

**The Marxist
Vol. XII, No. 4,
October-December 1996**

On the occasion of Lenin's 125th Birth Anniversary

Marxism Of The Era Of Imperialism

E M S Namboodiripad

The theoretical doctrines and revolutionary practices of Vladymir Illyich Lenin (whose 125th birth anniversary was recently observed by the Marxist-Leninists throughout the world), have well been called "Marxism of the Era of imperialism." For, not only was Lenin a loyal disciple of Marx and Engels applying in practice their theory in his own homeland, but he also further developed the theory and practices of the two founders of Marxism.

EARLY THEORETICAL BATTLES

Born in Tsarist Russia which was seeped in its feudal environment, he noticed that capitalism was slowly developing in his country. He fought the Narodniks who advocated the doctrine of the irrelevance and no-applicability of Marxism to Russian conditions. His first major theoretical work was the Development of Capitalism in Russia where he proved that, though in feudal environment, capitalism was rapidly developing in Russia. He thus established the truth of Marxist theory of the working class being the major political force in the development of society. Further, an alliance of peasantry under working class leadership will form the core of the revolutionary forces in the conditions of backward feudal Russia.

Having thus defeated the Narodniks, he proceeded to demolish the theory of "legal Marxists" according to whom Marxism was to be applies in perfectly legal battles against capitalism. He asserted the truth that the preparation for the social transformation in Russia should be based on the sharpening class struggle culminating in the proletarian revolution. The form of the struggle will have to necessarily adapt to the conditions of illegality in Russia.

Equally decisive defeat was administered to the advocates of the theory that the political party that is to carry out the proletarian revolution is like any other (bourgeois) political party. In his well known work What Is To Be Done?, he proved that the revolutionary party of the working class is basically different from the bourgeois political parties. Unlike them, it has to carry on a consistent

uncompromising ideological struggle against the bourgeoisie which always strives to bring the proletariat under its intellectual leadership.

PARTY BASED ON DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM

Furthermore, unlike the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie political parties, the proletarian party is based on democratic centralism. He, therefore successfully fought for the principle of every party member being subjected to the iron discipline of the party unit of which he or she is a member. Inside the unit every member had the right to air his/her opinion. But once the collective decision was arrived at everyone was bound to implement it, irrespective of their personal opinion.

On this question, he fought with the advocates of the theory of a flabby political organisation of which every member is free to do what he or she likes. He proved the necessity of iron discipline enforced by the central leadership of the party, while every member is free to express his or her view on any problem in the party. It was because of this conflict in the party on the relation between the party and the individual member, that the Russian Social Democratic Party eventually split between the majority (Bolsheviks) and the opponents, the minority (the Mensheviks). It was this battle for ideas that made him the young leader of Russian Marxists.

IMPERIALISM-A NEW STAGE

This struggle between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks was then carried into the international arena where a big ideological battle was being fought between the right-wing leaders and the left-wing revolutionaries. Taking the side of the latter, Lenin proved that the body of doctrines elaborated by Marx and Engels does not need any revision as alleged by the rightwing. On the contrary, by steadfastly adhering to its revolutionary tenets it required further enrichment in the light of developments in the conditions of the economic and politics of capitalism.

He, in fact, proceeded to re-examine the stage of capitalism as noted by Marx and Engels in their classical works.

He found that post-Marx-Engels developments in world capitalism had made a fundamental change in the character of capitalism: capitalism, as it was in the days of Marx and Engels was now developing into monopoly capitalism which he called "imperialism, the last stage of

capitalism." His famous theoretical work under the title was, in fact, a development of Marx's Capital to the early years of the 20th century. the book was a new major contribution to the Marx-Engels theory of the development of world capitalism-a task which Marx and Engels themselves would have undertaken if they had lived in the beginning of the 20th century.

Lenin's major theoretical work on imperialism therefore was the continuation and further development of the economic and political theories of Marx and Engels.

The Essence of the Leninist doctrine on imperialism was that would capitalism has so developed that the vast majority of backward and dependent countries were controlled and divided among a small group of developed capitalist or imperialist countries. Sharp competition among the small group of rising imperialist countries on the question of division of colonies and backward dependent countries among themselves was thus the central fact of the economic and politics of capitalism in the era of imperialism.

IMPERIALISM AND WARS

He drew from this the conclusion regarding the inevitable tendency towards world wars- wars among the imperialist powers for the re-division of the colonies by colony-owing powers and for securing control of colonies by the 'have not' imperialist power. Imperialist wars, wars for the division and re-division of colonies, semi-colonies and dependent countries is the basic law of capitalist development in the era of imperialism.

Characteristic of the era of imperialism are also national revolutionary wars waged by the colonies, semi-colonies and dependent countries for ensuring freedom, sovereignty and national independence. The combination of imperialist wars for the division and re-division of colonies among the imperialist powers and the national revolutionary wars for the regaining of the freedom lost by the colonial, semi-colonial and dependent countries is thus the basic law of imperialism.

From this basic law of the character of world capitalism in the era of imperialism, Lenin drew the conclusion that it will be possible for the world working class to take power even in countries where capitalism has not developed. He thus showed the possibility of breaking the imperialist chain of world bondage at its weakest link. His own country, Russia, belonged to this category: the development of its capitalism had not gone to the extent of making it possible for a socialist revolution because of the very immaturity of its capitalist

development. It however could have a revolution in which the proletariat in alliance with the peasantry and oppressed nationalities take political power and proceed to start the construction of a socialist society.

DEVELOPMENT OF, NOT DEPARTURE FROM THE MARX-ENGELS THEORY

Leninism was thus a development and enrichment of, not departure from, the Marx-Engels theory that socialist revolutions take place, ie, the working class takes political power, only when the development of capitalism has become fully mature. He pointed out that in a country like Russia, which was backward in respect of capitalist development, the working class is enabled to take political power because the bourgeoisie and its ally, the feudal lords are much weaker than in developed capitalist countries.

He thus developed the theory of the possibility of the proletariat taking power in groups of countries or even in single country, carrying out their proletarian revolution. His intimate understanding of the crisis of feudal-bourgeois rule made him assert that it is possible for the proletariat in his own country to have a class revolution.

He, however, pointed out that while it would be possible for the Russia proletariat to start building a socialist society in its own country earlier than the proletariat of the developed capitalist countries, the construction of a fully socialist society will be complete only when the more developed capitalist countries have their revolutions.

He made a significant observation that while Russia's proletarian revolution made the country politically more advance than the developed capitalist countries, it continued to be socially culturally and economically backward in relation to the developed capitalist countries. Furthermore, once proletarian revolutions take place in developed capitalist countries whose ruling proletariat starts building socialism, socialist Russia may revert to its backward position relative to such countries.

It is an accident of history that Russia has nor reverted to political backwardness not because proletarian revolutions took place in the advanced capitalist countries but because socialism was overthrown in Russia by the betrayal of the proletarian cause.

Successful proletarian revolutions and the building of socialism in Russia where the proletariat has been the ruling class on the one hand and proletarian revolutions and socialist construction in developed capitalist countries on the other are thus mutually related. Said Lenin: While the rapid development of socialist construction in Russia would help the acceleration of proletarian revolutions in developed capitalist countries, the latter would help the process of socialist construction and its development into building of a communist society.

PROLETARIAN INTERNATIONALISM

This is the theoretical basis on which Lenin took the leadership in the Third (Communist) International. Loyalty to the first land of socialism and fraternal solidarity with all the developed for socialist revolutions, are the fundamentals to which every contingent of the international should be deeply committed. The Third (Communist) International founded under Lenin's direct leadership was thus the continuation and further development of the two Internationals founded by the functioning under the direct leadership of Marx and Engels. It goes to the credit of Lenin that he was at once the organiser of the proletariat revolution in Russia, the initiator of socialist construction in his country and the founder leader of the Third (Communist) International.

He thus carried forward the glorious traditions of Marx and Engels who, in the mid-19th century, participated in the European bourgeois revolutions and proceeded to organise the working class and enabled it to attain leadership position in the bourgeois democratic revolution.

Later on, when the first socialist revolution in the world-the Paris Commune of 1871 broke out, Marx and Engels drew positive and negative conclusions as guidelines for organising proletarian revolutions in the future. Lenin based himself on Marx-Engels directives on the experience of the Paris Commune to organise the Russian Revolution of 1905, February 1917 and November 1917. he was thus the faithful follower of the Marx Engels theory and the practical organiser of the Russian revolution.

Having thus brought out the significance of Leninism as the continuation and enrichment of the Marx-Engels theories and practices of proletarian revolutions, let us examine the contributions made by Lenin in the fields of economic and political theory.

DEFENCE OF MATERIALISM

Defending the Marx-Engels theory of Dialectical Materialism against attacks from idealist philosophers, Lenin wrote his first major philosophical work Materialism and Emperio Criticism. He exploded the opponents' theory that recent findings in natural sciences have made matter irrelevant, proving that energy (which was supposed to be the refutation of the existence of matter) was itself a particular manifestation of matter. He further enriched the Marx – Engels theory of Dialectical Materialism by saying that matter is that which exists independently of our minds but which reflects itself in the human mind.

Thinking, emotions and so on are dependent on and are creatures of matter existing independently of the human mind. This is the reassertion of the Marx-Engels proposition that life itself has proved that the spiritual world is dependent on and produced by the material world, though the former can influence the way in which the latter moves and develops. Lenin's Materialism and Emperio Criticism is thus the finest way of refuting the bourgeois revisionist philosophers of his time who wanted to banish materialism from philosophy.

Earlier, through his works like the Development of Capitalism in Russia, Lenin had established himself as an outstanding leader of the Russian Marxists. Now Materialism and Emperio Criticism raised him to the pedestal of an outstanding world leader of the Marxists.

CLASS NATURE OF THE STATE

The greatest contribution made by Lenin in enriching the theory of Marx and Engels lies in defending the theory of class nature of the state, the contradiction between bourgeois dictatorship masqueraded as “parliamentary democracy”, and proletarian democracy which is dictatorship in relation to the bourgeoisie, the need to destroy the bourgeois state, since it is impossible within the frame work of the bourgeois setup, to bring about socialistic transition etc. In theoretical battles on this question, Lenin had to fight the revisionists in the international working class movement and in the Russian Party itself. While concentrating fire on this major danger, he also turned his guns against “Left” sectarianism and dogmatism.

Apart from a number of articles written for the periodical press in the battle against revisionism, Lenin wrote two major books: The State and Revolution; Proletarian Revolution and Renegade Kautsky. In these two major works, he polemised against those who talked about “democracy in general”, as if there is no difference between bourgeois democracy (which for the toiling people is bourgeois dictatorship) and proletarian democracy which has to be dictatorial in dealing with the

post-revolution remnants of the old ruling classes. This later, Lenin called "the dictatorship of the proletariat", as had been characterised by Marx and Engels in number of their major works.

Having thus demolished the right revisionist and reformist misinterpretation of the Marx-Engels theory of the state, he proceeded to demolish the "Left" communist tactical line of boycotting elections, boycotting bourgeois parliaments etc. This latter work he did in a pamphlet entitled Left wing communism: an infantile disorder.

The three works together laid the basis for the Marxist-Leninist understanding of the nature of the economy and polity of the bourgeois state and the class nature of the economy and polity of the bourgeois state and the class nature of the revolution. The state of proletarian dictatorship which follows the abolition of the bourgeois state has two phases of building the new socialist society – the lower phase which is called Socialist Society and the higher phase characterised as Communist Society.

The three works together constituted the basis of the revolutionary strategy and tactics to be pursued by the Party of the working class in the period of socialist revolution and the subsequent period of socialist construction. The ideological, political and practical weapon with which and party of the working class will destroy the bourgeois state and proceed to build the Socialist and communist Society through the state of proletarian dictatorship.

THE PARTY OF A NEW TYPE

The theory of State and Revolution which Lenin elaborated in three major works enabled him to develop the theory of the party as the organiser and leader of the proletarian revolution. He called the Marxist Party as "a Party of a new type", clearly distancing it from bourgeois and petty bourgeois parties. The revolutionary party of the working class has the following characteristic features:

Firstly, although the Party of the working class, it is also the leader of all sections of the working people who are opposed to and fighting the feudal – capitalist exploitation. The working class cannot secure its liberation from capitalism. The working class cannot secure its liberation from capitalism without liberating all other sections of the working people- the mass of peasantry above all. The working class takes under its wing even the democratic and advanced sections of the bourgeois which are opposed to the main leader of the bourgeois class. The Party of the proletariat as Lenin saw it should become the

ruling party of its own nation and of humanity. That is why he fought and defeated the narrow outlook of the trade union bureaucrats and fought for a party of the working class which is the “champion of the people.”

Secondly, the Party of the working class arms itself and arms all others sections of the working people with the advanced theory of Dialectical and Historical Materialism. There cannot be a revolutionary party, he said, without a revolutionary theory.

Thirdly, the advanced theory of Dialectical and Historical materialism is not an abstract theory but the theory which is applied in practice and which is enriched by the experience of practice. That is why Lenin attached utmost importance to a national journal of the working class in every country. His fight in the old Social Democratic Labour Party of Russia for an “All Russia” paper was the beginning of the foundation of the Party.

CLASH OF IDEAS

Fourthly, the party uses its own papers as well as all other journals and periodicals-including those run by the most reactionary sections of the bourgeoisie – to engage its theoretical and political opponents in ideological battles. Marx, Engels and Lenin developed themselves into Marxist-Leninist by continuous un-compromising battle of ideas with their opponents.

Fifthly, the Party and its mouthpiece is intimately connected with the movement including those organisations which are led by its political opponents. The biography of Marx, Engels and Lenin is a chronicle of the continuous uncompromising battle of ideas in which they engaged themselves. It was these writings, as much as the more fundamental theoretical volumes like Capital, Imperialism, Materialism and Emperio Criticism and so on, which gave birth to Marxism and its expansion to Leninism.

Sixthly, the party which engages itself in continuous battle of ideas also engages itself in the social and political battles. As Engels put it (which, it may be noted, was quoted by Lenin), the proletariat has to fight and defeat its class enemy not only economically but politically and above all theoretically. It is through such comprehensive battle with the enemy that the Party of the Working Class becomes the organiser of the proletarian revolution.

STRIKING AT THE RIGHT MOMENT

Seventhly, the Party and the working class should master the art of correctly estimating the concrete changes in the objective situation and create the subjective force – the organisation for conducting a political revolution with which power is seized at the right moment.

As Lenin remarked on the eve of the October Revolution, “it would have been premature to attempt a revolution ten days ago: it will be too late to organise a revolution ten days later.” It goes to the credit of Lenin that he discerned the exact moment when the decisive blow should be struck against the class enemy.

It was because such a revolutionary party of the Russian working class had been created that Lenin was able to organise the three Russian Revolutions of 1905, February 1917 and November 1917. In his book *The State and Revolution*, Lenin had planned to write a chapter on the experiences of the Russian revolutions but, by the time the first sentence of the first chapter was written, the November 1917 Revolution had broken out. He therefore, wrote that it was far more fruitful to go through a Revolution than writing about it.

POLITICALLY DIFFERENT

The November 1917 Revolution was basically different from the revolutions envisaged by Marx and Engels. It was taking place in a socially, economically and politically backward country. He therefore did not have before him any guidelines from his masters. He had to apply the principles of Dialectical materialism (of which he was a master) to the concrete conditions of the Russia he knew.

The question arose before him whether it is correct and desirable for the proletariat in a backward country to take power. There were “Marxist scholars” like Germany’s Kautsky and Russia’s Plekhanov who thought that the Russian proletariat should wait for the social conditions to mature, ie, Russia to develop its own advanced capitalist society, before the Russian proletariat takes power into its own hands.

Lenin disagreed and said that, since political power was passing into the hands of the Russian proletariat, it should be used to overcome Russia’s backwardness, complete the bourgeois democratic revolution and pass on to the socialist revolution.

This was the essence of his April (1917) theses which said that the February Revolution was a bourgeois Revolution but that it created a “dual power”. The power of the Soviets led by the workers, peasants and soldiers and the power of the revisionists and bourgeois-led politicians. The tactics that he worked out (which incidentally

changed more than once between April and November) facilitated the rapid change in the attitude of the Russian masses that they overcame their initial illusions regarding the character of the regime that came into existence in April.

That was how the “ten days” in October-November 1917 changed not only Russia but the whole world. For the first time in history, the worker-peasant masses took power into their own hands and started building socialism.

Lenin in this process was adopting a new path which Marx and Engels had left for their successors to find. The question before him was how exactly to use the state power when it comes into the hands of the proletariat. Lenin had to plan his own Russian path, since there were no guidelines from Marx and Engels.

WAR COMMUNISM-FIRST EXPERIMENT

In the first couple of years after the November Revolution, the young Soviet Russia was attacked by internal and external enemies.

The dethroned ruling classes of Russia organised a civil war against the new proletarian state power. At the same time, all the major imperialist powers launched an interventionist war to destroy the young Soviet Russian State. Lenin could not find any Marx-Engels guidelines to meet this concrete situation.

Applying the principles of dialectics to the existing Russian conditions, Lenin evolved what came to be known as “War Communism”. Every aspect of social life in Russia was to be subordinated to the need of defeating the internal and external enemies. Maximum control was imposed on the social, economic, cultural and political life of the nation (just as any state does when it is plunged in a war). The first experiment undertaken by Lenin after taking power in his own hands was to beat back the enemies both internal and external and save Soviet Russia.

NEW ECONOMIC POLICY

Having attained this objective, the question arose whether the rigours of “War Communism” are to continue or there could be certain relaxation. Lenin found that the mass of the Russian people, the peasantry, wanted to sell their products in the market and earn a profit. Lenin realised the urge for profit in the market entertained by the mass of peasantry. The new economic policy that he formulated was thus a break from War communism of the war days, a step

towards capitalism. But, he pointed out, since political power is wielded by the proletariat which can exercise control over the way in which market forces operate, Russia can, through the new economic policy, grow into a socialist Russia.

Lenin, however, was also the first to warn that the capitalist elements that the NEP will engender and the socialist state will have to battle it out for the preservation and strengthening of socialism.

NEW WORLD PERSPECTIVE

Before concluding it is necessary to point out that the way the Communist movement is being rejuvenated after the retreating from Socialism in the Soviet Union and East European people's democracies is instructive: the world communist movement of the old days has become irrelevant. The Chinese Communist party has made it clear that the socialism that they are building is with China's national characteristics.

We, Indian communists, can modestly claim that, as early as 45 years ago (in 1951) the then undivided Communist Party of India had declared that it would follow neither the Soviet nor the Chinese path, but would evolve its own Indian path of socialism.

It today's world situation therefore, Marxist-Leninists in every country will have to evolve their nationally suitable path to Socialism and communism. That is why the get-together of International Marxist-Leninists in Calcutta in 1993 was called an International seminar, rather than an International conference. Each national Marxist-Leninist Party has to work out its own specific path of socialist revolution and construction without depending on a centralised world leadership, but, by firmly adhering to the revolutionary tenets of Marxism-Leninism.

However, since all nationally based Marxist-Leninist parties are closely tied by the bond of fraternal solidarity with their counterparts in all other countries, it is necessary to have constant exchange of experience and views among the various national contingents of the world communist movement. This is the lesson that we have learnt from decades of experience of Marxism of the imperialist era which took shape in the early years of this century.