Why Lenin? Against Terror and War Post 9/11

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At the moment it seems as if we are drowning in articles on the terrorist attack of September 11th. And here's yet another. Does this serve to de-sensitise us from the pain of the attack, so it becomes just another in a series of violent images? Or do we begin to become perversely over-sensitised to the pain of a particular group of people, to the exclusion of all others?

The attempt to put us into a state of continual terror and extreme feeling for the victims, trying to maintain the horror at the same heightened pitch as the first time we saw those television images, is an attempt to prevent us from reflecting on the context of the attack. Paradoxically, given the column inches devoted to this event, it is beyond language: how many of our journalists have written something akin to 'words cannot express...' in relation to September 11th? The very words 'September 11th' have an iconic status. The event becomes sacred, a transcendental event. It is being regarded as a moment of temporal rupture: a new BC and a new AD. The only words that can be used in its description are those borrowed from theology: it was an act of pure 'evil'. And thus we find ourselves on the same linguistic terrain as the terrorists and we find ourselves on a 'crusade', first Afghanistan and now, incredibly, Iraq.

There is a level on which a certain de-sensitisation is necessary. We need to remember the horror and the pain of the victims of the attack, as we remember the horror and pain of all victims of violence (both direct and structural) - but also we need to develop a level of detachment so as not to be so appalled that we add our voice to the general baying for blood. We need to find the language to talk about the event, to pull it back from the ether and place it within a historical narrative that best explains it context. Moreover, we need to develop methods of organisation that allow us to communicate the politics of such an event and that can prevent the war that we are now hurtling towards.

So - what is to be done?

In the Guardian newspaper at the beginning of this September, in amongst the '1 year on' articles, Martin Amis has been wrestling with a terror that people can now laugh at. Amis has been upsetting old leftists with excerpts from his book *Koba the Dread* (2002) where he denounces those who supported Stalin, who shut their eyes to the famine and the

massacres and the gulags. He also denounces those who supported the work of Lenin and Trotsky, such as his friend Christopher Hitchens, because of the terror they laid the foundations for. While Amis has a point, his argument ultimately collapses under the weight of its liberal fear of substantial change - it becomes clear that he doesn't just have a problem with Stalinists but anyone with a left ideology (Amis tells us that he has 'never been ideological'), making no distinction between the politics of anyone to the left of the Labour party. The book becomes just another diatribe against Marx's apparent perversion of the enlightenment.

As well as a denunciation of Lenin there has also recently been the attempt by Slavoj Zizek (in his edited collection of Lenin's writings from 1917 'Revolution at the Gates' (2002)) to remind us of another Lenin, the political strategist who was thrust into a situation which forced him to reinvent Marxism. Zizek wants us to remember a political figure from when the game of intellectual debate was over, when his ideas 'seized the masses' and revolution was made. Rather than returning to Lenin we should repeat Lenin - not repeat his mistakes but repeat what he didn't do, to save the utopian spark in him. But why Lenin? Is it just because he 'won'? Even though his and the Bolshevik's victory was a brutal defeat for the proletarians and peasants at the time?

Ultimately Zizek's argument is aimed at liberals whose discourse revolves around identity politics but again - why Lenin? Assuming we need symbols to ignite resistance to liberalism and the capitalism it supports, why use the very symbol whereby a liberal can cross his arms and smugly say 'that way lies terror'?

The debate that Martin Amis fuelled - did Lenin and Trotsky lay the foundations for Stalinist terror? - is beside the point. Rather, our first concern is with Leninist and Trotskyist terror. The savage repression of the uprising against the Bolsheviks by the militant sailors of Kronstadt, to name just one of the regime's brutalities, is still brushed under the carpet by Leninists. 'When was the Russian Thermidor?' the Leninists agonise. Was it when Stalin came to power? Was it in the early 1920s when the failure of revolution in Europe left the country isolated? Perhaps it was 1917. Perhaps it was all over by October. Perhaps the domination of the Bolshevik party as a separate body to the mass had doomed this revolution from the outset.

Why Lenin? There are 'utopian sparks' throughout the history of communism, and if we were to re-examine their often ignored works we might be able to raise new questions. There is another tradition within Marxism that is all too quickly overlooked, as attention is paid to the 'winners' - a grotesque parody of the marxist adage that history is written by the victors. This tradition is commonly known through Lenin's pamphlet '"Left-Wing" Communism - An Infantile Disorder'. Zizek characterises this work as an attack on the tendency to terrorism, a slur on those who are the objects of Lenin's critique and who never countenaced the use of terror, and a slur on all those who follow their tradition and have nothing but contempt for terrorism. Lenin's text is in fact a vehement attack on the Dutch and German left communists for their refusal to compromise with reactionary parliaments and trade unions and who began a debate on the relationship of the party to the masses. Their approach emphasised the role of the workers' councils in any revolution and rejected party leadership.

Antonio Negri is still under house arrest in Italy, what is hopefully the final act in the saga of his arrest for a trumped-up charge of terrorism in the late 1970s. With the publication of his and Michael Hardt's *Empire* (2000) the tradition of the communist left is

given new breath; and ironically, for Negri's understanding of the changes in proletarian organisation comes from Lenin and his dismissal of Leninist politics appears to owe very little to the German and Dutch communist left of the early twentieth century, bar the fact that both argue from the point of view of historical materialism that the need for particular political forms of organisation are now outdated. After Lenin, Negri sees that the development of the working class subject changes along with the changes in capitalism and so does the working class's mode of organisation. So, in 1917, the hegemonic figure of the working class took the appearance of the skilled factory worker. This worker organised as a mass in the factory, in a skill-based corporate trade union, and it has an elite element organising politically.

However, in the age of Empire, where capital has now spread throughout the entirety of the world, geographically, socially and biopolitically, we are faced with a very different working class subject. Its labour can be characterised as immaterial, based on the communication of knowledge. Following on from this the class subject, now dubbed the multitude, has a very different method of organisation, in response to the new social setting within which it finds itself.

Civil society has withered away as a site of contestation between capital and labour, as capital (and, necessarily, labour - there is no capital without labour) now fills the political space. Consequently we arrive on a plane of immanence. There is no longer any point of mediation between capital and labour. To develop this picture of the new social terrain Negri and Hardt draw on the work of another theorist who worked in the tradition of left or council communism: Guy Debord. Civil society has been subsumed by the state and what was contestation has now become spectacle, designed to promote the illusion of participation through the social democratic merry-go-round.

As reformism becomes pure spectacle, a drama played out by NGOs, cabinet ministers and other figureheads, so the lines of conflict between labour and capital are forced to appear outside or beneath the sacred heights of the spectacle. Now, Hardt and Negri argue, with the end of the separation between the social and the political there is no space for representation by the Leninist party on behalf of the mass. Indeed, any body seeking to represent the multitude flies against its multiplicity. It is a Baudrillardian mass that won't be led by Parties - its silence in the face of the shouts for recognition is a sign that it doesn't want to hear. Rather, the multitude presents itself on a flat terrain, with the potential for developing the cooperation it has learned through its communicative and affective work practices into new methods of organisation.

What might such a new method, or methods, of organisation be? This is what we have to discover and certain groups within the anti-capitalist movement are making brave attempts to find new tactics. But we won't find it in the work of Lenin. Rather, it is time to explore the work and practice of those communist theorists who sought to develop the *autonomy* of labour.

There are many curious anomalies in the work of Hardt and Negri. So much of the autonomist tradition from which Negri emerged echoes the concerns of the left communists but Hardt and Negri do not tackle them head on. Their historicisation of the changes in capitalism and the consequent rejection of representational politics are similar to the left communists of the 1920s, but Hardt and Negri maintain that the Leninist model was the correct mode of organisation in 1917. This opens up such questions as to whether it is ever sensible to be involved in parliamentary politics, whether the unions can be

anything but a brake on class struggle. Should this be an 'invariant' principle or is it a matter of navigating through the choppy seas of bourgeois alliances?

As the rhetoric of war builds, the anti-war movement needs to grapple with these issues, to develop its own initiatives and free itself from those who seek to lead it: back bench labour MPs, trade union leaders, minor celebrities and such Leninist cults as the Socialist Workers Party.