

“The Bolsheviks Come to Power”: A New Interpretation

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Universal suffrage . . . indicates with the most perfect accuracy the day when a call to armed revolution has to be made.

— Engels, 1892

. . . we knew with certainty, from the experience of the mass elections to the Soviets, that the overwhelming majority of the workers and soldiers had already come over to our side in September and in early October.

— Lenin, 1918

IN THE WEEKS LEADING UP to the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 Lenin engaged in an intense debate with his comrades. Should and could the provisional government be overthrown? If so, when should it be done? And could the new regime hold power? Lenin, often in the minority, insisted that the Bolsheviks not only should but could successfully lead Russia’s workers and peasants to power — and that that conquest could be sustained. He also insisted on determining when best to make the overturn. Defending his position, Lenin frequently made reference to “objective facts,” such as “elections to the city councils

. . . and soviets” where “the Bolsheviks have majorities.” What exactly was he referring to and what did he mean? What were the assumptions and framework underlying his argument that eventually won over the majority of the Bolshevik Central Committee to his position? To fully understand Lenin’s stance it is necessary, I contend, to turn to Marx and Engels.

For all of the forests that have been felled to write about the Bolshevik Revolution, it’s striking — almost unbelievable — how few if any accounts connect it to the program and practice of Marx and Engels.¹ Some like that of Orlando Figes may make a nod in that direction, but only to claim that there is no connection (Figes, 1996, 145–46). Even in balanced and honest mainstream accounts that (unlike that of Figes) acknowledge Lenin’s “decisive” role — specifically, the breakthrough revisionist work of Alexander Rabinowitch — that lacuna exists. When Lenin initially appears in Rabinowitch’s award-winning trilogy about how the Bolsheviks came to lead the Revolution and how they ruled in its first year, there is no discussion or even hint of his roots in Marx and Engels, a tack continued throughout the three volumes. In the Prologue to the first volume Rabinowitch reveals: “Early in the course of research I became convinced that the key to an understanding of Bolshevik policy in June and July [1917] was not to be found in the

1 Aside from Lenin, the subject of this article, the lone exception I know is Waters, 1984. It’s possible that Soviet historians I’m unfamiliar with made the connection in a real rather than perfunctory way.

discovery of some preconceived revolutionary plan of Lenin's. . ." (Rabinowitch, 1968, 5). Having begun with that conclusion, it's probably no surprise that Rabinowitch wouldn't even consider Marx and Engels in informing Lenin's strategy for 1917. That neither founder of modern communism rates even an entry in the indexes of the first two volumes of the trilogy that focus on 1917 is all so telling — and this is the best that the academy has to offer.²

But the myopia isn't confined just to the mainstream academic literature. Even the magisterial account by Trotsky, Lenin's second in command in the October Revolution, is silent on the matter.³ Such omissions enable — inadvertently, certainly in Trotsky's case — the long-standing erection by Mensheviks and Social Democrats of the proverbial Chinese Wall between Lenin, on one side, and Marx and Engels, on the other — explaining, perhaps, why non-connectivity in the mainstream academic literature is almost *de rigueur*.

But Lenin didn't see such a "Chinese Wall." To the contrary, he considered that the strategy he pursued in 1917, and before, was deeply rooted in the program and practice of Marx and Engels. From the very beginning of his political career he

2 The second volume is Rabinowitch, 1976.

3 Trotsky, 2009. Marx is mentioned only in passing except for a two-paragraph discussion about whether he considered a socialist revolution could be carried out in a "backward" country like Russia (1227–8). I suspect for Trotsky and fellow Bolsheviks the connection was taken for granted and, thus, no need to mention. But that's speculation.

saw them as his mentors.⁴ Whether he was correct is in many ways the subject of this article. I contend that he was and at no time was that so clear as in 1917, the moment of Bolshevik ascendancy. And among the writings of Marx and Engels, none, I claim, was as influential in his strategy for 1917 as their balance sheet on the revolutionary events of 1848–1849, their baptism in fire — the context for which I begin with to make my case.

What Marx and Engels Bequeathed

Marx and Engels (hereafter M&E) had barely completed the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* when the “European Spring” commenced, in Paris, February 22, 1848, with popular revolts against Europe’s centuries-old monarchical regimes. Commissioned by the organization that they had helped to found a year earlier, the Communist League, the document was intended to be the theoretical foundation for the workers movement’s response to this most recent and anticipated chapter in the age-old class struggle.

When the revolutionary train arrived in Berlin a month later, the League’s leadership realized that the *Manifesto* had to be supplemented with another document that spoke to the immediacy of the German reality, where clearly a bourgeois democratic and not a socialist revolution was on the agenda; the latter required the realization of the former. They authorized M&E to write what was

4 See my “Lenin — Without Marx and Engels?” (Nimtz, 2009).

called the *Demands of the Communist Party in Germany*. At its core was the program for forging the “people’s alliance,” composed of workers, peasants and the petit bourgeoisie, necessary for the bourgeois democratic revolution.⁵ The reality of the revolutionary process in Germany began, however, to challenge preconceived plans and why Marx, apparently authorized to do so, decided to put the League on hold (*ibid.*, 70–71). So, for the duration of the revolution, the editorial board of Marx’s *Die Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (The New Rhineland Magazine) became, with him in the lead, its *de facto* organizational center.

M&E employed all available means to forge the “people’s alliance,” including propaganda and agitation through the *NRZ* as well as actions on the barricades and battlefield. When the monarchy was forced to concede elections for a constituent assembly in an effort to syphon off revolutionary energy in the streets, Marx thought it necessary to participate in order to take advantage of the opening to advance the revolution. A debate ensued within League ranks about whether to participate and how: to run a separate worker’s slate or to ally with the slate of the liberal democrats. Marx opted for the latter, given the weakness of the worker’s movement — a decision he would later critique.

A year after the commencement of the German edition of the European Spring, it was increasingly clear that the reaction was on the offensive. M&E and the rest of the League comrades were forced to retreat into exile in London by September

5 For details, see my *Marx and Engels* (2000), 64–65.

1849. The task now was to take stock of what had unfolded and to decide what next to do. Toward that end they produced a number of balance sheets, the most famous, probably, the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. But one of them proved, I argue, to be the most consequential for events in Russia seven decades later.

M&E's *Address of Central Authority to the League, March 1850* (Marx and Engels, 1975, Vol. 10, 277–87 — hereafter MECW, 10, 277–87) only eleven pages in length, had as its premise the imminent revival of the European Spring, specifically, its German theater. It's informed by the key lessons of the upheavals: first, the liberal bourgeoisie could not be counted on in realizing the bourgeois democratic revolution (the *Manifesto* held open that possibility) and, second, the petit-bourgeoisie could not be trusted. Yet it would be with the latter that the still small working class would have to ally in the expected renewal to overthrow “the reactionary party.” To avoid betrayal workers would have to be organized “independently,” a word that appears on virtually every page of the eleven-page document; hence, a self-criticism of the decision to suspend the League. An alliance with the petit bourgeoisie was simply that and not unity.

The *Address* advised the workers' movement and the League to have “unconcealed mistrust in the new government” that would issue from the overthrow of the old regime. “Alongside the new official governments they must immediately establish their own revolutionary workers' governments, whether in the form of . . . municipal councils . . . workers' committees” etc. The document also advised on

how the League should conduct itself in the electoral arena in the next upheaval. It should run League members, when possible, as candidates “even where there is no prospect whatever of their being elected” and not be persuaded by the petit bourgeoisie that in so doing “they are splitting the democratic party and giving the reactionaries the possibility of victory” — in other words, the time-worn wasted vote/lesser-evil argument. There was more to be gained than to be lost for the long-term interests of the workers’ movement in independent electoral action — an opportunity “to count their forces and to lay before the public their revolutionary attitude and party standpoint.”

That this advice followed almost immediately details on how workers should be “armed and organized” made clear why the need “to count their forces.” Only an independently organized and armed working class could assure that the next revolution in Germany would be, in the very last words of the document, “The Revolution in Permanence” — that is, a socialist revolution. The *Address* constitutes a foundational document in the M&E political arsenal.⁶

I argue that with regard to workers having their “own revolutionary governments,” independent electoral action, and being “armed and organized,” the *Address* informed, unlike any other writing of M&E, the Bolshevik course in 1917, crucial in explaining its success in leading Russia’s workers and peasants to power

6 Draper, Vol. 1, 1977, 599–612, convincingly argues that M&E, contrary to some claims, never disowned the document.

in October.⁷

While neither Marx nor Engels would ever again be directly involved in revolutionary politics, as they had been in the tumultuous two years in Germany, they drew extensively on that experience to pronounce on subsequent political developments there and elsewhere. That was especially the case when working-class political parties began to be formed two decades later — a development they both encouraged and helped to direct. “We have one firm rule for all modern countries and for all times and that is to prevail upon the workers to form their own independent party in opposition to all bourgeois parties” — the key lesson of the European Spring (MECW, 49, 515). Against the abstentionist position of the anarchists they argued that the electoral and parliamentary arenas offered a unique opportunity for the worker’s movement; in the words of the *Address of 1850*, “to count their forces.” This is what Engels was referring to in the conclusion to his 1884 book, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and State*, that “universal suffrage is the gauge of the maturity of the working class. It cannot and never will be anything

7 Absent in the *Address* is the worker-peasant alliance, all so vital in the success of the Bolsheviks. That omission was partly corrected in the subsequent Central Authority *Address of June, 1850*, that M&E wrote (MECW, 10, 371-77). For details see Nimitz, (2000), 106. I also provide the particulars on how M&E sought to recruit the peasantry to the “people’s alliance”—78-81, 95-98. The record doesn’t reveal that Lenin was familiar with this effort, for he would have certainly cited it.

more in the present-day state; but that,” he continued, “is sufficient. On the day the thermometer of universal suffrage registers boiling point among the workers, both they and the capitalists will know where they stand” (MECW, 26, 272). He was even more transparent eight years later to a comrade in Paris following electoral gains for his party:

Do you realize now what a splendid weapon you in France have had in your hands for forty years in universal suffrage; if only people know how to use it! It’s slower and more boring than the call to revolution, but it’s ten times more sure, and what is even better, it indicates with the most perfect accuracy the day when a call to armed revolution has to be made; it’s even ten to one that universal suffrage, intelligently used by the workers, will drive the rulers to overthrow legality, that is, to put us in the most favorable position to make the revolution. (MECW, 50, 29.)

To think, however, like growing reformist forces in the worker’s movement, that the electoral and parliamentary arenas were the be-all and end-all of politics would be to suffer from “parliamentary cretinism,” a phrase Engels coined in the heat of the 1848–1849 events in Germany.

Among the forces M&E worked with in later years none were more important in their opinion than the Russians, and for good reason. “Russia,” they wrote in 1882 in the preface to the second Russian edition of the *Manifesto*, “forms the

vanguard of revolutionary action in Europe.” And their youth were exemplary, as Engels wrote in 1872: “As far as talent and character are concerned, some of these are absolutely among the very best in our party.” And in anticipation of a Lenin, “They have a stoicism, strength of character and at the same time a grasp of theory which are truly admirable” (MECW, 44, 396). Some of those youth sought Marx’s opinion about Russia’s direction. He took the question so seriously that he learned to read Russian in order to consult original sources. Whether the country’s peasant communes would be the conduit to socialist transformation Marx cautiously opined two years before his death in 1883: “To save the Russian commune, a Russian revolution is needed” given the increasing penetration of capital in the countryside (MECW, 24, 371).

Engels, because he outlived his partner by 12 years, knew better how deep that penetration had advanced and agreed that only a “revolution in Russia” could save what was left of the peasant communes. And such a revolution would “give the labor movement of the West fresh impetus and create new, better conditions in which to carry on the struggle, thus hastening the victory of the modern industrial proletariat, without which present-day Russia can never achieve a socialist transformation, whether proceeding from the commune or from capitalism” (MECW, 27, 433). Contrary, therefore, to all future Stalinist distortions of M&E’s views, Russia could “never achieve a socialist transformation” *without* the overthrow of the bourgeoisie in Western Europe by its own proletariat. Engels could not have been more

prophetic.

A few months before his partner's death in 1883, Engels advised the newly formed workers parties not to found a new international. Conditions were not ripe; it had only been a decade since the end of the First International. But developments were “already taking shape in Russia where the avant-garde of the revolution will be going into battle. You should — or so we [Marx and I] think — wait for this and its inevitable repercussions on Germany, and then the moment will also have come for a big manifesto and the establishment of an *official* formal International, which can, however, no longer be a propaganda association but simply an association for action” (MECW, 46, 198). Engels, again, at his prescient best as history would soon confirm.

Lenin as Election and Duma Campaign Manager

For a decade, from 1905 to 1915, Lenin deeply immersed himself in electoral and parliamentary work — specifically, his activities around the elections to and the work of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party deputies, both Menshevik and Bolshevik, in the four State Dumas, the Romanovs' ill-fated dalliance with representative governance. It constituted about a third of his political life, which began in 1894 and ended in 1923, and is virtually ignored by friend and foe alike. What he did during that period and the lessons he drew are crucial to my argument. But the richness of that experience can't be distilled here.⁸ He briefly mentioned its

8 What my two-volume book does for the first time: Nimtz, 2014a,b.

significance in his most sustained writing after assuming state power responsibilities in October 1917. But with all of the demands that the last period entailed he was never able to provide the rich details. Nevertheless, what he did say about that experience is indispensable for my argument, as I'll explain at the end.

What is the most relevant evidence from that period in Lenin's life that supports my argument? First, to what extent did M&E inform his practice? That became immediately apparent with the commencement of Russia's "Spring" in 1905, its long-awaited edition of 1848–1849. A debate between Lenin and Georgi Plekhanov, the *eminence gris* of the rival Menshevik wing of the RSDLP, about whether M&E's *Address of 1850* was applicable at that moment, revealed that he was more informed than his one-time idol. Lenin argued, correctly, that the *Address* was intended for the moment when a popular democratic revolution had overthrown the old regime and for what the worker's movement had to then do to ensure a "revolution in permanence," that is, a socialist revolution. That's not, he opined, what was on the agenda in the first four months of Russia's Spring (LCW, 8, 385–89). Twelve years later it would be.

The reason, most likely, that Lenin could be more accurate about the *Address* than Plekhanov is that he "knew [it] by heart." Not only had he memorized the document but he "used to delight in quoting" it, according to fellow Bolshevik and party archivist David Riazanov — key evidence for my claim that M&E informed Lenin's course in 1917 (Riazanov, 1973, 100).

Compelling evidence for M&E having informed Lenin's engagement with the electoral/parliamentary arena is how he responded to the ever present lesser-evil/wasted vote conundrum — a bugbear until today for much of the left. The elections to the Second Duma in 1906 first posed the need to grapple with the issue. The Constitutional Democrats or Cadets, largely centrists, argued that unless the RSDLP supported them in the elections the extreme rightists, the Black Hundreds — a fascist-like current — would be the victorious party. Lenin vehemently disagreed with the Menshevik wing of the RSDLP, which was more inclined to agree with the Cadet's claim. He saw it as a scare tactic and did detailed analysis of election returns for the First Duma to make his case. He felt vindicated by the actual outcome in which the RSDLP, running its own slate, made its largest gains without having to lend support to the Cadets. And the Black Hundred threat proved to have been a dud. Though there is no explicit reference to M&E's *Address* in his polemics with the Mensheviks, there is no doubt that it informed his stance. What M&E had advocated — that the Communist League should run its own candidates in elections “even when there is no prospect whatever of being elected” and not be persuaded by the petit bourgeoisie “that they are splitting the democratic party and giving the reactionaries the possibility of victory” — is exactly what Lenin promoted.

The most contentious issue for the Bolsheviks was whether to participate or not in the electoral/parliamentary process. Though they were united in boycotting the Bulygin Duma in 1905, Czar Nicholas' transparent attempt to syphon off the

energy of the revolution (just as his cousin Frederick in Germany had done in 1848), they divided a year later over participation in the First Duma. The majority, with Lenin reluctantly on board, voted to boycott, a decision he admitted years later was an error — “left-wing communism.”

For the Second Duma, also in 1906, they were relatively united in deciding to participate. Lenin immediately drew up a plan of action for contesting the elections, including the writing and designing of campaign literature and propaganda. To appreciate how seriously he took the work, consider his appeals to fellow Bolsheviks about the election results, especially the returns from the workers’ curia or electoral college.

Unless our Party officials, and especially the advanced workers themselves, undertake the necessary and extremely important task of *studying* the course and the results of the elections in the worker curia, we can definitely say that we shall lose extremely valuable and necessary material for the future development of Party work and Party agitation. . . . It is our duty to give this fact [why the rival Social Revolutionary Party had done better in St. Petersburg than the RSDLP] the closest attention. *All* Social-Democrats must set to work to study this phenomenon carefully and find the correct explanation for it. . . . We *cannot* conduct consistent Social-Democratic work in St. Petersburg unless we pay close attention to the way in which the *masses of the workers* have voted for the candidates of the various parties. For the bourgeois parties it is important only to win so many seats. For us it is

important for the masses themselves *to understand* the tenets and tactics of *Social-Democracy* as distinct from all petty-bourgeois parties, even though they may call themselves revolutionary, socialist parties. We must therefore strive to obtain exact and complete data on the voting at the elections in the St. Petersburg worker curia. (LCW, 12, 62–69.)⁹

An intense debate broke out among the Bolsheviks about whether to participate in elections to the Third State Duma in 1907; new election rules were far less democratic than those for the two previous elections. Against the boycotters, Lenin employed M&E's balance sheets on 1848–1849 to make his case.

In the activities of Marx and Engels themselves the period of their participation in the mass revolutionary struggles of 1848–49 stands out as the central point. This was their point of departure when determining the future pattern of the workers' movement and democracy in different countries. It was to this point that they always returned in order to determine the essential nature of the different classes and their tendencies in the most striking and purest form. It was from the standpoint of the revolutionary period of that time that they always judged the later, lesser, political formations and organizations, political aims and political conflicts. (LCW, 13, 37.)

9 Lenin had already displayed a penchant for analyzing election results. See his polemic with the Mensheviks about the elections at the 1903 second congress of the RSDLP, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (1904).

No term that M&E coined in one of those balance sheets was Lenin more fond of employing — except perhaps for “the dictatorship of the proletariat” — than “parliamentary cretinism”; again, the mistaken belief that what takes place in the parliamentary arena is more important than what happens outside. In calling for Bolshevik participation in both the elections and the Duma, Lenin made clear that he wasn't a victim of that affliction.

By the time of the Fourth Duma elections in 1912, the Bolsheviks, now devoid of the boycotters, were in near-unanimous accord for participation. Lenin's assessment of the results reveals once again how seriously he took elections. “It is beyond question,” he wrote after analyzing them, “that elections supply *objective* data. Testing subjective wishes, sentiments and views by taking into account the vote of the *mass* of the population representing different classes should always be of value to a politician who is at all worthy of the name. The struggle of parties — in practice, before the electorate, and with the returns summed up — invariably furnishes data *erving to test* our conception of the balance of social forces in the country and of the significance of particular ‘slogans’” (LCW, 18, 505). That's exactly, I argue, why Lenin would pay such close attention to elections in Russia five years later. The entire record makes clear that these weren't aberrant pronouncements on his part about elections. They registered how thoroughly he had absorbed the lessons drawn by M&E, specifically, the need for the workers' parties to “count their

forces.”

Finally, Lenin gave detailed attention to the activities of those RSDLP deputies elected to the Dumas — again, both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. He did research and wrote speeches for them and employed the Bolshevik press, especially *Pravda*, to publicize their actions. In addition, he drafted bills to propose and offered advice on how to vote on pending legislation such as budgets. Most consequential for Bolshevik fortunes, he helped their deputies take advantage of their parliamentary immunity to organize anti-war work when the Guns of August exploded in 1914, activity for which they were arrested; as the masses increasingly soured on the war Bolshevik opposition to it became a pole of attraction. No two goals were more important for Lenin in all of this work than independent working-class political action — the core message of the *Address* — and the forging of the worker–peasant alliance. M&E, I claim, informed much of what he did — putting him in a uniquely advantageous position a few years later.

Prelude to October

Lenin was in exile in Switzerland when Russia’s masses once again became protagonists of history. This time, February–March 1917, they did what they couldn’t do in 1905–1907: finally put to rest the sclerotic 300-year-old Romanov dynasty. A provisional government composed mainly of Cadets, and other bourgeois forces took its place and claimed legitimacy in what remained of the Fourth Duma. But almost

immediately Lenin rained down criticisms on it.

In its manifesto, the new government promises every kind of freedom, but has failed in its direct and unconditional duty immediately to implement such freedoms as election of officers, etc., by the soldiers, elections to the St. Petersburg, Moscow and other City Councils on a basis of genuinely universal, and not merely male, suffrage, make all government and public buildings available for public meetings, appoint elections to all local institutions and Zemstvos, likewise on the basis of genuinely universal suffrage, repeal all restrictions on the rights of local government bodies, dismiss all officials appointed to supervise local government bodies, introduce not only freedom of religion, but also freedom from religion, immediately separate the school from the church and free it of control by government officials, etc. . . . Soviets of Workers' Deputies must be organized, the workers must be armed. Proletarian organizations must be extended to the army (which the new government has likewise promised political rights) and to the rural areas. In particular there must be a separate class organization for farm laborers. (LCW, 23, 289–90.)

Why was Lenin so insistent that elections be held, especially for “the soldiers”? Because the Bolsheviks, I argue, would then be able “to count their forces and to lay before the public their revolutionary attitude and party standpoint,” as M&E had advised in their *Address*; to see if “the thermometer of universal suffrage registers boiling point among the workers,” as Engels had put it in his *Origins of the Family, Private Property and State* in 1884; and, to see if “universal suffrage . . . indicates

with the most perfect accuracy when a call to armed struggle has to be made,” as Engels explained to a French comrade eight years later — the epigram that leads this article. Did subsequent developments confirm his expectations?

If it had been premature in the first few months of the 1905 uprising to employ M&E’s *Address*, as Lenin argued against Plekhanov, now was the time to do so. A popular democratic revolution of workers and peasants had overthrown the old regime. The *Address* spoke exactly to such a moment, what the workers’ movement needed to do to ensure a “Revolution in Permanence.” But, as Lenin sought to explain to his Bolshevik comrades, a unique situation arose, an unanticipated outcome: two contradictory institutions sharing state power, that is, “dual power.” On the one hand, there was the provisional government which clearly, on the basis of the class interests of the parties in power, sought to keep the process from being “Permanent” — the last thing they wanted. That was still true a few months later when the government was joined by Socialist Revolutionaries such as Alexander Kerensky — “near-socialists,” as Lenin sarcastically called them. On the other hand, soviets, the institutional embodiment of the popular uprising, had quickly emerged, independently of Lenin’s calls from abroad to do so — not unlike what happened in 1905.

In calling for the organization of soviets, Lenin was following M&E’s advice in the *Address*. The worker’s movement in such a situation, they wrote, should have “unconcealed mistrust in the new government. . . . Alongside the new government

they must immediately establish their own revolutionary workers' governments, whether in the form of . . . municipal councils . . . workers' committees," etc. Compare this to Lenin's advice to one of the first group of Bolsheviks returning to Russia after the February Revolution: "no trust in and no support of the new government." What had not been foreseen in the *Address*, the uniqueness of the situation, is that the alternative worker's institutions, the soviets, weren't contesting "the new government," but willingly conceding power to the provisional government.¹⁰

Much of Lenin's task for the next seven months was to make a convincing case, through "patient explaining," for why the soviets and not the provisional government were the real expression of the interests of Russia's plebian masses and why, therefore, they needed to stop ceding power to the provisional government and take power in their own name. Independent working-class political action in the electoral arena, what M&E and the prior decade of Duma work had prepared Lenin for, would be the way to realize his goal. The *Address*, I contend, again, served as Lenin's play book.

Lenin clarified his demand for elections:

Reference is not to the Constituent Assembly, but to elections to

10 Waters, 1984, 56–61, provides the best distillation of Lenin's explanation for this unanticipated situation.

municipal bodies. Elections to the Constituent Assembly are, so far, merely an empty promise. Elections to the Petrograd City Council [Duma] could and should be held *immediately*, if the government is really capable of introducing its promised freedoms. These elections could help the proletariat organize and strengthen its revolutionary positions. (LCW, 23, 292–93.)

To be clear, he still supported the convening of a Constituent Assembly but “without the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies . . . [its] convocation . . . is not guaranteed and its success is impossible” (LCW, 24, 25).

Prior to his return to Petrograd Lenin penned his now famous “Letters from Afar” in which he outlined his vision for the next stage in Russia’s revolution. Especially relevant were his comments about the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies formed in Petrograd. That the Soviet was “drawing in *soldiers’* deputies, and, undoubtedly deputies from rural *wage*-workers, and then (in one form or another) from the entire peasant poor” was most encouraging. The inclusion of the soldiers’ deputies gave license to say that the Soviet comprised “*over 1,500* deputies of workers and peasants dressed in soldiers’ uniform.”

The prime and most important task, and one that brooks no delay, is to set up organizations of this kind in all parts of Russia without exception, for all trades and strata of the proletarian and semi-proletarian population without exception. . . . I shall mention that for the entire mass of the peasantry our Party . . . should especially

recommend Soviets of wage-workers and Soviets of small tillers who do not sell grain, to be formed *separately* from the well-to-do peasants.

Just as Lenin had once sought to use the four Dumas to construct the worker–peasant alliance, he was now advocating that the soviets be the vehicle for doing the same — a far more democratic representative body, akin to the Paris Commune.

Of crucial importance for the effectiveness of the soviets, he emphasized, was the organization of a “genuine *people’s* militia, *i.e.*, one that, first, consists of the *entire* population, of all adult citizens of *both* sexes; and, second, one that combines the functions of a people’s army with police functions, with the functions of the chief and fundamental organ of public order and public administration” (LCW, 23, 324–29). Along with independent working-class political action in the electoral and parliamentary arenas and workers having “their own revolutionary workers’ governments,” an “armed” and “organized” proletariat was the third essential weapon in the *Address* for ensuring the “Revolution in Permanence.” Not for naught did Lenin place such emphasis on the militias; *nota bene*: “of *both* sexes.”

Lenin’s first task once he returned to Petrograd was to win over fellow Bolsheviks to his position. Campaigning for “all power to the soviets” would require “a systematic struggle within the Soviets (by means of propaganda and new elections) for the triumph of the proletarian line” (LCW, 24, 295–96). With Trotsky, who once headed up the now legendary St. Petersburg soviet of 1905, now on his side

after the two had been bitter opponents for more than a decade, Lenin was on surer footing in trying to win over the soviets via “propaganda and new elections.” In the May 15 issue of the newly revived *Pravda* Lenin raised publicly for the first time the slogan, “*All power to the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies! No confidence in the government of the capitalist!*” (LCW, 24, 334). But only for propaganda and not agitation — at least at this time.

Almost immediately upon his return in April, Lenin plunged into electoral work, picking up from where he had left off three years earlier before the arrests of the Bolshevik deputies. If there was one thing that characterized post-Romanov Russia, it was the ubiquity of elections, this time not only to soviets but to local dumas as well — why Lenin called Russia “the freest of all the belligerent countries [in World War I] in the world.” Elections, as he was fond of saying, were an opportunity “to teach.” He soon composed a piece of campaign literature for mass distribution modeled off of something he did for the 1906 Duma elections that neatly distinguished the stances of the four competing parties — “Parties and groups to the right of the Constitutional Democrats [Cadets],” the “Constitutional Democrats and kindred groups,” the “Social-Democrats [Mensheviks], the Socialist Revolutionaries and kindred groups,” and, lastly, the “Bolsheviks, the party which properly should be called the *Communist Party*.”

Especially important for Lenin was how the parties stood on “the elective principle.” If the principle applied to government officials, shouldn’t soldiers be able

to elect their officers? “Not only must they be elected, but every step of every officer and general must be supervised by persons specially elected for the purpose by the soldiers.” And if civilians could displace government officials, shouldn’t soldiers enjoy the same right? “It is desirable and essential in every way. The soldiers will obey and *respect* only elected authorities” (LCW, 24, 93–101). Whether Lenin’s pamphlet impacted soldiers is uncertain. It may have helped to generalize practices that were already in place as mounting losses on the battlefield sparked increasing rank-and-file resistance to the commands of officers. What is known is that Bolshevik success in October was due in large part to the support they enjoyed among soldiers and sailors, and the promise of democracy and the elective principle — what no other party put in writing — no doubt made them attractive. For the party’s new program he proposed that the principle apply at all levels of governance and throughout the new society it sought to bring into existence. It applied, as well, he argued, to the party itself.

Lenin’s pamphlet appeared just in time for the 12 Petrograd district duma elections held at the end of May. As they were about to take place Lenin pointed to “two shortcomings in our Party organization and Party work.” These concerned the Bolsheviks’ list of candidates for one of the wealthiest districts in the city.

Our list for Liteiny District has only 33 candidates as against the 63 of the Cadets and the Menshevik bloc. . . . Apparently, our Party workers have not been able to find more than 33 candidates of the proletarian

party in this wealthy district. But this is an obvious shortcoming in our work, an obvious indication that we have not gone down far enough into the midst of the working and exploited people. We must break with established custom. In the wealthy districts we must “go among the people” more energetically than ever, and waken more and more strata of the working and exploited people to political consciousness. We should get the non-party proletarian elements — especially the *domestic servants* for instance — to take an active part in the elections and not hesitate to put the most reliable of them into our proletarian list. Why should we fear a minority of non-party *proletarian* elements, when the majority are class-conscious internationalist proletarians? (LCW, 24, 512.)

Nothing in the published corpus about his activities in 1917 reveals better than this directive the seriousness that Lenin lent to elections — precisely because he was trying to measure public sentiment to determine when best to resort to armed struggle.

A few months later elections to the Petrograd City Duma took place. William Rosenberg provides the most detailed account in English (Rosenberg, 1969, 131–63). Of significance are the gains the Bolsheviks made over the prior elections, a 14% improvement which foreshadowed their future fortunes. The party went into full campaign mode, not only in Petrograd but in Moscow — where they increased their vote by 40% — and other locations where local duma elections were to take place. Crucial evidence for my argument is that post-revolution Bolshevik memoirs say that

they regarded their gains “not only as a means of ‘taking the revolutionary temperature of the masses’ (Engels’s “thermometer”) but also as a potential aid in seizing power” (*ibid.*, 162). Not only Lenin but other Bolsheviks were familiar with Engels’ metaphor.

Of tremendous assistance to the Bolshevik campaigns was the start-up of two party newspapers, *Proletary* and *Soldat*, in place of the now banned *Pravda*. The Bolsheviks could now disseminate their program on a mass scale. Very reminiscent of the campaign literature Lenin had once written was the appeal to voters in three issues of *Proletary*:

Every worker, peasant, and soldier must vote for our list because only our party is struggling staunchly and bravely against the raging counterrevolutionary dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and large landowners. [Only our party] is fighting the reimposition of capital punishment, the destruction of worker and soldier organizations, and the suppression of all the freedoms won with the blood and sweat of the people. You must vote for our party because it alone is struggling bravely with the peasantry against large landowners, with workers against factory owners, with the oppressed everywhere against the oppressors. (Quoted in Rabinowitch, 1976, 92.)

This appeal and all the details of the campaign make it hard to believe that Lenin, who was on the run —a fact that most likely accounts for the lack of a paper trail — was not its orchestrator and largely responsible for what was achieved. No other

Bolshevik knew more about how to conduct an effective and successful election campaign.

Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's comrade and wife, provides the best circumstantial evidence. After returning to Petrograd, she wrote: "My work at the secretariat bored me more and more."

I wanted to get into real mass work. I also wanted to see Ilyich [Lenin] more often. . . . The district Duma elections took place in June. I went to Vasilevsky Island to see what progress was being made in the election campaign. . . . The elections to the district Dumas were over. I was elected to the Vyborg district council. The only candidates to be elected to this council were Bolsheviks and a few Menshevik-Internationalists. . . . I learned a great deal from the work in the Vyborg district. It was a good school for Party and Soviet work. During the many years that I had lived abroad as a political exile, I never dared to make a speech even at a small meeting, and until that time I had never written a single line in *Pravda*. I needed such a school very much. (Krupskaya, 1970, 303-306.)

Krupskaya's education speaks volumes about what was opened up for the Bolsheviks with the new opportunity for "mass work" through the local duma elections. Again, it is highly unlikely that Lenin wasn't intimately involved with her new and more fulfilling political life.

More decisive than the elections to the local dumas, however, as history would

show, were those to the soviets. Unlike for the local dumas, elections to the soviets were more frequent and included the right of recall, the details of which, however, are not captured in the extant published Lenin corpus. A decisive turning point in the revolution came in July when the Bolsheviks, who, in Trotsky's words, "occupied a wholly insignificant sector" of the workers' section of the soviets in April, now constituted "two thirds of its members" as a result of by-elections in the factories. "That meant that among the masses their influence had become decisive" (Trotsky, 2009, 523-24).

The Bolsheviks achieved a major victory in the Petrograd and Moscow soviets on respectively August 31 and September 5, when an overwhelming majority of delegates in both bodies passed motions calling for a rejection of any compromises with the bourgeoisie and the transfer of "All Power to the Soviets!" — testimony to the deepening of the revolutionary process. About this moment Trotsky writes: "The city dumas, which had made an effort to compete with the soviets, died down in the days of danger and vanished. The Petrograd дума humbly sent its delegation to the soviet 'for an explanation of the general situation and the establishment of contact'" (*ibid.*, 795).

On October Eve

In the lead-up to the October Revolution the Bolsheviks debated whether they enjoyed sufficient support for carrying out an armed overthrow of the provisional

government. The carnage on the battlefield, enabled by Kerensky's government, specifically, the price that Russia's peasants and workers were paying in blood, was the pressing issue. Lenin, in the minority — Trotsky was the Central Committee member closest to his views on this — insisted that adequate support existed.

The Bolsheviks, having obtained a majority in the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies in both capitals, can and *must* take state power into their own hands. . . . The majority gained in the Soviets of the metropolitan cities *resulted* from the people coming over *to our side*. . . . Compare the elections to the city councils of Petrograd and Moscow with the elections to the Soviets. Compare the elections in Moscow with the Moscow strike of August 12. Those are objective facts regarding that majority of revolutionary elements that are leading the people. (LCW, 26, 19.)

For Lenin, again, elections were an invaluable tool for calculating the probability of success for the most important election, the masses voting with their feet — their willingness and ability to not only take power but defend it. Note “objective,” exactly the term he had used in analyzing the Fourth Duma elections results in 1912. Also note the qualifier, the “majority of revolutionary elements that are leading the people” — the most effective voters, those voting with their feet.

Lenin reiterated this point about the value of elections five months after the October Revolution in a debate about the prospects for a Bolshevik-like revolution in Germany.

As matters stood in October, we had made a precise calculation of the mass forces. We not only thought, we *knew* [the other epigram that begins this article] with certainty, from the experience of the mass elections to the Soviets, that the overwhelming majority of the workers and soldiers had already come over to our side in September and in early October. We knew . . . that the coalition [provisional government] had also lost the support of the peasantry — and that meant that our cause had already won. (LCW, 27, 25.)

Engels, as his epigram that leads this article suggests, would have nodded in agreement.

In mid-September, the Socialist Revolutionary–Menshevik leadership of the executive of the Soviet convened a “Democratic Conference,” basically an attempt to divert the energy boiling from below, and increasingly led by the Bolsheviks, into the parliamentary arena. Lenin urged the party’s leadership not to be enticed. “It would be a big mistake, sheer parliamentary cretinism on our part, if we were to regard the Democratic Conference as a parliament; for even if it were to proclaim itself a permanent and sovereign parliament of the revolution, it would nevertheless *decide nothing*. The power of decision lies *outside* it in the working-class quarters of Petrograd and Moscow” (LCW, 26, 25).¹¹ Consistent with all of the lessons M&E had drawn about 1848 and the experiences of Russia’s own revolution, Lenin explained

11 It is no accident that Lenin reemploys “parliamentary cretinism,” at this moment. He had been reading, as his letter to the Central Committee, “Marxism and Insurrection,” shows, M&E on the German Revolution of 1848.

— in anticipation of Russia’s future “civil war” and its outcome — why “outside” the electoral and parliamentary arenas was more important.

A comparison of the data on the “parliamentary” [local duma] elections and the data on the . . . mass movements [since April 20] fully corroborates, in respect of Russia, an observation often made in the West, namely, that the revolutionary proletariat is incomparably *stronger* in the *extra-parliamentary* than in the parliamentary struggle, as far as influencing the *masses* and drawing them into the struggle is concerned. (LCW, 26, 33.)

When Lenin decided that the Bolsheviks should boycott the Conference he drew on “the elements that went into shaping the correct tactics of boycotting the Bulygin Duma” in 1905 and the “incorrect” ones of “boycotting the Third Duma” in 1907 (LCW, 26, 54–55). Again, we may note the importance of his prior practice with the four state Dumas. Note, also, his love affair, once again, with “data.”

After delays and postponements the provisional government finally set a date for elections to the Constituent Assembly, November 12. Having insisted for months that they be held, the Bolsheviks immediately made preparations to take part. Ever vigilant about a proletarian approach to the electoral process, Lenin, however, criticized the composition of the list the Central Committee put together. There were two problems. First, more workers, “four or five times more,” needed to be included because in what would be an overwhelmingly “peasant Constituent Assembly . . .

they alone are capable of establishing close and intimate ties with the peasant deputies.” The second and related problem had to do with the political histories of many on the list. “It is absolutely inadmissible also to have an excessive number of candidates from among people who have but recently joined our Party and have not yet been tested. . . . In filling the list with such candidates who should first have worked in the Party for months and months, the C.C. has thrown wide open the door for careerists who scramble for seats in the Constituent Assembly” (LCW, 41, 446–48). His more than a decade of work around the four state Dumas had prepared Lenin for this moment — to ensure that the Bolsheviks who might be elected, including himself, hewed strictly to a course of independent working-class political action and the forging of the worker–peasant alliance.

In the meantime, and almost anti-climactically, Lenin was finally able through the use of “data” and “objective facts” to convince the majority of the Bolshevik Central Committee to organize an armed overthrow of the now-discredited provisional government. The relative ease with which the Revolution was carried out on October 25, marked by the absence of any real defense of the provisional government and, thus, minimal bloodshed, especially in Petrograd, offers convincing evidence that Lenin was indeed right that the effective majority of the population — those willing to vote with their feet — would support the insurrection. And nothing was as important in his calculus as the results of the various elections that preceded it — an opportunity, as the *Address* put it, for the Bolsheviks to “count their forces.”

After October

The fundamental question of the Russian Revolution — which class would rule after the overthrow of the monarchy — was officially settled on January 6, 1918. The new Soviet government, at Lenin’s initiative, essentially declared null and void the long-delayed Constituent Assembly that finally met the day before. Events on the ground from at least October 25 to January 6 revealed that the coalition of workers and peasants *via* the soviets constituted the country’s *de facto* and new ruling classes. “All power to the soviets” was no longer just a demand but now a *fait accompli*. Unlike in July and August 1917 when soviet power was threatened by the bourgeoisie (the attempted *coup d’etat* of Kerensky and Kornilov), the masses did not come out into the streets to defend the Constituent Assembly when it was dissolved on January 6 — a fact that is telling testimony to what had transpired over the course of the preceding year. Its dissolution meant that the bourgeoisie no longer had the prospect of a government, like the provisional one, to protect its class interests. The bourgeoisie and its supporters had made the mistake of confusing an election, to the Constituent Assembly, with the actual exercise of political power — what I call voting fetishism (the necessary complement to parliamentary cretinism).

Realizing that real political power lies outside the electoral–parliamentary arena, Russia’s bourgeoisie sought to recoup its losses by launching a civil war, with the assistance of fellow bourgeois governments, including that of the United States. The Bolsheviks had anticipated as much, and this is one reason why the internal

debate had been so heated. It wasn't enough, the argument went, to take state power; could it also be held? When the data for the Constituent Assembly elections finally became available in 1919 — more than a year into the civil war — Lenin's penchant for number crunching kicked into high gear. The data, he argued, explained not only why the Bolsheviks were able to take power in October but why they were winning the civil war at the end of 1919. Even Lenin's opponents grudgingly admit to the objectivity and validity of his analysis.¹² His article, "The Constituent Assembly Elections and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat" (LCW, 30, 252–75), with its concluding list of ten thesis-like points, proved to be Lenin's penultimate declaration on the revolutionary employment of the electoral and parliamentary arenas, a summary and generalization of the Russian experience.¹³

Lenin's final word on the topic came a few months later: *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (LCW, 31, 1–118), his most extensive writing after the October Revolution. In preparation for the second congress of the newly

12 Radkey, 1990, 6. About the analysis, "his point of view was by no means as biased as one might expect, for he consciously sought in the figures the lessons they contained for his party, whether flattering or otherwise, and his deductions constitute a thoroughgoing and penetrating analysis of the results."

13 Trotsky and Zinoviev drafted a set of Theses on the Communist Parties and Parliamentarism for the second congress of Comintern in 1920 that drew on that experience. See Riddell, 1991.

founded Communist or Third International, its purpose was to convince revolutionary forces elsewhere inspired by the October Revolution of the need to fully understand Bolshevik ascendancy. For those who thought that participation in bourgeois elections and parliaments was a waste of time, he demurred. Referring to the four state Dumas, he wrote: “We Bolsheviks participated in the most counterrevolutionary parliaments, and experience has shown that this participation was not only useful but indispensable to the party of the revolutionary proletariat, after the first bourgeois revolution in Russia (1905), so as to pave the way for the second bourgeois revolution (February 1917), and then for the socialist revolution (October 1917).” Lenin could not have been clearer about how “indispensable,” for Bolshevik success in 1917, was his decade-long experience in electoral–parliamentary work around the four state Dumas. The evidence also makes clear, I claim, that M&E were his “indispensable” informants in that work.

The only addendum M&E ever made to the *Communist Manifesto*, in 1872, was what they regarded as the principle lesson of the Paris Commune of 1871. “One thing especially was proved by the Commune. . . . the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purpose” (MECW, 23, 175). The bourgeois republic, in other words, could not be a vehicle for socialist transformation — a lesson either ignored or unknown by many a workers’ movement party ever since and, tragically, to their peril. (The most notable recent casualties, arguably, are Syriza in Greece and the Worker’s Party in Brazil.) The

Commune revealed that a new kind of state was needed for such a transformation, such as what Russia's toilers invented — soviet governance. Participation in the bourgeois electoral–parliamentary arena, M&E recognized, was indeed fraught with all kinds of reformist dangers. But to abstain, as the anarchists advocated, was a dead-end. The alternative, squarely rooted in M&E, was what Lenin came to call “revolutionary parliamentarism.” Rather than an end in itself, taking part in bourgeois elections and parliaments was a means to an end — working-class ascent. That is the lesson of the October Revolution, which has, I argue, more currency than ever.

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