Vol. 2 No. 1 Spring 2023

PIETAS

A Journal of Tradition, Place, and Things Divine

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Book Reviews

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Lenin Lived, Lenin Lives, Lenin Will Live—Again?

Dominick Sansone

Review: *Lenin 2017: Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through,* by V.I. Lenin, edited and introduced by Slavoj Žižek (London, UK: Verso, 2017), 186 pp. $19.95.

Upon its publication, *Lenin 2017* ostensibly set out to provide an intellectual framework for understanding theoretically unexpected geopolitical developments that were occurring not in 1917, but rather in the present day. It is easy to forget that at the time of the book's release in the latter half of the 2010s, the international left was spiritually shaken in a way that it had not been since the collapse of European communism nearly thirty years earlier. And yet, according to Žižek, it also found itself at a moment that "uncannily resembled" the rise of Leninism in the early 20th Century (xv). The stated purpose of the collection is therefore to examine the reflections of the Bolshevik leader in the wake of the October Revolution so as to help the modern left understand the "missed opportunities" of 1917 (xv). Slightly less than two-thirds of the text is composed of a number of Lenin's theoretical writings, letters, and speeches from the early post-revolutionary period until his death in 1924. The remaining one-third consists of a nearly eighty-page introduction by Žižek, as well as a fifteen-page afterword. As the book's central focus is to connect the experience of Lenin with the present day in order to inspire radical change, this review will first examine Žižek's central thesis as laid out in his introduction, followed by his decision to include certain selections of Lenin's work, and conclude with a critical analysis of Žižek's presentation of historical events, as well as take a closer look at the general motivations behind his decision to release *Lenin 2017.*

The goal of Slavoj Žižek's writing is to inspire radical sociopolitical change that abolishes all existing value hierarchies and fundamentally reorients the manner and meaning of human association. In pursuit of this end, he often celebrates political violence—past, present, and future. But he is nonetheless an honest radical (at least for the most part). His intent is not hidden. Besides being theoretically consistent, not to mention an undoubtedly gifted writer and powerful thinker, he is a man committed to forming a revolutionary consciousness in the intellectual types that are drawn to his work. Žižek released *Lenin 2017*, as he has every

work in his canon, as an unabashed man of the left. This review, despite generally disagreeing with that ideology, aims to take his intellectual position seriously.

LENIN THE IDEAL

At first glance, the book seems to be a standard practice of Soviet apologetics: Salvaging the communist project from the administrative ogre Stalin by celebrating the name and legacy of Lenin (supplemented, of course, with plenty of allusions to Trotsky). Upon closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that the intention was not to simply engage in a mere glorification of Lenin the man, but rather Lenin as (subjective) representative of the revolutionary ideal in the historical dialectic. In his introduction, Žižek explains that the left in 2017 was approaching a moment of crisis. The Social-Democratic welfare state had failed—and would continue to fail—to enact the institutional change that is demanded by authentic liberation (xxix). Yet, the inability for our "politico-ideological constellation" to produce real solutions to transnational issues such as those pertaining to "ecology" and "emancipated sexuality" would create the circumstances, both material and psychological, for the rise of a new radical and revolutionary movement (xiv, lxi). Operating within a corporate capitalist economic system and liberal democratic political superstructure, however, the contradictions of the current order would first induce a reactionary backlash to the internationalism of global capital (i.e., a resurgent nationalism). The dialectical antithesis of the old left's failure would therefore necessarily be the rise of a "rightist populism" (xxix).

This was not an unreasonable assessment. The 2016 election of Donald Trump as well as the Brexit vote, not to mention the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea through military force and the subsequent separatist wars in Eastern Ukraine—the latter two specifically referenced by Žižek in support of his thesis—certainly seemed to indicate a nationalist response to rampant internationalism (xv–xx, xxx). For Žižek, even the European Union is considered as "a tool of global capital [being used] to dismantle the welfare state" (xxix). All of this, however, was necessary according to the existing dialectic. The conditions for true liberation could only be brought about through an upheaval in the structural basis of society. Žižek works within a Hegelian framework in which the existing circumstances of the given stage of historical development create the necessary conditions for the subsequent order. In keeping with Marx, he also largely acknowledges that this general process can be ascertained

through examining the economic mode of production and the contradictions inherent to it. His unique methodology additionally utilizes a modern psychoanalytic lens (informed primarily by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan) to intellectually dissect the sociopolitical superstructure (i.e., the existing power structure that dictates the manner and mode of human interaction in a given society) that rests upon that economic foundation. Understanding the theoretical scaffolding for his thought is therefore essential to make sense of both Žižek's methodology of interpreting current affairs and how he forms his thesis for potential future developments (expanded upon further below).

Returning to 2017, Žižek perceived in the temporary triumph of populism the fertile womb from which a genuine leftism could then emerge. But it would be the task of a Lenin-type figure, acting as representative of the revolutionary ideal, to first properly ascertain the objective conditions of the historical situation. Responding to the reactionary backlash of the Social-Democratic model's breakdown, the subsequent synthesis would be the rise of an actually radical movement. By engaging in a Freudian psychoanalytic process of remembering past traumatic events, the modern left could glean from Lenin's experience the means by which to begin the process of "re-actualising" communism for the present day (xiii). The repeat of, and not the return to, Petrograd 1917 would allow them to face the "resistance" that was the unfortunate turn to Stalinism and the subsequent Soviet disaster (xv). The latter, previously an obstacle, could then be transformed into "the very resort of analysis, and this in turn [would be] self-reflexive in a properly Hegelian sense: resistance is a link between object and subject, between past and present" (viii).

The subsequent result is that the terror of communism and its 1989 collapse could now be therapeutically "worked through" in the psychoanalytic sense (vii–viii). Otherwise, the continued "false remembering" of the Soviet experience dooms the modern left to repeat it (xiii). According to Žižek, this "working through" enables one to transcend the standard right versus left interpretation of the October Revolution (i.e., the horrors of the Soviet Union that proceeded from the Marxist seizure of power were baked into the Bolshevik cake versus if only Trotsky had won the battle of succession, the true legacy of Lenin would have been secured, and with it an authentic socialist state) (xv). The question of whether the Stalinist threat was inherent to the October Revolution becomes irrelevant. Even if the historical conditions at the time fated the Soviet project to a descent towards the authoritarian

bureaucratism represented by Stalin's rise to power, the modern left could still learn from (not to mention lament) "an authentic emancipatory vision condemned to failure by its very victory" (xiii).

Žižek therefore takes care to explain that the turn to Stalinism and the proceeding terror have no bearing on whether or not the Bolshevik seizure of power was justified (indeed, his call to "repeat" Petrograd 1917 is essentially a call for revolution). Lenin himself is presented as having been largely aware of the difficulty of implementing a program that would create the necessary conditions for a viable socialist state. Selected texts include him discussing the industrially underdeveloped and culturally backwards circumstances that the communists were presented with in early twentieth-century Russia. Yet, as Žižek intends to stress, Lenin never wavered from his belief in the inevitability of Marxist liberation.

EFFECTIVE PRAXIS

In the section "Notes on the Texts," Žižek states that his method for selecting the various pieces was to "present Lenin's attempt to surmount the problems confronting the Soviet state at the end of the [Russian civil] war." However, he makes an exception in his decision to include the last two seemingly unconnected letters since they "render palpable not only Lenin's desperate effort to fight to the end but also the painful personal stakes of his last struggle."

The first of the selected texts sets the tone for the book: namely, revolutionary perseverance through unforeseen developments and overcoming unfortunate setbacks. In a 1921 letter to M.F. Sokolov, the Soviet administrator in charge of overseeing the management of territory seized in the Polish-Soviet War, Lenin responds to Sokolov's implication that the Bolsheviks should be able to simply tear out all of the existing bureaucratic features in the state apparatus (1–3). Sokolov naively believed that a socialist economy would then naturally arise from the ashes of the bourgeois-capitalist structure. Lenin explains to him that despite their frustration over the difficulty in cultivating the necessary revolutionary mindset, a proper understanding of the objective conditions in "a peasant country" requires patience and gradual reform. He then reaffirms the fact that although the present stage of historical development in Russia may not be ripe for socialist economics, this had no bearing on the rightfulness of seizing power (3).

This general theme, balancing (or adapting) the demands of theory with specific historical conditions, is the focus in all of proceeding texts selected by Žižek (besides the last two). Close to the first 100 pages in the book are composed of a number of Lenin's speeches and letters justifying the 1921 introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Žižek in his introduction specifically draws attention to the section "Notes of a Publicist: On Ascending a High Mountain" (xxvi). In the latter, Lenin makes the analogy between the Bolsheviks' revolutionary endeavor with a mountain climber charting a new path up a rock face. There may come a time when the climber needs to partially descend back down the path that he has come up in order to reevaluate the best way to proceed even further up the mountain (29–30). Onlookers, doubting the climber and rejoicing in his missteps, will revel in this fact. The NEP's apparent retreat from socialist economics and the introduction of minor features of a market economy were seen by some as proof of the Bolsheviks' failure. "This is exactly where we [the left] are today, after the 'obscure disaster' of 1989," explains Žižek (xxviii). In order to present a viable communist project that can serve as a true alternative to global capitalism, going back to the mountain climbers starting point (i.e., Lenin's seizure of power) is once again necessary so as to "choose a *different* path," and proceed forward in an appropriately dialectical manner given the present circumstances (xxix).

Turning from analysis of economic factors, the remaining texts that Žižek chooses to include are primarily focused on Bolshevik engagement with a culturally and educationally deficient Soviet populace. The central theme of these selections is Lenin's attempt to wrestle with the challenge of building socialism among a people largely lacking in revolutionary consciousness. While the traditional Marxist economic concerns are left to the reform implementations of the NEP, the task of preparing a workable socialist state is therefore also perceived to be one of generating the proper psychological conditions among the citizenry. In keeping with Žižek's own intellectual framework of modern psychoanalytic thought synthesized with more orthodox Marxist views on class relations, the latter half of the book appears to be emphasizing Lenin's personal realization that the relationship between the sociopolitical superstructure and the economic mode of production upon which it sits may be more mutually influential upon one another than previously believed (in comparison to orthodox Marxism, in which the former is overwhelmingly dictated by the latter). The reason for focusing so sharply on the challenges of adapting theory to objective conditions are

covered below under the subheading "Searching for a Hero," but here it will suffice to say that Žižek is intently concerned with the question of praxis and the fact that all effective political action requires breaking the confining chains of dogmatic theory.

Beginning with Lenin's "'Last Testament': Letters to Congress," the question of social reorganization concerns itself with the actual individuals who are staffing the state apparatus. Creating widespread revolutionary consciousness among the citizenry required having genuine members of the working class—not just the Bolshevik Party as proletariat vanguard—integrated into the "administrative machinery" of the state (117). Pages from Lenin's diary express his changing focus away from the realm of economics and towards the people's "deficiencies" in literacy, education, and culture (122, 138–140). General social organization of the peasantry, including the formation of state-sanctioned cooperatives in the countryside, is presented as a medium for further cultivating the aforementioned revolutionary consciousness necessary for liberation; specifically, this meant dispelling the false illusions of otherworldly prosperity bestowed by religion (127–128). "There is 'only' one thing we have left to do and that is to make our people so 'enlightened' that they understand all the advantages of everybody participating in the work of the cooperatives, and organizes [sic] participation" (130).

Lenin also castigates pedantic Marxists who refuse to understand the nature of "revolutionary dialectics," in which Marx himself (according to Lenin) is said to have acknowledged the demand for "utmost flexibility" in times of revolution (137). The last of Lenin's selected writings (before the unrelated final two) demonstrate a leader who has come to the realization that bureaucracy is now, and will remain for the foreseeable future, indispensable to the burgeoning Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The question instead becomes one of advantageous reorganization, and staffing the various administrations of the state apparatus with the right individuals—i.e., "irreproachable Communists" (153).

The penultimate text is a letter in which Lenin harshly scolds Stalin for having spoken rudely to Nadezhda Krupskaya (Lenin's wife) during a phone call (167). Krupskaya had been keeping an incapacitated Lenin abreast of political news, which was expressly forbidden by the Central Committee based on the medical recommendation of Lenin's doctors.[1] Stalin, busy aggrandizing power and maneuvering himself as the sole successor to Lenin, had an

[1] Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography* (UK: Macmillan, 2000), 463.

obvious interest in keeping the latter in the dark to his political machinations, and subsequently lashed out harshly against Krupskaya for her insubordination. The last letter is in reference to an affair concerning a group of Georgian communists (169). After being accused of acting like an imperial emissary, the Bolshevik Sergo Ordzhonikidze physically beat up a member of the latter group. Stalin's subsequent protection of Ordzhonikidze enraged Lenin and led him to castigate Stalin in writing. These letters were dictated on both the day before, as well as the day of Lenin's death, and clearly demonstrate the difficulty brewing between him and his soon to be successor. Besides taking up a good amount of the book's introduction, this subject—the Stalinist turn—is additionally the primary theme of the afterword.

As stated above, Žižek presents his argument—in which the protagonist, Lenin, wrestles with the unforeseen challenges of founding a (post) Revolutionary state—with the intention of "working through" the unfortunate experience of the Soviet Union. By going back to the Bolshevik seizure of power, the "resistance" of the USSR's downfall is used to re-actualize communism for the present day. What does this actually mean? Clearly, by examining the selection of texts, Žižek attempts to make the argument that the descent towards bureaucratism and the impending implosion in 1989 was not only something that may have been inherent in the revolution given the dialectical progression of history, but that Lenin himself had come to realize this fact and subsequently adjusted his political goals accordingly. By analyzing the thought of Lenin in the aftermath of October 1917, Žižek means to demonstrate the communist vision—not as it turned out, but as it could have turned out—through the eyes of the revolutionary ideal in one of its greatest historical forms. This is how the Soviet project, with all of its potentialities still intact, can be transformed from trauma-induced "resistance" directly into a tool for re-actualizing communism for the modern revolutionary moment.

SEARCHING FOR A HERO

This is the theoretical reasoning which Žižek provides as justification for presenting *Lenin 2017*. However, the argument cannot be separated from the general theme that is being expressed through the various selected texts: the need to concentrate on the objective conditions at the time, and to prepare the people psychologically for liberation. This means

fundamentally reorienting views on culture and religion, as well as overhauling education. Žižek is eager to point to Bolshevik efforts at implementing social initiatives that were radically different from the established tradition. For instance, he mentions that in addition to the introduction of universal healthcare and social-security benefits, "women's rights were [also] greatly increased through new laws designed to wipe away centuries-old inequalities" left over from the Czarist regime—although this is rather questionably cited from a Wikipedia page on Ukraine in the 1920s (xvii).

The leftist attempt to undermine traditional Western culture and change public attitudes on social issues does not seem like a revelatory insight. Yet considering the aforementioned context of "re-actualizing communism for the present day," presenting Lenin in this way is integral to Žižek's thesis. The realization that the psychological state of the public must be made ready for liberation leads to the conclusion that only an enlightened people could have made the Soviet project work. The Stalinist threat may have been inherent to the Bolshevik Revolution, but that was only because the citizenry was not properly conditioned at the time of the seizure of power. The lesson for the modern left is clear: patience and persistence is needed in changing public attitudes. This next time around, with the proper consciousness, the communist vision will succeed.

Why did Žižek feel the need to relay this specific message at this point in time? The centennial of the October Revolution is certainly part of the answer, but his full motivation for publishing the book must also be considered in light of the events in the lead up to 2017. Žižek is a man who writes with political action in mind. Perhaps most famous for cultural analysis, his work attempts to understand historical conditions in all domains of human association so as to (purportedly) identify the dialectical contradictions and inspire revolutionary change. Effective praxis is always the primary consideration—theory without political implementation is useless. Therefore, at the time of his editing *Lenin 2017*, the international left did not just need a theoretical framework for analyzing previously unforeseen political events: it needed hope. It shouldn't be underestimated how genuinely demoralized the latter group was in the second half of the 2010s. There was a palpable moment of utter panic as their ostensible arc of progress seemed to continually bend not towards leftwing equity and Social Justice, but rightwing tradition and the return of national sovereignty. As he does in all of his writing, Žižek in *Lenin 2017* adapted a concept to meet

the practical political demands of the present moment.[2] 100 years after the birth of the Soviet Union, the return to Lenin was meant to present one of the left's greatest political figures as a man dealing with unforeseen obstacles. Theoretical analysis aside, he appears as a normal human persevering through hardship, and demonstrating undying commitment to the revolutionary endeavor even in the face of setbacks. Žižek is attempting to inspire the international left to keep fighting for the hopes of their sought after tomorrow, despite the temporary triumphs of the world's Trumps and Brexits (not to mention its Stalins).

However, Žižek's political intentions can at times lead him to dip into the realm of exaggeration. Consider his portrayal of Lenin as a champion of national sovereignty. In the introduction, Žižek attempts to draw a direct line from Stalin to current Russian President Vladimir Putin, particularly in regard to Ukraine and "Great Russian chauvinism" (xix–xx). Lenin is presented in opposition as a defender of self-determination for the variegated peoples of the Soviet Union. In reality, "self-determination" for Lenin was primarily a programmatic slogan.[3] Similar to Trotsky, the question of a "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" was not confined to the former Russian Empire, but was rather an aspirational project for all of Europe (and eventually the world).

Further, Lenin's focus on imperialism as the end result of the internationalization of capital led him to see national liberation movements as key to the downfall of the planet's capitalist empires. The debate with Stalin over Ukrainian and Georgian incorporation into the RSFSR was a question of administration and logistics, not one of principle regarding the nature of "independence."[4] To state that this was imagined as meaning total political self-determination in Ukraine or Georgia free from the control of the Politburo sitting in Moscow (at least prior to the full realization of communism), would be entirely contrary to Lenin's Marxist revolutionary ideology.[5] It cannot be separated from Lenin's belief in spreading the revolution westward—a fact which Žižek himself is eager to emphasize in order to theoretically disconnect Lenin's teachings entirely from the policy of "Socialism in One

[2] See two of his most recent publications on the Covid pandemic, *Pandemic!* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020) and *Pandemic! 2* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).
[3] Stephen Cohen, *Bukharin and The Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888–1938* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 36–38.
[4] Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography*, 452.
[5] Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography*, 413.

Country" implemented by Stalin (xlviii). Allowing for political units that included common language and tradition would provide for easier dissemination of Marxist literature and educational initiatives, expediting the process of forming a class consciousness that would fundamentally destroy any semblance of the nation-state and dissolve all arbitrarily defined borders. Žižek, if speaking honestly, knows that there is little connection between the notion of Ukrainian "independence" envisioned by Lenin and the current nationalist elements that are fighting in opposition to Putin at present.

Still, this attempt to glob on to the current leftwing hot button issue and make it indicative of the inevitably approaching revolution is not necessarily a weakness. Even if one were to disagree with his jargon-heavy theoretical analysis, it is much harder to critique Žižek's acumen as a political actor of the left. Putin is a reviled figure among the latter today, as much for his perceived anti-LGBT legislation as for his foreign policy excursions. Linking him to Stalin aids the project of salvaging the world's first socialist state from its bloody descent into political oppression and economic failure—pretending that Ukrainian nationalism was a founding feature of that socialist state even more so. Crafting a feasible narrative in which the fight against Putin in Ukraine is synonymous to Lenin fighting for socialism against Stalin's reactionary politics is testament to both Žižek's commitment to his cause as well as oratory skill. Much like Lenin before him, he understands that political change is made by those who have the mental acuity to understand the current historical conditions that predominate at a given time, the qualities of leadership that attract loyalty, and the efficacy of the call for the courage to risk life and limb when the opportunity for action presents itself.

Lenin 2017 was written at a time when the international left felt as though its back was up against the wall. For this reason alone, it is worth reading now, five years later when the political situation has largely been reversed. Post-Covid, supranational decision-makers have reenergized their attempts to birth a new order from the womb of international circumstances that were largely orchestrated by those with a similar humanist worldview to that of Žižek—even though he is often a contrarian voice against today's primary power holders. Like all acolytes of Marx, both believe in an alchemic human nature in which a base material can be transformed *en masse* into some fundamentally different product. Real efforts have been made to centralize energy decision-making in order to fight climate change—also advocated

for by Žižek.[6] The implementation of leftwing social policy has also accelerated in transgender rights, anti-racism, and other forms of identity politics. Since the writing of his book, Žižek's calls for emancipation have found general acceptance in many Western nations.

Žižek's theoretical analysis in *Lenin 2017* provides an interesting perspective in helping to answer the perennial question 'What is to be done?' However, even for those of us who deny the Hegelian-Marxist dialectical progression of history, a closer look at the motivations for the book reveals a more enduring feature of political life: the need for hope, and the timeless reality that in the final analysis, it is the courage of men that charts the course. As Žižek closes out the final paragraph of his afterword:

> We navigate today in uncharted territories, with no global cognitive map—but what if this is hope, an opening to avoid totalitarian closure, like Saint-Just for Milner? What if we read the couple Lenin/Trotsky as a repetition of the couple Robespierre/Saint-Just—who are, or could be, today's Lenin and Trotsky? (182–83).

Indeed, even the conservative right that disagrees with the politics associated with these names cannot deny that Žižek's abrasive form of questioning rings loudly for them in 2022.

[6] For example, see Žižek, "Yes, it is a climate crisis. And your tiny human efforts have never seemed so meagre," *Independent*, September 29, 2019. After arguing that individual efforts to act responsibly towards the environment are largely futile in fighting off ecological ruin, Žižek cites the need to raise "more pertinent global questions about our entire industrial civilization." He concludes his article by citing Lenin's question, "What is to be done?" His implied answer in the final sentence is telling: "A strong global agency is needed with the power to coordinate the necessary measures. And does such the need for such an agency point in the direction of what we once called 'communism'?"

The examples of supranational efforts to increase regulatory control over the entire energy sector are numerous. For example, the most recent case of it upon this writing is a deal reached by the EU on Dec. 18, 2022 for the world's first major carbon border tax. The price of energy imports into the European Union will increase significantly while all "carbon-intensive industries" in Europe remain under the world's most stringent emissions standards. The effect will be to increase energy insecurity while further hamstringing European industry—all at a time in which the continent is starving for energy because of sanctions against Russia.