

Eleven theses on Lenin in the Corona era

Thomas Seibert

0.

When I gladly accepted the offer to contribute to this book, the Corona virus was not yet on the map. As I write now (20.03.2020), it seems the world is talking about almost nothing else. Although, with the exception of Slavoj Žižek,¹ nobody has yet made the connection to Lenin, there are obvious links to the decisive thinker behind the question, “What is to be done?” In fact, we might just be witnessing a “Lenin moment”:² suddenly many things seem possible that were previously considered impossible. This not only concerns the coercive measures employed by the media and the police to isolate millions of people, and the suspension of basic rights. Nor does it only concern solidarity, in which individuals assume responsibility towards themselves and, without exception, towards all others (see XI.5 below). Rather, the impossibility that has suddenly become possibility concerns the entire process of capitalist globalisation, i.e. the prevailing dynamic of the last five decades and, at the same time, the whole of post-colonial modernity. It thus concerns the transformation of the world in its entirety, which for decades has been considered impossible. Tomorrow, it seems, the free circulation of capital, goods and services around the globe might come to an end, as the movement of people, which has always been regulated, is abruptly and completely curtailed, every one of us being detained in our current location. It is also clear, however, that the closure of national borders in itself necessitates binding global rules, and it is equally clear that nation states, as the creditors of a near-paralysed global economy, could be called upon from all sides to nationalise production to a significant extent. It is therefore hardly remarkable that the neoliberal dogma of “austerity” – with its compulsory balancing of state budgets – is no longer worth the paper on which, only yesterday, it was prescribed for all eternity, on whatever dubious grounds and with whatever sinister intentions. If everything can so suddenly become completely different from before, and given that the post-Corona world will no longer be the same, the Left must, in all urgency, turn once more towards Lenin: “What is to be done?” This is less about concrete instructions than about what one could call the spirit of Leninist thought and action: the resolve to engage with history in the purest sense of the word, namely with the possibility of a revolutionary rupture of fundamental and thereby world-historical significance.

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Das Ende der Welt, wie wir sie kennen*, <https://www.welt.de/kultur/plus206189063/Corona-Epidemie-Das-Ende-der-Welt-wie-wir-sie-kennen.html>. Žižek writes not of Lenin himself, but of a “Lenin moment.”

² Mimmo Porcaro, *Occupy Lenin*, in: *The Socialist Register*, 49/2013: 89.

I.

Let us then investigate the “Lenin moment.” The term signifies not only a specific historical moment, but a way of thinking and acting that is characterized by extreme openness to even the most inconspicuous changes in the given situation. It found its ideal-typical expression in the Bolshevik revolutionary leader and is therefore encapsulated by his *nom de guerre*: “Lenin therefore is a continuous *movement of rupture* in the face of convictions, of political lines and of organisational forms, which, having matured in a preceding situation, tend by inertia to repeat their problems and solutions and therefore remain prisoners of the old class relations. This is the fundamental core of the concept of party (and therefore of communist politics) in Lenin: [...] the idea of a politics that continuously shifts the more simple and direct reactions of the movements and *of the party itself*, raising them to a level at which it is possible to understand the reciprocal relations among all the classes and between all the classes and the state and *therefore* to understand the *continuous change* of these relations – for a communist goal, which [...] is always itself subject to incessant redefinition.”³

I.1

To promote revolutionary self-empowerment with an orientation towards the sudden dawning of the “eve of revolution,” in 1902 Lenin wrote *What is to be done?*⁴ The book differentiates between three conflicting modes of thought and action with regard to the revolution:

I.2

truly revolutionary, “social democratic” thought and action, which according to current language usage, based on the schism of the Second and the foundation of the Third International, is called communist;

I.3

the simultaneously “economistic” and “opportunistic” limitation of revolutionary activity to a purely trade-unionist sphere and rationale, which in today’s language is called social democratic or socialist thought and action;

I.4

³ Ibid: 135.

⁴ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *What is to be done?*: 304. In: *Collected Works* 5, Moscow 1977: 347-529.

the abstract negation of economism through “revolutionary” thought and action, which perpetually imagines itself on the “eve of the revolution,” wants to bring on the dawn via force (“terrorism”) and thereby also falls prey to opportunism; we refer to this today rather as anarchism, in the sense of an existentially driven voluntarism.

II.

What is to be done? remains relevant to this day because the triad of social democrats (communists), opportunists (social democrats) and revolutionists (anarchists) is not only to be found in early 20th century Russia. It was, and is, also found in all social struggles of capitalist modernity and in all emancipatory movements, including in locations where the terms themselves are not used. Thus understood, anarchist, social democratic and communist tendencies existed and exist not only in the workers’ movement, but also in the youth, student and women’s movements, in the anti-colonial and anti-racist movements, in all broadly anti-normalist movements, as well as in the ecological and even the democratic movements. Socialism, anarchism and communism thus signify the structural differences in all emancipatory action and thereby form the three elementary answers to the question, “What is to be done?” Those seeking illumination of this should read (not only for this reason) Emile Zola’s great novel *Germinal*, which personalizes the inner conflicts of a miners’ uprising in the 1860s in the form of three protagonists, whose position can be understood as typically social democratic (“economic-opportunistic”), typically communist (“social democratic”) and typically anarchistic (“revolutionary”).⁵ If, in what follows, I at first focus on Lenin, it must be noted that the structural character of the triad of emancipatory action has an intrinsic quality, including tendencies criticized by Lenin, to which we will turn our attention in due course.⁶

II.2

The error of both social democracy and anarchism lies, according to Lenin, in their “bowing to spontaneity.”⁷ This orientation is economistic and opportunistic, he argues, because it takes its cue from spontaneously emergent, on the whole economically driven social struggles, to which it seeks to “lend a political character”⁸ based on their inherent nature, i.e. justified by their own logic and dynamics. For Lenin, however, such an orientation

⁵ Emile Zola, *Germinal*, Penguin Classics. 2004.

⁶ I make this reservation with thanks to Karin Zennig, who, as the first reader and comrade of this text, rightly insisted on an early clarification.

⁷ *What is to be done?*: 378 and 12 further instances.

⁸ Ibid: 401 and 18 further instances.

“degrades” a clearly universalistic politics to the level of executing what can always and only be a particularistic calculation of interests.⁹ Lenin ascribes to economism a fundamental misinterpretation of Marx’s central discovery, which was indeed not intended to be understood in terms of tactics. To illustrate this point, Lenin cites the opportunist newspaper *Rabocheye Dyelo*, which states in an apparently classical Marxist manner: “What Social-Democrat does not know that according to the theories of Marx and Engels the economic interests of certain classes play a decisive role in history, and, *consequently*, that particularly the proletariat’s struggle for its economic interests must also be of paramount importance in its class development and struggle for emancipation?” (Lenin’s emphasis).

II.3

Lenin immediately presents his fundamental objection to this: “The word ‘consequently’ is completely irrelevant. The fact that economic interests play a decisive role *does not in the least imply* that the economic (i.e. trade union) struggle is of prime importance; for the most essential, the ‘decisive’ interests of classes can be satisfied *only by* radical *political* changes in general. In particular the fundamental economic interests of the proletariat can be satisfied only by a political revolution that replaces the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie by the dictatorship of the proletariat.”¹⁰ Whereas economic struggle arises spontaneously, political struggle comes about only by means of a conscious decision by those who struggle towards a universal project that transcends even their own immediate interests. Between spontaneity and consciousness, and thus between economy and politics, there lies a gaping, existential discontinuity; as a result, economic struggle cannot, in and of itself, be given a “political character.” This is precisely the error made by both opportunists and revolutionists, who differ “only” in the choice of means (legality vs. illegality) with which they seek to politicise spontaneous struggle driven by narrow self-interest.

III.

Having formulated the polemic in this manner, Lenin arrives at his central thesis: that the consciousness necessary for leading the political struggle can only be brought to the proletariat “from without,” through a tightly centralized organization, initially consisting primarily of intellectuals, which must thereby act as a vanguard always one step ahead of the working classes.¹¹ The centrality of this thesis is clearly demonstrated by the fact that it is, to this day, the first point of reference for all objections made against Lenin. The majority of

⁹ Ibid: 365; Lenin uses the expression “degrade” in ten other instances.

¹⁰ Ibid: 390-391.

¹¹ Ibid: 375, 384, 422.

these objections, however, are undermined by a misunderstanding of the discontinuity that Lenin not only claimed but insisted upon between economics and politics, between spontaneity and consciousness. Contrary to what is generally assumed, this discontinuity must not be understood categorically, but specifically¹² – as is evident from the passage in which Lenin clarifies what he means by “from without,” which we cite here in its entirety:

“Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers. The sphere from which alone it is possible to obtain this knowledge is the sphere of relationships of *all* classes and strata to the state and the government, the sphere of interrelations between *all* classes. For that reason, the reply to the question as to what must be done to bring political knowledge to the workers cannot merely be the answer with which, in the majority of cases, the practical workers, especially those inclined towards Economism, mostly content themselves, namely: ‘To go among the workers.’ To bring political consciousness to the *workers* the Social Democrats must *go among all classes of the population*; they must dispatch units of their army *in all directions*.”¹³ (Lenin’s emphasis)

IV.

There follow five passages in which Lenin indicates the actual tasks that the communists must carry out when, with regard to the “sphere of relationships of *all* classes and strata with the state and the government” and the “interrelations between all classes,” they resolutely “go among all classes” and “dispatch units of their army in all directions.”

IV.1

In the first passage, Lenin describes the political struggle, which is superior to all economic (i.e. particularistic) struggles, as an “all-round political struggle,” that is, a universal struggle waged in consciousness of this universality.¹⁴

IV.2

¹² Nor, incidentally, should it be tied to the different types of existence of workers and intellectuals, nor to the divergence between looser and tighter forms of organising – which Lenin explicitly refers to tactically and not strategically, and which are to be abolished as soon as possible by alignment with the rules of German Social-Democracy. Cf. *Ibid*: 478f.

¹³ *Ibid*: 422.

¹⁴ *Ibid*: 428.

In the second passage, Lenin qualifies the “all-round” communist struggle in the words of a worker as a struggle in which all the “sections of the people” will learn “how to live and how to die.” As this existential demand for right action makes clear, the struggle is not only a political but an ethical one, and in the same sentence Lenin defines it as primarily a struggle for “publicity”¹⁵ – i.e. a struggle that must be waged through public discourse. Lenin’s use of the term “publicity” should not be reduced to the example he cites (newspapers) but understood as referring to the leading role that theory – i.e. discourse, reflection, debate, and thus education – plays in the relationship between theory and practice. Even in its most tangible praxis, the communist project is also an educational project; it is, in the words of Alain Badiou, a “politics of truth.”¹⁶

IV.3

The third passage separates once again the political struggle, the “all-round” struggle carried out in all classes, from “the economic struggle against the employers and against the government,” in that Lenin prescribes to the communists the task of “actively intervening in every ‘liberal’ issue and of determining [*their*] own, Social-Democratic [= communist] attitude towards this question.” (Lenin’s emphasis)¹⁷ I will return to this point in IV.6 below.

IV.4

The fourth passage is found in a footnote at the end of the entire book and summarises the communist struggle in light of its explicitly universal goal, which according to Lenin, is “to transform radically the conditions of life of the whole of mankind.” The universality of this goal corresponds to Lenin’s admonition in the same sentence that the communists must not “be ‘perturbed’ by the question of the duration of the work.”¹⁸ This should be understood not only as a reference to the length of time needed to prepare the ground for revolution, but also to the utter suddenness with which it can arrive.

IV.5

Let us then get to the heart of the specific discontinuity between economic and political struggle, as well as between spontaneity and consciousness. This discontinuity should *not* be conceived of as two sides: economism and spontaneity on one side, politics and

¹⁵ Ibid: 477. Lenin uses the term “publicity” five times and, tellingly, ascribes to the economists a “fear of publicity.” Ibid: 364 and 478.

¹⁶ For example, Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, London 2005.

¹⁷ *What is to be done?*: 436.

¹⁸ Ibid: 514.

consciousness on the other; unorganized struggling workers on one side, while on the other, organized professional revolutionary intellectuals, who move among the workers to bring consciousness and politics to them. Rather, the discontinuity between economism and politics, or spontaneity and consciousness, is intrinsic to the nature of spontaneity and consciousness *per se*. Those who spontaneously follow their particularistic, generally economic interests, and align their political affiliation accordingly, will change little or nothing in the consciousness that has informed them from the very beginning. S/he sets out, fights, wins or loses, achieves or does not achieve that which s/he desires. S/he is, at best, wiser as a result, but has not yet become someone else. If, however, the workers spontaneously pursuing their particularistic interests in the struggle are to become communists, they must no longer be beholden to the spontaneity of their immediate interests, rather they must consciously pursue the universal interest in order to “to transform radically the conditions of life of the whole of mankind.” They must therefore conduct their political struggle resolutely, over a longer period and in all directions and all classes of society. To do so, however, they must extend their consciousness, originally fixed on the calculation of their own economic interests, to a new, completely different consciousness: one that is at the same time moral and political. This, then, will be a consciousness that has learned “how to live and how to die,” and how to lead this living and dying with regard to itself and all of humanity. Yet this consciousness of how one “should” live and die can only be adequate to its all-encompassing, radically universalistic task if it does so spontaneously, if those waging the struggle do not only – and this is ultimately the decisive point! – change their inherent consciousness, but also their inherent spontaneity. As an existential example of this anticipated change in both consciousness and spontaneity, and thus of existence itself, Lenin can then cite his own professional-revolutionary existence. The term “professional revolutionaries” does not only mean professionalism in a technical-pragmatic sense, but a specifically adopted vocation – a “profession” in the purest sense (from the French *profession*, vow, calling, position, from Latin *professio*, public avowal, public declaration of name, property, or trade, to Latin *profiteri*, *professus sum*, to declare, confess, acknowledge openly, publicly and voluntarily; in Lenin’s case, therefore, the term expressly points to the essential “publicity” of political action, despite tactically unavoidable clandestinity).¹⁹ In an appropriately existential passage he condenses his “professional” universalism into the assertion that “the ‘economic struggle against the employers and the government’ can *never* satisfy revolutionaries” and that the revolution itself therefore

¹⁹ Cf. Jacques Derrida’s enduringly authoritative essay, “*The University Without Condition*” in *Without Alibi*, Stanford 2002: 202-237.

demands a “militant organisation” that “satisfies [...] all revolutionary instincts and strivings.”²⁰

IV.6

The fifth passage, referred to previously in IV.3, clarifies the ultimate goal of the dissociation by the proletariat from its particular interests in favour of its “revolutionary instincts and strivings,” i.e. in favour of both a different consciousness and spontaneity. In effect, this goal does not only concern the moral progress achieved in the transition from a particularistic-economic to a universal-political position, but far more significantly, the existential denunciation of subjugation to the “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie” and the self-empowerment towards the “dictatorship of the proletariat” – a step in which Lenin explicitly identifies the “most essential,” indeed the “decisive” interests of classes.²¹ Concomitantly, however, this means that as long as the proletariat is driven by its narrow economic self-interest, it remains subject to the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie – even when engaged in the most fervent economic struggle.

V.

If one realizes that the politicisation of proletarian consciousness and proletarian spontaneity, that is, of its entire existence, is the real point of Lenin, the actual communist point, then it becomes equally clear that the professional-revolutionary existence was and is also the precise condition of the ‘Lenin moment,’ that is, the condition of the extraordinary tactical agility of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. At the same time, conversely, one recognizes the moment of truth in the accusation that Lenin’s opponents repeatedly make against him, namely his “overestimation of ideology,” which is in itself an “overestimation of the conscious element.”²² According to such criticism, this overestimation is the reason why the communists, as they pursue their all-round course in all directions, frequently depart from the “class point of view” – upheld by the economists as their most immanent task – and “obscure class antagonisms”²³ in the purely economic sense. Simultaneously, this overestimation of consciousness and ideology is at the root of the communists’ failure to speak to the proletariat through its own economic interests, instead addressing it as the “vanguard fighter for democracy”, i.e. through deeply “ideological” interests.²⁴ Lenin rejects these reproaches, rightly – and wrongly: he conceives the communist activity of the working

²⁰ Ibid: 477.

²¹ Ibid: 390f, Notes.

²² Ibid: 318f, 382, 386, 394, 395, 433.

²³ Ibid: 434.

²⁴ Ibid: 421-436.

classes explicitly with a view to the “the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat,” which, in his own words, however, is only revealed through an “ideological” interest whose aim is “to transform radically the conditions of life of the whole of mankind.” Therefore, it can only reveal itself in the fullest sense when one exists spontaneously from one’s conscious ideological choice – in and from one’s own idea.²⁵ This point alone ultimately explains the concrete organizational-political question of founding a newspaper as the “collective organiser” of the search for the answer to the all-important question: “What type of organization do we require?”²⁶ Both the newspaper and the organization are the media of the true Leninist project of turning “workers’ revolutionaries,” with their spontaneous and conscious economic interests, who are thus radically subjected to the bourgeoisie, into radically de-subjugated “professional revolutionaries” on account of their spontaneous and conscious political interests: a deeply “ideological” project in which the path and the goal, the medium and the message, are to coincide.²⁷ Thus, Lenin was wrong only because he should have shrugged his shoulders when accused and simply said: “So fucking what?”

VI.

Let us now return from the year 1902 to the present day, as the world finds itself convulsed by the Corona pandemic, and can only be convulsed by the pandemic because it has found its “collective organizer” in the form of the electronic media (of course, Lenin would today, in concrete terms, no longer propose the creation of a newspaper, but strategic participation in precisely these media!). If this present, despite its obvious horror and unfathomable perilousness, appears to us, at least for the moment, to be open, then this has to do not only with the virus, but also with the fact that until recently the modern era seemed to us to be just the reverse, to be closed in on itself. Worse still: at the turn of the century, many observers even believed that we had arrived at the “end of history,” that we had reached a time in which only incidental changes would now be possible to our irrevocable achievements.²⁸ Of course, there have been massive upheavals since then, from the 9/11 attacks to the 2015 European migrant crisis, but there has not been – and this is my point – since the epoch of May 68, a political project concerned with the whole world and the existence of humankind. That this was and still is so, owes much to Lenin again: but this time to the failure of the Bolshevik-led October Revolution in almost all of its immediate and

²⁵ Ibid: 514.

²⁶ Ibid: 510-516.

²⁷ Ibid: 472.

²⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York 1992.

later repercussions. While it is true that the “Lenin moment” did indeed lead to a glorious, ever memorable beginning, it is also true that it subsequently led to a literally bloody failure, over decades, and finally to a pitiful agony: perhaps the greatest broken promise in secular history. Here, this fiasco can only be discussed within the limits of the question as to the relevance of Lenin in the Corona era. If we concede that Lenin’s criticism of economism and revolutionism was correct and has been confirmed by the ensuing history of both social democracy and anarchism, we must now also admit that his proposal for the politicisation of proletarian existence, through its professional revolutionary education under a tightly centralized vanguard leadership, has equally failed.

VI.1

Moreover, the full extent of the dilemma lies in the fact that the failure of all three strategic options (social democracy, anarchism and communism) applies not only to proletarian struggles in the narrower sense, but to all social struggles more broadly: they too have been unable to take the step from the calculation of their immediate interests to their “most essential” and “decisive” interest, or at least not in a sufficient way, and have therefore not achieved the common goal of “transform[ing] radically the conditions of life of the whole of mankind.” If we nevertheless recognise Lenin’s relevance to our time, this derives solely from the clarity with which he framed the question that still occupies us today: namely, that spontaneous social struggles must first become political struggles, in the purest sense of the word, if they are to fulfil the hopes that Lenin, and we ourselves, place in them.

VII.

Acknowledging Lenin’s ongoing relevance also means rejecting the three post-Leninist alternative solutions to our problem that have emerged in the intervening period.

VII.1

The first alternative solution lies in simply abandoning the supposedly unattainable goal of “transform[ing] radically the conditions of life of the whole of mankind.” It is not difficult to recognise how this will only lead to a renewal of economism, as we allow ourselves to be reduced from our “most essential” and “decisive” interests to our most immediate, largely economic particularistic interests – this time without even the sense of remorse that troubled the economists in Lenin’s time. As Lenin’s criticism made clear, however, this proposal is doomed from the start: in the structural capitalist crisis it cannot even achieve these starkly reduced interests. Worse still, as Lenin perceptively recognised, by limiting us

to the purely economic, it subjects us to the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, whose foundation rests precisely on the reduction of our spontaneity and consciousness to the economic sphere. With regard to the Corona pandemic, this can be seen in the willingness with which entire societies, including significant segments of the Left, have submitted to a crisis management regime that threatens to reduce us to living beings whose sole interest is mere survival.

VII.2

This last point leads us to the second alternative solution, that of an anarchist self-assertion raised to an end in itself, whose only goal would be antibourgeois, i.e. pure anti-economic de-subjugation as such. It would follow the surrealist André Breton's 'revolver maxim,' which states:

“The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd with his belly at barrel level.”²⁹

Regardless of the extent to which the “debasement” and “cretinization” produced by the economism of the bourgeoisie might lead us to support such a proposition, its observance today could not be distinguished from fundamentalist terror of any origin, with which it under no circumstances wishes to be conflated.

VII.3

That leaves us with the third alternative solution to Lenin's problem: if the proletariat is not capable of politicizing itself, then we replace it with another subject of history, or eliminate such a subject altogether. Whichever of the two options of “farewell to the working class” (André Gorz) one chooses, both lead in practice to either an economic or a revolutionist position: one either eventually gives up on broader goals and demeans oneself to particularism, or one despairs in the dark glow of aimless anarchic self-assertion. In fact, what the proletariat has thus far been unable to accomplish can equally not be expected from a “global civil society,” or from any “new social movements” regardless of their race or

²⁹ André Breton, *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*. In: *Manifestos of Surrealism*, Ann Arbor 1972: 125.

gender, nor yet from the “multitudes” – at all of whom this most far-reaching proposal for the replacement of the proletariat is aimed.³⁰

VIII

It is perhaps no coincidence that a fourth proposal was developed by Jean-Paul Sartre directly after the nightmare of the Second World War, in the face of the Stalinist reversal of the revolution and, last but not least, on the “eve of the revolution” of May 1968: a proposal which, suffused by this historical *intermediacy*, seems to have fallen out of the passage of time. It is certainly no coincidence that, through this proposal, Sartre was able to free himself from the aimless anarchic self-assertion of his early existentialism. In order to present his proposal as reflectively as possible, I introduce it by means of the criticism made of it by Sartre’s erstwhile companion, Maurice Merleau-Ponty: a criticism that relates to Sartre’s first concrete composition in its immediate temporal context, rather than to his actual, more broadly historical point. The justified criticism of this first concrete proposal concerned Sartre’s decision to toe the line of the Soviet Union and the *Parti communiste français*, despite his own objections to their specific policies: a decision that Sartre himself soon abandoned. The connection to Lenin lies in the actual point of the proposal and is at once evident in the extremely apposite term that Merleau-Ponty coined to describe it: “Ultrabolshevism,” i.e. an immanent radicalization of Lenin’s Bolshevism.³¹

VIII.1

In its actual point, Ultrabolshevism adheres to Marx and Lenin’s conception of the proletariat as the immanent subjective negation of capitalist society. It does not, however, regard the proletariat as an empirical, social reality, much less an economically driven one, but rather as a universal-existential possibility of history and its politicisation. In his commitment to this possibility, Sartre is thus concerned with a politics that continues to aim at “transform[ing] radically the conditions of life of the whole of mankind” and, to this end – and herein lies its “Lenin moment” – seeks to transcend all particularistic interests, without exception. If I now outline this Ultrabolshevism in the words that Merleau-Ponty used to critique Sartre, in which he sought to remain true to Lenin, I also place my own emphasis on the philosophical-political realisation on which Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and

³⁰ See the manifesto-like pamphlet by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Declaration*, Argo Navis Author Services 2012.

³¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Chapter 5: *Sartre and Ultra-Bolshevism*, Evanston 1973: 95-201. The works of Sartre to which Merleau-Ponty refers are the essay *Materialism and Revolution* (in: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, New York 1962: 198-256) and the article series *The Communists and Peace* (New York 1952), originally published in *Les Temps modernes*. At the time, Sartre’s later Marxist works had not yet been written.

Lenin all agree. According to this realisation, the historical facts themselves say “neither yes nor no” to the possibility, asserted by Lenin and Sartre, of the arrival of the revolutionary proletariat in history, thereby confirming it in its inescapable potentiality as such:

“It is [...] a question of [...] remaining faithful to what you think of capitalism and pursuing the consequences of this position. If capitalism overturns personal relationships by subjugating one class to another, if it even succeeds in depriving the oppressed class any hold on history, dispersing it through the democratic game, which allows for all opinions but not for the enterprise of *recreating humanity and beginning history anew*, and if you do not want to become the enemy of the proletariat and of mankind by opposing this enterprise – if, additionally, you hold with Sartre that the dialectic, aside from a few privileged moments, never was anything but a cover for violent action [...] – then what is there to do except to open a credit account (which cannot be precisely measured in advance) to the only party that claims kinship with the proletariat, all the while reserving only your right to inspect the account? In a history which is without reason, in the name of what would you proclaim that the communist enterprise is impossible? This reasoning takes into account only intentions, not what one prefers or chooses; it tells us *on what condition we will be irreproachable before the proletariat*, at least in the short run, but it does not tell us how our action will liberate the proletariat. Yet it is the liberation of the worker that you are pretending to pursue. If the facts say “neither yes nor no,” if the regime the proletariat desires is equivocal, and if, being aware of that and knowing the liabilities of the system, you help the proletariat establish such a regime, *it is because you are thinking less of the proletariat than of yourself.*”³² (My emphasis)

IX.

This “thinking of oneself,” which in the undecidability of historical facts makes it at all possible for us to decide “on what condition we will be irreproachable before the proletariat,” Sartre later identified as the concept of the “singular universal”: the one who stands alone for herself and at the same time for all others, and thus does what she is and remains free to do under all circumstances, like each and every other, namely to give all others the example of her own action and thus to impose it on them insofar as they are of good will.³³ Although Sartre was thinking, in this regard, less of Lenin than of Kierkegaard, he nevertheless confirmed the truth in which Lenin and Kierkegaard, Marxism and existentialism coincide.

³² Merleau-Ponty, loc. cit.: 180.

³³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Singular Universal*. In: *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. London 2008: 141-169.

In this way, he does exactly what Lenin demanded of communists in his time: he poses liberal questions, that is, questions about freedom, in a communist way, that is, as questions about equality, and thus refuses to separate the two questions that guide modernity (cf. IV.3 above). In a similar vein, the contemporary value of the party, as both Sartre and Lenin conceive of it, is revealed. For Sartre, the term ‘party’ evokes only the necessity that all those who, in thinking of themselves, think always also of all others and thereby become ‘political,’ must unite with one another in order to be able to take action together, both theoretically and practically. On this point, Marx spoke of the “party in the broad historical sense” and categorically separated this party from all concrete organisations, including the Communist League, which he himself co-founded and was the nucleus of all later social democratic and communist parties.³⁴ Sartre, then, placed this “party in the broad historical sense” under the further condition of a “right to inspect,” to be practiced in any case on one’s own account, and thereby made it the subject of a “politics in the first person” to be freely exchanged with others.

IX.1

Such a “party in the broad historical sense” also alters, however, the relationship between social democracy, anarchism and communism. Given that they express structural tendencies of all social struggles, their contradiction must not be determined in favour of one tendency in particular. Instead, one must always re-evaluate this contradiction according to the situation, thereby dialectically emphasising the moment of truth in each tendency.

IX.2

The right of social democracy lies precisely in its realism, i.e. in the unfortunate yet undeniable understanding that, on the whole, “the people” fight only for their spontaneous interests, and that this narrow self-interest must therefore be taken into account strategically, that is to say, politically.

IX.3

If anarchism sets the antithesis to this, its “propaganda of the deed” rightly bears witness to the always and everywhere available possibility of de-subjugation, performed in the here-and-now and in the first person. In this way, it testifies to the fundamental primacy of possibility over all reality and realism, without which we would indeed be without any hope.

³⁴ Karl Marx in a letter to Ferdinand Freiligrath, 29.02.1860. Available in English at: https://marxists.catbull.com/archive/marx/works/1860/letters/60_02_29.htm.

IX.4

The right of communism, however, then lies in insisting – against social democracy and against anarchism – on the dialectic, which as such is always also the dialectic of the possible and the necessary. If, in the contradiction of the three tendencies, it is thus rightly given prominence, then for this very reason it must not make itself into a party in the narrow historical sense, and certainly not into a state: the leading role of the communists must be exercised only indirectly, primarily through ‘publicity,’ i.e. through the dissemination of thought in the form of speaking and writing. This insight leads back from Lenin to Marx and Engels, for whom the primacy of the communists lay, tellingly, precisely in being “not a special party in relation to the other working-class parties,” but championing in these parties the power of reflection on the “most essential,” the “decisive” interest³⁵

X.

Philosophically, Sartre’s Ultrabolshevism is based on an ultra-dialecticism that impels the original Leninist understanding against Hegel and Marx. As its “in-itself,” it presupposes a *physis*, to which nature and the “practical inertia” moment of all social praxis belong.³⁶ This *physis* confronts the “for-itself” of an *antiphysis* that explicitly recognizes its radical contingency and thus, borderline to all dialectics, its perhaps ultimate incommunicability, i.e. “uselessness.”³⁷ Dialectically, the contradiction between the in-itself of *physis* and the for-itself of *antiphysis* remains, because the for-itself does not run away from the struggle for recognition and wagers everything on the *possibility* of a transition from the “society of laws” to a “Kingdom of Ends”: the irredeemable possibility of “classless society or the liberation of man.”³⁸

XI.

In the Corona crisis, Ultrabolshevism and ultra-dialectics are not entirely without strategic points of reference in empirical reality. If these points appear comparatively abstract, this

³⁵ Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, London 2002: 234f and not to forget 257. For a detailed discussion of the structural contradictions of social democracy, anarchism and communism, see (in German) Thomas Seibert, *Zur Ökologie der Existenz. Freiheit, Gleichheit, Umwelt*, Frankfurt 2017: 351-393.

³⁶ Sartre first employs the conceptual pairing *physis* (Nature)--*antiphysis* in *Materialism and Revolution*, where he states that he derived the terminology from Marxism, cf. loc. cit.: 234. “Practical inertia” is a key term in Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason Vol. 1*: London 2004.

³⁷ In the final sentence of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre calls man “a useless passion,” which nonetheless cannot and must not lose itself: New York 1993.

³⁸ *Materialism and Revolution*: 234, 236. This extremely well-considered formulation connects St. Paul (“society of laws”), Kant (“Kingdom of Ends”) and Marx (“classless society”) through their shared conceptualisation of that which runs through all of history: “the liberation of man.”

only indicates that the whole world and the whole of human existence are on the line and just how high the stakes must therefore be.

XI.1

In the first point, the Corona Crisis presents itself as a palpable crisis of globalization, which it situates just as palpably in the everyday life of each and every one of us. The virus infects the whole world and affects every dimension of our being-in-the-world: more generally, in the fear and anxiety of the world inherent in many emotions, very practically in the increasing daily upheavals that affect us simultaneously in the most diverse places of life: at home, on vacation, in the factory and office, in the supermarket, in front of suddenly closed doors, in the cancellation of a multitude of appointments and plans, and almost inevitably in the comprehensive communication of all events through the media. Today we can only imagine what it will mean in Lagos, Mexico City or Karachi.

XI.2

The second point translates the double corona/globalization crisis directly into the capitalist crisis that encompasses them – both the long-standing capitalist crisis, as well as the one that will result from the interruption, if not the total disruption, of global manufacturing and supply chains.

XI.3

That this crisis is not only an economic but also a political one is demonstrated by the third reference point, namely the ambiguous return of state power and authority. This return of the state goes hand in hand with a macro-political weakening of all transnational or global governance, and a micro-political infiltration that interweaves everyday life and the state in a web of relationships and practices of solidarity, the former badly, the latter well, albeit thus far insufficient.

XI.4

This crisis is of course also political, in the purest sense of the word, and here at last the circle closes, in the equally immediately palpable re-opening of history. The fourth point conveys the breadth of this historical re-opening, by revealing that the corona, globalization, capitalist and political crises are in fact an ecological crisis, connected on the one hand with the climate crisis, which is present everywhere, and on the other with the now plainly irrefutable knowledge that the out-of-control threat of this global virus is largely a

consequence of the capitalist agroindustry. If it is precisely here that the necessity, ultimately even the inevitability, of “transform[ing] radically the living conditions of all of mankind” is called for, Corona also reveals a deeper dimension, which is still far from being understood: that we are, and must be, *antiphysis* to the extent that the *physis* that surrounds and penetrates us is, and must always be, a hostile, life-threatening milieu in which we ourselves, conversely, exert the no less life-threatening effect of a virus: again, for better or worse, since the spirit, as Hegel already knew, has its “immediate existence ” in the “skull.”³⁹

XI.5

Finally, the fifth point refers us to the two virtues without which we will be lost. These virtues are imposed on us by the sudden shut-down of the machinery of capital and labour that has been hit at full swing. On the one hand, it forces us into the mutuality of practical recognition, and on the other, it condemns us to solitude, to loneliness, at worst to abandonment. The Leninist quality herein will be a political conception of solidarity, understood as a universal obligation of all individuals to all others that thereby frees us from the arbitrariness of spontaneous empathies, sympathies and antipathies. Sartrean in this is the concept of the sudden condemnation to be-alone-for-oneself, which through the employment of quarantine is affirmed as a “condemnation to freedom”: “Man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.”⁴⁰

XI.6

Drawing all of this together – and how could one not do so in such a time as this! – there remains a fundamental uncertainty that we are exposed to in the form of Corona, thanks to which history is being reopened: as in all of its epochs, history can always turn towards the better or the worse, and ultimately towards the best or the worst. The facts will say neither yes nor no on this score for some time to come, and as such we would be well advised to reflect on the question posed by Lenin and Sartre: what could it mean, today, to be “irreproachable” perhaps no longer only before the proletariat but before all humanity? Here, “humanity” and “proletariat” would be understood as the immanent subjective negation of existing reality, which, as a “perpetual dream of *antiphysis*,” is still the possible “that becomes possible starting from us.”⁴¹ To test this perhaps useless passion, then, the

³⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Cambridge 2018: 192. See also Seibert, *Zur Ökologie der Existenz* loc. cit.: 224-241 and 393-422, as well as the first footnote in the article by Žižek cited above.

⁴⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, New Haven & London 2007: 29.

⁴¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebook for an Ethics*, Chicago 1992: 6f.

“legitimacy of conversion” (ibid.) must still be claimed, which Lenin, like Sartre, locates not in economics but only in politics, as its first and last truth. One of the more hopeful tendencies of the Corona era is that this truth communicates itself even where the names Lenin and Sartre are not mentioned at all. The risk taken by this text of overestimating the Corona crisis, which cannot be ruled out today, thus only partially impacts the embrace of this truth, because the pure facts would then have said “neither yes nor no” once again. They would have shown yet again that philosophically, politically and ethically, they are not the only things that matter if we do not wish to fall into the trap of economism and opportunism. Thanks to Lenin.

Translation: Patrick Anderson
