

Lenin on Imperialism

Vladimir Ilich Lenin (1870-1924) is best known for his role in the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the founding of the Soviet Union. Lenin symbolized for many people the principles and ideas of the 1917 Revolution. Lenin's famous summary of his views is *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917).

In short, Lenin added to Marx what Robert Gilpin has called a "fourth law" of capitalism, which we might call the law of capitalist imperialism: "As capitalist economies mature, as capital accumulates, and as profit rates fall, the capitalist economies are compelled to seize colonies and create dependencies to serve as markets, investment outlets, and sources of food and raw materials. In competition with one another, they divide up the colonial world in accordance with their relative strengths."

To Lenin, imperialism is another portion of the capitalist epoch of history that the world must endure on the road to communism. According to Lenin, "Monopoly is the transition from capitalism to a higher system."

The critical element fuelling imperialism, according to Lenin, was the decline of national economic competition and the growth of monopolies. Based on Marx's law of concentration, what emerged was an aggregation of market power into the hands of a few "cartels, syndicates and trusts, and merging with them, the capital of a dozen or so banks manipulating thousands of millions." Lenin went on to argue that.

The key for Lenin was that because monopolies concentrated capital, they could not find sufficient investment opportunities in industrial regions of the world. They therefore found it necessary to export capital around the globe to earn sufficient profits.

Hence Lenin argued that imperialist expansion created new, serious problems for the world. Lenin viewed World War I as an imperialist war, caused by tensions that arose from the simultaneous expansion of several European empires. As nations at the core of capitalism competed to expand their exploitative sphere, their interests intersected and conflicted with one another, producing the Great War.

For Lenin, profit-seeking capitalists could not be expected to use surplus capital to improve the living standards of the proletariat. Therefore, capitalist societies would remain unevenly developed ones, with some classes prospering as others were mired in poverty. The imperial phase of capitalism simply transferred this duality of wealth and poverty onto the world stage, as capitalists, seeking to maintain and even increase their profits, exported to what contemporaries of Lenin called "backward" regions of the world. These poor peripheral countries were now integrated into the world economy as the new "proletariat" of the world.

The bottom line of imperialism, for Lenin, was that the rich capitalist nations were able to delay their final crisis by keeping the poorer nations underdeveloped and deep in debt, and dependent on them for manufactured goods, jobs, and financial resources.

Lenin developed a theory of "five basic features" in his systematic structural explanation of imperialism, viz., (1) The concentration of production and capital has reached such an advanced stage that it has created monopolies which play a decisive role in economic life; (2) The merging of bank capital with industrial capital has created a financial oligarchy based on this "financial capital"; (3) The export of capital as distinguished from the export of commodities has acquired exceptional importance; (4) International monopoly capitalist alliances which divide the world among themselves have come into being; and (5) The territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers has been completed.

Over nearly half a century of global economic crises, the international system developed a vertical division of labour and an international order in which the major capitalist countries held the dominant position and colonized countries were subordinate.

Monopoly hence led to the formation of a new world system under monopoly capital and zeal for plunder. The movement of imperialism truly begins to expand beyond the capitalism of individual countries, monopoly gives rise to a struggle for world domination on a global

scale. “The content of imperialist politics is ‘world domination’ and the continuation of this politics is imperialist war.”

Lenin’s theory of imperialism was a practical response to the world structural contradictions caused by imperialism. It sought a scientific basis for the multi-dimensional construction of a critical theory of capitalism. It is not surprising, then, that Lenin's theory of imperialism has been very influential, especially among intellectuals in the less developed countries, where his views have shaped policy and attitudes toward international trade and finance generally. Lenin’s theory of imperialism deepened and expanded the Marxist view of world history, providing a broad theoretical perspective for examining the historical logic of the development of capitalism in the era of globalization.

Lenin on Revolution

Lenin was never an orthodox theoretician. His purpose of analyzing party was to bring about a revolution for the emancipation of the working class. In his judgment only party could achieve this task.

Now what we call revolution, interpreters of Lenin's political ideas and philosophy call it social revolution. They change the whole social, economic and political structure of society.

It implied a qualitative leap in the development of society resulting in the replacement of one social economic formation by another. It not only replaces one ruling class by another, but abolished old relation of production and introduces new ones and radically changes social views and institutions.

Social revolution or revolution as it may also be called is quite different from ordinary bourgeois revolution. In the latter, one class of rulers is replaced by another class while the whole political and economic structure remains intact.

A bourgeois revolution never touches the economic system of society and, more particularly, the relations of production. Lenin thought that social revolution could only be the goal of working class.

In their writings both Marx and Engels gave primary importance to the objective condition of social revolution. Both of them were also convinced that subjective conditions were also necessary. However, Lenin elaborately discussed both the subjective and objective factors of social revolution. But it would be wrong to hold that both objective and subjective factors are quite different and they work separately. These two elements of social revolution are intimately connected.

Following Marx and Engels Lenin had said that to make revolution possible there must be a revolutionary situation. What is revolutionary situation? Revolutionary situation arises when the contradictions between classes became extremely acute. Not only this, the working class will utilize this revolutionary situation.

The Conditions of Revolution

After the First World War (1914-1918), revolution in some of the countries in Europe could not succeed although in those countries there were either objective or subjective conditions. But the presence of both of them was essential for revolution.

In those countries there could not form powerful and widespread mass communist parties or revolutionary parties based on communism. The absence of leadership, Lenin thought, was also another factor. The working class in these countries was exploited, but the powerful capitalist class through various techniques suppressed their discontent.

Some bourgeois ideologists acknowledge the growing role of subjective preconditions. But Lenin attacks this stand. He is of opinion that for a successful revolution the subjective preconditions must be combined with the mature objective preconditions.

Lenin in his *The Collapse of the Second International* published in 1915 has defined these symptoms in the following way (objective conditions)

(a) A crisis in the upper classes, a crisis in the policy of the ruling classes, when it is impossible to maintain their rule without any change,

In some writings Lenin has also pointed out another objective element of social revolution. The rise and growing strength of capitalism forged an alliance which may appropriately be called unholy alliance between capitalism and state power. In order to overcome the growing and uncontrollable crisis, capitalism sought the assistance of state power. The rapid progress

of capitalism also brought about another situation. The capitalist world was divided. In order to maximize profits the capitalists came into conflict with each other and this to a considerable extent eroded their power of exploitation and domination.

The conflict among the capitalists finally weakened the very foundation of the capitalist system. This appeared to the working class as an opportunity. The weakness of capitalism is the strength of the working class.

(b) The suffering of the oppressed classes and their wants has grown more acute. That is, suffering would be intolerable,

(c) Because of the above factors there would arise increasing activities of the masses.

Subjective Conditions:

There are few subjective conditions and the important of them are:

(1) Revolutionary consciousness of the masses, their readiness and determination to carry through the struggle to the end. The readiness and determination of masses are vital because only the people carry out the practical tasks of revolution, while the leaders give them directions. The anti-revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces first throw their attack against the common people to frustrate their courage.

(2) The organisation of masses and their vanguard make possible the victory of revolution. Lenin was determined to form a centralized, strong, effective party for revolution. He was of opinion that left to themselves mass cannot do anything. They must be guided by a vanguard party.

(3) Finally, the leadership of the party must be experienced and trained. Otherwise the battle against the bourgeoisie shall be abortive. It is the duty of the leadership to find out a correct strategy and adopt pragmatic tactics. Lenin emphasized leadership on the ground that because of the lack of experience and political consciousness common people cannot select the right strategy.

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These were the ideas contributed by Lenin discussing the conditions and initiation of a communist revolution.