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LENINISM, THE GENERAL INTELLECT AND WORLD REVOLUTION TODAY

This paper starts from a recent essay by Antonio Negri entitled 'What to do Today with What is to be Done, or Rather The Body of the General Intellect' published in 2008.¹ Given the deepening capitalist economic crisis and growing threat of inter-imperialist war it takes up Negri's surprising view that a revived Leninism is necessary to overcoming the crisis. By Leninism I mean in the first place placing the question of revolutionary political change on a world scale at the core of discussion and viewing such change not as the product of some predetermined scheme but the outcome of a test of strategy, organization and political will between contending classes nationally and on a global scale. It means focusing on the weak links in the global capitalist system and organizing a political attack on such vulnerable points. It means finally reconsidering the whole process of party building in a way that could bring about the reign of the democratic general intellect.

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In the wake of the failure of Soviet Communism and demise of the great Marxist-Leninist parties in the West it seems absurd to talk about either world revolution or Leninism. I will talk about both. In the first place we are living in a time in which capitalism is in crisis once again as it was in 1914 and 1929. But this is not simply an imperialist crisis or a crisis of the economic system. It is a crisis of both. These contradictions are fuelling international conflict and in particular the exacerbation of American militarism which poses the threat of another world war. The latter makes it possible to envision a nuclear Armageddon in which case all bets are off. Short of that the possibility of revolution on a world scale is also on the horizon. We seem to be approaching a tipping point that resembles in its urgency the period 1914-18. Accordingly Lenin's ideas on world revolution which emerged in this period deserve reconsideration.

The possibility of global war arises from the crisis of capitalism which in part is a product of the inability of the system to transcend the system of antagonistic sovereign states. This long standing contradiction primarily takes the form today of the attempt on the part of the United States to hold onto its hegemonic role in the face of competition from an increasingly economically strong China and militarily and diplomatically strong Russia as well as the resistance that its imperialism is meeting in the Middle East and Latin America. These conflicts are exacerbated by the tensions arising from the capitalist economic crisis which broke out in 2008 and shows little sign of abating.

There are Marxists who claim that the present economic malaise is simply the outcome of an insufficient level of profits and/or excessive debt. When these problems are overcome they contend that capitalism will recover and the status quo ante will be restored more or less. The less takes the form above all of less for the working class all over the world including the West. It is my view to the contrary that the system has

¹ Lenin Reloaded 197-207.

entered into a general crisis composed of so many negative factors that it is difficult to believe that it can restore itself. What are the elements of this crisis ? We have already mentioned some: a geopolitical crisis based on the system's inability to transcend the pattern of mutually antagonistic territorial states, resultant uneven development and intensified imperialist rivalry, lack of profitability on accumulated capital, speculative bubbles, overhanging debt and credit crunches, and a lack of demand. Last but not least is a growing legitimization problem based on the widening gap between the rich and the rest of the population. This expresses itself in the alienation of the mass of the population from the state and political parties. Lurking in the background is the ecological crisis which one way or another will constrain the renewal of the system.

One hears that the American economy in contrast to most of the rest of the world is recovering. But Europe, Latin America, the Middle East Africa, even China and Japan continue to be experiencing difficulties. World GDP has slowed below 3 percent, levels of productive investment languish, the value of world trade is falling, protectionist sentiment is growing among other negative symptoms. In this inter-dependent world it is difficult to believe that the American recovery can be anything but temporary. Moreover the economic nationalism of Trump can only deepen the problems of the system as whole.

Despite its recent positive economic performance in many respects the United States the heart of capitalism which some believe is immune to socialist revolution is at the focal point of the crisis and the weak point of the whole system. Obama represented the ultimate attempt to salvage the idea of liberal reform. The election of Trump signals the demise of the liberal order in the United States which up to now has been able to contain class and racial conflict. Clinton's defeat represents the collapse of the liberal ideology based on the idea that American capitalism could and would reform itself. In its place has developed a split in the ruling class between the failed liberal democratic elite and those rallying behind the new authoritarianism of Trump. Since the crisis of 2008 the job market has recovered. But the overwhelming number of new jobs created have been temporary or low paying. Many young people unable to find stable employment have either withdrawn from the system or have gone over to socialism. The liberal intelligentsia bemused by identity politics or clinging to cultural studies or neokeynesian economics have no capacity to address the crisis. All pretence of reform has been abandoned by the ruling class.

Given the reactionary economic and social policies of the Trump Presidency at some point we are likely to see an exacerbation of social and economic problems and an upsurge of protest from below. In reaction there will be an intensification of state repression. Indeed, the militarization of the police, growth of the carceral system and deepening of government surveillance and censorship has prepared the way for the transition toward a fully authoritarian police state rationalized on the need to preserve the constitutional legacy of the Founding Fathers.

Any idea that America will willingly retreat from its posture of aggressive militarism abroad is belied by the fact that three generals sit in the Cabinet testifying to the overriding influence of the military-industrial complex. Their presence will usher in a new arms race involving a whole new level of military spending despite the fact that the over \$600 billion defense budget already dwarfs that of all other states combined. The President has at his immediate disposition a 70,000 strong praetorian guard and large so-

called volunteer and private armies as well an unlimited array of technologically sophisticated weapons. Militarist rhetoric and culture pervades the society and the growth of large organized armed vigilante groups is perfectly possible under Trump. In recent American history militarism and militarist adventurism has repeatedly been used as a means of evading internal social and political conflict at home and maintaining American influence overseas and is once more likely to be seen as a way out by the political and social elite. Ongoing war abroad is now built into the system.

Under such circumstances, to wit, economic crisis, growing class conflict, an entrenched ruling class unwilling and unable to reform itself, an exhausted liberal intelligentsia and alienated younger generation, embittered racial and ethnic minority populations and a frustrated and impoverished working class, the United States seems headed toward internal political crisis one possible outcome of which is revolution. Indeed, a failed military adventure would be a catalyst for such a crisis as the population in such circumstances is unlikely to rally around the flag. In more intense form mass protest could develop as happened during the period of the Vietnam War. Even without a revolution the result of such internal divisions could be a management crisis of the American empire. The United States falling into internal confusion could open the way for revolutionary change elsewhere in the empire as, for example, South Africa or Saudi Arabia. The possibility of revolutionary change within the United States or of internal conflict within that country which is the core state of global capitalism needs to be considered central to contemporary global political analysis. We conclude by reiterating that the possibility of future revolution and indeed a revolution which could challenge the existence of capitalism has to be put back on the agenda.

To be sure this traditional *deus ex machine* of the left has to be questioned. Given the decomposition of the work force especially in the advanced capitalist countries can the working class be reconstituted as a revolutionary agent? Or could it not be argued that capitalism could decay and society decompose without being able to reconstitute itself. It cannot be ignored that leftwing political parties, the institutions of the state and family are in decomposition. By what means can a revolutionary instrument be forged. There are no simple answers.

But let us assume that such an institutional means could be formed. Historically it was out of Lenin's thought that the revolutionary agents of the twentieth century were formed. Can Leninism be brought back to life? By Leninism I mean in the first place placing the question of revolutionary political change on a world scale at the core of discussion and viewing such change not as the product of some predetermined scheme but the outcome of a test of strategy, organization and political will between contending classes on a global scale. And in particular it means focusing on the weak links in the capitalist system and organizing a political attack on such vulnerable points. In Lenin's time this meant viewing the Russian Revolution as a catalyst of world revolution, organizing a political party sufficient to the task, creating a new Communist International which could bring about world revolution and understanding the anti-colonial struggle as an intrinsic part of the global revolution.

The question of how Leninism could apply to the contemporary world situation was brooded in a recently published collection of essays *Lenin Reloaded: Towards A Politics of Truth* edited by Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis and Slavoj Žižek (2007). Among the most intriguing pieces in this collection of essays was one by Antonio Negri entitled 'What to do Today with What is to be Done, or Rather The Body of the General Intellect'.² Negri of course became well known as a radical anti-Leninist who contended that it was possible for the working class or rather the multitude to transform the capitalist system without overcoming the bourgeois state by means of the mobilization effected by a revolutionary party and the support of organized labor.

Negri begins his essay by acknowledging that Lenin's project looked toward doing away with the state although in fact it resulted in the very opposite. Despite the unfortunate way things turned out Negri is forced to concede that we must once again return to Lenin's project which was a political one. But Negri insists it must be understood as biopolitical, i.e., involving every aspect of life. Lenin's noble aim was the victory of the political will of the proletariat in which body and reason, life and passion, rebellion and design constitute themselves as a biopolitical subject with the vanguard of the proletariat as its soul.

Having conceded this much to Lenin Negri then mistakenly argues that the relations of production in contemporary capitalism have changed utterly since the time of Lenin. He claims that the development of so-called immaterial labour means that the material production and the ensuing relations of production in the capitalism of Lenin's time are irrelevant to political organization today. That is not entirely the case. Factory production remains important in the First World and is increasingly important in the Global South. The factory or material proletariat and industrial trade unionism remain important to the political struggle of the working class. At the same time as Negri points out there has emerged new and advanced forms of commodity production in the form of so-called knowledge industries including universities. Negri is also right to note that industry is enmeshed in and dependent on as never before local, national and international infrastructures including those in the public sector. Negri is also right to conclude that changing conditions of the capitalist organization of production require new forms of political organization.

This latter point was fully understood by Lenin whose outlook was supremely political. Indeed the creation of the Bolshevik Party and the Communist International were themselves in their time a fresh response to the development of mass production, monopoly capitalism, and imperialism.

But the really original part of Negri's argument has to do with his discussion of Marx's concept of the general intellect. It is this concept which Negri uses to characterize all of the changes that have taken place in the forces of production in recent history while underlining their revolutionary potential. These changes add up to a major contemporary conflict between the forces of production which are in contradiction with the existing capitalist relations of production. It is this contradiction which constitutes the most important factor behind the movement toward world revolution today.

² 197-207.

As described by Marx in his famous chapter on machines in the Grundrisse the general intellect is a combination of the accumulated technical and social knowledge that develops under the control of industrial capitalism. But taking his cue from Marx Negri underlines the explosive contradictions latent within the general intellect. Contained within in it are all the vital forces of production and reproduction that are implicit within the biopolitical matrix of current capitalist society. This includes the struggle against wage labour and the demand for leisure and non-work which are inimical to capitalism and are in struggle against it. In other words the general intellect includes the sum total of the forces of production engendered by capitalism but also are in contradiction with the existing relations of production. An excellent instance of this contradiction is to be found in the contemporary university which is at once a product of capitalist society and at the same time inhibited in the production and dissemination of knowledge by its corporate form and administration. Another example is the medical system which is under the thrall of a bureaucratized and professional elite dominated by the drug companies. The latter blocks the full application of the vast accumulation of medical and social knowledge which could ameliorate disease and illness. In like manner the oil and gas industry and the profit system limits the possibility of the application of ecological science from resolving the environmental problems which threaten humankind. The forces of production which comprise the general intellect constitute a prime revolutionary contradiction with the relations of production of capitalism which threaten to burst it asunder. The more so as awareness or consciousness of this contradiction is growing not merely among elites but in the mass of the population.

In Negri's eyes then the general intellect is a subversive force but the form of the struggle which it will take in an effort to free itself from capitalist control is uncertain and will be determined by the development of the struggle itself. It is at this point that Negri falls back on Lenin in declaring that such a struggle must assume a political form which is not yet clear but which respects the liberating potential of the general intellect. Leninist it may be but its form must conform to the goal of realizing the potential of the general intellect. As such it is the liberation of the general intellect by its appropriation by the proletariat which is both the means and the goal of world revolution. Negri also underscores the importance of identifying the weak links where a breakthrough of where resistance, insurrection and an breakthrough of the general intellect is possible in accord with Lenin's dictums.

Negri's conception of revolution is likewise global as was Lenin's. The latter saw Russia as the denotator of a global revolution focused on Germany which was the command point of European capitalism. He also pointed to the revolutionary potential of the colonized countries as points from which capitalism could be undermined. We argue that today it is the United States in the era of Trump which is the epicenter of capitalism and is now the most vulnerable point for a revolutionary breakthrough or at least a political breakdown which could open the way for revolutionary change elsewhere.

But at the heart of Leninism is the concept of the party organized on democratic centralist lines and constituting the brains and the nervous system of revolution. Without such a body it is difficult to see how the overthrow of the bourgeois state and capitalist relations of production would be possible. Such a party needs to be capable of effective action against capitalist institutions. Negri makes a bow in this direction although as we have noted he insists that the revolutionary movement of the general intellect will

develop a new and original form of organization in order to bring about revolution. This is an important point. The party needs to assume a form which will prevent it from becoming a closed sectarian organization which will be capable of instituting the general intellect and not instead becoming a post-revolutionary bureaucratic machine. At the same time the party must be organized enough to overthrow capitalism.

Paul Leblanc has put forward a conception of Leninist political leadership which might be able to overthrow the capitalist state and relations of production while opening the way for the liberation of the general intellect.³ Perhaps it is not the ultimate form that such an organization will take. Nonetheless it is suggestive of how such a party might come into being. Leblanc sees the precondition of a broadly based and democratic revolutionary party to be a large vanguard layer of a broadly defined working class who have more knowledge and organizing experience than the rest. This stratum is not organized in a single party or is not in a party at all but does have a capacity to educate and organize other workers. It is this group which we can say constitute the organic intellectuals of the working class charged with ensuring the successful realization of the general intellect under socialism.

Only through the coordinated efforts of different components of this broad vanguard layer will it become possible to mobilize tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, and millions of people in serious challenges to the capitalist status quo, which should be the primary goal of revolutionaries today. Mass action coordinated by the broad vanguard layer obviously must go parallel with--and is inseparable from--efforts to nurture revolutionary consciousness within more and more of the working class as a whole. Various groups and individuals can and should feel free to develop theoretical perspectives, share their ideas, disagree with each other, engage in debates, etc., while continuing to collaborate closely in building the mass struggles. This is the pathway to revolution.

If one or another segment of this broad vanguard layer--under the banner of some spurious "Leninism"--seeks to dominate the broader effort at the expense of other segments, the result would be fragmentation and defeat. On the other hand, Leblanc's conception does not preclude the existence of parties which are Leninist in their organization.

But it is this broad vanguard element which in the course of the development forges a revolutionary party. If something approximating a revolutionary vanguard party, with good politics and a mass base, can actually be forged by different currents joining together in the class struggle, then the question is posed as to how such a formation can hold together and be an effective force for the advance of the working class and the revolutionary cause. Freedom of discussion including debate over the principles of such a party should be axiomatic. On the other hand, once decisions about political action are democratically arrived they should be binding on members. The importance of free discussion and debate lies in that it is the only way that the realization of the general intellect is possible in

³ Leninidm ii unfinished pp. 159=85.

dismantling capitalism and the capitalist state and moving toward socialism. Such a party would on the one hand always define itself in terms of the implementation of the general intellect and on the other hand have the political means for overthrowing capitalism and creating the institutions of a new democratic and socialist order.