

# On Lenin's "Usability," Or, How to Stay on the Edge

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*However timely, the contemporary "returns to Lenin" have succeeded only to a limited extent in the task of showing exactly how Lenin's writings and political experiences are useful today. Moreover, the question of the pre-pragmatic usability—as opposed to the utility or usefulness—of these writings and of these experiences remains unaddressed. What are the (unavoidably precarious) conditions of possibility not only for "making use of" but also for "becoming-useful" of something? I suggest that Lenin offers us several hitherto neglected insights on the subject of usability in his discussions of (1) political, revolutionary, economic, and conceptual work as a discontinuous, interrupted process uncoupled from all guarantees of actualization; (2) revolutionary temporality as strategic presentism; (3) attunement to . . . interlaced with attunement of . . . the situation at hand; and (4) the revolutionary task of lifting quotation marks from various mantras and key words of the old regime. Taken as a whole, these insights do not invalidate the contemporary "returns to Lenin" but, rather, provide a critical supplement intended to strengthen them.*

**Key Words:** Revolution, Work, Temporality, *Différance*, Subjectivity, Attunement, Translation

After a long period of oblivion, Lenin's corpus is again broached thanks to the vicissitudes of political theoretical discourses on the Left. Two notable examples of a revised and, ostensibly, a more "sympathetic" reading of Lenin are Slavoj Žižek's highly provocative compilation *Revolution at the Gates* and Hardt and Negri's sequel to *Empire*, titled *Multitude*. One can hardly imagine two appropriations of the same thinker that would diverge more drastically from each other and from the revenant called forth to lend if not support, then at least credibility. *Multitude* concludes with an appeal to recover the thoroughly purified anarchism of *State and Revolution* (Hardt and Negri 2004, 353) placed in an unusual conjunction with Madisonian federalism. This appeal is, however, presaged by Žižek's ironic diagnosis of the Kleinian split in Lenin—the object into the "'bad' Jacobin—elitist Lenin of *What Is To Be Done?* . . . [and] the 'good' Lenin of *State and Revolution*," such that the latter figure is valorized at the expense of the former (Žižek 2002a, 192). In his turn, Žižek intends to "repeat Lenin" in a way that will permit us to recover the Leninist legacy in the form of "the politics of truth," only to admit at the end of his

afterword that what he retains from Lenin is “more or less just the name itself” (176, 312).

I consider neither of these alternatives to be satisfactory, because—and this is the dim area in which they effectively overlap—they both endeavor to make use of Lenin’s 1917 theoretical writings in a somewhat unmediated fashion by bringing them into startling proximity with today’s political situation. But what if these writings cannot lend themselves to a “making use of”—not in the sense that they are utterly peculiar and useless, but in the sense of their dense *un-usability* undergirding all pragmatic concerns and supplying their conditions of possibility? If this is so, then by way of prefacing the “applications” of Lenin’s texts, we should perhaps learn from them what it means to “learn,” to make use of a situation, of an intellectual tradition, of a following without indulging in the opportunistic reduction of that which is used to the status of an abused object.

The stakes of the emphasis I place on the pre-pragmatic domain are at least twofold. From the formal-methodological standpoint, I contest some of the ways of *reading* Lenin prevalent today and, treating this contestation as a point of departure, offer a reading of Lenin heavily indebted to Derridian deconstruction and to the patient mediations it supplies. It is important to note from the outset that the contested ways of reading are not themselves homogenous and, therefore, should not be rejected *in toto*. Žižek’s numerous engagements with Lenin, for instance, exhibit certain nascent deconstructive tendencies that are, lamentably, stopped in their tracks by the rigid “politics of truth,” on the one hand, and by nominalist inclinations, on the other. In this case, immanent criticism, accentuating the Žižekian deconstructive kernel and discarding those tendencies that suffocate it, would be the best weapon at one’s disposal.

The content-oriented task at hand (which is, however, inconceivable without the first formal task) is to begin to understand the stakes of the tremendous “work” that needs to be done before work or usage might actually begin; the complexity of the present as the time-place of revolutionary struggles; the importance of the interlaced attunement to and attunement of the given situation; and the lifting of quotation marks from work, order, politics, and so on that might instantiate everything that is of use. Combined, these thematic clusters enunciate the most pressing lessons of Leninism today.

## Work!

Žižekian nominal Leninism is certainly not the only thing that validates Lenin’s almost prophetic lamentation on the fate of revolutionary thinkers:

Attempts are made after their death . . . to confer a certain prestige on their *names* so as to ‘console’ the oppressed classes by emasculating the *essence* of the revolutionary teaching, blunting its revolutionary edge and vulgarizing it. The bourgeoisie and the opportunists within the working-class movement

at the moment co-operate in this ‘elaboration’ [*obrabotka*] of Marxism. (Lenin 1992, 7)<sup>1</sup>

According to this precise formulation, elaboration means much more than a mere perpetuation of the same (misunderstanding) in a more intricate form. It also refers to one’s commitment to a special modality of work, a working-over or a working-on (*obrabotka*), a gliding on the surface that “blunts” the edges of its object. There is no usual evocation of the surface/depth distinction characteristic of dialectical methodology here. Rather, for Lenin the “emasculatation of the essence” is effectuated on the surface itself: in the bourgeois-opportunist modification of the sharp edge where the surface abruptly comes to an end. Elaborating on a text or a set of texts, the abradant-subject “polishes” the object, wears it down and extends its surface, but at the cost of edging out the edge that made it revolutionary in the first place. The extreme outcome of this emptying extension is the kind of nominalism where the name associated with the text in the authorial relation—the relation, which is surprisingly all too often taken to be unmarked and nonproblematic today—becomes a container for nothing and for everything, including the contemporary political situation, a critique of multicultural tolerance, and the Lacanian reading of *Hamlet* (see the afterword to Žižek [2002a]). Hence, elaborations of Marxism (and of Leninism) become synonymous with its vulgarizations and abuses while nominalism emerges as the new locution for opportunism.

Still without naming the Leninist substitute for elaboration, let us diligently follow the work/economy and the state/politics nexus in *State and Revolution* since this nexus, or at least its latter part, is what interests our “elaborationists.” One of my main tasks in this section will be to avoid the claims of “primacy”: whether the primacy of the economic and the long legacy of economic determinism that has plagued Marxism since its very inception, or the primacy of the political underpinning virtually all contemporary attempts to remedy this damaging legacy. In order to get a foretaste of the argument against “primacy,” we might meditate on the term “work before work.” For, even if “work” smacks of the economic, it fails to make a solid start (let alone to determine the outcome) either for theory or for praxis due to its divergence from itself, due to the temporal-ontological split within work indicated by the word “before.”

Halfway through *State and Revolution*, the reader comes across a selection from Engels’s letter to Bebel, containing the suggestion that “the word ‘state’ *be struck out* [*vykinut*’: thrown out] of *the programme* and be replaced by the word ‘community’ [*Gemeinwesen*]” (in Lenin 1992, 59). The state is erased, symbolically and programmatically, and also unceremoniously; it is thrown out on the assumption that in a socialist society the majority will suppress the formerly privileged minority directly and communally, diminishing the need for a special apparatus of suppression. This move instantly poses the problem of translation, since, according to Lenin, “Engels used the one [word] which denotes *not* a single community but a system of communities. In Russian there is no such word” (59). The vacuum of indeterminacy

1. Quite tellingly, Žižek professes his intention to maintain the “subversive edge” of nothing but the “signifier Lenin” (2002a, 312).

that infiltrates in the place of what's been ostensibly thrown out fails to dissipate after Lenin's reluctant concession that *Gemeinwesen* be translated as 'community' in the singular. Like any other translation, the Russian encryption of *Gemeinwesen* can function only because it fails to carry over the unique circulation of meaning that governs writing in the original. The striking out of the state is coeval with the erasure of its "alternative" in translation.

But the reach of the problem is more extensive than Lenin imagines. The mistranslation of *Gemeinwesen* is magnified manifold, not when the word is rendered in the singular, but when *Wesen* 'essence' silently passes into a system—when the "essence of commonality," or the "essence in common," or "essencing of the common" is perversely interpreted in terms of gathering into a system.<sup>2</sup> It is tempting to conclude that in this passage we come across the very edge, the very limit of Lenin's thought covered over with the (Orientalist) reproach addressed to Russian language.<sup>3</sup> Otherwise, the argument that Russian socialism was destined to "fail" because of the problems plaguing translation in general and because of the relative poverty of Russian in particular will be redolent of nothing short of hypocrisy.

Needless to say, this limit of Lenin's thought that prevented him from making the linguistic, but also the political translation of the lost-and-found letter enabled, in concrete terms, decades of state bureaucracy in the actually existing socialist regimes. Just as the essence silently passes into a system, so does the system yield the monstrosity of the state apparatuses. And yet, in principle, does not Lenin's revolutionary work and his demand for the *smashing* of state machinery resonate with and reiterate the unceremonious theoretico-symbolic erasure performed by Engels and complicated by the various intricacies of translation? The key task of the revolution has been worked out, notwithstanding its failure to materialize, or else, to subdue the radical volatility of the trace unable to maintain itself. But this is not all. Where revolutionary work reasserts theoretical work, socialist economic work reaffirms revolutionary work on a mass scale (25). "Work before work"—the Leninist variation on *hors d'oeuvre*—is thus two-fold: the striking out of the state before the smashing of the state, and the smashing of the state before the "establishment" of a truly socialist economy.

From the vantage of Hegelian dialectics, the real work begins, *stricto sensu*, when everything has been already done. In the end, however, we are unable to rediscover what's been "already done" in the "new beginning." The open-ended *Aufhebung* (if it is still capable of preserving any features of *Aufhebung*) of work before work is complicated by what I am calling "the volatility of the trace" marked by a double delay. The first erasure of the state erases itself when the letter to Bebel misses its mark and is not published for thirty-six years after the time of its composition (60). The same erasure is reinforced by the impossibility of translation, both registered and glossed over by Lenin. Second, the introduction of socialism is postponed by the

2. I am grateful to Simon Critchley for mentioning the possible translations of this word.

3. There are various ways in which *Gemeinwesen* may be rendered in Russian: *obschestvyennaiia suschnost* 'communal essence', *obschaia suschnost* 'common essence', *suschnost* 'obschestva' 'essence of the community', and so forth. These options were readily available in Lenin's epoch as well.

urgent but diversionary concern with gaining political control over economy: “It is not our *immediate* task to ‘introduce’ socialism, but only to bring social production and distribution of products at once under direct control of the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies” (Lenin 1964a, 24). And, indeed, one might rejoin that the phase of “introducing” socialism has never arrived.

The double delay indicates that there is no proper succession of stages along which work would or should unfold. Amidst broken continuity, it will start anew every time. That is also to say: elaboration is symptomatic of the fact that its practitioners have succumbed to the mirage of continuity they sustain and perpetuate insofar as they blunt the broken edges that confront them and treat ruptures *qua* mediations, unfortunate historical accidents, and theoretical oversights. Work before work which still remains subversive may prevent its subjects from moving “beyond” provisional, interim conjunctures, or synthetic series of beginnings. It is not a premeditated preparation, but a bare precession uncertain as to what will succeed it and as to whether it will be succeeded. Devoid of teleological underpinnings, it is neither purely destructive nor productive of something other than more work. Unfamiliar with the work of mourning and with the work of melancholia that bemoans the impossibility of mourning, it stands for the “being-not-yet-of-work” enveloped in the night of not-knowing and in the premonition of its potential futility within those schemas that calculate probabilities and intended outcomes. As Lenin put it apropos of the second delay: “But how rapidly this development will proceed, how soon it will reach the point of rupture with the division of labor . . . of the transformation of labor into the ‘prime necessity of life’—this we do not and *cannot* know” (1992, 86; Lenin’s emphasis).

A further step in this argument is contingent on the articulation of speculative identity encompassing rupture and mediation. Rupture mediates and mediation ruptures. The proponents of “elaboration” focus exclusively on the first part of the articulation, reducing ruptures to mediations. They forget that mediations themselves rupture what they purportedly conjoin, that—to return to the problem of translation—all attempts to move between languages transpire, at best, in the space of broken continuities. Only if it is taken as a whole, does this speculative identity form the edifice of work/economy and state/politics in *State and Revolution*.

So far, I have pointed out the three moments (the striking out of the state, the smashing of the state, and the “establishment” of the new economy) and the two delays (the delay in the publication of the letter reinforced by the deferral of its meaning in translation and the delay in “introducing” socialism) that comprise this edifice. If the three moments are considered in the Althusserian vein as “relatively autonomous practices” of the theoretical, the political, and the economic, then they are indeed autonomous by virtue of the radical disconnects and interruptions that stand between them, but only *relatively* so to the extent that each relies on the notion of work that may be accomplished only outside of it, with the possible exception of “socialist economy.” Given the tripartite structure, political-revolutionary work is positioned in the very middle of the edifice simultaneously as “before-work” in its relation to the economic and as “after-work” in its relation to the theoretical, or phenomenologically speaking as both analogical and provisional. The middling position opens onto the thinking of the political in light of im-mediation,

into which the theoretical and the economic collapse and from which they are repelled by various mechanisms of delay.

### Present?

A number of commentators from Althusser to Badiou and Žižek have interpreted revolutionary temporality as the pure, “absolute present” and as “the eternal current situation” in which Lenin found himself (see Althusser 1996, 180; Badiou 1999; Žižek 2002b, 117). In the most straightforward of readings, Lenin’s presentism becomes a corollary of his “metaphysical reading of Marx,” which in Michael Ryan’s view plays a central role in the Bolshevik valuation of elitism, strict discipline, and hierarchy (1992, 160, 175). But are things really that unequivocal? Žižek compounds, to some extent, the scenario of the absolute present when he defines the interrevolutionary period in Russia along the lines of Pauline temporality, as the time that is “already, but not yet”: “Revolution is already behind us, the old regime is out, freedom is here—but the hard work still lies ahead” (2003, 9). And yet, he does not admit a possibility that such a temporality is operative not only between two phases of a revolution, but also in and as the “internal” timeframe of each revolutionary phase.

Extracting that which is “already, but not yet” from revolutionary temporality, I will argue that the absolute present of the now is inflected by a nagging nonpresence, that the identity of the drawn-out moment is precarious, and that the experience of this temporality is not instantaneously present even to itself. The “revolutionary forms . . . would be urgency, immanence but, irreducible paradox, a waiting without horizon of expectation” (Derrida 1994, 168); in other words, the urgency of the “already” would enter into a loose, paradoxical assemblage with the “not yet” of “a waiting without horizon” within the revolution itself.

“Already, but not yet” appeals to a highly condensed version of revolutionary work before work—of the (excluded) middle term in the structure marked by a double delay. It is here that the tragic possibility of missing the right moment is announced, even as we find ourselves in that moment’s midst. It is here that the incompleteness of revolutionary temporality abruptly turns into its opposite in the form of “already, and always not yet,” or “already, and already not yet.” Leninist “presentism” is deployed especially, and in the first instance, against the overwhelming odds of missing the moment, for example, when one decides to wait for a “formal majority” or for a presentation of the strictly “objective” facts. That is, the secret intensity characterizing revolutionary consciousness lies in the vigilance it keeps in the face of profound absence, crushing impossibility, and bitter disappointment. This vigilance is the untiring source of presentism, which retraces the same trace but does not prevent the return of difference in each iteration.

Revolutionary consciousness is located on the razor-thin limit, border, or edge of revolutionary temporality. In the time that is “already, but not yet”—the time of the trace—the revolutionary situation is already before us, but it is not yet indexed as such. Or, better yet, it has been indexed, but its volatile trace has been erased. Vigilant consciousness motivated by its desire to hold onto the trace interjects into

the “not yet” and strategically negates its negativity. “In the insurrection,” Lenin remarks, “delay is fatal” (1964b, 208), hinting that the task of the comrades to whom the letter is addressed is to delay the delay, to bring the trace into presence, to inaugurate the political space without time, in which the revolution would establish itself, at last. Of course, the political risk taken here is enormous and winning is equivalent to losing. To register the trace is to confine the revolution to pure present, while not to register it is to miss the singular, irreversible, and unrepeatable “*given*” (*dannyi*) moment: the instant of the historical *gift*.

The practical way in which Lenin delays the delay hinges upon a self-authorized enunciation that creates its own conditions of possibility. For instance, alongside the invalidation of the slogan “All power must be transferred to the Soviets,” symbolic of the outdated hope for a “peaceful progress of the revolution,” Lenin states in July of 1917: “Peaceful development would then have been impossible” (1964c, 184). On this critical occasion for work before work Lenin lays claim to sovereignty before the actual seizure of power. (I note in passing that according to Schmitt [1996], 35], the sovereign has the right to decide on the state of exception and on whether the time for proclaiming the state of war has arrived.) Sovereignty without power is still ontic, *already* at hand but *not yet* grasped—hence, the slightly reluctant grammatical form “would have been.” In order to fully substantiate his claim and to say that the peaceful development *is* impossible, Lenin must delay the delay by means of the actual seizure of power, elevating revolutionary dynamics to the level of the ontological.

Portending this seizure, however, revolutionary work before work is a speech act of “*aussprechen was ist*’, stat[ing] the facts” (Lenin 1964d, 82; German in the original). More precisely, in the course of stating—speaking out—the facts, “what is” emerges for the first time, but only as the *après-coup* of the event that becomes visible through its own repetition. By announcing that “the revolution has reached a turning-point” (78), does not Lenin implicitly furnish the theoretical practice of the revolutionary subject who, besides *turning to* a given point, *turns it around*? Of the subject locating itself in the fold or on the edge where the turning-to and the turning-around are fused? And, at the same time, of the incessantly reorganized and equally motile object of knowledge—the evidence for the crisis that has “matured”—deepening the knowledge of the real object, the “mature” crisis itself (Althusser and Balibar 1979, 156)?

But in the process of furnishing this theoretical practice, Lenin gives (himself) a sign of the event and inaugurates the event of the sign. It is as though he anachronistically takes exception to the early Derrida of *Speech and Phenomena*, who writes: “A sign is never an event, if by the event we mean an irreplaceable and irreversible empirical particular. A sign which would take place but “once” would be not a sign; a purely idiomatic sign would not be a sign” (Derrida 1973, 50). Whether an exception from this axiom is conceivable, whether a singular sign signifies something discernable, whether revolutionary work before work is an event of a sign—these are the questions that arise in the wake of this “axiom.” At the very least, these questions will have to be answered in the affirmative when considering the forgotten letter and the event of the theoretical erasure of the state, as well as the first revolution and the subsequent interrevolutionary period. What these events of the

sign have in common is that for thirty-six years and for eight months they persist as “irreplaceable empirical particulars” before the rediscovery of the letter and the “repetition” of the revolution retracing, idealizing, and “de-eventalizing” the sign. And, supplementing these exceptions, Lenin’s intention to *aussprechen was ist* gives (itself) the sign of the event in a self-authorized enunciation that is not preceded by the event but ordains it. The event of the sign and the sign of the event are, thus, absolutely un-usable outside their irreplaceable empirical idiosyncrasy, even though they harbor far-reaching implications for the theory of the revolutionary subject and object as well as their interplay.

If, by now, work before work appears to approximate the problematic of *différance*, there must be good reasons for drawing such an analogy. Not unlike *différance*, work before work oscillates in the undecidable region between the investment of energy, the necessary “economic detour,” and an “expenditure without reserve.” That the un-usability “proper” to this work is not cancelled by any delays of the delay, re-presentations, and seizures of power is evident from its reinscription back into the movement of *différance* under the title of what annuls or tempers with its own effects (8). The effort to maintain the eternal revolutionary present, to exclude the possibility of erasure from the new revolutionary writing, requires more than ever working in and for the moment (*Augenblick*) with the full awareness that letting “the present moment pass, we shall ruin the revolution” (Lenin 1964d, 84). But the two moments of the moment—the “in” and the “for”—already shatter and ruin its immediate self-presence and ostensibly simple temporality. While the eternal now of the revolution defers *ad infinitum* the withering away of the state that it seeks, the *gradual* withering away of the state puts an end to the “eternity” of the revolutionary now (Lenin 1992, 55).

The lapse of vigilance at the heart of the present moment, the space of divergence from itself of *Augenblick*, shuttles transimmanently between “already” and “not yet,” between “here” and “to come.” One of the epistemic signs indicating the seriousness of this enmeshment is the performative contradiction in Lenin’s prognostications declaring that “we shall win *absolutely and unquestionably*” (1964e, 21), and on the other hand, maintaining that “history has never given such a guarantee, and is quite unable to give it in any revolution” (1964b, 196). Whereas the first statement performatively creates the conditions of possibility for its own truthfulness, the second reveals that these are conditions of a possible impossibility, regardless of the degree to which the subject turns to history and, in so doing, turns it around. The irresistible enticement of work before work crystallizes in the subject’s unshakeable determination and belief in its accomplishment supplemented by a sober realization that it may never achieve its goal. The Bolsheviks’ victory is not absolute and unquestionable *in and of itself*; all they can do is work *as if* it were absolute and unquestionable against the much greater chance of defeat.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this is what

4. Zupančič maintains that the logic of “as if” (*als ob*) organizes the Kantian theory of freedom. While the subject is not really free in any of her actions, she is responsible for all these actions *as if* she were free to act the way she does (2000, 27). The theoretical fiction of the regulative principle is homologous with Lenin’s performative contradiction.

Badiou means by the event inscribed as “the supplement . . . committed to chance” (2003, 62).

Tactically, Lenin situates revolutionary work in the internal fissuring of power: “We said that the fundamental issue of the revolution is the issue of power. We must add that the critical function of revolutions is to show us at every step how the question of power is obscured, and reveal the divergence between formal and real power” (1964c, 187). At issue here is not the opposition between the powerful and the powerless, but the different intensities that animate the political force field and constitute every other force field as “always already” political. In the antagonism of formal and real power, the formal both differs from the real (and, therefore, represents an empty form of power in name alone) and defers the real (such that the latter seems to be utopian, illegitimate, dangerous for the conservation of the public order, and ultimately “unreal”). Revolutionary work before work locates the gap between the two and, rather than mediate between them so as to facilitate their reconciliation, intensifies this gap by way of exposing the real illegitimacy of formal power. As long as the gap between the formal and the real is minimally given, unless the name truly reflects the essence, and until the essence finds its proper name—work before work will not cease. Struggling to satisfy these three conditions, the Leninist political project will have been launched under the aegis of “control” and “accounting” by all (Lenin 1992, 90), which amounts to saying that it will have abutted the zero degree of the political capable of driving the question of power out of its obscurity and, thereby, resolving and dissolving it altogether in the withering away of the state.

The yearning for full presence and visibility, emphasized by various commentators, needs to be contrasted with the kind of writing that was literally constitutive of the revolutionary present. In her memoirs, Lenin’s wife Nadezhda K. Krupskaya (1959) relates that, throughout a period of hiding in Finland, Lenin had sent her letters written in “invisible ink” (*nevidimye chernila*). Upon receipt, Krupskaya was to heat these letters over a lamp in order for the writing to become legible. Such writing is absolutely indistinguishable from its erasure; the point of the pen touching the barren surface of the sheet fails to leave a mark, but this failure is the ultimate mark of success. Without being confiscated by the secret police, the letter reaches its destination.

The unmarked, untraced writing of work before work (the writing of the underground) is at one with the writer and, as such, it is confined to the level of the first revolution “*qua* the imaginary explosion of freedom” (2002a, 7), in Žižek’s words. In the same breath, Žižek hastily adds that “revolution must strike twice, and for essential reasons.” It must *essentially* strike twice for the writing to become fully visible, for the trace to be propelled out of its self-enclosed obscurity, for work before work to give way to real “hard work.” This hastiness should give us an occasion to pause, for in it the limit of the elaborationist approach, attempting to render the invisible absolutely visible, is at its starkest. To the accompaniment of the second strike of the historical clock, we enter a treacherous territory Krupskaya got intimately familiar with when she burnt the edges of the letter over a heating lamp and irretrievably lost its message, when—in our terms—the revolution’s coagulation in the eternal present robbed it of its vigor. Without mediations, immediately, one

can get carried away by this double edge: by the powerful explosion of imagination detached from the real, and by the overpowering urge to strike out the first strike, to return to the real, to realize what was imagined *now*, in the fullness of presence.

But what if the point of work before work was nothing more and nothing less than preparing to confront, measure, and “transvalue” work itself? What if revolutionary writing is best left half-visible, the letter *already* heated but *not yet* burned in the reader's zeal (I am by no means entering a veiled plea for moderation or restraint here), the gap not fully bridged? What if those who profess to learn from revolutionary experiences should, in the first place, familiarize themselves with the art of lingering in the difficulty of the passage before rushing to pass to the act in what may be called “second-level opportunism”? These precautions are indispensable if the externalization of “imaginary explosions” is not to turn interiority and revolutionary politics into a series of woeful spectacles.

### Attunement!

Lenin knew how to stay with/in the difficult passage. In more ways than one, he followed the rule Adorno hesitantly thematized later on, in *Minima Moralia*, as, “One might almost say that truth . . . depends on the tempo, the patience and perseverance of lingering with the particular” (1978, 77). When Lenin consults the experience of the Paris Commune, he refuses to treat it as a mere concrete example of revolution in the abstract, to extract universalizable dynamics and models from a historical event, to apply it directly and immediately to the Russian revolution. Indeed, the refusal to recognize the abstract in the concrete goes a long way to oppose, anachronistically, Žižek's definition of Leninist freedom in terms of “the capacity to transcend the coordinates of a given situation” (2001, 4). Instead of succumbing to such temptations, Lenin assembles the “current situation” and the experience of the past in a Benjaminian constellation that can afford the particular its particularity, without denying its broader ramifications and more general use-fulness for understanding the present. As he writes in “On Slogans”: “The substitution of the abstract for the concrete is one of the greatest and most dangerous sins in a revolution” (Lenin 1964c, 189).

We are getting attuned, by now, to Lenin's attunement or, to put it more accurately, to one of its two slopes—attunement *to*. Attunement, which is to some extent Heidegger's word (reminiscent of *Befindlichkeit*), not be confused with “regulation” whose modus operandi is highly regimented and rule-bound, has everything to do with sense, and especially with the sense of hearing. Listening to the rhythms of historical singularities, Lenin's ear picks up their transpositions and modulations, their “sharp turns” (183) that demand an active adaptation to the current situation, a radical revision of old slogans and tactics, and a hypercritical sensitivity to the moment that has just passed, but still strikes everyone as being present in its effects. And—we must not lose sight of this—it also has to do with the sense of vision.

Contrary to the Žižekian-Badiouian Lenin who “tunes out” of the local and is coldly indifferent to its contingencies, Benjamin's Lenin is attuned at once to the

local and the international, to the particular and the universal: “Lenin at a table bent over a copy of *Pravda*. When he is thus immersed in an ephemeral newspaper, the dialectical tension of his nature appears: his gaze turned, certainly, to the far horizon, but the tireless care of his heart to the moment” (Benjamin 1978, 130). Not indifferent, but in difference—neither inside, nor outside the working class; neither entirely in the horizontality of visible space, nor fully in the momentarity of “inner” time—Lenin is capable of shuttling between theory and practice, between the cacophony of contradictory voices in the party, and between the dissonant signals sent from various parts of the country. It is this indeterminate position “in the difference,” and not a relegation to pure externality with which Žižek (2001) aims to capture the uniqueness of Lenin’s politics, that harbors the radicality of revolutionary praxis.

Further, Lenin substantiates the tense combination of absolute certainty and lacking guarantees concerning the outcome of the revolutionary struggle with a differentiation between the ignorant promise of the arrival of communism and “the anticipation [*predvideniie* ‘prevision, foresight’] by the great socialists that it will arrive” (Lenin 1992, 87). Attunement to the future cannot take the shape of a promise that turns its back on history. That would be, in Lenin’s somewhat uncharitable terms, “infantile.” What it presupposes is the continuation of work before work within work itself, a turning back to history in the course of moving forth, or, in musicological vernacular, the necessity of *acciaccatura* (something, in the literal sense, “crushed”): an “extra,” grace note played just before the main note and then quickly released. By soliciting sense and heightened sensitivities without promising anything, attunement to . . . thus resonates with Derrida’s conclusion that “sense *does not wait upon truth* . . . it only precedes truth as its anticipation” (Derrida 1973, 98).

In fact, attunement *to* . . . functions (only) as an invaluable appendage to attunement *of*. The hand is supplemented by the ear and the eye; it is in the attunement *of/* to before its split into two that we will locate the primordial unity of theory and praxis, before speaking of “theory” and “praxis” as such. Only such attunement can lay a claim to something like presence. Beyond this unity, which is never fully broken, the act of attuning a musical instrument, for instance, is still caught up in the routines of work before work (or work before *play*), so that, paradoxically enough, a certain variety of “blind” preparation for *instrumental* use turns out to be the least allergic to the exigencies of these routines.

What, then, does Lenin attune? With the greatest of passions, he opposes the perfection of state machinery undertaken by all previous revolutions that were hesitant to smash it (Lenin 1992, 26). In the first fold of work before work, the object of attunement is not a state, but the Bolshevik party, such that “a firm party line, its unyielding resolve, is *also* a mood-creating *factor*, particularly at the sharpest revolutionary moments” (1964b, 209). And equally crucial to the process is the infusion of those party members who carry out the minutest of political tasks with a conviction of the necessity and meaningfulness of their work (1987, 152). This is where Lenin differs from the much despised opportunists. He *attunes attunement itself*, creates the mood (*nastroyeniie*, also ‘alignment’ or ‘attunement’) of the party, adjusts it by keeping to a firm though unpopular party line, rather than chase

after empirico-statistical trends in an unprincipled manner.<sup>5</sup> This remarkable point is worth highlighting again: the party's general mood/attunement to the political situation will be itself attuned by the party's own course of action. (Later on, the internal-external modulation of political mood will give way to a much finer cultivation of the inner democratic habit paving the way to the withering of the state.) While the intertwined tasks of creating a mood and infusing a conviction are the two crescendos of political party attunement, one cannot help but wonder what the meaning of attunement will be in a world where other, more complex modes of representation, such as noncentralized, heterogeneous global coalitions, come to the fore.

In the second fold of work before work, the reader of Robert Service's English translation of *State and Revolution* is faced with what is incorrectly called "the work of 'establishing' a socialist economy" (Lenin 1992, 25). I translate what Lenin states on the same page: "The proletariat needs state power . . . both for the suppression of exploiters' resistance and for exercising *leadership* [*rukovodstvo*] over the enormous mass of the population . . . in the work that will "attune" [*v dele 'nalazhivaniia'*] a socialist economy." To be sure, a commonsensical reading would support Service's translation: Is it not absurd to claim that what is not yet in being (socialist economy) could be modified or attuned without having been established first? That some elements of work might fall outside the economic domain in order to adjust this very domain? In recognition of the absurdity of "pre-ontological" attunement, Lenin constrains its work within quotation marks, but this constraint is set in place belatedly, given the rhetorico-semantic twist that precedes it. In Russian, someone who "exercises leadership [*rukovodstvo*]" lends a guiding hand (*ruka, vodit'*)—the very hand that will guide and attune an instrument in a state of disrepair. At the same time, this guidance unfolds on a scene of unmarked present, of the present without a trace and, therefore, without sense. It is as though the only commandment consistent with the task were inscribed with invisible ink in a letter that has not yet arrived.

Whether or not postrevolutionary implementation of attunement was heavy-handed, it behooves us to acknowledge that Lenin had to lead without a trace, in contrast to the bourgeois politicians and opportunists who are able to master nothing but the "art" of tracing without leading. This opposition or, better yet, this reversal, will not fail to remind us of Heidegger's distinction between the guiding and the grounding questions of metaphysics in *Contributions to Philosophy*, where the "other beginning" opens up in a leap from the guiding to the grounding and, moreover, to the grounding without a guide (Heidegger 1999, 120–2). The second moment of work before work prepares for the leap, but in the course of this preparation the hand gets divorced from the ear and from the eye, and attunement of . . . is separated from attunement to. In the absolute rupture of the leap, who can expect a following of "the enormous mass of the population," when the directives are already given, but the "plan" (New Economic Plan [NEP], for instance) is not yet formulated? As Derrida

5. The double meaning of *nastroyeniie* ('attunement' and 'mood') in Russian mirrors its German equivalent.

writes apropos of Heidegger's "Rectorship Address": "Undoubtedly it will be difficult to understand what can be meant by a *Führung* (guidance) which mandates, demands, or commands without being followed, obeyed, or listened to in any way" (Derrida 1989, 44).

Even prior to its split into two, Lenin's attunement exacts various exclusions intended to sensitize the ear and to strengthen the hand. But exactly what gets excluded? First of all, multiplicity and contradiction in all of their guises, be they political or "factual": "In the face of such a fact as a peasant revolt all other political symptoms, even were they to contradict the fact that a nation-wide crisis is maturing, would have no significance whatsoever" (Žižek 2002a, 139). The first act of exclusion goes hand in hand with the construction of the revolutionary present, of "the absolute 'this' of time, or the now . . . of an absolutely negative simplicity, which absolutely excludes from itself all multiplicity" (quoted in Derrida 1982, 13). The nerve of the Hegelian argument runs through the relentless reiteration of absolute-ness, heralding, above all, the (impossible) absolution of the present, its release from that which is not present, presumably enabling the present moment, absolved and absolute, to attain simultaneity and synchronicity with itself. Instead of neutralizing "difference," antagonism, and so on, this hyperbolic commitment to a certain political symptomatology only highlights and recreates the uncompromising, unbridgeable gap constitutive of the maturing crisis.

Among other candidates for exclusion, Lenin names individual "excesses" that will begin to wither away in a communist society (1992, 82), where attunement is gradually transformed into self-disciplining and self-attunement, habituation. The reader should recall that Lenin reserves the same expression—"withering away" (*otmiraniie*)—for the demise of the state and for the disappearance of individual "excesses." This commonality is not merely coincidental, for it reveals that the state corresponds to the greatest excessiveness of brutal minority force imposed on the society as a whole. The attunement of habit coextensive with the diminution of individual excesses will not be successful unless the process of this force's desaturation is provisionally set in motion and the root cause of all excesses—the Excess—already eradicated. Minor excesses inherent in the state are, therefore, understood not as exceptions but as corroborations and residues of the excessive state, the state *as* excess, and the state *of* excess.

In this context, Lenin's peculiarly negative reaction to Beethoven's *Appassionata* ("one must not listen to such music too much, because it makes you soft") finds its justification (Žižek 2002b, 111). It may well be the case that Lenin happened to listen to the piece in a bad mood, which prevented him from getting attuned to its atmosphere. Or, maybe the exact opposite is true: he was too finely attuned to it, as Žižek suggests, paying careful attention to the context. In any event, the musical episode comes into sharper focus when it is interrogated alongside the third (and final) period of Russian Social Democracy described in *What Is To Be Done?* as the period when "the voices" of its representatives "began to break, began to strike a false note" (Lenin 1987, 174). Two related hermeneutical possibilities arise from this juxtaposition. First, false political notes and euphonic musical ones are equally harmful: the former, because they detract the revolutionary movement from a unified, "unbroken" purpose, and the latter, because, in critical theory terms, they

prematurely reconcile antagonistic reality in fantasy and confine the revolution to a purely imaginary "explosion of freedom." Second, if these two kinds of notes complement each other, establish an eccentric harmonious accord with one another, and are on the same wavelength, then one of the preconditions for attunement to what is not false in politics will be a break with (nondissonant) musicality. Therefore, the famous reaction to *Appassionata* is simultaneously a product of extreme attunement and lack of attunement: with his ear highly sensitized to the political, Lenin could not tolerate its obverse in the form of musical harmony.

### Quotations?

Work before work, the passage through revolutionary present, and the operations of attunement prepare for and anticipate without promise the lifting of quotation marks. A dense paragraph in *State and Revolution* proclaims:

*We ourselves*, the workers, will organize large-scale production on the basis of what has already been created by capitalism . . . Such a start, on the basis of large-scale production, will of itself lead to the gradual "withering away" of all bureaucracy, to the gradual creation of an order, an order without quotation marks . . . an order in which ever simpler functions of control and accounting will be performed by each person in turn, will then become a habit and will finally die out. (Lenin 1992, 45)

Everything makes its appearance here: the revolutionary temporality of what's been already created by capitalism but is not yet organized by the workers, the rejection of representation and its corollary desire for direct presentation ("We ourselves, the workers"), the programmatic erasure of bureaucracy, self-attunement *qua* habituation, and so on. Or, rather, everything is allowed to appear by dint of a disappearance of sorts—the disappearance of quotations that (as Derrida will say in an echo of Kafka) stood "guard at the frontier or before the door" (Derrida 1989, 31), masking the revolutionary edge behind the curtains of bourgeois legality, propriety, and duty. Yet, behind Lenin's curtain the observer finds anything but a theatrical stage. There is no place for catharsis in the souls of those who practice self-administered control and accounting. In addition to making something appear in the bright light of self-administration, the lifting of quotation marks reveals a sharp edge demarcating the end of the preceding surface/stage and the impossibility of elaborating, or working on it any longer. And a firm party *line* does not extend this defunct surface, but crosses out its guards and demarcates a different edge for the new drama.

Whatever its content, the formal task of the revolution is defined by the act of lifting quotation marks. Unmarked and apparently available for use, order and work make their nondramatic, gradual appearance in the name of a new political and economic "organization," but also in the names of simplification and even "death" accompanying the becoming-literal, the becoming-univocal, of meaning. No more decipherings of hieroglyphic commodity structures? No more legal hermeneutics? No more accounting acrobatics? Is Lenin, therefore, a proponent of total transparency?

It is hardly doubtful that Lenin's 1917 writings display strong tendencies toward the obliteration of equivocity and the literalization of meaning that would ensure the undisturbed reign of revolutionary presence. We could, nevertheless, read these texts against the grain, putting renewed emphasis on their dialectical commitments. To the extent that Hegel's dialectical method underwrites Lenin's political thought, the "new" transparency both cancels and preserves the "old" obliqueness, which means (in more concrete terms) that socialism must be organized "on the basis of what has already been created by capitalism." As for use, it does not merely coincide with the recovered literalness of meaning. On the one hand, the figurative, ideological notion of "order" is abused by the bourgeoisie to wage class struggle and to oppress the workers. On the other hand, no sooner is the literalness of this notion restored than order (without quotation marks) becomes utterly use-less and "dies out" with the entrenchment of habit. Any use worthy of its name refers to the fleeting episode of lifting the quotation marks—that is to say, to the vanishing mediation between the abusive and the usual, the internalized, the habituated.

The genealogy of "order" before the removal—or should we say: the change?—of the guards/quotation marks is outlined in a piecemeal, schematic fashion in statements such as, "the state is an organ of class rule... it is the creation of 'order', legalizing and perpetuating this oppression by moderating the clashes among the classes" (Lenin 1992, 9). What this pithy remark entails is the view of the state as an apparatus of "moderation," however excessive, and a way of adjudicating the edgy "peace" across class divides. The lifting of quotation marks does not immediately put the state under erasure, but lays bare the truth of the state, unleashes its powers of pacification, and at the same time turns it against itself. Above and beyond a qualitatively different mode of waging class struggle, the proletarian state points to the demise of statehood as such, the "withering away" (*otmiraniie*) of the state experienced as its death and pacification. (The grammatical root of *otmiraniie* is supplied by *-mir-*, that is, 'peace'.) Ultimately, a pacified state is a dead state. Hardt and Negri are only partially justified in their assumption that one of the objectives of *State and Revolution* is "the destruction of sovereignty through the power of the common" (2004, 354), since, in Lenin's thinking, this destruction cannot take place outside a state controlled by the proletarian majority. And here it is possible to detect an unexpected resonance with the political thought of Emmanuel Levinas and the title of his famous Talmudic lesson, "Beyond the State in the State."

Lenin tracks a parallel trajectory of "work" back to the couloirs of chancelleries, where "the 'work' on the business of 'state' is being worked" (1992, 43; my translation). The otherwise awkward passive voice, in effect, accentuates the impersonality of bureaucratic "work" removed from the private and from the public spheres alike, and executed in secret. Ironically perhaps, the critique of this political practice comes from its displaced simulacrum—from the equally clandestine revolutionary work. More secretive than the secret police, the revolutionary underground holds an ominous mirror before the "work" that transpires in the dim couloirs of official power. At any rate, the act of lifting quotation marks from "work" requires the exposure and diffusion of the political-bureaucratic power, as well as an extra

share of work before work consisting of “learn[ing] to work for society *without any norms of right*” (85). But from whom does one learn to work?

Bracketing the conventional Leninist didactic response (i.e., that one learns mimetically from a small group of exemplary vanguard revolutionaries), I turn to *What Is To Be Done?*—an earlier text, where “it doesn’t matter who, a student or a worker, is able to work out of himself [*vyrabotat’ iz sebia*] a professional revolutionary” (Lenin 1987, 146; my translation). We are now in a position to identify that which takes the place of elaboration (*obrabotka*)—namely, the process of working out (*vyrabotka*). The dual advantage of *vyrabotka* is that, on one hand, it projects the subject’s subversive kernel onto the unpolished edge of the object and, on the other, it refuses to dispense with the “out-work” that subtends the attunement of a socialist economy.

That this word of Lenin’s entails the old dialectical notion of the true subjective core occluded by the shell of the bourgeois legal person is banally self-evident. A more interesting approach, however, would be to situate the projected maieutic movement of interiority in the narrative of *Das Kapital*, in “what on the side of the worker appeared in the form of unrest [*Unruhe*]” (Marx 1976, 287). Here, the kernel does not preexist the discarding of the shell, but is created in the act of this discarding, right on the edge of its surface. Here, the strategies of “working out” the revolution and “striking out” the state merge as two moments of the same labor of the negative. The one who works a revolutionary out of herself is guided by her subjective unrest and learns to learn and to work only through her distance from herself, “without any norms of right” and without imitating any personifications of the new right. This line of argumentation finally inaugurates a new way of reading the famous Leninist slogan, “Learning [*uchit’sia*: literally ‘teaching oneself’], learning, and, once more, learning...communism!” catachrestically inscribed with the omission of the last word (communism) on the walls of every secondary school in the Soviet Union.

### Worked Present, Attuned Quotations

The lifting of quotations marks does not merely produce two distinct phenomena of work and order; it creates the amalgam of ordered work and working order. Before hurling predictable allegations concerning the obviously authoritarian “uses” and overtones of this nascent structure, why not meditate on how Lenin manages to destabilize it internally, albeit not expressly? In keeping with Derrida’s careful explication of Heidegger’s complex relation to “spirit,” while a word is “held at a distance by the procedure of quotation marks” (Derrida 1989, 29), any experiment that involves the vanishing of quotations unavoidably encroaches on this distance. When ordered work and working order become a matter of (self-taught) habit, they indeed follow this rule, striving toward a zero degree of difference between “is” and “ought,” between the interiority of habit and the exteriority of performance, and so on. Between the two, there is only the self-erasure of the present that diverges from itself and thereby creates a space for revolutionary subjectivity.

And what exactly are postrevolutionary subjects habituated or attuned to, if not the “ever simpler (but never completely superfluous) functions of control and accounting”? As such, these functions cultivate the attunement of the eye to the still uncontrolled and unaccounted for, relying on a sharper sense of vision, and therefore on spacing, distancing, and differentiation. The nuance of internalization is that the very thing one gets habituated to disturbs habits in the process of their formation: ordered work and working order depend on lingering, irreducible disorder for providing them with their conditions of possibility or, at least, with some measure of coherence. The struggle against disorder will only strengthen it; the lifting of quotation marks will only push those few “liberated” words to the edge of the metaphorical. Including the “usefulness” of any given theory, political orientation, or exemplary practice.

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