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The only hope of the revolution is the crowd: The limits of Žižek's Leninism

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The first reaction, according to Slavoj Žižek, to the idea of taking a new look at Lenin is “sarcastic laughter ... Doesn't Lenin stand precisely for the *failure* to put Marxism into practice, for the big catastrophe which left its mark on the whole twentieth-century world politics, for the Real Socialist experiment which culminated in an economically inefficient dictatorship?” Most believe that in building a New Left we have to “leave the Leninist legacy behind” (Žižek 2002b: 3). Žižek – most centrally in his *Revolution At The Gates* (Žižek: 2002) – is part of a new generation of scholars who reject both the Cold War version of Lenin as “a devil” and the Stalinist version of Lenin as “a god.” This is a necessary and worthwhile project – and, given the long shadow of the Cold War era, not an easy one. The fact that a theorist of Žižek's prominence takes Lenin seriously is important in itself. The writings of Lenin which Žižek introduces to a new generation are remarkable. One early reviewer said that “Žižek's effort” in this revival of Lenin studies, “demands praise. His courage to stand against both the prevailing postmodernism and liberal multiculturalism, his taking a stand on the side of radical action against impotent talk is to be commended” (Gretz 2002: unpaginated). This article – after a review of the particular Lenin offered us by Žižek – will suggest three ways in which this praise needs to be tempered. It will challenge Žižek's interpretation of the relationship

between Lenin and democracy, Lenin and violence, and Lenin and Stalin. It will conclude with a suggestion that Žižek has focused on one aspect of Lenin in 1917 that while impressive, is not terribly relevant to today's new left. There is however another Lenin in 1917, unexamined by Žižek, that may be more "prosaic" but might be somewhat more useful for the 21st century.

Theory and Practice in 1917

Žižek says that "it is crucial to emphasize the relevance of 'high theory' for the most concrete political struggle *today*" (Žižek 2002b: 4) and argues that Lenin's theoretical writings in the 1917 era were crucial to the successful October Revolution. He praises the "high theory" of Lenin as being remarkably "*readable* ... there is no need for long explanatory notes" displaying "an almost classical clarity in tracing the contours of the struggle in which they participate" (Žižek 2002b: 7). What Žižek offers us is a remarkable selection of Lenin's writings, composed from the overthrow of the Tsar and the creation of the provisional government in early 1917, to the overthrow of the provisional government and the installation of a workers' council based state in late 1917.

These writings are well worth close study. The very first lines reveal the clarity of Lenin's insights into the politics of his day. In the immediate aftermath of the overthrow of the Tsar, Lenin writes: "The first revolution engendered by the imperialist world war has broken out. The first revolution but certainly not the last" (Žižek 2002b: 15). This was to prove true both inside and outside Russia. Inside Russia, there was to be a second revolution that established a state based on workers' councils (soviets). Outside Russia, revolutions were to sweep through Eastern and Central Europe, most notably in Germany, where the Kaiser was overthrown.

Žižek also reprints what came to be known as Lenin's "April Theses," in which he broke from the established orthodoxy of his own party (the Bolsheviks). In theory largely shaped over the years by Lenin himself, the Bolsheviks had concluded that Russia after the overthrow of the Tsar was in for a prolonged period of bourgeois rule. In the "April Theses," Lenin comes over completely to the ideas of Leon Trotsky, who had seen a decade earlier that in Russia, the democratic revolution would necessarily take the form of a workers' revolution, raising the banner of socialism. In what would seem like heresy to Marxists trained in the mechanical formulae of the Second (Socialist) International – what Žižek calls "evolutionary historicism" – Lenin writes that the first stage of the revolution was not bourgeois out of historic inevitability (as most Marxists thought), but because of the "insufficient class-consciousness and organization of the proletariat." There must soon be a "*second* stage, which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants" (Žižek 2002b: 57).

This idea was like a thunderbolt inside the Russian socialist movement. Until now, the idea that a poor country such as Russia, with a large peasant population, could proceed directly to a

workers' revolution, was the property of a very small minority, best represented by Trotsky. Lenin had the courage to abandon his old theories, come over to the substance of Trotsky's position (without, however, ever formally saying so), laying the ground for Trotsky and his followers (the Inter-District Committee – in Russian, *Mezhrayontsi* or *Mezhrayonka*) fusing with Lenin's Bolsheviks in the summer of 1917.¹ From that point on, until the rise of Stalin, the Russian Revolution was pre-eminently identified with Lenin and Trotsky as an inseparable team.

Žižek concludes his reprints with a section of Lenin's works written in the immediate run-up to the insurrection that overthrew the provisional government. Here, Lenin is making every effort to persuade some of his more conservative co-thinkers, that there is a place in Marxism for the "art" of insurrection. Being a Marxist, he argues, doesn't mean waiting for the laws of history to work themselves out, but to study those laws to determine how best to actively intervene into their "working out" in order to further the interests of the working class and the oppressed. At certain moments, that intervention can take the form of preparing an insurrection, something most Marxists considered the preserve of the unscientific anarchists. Lenin disagreed. He said first, that in certain circumstances it was *possible* for socialists to organize an insurrection, but it "must rely not on conspiracy and not upon a party, but upon the advanced class ... Insurrection must rely upon a *revolutionary upsurge of the people*. ... Insurrection must rely upon that *turning-point* in the history of the growing revolution when the activity of the advanced ranks of the people is at its height" (Žižek 2002b: 117). But Lenin went further. By October 1917, he was writing that not only was insurrection possible, it was also *necessary*. "It is clear that all power must pass to the Soviets" but "in practice the transfer of power to the Soviets now means armed uprising ... To repudiate armed uprising now would mean to repudiate the key slogan of Bolshevism (All Power to the Soviets)" (Žižek 2002b: 142).

These are remarkable writings from a key figure active during one of the critical turning points of the twentieth century, a moment when objective forces (war and economic crisis) had engendered mass movements of millions, creating conditions where the determined actions of an organized minority (the Bolshevik party) could change the course of history. Making these readings available to a new generation is extremely worthwhile. This worthwhile project is, unfortunately, seriously flawed by a quite mistaken (and at times quite confusing) analysis of these ideas.

Democracy and the state

To begin with, we are presented with a very one-sided "insurrectionary" Lenin, who has no use for the struggle for reforms. Žižek asserts that Lenin's *State and Revolution* (Lenin: 1980) a key text of the 1917 revolution, is arguing that "*in so far as we still dwell within the domain of the State*, we are legitimately entitled to exercise full violent terror, since, within this domain, every democracy

is a fake ... since the State is an instrument of oppression, it is not worth trying to improve its apparatuses, the protection of the legal order, elections, laws guaranteeing personal freedom ... – all this becomes irrelevant” (Žižek 2002b: 192). Perhaps this is Žižek “bending the stick” to make a point. Elsewhere, he shows a more nuanced understanding of Lenin’s attitude towards formal democracy. When Lenin “underlines that there is no ‘pure’ democracy, that we should always ask whom does a freedom under consideration serve and where is its role in the class struggle, his point is precisely to maintain the possibility of the true radical choice. ... when Lenin asks about the role of a freedom within the class struggle, what he is asking is precisely: ‘Does this freedom contribute to or constrain the fundamental revolutionary Choice?’” (Žižek 2004: unpaginated). But if that more nuanced position is Žižek’s, then it is incumbent on him to include it in his long analysis of Lenin’s writings. Its absence seriously distorts the argument.

Žižek’s object is to rescue *State and Revolution* from socialists who focus on the text as envisioning “the prospect of abolishing the State, of the broad masses directly taking the administration of public affairs into their own hands” (Žižek 2002b: 192). Žižek is undoubtedly right in one thing – most do not read the pamphlet and come away seeing its key lesson as an argument that we are “entitled to exercise full violent terror.” Most do in fact focus on its emancipatory vision of a world without state oppression. But this, according to Žižek, is misleading. We have to understand, he is saying, that even in this “libertarian” vision, there is embedded a politics of violence, that is a thread linking the 1917 Lenin with the “Jacobin-elitist Lenin of *What Is to Be Done?*” (Žižek 2002b: 192). But Žižek’s gloss is wrong, and the conclusions about the place for the struggle for democracy might be Žižek’s, but they are not Lenin’s.

First of all – what does it mean to say we live “within the domain of the State” (the word “state” being for unknown reasons introduced with a capital letter)? The state is a contradictory component of the superstructure of modern society – part administrative, and part repressive. It arises out of the contradictions and complexity of developing class society, but becomes “a power standing *above* society and ‘*alienating* itself *more and more* from it’ in the words of Lenin and Marx’s co-thinker, Frederick Engels (Lenin 1980: 393). The people who in any meaningful sense “live within the domain of the state” are the upper level bureaucrats and the privileged classes whose interests they serve. Ordinary people don’t “live in the domain of the state” unless in the most general sense that we all live in societies that have states – and that is such a level of abstraction as to be meaningless.

Second, would Lenin really agree with the political conclusions Žižek summarizes – that “every democracy is a fake” and thus “it is not worth trying to improve” democratic rights? With a phrase, he has dismissed out of hand the struggles of literally millions of the world’s oppressed. From one standpoint, the history of the last half of the 20th century was a history of mass movements for the extension of this “fake” democracy. What was the Civil Rights movement in the

United States, but a mass assertion of the right of African Americans to exercise their franchise? This great rising of the oppressed laid the foundation for all the key social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. What was the ten-million strong Polish trade union Solidarność, but a monumental effort to win democracy against repressive Stalinist state capitalism? This enormous democratic movement at the beginning of the 1980s laid the basis for the undermining of Stalinist totalitarianism at the end of that decade. What was the great movement against apartheid in South Africa, but a millions-strong rebellion against lack of democracy, and an assertion of the right of the Black majority to enter into the official realm of politics? What were the movements for independence in India, the Chinese revolution, the anti-colonial uprisings in Africa, but movements by the oppressed majority to assert their democratic right to sovereignty? Of course Žižek – as a person of the left – would have supported the struggles of the workers and poor of Mississippi, Gdansk and Soweto. However, his careless gloss on Lenin – that “it is not worth trying” to improve “the protection of the legal order, elections, laws guaranteeing personal freedoms...” – leads in the opposite direction, to a political position of indifference towards these mass struggles for democratic reform.

This is not Leninism as Lenin would have recognized it. Most of Lenin’s adult political life was organized around the struggle for the extension of democracy, what Žižek claims the Lenin of 1917 would have seen as a struggle “not worth trying”. Lenin of course knew the limitations of contemporary democracy. It was Lenin who in 1919 said, “the most democratic bourgeois republic is no more than a machine for the suppression of the working class by the bourgeoisie, for the suppression of the working people by a handful of capitalists” (Lenin 1987: 151). But Lenin, and all thinkers, has to be put into context. This 1919 statement on democracy was written at the high point of the spread of the Russian and European workers’ council movement, which showed in life the possibility of an alternative to bourgeois democracy, the much more democratic workers’ democracy based on direct democracy at the workplace. His 1917 *State and Revolution* – where he develops at length the theory of a workers’ council based democracy – was written after three years of barbarous world war, and in the context of a fierce reaction against the February, 1917 revolution, a reaction with parliamentary socialists at its head.

Take Lenin in a different context – at the mid-point of what would come to be known as the 1905 Revolution. In July 1905, the first wave of strikes had subsided, and the second wave (that would lead to the establishment of history’s first workers’ councils) had not yet begun. In this interregnum, “unlimited terror reigned in the streets” (Trotsky 1971: 83) according to Trotsky, along with Rosa Luxemburg, the 1905 revolution’s great historian. In this context, Lenin wrote: “The full development of the productive forces in modern bourgeois society, a broad, free, and open class struggle, and the political education, training, and rallying of the masses of the proletariat are inconceivable without political [freedom](#). Therefore it has always been the aim of the class-

conscious proletariat to wage a determined struggle for complete political freedom and the democratic revolution” (Lenin 1977d: 511). There is nothing unique about this quote. This orientation towards advocating democratic reform was central to his political theory and practice while organizing against the autocracy.

It is outside the scope of this article, but in the context of a discussion of Lenin and democracy, one particular democratic demand distinguished Lenin and his party from all others of his time – his and their insistence on the right of oppressed nations to self-determination. It was here that Lenin parted company with Rosa Luxemburg, who had many strengths as a political theorist and activist, but – because she feared that its independence movement would not be led by Socialists – did not support the right of Poland to self-determination (Dunayevskaya 1991, Davis 1976). Lenin’s insistence on this democratic right divided him from the reformists of the Second International (who consistently lined up with this or that imperialist power) and later from his successor, Joseph Stalin, whose counter-revolution against the Russian workers’ state in many ways began with an attack on the right of small nations – including his own homeland of Georgia – to exercise their right to self-determination (Lewin 1973, Lenin and Trotsky 1975). The contrast couldn’t be greater: Lenin the revolutionary democrat, who on his deathbed saw the importance of the democratic demand of national self-determination; Stalin the counter-revolutionary autocrat whose consolidation of power involved the brutal suppression of the oppressed nationalities.

Lars T. Lih’s introduction to the ideas of Lenin highlights clearly the democratic content to the life’s work of Lenin and his socialist current. “Overthrowing the autocracy – in other words, achieving political freedom – is vital not only for Russia but for the workers who can then set out on the *direct* road of *open* political struggle. ‘Open’ should be understood as meaning ‘without the censorship and repression that keeps us from bringing insight and organization to the workers in the most effective way possible” (Lih 2006: 117).

Elsewhere, Žižek has written clearly on not treating with disdain the formal democracy available under capitalism. In 2005 in *New Left Review* he argued that “formal democracy” can from one standpoint be seen as “a necessary but illusory expression of a concrete social reality of exploitation and class domination. But it can also be read in the more subversive sense of a tension in which the ‘appearance’ of *égalité* is not a ‘mere appearance’ but contains an efficacy of its own, which allows it to set in motion the rearticulation of actual socio-economic relations by way of their progressive ‘politicization.’ Why shouldn’t women also be allowed to vote? Why shouldn’t workplace conditions be a matter of public concern as well?” (Žižek 2005a: 130). But this nuanced understanding of the dual nature of democratic reforms under capitalism, is completely absent in his presentation of the 1917 Lenin.

Redemptive Violence?

Žižek's decontextualized and therefore overly abstract outline of what he call's Lenin's theory of the state, leads to an "ultraleft" dismissal of the struggle for democracy. Ultraleft is a term describing political theory and practice that sounds very "left-wing" (we are much more radical than those fighting for democracy) but in practice is highly conservative (we stand on the sidelines with arms folded while millions put their lives on the line for democratic reform).² But this is only part of the problem. His ultraleftism is tangled up with a grotesque fascination with violence.

These two aspects of his theory – ultraleftism and a fascination with violence – are linked. Žižek's ultraleftism reveals itself in his utter contempt for a long list of political activities. "*Médecins sans frontières*, Greenpeace, feminist and anti-racist campaigns" are examples of what he calls "interpassivity: of doing things not in order to achieve something, but to prevent something from really happening, really changing. All this frenetic humanitarian, Politically Correct, etc. activity fits the formula of 'Let's go on changing something all the time so that, globally, things will remain the same!'" (Žižek 2002b: 170). His contempt for these activities is matched by his contempt for "one of the hottest topics in today's 'radical' American academia: postcolonial studies" (Žižek 2002b: 171). He calls this academic radicalism "an empty gesture which obliges no one to do anything definite" (Žižek 2002b: 172).

And the solution? – reading Žižek, the inescapable conclusion is that, for him, what this "empty gesture" lacks is violence. This is made clear in one of the strangest parts of his analysis of Lenin, his long critique of the 1999 Hollywood film, *Fight Club* (Fincher 1999). Lead character Ed Norton together with new friend Tyler (Brad Pitt) "set up the secret organization, Fight Club. This is where equally unhappy men can experience some "real masculine emotion" - pain. ... [Tyler] turns the "slaves in white collars" at Fight Club into a guerrilla fighting force who wear a blackshirt uniform. They make explosives for Project Mayhem - to take on big business and the wealthy".

One socialist reviewer said the film "left a nasty taste in my mouth ... I was treated to over two hours of a nasty, cynical film whose violence was the least offensive part" (Shooter 1999: unpaginated). But Žižek is not offended in the least. He takes the film, and uses it to develop a theme he calls "redemptive violence." He calls the founding of Fight Club a "much more radical exercise" than "love for one's neighbour" (Žižek 2002b: 250). Žižek establishes this with impressive phraseology. A scene which involves "self-beating" is designed to "reach out and re-establish the connection with the real Other – to suspend the fundamental abstraction and coldness of capitalist subjectivity, best exemplified by the figure of the lone monadic individual who, alone in front of the PC screen, communicates with the entire world ... the very violence of the fight signals the abolition of this distance" (Žižek 2002b: 251-2).

The individual “alone in front of the PC screen” may be Žižek, but it is not the modern proletariat in either the office or the factory. Žižek would benefit from some class analysis. “[T]he film's starting point is the miserable lives many ordinary people have. But the everyman character and the film's narrator, played by Ed Norton, is not your average worker. He is employed by a leading car company to see how far they can get away with unsafe vehicles before they have to recall the product” (Shooter 1999: unpaginated). Norton is a member of the Professional Middle Class – what we used to call the petty-bourgeoisie – a section of society that is prone to extreme individualism. “Radical” versions of this individualism can end up with a fixation on individual violence. Acts of individual violence are often seen as the only way to resist capitalist society, because the class standpoint of the petty bourgeoisie is divorced from the day-to-day collective work and struggles of the mass of the oppressed, and therefore distant from the great potential power of working-class collective action.

The classic theoretical expression of this is the chaotic thinker Georges Sorel. There were left-wing revolutionary syndicalists at the beginning of the last century who saw Sorel's philosophic justification of the role of violence (best expressed in his *Reflections on Violence*) as part of their ideological armour in the fight against capitalism. “In 1905, Sorel declared flatly that ‘revolutionary syndicalism’ is the practical realization of what is truly essential in Marxism. For him, it was an expression of Marxism ‘superior to any and all theoretical formulations’, because it expressed the class struggle in a conscious, militant and direct fashion” (Portis 1980: 64).

But we now have more than a century of experience since that was written. The sobering truth is that Sorel's fascination with action and violence – unrooted in anything resembling a political economy let alone class politics – was most useful not to the left, but to the far right. The Italian fascist Benito Mussolini said: “I owe most to Georges Sorel. This master of syndicalism by his rough theories of revolutionary tactics has contributed most to form the discipline, energy and power of the fascist cohorts” (Shils 1971: 24). In fact the film Žižek celebrates has some clear references to fascism. One reviewer characterizes the film's violence as “anti-capitalist fascist terror” (Jarvis 1999, unpaginated). Another points out that, as well as wearing black shirt uniforms, the explosives made by the films “heroes” are made “from a concoction made from human fat. These are not unwitting references to Nazism. They are part of a film whose conclusion is that a brutal army is the force to bring down the present system” (Shooter 1999: unpaginated). Žižek is aware of this, citing favourably an analysis of *Fight Club* which argues that the organization founded by the two key protagonists “ends up transforming into a fascist organization with a new name: Project Mayhem” (Diken and Laustsen 2001: 2). But this acknowledgement of the reactionary message embedded in the film is added on as an after-thought. Žižek celebrates the film as a response to capitalist alienation – ignoring that this response, as well as proto-fascist, is deeply misogynist. “We're a generation of men raised by women. I'm wondering if another woman is really

the answer we need” says Tyler at one point. And the fat used in the making of their soap? It comes from a liposuction clinic, allowing for the following line: “It was beautiful. We were selling rich women their fat asses back to them” (Fincher, 1999).

Marx talked about the working class becoming the subject of history. For Žižek however, subjectivity is individualized in a way that is characteristic of thinkers who do not root their thinking in class analysis. “The first lesson of *Fight Club*” he writes is “that we cannot go *directly* from capitalist to revolutionary subjectivity: the abstraction, the foreclosure of others, the blindness to the other’s suffering and pain, has first to be broken in a gesture of taking the risk and reaching directly out to the suffering other – a gesture which, since it shatters the very kernel of our identity, cannot fail to appear extremely violent” (Žižek 2002b: 252). But working class subjectivity – understood as the development of class consciousness – is not an individual gesture of risk taking and violence. It is a product of collective work and collective struggle, something completely absent in Žižek’s analysis.

This picture of Žižek’s fascination with violence, helps illuminate his very particular reading of *State and Revolution*, examined earlier. The key for him is not the emancipatory vision of the withering away of the state. The key is the fact that “every democracy is a fake” and thus “we are legitimately entitled to exercise full violent terror.” Violence, for Žižek, is an end in itself. It was not for Lenin. Lenin’s generation of socialists was quite aware of the sometimes violent nature of the struggle for change. They were, after all, operating inside a repressive Tsarist autocracy. Siberia and prison were the almost inevitable reward for becoming a political activist. Lenin – like Malcolm X in the 1960s – was a defender of the right of the mass movement to resist the violent attacks of the state, including the right of the oppressed to use violence in return. But both Lenin and Malcolm X knew that this was not an end in itself. The key was developing the capacities of the mass of the working class as a whole. Tactics had to be chosen that “were calculated to bring about the direct participation of the masses and which guaranteed that participation” (Lenin 1977c: 193). For those activists who celebrated violence as an end in itself, Lenin had very strong words. “[W]ithout the working people all bombs are powerless, patently powerless ... an appeal to resort to such terrorist acts as the organization of attempts on the lives of ministers by individuals and groups that are not known to one another means, not only *thereby* breaking off work among the masses, but also introducing downright disorganization into that work.” Acts of terrorism by individuals can create “a short-lived sensation” but that is followed quickly by “apathy and passive waiting for the next *bout*” (Lenin 1977c: 189 and 191).

In a certain sense, it is unfair to Lenin’s opponents to use them in such a way to critique Žižek’s positions. Lenin was polemicizing against the Socialist Revolutionaries, a group on the left focused on the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. Lenin might have profoundly disagreed with their tactics, but he dealt with them seriously and at length because they were engaged in political

work on a mass scale. In the tumultuous epoch of revolution in 1917, a big section of the Socialist Revolutionaries would join with Lenin's Bolsheviks in the new party of the revolution. Žižek's celebration of violence, by contrast, is not rooted in mass work of any sort. It is totally and utterly individualistic.

Žižek's celebration of the violent individual reflects a profound pessimism in the political mass. This is characteristic of all such individualistic celebrations of violence – something that Lenin argued made them, in spite of their left-wing rhetoric, very similar to those whose horizons are limited to the parliamentary struggle for reforms. The British socialist Gareth Jenkins summarizes Lenin's point succinctly. Both the terrorist and the parliamentary reformist “evaded the central role of how workers themselves would change society ... One tendency substituted terror for mass work, the other reform for revolution. ... neither looks to working class self-activity as the lever for revolutionary change” (Jenkins 2006: 67).

Žižek is using his role as an intellectual in the most irresponsible of fashions. For him these are just words, to shock and impress an academic audience. But there are activists in the world trying to find theories and practices that will help them deal with the oppression and exploitation that are the bitter daily reality for millions. Should any of them read Žižek and take him at his word – one shudders at the political conclusions that could be drawn. Forget about democracy, forget about the struggle for reforms, understand your right to “extreme terror”, and look for the revolutionary gesture of violence to confront “The Other” – the only way to develop your revolutionary subjectivity. If these conclusions weren't so potentially dangerous, they would be laughable.

The Obvious Barbarism of Stalinism

“The very thin layer of those who still think and feel and have not so far been strangled, shot, starved or frozen, is depressed, oppressed, and – silent” (Joffe 1978: 222). These were the grim words of Russian socialist Maria Joffe, emerging from almost 30 years in the gulag – Stalin's system of Siberian concentration camps – an experience she called “One Long Night”. The anti-Stalinist left can no longer be silenced. But in breaking the silence imposed by 20th century totalitarianism – Stalin's included – it does not help to, again, romanticize one of history's saddest chapters, the long night of Joseph Stalin. Unfortunately, this is exactly what Žižek does in what is the most disturbing section of his analysis of Lenin, something he titles, “The Inner Greatness of Stalinism.”

Žižek knows very well the horrors of Stalinism. “‘Really Existing Socialism’ was barbarism” (Žižek 2002b: 192) he quite accurately observes. “I am from the East, I know what shit it was. I have no nostalgia for Stalinism” (Rasmussen 2004: unpaginated). But this reads like an “add-on” to

his basic orientation, similar to his giving a nod to the fact that *Fight Club* – a film he idolizes – does have a “few” fascist overtones. His basic position in the Afterword to *Revolution at the Gates* is very much pro-Stalin. “We should” he argues “stop the ridiculous game of opposing the Stalinist terror to the ‘authentic’ Leninist legacy betrayed by Stalinism: ‘Leninism’ is a thoroughly *Stalinist* notion” (Žižek 2002b: 193). This is the oldest intellectual exercise of the 20th century, one practiced by both left and right. Stalin is rooted in Lenin. Therefore if you choose Lenin, you get Stalin. The only difference is one of attitude. The right says “Stalin was horrible – that means Lenin was horrible too.” The left says “O.K., Stalin was horrible, but he had to be, he was up against imperialism – he is just an extreme Lenin.” But if, to get Lenin, the left has to also apologize for Stalinist barbarism, then it would be better to forget about Lenin.

The great tragedy of the 20th century was that in country after country, large sections of the workers’ movement – often the most militant and organized – defined their left politics with reference to Stalin. They accepted, in other words, that to take on board Lenin, they had to take on board Stalin as well. Those worker militants often did wonderful work in spite of being influenced by Stalinism. But Stalinism inside Russia and Eastern Europe – which is the subject of Žižek’s analysis – was the ideology of totalitarian states. In Russia’s case, it was also the ideology of the counter-revolution that crushed the remnants of workers’ democracy under an iron boot. Many observers at the time knew this very well. Stalin’s terror culminated in the show trials and mass executions of 1936-1938. On March 5th 1938 in an article in *Popolo d’Italia* “Mussolini ... asked whether ‘in view of the catastrophe of Lenin’s system, Stalin could secretly have become a fascist,’ and stated that in any case ‘Stalin is doing a notable service to fascism by mowing down in large armfuls his enemies who had been reduced to impotence’” (Cited in Souvarine 1939: 634). In the words of Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko the 1930s, dominated by fascism and Stalinism, represented “the history of the counter-revolution ... an entire historical epoch during which the vilest and bloodiest kind of evildoing flourished upon the earth” (Antonov-Ovseyenko 1981: 40).

Žižek, says that “we still lack a satisfactory theory of Stalinism” citing the inadequacies of Franz Neumann, Herbert Marcuse and the Habermasian school (Žižek 2005b: unpaginated). But in this list, there is a strange absence – the entirety of the main body of Marxist anti-Stalinism, represented by followers of Leon Trotsky. This is not accidental. Žižek has little understanding of the tradition he calls “Trotskyite”. He argues, for instance, that you can only accept the authentic “act” of revolution, if you “endorse the act fully in all its consequences” including the possibility of “the Worse.” His meaning is clear – to embrace October 1917, you have to also accept responsibility for Stalinism in the 1930s. He has nothing but contempt for “the nostalgia of Trotskyite (sic) and other radical Leftists for the early days of the Revolution, with workers’ councils popping up ‘spontaneously’ everywhere, against the Thermidor, that is, the later ossification of the Revolution into a new hierarchical state structure” (Žižek 1999: 377). But this theoretical

perspective cannot explain why the leading figure of anti-Stalinism became Leon Trotsky – along with Lenin the pre-eminent leader of the October Revolution. Who embraced the revolutionary act more fully than Leon Trotsky – president of the Petrograd Soviet in 1905 and again in 1917, organizer of the insurrection in October 1917, organizer of the Red Army in the desperate prosecution of the Civil War? This embrace of the revolutionary act did not require a subsequent embrace of Stalinism. In fact, to hold onto this revolutionary act, demanded the embracing of resistance to Stalinism, what Antonov-Ovseyenko accurately labeled “counter-revolution.”

The British Trotskyist Alex Callinicos also calls Russian Stalinism a counter-revolution, and identifies four inter-related aspects. First was the euphemistically named forced “collectivization” of agriculture, in reality the launching of a civil war against small peasant holdings by the state resulting in millions of deaths, relocations and imprisonments. Driving the regime to this “primitive accumulation” was the second aspect of the counter-revolution, the need to subordinate all efforts to industrialization, to allow the Soviet Union to catch up with the advanced west. And collectivization “allowed the regime drastically to increase grain exports and thereby to finance imports of plant and equipment from the West.” Growing war fears with the west fuelled the drive for rapid industrialisation. Lenin in 1919 argued “We are living not merely in a state, but *in a system of states*, and it is inconceivable for the Soviet Republic to live alongside of the imperialist states for any length of time. One or other must triumph in the end.” For Lenin and Trotsky, the conclusion was to win the other states to workers’ revolution through the Communist International, founded in 1919. For Stalin the conclusion was, industrialize and become a Great Power. But this required the third aspect of the counter-revolution – systematic coercion. To achieve industrialization, there was feverish urbanization (driving peasants to the cities) and a massive increase in exploitation. “Real wages in 1932 were at most 50 per cent of their 1928 level.” There was resistance to these attacks by workers in the cities, just as peasants in the countryside resisted the expropriation of their land. This capacity to resist had to be crushed in order for the counter-revolution to succeed, and thus any inside the cities with a memory of the politics of workers’ resistance had to be repressed. The coercion, then, was directed first and foremost at former and current activists in the Bolshevik Party, the party that, for more than a generation, had been the leading exponent of workers’ opposition to exploitation. This coercion culminated in the Great Terror of 1936-38 where several hundred thousand people perished. On the backs of these three aspects, then, the fourth came into play, the upward mobility of a new generation of non-“Old Bolshevik” rulers. The Terror “wiped out the generation of Bolsheviks who had been shaped by the underground struggle against Tsarism and led the October Revolution itself.” Their shoes were filled by a new generation organized not around world revolution, but around national industrial and military growth, a new bureaucratic ruling class (Callinicos 1992: 29-35). That is, in outline, an understanding of Stalinism that has stood the test of time. It confronts head-on the obvious barbarism of Stalinism, and insists that –

Stalin's claims to the contrary – this barbarism has nothing to do with any left project, it has nothing to do with Lenin. That is why Trotsky – Lenin's closest collaborator from 1917 until Lenin's death – said there was “between Bolshevism and Stalinism not simply a bloody line but a whole river of blood.”

This kind of analysis – rooted in political economy and concrete historical study – does not exist for Žižek. His analysis wanders in a garden of culture, biography and comment and is frequently more favourable to Stalin than Lenin. At one level, he says, Lenin's attempt to lead a revolution in 1917 was a “utopia” a kind of “madness,” and “if anything, Stalinism stands for a return to the realistic ‘common sense’” (Žižek 2002b: 5). Two prominent Marxist anti-Stalinist (and Trotskyist) theorists identify 1928, the first five-year plan and the beginning of forced industrialization as a watershed in the transition from a workers' state to counter-revolution and state capitalism (Cliff 1974, Dunayevskaya 1946/47). Žižek quotes approvingly an analysis that sees that same year and that same event the year as “not a kind of ‘Thermidor’ but, rather, the consequent radicalization of the October Revolution” (Žižek 2002b: 317). This “radicalization” led to the death of millions of peasants, and the destruction of virtually the entirety of the 1917-era Bolshevik party. He also combines his fascination with violence with an analysis of Stalin's rule. He praises the reign of “institutional terror” in the Stalin regime as parallel to some kinds of treatment in psychoanalysis. “[W]hat, in politics, is self-destructive terror is of a totally different order in the psychoanalytic community – here, the Stalin figure is a ‘good’ one” (Žižek 2002b: 316). With a phrase – and a bad analogy – he sweeps away the pain and suffering of the millions who suffered under that terror.

The annoying thing about Žižek's analysis of Stalinism is that it's not really an analysis at all, but a series of comments. The centrepiece of the section is a long discussion of the playwright, Bertolt Brecht's attitude towards the Stalinist states of Eastern Europe. Apparently, when Russian tanks moved into Berlin in 1953 to crush a workers' uprising, Brecht celebrated. Apparently he “was tempted for the first time in his life to join the Communist Party – is this not an outstanding case of what Alain Badiou has called *la passion du réel* which defines the twentieth century? It was not that Brecht tolerated the cruelty of the struggle in the hope that it would bring a prosperous future: the harshness of the violence as such was perceived and endorsed as a sign of authenticity” (Žižek 2002b: 194). Does Žižek endorse this “passion for the real”? Does he agree that violent repression from the Russian occupiers gives this intervention a “sign of authenticity” as something we should endorse? Žižek doesn't say. His analysis wanders along, making this or that random observation – but leaving open the conclusion that Brecht was right. Mostly he seems enthralled by violence and the use of force as ends in themselves.

The obvious rebuttal to Brecht would be his contemporary George Lukács. Like Brecht, Lukács accommodated himself to the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe. Unlike Brecht, Lukács

welcomed the anti-Stalinist uprisings of the 1950s, supporting Imre Nagy's dissident government in 1956. But somehow, for Žižek, this made Lukács "the *ultimate Stalinist*. In contrast to Lukács, Brecht was unbearable to the Stalinist cultural establishment because of his very 'over-orthodoxy' ... If the young Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* was the philosopher of Lenin's historical moment, after the 1930s he turned into the ideal Stalinist philosopher who, for that very reason, in contrast to Brecht, missed the true greatness of Stalinism" (Žižek 2002b: 196-7).

Surely there are alternatives to this confusing argument. Perhaps we should judge Brecht on his plays, and not on his overt political stances. He was after-all, a playwright. Perhaps both Brecht and Lukács were wrong to submit for so long to the Stalinist regimes in which they worked. But perhaps they had little choice. Perhaps they were individuals caught up in huge historical forces that neither they, nor any other individual could control, and lived with it as best they could. Perhaps it would be best to try – as Trotsky and his heirs have done – to understand those forces through political economy and the examination of history, and not through the momentary acts and gestures – no matter how "violent" – of this or that individual. But there is none of this in Žižek. He has offered us a series of disconnected observations on politics, culture and biography, given it a provocative pro-Stalinist title, and left his own position open-ended, with no sense of his own responsibility as an intellectual to help clarify matters for a new generation.

Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey have helped in the archaeology necessary to an understanding of Žižek's attitude towards both Lenin and Stalin. They have dug through all of his key writings with a view to putting together a consistent picture of his views on this subject. Any who wish to pursue this task in detail, should read their paper. They point out his reverence for the departed Stalinist Eastern European regimes as "liberated zones". He doesn't see Stalin as the negation of Marxism, but "as being the realiser of Marxism, however 'perverted' its realisation." Their conclusion is harsh, and accurate.

Žižek's Lenin, therefore, is not the 'Lenin' of the left, but the 'Lenin' of the right. Just as conservative critics are interested in 'Lenin' insofar as he gave us Stalin, orthodox Communism, the Cold War and the gulag, so Žižek is interested in a 'Lenin' of the Master, the Act, the carving of the field and the Good Terror. Žižek's Lenin is also the 'Lenin' that Stalin built: the 'cult of Lenin' Stalin used to legitimate his own agenda of the omnipotence of the Leader, widespread terror and power as an in-itself ... In short, it is a Leninism for Stalinists (Robinson And Tormey, 2003: unpaginated).

It is almost a generation since the collapse of the European Stalinist state systems. Today's new left has come out from the shadows of the Stalinist "One Long Night." However, this generation, like all before it, is reaching back to pick up the threads of anti-capitalist struggle from the past. Many have rediscovered Marx. Some are starting to rediscover Lenin. But a casual reading of

Žižek's confusing analysis might lead some to try and rediscover Stalin. It is the responsibility of the older generation to confront head-on the problems of the past, and in part this means honestly confronting the horror that was Stalinism – a horror that sullied the name of the left for three generations. Yet Žižek talks about Stalinism's "Inner Greatness." The very fact that Žižek can without editorial comment publish such a headline in a book published by Verso, one of the world's leading left-wing publishers, is a sign of the fact that Stalinism remains an unresolved issue for today's left.

Conclusion: The other Lenin of 1917

One of the best systematic analyses of the political thought of Vladimir Lenin, is that written by Marcel Liebman more than 30 years ago. In *Leninism Under Lenin*, Liebman insists that context is everything. It is important "not to separate the doctrine from the historical setting in which it arose and developed. An analysis of Leninism must be a *history* of Leninism in its living evolution, and no history of Leninism can be separated from the history of the Russian revolution" (Liebman, 1975: 21).³ By contrast, Žižek's treatment of Lenin is completely decontextualized, as if history and economics did not matter. And when he does briefly provide a context, he gets it completely wrong. The Lenin he is reviving is the Lenin that is least relevant to contemporary conditions.

Žižek's "Leninism" emerges by way of an Introduction and long Afterword to a series of articles written by Lenin that are widely accessible on the internet. The point, then, is to highlight *this* Lenin, and to explain why *this* Lenin – the Lenin between the February Revolution of 1917, and the second revolution in October – is the most relevant to today's new left. This is the Lenin of the decisive act, the Lenin who could see the possibility of a socialist revolution when the rest of the party leadership could not, the Lenin who broke from his own theory of the bourgeois character of the revolution to insist on the possibility of a workers' revolution, the Lenin who "stood alone, struggling against the current in his own party" a Lenin who, against all his peers, said that the moment had arrived for "the unique chance for a revolution" (Žižek 2002b: 5).

"This is the Lenin" says Žižek, from whom we still have something to learn. The greatness of Lenin was that in this catastrophic situation, *he wasn't afraid to succeed* ... In 1917, instead of waiting until the time was ripe, Lenin organized a pre-emptive strike" (Žižek 2002b: 6). We have something to learn from this because our context is similar. He says "today's Left is undergoing the shattering experience of the end of an entire epoch ... an experience which compels it to reinvent the very basic co-ordinates of its project." He argues that "it was an exactly homologous experience that gave birth to Leninism," the shock of betrayal when the major socialist parties supported World War in August, 1914 (Žižek 2002b: 3).

Let us think this through. The context of Lenin was, as Žižek argues, World War. But what Žižek does not deal with is that the issue was not simply the ideological crisis of the socialist project, as the socialist leaders lined up to support their ruling classes. The issue was the war itself and what it did to ordinary peoples' lives. The major powers of Europe sent their young men to the trenches by the millions for four long years. And for four long years, they came back by the millions dead, by the tens of millions mangled and wounded, leading to the radicalization of hundreds of millions. By the end of the war, three old empires lay in ruins – the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Russian. The state system of Europe was close to crumbling. The Kaiser in Germany was chased from his throne. The Tsar in Russia was swept away. And then, in a magnificent awakening, mass democracy emerged from Russia to Hungary to Germany – mass workers' councils developing as the oppressed masses strained every sinew to try and recreate a new society from the ashes of the old. (Gluckstein 1985). That is the context of the Lenin of 1917 – an era that Lenin called one of wars and revolutions.

Now step back for a moment. We are told that we are living through “an exactly homologous experience.” Homologous is a term that comes from science. It refers to: “A pair of chromosomes containing the same linear gene sequences” (National Institute of Standards and Technology n.d.), so this is a very strong comparison, not a weak one. We are to believe that our epoch is one equivalent to Lenin's epoch of 1914 World War and 1917 millions-strong workers' revolutions, the end of empires, the collapse of tyrants, the spreading of workers' councils. In that circumstance, we need a Lenin, someone prepared to act, someone prepared to challenge old orthodoxies, who isn't “afraid to succeed.” It is a wonderful fantasy. That does not stop it being just that – a fantasy.

The European state system today is not collapsing. That state system is defined by the European Union, which adds new nations every decade. The United States empire might be in decline, but it is in no danger of the disintegration experienced by the Ottoman. There are wars – many horrible barbaric wars – but since World War II, they have not been wars between the major imperialist powers, but predatory wars of the Global North against the countries of the Global South. And unfortunately, we are not in an era of the mass expansion of workers' councils. In fact, in many countries of the Global North, unionization levels are slowly declining and strike levels are at historic lows.

There are exceptions to this picture. One empire in recent memory has disappeared – the Russian empire. In the turmoil around its collapse, there was perhaps, room for the kind of catastrophism implied by Žižek. But that moment has passed, and even the Russian state has reconsolidated. We do not have workers' councils. There is an emergence of some exciting forms of self-governance in Latin America, particularly in Venezuela, but these are exceptions to the

general picture, not the norm. Our world today is not “homologous” to the Russia of 1914, nor the Russia of 1917.

There is another Lenin from 1917 – one that does not figure into *Revolution At The Gates*. The tumultuous year of 1917 was not in its entirety, a year where revolutionary breakthrough seemed imminent. By May, the February wave was receding, the forces of reaction were gathering, and the great radicalization that was to lead to the October uprising was not yet visible. In that context, Lenin’s perspectives were very modest.

[O]ur task is patiently to explain to the workers and peasants that everything – the end of the war, land for the peasants, and real struggle against the capitalists, not in words, but in deeds – will be secured only when the whole people comes to realize ... that only full power for the workers and peasants, only the power of the Soviets of Workers’, Peasants’ and Soldiers’ Deputies can help to start a resolute struggle for peace, for land and for socialism. You cannot disregard the people. Only dreamers and plotters believed that a minority could impose their will on a majority. That was what the French revolutionary Blanqui thought, and he was wrong. When the majority of the people refuse, because they do not yet understand, to take power into their own hands, the minority, however revolutionary and clever, cannot impose their desire on the majority of the people. From this flow our actions. We Bolsheviks must patiently and perseveringly explain our views to the workers and peasants. Each of us must forget our old view of our work, each, without waiting for the arrival of an agitator, a propagandist, a more knowledgeable comrade who will explain everything – each of us must become all in one: agitator, propagandist and Party organizer (Lenin 1977b: 431).

This is not as exciting as the Lenin of the decisive act, the Lenin who isn’t “afraid to succeed,” the Lenin of the revolutionary gesture. But it might just be a more useful Lenin for contemporary realities, than the Lenin offered us by Žižek. The context of an isolated left is very different from a left poised for a revolutionary breakthrough. But Žižek is not looking for historical context. He is looking for the decisive act, the gesture against “The Other,” the violent confrontation with normality. So he seizes on an aspect of the Lenin of 1917 to highlight the individual of the decisive act, prepared to violently confront a system rotten ripe for overthrow. But is it really true that today’s left’s big weakness is the absence of an individual who isn’t “afraid to succeed,” who is willing to make the decisive gesture?

Let us try on something more modest. Let us try on the idea of a left that roots itself in the struggles that do exist for reform – against war, for better housing, for Palestinian rights, in defence of the Venezuelan Revolution, for women’s rights. Let us suggest that in that process we try to build organizations where there is considerable room for debate, discussion, and experimentation. Let us suggest that we try not to create a superman capable of the decisive act, but rather modest organizations capable of democratic decision-making and collective solidarity, ones that try

“patiently to explain” the socialist project to the working people with whom they work in these struggles. You won’t find anything of Žižek in such a project. But you might just find a bit of Lenin.

That Lenin is a Lenin who, in the tradition of Karl Marx, saw his socialism as being impossible without radical democracy. This democracy leads to two inseparable political conclusions: that socialism itself must be structured around the deep democracy of the soviets (workers’ councils); and that this is impossible without a politics “rooted in the self-activity of the working class” (Jenkins, 2006: 65). For Žižek, the hope of revolution is to be found in a gesture of individual violence directed at “The Other”. Better we stick with Lenin, for whom “the only ‘hope’ of the revolution is the ‘crowd’” (Lenin 1977c: 184).

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Endnotes:

¹ The story of the Mezhrayontsi/Mezhrayonka has yet to be written, lost in the enormity of the events that were to engulf the Russian people after 1917. For a sense of their role in preparing those events, see Melancon (1988).

² The modern position on ultraleftism was first developed by Lenin in *“Left-Wing” Communism – An Infantile Disorder* (Lenin 1977a).

³ The ideas in this section are developed in considerably more detail in Author, “Leninism – It’s Not What You Think,” forthcoming in *21st Century Anti-Imperialism: Marxism 6*, 2008.