Leninthink
by Gary Saul Morson

On the practice behind the theory of Marxism-Leninism.

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Lenin was more severe.

—Vyacheslav Molotov, the only senior official to work for both Lenin and Stalin, when asked to compare them.

Lenin “in general” loved people but . . . his love looked far ahead, through the mists of hatred.

—Maxim Gorky

When we are reproached with cruelty, we wonder how people can forget the most elementary Marxism.

—Lenin

Beyond Doctrine

An old Soviet joke poses the question: What was the most important world-historical event of the year 1875? Answer: Lenin was five years old.

The point of the joke, of course, is that the Soviets virtually deified Lenin. Criticism of him was routinely referred to as “blasphemy,” while icon corners in homes and institutions were replaced by “Lenin corners.” Lenin museums sprung up everywhere, and institutions of every kind took his name. In addition to Leningrad, there were cities named Leninsk (in Kazakhstan), Leninogorsk (in Tatarstan), Leninaul (in Dagestan), Leninakan (in Armenia), Leninkend, Leninavan, and at least four different Leninabads. On a visit to the Caucasus I remember being surprised at seeing Mayakovsky’s famous verses about Lenin inscribed on a mountaintop: “Lenin lived! Lenin lives! Lenin will live!” The famous mausoleum where his body is preserved served as the regime’s most sacred shrine.
As we approach the 150th anniversary of Lenin’s birth, understanding him grows ever more important. Despite the fall of the Soviet Union, Leninist ways of thinking continue to spread, especially among Western radicals who have never read a word of Lenin. This essay is not just about Lenin, and not just Leninism, the official philosophy of the USSR, but also the very style of thought that Lenin pioneered. Call it Leninthink.

Lenin did more than anyone else to shape the last hundred years. He invented a form of government we have come to call totalitarian, which rejected in principle the idea of any private sphere outside of state control. To establish this power, he invented the one-party state, a term that would previously have seemed self-contradictory since a party was, by definition, a part. An admirer of the French Jacobins, Lenin believed that state power had to be based on sheer terror, and so he also created the terrorist state.

Stephen Pinker has recently argued that the world has been getting less bloodthirsty. The Mongols, after all, destroyed entire cities. But the Mongols murdered other people; what is new, and uniquely horrible about the Soviets and their successors, is that they directed their fury at their own people. The Russian empire lost more people in World War I than any other country, but still more died under Lenin. His war against the peasants, for instance, took more lives than combat between Reds and Whites.

Numbers do not tell the whole story. Under the Third Reich, an ethnic German loyal to the regime did not have to fear arrest, but Lenin pioneered and Stalin greatly expanded a policy in which arrests were entirely arbitrary: that is true terror. By the time of the Great Terror of 1936–38, millions of entirely innocent people were arrested, often by quota. Literally no one was safe. The Party itself was an especially dangerous place to be, and the NKVD was constantly arresting its own members—a practice that was also true of its predecessor, the Cheka, which Lenin founded almost immediately after the Bolshevik coup.

NKVD interrogators who suspected they were to be arrested often committed suicide since they had no illusions about what arrest entailed. They had practiced exquisite forms of torture and humiliation on prisoners—and on prisoners’ colleagues, friends, and families. “Member of a family of a traitor to the fatherland” was itself a criminal category, and whole camps were set up for wives of “enemies of the people.” Never before had such practices defined a state.

For good reason, many have traced these practices to Lenin’s doctrines. In his view, Marx’s greatest contribution was not the idea of the class struggle but “the dictatorship of the proletariat,” and as far back as 1906 Lenin had defined dictatorship as “nothing other than power which is totally unlimited by any laws, totally unrestrained by absolutely any rules, and based directly on force.” He argued that a revolutionary Party must be composed entirely of professional revolutionaries, drawn mainly from the intelligentsia and subject to absolute discipline, with a readiness to do literally anything the leadership demanded.
These and other disastrous Leninist ideas derived from a specific Leninist way of thinking, and that is what this essay focuses on. I know this way of thinking in my bones. I am myself a pink diaper baby and I remember being taught this way of thinking, taken for granted by all right-thinking people. Memoirs of many ex-Communists, from David Horowitz to Richard Wright, confirm that, more than doctrines, it was the Leninist style of thought that defined the difference between an insider and an outsider. And that way of thought is very much with us.

Who Whom?

Introduce at once mass terror, execute and deport hundreds of prostitutes, drunken soldiers, ex-officers, etc.

—Lenin’s instructions to authorities in Nizhnii Novgorod, August 1918

Lenin regarded all interactions as zero-sum. To use the phrase he made famous, the fundamental question is always “Who Whom?”—who dominates whom, who does what to whom, ultimately who annihilates whom. To the extent that we gain, you lose. Contrast this view with the one taught in basic microeconomics: whenever there is a non-forced transaction, both sides benefit, or they would not make the exchange. For the seller, the money is worth more than the goods he sells, and for the buyer the goods are worth more than the money. Lenin’s hatred of the market, and his attempts to abolish it entirely during War Communism, derived from the opposite idea, that all buying and selling is necessarily exploitative. When Lenin speaks of “profiteering” or “speculation” (capital crimes), he is referring to every transaction, however small. Peasant “bagmen” selling produce were shot.

Basic books on negotiation teach that you can often do better than split the difference, since people have different concerns. Both sides can come out ahead—but not for the Soviets, whose negotiating stance John F. Kennedy once paraphrased as: what’s mine is mine; and what’s yours is negotiable. For us, the word “politics” means a process of give and take, but for Lenin it’s we take, and you give. From this it follows that one must take maximum advantage of one’s position. If the enemy is weak enough to be destroyed, and one stops simply at one’s initial demands, one is objectively helping the enemy, which makes one a traitor. Of course, one might simply be insane. Long before Brezhnev began incarcerating dissidents in madhouses, Lenin was so appalled that his foreign minister, Boris Chicherin, recommended an unnecessary concession to American loan negotiators, that he pronounced him mad—not metaphorically—and demanded he be forcibly committed. “We will be fools if we do not immediately and forcibly send him to a sanatorium.”
Such thinking automatically favors extreme solutions. If there is one sort of person Lenin truly hated more than any other, it is—to use some of his more printable adjectives—the squishy, squeamish, spineless, dull-witted liberal reformer. In philosophical issues, too, there can never be a middle ground. If you are not a materialist in precisely Lenin’s interpretation, you are an idealist, and idealism is simply disguised religion supporting the bourgeoisie. The following statement from his most famous book, What Is to Be Done?, is typical (the italics are Lenin’s): “The only choice is: either the bourgeois or the socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for humanity has not created a ‘third’ ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or above-class ideology). Hence to belittle the socialist ideology in any way, to turn away from it in the slightest degree, means to strengthen bourgeois ideology.”

There is either rule by the bourgeoisie or dictatorship of the proletariat: “Every solution that offers a middle path is a deception . . . or an expression of the dull-wittedness of the petty-bourgeois democrats.”

Contrary to the wishes even of other Bolsheviks, Lenin categorically rejected the idea of a broad socialist coalition government. He was immensely relieved when the short-lived coalition with the Left Socialist Revolutionaries collapsed. Immediately after seizing power he declared the left-liberal Kadets “outside the law,” leading to the lynching of two of their ex-ministers in a Petersburg Hospital. He would soon arrest Mensheviks and the most numerous group of radicals, the Socialist Revolutionaries, famed for countless assassinations of tsarist officials. We think of show trials as Stalinist, but Lenin staged a show trial of Socialist Revolutionary leaders in 1922.

Lenin always insisted on the most violent solutions. Those who do not understand him mistake his ideas for those of radicals like the anarchist Peter Kropotkin, who argued that violence was permitted when necessary. By the same token, Lenin always insisted on the most violent solutions. Those who do not understand him mistake his ideas for those of radicals like the anarchist Peter Kropotkin, who argued that violence was permitted when necessary. That squishy formulation suggests that other solutions would be preferable. But for Lenin maximal violence was the default position. He was constantly rebuking subordinates for not using enough force, for restraining mobs from lynchings, and for hesitating to shoot randomly chosen hostages.

One could almost say that force had a mystical attraction for Lenin. He had workers drafted into a labor army where any shirking or lateness was punished by sentence to a concentration camp. Yes, Bolsheviks used the term concentration camp from the start, and did so with pride. Until economic collapse forced Lenin to adopt the New Economic Policy, he demanded that grain not be purchased from peasants but requisitioned at gunpoint. Naturally, peasants—Lenin called recalcitrant peasants “kulaks”—rebelled all over Russia. In response to one such “kulak” uprising
Lenin issued the following order:

> The kulak uprising in [your] 5 districts must be crushed without pity. . . . 1) Hang (and I mean hang so that the people can see) not less than 100 known kulaks, rich men, bloodsuckers. 2) Publish their names. 3) Take all their grain away from them. 4) Identify hostages . . . . Do this so that for hundreds of miles around the people can see, tremble, know and cry . . . . Yours, Lenin. P. S. Find tougher people.

Dmitri Volkogonov, the first biographer with access to the secret Lenin archives, concluded that for Lenin violence was a goal in itself. He quotes Lenin in 1908 recommending “real, nationwide terror, which invigorates the country and through which the Great French Revolution achieved glory.”

Lenin constantly recommended that people be shot “without pity” or “exterminated mercilessly” (Leszek Kolakowski wondered wryly what it would mean to exterminate people mercifully). “Exterminate” is a term used for vermin, and, long before the Nazis described Jews as Ungeziefer (vermin), Lenin routinely called for “the cleansing of Russia’s soil of all harmful insects, of scoundrels, fleas, bedbugs—the rich, and so on.”

Lenin worked by a principle of anti-empathy, and this approach was to define Soviet ethics. I know of no other society, except those modeled on the one Lenin created, where schoolchildren were taught that mercy, kindness, and pity are vices. After all, these feelings might lead one to hesitate shooting a class enemy or denouncing one’s parents. The word “conscience” went out of use, replaced by “consciousness” (in the sense of Marxist-Leninist ideological consciousness). During Stalin’s great purges a culture of denunciation reigned, but it was Lenin who taught “A good communist is also a good Chekist.”

*The Abbey of Thélème*

A special logic governs the Leninist approach to morality, legality, and rights. In his famous address to the Youth Leagues, Lenin complains that bourgeois thinkers have slanderously denied that Bolsheviks have any ethics. In fact,

> We reject any morality based on extra-human and extra-class concepts. We say that this is a deception . . . We say that morality is entirely subordinated to the interests of the proletariat’s class struggle. . . . That is why we say that to us there is no such thing as a morality that stands outside human society; that is a fraud. To us morality is subordinated to the interests of the proletariat’s class struggle.

> When people tell us about morality, we say: to a Communist all morality lies in this united discipline and conscious mass struggle against the exploiters.

In short, Bolshevik morality holds that whatever contributes to Bolshevik success is moral, whatever hinders it is immoral.

Imagine someone saying: “my detractors claim I have no morals, but that is sheer slander. On the contrary, I have a very strict moral code, from which I never deviate: *look out for number 1.*” We
might reply: the whole point of a moral code is to *restrain* you from acting only out of self-interest. Morality begins with number 2. A moral code that says you must do what you regard as your self-interest is no moral code at all. The same is true for a code that says the Communist Party is morally bound to do whatever it regards as in its interest.

Rabelais’s pleasure-seeking utopia, the Abbey of Thélème, was governed, like all abbeys, by a rule. In this case, however, the rule was an anti-rule: *Fay çe que vouldras*, “Do as you wish!” People were to be restrained from yielding to any restraints. Ever since, such self-canceling imperatives have been called *Thelemite commands*.

Bolshevik legality was also Thelemite. If by law one means a code that binds the state as well as the individual, specifies what is and is not permitted, and eliminates arbitrariness, then Lenin entirely rejected law as “bourgeois.” He expressed utter contempt for the principles “no crime without law” and “no punishment without a crime.” Recall that he defined the dictatorship of the proletariat as rule based entirely on force absolutely unrestrained by any law. His more naïve followers imagined that rule by sheer terror would cease when Bolshevik hold on power was secure, or when the New Economic Policy relaxed restrictions on trade, but Lenin made a point of disillusioning them. “It is the biggest mistake to think that nep will put an end to the terror. We shall return to the terror, and to economic terror,” he wrote. When D. I. Kursky, People’s Commissariat of Justice, was formulating the first Soviet legal code, Lenin demanded that terror and arbitrary use of power be written into the code itself! “The law should not abolish terror,” he insisted. “It should be substantiated and legalized in principle, without evasion or embellishment.”

So far as I know, never before had the law prescribed lawlessness. Do as you wish, or else. Lenin had ascribed the fall of the Paris Commune to the failure to eliminate all law, and so the Soviet state was absolutely forbidden from exercising any restraint on arbitrary use of power. Indeed, officials were punished for such restraint, which Lenin called impermissible slackness and Stalin would deem lack of vigilance.

The same logic applied to rights. On paper, the Soviet Constitution of 1936 guaranteed more rights than any other state in the world. I recall a Soviet citizen telling me that people in the USSR had absolute freedom of speech—so long as they did not lie. I recalled this curious concept of freedom when a student defended complete freedom of speech except for hate speech—and hate speech included anything he disagreed with. Whatever did not *seem* hateful was actually a “dog-whistle.”
As far back as 1919, Soviet parlance distinguished between purely formal law and what was called “the material determination of the crime.” A crime was not an action or omission specified in the formal code, because every “socially dangerous” act (or omission) was automatically criminal. Article 1 of the Civil Code of October 31, 1922 laid down that civil rights “are protected by the law unless they are exercised in contradiction to their social and economic purposes.” Like the “material” definition of crime, the concept of “purposefulness” (tselesoobraznost’) created a system of Thelemite rights: the state was absolutely prohibited from interfering with your rights unless it wanted to.

**Leninspeak**

Lenin’s language, no less than his ethics, served as a model, taught in Soviet schools and recommended in books with titles like Lenin’s Language and On Lenin’s Polemical Art. In Lenin’s view, a true revolutionary did not establish the correctness of his beliefs by appealing to evidence or logic, as if there were some standards of truthfulness above social classes. Rather, one engaged in “blackening an opponent’s mug so well it takes him ages to get it clean again.” Nikolay Valentinov, a Bolshevik who knew Lenin well before becoming disillusioned, reports him saying: “There is only one answer to revisionism: smash its face in!”

When Mensheviks objected to Lenin’s personal attacks, he replied frankly that his purpose was not to convince but to destroy his opponent. In work after work, Lenin does not offer arguments refuting other Social Democrats but brands them as “renegades” from Marxism. Marxists who disagreed with his naïve epistemology were “philosophic scum.” Object to his brutality and your arguments are “moralizing vomit.” You can see traces of this approach in the advice of Saul Alinsky—who cites Lenin—to “pick the target, freeze it, personalize it.”

Compulsive underlining, name calling, and personal invective hardly exhaust the ways in which Lenin’s prose assaults the reader. He does not just advance a claim, he insists that it is absolutely certain and, for good measure, says the same thing again in other words. It is absolutely certain, beyond any possible doubt, perfectly clear to anyone not dull-witted. Any alliance with the democratic bourgeoisie can only be short-lived, he explains: “This is beyond doubt. Hence the absolute necessity of a separate . . . strictly class party of Social Democrats. . . . All this is beyond the slightest possible doubt.” Nothing is true unless it is absolutely, indubitably so; if a position is wrong, it is entirely and irredeemably so; if something must be done, it must be done “immediately, without delay”; Party representatives are to make “no concessions whatsoever.” Under Lenin’s direction the Party demanded “the dissolution of all
groups without exception formed on the basis of one platform or another” (italics mine). It was not enough just to shoot kulaks summarily, they had “to be shot on the spot without trial,” a phrase that in one brief decree he managed to use in each of its six numbered commands before concluding: “This order is to be carried out strictly, mercilessly.” You’d think that was clear enough already.

No concessions, compromises, exceptions, or acts of leniency; everything must be totally uniform, absolutely the same, unqualifiedly unqualified. At one point he claims that the views of Marx and Engels are “completely identical,” as if they might have been incompletely identical.

Critics objected that Lenin argued by mere assertion. He disproved a position simply by showing it contradicted what he believed. In his attack on the epistemology of Ernst Mach and Richard Avenarius, for instance, every argument contrary to dialectical materialism is rejected for that reason alone. Valentinov, who saw Lenin frequently when he was crafting this treatise, reports that Lenin at most glanced through their works for a few hours. It was easy enough to attribute to them views they did not hold, associate them with disreputable people they had never heard of, or ascribe political purposes they had never imagined. These were Lenin’s usual techniques, and he made no bones about it.

Valentinov was appalled that both Lenin and Plekhanov, the first Russian Marxist, insisted that there was no need to understand opposing views before denouncing them, since the very fact that they were opposing views proved them wrong—and what was wrong served the enemy and so was criminal. He quotes Lenin:

Marxism is a monolithic conception of the world, it does not tolerate dilution and vulgarization by means of various insertions and additions. Plekhanov once said to me about a critic of Marxism . . . : “First, let’s stick the convict’s badge on him, and then after that we’ll examine his case.” And I think we must stick the “convict’s badge” on anyone and everyone who tries to undermine Marxism, even if we don’t go on to examine his case. That’s how every sound revolutionary should react. When you see a stinking heap on the road you don’t have to poke around in it to see what it is. Your nose tells you it’s shit, and you give it a wide berth.

“Lenin’s words took my breath away,” Valentinov recalls. I had the same reaction when I first heard a student explain that a view had to be wrong simply because it was voiced on Fox News.

Opponents objected that Lenin lied without compunction, and it is easy to find quotations in which he says—as he did to the Bolshevik leader Karl Radek—“Who told you a historian has to establish the truth?” Yes, we are contradicting what we said before, he told Radek, and when it is useful to reverse positions again, we will. Orwell caught this aspect of Leninism: “Oceania was at war with Eastasia; therefore Oceania had always been at war with Eastasia.”

And yet the concept of “lying,” if one stops there, does not reach the heart of the matter. In The Death of Ivan Ilyich, Tolstoy remarks that, contrary to appearances, the hero was not a toady. Rather, he “was attracted to people of high station as a fly is drawn to the light.” A toady decides
to toady, but Ivan Ilyich had no need to make such a decision. In much the same way, a true Leninist does not decide whether to lie. He automatically says what is most useful, with no reflection necessary. That is why he can show no visible signs of mendacity, perhaps even pass a lie detector test. La Rochefoucauld famously said that “hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue,” but a true Bolshevik is not even a hypocrite.

Western scholars who missed this aspect of Leninism made significant errors. For example, they estimated the size of the Soviet economy by assuming that official figures were distorted and made appropriate adjustments. But as Robert Conquest pointed out, “they were not distorted, they were invented.” The Soviets did not find out the truth and then exaggerate; they often did not know the truth themselves. In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Winston Smith hears that fifty million pairs of boots were produced that year and reflects that, for all he knows, no boots at all were produced. Orwell, who never studied the Soviet economy, grasped a point that escaped experts because he understood Leninthink.

**Partyness**

Lenin did not just invent a new kind of party, he also laid the basis for what would come to be known in official parlance as “partiinost’,” literally Partyness, in the sense of Party-mindedness. Arthur Koestler understood part of partiinost’ when he described a Communist confessing to fantastic crimes because loyalty to the Party trumped everything else. If the Party needed one to confess to spying for the Poles, Japanese, and Germans at the same time, while conspiring with Trotsky to murder Stalin and spread typhus among pigs—all while one was already in prison—a true, party-minded Bolshevik would do so.

In his celebrated “Catechism of a Revolutionary,” the nineteenth-century terrorist Sergei Nechaev—whose story inspired Dostoevsky’s novel The Possessed—writes that a true revolutionary “has no interests, no habits, no property, not even a name. Everything in him is wholly absorbed by a single, exclusive interest, a single thought, a single passion—the revolution.” Nechaev and his contemporary Pyotr Tkachov established a particular tradition of revolutionaries, to which Lenin traced his lineage. The true Party member cares for nothing but the Party. It is his family, his community, his church. And according to Marxism-Leninism, everything it did was guaranteed to be correct.

Trotsky, forced to reverse one of his positions to conform to the Party line, explained:

> None of us desires or is able to dispute the will of the Party. Clearly the Party is always right. . . . We can only be right with and by the Party, for history has provided no other way of being in the right. . . . [I]f the Party adopts a decision which one or other of us thinks unjust, he will say, just or unjust, it is my party, and I will support the consequences of the decision to the end.

Even this much-quoted statement does not get partiinost’ quite right, since, immediately after affirming that history guarantees the Party’s infallibility, Trotsky speaks of supporting the Party even when it is wrong. His ally, the prominent Bolshevik Yuri Pyatakov, did better. When
Valentinov happened to meet Pyatakov in Paris, he reproached him for cowardice in renouncing his former Trotskyite views. Pyatakov replied by explaining the Leninist concept of the Party:

According to Lenin, the Communist Party is based on the principle of coercion which doesn’t recognize any limitations or inhibitions. And the central idea of this principle of boundless coercion is not coercion itself but the absence of any limitation whatsoever—moral, political, and even physical, as far as that goes. Such a Party is capable of achieving miracles and doing things which no other collective of men could achieve. . . . A real Communist . . . [is] a man who was raised by the Party and had absorbed its spirit deeply enough to become a miracle man.

Pyatakov grasped Lenin’s idea that coercion is not a last resort but the first principle of Party action. Changing human nature, producing boundless prosperity, overcoming death itself: all these miracles could be achieved because the Party was the first organization ever to pursue coercion without limits. In one treatise Stalin corrects the widespread notion that the laws of nature are not binding on Bolsheviks, and it is not hard to see how this kind of thinking took root. And, given an essentially mystical faith in coercion, it is not hard to see how imaginative forms of torture became routine in Soviet justice.

Pyatakov drew significant conclusions from this concept of the Party:

For such a Party a true Bolshevik will readily cast out from his mind ideas in which he has believed for years. A true Bolshevik has submerged his personality in the collectivity, “the Party,” to such an extent that he can make the necessary effort to break away from his own opinions and convictions, and can honestly agree with the Party—that is the test of a true Bolshevik.

There could be no life for him outside the ranks of the Party, and he would be ready to believe that black was white, and white was black, if the Party required it. In order to become one with this great Party he would fuse himself with it, abandon his own personality, so that there was no particle left inside him which was not at one with the Party.

Did Orwell have this statement in mind when O’Brien gets Winston Smith to believe that twice two is five? In 1936 Pyatakov asked the Party secretariat to censure him for not having revealed his wife’s Trotskyite connections. To prove his partiinost’, he offered to testify against her and then, after her condemnation, shoot her. Pyatakov was himself shot.

The Nature of Leninist Belief

Partyness does not entail merely affirming that black is white but actually believing it. The wisest specialists on Bolshevik thinking have wondered: What does it mean to believe—truly believe—what one does not believe?

Many former Communists describe their belated recognition that experienced Party members do not seem to believe what they profess. In his memoir American Hunger, much of which is devoted to his experiences in the American Communist Party, Richard Wright describes how he would
point out that the Party sometimes acted contrary to its convictions, or in the name of helping black people, actually hurt them. What most amazed Wright was that he usually could get no explanation for such actions at all. “You don’t understand,” he was constantly told. And the very fact that he asked such questions proved that he didn’t. It gradually dawned on him that the Party takes stances not because it cares about them—although it may—but because it is useful for the Party to do so.

Doing so may help recruit new members, as its stance on race had gotten Wright to join. But after a while a shrewd member learned, without having been explicitly told, that loyalty belonged not to an issue, not even to justice broadly conceived, but to the Party itself. Issues would be raised or dismissed as needed.

My mother left the American Communist Party in 1939 in response to the Hitler–Stalin pact, but her friends who remained were able, like Pyatakov, to turn on a dime. One morning The Daily Worker followed Pravda and described Nazis as true friends of the working class; the next, nothing too strong could be said against them. Crucially, and as Orwell dramatized in Nineteen Eighty-Four, there was never an admission that any change had taken place.

When it suddenly dawned on them that issues were pretexts, Wright and some others like him faced a choice. Usually, however, there was no sudden realization and so no choice was required. I speak from memory now. What happens is something like this: when a criticism of the true ideology is advanced, or when embarrassing facts come out, everyone learns a particular answer. One neither believes nor disbelieves the answer; one demonstrates one’s loyalty by saying it. It is interesting to be present when the answer is still being rehearsed. Gradually, one acquires a little mental library of such canned answers, and the use of them signals to others in the know that you are one of them. If this process took place often enough in childhood, the moment of decision lies in the remote past, if it ever happened at all. For those who joined as adults, there is social pressure to accept one more explanation. Imagine not accepting today’s charge against Trump or Chick-fil-A. Why stop now? Wright is unusual in that for him the process became acute and demanded he address it.

In his history of Marxism, Kolakowski explains some puzzling aspects of Bolshevik practice in these terms. Everyone understands why Bolsheviks shot liberals, socialist revolutionaries, Mensheviks, and Trotskyites. But what, he asks, was the point of turning the same fury on the Party itself, especially on its most loyal, Stalinists, who accepted Leninist-Stalinist ideology without question? Kolakowski observes that it is precisely the loyalty to the ideology that was the problem.
Anyone who believed in the ideology might question the leader’s conformity to it. He might recognize that the Marxist-Leninist Party was acting against Marxism-Leninism as the Party itself defined it; or he might compare Stalin’s statements today with Stalin’s statements yesterday. “The citizen belongs to the state and must have no other loyalty, not even to the state ideology,” Kołakowski observes. That might seem strange to Westerners, but, “it is not surprising to anyone who knows a system of this type from within.” All deviations from the Party line, all challenges to the leadership, appealed to official ideology, and so anyone who truly believed the ideology was suspect. “The [great] purge, therefore, was designed to destroy such ideological links as still existed within the party, to convince its members that they had no ideology or loyalty except to the latest orders from on high . . . . Loyalty to Marxist ideology as such is still—[in 1978]—a crime and a source of deviations of all kinds.” The true Leninist did not even believe in Leninism.

The Other Foot

I know of no other political ideology that entails such a conception of belief. When I was a young associate professor teaching in a comparative literature department, whose faculty were at each other’s throats, I remarked to one colleague, who called herself a Marxist-Leninist, that it only made things worse when she told obvious falsehoods in departmental meetings. Surely, such unprincipled behavior must bring discredit to your own position, I pleaded.

Her reply brought me back to my childhood. I quote it word-for-word: “You stick to your principles, and I’ll stick to mine.” From a Leninist perspective, a liberal, a Christian, or any type of idealist only ties his hands by refraining from doing whatever works. She meant: we Leninists will win because we know better than to do that. Even Westerners who regard themselves as realists have only taken a few baby steps towards a true Leninist position. They are all the more vulnerable for imagining they have an unclouded view.

The whole point of Leninism is that only a few people must understand what is going on.

Recently Attorney General William Barr asked how his critics would have reacted had the fbi secretly interfered with the Obama campaign: “What if the shoe were on the other foot?” From a Leninist perspective, this question demonstrates befuddlement. In his book Terrorism and Communism, Trotsky imagines “the high priests of liberalism” asking how Bolshevik use of arbitrary power differs from tsarist practices. Trotsky sneers:

You do not understand this, holy men? We shall explain it to you. The terror of Tsarism was directed against the proletariat. . . . Our Extraordinary Commissions shoot landlords, capitalists, and generals . . . . Do you grasp this—distinction? For us Communists it is quite sufficient.

What is reprehensible for them is proper for us, and that’s all there is to it. For a Leninist, the shoe is never on the other foot because he has no other foot.
When I detect Leninist ways of thinking today, people respond: surely you don’t think all those social justice warriors are Leninists! Of course not. The whole point of Leninism is that only a few people must understand what is going on. That was the key insight of his tract What Is to Be Done? When Leninism is significant, there will always be a spectrum going from those who really understand, to those who just practice the appropriate responses, to those who are entirely innocent. The real questions are: Is there such a spectrum now, and how do we locate people on it? And if there is such a spectrum, what do we do about it?

There is no space to address such questions here. My point is that they need to be asked.

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