

Lenin on Freedom

Roland Boer

But see how quickly the slave of yesterday is straightening his back, how the spark of liberty is gleaming even in his half-dimmed eyes (Lenin 1905 [1963]: 541).

Lenin and freedom – it is perhaps a jarring juxtaposition for many. Was not Lenin the harbinger of what is occasionally called the most dictatorial and authoritarian ‘regime’ in history? Is not any discussion of freedom with regard to Lenin a bad joke? A close reading of Lenin reveals that his arguments are far more subtle than much received opinion. Indeed, he seeks to hold together two seemingly contradictory positions: freedom is both actual and partisan. That is, communists must always hold to the position of actual freedom, in which one may act to destroy the very conditions under which ‘freedom’ has thus far been understood; yet freedom can never escape the questions, ‘for whom and for what purpose?’ Over against the limitations of bourgeois freedom, invariably propagated without the epithet and thereby assumed to be universal, Lenin strenuously urges proletarian freedom. Only through this utterly explicit partisanship is an actual, universal freedom possible. The attempted resolution of that contradiction takes place in the thorough redefinition of freedom through the whole revolutionary process, especially in the period after seizing power, a redefinition that renders all hitherto known senses of freedom obsolete.

At this point the distinction between formal and actual freedom becomes useful, with the former designating the often unrecognised conditions under which freedom operates and latter that moment when ‘everything is possible’, when it is possible to alter the coordinates by which freedom itself is defined. Lenin never tires of pointing out that the much-vaunted bourgeois claims to ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ are anything but absolutes, that they are always tied to the interests of that class and thereby constricted by a whole series of limiting conditions. Freedom

of industry? That gives reign to predatory wars. Freedom of labour? It is merely another excuse to rob workers (Lenin 1902 [1961]: 355). Freedom of the press? It is actually freedom for the rich to own the press and propagate their bourgeois views and befuddle the people (Lenin 1919 [1965]: 370-1). Parliamentary freedom? That depends entirely on the bureaucrats deciding precisely which ‘freedoms’ might be exercised (Lenin 1906 [1962]-a: 422; 1912 [1964]-a). The ultimately determining instance is capitalism, which generates certain forms of political representation that further its own aims; that is, ‘democracy’ operates within strict parameters: ‘The facts of democracy must not make us lose sight of a circumstance, often overlooked by bourgeois democrats, that in the capitalist countries representative institutions inevitably give rise to specific forms in which capital exercises its influence on the state power’ (Lenin 1912 [1963]: 129). All of which Lenin sums up in characteristic fashion, replete with a biblical allusion (Matthew 23:27):

All your talk about freedom and democracy is sheer claptrap, parrot phrases, fashionable twaddle, or hypocrisy. It is just a painted signboard. And you yourselves are whited sepulchres. You are mean-spirited boors, and your education, culture, and enlightenment are only a species of thoroughgoing prostitution (Lenin 1907 [1963]: 53).

Over against these various permutations of formal freedom is actual freedom. Here we need to be careful, since Lenin means neither a ‘free-for-all’, nor indeed the full display of individual freedoms assumed but never practised in liberal slogans. Actual freedom is the insistence that we have the ability and opportunity to abolish the old system and its formal freedoms. Hence the persistence in maintaining the illegal party, hence the need for a military wing, hence the constant uncovering of sham bourgeois slogans of ‘freedom’. Yet at times Lenin sounds like a good liberal, arguing for a state administration that is utterly responsible to the people, that is accountable to, elected by and subject to recall by the people (Lenin 1905 [1966]-b: 41). It is all too easy to juxtapose these

statements with the restrictions on such freedoms after the revolution (Lih 2011; Rabinowitch 2004 [1976], 2007), but that misses a subtle point Lenin makes, not only in the debates during the times of the Duma (1905-17), but also after the revolution, as we will see in a moment. Before the revolution, liberal freedoms are indeed to be pursued, he points out, for in that context workers' associations and parties may make full use of the greater possibilities of legal gatherings, associations, press and strikes. But they are not an end in themselves, for the workers always keep in sight a '*radical* change in the entire political system', precisely that system which has enabled those freedoms (Lenin 1912 [1964]-b: 418).

A vital question remains: what happens after the exercise of actual freedom when the whole order that has set the terms for formal freedom has been abolished, or at least is in the process of being abolished? Or more simply, what happens after the revolution? The beginning of an answer is that the revolution is not merely the moment – with however long a process leading up to that moment – when the old order has been overthrown and power has been seized by the revolutionaries. It includes that vital period after the revolutionary overthrow when all things have to be made anew.

In this context, freedom becomes what at first appears to be a paradox: freedom is partisan. Is this not precisely the accusation hurled at the bourgeoisie, that their prattle about 'freedom' conceals specific class interests? Does it not become another version of formal freedom? Not at all, but let us see why. Five factors play a role in Lenin's argument. First, in the appropriation of Western political terminology during the revolutionary process after February 1917, 'democracy' became associated with the labouring masses of workers and peasants, who were the 'people' (*demos* and thereby *narod*). The opposite of democracy was not the autocracy or dictatorship, but the classes of the old aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Thus, terms such as 'democratic elements' 'democratic classes', 'revolutionary democracy', along with 'democracy' itself had distinct class

dimensions. Democracy became synonymous with the range of socialist parties, while those of the bourgeoisie (Kadets) and the old aristocracy (Octobrists and others) were anti-democratic (Kolonitskii 2004).

Lenin played no small part in that process of redefinition, which brings us to our second point, concerning concealment: bourgeois claims to foster freedom in general conceal their class interest. By contrast, one must not conceal the partisan nature of proletarian freedom, for it is '*openly* linked to the proletariat' (Lenin 1905 [1966]-a: 48). Third, bourgeois freedom is predicated on the individual, while proletarian freedom is collective. The catch here is that this supposed individuality of bourgeois freedom is in fact a collective position that is, once again, systematically concealed and denied. However, if one begins explicitly with the collective, then freedom begins to mean a very different type of freedom. Fourth, this apparently individual, bourgeois freedom operates within 'a society based on the power of money, in a society in which the masses of working people live in poverty and the handful of rich live like parasites' (Lenin 1905 [1966]-a: 48). In other words, bourgeois freedom serves the cause of capitalism in which the vast majority are systematically denied freedom. Only when the power of money and thereby capitalism is destroyed and replaced with a communist system will the masses be able to enjoy 'freedom without inverted commas' (Lenin 1906 [1962]-b: 264). Finally, all of this means that bourgeois freedom constitutes a false universal, based upon a particular which is concealed, namely the power of capital, while proletarian freedom is a genuine universal, based not upon greed or careerism but upon the interests of the vast majority that unites the best of the past's revolutionary traditions and the best of the present struggle for a new life.

We may describe this argument as an effort to redefine freedom in a sense that is not bourgeois. The problem is that such a task had never been undertaken after a successful overthrow of bourgeois power, so Lenin and the communists found themselves in uncharted waters. As he reiterated over and over, the actual seizure of power is the easy part, but the task of constructing communism is far

more complex than anything that has gone before.¹ And he repeatedly reminded his fellow Bolsheviks of the many mistakes made, of the need to try anew each time. That sense of setting out into unknown territory is reflected forcefully in the piecemeal notes, concerning freedom and new democratic structures, Lenin made for the Extraordinary Seventh Congress of the Russian Communist Party in March, 1918 (Lenin 1918 [1965]: 152-7). We may, of course, attribute the sketchy nature of the notes to Lenin's crushing workload, but I would suggest they also reveal the tentativeness of exploring what a new sense of freedom means. Lenin's effort to work out that new meaning of freedom had at least two ramifications. To begin with, the partisan nature of actual freedom meant that the bourgeoisie would have to be smashed. So he writes, "Liberties" and democracy *not* for all, but *for* the working and exploited masses, to emancipate them from exploitation; ruthless suppression of exploiters'. And in explanation, 'NB: chief stress is shifted *from* formal *recognition* of liberties (such as existed under bourgeois parliamentarism) *to* actually ensuring the *enjoyment* of liberties by the working people who are overthrowing the exploiters, e.g., from *recognition* of freedom of assembly to the *handing over* of all the best halls and premises to the workers, from recognition of freedom of speech to the handing over of all the best printing presses to the workers, and so forth' (Lenin 1918 [1965]: 155). Naturally, the offer was always there for the bourgeoisie to join the process of constructing communism and to divest themselves of bourgeois class identity, as indeed many did among intellectuals, inheritors of capitalist wealth and middle peasants. But many more continued resistance and, when that proved futile, fled abroad to feed the anti-communist cause in as many ways as they could among the Entente. The reality of the concentrated effort by the Entente to dislodge the new government, with troops, equipment and money for the White Terror at the hands of the various

¹ As Yermakov puts it so well, 'They were part of a search for a correct road to the unknown' (Yermakov 1975: 107).

White Armies and their temporary regimes, ensured that the remnants of the bourgeoisie and old aristocracy within Russia would indeed be smashed.²

Yet the ramifications of constructing everything anew also unleashed new forms of freedom, forms that were partially in evidence in the lead-up to October, but forms that simultaneously risked falling back into old patterns while exhibited new possibilities. Let me give two examples. Before October, the Bolsheviks were, as Rabinowitch makes clear through a mass of detail on internal debates, less a tightly disciplined and unanimous organisation and much more a flexible party, especially in the crucial period between July and October in 1917, with open and vigorous and freewheeling debate, disagreements and responsiveness to the mood of the masses. Indeed, the ‘phenomenal Bolshevik success can be attributed in no small measure to the nature of the party in 1917 ... I would emphasize the party’s internally relatively democratic, tolerant, and decentralized structure and method of operation, as well as its open and essentially mass character’ (Rabinowitch 2004 [1976]: 311). It is worth noting that after October the party operated in largely the same pattern, with spirited debate in which Lenin’s ‘directives’ were not necessarily ‘obeyed’ but formed sharp points in that ongoing debate.

As a second example, let us now move to the period after October and the account of Arthur Ransome at a conference in Jaroslavl in 1920. Even in the midst of the multiple crises brought on by the aftermath of the First World War and the ‘Civil’ War, debates were vigorously open. Upon arrival from Moscow with Radek and Larin (a Menshevik), Ransome notes that the auditorium was full of workers, with not an intellectual to be seen. The topic was industrial conscription. In the first session Radek and Larin lengthily set out their opposing views, but the second

² Much has also been made of the exclusion of other socialist parties from the government (Rabinowitch 2007), whether mainstream Mensheviks, Right Socialist-Revolutionaries, Anarchists, and eventually Left-Socialist-Revolutionaries, Menshevik-Internationalists and Mezhrainontsy (Interdistrict Group). But on this matter some excluded themselves (mainstream Mensheviks and Right Socialist-Revolutionaries) by organising resistance to the government. Others were in coalition until they shot themselves in the foot by letting loose assassins on the Bolsheviks in 1918, one of whom put a couple of bullets in Lenin (Left-Socialist-Revolutionaries). Others joined the renamed Russian Communist Party (from all groups, but especially Mezhrainontsy, Left Socialist-Revolutionaries and Menshevik-Internationalists).

session on the following day turned out to be very revealing. Worker after worker came forward to speak, some a little naive but most astutely aware of the political issues at stake, exhibiting a ‘political consciousness which would have been almost incredible three years ago’. The debate rolled on all evening, covering myriad topics, with all who wished to speak given the floor. The outcome: the sympathy for Larin’s opposition faded and Radek’s proposal to support the proposal was carried. Yet the most intriguing point is that for Ransome this is nothing less than the complex process of free debate enabled under the dictatorship of the proletariat (Ransome 2011 [1921]: 28-34). It is as if Ransome is reporting on the actual embodiment of three of Lenin’s ‘Ten Theses on Soviet Power’:

(4) (3) abolition of parliamentarism (as the separation of legislative from executive activity); union of legislative and executive state activity. Fusion of administration with legislation;

(3) (4) closer connection of the whole apparatus of state power and state administration with the masses than under previous forms of democracy;

(9) transfer of the focus of attention in questions of democracy from formal recognition of a formal equality of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, of poor and rich, to the practical feasibility of the enjoyment of freedom (democracy) by the working and exploited mass of the population (Lenin 1918 [1965]: 154-5).

Perhaps it would be better to say that Lenin was formulating a process already under way.

Thus far I have argued that actual freedom arises from the explicit partisanship of freedom advocated by Lenin. This formulation is not quite correct, for the opposition between formal and actual freedom was a product of the former system that the communists set out to smash and replace. That is, with the very

conditions for distinguishing between actual and formal freedom now passing, the type of freedom fitfully emerging is qualitatively different.

References

- Kolonitskii, Boris Ivanovich. 2004. 'Democracy' in the Political Consciousness of the Freruary Revolution. In *Revolutionary Russia: New Approaches*. edited by R. A. Wade. New York: Routlege, 75-90.
- Lenin, V.I. 1902 [1961]. What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement. In *Collected Works*, Vol. 5. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 347-529.
- . 1905 [1963]. The Struggle of the Proletariat and the Servility of the Bourgeoisie. In *Collected Works*, Vol. 8. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 537-43.
- . 1905 [1966]-a. Party Organisation and Party Literature. In *Collected Works*, Vol. 10. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 44-9.
- . 1905 [1966]-b. The Proletariat and the Peasantry. In *Collected Works*, Vol. 10. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 40-3.
- . 1906 [1962]-a. Neither Land Nor Freedom. In *Collected Works*, Vol. 10. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 421-2.
- . 1906 [1962]-b. The Victory of the Cadets and the 'Tasks of the Workers' Party. In *Collected Works*, Vol. 10. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 199-276.
- . 1907 [1963]. In Memory of Count Heyden: What Are Our Non-Party "Democrats" Teaching the People? In *Collected Works*, Vol. 13. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 50-7.
- . 1912 [1963]. Capitalism and "Parliament". In *Collected Works*, Vol. 18. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 129-31.
- . 1912 [1964]-a. Can the Slogan "Freedom of Association" Serve as a Basis for the Working-Class Movement Today? In *Collected Works*, Vol. 18. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 242-4.
- . 1912 [1964]-b. Concerning Certain Speeches by Workers' Deputies. In *Collected Works*, Vol. 18. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 413-19.
- . 1918 [1965]. Extraordinary Seventh Congress of the R.C.P.(B.), March 6-8, 1918. In *Collected Works*, Vol. 27. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 85-158.
- . 1919 [1965]. "Democracy" and Dictatorship. In *Collected Works*, Vol. 28. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 368-72.
- Lih, Lars T. 2011. *Lenin*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Rabinowitch, Alexander. 2004 [1976]. *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*. Chicago: Haymarket.
- . 2007. *The Bolsheviks In Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ransome, Arthur. 2011 [1921]. *The Crisis in Russia*. New York: Dodo.

Yermakov, A. 1975. *A. Lunacharsky*. Moscow: Novosti.