*". Do not the intellectuals raise a similar claim – once the juridical intelligentsia (Engels has at one occasion treated this "*lawyers' socialism*" exhaustively) ⁽¹⁾ and presently the technical or even the economical intelligentsia (technocracy and bureaucracy)?

The Utopians are searching for a "social science" in order to create new social conditions with its help. This action departs from their intellectual initiative, relies on the insight and the power to act of the intelligentsia, whereas the proletariat "*offers to them the spectacle of a class without any historical initiative or any independent political movement*", as the "Communist Manifesto" states. ⁽²⁾

"Scientific socialism"

Is thereby "scientific socialism" itself Utopianism? No, it has originated precisely in contradiction to this conception. It does not oppose science to social development, claiming that the latter should be guided by the former, by "*realizing*" the scientific insights. Inversely science should be "*(derived) from a critical knowledge of the historical movement*" (Marx). ⁽³⁾ In this way Marx and Engels have *derived* Marxism in the course of their lives *from the history* of Western and Central Europe. Faced with the Utopian conception Marx has determined the role of the intellectuals as a significantly more modest one as well: because it is not about "*carrying through some Utopian system*", the latter should content himself with "*the self-conscious participation in the historical process of revolution of history that goes on before our eyes*" (Marx, "Herr Vogt"). ⁽⁴⁾ By deriving science from the factually occurring history, it becomes "*a conscious product of the historical movement*" and "*ceases to be doctrinaire*" ("The misery of philosophy"). ⁽⁵⁾

For Utopianism the proletariat only exists from the point of view of the suffering, and thereby passive, class who needs help from above and from the outside. Marxism departs from the *autonomous activity* of the workers. For the Utopians all future history becomes a mere "*propaganda*" and a "*practical carrying through*" of its "*systematic societal plans*". Marx, on the contrary, rejects in the "Communist Manifesto" *all* systems and solely relies, as Engels assured in 1890, on the intellectual development of the working class, "*as it necessarily has to ensue from the united action and discussion*", ⁽⁶⁾ for the ultimate

1 Friedrich Engels/Karl Kautsky: "Juristen-Sozialismus", MEW Bd. 21, S. 491. (Die Neue Zeit, Heft 2, 1887)

2 Marx/Engels, The Communist Manifesto; 3. Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism.

3 MEW Bd. 16, S. 25. Letter from Marx to J.B. von Schweitzer, January 24, 1865; on Proudhon.

4 MEW Bd. 14, S. 439.

5 MEW Bd. 4, S. 143.

6 MEW Bd. 22, S. 57. Engels (1890): Preface to the 4th German edition of the Communist Manifesto.

victory of the theses propounded in the Manifesto. In accordance with his rationalistic origins, the Utopian socialist thus takes up a school-masterly attitude towards history, whereas Marx and Engels saw in her our only learning mistress.

National-political contradictions

According to the view of its founders (which itself had grown and deepened historically), Marxism wanted to be nothing else than the knowledge of the social development of the most advanced European countries, in which they had taken part themselves self-consciously. For them it was a derivation from the historical movement of their time and their practical participation. It was **Trotsky** who has seen this problem in all its acuity. About forty years ago he demonstrated that the socialists and intellectuals of backward countries, who had not yet lived through the transition from Utopian to scientific socialism, and who had not fought through the struggle between both attitudes themselves, were in danger of taking up the scientific insights of Marx and Engels in the sense of Utopianism, and thereby in a dogmatic and “orthodox” way. Trotsky warned precisely against this, as he concluded for Russia: *“These inner contradictions in the construction of socialism, which Marxism had superseded theoretically, return in the practical application of Marxism in the shape of national-political contradictions. Even the best social doctrine, the one that represents world experience in the most correct way, cannot by itself replace the experience. Every country had and has to acquire Marxism for itself anew in order to be in possession of it. The international character of the socialist movement does not only show up in every country drawing lessons for itself from the experience of the more advanced country, but also by repeating its mistakes.”* (7)

In old feudal-absolutist, mainly agrarian Russia with its underdeveloped trade, its weak modern industry, that moreover was mostly relying on import of foreign capital, the essential preconditions for a workers’ organization based on Marxist insights were lacking. As the first Marxist group ‘for the liberation of labor’ was formed in 1883, its co-founder Plekhanov stated that in Russia neither the basis nor the objective social conditions for a socialist organization existed. As the revolutionary intelligentsia of Russia studied and adopted the most advanced science and ideas of Western and Central Europe nevertheless, this “national-political contradiction” had to transform the revolutionary movement of Russia into one “typical of all movements of ideologues” (Kritshevksy) in every respect.

Ten intellectuals and a worker

It was the Bolshevik historian Pokrovski who, of all people, has pointed at the *revolutionary intelligentsia* in the middle of the 19th Century as the spiritual precursors of Bolshevism. **Chernyshevsky** held the opinion that the “educated classes” of Russia could change the political relations by their action, and the “Proclamation of young Russia”, originating from the circles of his adherents and pupils, already demanded the dictatorship of the party of the revolutionary intelligentsia. The political goal of the latter was an “enlightened despotism” that should enact an “economical revolution” from above, in order to – wholly Utopian – thereby create the preconditions for the liberation from social misery. The agrarian socialism of the **Narodniki**, that was to be built on the peasants’ community, also showed these Utopian characteristics. *“The revolutionary intelligence should conquer dictatorship and carry through a social revolution by means of the latter... From a political precondition for the liberation of the working class, the forthcoming collapse of absolutism transforms itself in the minds of the intelligentsia into a means to immediately cause a socialist revolution.”* (Pavel Axelrod in 1892) (8) In fact, Russian Social-Democracy was, even at the time Axelrod wrote these sentences, still not

7 The quotation from Trotsky has not been found at MIA.

8 Reference to works by Pavel Axelrod could not be found at MIA.

an autonomous workers' organization, but only a party of the revolutionary intelligentsia: "One can say", observed one of the few workers who then already adhered to it, "that for ten intellectuals there was one worker in the 1890s" (Shapovalov, "On the road to Marxism").

In these 1890s the theoretical and political trajectory of **Lenin** started. From the beginning he saw in the working class only the class who would wake up in an elementary way, whom the Russian revolutionary could "lean" on, and whom the Russian intellectual (he significantly designates the latter as "**Jacobin**"!) could "connect" himself to. Both these expressions betray that it is still about a movement of intellectuals, an action of the "knowing" who only want to use the workers' movement as a means to bring about the fall of Tsarism in a big national revolution that comprises all discontented classes of the population; a historical movement as it is of actuality, since the extension of democratic ideas to the East from 1900 on, for about the whole of Asia as well.

Three kinds of humans

Already in 1913 this circumstance inspired Lenin to the thesis that no longer Europe, but Asia would be the bearer of historical progress. This ideology manifests itself in China in a remarkable parallel: **Sun Yat-sen**, who has been called the "Chinese Lenin", distinguishes in his work "The plan for the construction of the Empire" three kind of people: "First, those who know, the inventors; second: those who know late, the extenders or propagandists; third: those who do not know, the collaborators or practitioners."

This analogy becomes very clear in Lenin's "arrangement of cogwheels".⁽⁹⁾ It is about 1. the mass of exploited and oppressed; i.e. the peasants and the industrial workers; 2. the vanguard of this mass; i.e. the urban industrial proletariat; 3. the vanguard of the industrial proletariat, the "communists", as the Bolshevik intelligentsia called itself since 1918. The three cogwheels "mass", "[mass] vanguard" and "[proletarian] vanguard" should not democratically interact in this sequence, but according to the Leninist principle of organization "top-down"! The historical initiative, properly speaking, originates from the party of the revolutionary intelligentsia. Lenin's point of departure is already a Utopian one: in 1894 he voices the opinion that "all history is made up of the actions of **personalities** (...) The real question that arises in appraising the social activity of an individual is: what conditions ensure the success of his [public] actions, what guarantee is there that these actions will not remain an isolated act lost in a welter of contrary acts?",⁽¹⁰⁾

This does not sound like a conception of history that first and foremost is concerned with mass initiative and class activity! Those active personalities are confronted with the problem: "how must [their] actions aimed at bringing about the socialist system attract the masses in order to yield serious fruits?" Utopianism thereby was confronted with the dilemma to have to win and attract the masses on the one hand, for the acts of the personalities not to remain isolated ones, and to take care, on the other hand, that these acts of the respective historical activists are not lost in a welter of contrary actions by the mass.⁽¹¹⁾

9 LW Bd. 32, S. 3/4. Lenin (December 30, 1920): The Trade Unions, The present Situation and Trotsky's Mistakes

10 LW Bd. 1, S. 152. Lenin: *What the "Friends of the People" are and how they fight the Social-Democrats* (1894); Part I. The English translation speaks of "individuals", the German of "personalities". Huhn uses the latter term.

11Translator's note: Huhn's texts twice uses the expression "a sea" (of "acts" or "actions"). We use "a welter" in accordance to the translation in LCW.

The struggle against spontaneity

“A fierce struggle against spontaneity was necessary”, (12) Lenin writes eight years later, laying claim to the organizational principles of... **Lassalle!** On this point one has to realize that Marx made the remark, in a letter of October 13, 1868 to Schweitzer, the successor of Lassalle, that the latter had fallen in Proudhon’s mistake “not to search the real foundation of his agitation from the real elements of the class movement”, but to “want to prescribe the latter its course according to a certain doctrinaire recipe.” (13) Three years later, in a letter of November 23, 1871 to Bolte, Marx emphasizes once more that Lassalle’s organization is “nothing but a **sectarian** organization” and is “as such hostile to the organization of the genuine workers’ movement striven for by the International.” (14) As Lenin precisely takes Lassalle’s struggle against the autonomous German workers’ movement as an historical merit of his, Marx’s polemic on this decisive point is directed against Lenin himself!

According to Lenin, a social-democratic consciousness can only be “brought to the workers from without.” The history of all countries would prove that by their own strength they only acquire a trades-unionist consciousness, whereas socialism would have been developed by the educated representatives of the bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia: “In the very same way, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working-class movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia.” (15)

The dictatorship of the Jacobins

Russian Social-Democracy thereby could only be a cartel, an alliance of the leading intelligentsia with the masses following them: “A Jacobin who wholly identifies himself with the organization of the proletariat—a proletariat conscious of its class interests—[just that is] a revolutionary Social-Democrat.” (16) Well, the dictatorship of the Jacobins in the great French revolution also was a reign of the intelligentsia, the only class able to govern after the fall of the court nobility and the high finance allied to it, a “lawyers’ regiment”, as Kautsky accurately designated it. With regards to this confession Rosa Luxemburg pointed out that Lenin has “characterized his position perhaps keener than anyone of his opponents could do.” (17)

Precisely in this utterance the old ideas of Russian utopianism are expressed, that the revolution must be the work of the radical-democratic intelligentsia, aiming at the dictatorship of its conspiratorial organization, the **Jacobin** party. Because the spontaneous historical movement does not lead to a revolution: “Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.” Only the revolutionary theoreticians and intellectuals are guarantors of revolution, “the sages who discover the truth” are the real historical “personalities”, be they in need of propagandists, of “preachers who diffuse the truth.” But for Leninist ideology as well the workers are only the “executors” who “do not know” the real “truth”. «

12 LW Bd.5, S. 396. Lenin: What is to be done? II. The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social-Democrats. (1902)

13 MEW Bd. 32, S. 569. (Marx to Johann Baptist von Schweitzer)

14 MEW Bd. 33, S. 329. (Marx to Friedrich Bolte in New York – Abstract)

15 LW Bd. 5, S. 386. Lenin: *What is to be done?* (see footnote 12)

16 LW Bd. 7, S.386. Lenin: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back (1904); q) The New Iskra. Opportunism In Questions Of Organization.

17 Rosa Luxemburg, Organisationsfragen der russischen Sozialdemokratie (1904). The sentence has been left out in the English translation on M.I.A.

Original source: ‘*Das Sozialistische Jahrhundert*’, 2. Jg., Nr. 20, Berlin 1948, S. 290 f.

Reproduced in Jochen Gester: “Auf der Suche nach Rosas Erbe. Der deutsche Marxist Willy Huhn (1909-1970)”, Berlin, Die Buchmacherei, 2017. S. 267/272.

Translation: Jac. J.; Proofreading: F.C.; First published at [A Free Retriever’s Digest](#).

Source references by: F.C. and Jac. J.

Annotations

MEW and LW refer to the German editions, which are used as the primary reference for the quotations. If available, their English translation at the M.I.A. website has been used and a reference to the latter has been included. Differences with the German language editions are indicated.