

Daniel Bensaïd

**8**

**“Leaps!**

**Leaps!**

**Leaps!”**

Hannah Arendt was worried that politics might disappear completely from the world. The century had seen such disasters that the question of whether “politics still has any meaning at all” had become unavoidable. The issues at stake in these fears were eminently practical: “The lack of meaning in which the whole of politics has ended up is confirmed by the dead end into which specific political questions are flocking.”<sup>1</sup>

For her, the form taken by this feared disappearance of politics was totalitarianism. Today we are confronted with a different form of the danger: totalitarianism, the human face of market tyranny. Here politics finds itself crushed between the order of financial markets—which is made to seem natural—and the moralizing prescriptions of ventriloquist capitalism. The end of politics and the end of history then coincide in the infernal repetition of the eternity of the commodity, in which echo the toneless voices of Fukuyama and Furet. According to them, “the idea of *another* society has become almost impossible to conceive of, and no one in the world today is offering any advice on the subject. Here we are, condemned to live in the world as it is.”<sup>2</sup> This is worse than melancholy—it is despair, as Blanqui might have said, this eternity of mankind through the Dow Jones and the FT 100.

Hannah Arendt thought she could set a date on the beginning and end of politics: inaugurated by Plato and Aristotle, it found “its definitive end in the theories of Marx.”<sup>3</sup> Announcing the end of philosophy, Marx is also, by some jest of the dialectic, said to have pronounced that

of politics. This fails to recognize Marx’s politics as the only one that is conceivable in the face of capitalized violence and the fetishisms of modernity. The state is not valid for everything, he wrote in his early writings, standing up clearly against the presumptuous exaggeration of the political factor, which makes the bureaucratic state into the embodiment of the abstract universal. Rather than a one-sided passion for the social, Marx’s effort is directed toward the emergence of a politics of the oppressed starting from the constitution of nonstate political bodies that prepare the way for the necessary withering away of the state as a separate body.

The vital, urgent question is that of politics from below, politics for those who are excluded and cut off from the state politics of the ruling class. We have to solve the puzzle of proletarian revolutions and their repeated tragedies: How do we spurn the dust and win the prize? How can a class that is physically and morally stunted in its daily life by the involuntary servitude of forced labor transform itself into the universal subject of human emancipation? Marx’s answers on this point derive from a sociological gamble—industrial development leads to the numerical growth and the concentration of the working classes, which in turn leads to progress in their organization and consciousness. The logic of capital itself is thus said to lead to “the constitution of the proletarians into a ruling class.” Engels’s preface to the 1890 edition of the *Communist Manifesto* confirms this assumption: “For the ultimate triumph of the ideas set forth in the *Manifesto* Marx relied solely and exclusively upon the intellectual development of the working class as it necessarily had to ensue from united action and discussion.”<sup>4</sup> The illusion according to which the winning of universal suffrage would allow the English proletariat, which was a majority in society, to adjust political representation to social reality derives from this gamble. In the same spirit, in his 1896 commentary on the *Manifesto*, Antonio Labriola expressed the view, “The desired union of communists and proletarians is henceforth an accomplished fact.”<sup>5</sup> The political emancipation of the proletariat flowed necessarily from its social development.

The convulsive history of the last century shows that we cannot so easily escape from the haunted world of the commodity, from its blood-thirsty gods and from their “box of repetitions.” Lenin’s untimely relevance results necessarily from this observation. If politics today still has

a chance of averting the double danger of a naturalization of the economy and a fatalization of history, this chance requires a new Leninist act in the conditions of imperial globalization. Lenin's political thought is that of politics as strategy, of favorable moments and weak links.

The "homogeneous and empty," to use Walter Benjamin's terms, time of mechanical progress, without crises or breaks, is a nonpolitical time. The idea maintained by Kautsky of a "passive accumulation of forces" belongs to this view of time. A primitive version of calm force, this "socialism outside of time" and at the speed of a tortoise dissolves the uncertainty of the political struggle into the proclaimed laws of historical evolution.

Lenin, in contrast, thought of politics as a time full of struggle, a time of crises and collapses. For him the specificity of politics is expressed in the concept of a revolutionary crisis, which is not the logical continuation of a social movement, but a general crisis of the reciprocal relations between all the classes in society. The crisis is then defined as a national crisis. It acts to lay bare the battle lines, which have been obscured by the mystical phantasmagoria of the commodity. Then alone, and not by virtue of some inevitable historical ripening, can the proletariat be transformed and "become what it is."

The revolutionary crisis and political struggle are thus closely linked. For Lenin, the knowledge that the working class can have of itself is indissolubly linked to a precise knowledge of the reciprocal relations of all the classes in contemporary society, a knowledge which is not only theoretical, we should rather say which is less theoretical than founded on the experience of politics. It is through the test of practical politics that this knowledge of the reciprocal relations between classes is acquired. To paraphrase Lenin, this makes "our revolution" into a "revolution of the whole people."

This approach is the complete opposite of a crude workerism, which reduces the political to the social. Lenin categorically refuses to mix the question of classes with that of parties. The class struggle is not reduced to the antagonism between the worker and his boss. It confronts the proletariat with the capitalist class as such on the level of the process of capitalist production as a whole, which is the object of study in volume 3 of *Capital*. This, moreover, is why it is perfectly logical for Marx's unfinished chapter on class to come precisely at this point and

not in volume 1 on the process of production or volume 2 on the process of circulation. As a political party, revolutionary Social Democracy thus represented for Lenin the working class, not just in its relations with a group of employers, but also with all the classes of contemporary society and with the state as an organized force.

The time of the propitious moment in Leninist strategy is no longer that of the electoral Penelopes and Danaïdes, whose work is constantly undone again, but that which gives a rhythm to struggle and which is suspended by crisis—the time of the opportune moment and of the singular conjuncture, where necessity and contingency, act and process, history and event are knotted together. We should not imagine revolution itself in the form of a singular act: the revolution will be a rapid succession of more or less violent explosions, alternating with phases of more or less deep calm. That is why, according to Lenin, the essential activity of the party, the essential focus of its activity, must be possible and necessary work both in the periods of the most violent explosion and in those of calm, that is, a work of unified political agitation.

Revolutions have their own tempo, marked by accelerations and slow-downs. They also have their own geometry, where the straight line is broken in bifurcation and sudden turns. The party thus appears in a new light. For Lenin, it is no longer the result of a cumulative experience, nor the modest teacher with the task of raising proletarians from the darkness of ignorance to the illumination of reason. It becomes a strategic operator, a sort of gearbox and point man of the class struggle. As Walter Benjamin very clearly recognized, the strategic time of politics is not the homogeneous and empty time of classical mechanics, but a broken time, full of knots and wombs pregnant with events.

Without any doubt there is, in the formation of Lenin’s thought, an interplay of continuities and breaks. The major breaks (which are not epistemological breaks) can be placed in 1902, around *What Is to Be Done?* and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, or again in 1914–16, when it was necessary to rethink imperialism and the state amid the twilight of the war and by taking up again the thread of Hegelian logic. At the same time, from *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, a foundational work, Lenin will establish the framework that will allow him subsequently to make theoretical corrections and strategic adjustments.

The confrontations in the course of which Bolshevism was defined are an expression of this revolution in the revolution. From the polemics of *What Is to Be Done?* and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, the classic texts essentially preserve the idea of a centralized vanguard with military discipline. The real point is elsewhere. Lenin is fighting against the confusion, which he describes as disorganizing, between the party and the class. The making of a distinction between them has its context in the great controversies then running through the socialist movement, especially in Russia. This is in opposition to the populist, economist, and Menshevik currents, which sometimes converge to defend pure socialism. The apparent intransigence of this formal orthodoxy in fact expresses the idea that the democratic revolution must be a necessary stage on the road of historic evolution. While waiting to be strengthened and to achieve the social and electoral majority, the nascent working-class movement was supposed to leave the leading role to the bourgeoisie and be satisfied with acting in support of capitalist modernization. This confidence in the direction of history, where everything would come in due time to those who wait, underlies the orthodox positions of Kautsky in the Second International: we must patiently advance along the roads to power until power falls like a ripe fruit.

For Lenin, in contrast, it is the goal that orientates the movement; strategy takes precedence over tactics, politics over history. That is why it is necessary to demarcate oneself before uniting, and, in order to unite, “to utilize every manifestation of discontent, and to gather and turn to the best account every protest, however small.” In other words, it means to conceive the political struggle as “far more extensive and complex than the economic struggle of the workers against the employers and the government.”<sup>6</sup> Thus when *Rabocheye Dyelo* deduces the political objectives from economic struggle, Lenin criticizes it for lowering the level of the many-sided political activity of the proletariat. It is an illusion to imagine that the “labour movement pure and simple” is capable by itself of elaborating an independent ideology. The merely spontaneous development of the working-class movement on the contrary leads to “its subordination to bourgeois ideology”<sup>7</sup> For the ruling ideology is not a question of the manipulation of consciousness, but the objective result of the fetishism of commodities. Its iron grip and enforced servitude can only be escaped through the revolutionary crisis

and the political struggle of parties. This is indeed the Leninist answer to the unsolved puzzle of Marx.

For Lenin everything leads to the conception of politics as the invasion whereby that which was absent becomes present: the division into classes is certainly, in the last resort, the most profound basis for political groupings, but this last resort is established only by political struggle. Thus, communism literally erupts from all points of social life: decidedly it blossoms everywhere. If one of the outlets is blocked with particular care, then the contagion will find another, sometimes the most unexpected. That is why we cannot know which spark will ignite the fire.

From whence comes the slogan that, according to Tucholsky, sums up Leninist politics: “Be ready!” Be ready for the improbable, for the unexpected, for what happens. If Lenin could describe politics as “concentrated economics,” this concentration means a qualitative change on the basis of which politics cannot fail to “take precedence over economics,” “Bukharin’s insistence on combining the political *and* the economic approach,” in contrast, “has landed him in theoretical *eclecticism*.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, in his 1921 polemic against the Workers’ Opposition, Lenin criticizes this “disreputable” name,<sup>9</sup> which once again reduces politics to the social and which claims that the management of the national economy should be directly incumbent on the “producers organized in trade and industrial unions,” which would come down to reducing the class struggle to a confrontation of sectional interests without synthesis.

Politics, on the contrary, has its own language, grammar, and syntax. It has its latencies and its slips. On the political stage, the transfigured class struggle has its fullest, most rigorous and best defined expression in the struggle of parties. Deriving from a specific register, which is not reducible to its immediate determinations, political discourse is more closely related to algebra than to arithmetic. Its necessity is of a different order, much more complex, than that of social demands directly linked to the relationship of exploitation. For contrary to what vulgar Marxists imagine, politics does not tamely follow economics. The ideal of the revolutionary militant is not the trade unionist with a narrow horizon, but the tribune of the people, which fans the embers of subversion in all spheres of society.

Leninism, or rather Stalinized Leninism, built up as a state orthodoxy, is often made responsible for bureaucratic despotism. The notion of the vanguard party, separate from the class, is thus believed to have contained the germ of the substitution of the apparatus for the real social movement and of all the circles of bureaucratic hell. However unfair it may be, this accusation raises a real difficulty. If politics is not identical with the social, the representation of the one by the other necessarily becomes problematic—on what can its legitimacy be based?

For Lenin, the temptation very much exists of resolving the contradiction by supposing a tendency for representatives to adequately represent their constituents, culminating in the withering away of the political state. The contradictions in representation do not allow for any exclusive agent, and being constantly called into question in the plurality of constitutive forms, they are eliminated at the same time. This aspect of the question risks covering up another, which is no less important, inasmuch as Lenin does not seem to recognize the full extent of his innovation. Thinking that he was paraphrasing a canonical text by Kautsky, he distorted it significantly as follows. Kautsky wrote that “science” comes to the proletarians “from outside the class struggle, borne by ‘the bourgeois intelligentsia.’” By an extraordinary verbal shift, Lenin translates this so that “class political consciousness” (rather than “science”!) comes “from outside the economic struggle”<sup>10</sup> (rather than from outside the class struggle, which is political as much as social!), borne no longer by the intellectuals as a social category, but by the party as an agent that specifically structures the political field. The difference is pretty substantial.

Such a constant insistence on the language of politics, where social reality is manifested through a permanent interplay of displacements and condensations, should logically result in a way of thought based on plurality and representation. If the party is not the class, the same class should be represented politically by several parties expressing its differences and contradictions. The representation of the social in the political should then become the object of an institutional and juridical elaboration. Lenin does not go so far. A detailed study, which would go beyond the dimensions of an essay like this, of his positions on the national question, on the trade union question in 1921, and on democracy throughout 1917 would enable us to verify it.<sup>11</sup>

Thus he subjects representation to rules inspired by the Paris Commune, aiming to limit political professionalization: elected representatives to be paid a wage equal to that of a skilled worker, constant vigilance about favors and privileges for office holders, the responsibility of those elected to those who elected them. Contrary to a persistent myth, he did not advocate binding mandates. This was the case in the party: the powers of delegates must not be limited by binding mandates; in the exercise of their powers they should be completely free and independent.

As for plurality, Lenin constantly affirmed that “the struggle of shades of opinion” in the party is inevitable and necessary, so long as it takes place within limits “approved by common agreement.” He maintained “that it is necessary to include in the party rules guarantees of minority rights, so that the dissatisfactions, irritations and conflicts that will constantly and unavoidably arise may be diverted from the accustomed philistine channels of rows and squabbling into the still unaccustomed channels of a constitutional and dignified struggle for one’s convictions. As one of these essential guarantees, we propose that the minority be allowed one or more writers’ groups, with the right to be represented at congresses and with complete ‘freedom of speech.’”<sup>12</sup>

If politics is a matter of choice and decision, it implies an organized plurality. This is a question of principles of organization. As for the system of organization, it may vary according to concrete circumstances, on the condition that it does not lose the guiding thread of principle in the labyrinth of opportunities. Then even the notorious discipline in action seems less sacrosanct than the golden myth of Leninism would have it. We know how Zinoviev and Kamenev were guilty of indiscipline by publicly opposing the insurrection, yet they were not permanently removed from their responsibilities. Lenin himself, in extreme circumstances, did not hesitate to demand a personal right to disobey the party. Thus he considered resigning his responsibilities in order to resume “freedom to campaign among the *rank and file* of the party.”<sup>13</sup>

His own logic led him to envisage plurality and representation in a country with no parliamentary or democratic traditions. But Lenin did not go all the way. There are (at least) two reasons for that. The first is that he had inherited from the French Revolution the illusion that once the oppressor has been removed, the homogenization of the people (or

of the class) is only a matter of time: contradictions among the people can now come only from the other (the foreigner) or from treason. The second is that the distinction between politics and the social is not a guarantee against a fatal inversion: instead of leading to the socialization of the political, the dictatorship may mean the bureaucratic statification of the social.

In *The State and Revolution* parties do indeed lose their function in favor of a direct democracy, which is not supposed to be entirely a separate state. But, contrary to initial hopes, the statification of society was victorious over the socialization of state functions. Absorbed in the main dangers of military encirclement and capitalist restoration, the revolutionaries did not see growing beneath their feet the no less important danger of bureaucratic counter-revolution. Paradoxically, Lenin's weaknesses are linked as much, or even more, to his libertarian inclinations as to his authoritarian temptations, as if a secret link united the two.

The revolutionary crisis appears as the critical moment of the possible resolution, where theory becomes strategy. History in general and more particularly the history of revolutions is always richer in its content, more varied, more many-sided, more alive, more ingenious than is conceived by the best parties, the most conscious vanguards of the most advanced classes. And that is understandable since the best vanguards express the consciousness, the will, and the passion of tens of thousands of men, while the revolution is one of the moments of special exaltation and tension of all human faculties—the work of the consciousness, the will, the imagination, the passion of hundreds of thousands of men spurred on by the harshest class struggle. Hence two practical conclusions of great importance: first, that the revolutionary class must, in order to carry out its task, be able to take possession of all forms and all aspects of social activity without the slightest exception; secondly, the revolutionary class must be ready to replace one form by another rapidly and without warning.

From this Lenin deduces the need to respond to unexpected events where often the hidden truth of social relations is suddenly revealed: “We do not and cannot know which spark . . . will kindle the conflagration, in the sense of raising up the masses; we must, therefore, with our new and communist principles, set to work to stir up all and sundry,

even the oldest, mustiest and seemingly hopeless spheres, for otherwise we shall not be able to cope with our tasks, shall not be comprehensively prepared, shall not be in possession of all the weapons.”<sup>14</sup>

Stir up all spheres! Be on the watch for the most unpredictable solutions! Remain ready for the sudden change of forms! Know how to employ all weapons!

These are the maxims of a politics conceived as the art of unexpected events and of the effective possibilities of a determinate conjuncture.

This revolution in politics brings us back to the notion of revolutionary crisis systematized in “The Collapse of the Second International.” It is defined by an interaction between several variable elements in a situation: when those above can no longer govern as they did before; when those below will not tolerate being oppressed as they were before; and when this double impossibility is expressed by a sudden effervescence of the masses. Adopting these criteria, Trotsky stresses in his *History of the Russian Revolution* “that these premises condition each other is obvious. The more decisively and confidently the proletariat acts, the better will it succeed in bringing after it the intermediate layer, the more isolated will be the ruling class, and the more acute its demoralization. And, on the other hand, a demoralization of the rulers will pour water into the mill of the revolutionary class.”<sup>15</sup> But the crisis does not guarantee the conditions of its own resolution. That is why Lenin makes the intervention of a revolutionary party into the decisive factor in a critical situation: “It is not every revolutionary situation that gives rise to a revolution; revolution arises only out of a situation in which the above-mentioned objective changes are accompanied by a subjective change, namely, the ability of the revolutionary *class* to take revolutionary mass action *strong* enough to break (or dislocate) the old government, which never, not even in a period of crisis, ‘falls,’ if it is not toppled over.”<sup>16</sup> The crisis can be resolved only by defeat at the hands of a reaction that will often be murderous or by the intervention of a resolute subject.

This was very much the interpretation of Leninism in Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*. Already at the Fifth Congress of the Communist International this earned him the anathema of the Thermidorian Bolsheviks. Lukács in fact insisted on the fact that “*Only the consciousness of the proletariat can point to the way that leads out of the impasse of capitalism*. As long as this consciousness is lacking, the

crisis remains permanent, it goes back to its starting-point, repeats the cycle. . . .” Lukács states that

the difference between the period in which the decisive battles are fought and the foregoing period does not lie in the extent and the intensity of the battles themselves. These quantitative changes are merely symptomatic of the fundamental differences in quality which distinguish these struggles from earlier ones. . . . Now, however, the process by which the proletariat becomes independent and “organizes itself into a class” is repeated and intensified until the time when the final crisis of capitalism has been reached, the time when the decision comes more and more within the grasp of the proletariat.<sup>17</sup>

This is echoed in the 1930s when Trotsky, facing Nazism and Stalinist reaction, produced a formulation equating the crisis of humanity with the crisis of revolutionary leadership.

Strategy is “a calculation of mass, speed and time,” wrote Chateaubriand. For Sun Tzu, the art of war was already the art of change and of speed. This art required acquiring “the speed of the hare” and “coming to a decision immediately,” for it is proven that the most famous victory could have turned to defeat “if battle had been joined a day earlier or a few hours later.” The rule of conduct derived from this is valid for politicians as well as soldiers: “Never let any opportunity slip, when you find it favorable. The five elements are not everywhere, nor are they equally pure; the four seasons do not follow each other in the same fashion every year; the rising and setting of the sun are not always at the same point on the horizon. Some days are long and others short. The moon waxes and wanes and is not always equally bright. An army that is well led and well disciplined aptly imitates all these variations.”<sup>18</sup>

The notion of revolutionary crisis takes up this lesson of strategy and politicizes it. In certain exceptional circumstances the balance of forces reaches a critical point. Any disruption of the rhythms produces effects of conflict. It upsets and disturbs. It can also produce a gap in time, to be filled with an invention, with a creation. This happens, individually and socially, only by passing through a crisis.” Through such a gap or moment can arise the unaccomplished fact, which contradicts the fatality of the accomplished fact.

In 1905 Lenin comes together with Sun Tzu in his praise of speed. It

is necessary, he says, “to begin on time,” to act “immediately.” “Form immediately, in all places, combat groups.” We must indeed be able to grasp in flight those “fleeting moments” of which Hegel speaks and which constitute an excellent definition of the dialectic. For the revolution in Russia is not the organic result of a bourgeois revolution extended into a proletarian revolution, but an “intertwining” of two revolutions. Whether the probable disaster can be avoided depends on an acute sense of conjuncture. The art of the slogan is an art of the favorable moment. A particular instruction that was valid yesterday may not be so today but may be valid again tomorrow. “The slogan ‘All Power to the Soviets!’ . . . was possible in April, May, June and up to July 5–9 [1917] . . . This slogan is no longer correct.” “At this moment and this moment alone, perhaps for a few days at most, or for a week or two, such a government could survive.”<sup>19</sup>

A few days! A week! On 29 September 1917 Lenin wrote to the hesitating central committee: “The crisis has matured.”<sup>20</sup> Waiting was becoming a crime. On 1 October he urged them to “*take power at once,*” to “*resort to insurrection at once.*”<sup>21</sup> A few days later he tried again: “I am writing these lines on 8 October. . . . The success of both the Russian and the world revolution depends on two or three days’ fighting.”<sup>22</sup> He still insisted: “I am writing these lines on the evening of the 24th. The situation is critical in the extreme. In fact it is now absolutely clear that to delay the uprising would be fatal. . . . Everything now hangs by a thread.” So it is necessary to act “this very evening, this very night.”<sup>23</sup>

“Breaks in gradualness” noted Lenin in the margins of Hegel’s *The Science of Logic* at the beginning of the war. And he stressed, “Gradualness explains nothing without leaps. Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!”<sup>24</sup>

Three brief remarks will conclude this discussion on the relevance of Lenin today. His strategic thought defines a state of being available to act in relation to whatever event may arise. But this event is not the absolute Event, coming from nowhere, which some people have mentioned with reference to 11 September. It is situated in conditions of historically determined possibility. That is what distinguishes it from the religious miracle. Thus the revolutionary crisis of 1917 and its resolution by insurrection become strategically thinkable in the framework traced by *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. This dialectical relation between necessity and contingency, structure and break, history

and event, lays the basis for the possibility of a politics organized in duration, whereas the arbitrarily voluntarist gamble on the sudden explosion of an event may allow us to resist the mood of the times, but it generally leads to a stance of aesthetic resistance rather than militant commitment to patiently modify the course of things.

For Lenin—as for Trotsky—the revolutionary crisis is formed and begins in the national arena, which at the time constitutes the framework of the struggle for hegemony and goes on to take its place in the context of the world revolution. The crisis in which dual power arises is therefore not reduced to an economic crisis or an immediate conflict between wage labor and capital in the process of production. The Leninist question—who will come out on top?—is that of political leadership: Which class will be capable of resolving the contradictions that are stifling society, capable of imposing an alternative logic to that of the accumulation of capital, capable of transcending the existing relations of production and opening up a new field of possibilities? The revolutionary crisis is therefore not a simple social crisis but also a national crisis: in Russia as in Germany, in Spain as in China. The question today is doubtless more complex to the extent that capitalist globalization has reinforced the overlapping of national, continental, and world spaces. A revolutionary crisis in a major country would immediately have an international dimension and would require responses in terms that are both national and continental, or even directly global on questions such as energy, ecology, armaments policy, movement of migrants, and so forth. It nonetheless remains an illusion to believe that we can evade this difficulty by eliminating the question of the conquest of political power (on the pretext that power today is divorced from territory and scattered everywhere and nowhere) in favor of a rhetoric of counterpowers. Economic, military, and cultural powers are perhaps more widely scattered, but they are also more concentrated than ever. You can pretend to ignore power, but it will not ignore you. You can act superior by refusing to take it, but from Catalonia 1937 to Chiapas, via Chile, experience shows right up to this very day that it will not hesitate to take you in the most brutal fashion. In a word, a strategy of counterpower only has any meaning in the perspective of dual power and its resolution. Who will come out on top?

Finally, detractors often identify Leninism and Lenin himself with a historical form of the political party, which is said to have died along

with the collapse of the bureaucratic party-states. In this hasty judgment there is a lot of historical ignorance and political frivolity, which can be only partially explained by the traumatism of Stalinist practices. The experience of the past century poses the question of bureaucratization as a social phenomenon, rather than the question of the form of vanguard party inherited from *What Is to Be Done?* Mass organizations (not only political ones, but equally trade unions and associations) are far from being the least bureaucratic: in France the cases of the CFDT, of the Socialist Party, of the allegedly renovated Communist Party, and of the Greens are absolutely eloquent on this point. But at the same time—as we have mentioned—in the Leninist distinction of party and class there are some fertile trails for thinking about the relations between social movements and political representation. Likewise in the superficially disparaged principles of democratic centralism, detractors stress primarily the bureaucratic hypercentralism exemplified in sinister fashion by the Stalinist parties. But a certain degree of centralization, far from being opposed to democracy, is the essential condition for it to exist—because the delimitation of the party is a means of resisting the decomposing effects of the dominant ideology, and also of aiming at a certain equality between members, counter to the inequalities that are inevitably generated by social relations and by the division of labor. Today we can see very well how the weakening of these principles, far from favoring a higher form of democracy, leads to co-option by the media and the legitimization by a plebiscite of leaders who are even less controlled by the rank and file. Moreover, the democracy in a revolutionary party aims to produce decisions that are assumed collectively in order to act on the balance of forces. When the superficial detractors of Leninism claim to have freed themselves from a stifling discipline, they are in fact emptying discussion of all its relevance, reducing it to a forum of opinions that does not commit anybody: after an exchange of free speech without any common decision, everyone can leave as they came and no shared practice makes it possible to test the validity of the opposing positions under consideration. Finally, the stress laid—in particular by recycled bureaucrats from the former Communist parties—on the crisis of the party form often enables them to avoid talking about the crisis of the programmatic content and justifies the absence of strategic preoccupation.

A politics without parties (whatever name—movement, organization,

league, party—that they are given) ends up in most cases as a politics without politics: either an aimless tailism toward the spontaneity of social movements, or the worst form of elitist individualist vanguardism, or finally a repression of the political in favor of the aesthetic or the ethical.

## Notes

- This essay was originally published in *International Socialism Journal* 95 (Summer 2002) and in D. Bensaïd, *Un monde à changer* (Paris: Editions Textuel, 2003).
- 1 H. Arendt, *Was ist Politik?* (Munich: M. Piper Verlag, 1993), 28, 31.
  - 2 F. Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 502.
  - 3 Arendt, *Was ist Politik?*, 146.
  - 4 K. Marx and F. Engels, “Preface to the Fourth German Edition of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*,” *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975ff.), 27:59.
  - 5 Antonio Labriola, *Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l’histoire* (Paris: Gordon and Breach, 1970), 46.
  - 6 V. I. Lenin, “What Is to Be Done?” *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960), 5:430, 452. All subsequent references in this chapter to the *Collected Works* refer to this edition.
  - 7 “What Is to Be Done?,” *Collected Works* 5:382, 384.
  - 8 “Once Again on the Trade Unions,” 25 January 1921, *Collected Works* 32:83, 84.
  - 9 “Summing-Up Speech on the report of the CC of the RCP(B) March 9, 1921,” *Collected Works* 32:195, 198.
  - 10 V. I. Lenin, “What Is to Be Done?” *Collected Works* 5:383, 422.
  - 11 Thus in the 1915 debate on ultra-imperialism, Lenin perceives the danger of a new economism whereby the maturity of the capitalist relations of production on the world scale would be a prelude to a final collapse of the system. We again find this concern to avoid any reduction of the political to the economic or the social in the debates of the early 1920s on the characterization of the Soviet state. To those who speak of a workers’ state, Lenin replies that “the whole point is that it is not quite a workers’ state.” His formulation is then more descriptive and complex than a sociological characterization: it is a workers’ and peasants’ state “with a bureaucratic twist to it,” and “there you have the reality of the transition” (Lenin, “The Trade Unions, the Present Situation and Trotsky’s Mistakes,” *Collected Works* 32:24). Finally, in the debate on the trade unions, Lenin again defends an original position: because they are not an organ of political power, the unions must not be transformed into “coercive state organizations.”
  - 12 Lenin, “What We are Working For,” *Collected Works* 7:450.
  - 13 Lenin, “The Crisis has Matured,” *Collected Works* 26:84.

- 14 Lenin, “‘Left-Wing’ Communism—An Infantile Disorder,” *Collected Works* 31:99.
- 15 L. Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pluto, 1997), 1024.
- 16 Lenin, “The Collapse of the Second International,” *Collected Works* 21:214.
- 17 G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 76, 313. Emphasis in original.
- 18 On this topic see H. Lefebvre, *Eléments de rythmanalyse* (Paris: Syllepse, 1996).
- 19 Lenin, “The Political Situation,” 10 July 1917, *Collected Works* 25:177.
- 20 Lenin, “The Crisis has Matured,” *Collected Works* 26:82.
- 21 Lenin, “Letter to the Central Committee, the Moscow and Petrograd Committees and the Bolshevik Members of the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets,” *Collected Works* 26:140–41.
- 22 Lenin, “Advice of an Onlooker,” *Collected Works* 26:179–81.
- 23 Lenin, “Letter to Central Committee Members,” *Collected Works* 26:234.
- 24 Lenin, “Conspectus of Hegel’s Book *The Science of Logic*,” *Collected Works* 38:123.