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Lenin On "Counter-Hegemony"

THE WORD "HEGEMONY" simply means "leadership", particularly the leadership of, say, one state within a confederation of states. In revolutionary politics it rather means the leadership of one class within a polity consisting of several classes. This question is of particular interest to revolutionaries today as consciousness grows of the fact that the main way in which the bourgeoisie in advanced capitalist countries at present maintain their system is their capacity to have their ideas, values and institutions accepted by the majority of the proletariat and other classes. The bourgeoisie thus exercises a leadership or "hegemony" within society, and revolution can become a possibility only if that hegemony is destroyed by a "counter-hegemony" built up by the revolutionary forces. Here I take some aspects of Lenin's treatment of the subject.*

* This article is part of a booklet entitled Lenin on Theories of Revolution which will be published this month. This section of the booklet deals with four aspects of Lenin on Counter-hegemony — the party; different forms of hegemony; hegemony and the struggle against anarchism; alliances, compromises and hegemony.

The references are to the Collected Works of Lenin. Thus 5/451 means page 451 of volume 5.

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THE PARTY

Lenin’s views on organisation of the party followed from the struggle for hegemony in the revolution in the conditions existing in Russia at the time, in which four main features stood out: the oppression of the autocracy; the great spontaneous upsurge of the struggle which culminated in the 1905 revolution; the smallness of the proletarian and socialist forces within that great movement; and the great differences in outlook and aims of the class and party forces participating:

The government is steadily developing the size and range of the activities of those of its lackeys who are hounding revolutionaries, is devising new methods, introducing more provocateurs, trying to exert pressure on the arrested by means of intimidation, confrontation with false testimony, forged signatures, planting faked letters, etc., etc. Without a strengthening and development of revolutionary discipline, organisation and underground activity, struggle against the government is impossible. And underground activity demands above all that groups and individuals specialise in different aspects of work and that the job of co-operation be assigned to the central group of the League of Struggle, with as few members as possible.

The Tasks of the Russian Social-Democrats, 1897, 2/349.

. . . a special ‘struggle against the political police’ is required, a struggle that can never be conducted actively by such large masses as take part in strikes. This struggle must be organised according to ‘all the rules of the art’, by people who are professionally engaged in revolutionary activity.

What is to be Done? 1902, 5/451.

The root of the mistake made by those who stand for Martov’s formulation is that they not only ignore one of the main evils of our Party life, but even sanctify it. The evil is that, at a time when political discontent is almost universal, when conditions require our work to be carried out in complete secrecy, and when most of our activities have to be confined to limited, secret circles and even to private meetings, it is extremely difficult, almost impossible in fact, for us to distinguish those who only talk from those who do the work. There is hardly another country in the world where the jumbling of these two categories is as common and as productive of such boundless confusion and harm as in Russia.

in a period of great social turmoil, when the political atmosphere is charged with electricity, when now here and now there, from the most varied and unforeseen causes, outbreaks occur with increasing frequency, heralding the approaching revolutionary storm — in a word when it is necessary either to agitate or remain in the rear, at such a time only organised revolutionary forces can seriously influence the progress of events.

Preface to the Pamphlet 'May Days in Kharkov', 1901, 4/361.

The peasantry includes a great number of semi-proletarian as well as petty-bourgeois elements. This makes it also unstable, compelling the proletariat to rally in a strictly class party.

Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution, 1905, 9/98.

Russia is one of the most petty-bourgeois countries in the world and is least accustomed to free political activities. This, and this alone, explains the contempt that is so widespread in this country for adherence to a party. One of the tasks of class-conscious workers in Russia (and one of the great historical services they must render) is to wage a systematic and persevering struggle against this attitude.

Bewildered Non-Party People, 1913, 19/436.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF HEGEMONY

As Lenin saw it, the struggle for hegemony in Russia had to take a predominantly political form, though he was conscious that this was not a universal imperative, but related to the conditions. Thus in polemics with the Economists he said:

... the workers' parties in the various countries have discussed the question many times and, of course, will discuss it again and again — whether to devote more or less attention at any given moment to the economic or to the political struggle of the proletariat; but the general question, or the question in principle, today remains as it was presented by Marxism. The conviction that the class struggle must necessarily combine the political and the economic struggle into one integral whole has entered into the flesh and blood of international Social-Democracy. The experience of history has, furthermore, incontrovertibly proved that absence of freedom, or restriction of the political rights of
the proletariat, always make it necessary to put the political struggle in the forefront.

A Protest by Russian Social-Democrats, 1899, 4/77. Emphasis added.

This seems to confine the question only to economics or politics, but it is broader than that:

Considering the wealth and many-sidedness of the ideological content of Marxism, there is nothing surprising in the fact that in Russia, just as in other countries, various historical periods give prominence now to one, now to another particular aspect of Marxism. In Germany before 1848, the philosophical forming of Marxism was the aspect particularly stressed; in 1848 it was the political ideas of Marxism; in the fifties and sixties it was the economic doctrine of Marxism. In Russia before the revolution, the aspect that was particularly stressed was the application of the economic doctrine of Marxism to Russian reality; during the revolution, it was Marxist politics; since the revolution it is Marxist philosophy. This does not mean that any of the aspects of Marxism may at any time be ignored; it only means that the prevalence of interest in one aspect or another does not depend on subjective wishes, but on the totality of historical conditions.

Those Who Would Liquidate Us, 1911, 17/76.

This certainly does not speak for those who consider that the emphasis being given to the development of counter-hegemony in the cultural and moral fields alongside the political and economic is "anti-Marxist-Leninist".

With the foregoing in mind, it is instructive to look further into the struggle against economism in the period preceding the 1905 revolution when, on Lenin's assessment, the struggle for hegemony was concentrated in the political field. The essential question was the role or importance of consciousness in the revolutionary movement. It had several aspects to it:

(a) the general question of consciousness; or, bourgeois versus socialist ideas, referring to all fields—cultural, economic, political, etc. Bourgeois ideas prevail, said Lenin because:

bourgeois ideology is far older in origin than socialist ideology . . . it is more fully developed and . . . it has at its disposal immeasurably more means of dissemination.

What is to be Done?, 1902, 5/386.
(b) the kind of political consciousness needed for the establishment of proletarian hegemony:

There is politics and politics. Thus, we see that Rabochaya Mysl does not so much deny the political struggle as it bows to its spontaneity, to its unconsciousness. While fully recognising the political struggle (better: the political desires and demands of the workers), which arises spontaneously from the working-class movement itself, it absolutely refuses independently to work out a specifically Social-Democratic politics corresponding to the general tasks of socialism and to the present-day conditions in Russia.

Ibid., 5/387.

(c) the kind of organisation needed in the conditions then prevailing to give practical effect to hegemony, the essential point being the independence of the social-democratic workers from peasants and liberal bourgeoisie — but the real and not merely formal independence:

The ultimate political outcome of the revolution may prove to be that, despite the formal 'independence' of Social-Democracy, despite its complete organisational individuality as a separate party, it will in fact not be independent, it will not be able to place the imprint of its proletarian independence on the course of events; it will prove so weak that, on the whole and in the last analysis, its 'dissolution' in bourgeois democracy will nevertheless be a historical fact.

Two Tactics, 1905, 9/54.

Change "dissolution" to "integration" and "social-democratic politics" to "socialist strategy" and we are not so far from some key problems of today!

Taken in its most general form, the idea of 'economism' is that of 'economic determinism' or 'mechanical materialism'. This takes various forms such as attempting to explain the actions of individuals, parties and classes as a direct result of economic interests or processes; in line with this giving primacy in thought and activity to economic struggles; of expecting that these will at some time spontaneously give rise to socialist consciousness on a mass scale; and neglecting the intellectual effort and intellectual cadre force needed to develop and promote socialist ideas. It also reflects itself in a tendency to reduce the content of revolutionary material to the lowest common denominator:

Attention, therefore, must be devoted principally to raising the workers to the level of revolutionaries; it is not at all our task
to descend to the level of the ‘working class’ as the Economists wish to do, or to the level of the ‘average worker’, as Svoboda desires to do. . . You, gentlemen, who are so much concerned about the ‘average worker’, as a matter of fact, rather insult the workers by your desire to talk down to them. . .

*What is to be Done?*, 1902, 5/470-1.

In 1916 Lenin returned to the struggle against a new type of economism which he dubbed “imperialist economism”, which cannot solve the problem of how to link the advent of imperialism with the struggle for reforms and democracy — just as the Economism of blessed memory could not link the advent of capitalism with the struggle for democracy.


Capitalism and imperialism can be overthrown only by economic revolution. They cannot be overthrown by democratic transformations, even the most ‘ideal’. But a proletariat not schooled in the struggle for democracy is incapable of performing an economic revolution.


Again, take “democracy” to include self-activity and the struggle for “workers’ control” and all forms of self-management, and we have an interesting comment on some present day problems.