

Lenin's Electoral Strategy from Marx and Engels through the Revolution of 1905

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The Ballot, the Streets—or Both

August H. Nimtz

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Preface

Three years after the Bolshevik-led triumph in Russia in October 1917, Lenin declared that his party's "participation...in parliaments...was not only useful but indispensable" in its success.¹ If true, this means that the Russian Revolution was the first and only revolution in history to employ the parliamentary arena for working-class ascent to state power. But what exactly did Lenin mean by "participation in parliaments"? This book aims to answer that very question and in the process to understand and sustain the validity of Lenin's claim. The Bolshevik example offers, therefore, potentially rich lessons for today's "protestors" in whatever corner of the globe. Yearning for something (however inchoate) more fundamental than what is often touted as "change" (not just new apps but a new operating system), many are torn between the "streets" and the "ballot box" for its realization. The solution Lenin fought for to this apparent dilemma was what he called "revolutionary parliamentarism"—the subject of this book.

The book, which includes the companion volume, *Lenin's Electoral Strategy from 1907 to the Revolution of October 1917: "The Ballot" or "the Streets"—or Both (hereafter, LES)*, makes four arguments. The first is that no one did more to utilize the electoral and parliamentary arenas for revolutionary ends than Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov—Lenin. The second argument is that Lenin's position on the "streets" versus the "ballot box"—no, it wasn't either/or—was squarely rooted in the politics of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Third, the historic split in international Marxism between communism and social democracy was long in place before the Guns of August 1914 exploded, owing in large part to two very different conceptions of how Marxists should comport themselves in the electoral/parliamentary arenas—with Lenin on one side and what would become twentieth-century social democracy on the other side. The last claim is that the head-start program the founders of the modern communist movement gave Lenin on electoral politics goes a long way toward explaining why the Bolsheviks, rather than any other political current, were hegemonic in October 1917.

To make my case I do the following: For the first argument, I extract and summarize from the entire Lenin corpus in print all his electoral activities, especially his leadership of the Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) in the four State Dumas from 1906 to the beginning of the First World War. This is no easy task, since it's likely that on no other question apart from that of the peasantry did Lenin spill so much ink. But it's

doable because Lenin often reiterated the same claims for different venues. As for my argument that he was squarely rooted in Marx and Engels, I draw on my two earlier books on their politics. As many forests as have been felled for the Marxological industry, it is telling that this is the first synthesis of Marx and Engels's views on the electoral process. The Leninologists have also been derelict.² Particularly striking about their enterprise is the almost complete absence of any sustained or, certainly, book-length discussion of Lenin's political kinship with Marx and Engels despite their frequent denial of such paternity. This book is, thus, a correction of two intellectual deficits. In the process, I show that no one of Lenin's generation understood Marx and Engels as well as he did. As for the argument about the roots of the historic split in international Marxism, I cull in chronological order from Lenin's writings and actions his awareness of the growing disagreements and divide between him and Western European Marxists. The record reveals—admittedly in hindsight—that the formal split that took place when the First World War erupted was the culmination of a decade-long process.

Finally, as for the “so what” question—what difference did it make that Lenin got Marx and Engels right?—this book argues that there is enough circumstantial evidence to show that his electoral/parliamentary strategy was decisive in the Bolshevik-led triumph in 1917, probably the only revolution to have been realized in such fashion. This is, therefore—and surprisingly, given all that's been written about it—the first study to trace the connection between the politics of the two founders of the modern communist movement and the Russian Revolution. Though not a definitive explanation for the Bolshevik success, a tentative case—given what's at stake in politics today—is infinitely superior to none at all. Just ask the protesters in Tahrir Square!

When I'd tell someone what I was working on while researching and writing this book, my words would often be greeted with a look of incredulity. “Lenin's electoral strategy?” That sounded oxymoronic. Such a reaction is not surprising. No figure in modern political history has been as misrepresented as Lenin. The reason is that not only his enemies but also many of his so-called friends are culpable. His enemies can easily justify their disdain simply on the basis of what has been done in Lenin's name for almost a century.³ The Stalinist counterrevolution that replaced the rule of the proletariat with that of the bureaucracy, and all the accompanying horrors, has indeed enabled his enemies' ever-present campaign to fault Lenin for what occurred after his death. But that reading of Lenin can only be sustained if there is indeed evidence of a causal link between his actions and Stalin's crimes; that the latter followed the former and

employed Lenin's name and corpse to justify what he did is no proof of Lenin's culpability. Lenin's more than decade-long work in electoral/parliamentary politics between 1905 and 1918 is inconvenient for his enemies, and that is why—in almost Stalinist-like fashion—it has been deleted in Leninological accounts.⁴

Lenin's smarter enemies know that *post hoc* explanation is unpersuasive—hence their never-ending quest to find the proverbial smoking gun, some evidence that he parented Stalin. And if that can't be found, it can be invented.⁵ Others have been less brazen and mainly impugn Lenin by innuendo. Rather than clutter the text with a discussion of that constant campaign, I confine it largely to the section “A Critical Review of the Literature.” One enemy's effort, though, is worth pointing out here: Richard Pipes's *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive* (1996). Because he was one of the first Western scholars granted permission to peruse formerly closed archives after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and owing to his renown as a Leninologist, Pipes's book was highly anticipated. If anyone could find the smoking gun, surely he could. But Pipes fired a dud, because the documents he reproduces from before the October Revolution contain no seed of the Stalinist counterrevolution. And one can be sure that if there was anything in that trove of documents that put Lenin, “a thoroughgoing misanthrope,” in a positive light, it didn't find its way into the Pipes selection.⁶ For different reasons, Lenin's “friends,” both real and fictitious—such as the hagiographers in Moscow and their cheerleaders elsewhere—are also complicit in veiling the rich record this book unearths. In the Conclusion in *LES*, I discuss what I call a conspiracy of silence by both foe and friend that helps make “Lenin's electoral strategy” sound so incongruous.

Though this book isn't about the Stalinist counterrevolution, it's a matter that can't be ignored. Along with mention of Lenin's unsuccessful fight from his sick bed to arrest the development, I devote a few pages toward an explanation along with relevant facts about the Bolsheviks in power after the October Revolution at the end of Chapter 3 and in the Conclusion in *LES*. Leon Trotsky's time-tested theory of Stalinism is what I employ. Lenin's second-in-command in the October Revolution, head of the Red Army in the civil war, a witness to the counterrevolution and eventually one of its many victims, Trotsky argued that political contingency best explains what happened. In other words, the Stalinist outcome was no more preordained than were the counterrevolutions that overthrew Radical Reconstruction after the US Civil War or the Paris Commune in 1871.⁷ There's no smoking gun to be found. I recognize

there's no convincing Lenin's *class* enemies, like Pipes, of the truth. But for those who are willing to suspend judgment until learning about this hitherto ignored side of Lenin, I offer this advice: The same kind of historical perspective needed to make judgments about the American Revolution, both phases—the war for national liberation and the social revolution that overthrew slavery (as viewers of Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* might agree)—is also required for the Russian Revolution.

Lest it be construed that only reactionary forces have disdain for Lenin, let me mention another crowd. The reader will probably be struck by Lenin's unsparing criticism of Russian liberalism and the Cadet Party in particular—the “treachery of liberals,” as he called it. At times he vented more anger at them than at the Czarist regime. Inveterate apologists for the latter, the liberals almost always vacillated at critical moments in Russia's democratic quest. Because they tried to inculcate workers and peasants with their antirevolutionary politics, Lenin constantly hammered on the difference between democracy and liberalism and made special use of election campaigns to that end. His scathing denunciation of Russian liberals has earned him no friends in the liberal academy. The forces in Russia they are likely to identify with—despite pretenses of being “objective” in their accounts about the Russian Revolution—proved to be just what Lenin predicted: hand-wringing prevaricators. And that Lenin was so accurate in his predictions about them is even more galling. Lenin, informed by the lessons Marx and Engels drew on the revolutions of 1848–49, read the politics of liberals better than any modern figure, and they've never forgiven him for it.

I'm not sure I would have written this book had I not read many years ago *Lenin as Election Campaign Manager*, a 23-page pamphlet that, fortunately—because it's still the best introduction to the topic and, thus, to this book—remains in print.⁸ Deep in my memory banks, it began to prick my consciousness a few years ago as I was reading a classic by a doyen of the academy that claimed that working-class participation in the electoral/parliamentary arena was inevitably compromising. According to political scientist Adam Przeworski, working-class parties, because they represented a minority of the population, had to enter into coalitions with parties representing other social layers and, thus, had to attenuate their demands and pursue a reformist political course à la Western European Social Democracy. But I vaguely remembered a different scenario: the Bolshevik experience. I revisited the pamphlet and found what I was trying to recall—Lenin's argument that the Russian movement also heard the siren call of

opportunism but didn't succumb, at least in its revolutionary wing. In a 2010 article, I critiqued Przeworski—mainly for his dishonest treatment of Marx and Engels's views on electoral/parliamentary politics—and concluded that until the Russian case had been looked at closely, his hypothesis must remain no more than that.⁹ This book is that examination, and it refutes Przeworski's claim of the inevitability of reformism. In my book *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough* (2000), I told readers that I'd address in a future volume what happened to their project after their deaths.¹⁰ This book also constitutes the first—belated largely because of the rich database I had to mine—down payment on that promise.

The chronological organization of the book, both this and the second volume, is dictated by its four arguments. In this volume, Chapter 1, “What Marx and Engels Bequeathed,” provides the necessary evidence for the second argument, that Lenin's electoral/parliamentary strategy was squarely rooted in their politics. It distills and summarizes what the two founders of the modern communist movement said and did about electoral politics from the Revolutions of 1848–49 to the fight against reformism Engels was engaged in at the time of his death in 1895. It ends with their judgments about the revolutionary prospects for Russia—also necessary in making a determination about Lenin's continuity with their program. Chapter 2, “Revolutionary Continuity: Lenin's Politics Prior to 1905,” seeks to understand how he responded when the first opportunity for electoral/parliamentary activity in Czarist Russia presented itself. What were his views from the time he entered politics in 1894 to the beginning of the “Russian Spring” in 1905, on democracy in general, parliamentary democracy, constitutional government, and their relation to socialist revolution? And how did the democratic norm inform his views on the working class organizing itself into a party?

Chapters 3 and 4 of this volume, and Chapters 1 and 2 of *LES*, constitute the empirical heart of the book: the very rich details about the leadership Lenin provided for the RSDLP for the elections to and participation in the four State Dumas from 1906 to 1914. Issues such as whether to boycott or participate in undemocratic elections, how to conduct election campaigns, whether to enter into electoral blocs and the related (and ever current) “lesser of two evils” dilemma, how to keep deputies accountable to the party, and how to balance electoral politics with armed struggle all had to be addressed. And most important, how could the electoral/parliamentary process be utilized to forge a revolutionary coalition of the majority, the worker-peasant alliance? Throughout the process, the often-contentious issue of internal party

politics, specifically the growing split between the RSDLP's Bolshevik and Menshevik wings, looms large. That conflict, the evidence shows, mirrored the growing divide between revolutionary and reformist Social Democracy at the international level. This part of the narrative is framed by the Revolution of 1905, its defeat, the revival of revolutionary activity in 1912, and the outbreak of the First World War two years later.

Chapter 3 in *LES*, “‘The Great War,’ 1917, and Beyond,” begins with the Bolshevik Duma deputies' response to the outbreak of the war, their arrest and trial, and the split in international Social Democracy. The February Revolution in 1917, the overthrow of Czarist rule, allowed Lenin to apply the lessons of decade-long experience in the electoral arena—specifically, how “to count one's forces”—to determine when the Bolsheviks should lead an armed uprising of Russia's proletariat to take state power. There is sufficient evidence, as this chapter reveals, to make a more than credible case that the Bolshevik-led revolution in October, under Lenin's direction, was very much informed by the electoral/parliamentary strategy of modern communism's two founders—the first reading of the October Revolution to show its roots in Marx and Engels. Lenin's October Revolution balance sheets lend credence to this claim.

Last, in the Conclusion in *LES*, I begin with a summary of the chapters of each volume and then interrogate the book's four arguments to see if the evidence presented is convincing. I then offer an explanation for the silences in the literatures of foe and friend about Lenin's rich record in electoral/parliamentary politics. I end with a discussion of the potential relevance of Lenin's strategy of “revolutionary parliamentarism” for activists today in a variety of settings around the world.

Lenin's voice is prioritized and not, as is all too frequent in Leninological accounts, the author's. His voice is heard more than my own in these chapters. Readers, I think, will be pleased with that decision as they learn what Lenin actually said as opposed to what is often attributed to him and understand why he is all too often silenced. Lenin's detractors' accounts of him assume the reader has not and will not read him in his own words. Otherwise they would take far more precautions, make more hedges, or be less categorical than any of them have. Here Lenin is allowed to speak for himself. Virtually every word between quotation marks in the text is that of one of the protagonists of this story with the citation usually in reasonable proximity. If quotations come from the same writing, I provide the citation at the last one—to minimize the

number of endnotes. To avoid confusion with quoted material, I have refrained as much as possible from the all-too-common practice of employing “scare quotes.”

For Lenin’s voice, I rely almost exclusively on the 1976 printing of V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, in 45 volumes, the English edition of the slightly more extensive Russian edition, which is now online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/cw/index.htm>; for that reason I employ its spellings, such as “Cadets” rather than “Kadets.” I’m aware that not all that Lenin wrote is in print—and not just the unpublished documents Pipes’s aforementioned selection drew on. Lenin’s wife Krupskaya reported that much of their archives had to be burned before they fled Finland at the end of 1907, no doubt including many documents related to the Second State Duma.¹¹ And then there are the gargantuan Cracow archives that Lenin and Krupskaya had to abandon when the First World War broke out, reported to dwarf the *Collected Works* by at least a factor of ten.¹² For some reason they have never found their way into print; they too are no doubt rich in relevant documents, especially about the Third and Fourth State Dumas. That I rely primarily on the *Collected Works* may for some readers raise a red flag. Shouldn’t I employ other voices in a more “even-handed” way? First, the aim of this book is to present what Lenin actually said given the silences in other accounts. Relying on his *Collected Works* is the only feasible way to do that. Second, as for differing opinions on significant issues, the reader will see that Lenin, who was writing in real time, often copiously reproduced his opponents’ views in his polemics in order to take them on. Unlike today, his audience had access to both sides of the debate, and I assume with some confidence, therefore, Lenin had to be faithful in quoting opponents. What I can’t determine, admittedly, is what Lenin didn’t quote. Yet as the reader will see, he had to be convincing to be effective, which meant addressing his opponents’ arguments in good faith.

Every so often in politics a moment occurs that suggests history in the making. Only Minerva’s owl and, more encouragingly, students of history can make a definitive judgment. At the risk of sounding tempocentric, the eruption that began at the end of 2010—in Tunis, and then Cairo (where Natalie, my companion, was able to put in a brief appearance), Madison (where she spent a lot of time), New Delhi, Tel Aviv, New York, Oakland, Athens, Madrid, and then back to New Delhi, nearby Dhaka, and later the improbable Nicosia, and now, as this is being written, Istanbul and Rio de Janeiro—appears to be the long-expected (at least by some of us) breakthrough in the more than three-decade-long lull in the global class struggle. And this time

the axis had finally shifted from the long-overburdened Third World to the long somnolent advanced capitalist world, especially its capital, the United States. Since it is in essence a response to one of those rare moments in the 250-year history of the capitalist mode of production, a global economic crisis—the last time the masses have gone in motion on a near-global scale—we can have more confidence that this upsurge, despite its inevitable ebbs and flows, has staying power. Years of resistance, with all the learning opportunities that come with such challenges to business as usual, are on the agenda for the world’s toilers. What is needed are those prepared to participate in and distill the lessons of those opportunities, like the 35-year old Lenin in Russia’s “dress rehearsal” of 1905. This book, along with all the unseen, unacknowledged efforts in every corner of the world, is offered to aid and abet the future Lenins—to ensure that this moment will one day be the stuff of history.

Acknowledgments

I want to recognize and thank the many people who helped to make this book possible, roughly in the order in which they provided assistance. First, to the volunteers who put and maintain online the Lenin *Collected Works*, to whom I'm truly indebted. Not only did their labor facilitate the production of the book, but it makes it easier for readers to verify my citations. For those I know personally, Sergio Valverde, a PhD student in my department of political science at the University of Minnesota, gave me the first opportunity to present the project in a public setting at the Minnesota Political Theory Colloquium he organized in the fall of 2011. The feedback I received was most valuable, especially from my colleague Elizabeth Beaumont. What I say about the outcome of the Russian Revolution in Chapter 3 in the second volume and how to position Lenin in relation to it is in many ways a response to the thoughtful questions she raised. About a year later, Linda Hoover organized a group presentation for the Minnesota Marxist Book Club where I was able to share what I'd written, about half of the manuscript, with her, Michael Livingston, Dean Gunderson, and Amit Singh. That too was quite rewarding, not only on matters of content relevant to activists in that milieu, but also on stylistic issues I hadn't considered. In the meantime, Bob Braxton, a longtime acquaintance with editorial and revolutionary political experience, volunteered to give me feedback on the first three chapters. His advice and suggestions, for which I'm forever grateful, have informed the subsequent chapters in various ways. Joseph Towns IV also provided invaluable editorial input on the first four chapters as well as raising important questions about formulations in the manuscript that required clarification to make for a more readable narrative. And to Carl Voss, who read the Preface and Conclusion, the rumors about your superb editing skills were indeed true. No one was more helpful in pointing me toward the mainstream literature I interrogate in "A Critical Review of the Relevant Literature" than Theo Stavrou, distinguished professor of Russian history at the University of Minnesota. Another colleague, Bud Duvall, took time from his very busy schedule as chair of the Department of Political Science to help me think through the logic of my fourth argument as I was writing the Conclusion. Last, to my longtime comrade and companion, Natalie Johnsen Morrison, the best of the working class, whose constant injunction was to make this accessible to the working class, your forbearance and patience will forever be

appreciated. Of course, I am ultimately responsible for what found its way into the book, but without the supportive and ever watchful staff at Palgrave Macmillan that would not have been possible.

Preface

¹ V. I. Lenin, “*Left-Wing*” *Communism—An Infantile Disorder*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 31 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978), p. 61. Hereafter, citations from his *Collected Works* will be designated as in this case: 31, p. 61.

² Like Marxologists (and unlike Marxists and Leninists), Leninologists pretend to be nonpartisan in pursuit of “objective research.” The reality in both cases is otherwise; for the duplicity of the Leninologists, see “A Critical Review of the Literature.” I owe the distinction to Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*, vol. 1 (New York: Monthly Review, 1977).

³ I recognize that Lenin’s portrait by his enemies is complicated. Some of them actually praise what they see as his organizing skills while disdaining his politics. A classic example is Samuel Huntington’s assessment in his *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967). Huntington’s portrait may in fact be the inspiration for such neoconservatives as William Kristol; “neoconservative foreign policy thinking has all along indulged a romance of the ruthless—an expectation that small numbers of people might be able to play a decisive role in world events, if only their ferocity could be unleashed” (Paul Berman, *New York Times Book Review*, March 26, 2006).

⁴ At the end of his influential career, Leninologist Leopold Haimson appears to have had a greater appreciation of the Bolshevik leader. But he still couldn’t resist reading him through the lens of the Stalinist outcome of the Russian Revolution. See his “Lenin’s Revolutionary Career Revisited: Some Observations on Recent Discussion,” *Kritika* 5, no. 1 (2004), p. 79.

⁵ See “A Critical Review of the Literature: Chapter Two” for what might be the most blatant example.

⁶ Richard Pipes, *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

⁷ I discuss in my *Marx, Tocqueville, and Race in America: The “Absolute Democracy” or “Defiled Republic”* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), pp. 161–71, how these two overturns were actually linked.

Just as I was completing the manuscript, I discovered Roland Boer’s *Lenin, Religion, and Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), a most informative treatment of a hitherto neglected dimension of the Bolshevik leader. I didn’t have time to give it more than a cursory glance other than the references to Lenin vis-à-vis Duma politics—none of which appear to be problematic. However, I beg to differ with his claim about those who argue, like Trotsky and Krupskaya (Lenin’s widow), that “Lenin was thoroughly consistent and faithful to Marx throughout his life, operating with a grand socialist narrative that moved...to the glorious construction of communism. The problem with this position is not only that it must end with a narrative of disappointment, for Lenin found after the revolution that events did not turn out as expected, but also that it

must smooth over the many times Lenin took an unexpected direction” (p. 7). Readers of this book and its companion volume will be able to determine if one of “many times” applied to his electoral/parliamentary strategy. Relevant here, though, is the false assumption that neither Lenin nor his mentors, Marx and Engels, were prepared for defeats or counterrevolutions. Nothing could be further from the truth. The authors of the *Communist Manifesto* recognized this reality about the class struggle in the second paragraph of the first part of the document. Proletarian defeats, a few pages later, were more common than victories. And the living class struggle, from the coup d’état of Louis Bonaparte in 1851 to the defeat of the Communards of Paris in 1871—whose lessons Lenin had internalized—made theory real.

8 Doug Jenness, *Lenin as Election Campaign Manager* (New York: Pathfinder, 1971).

9 “Marx and Engels’s Electoral Strategy: The Alleged versus the Real,” *New Political Science* 32, no. 3 (September 2010): 367–87.

10 *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

11 Nadezhda Krupskaya, *Memories of Lenin* (London: Panther Books, 1970), p. 145.

12 Robert Service, *Lenin: A Political Life*, vol. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 353n32.