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Economic Transition: A Movement of the People or the Leader?

by Kyle Berthel

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As the Bolshevik faction transitioned from revolutionary group to state power their greatest test came not in their solidifying of political authority but in their handling of the complex Russian economic situation. The new Bolshevik government was confronted with the immense task of restructuring the entire framework of the economic system while still maintaining the delicate equilibrium that kept Russia from collapsing into famine and chaos. In analyzing Lenin's documents in which he addresses Russia's economic transition, a clear distinction can be made between his initial perceived unanimity with the Russian proletariat in a struggle to create an economic system void of the social costs of capitalist actions, and his later realizations that demanded a more realistic economic approach. Lenin's notion of a concurrent ideological thought process with the Russian proletariat was eventually revealed as fictitious, forcing him, against his will, to abandon his firm ideological stance for more pragmatic solutions.

From the beginning of his public career Lenin was heralded as an economic thinker. His assessment of Russia's economic development, which he detailed in his first book *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* reflected his disdain for the ever increasing gap between the rich and the poor in the economic system. Lenin's outright opposition to the social injustices endured by the lower class fueled his desire to reconfigure the Russian economy into a Soviet system. Despite his firm ideological belief in Marxist communist society, Lenin disregarded the need for a capitalist era as prescribed by Marx in his writings on the socioeconomic stages of development. Rather, he envisioned a movement from the base of society, driven and strengthened by the will of the proletariat that would rise up and uproot the current economic imbalance. As reflected in his early writings, Lenin's apparent belief in the power of the proletariat's resolve infused in him the obligation to act as a vessel through which the proletariat's voice could be heard. Despite being raised in a higher class environment, Lenin claimed his authority to represent the uneasy proletariat was rooted in the sporadic working class revolts which he described as a comprehensive movement in its "embryonic form" (p 41).¹ As he explains in his essay "What Is To Be Done," "there can be no talk of independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the only choice is – either bourgeois or socialist ideology" (p 41). Lenin later claimed in an interview amidst recent revolts that "the worker and peasant masses have been rallying ever closer and more solidly around the Communist-Bolshevik Party, the authentic spokesperson of the will of the masses" (p 71). Lenin sensed a strong unity between the will of the people and the objectives of the Bolshevik movement. Thus Lenin assumed the position of facilitator of an uprising born amongst the proletariat's scorn for the current economic environment.

The extent of Lenin's perceived ideological connections with the proletariat movement become evident in his subsequent writings. In response to tsar Nicholas II's loosening of standards imposed on the press Lenin emphatically condemned the role of literature as an "individual undertaking, independent of the common cause of the proletariat" (p 43). The proletariat, in Lenin's view, clearly needed an established state and leader to promote their voice; the Bolshevik movement to Lenin ran parallel with the desires of the proletariat thus putting him in the position to fulfill this role of spokesperson. Lenin's allusions to the proletariat's voice enforce his notion of singularity of thought between his ideology and that of the peasant proletariat. In his speech to Bolshevik propagandists after their rise to power Lenin confidently declared "we know that every worker and

peasant earning his own livelihood feels, deep down in his heart, that there is no salvation from famine and ruin but in Soviet power... every peasant will help you in this difficult task” (p 68). Lenin’s seemingly concurrent ideological economic beliefs with the proletariat would later be questioned by the impending economic hardships soon to be faced.

Lenin saw capitalism as the worldwide economic scourge which facilitated the discontent of the proletariat and the oppression of individuals worldwide. The foundation of Lenin’s economic ideology rested on the notion of decimating the existence of a class of people without access to means of production and capital, such as the proletariat, through the extermination of capitalism. Lenin condemned the creation of monopolies by capitalist powers, emphatically stating that “the more capitalism is developed, the more strongly the shortage of raw materials is felt” (p 45). Lenin laid out in his essay “The State and Revolution,” his plan for the acquisition of “large scale production on the basis of what capitalism had created” – a complete reorganization of roles within the economic structure (p 47). Regardless of the method, Lenin clearly wished to emancipate the Russian economy from the grips of a free market capitalist system, transforming it into a Soviet system in line with the supposed proletariat will.

As Lenin began laying out his economic plan of a proletariat take over he reaffirmed his faith in the proletariat to function through the transition. In his letter to the delegates of the all-Russian Congress Lenin explicitly opens with “[a]ll the land must belong to the people. All the landed estates must be turned over to the peasants without compensation” (p 54). Lenin’s plan expressed great faith in the proletariat as he entrusts them to “take over the land without delay and to do it in as organized a way as possible, under no circumstances allowing damage to the property and exerting every effort to increase the production of grain and meat since the troops at the front are in dire straits” (p 54). Lenin further underlines the necessity in collaboration between the urban and rural proletariat in order to vanquish the influence of capitalist powers (p 55). In an article published soon before the Bolshevik take over Lenin proclaims that the proletariat “through their own experience, would soon learn how to distribute the land, products, and grains properly” (p 60). Lenin would soon learn that his confidence in the proficiency of the proletariat, though most compatible with his vision of economic turnover in Russia, was excessively idealistic.

As economic pressures threatened to collapse the Russian state after the Bolshevik acquisition of power, the realization of the naivety of a smooth transition through proletariat actions begins to surface in Lenin’s altered tone and actions. The Bolsheviks were forced to impose forced seizures of grain in order to equally distribute the food supply between urban and rural centers. Lenin’s desired state of collaborative effort between urban and rural proletariat had not come to fruition, partially due to the Soviet’s crushing of the emerging black market. In the face of uprisings Lenin proclaimed his fear of a capitalist re-emergence stating “the more acute the food crisis, the more the capitalist intensify their struggle against Soviet power” (p 76). Lenin’s defense of the peasant’s ability to support the economy remained, but Lenin’s tone shifted to a defensive stance as evidenced in his letter to Maxim Gorky where he writes, “the intellectual forces of the worker and peasants are growing and gaining strength in the struggle to overthrow the bourgeoisie and its henchmen, the intellectual lackeys of capital, who imagine they are the brains of the nation. Actually, they are not the brains, but shit” (p 79). His sharp tone reflects his increasing realization that the proletariat people were not as competent as he initially expected and it would take time before they were capable of sustaining the economy. In his *Resolution on War and Peace* Lenin displays the extent of his realization that the peasantry were inept, stating it would take “the adoption of the most energetic, ruthlessly determined and Draconian measures to improve the self-discipline of the workers and peasants of Russia” (p 82).

Increased pressure from the Whites intensified the Civil War and furthered Lenin’s realization that the Soviet economy was unsafe in the peasant’s hands. The continued suppression of war communism led to anti-Bolshevik uprisings as well as reinstatement of free market practice,

facilitated by the Kolchak. Lenin's disgust in regards to the peasants actions led to his writing a *Letter to the Workers and Peasants Apropos of the Victory* in which he declares "rogues and profiteers and very ignorant peasants argue in this way – better sell my grain at the open market price, I will get far more for it than the fixed paid by the state" (p 85). This attitude of the peasants undermined both Lenin's fervent belief in the power of the peasants as well as the backbone of a functioning Soviet system. Initially convinced that the power of the peasants could rid themselves of capitalism, Lenin was now reduced to chiding them for reinstating the use of a free market system. As the peasants began retreating back to free market practices, Lenin was forced to reconsider the practicality of his initial ideological notion of a harmonious urban and rural peasant run economy.

Lenin's documents during the transition from War Communism to the installation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) show his evolving mindset towards the roles played by the state and the peasants in the attempt to establish the Soviet system. Lenin willingly admits that "the peasantry is dissatisfied with the form of [the states] relations...only agreement with the peasants can save the socialist revolution" (p 116) and thus begins to compromise his ideological economic framework for an alternative program to rescue the struggling economy. The new system proposed by Lenin was a hybrid of free trade capitalist enterprise and dominant state authority. In his proposition of this limited capitalism under state control Lenin admits "we overdid the nationalization of industry and trade, clamping down on local exchange of commodities. Was that a mistake? It certainly was." (p 119) While discoursing on the functions of the NEP Lenin states "it is impossible to establish a correct relationship between the proletariat and the peasantry, or an altogether stable form of economic alliance between these two classes in the period of transition from capitalism to socialism, without regular commodity exchange or the exchange of products between industry and agriculture." (p 120) In his report on the progress of the NEP Lenin writes "the customary operation of capitalist economy and capitalist exchange...is essential for the people" (p 127). Statements such as these starkly contrast Lenin's initial ideological scorn of even the notion of capitalism, yet the reality of the proletariat's nature forced him to compromise.

Amidst the intellectual and ideological debate surrounding the NEP, Lenin shows a strong desire to re-administer and adhere to his initial ideological inclinations of a Soviet economy in the hands of the people, void of any hint of capitalism. This perception is reinforced by Lenin's constant referencing of limited capitalism in the Soviet system as a retreat (p 128-129). The idea of limited capitalism controlled by the state is admittedly not addressed by Marx, and Lenin is forced to struggle with how this system fits into his original ideological beliefs. When addressing the Congress he prods them to "show by [their] practical efforts that [they could] work no less efficiently than the capitalist" avowing that if they "beat capitalism and create a link with peasant farming [they] shall become an absolutely invincible power" (p 129). Although Lenin out of necessity re-introduced limited forms of capitalism, it is clear that he would still prefer to instill the ideological superiority of communism. Lenin concludes his address to Congress with an interesting statement that displays his altered view of the peasants, stating that if they succeed without capitalism then "the rank-and-file peasants will see that we are helping them and they will follow our lead" (p 129). Lenin no longer conceived of the peasants at the forefront of the surge for economic change, but now viewed them as incompetent followers willing only to follow those who could promise material success.

Ultimately the convoluted economic system that emerged from the desires of Soviet structure and the necessity for free market trade left Lenin in an inconclusive state regarding the direction of the economy and the role of the peasants throughout the course of transition. In his "Report to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International" Lenin outlines the road Russia had taken to arrive at its current economic state, admitting the naivety of the government at times in its hasty implementation of dominant state control. In this document Lenin presents contradictory statements as to the role of the peasants throughout the economic transition, first admitting that "feeling ran against us among large masses of peasants" yet later noting that because of their extreme hatred

towards landowners “the peasantry supported us with all their enthusiasm and loyalty” (p 133). While the support of the peasants was indeed volatile, largely dependant on their economic well being, it is clear that even in Lenin’s mind the prominence of their role in facilitating the economic revolution had become elusive. What Lenin had learned was that the state would have to solve the complex issue of Soviet integration – it would not be solved purely by the peasant’s disgust in capitalism.

Lenin’s unfaltering ideological distaste for capitalism, though compromised later in his leadership through the introduction of state capitalism, remained a firm standard for Lenin. His introduction of the NEP was a necessary action to reconcile his misplaced trust in the desire of the lower class. The unyielding reliance Lenin initially placed in the peasantry to establish the Soviet system was revealed to be excessive as the peasants ultimately retreated to free market practices. Though eventually having to support policies that reinstated limited capitalist endeavors Lenin was resolute in his position that the Soviet system when functioning through the support of the people was superior. Thus the decisions adopted in the NEP arose merely from a necessity to counteract the deficiencies of the peasantry in which Lenin had over trusted to carry the Soviet mission. In his address to the Congress of International Communist Lenin concludes that “[the Soviet state] shall have to learn much, and we have realized that we still have much to learn” (p 133). Lenin’s ideology was initially nothing more than that – an untested ideology that placed its faith in the power of the people. Five years later that ideology had been transformed into a vast functioning system, and despite the necessity of sacrificing some ideological positions for pragmatic purposes Lenin remained determined to learn from his past mistakes to bring to fruition his dream of a functioning Soviet state.

Note

¹ All Lenin’s essay titles and page numbers referred to in this paper come from the book in the Work Cited listing.

Work Cited

Brooks, Jeffrey, and Georgiy Chernyavskiy (eds). *Lenin and the Making of the Soviet State: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007.