

Contributi/8

Lenin's Revolutionary Tactics in an Age of Liberal Revolution

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Though he is widely recognized as the most brilliant revolutionary tactician of the twentieth century, appreciation of Lenin's revolutionary thought has largely concentrated on Marxist or other class-based forms of revolutionary action. In addition, Lenin's legacy is inextricably tied to revolutionary violence and post-revolutionary dictatorship, leading some – including many among the most recent wave of revolutionary protestors in the Western and Arab worlds – to reject leadership or organizational models of revolution altogether. From Occupy to the recent failures of liberal democratic revolution in Egypt, however, recent history has shown the political weakness of leaderless and anti-organization movements, including those relying on diffuse or social media platforms of mobilization. Against these patterns, I suggest that we revisit and reassess the tactical insights of Lenin's revolutionary thought even in our post-Leninist democratic age, and argue that Lenin's basic tactical approach is as relevant to liberal revolutions as to Marxist ones.

1. Revolution in the Post-Communist Era

In the aftermath of the mostly peaceful Revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe, and the Soviet collapse that followed between 1989 and 1991, scholars declared a new era of non-violent «liberal revolutions»¹. This was a shift from what Timothy Garton Ash later called the old '1789-style' revolution to a new '1989-style'. As Garton Ash wrote in 2009:

The 1789 ideal type is violent, utopian, professedly class-based, and characterized by a progressive radicalization, culminating in terror... The 1989 ideal type, by contrast, is non-violent, anti-utopian, based not on a single class but on broad social coalitions, and characterized by the application of mass social pressure – 'people power' – to bring

¹ See e.g. R. S. Snyder, *The End of Revolution?*, «The Review of Politics», LXI, 1999, 1, pp. 5-28; B. Ackerman, *The Future of Liberal Revolution*, New Haven 1992; and S. Auer, *Violence and the End of Revolution after 1989*, «Thesis Eleven», XCVII, 2009, 6, pp. 6-25.

the current powerholders to negotiate. It culminates not in terror but in compromise. If the totem of 1789-type revolution is the guillotine, that of 1989 is the round table².

The fall of communism thus marked not only the end of Marxism as a credible political doctrine, but the twilight of Leninism as a normative approach to revolutionary change. As Bruce Ackerman wrote in 1992:

One of Marxism's most consequential acts of appropriation in 1917 (or earlier) was to seize the idea of revolution... [T]here were many more non-Marxist than Marxist revolutions even at the height of Lenin's ascendancy. But the Leninists were remarkably successful in getting nearly everyone to believe that their kind of revolution was the genuine article³.

By 1992 this was over. And for the next two decades the proliferation of transformative events variously described as 'velvet', 'color', or 'flower' revolutions – events which were somehow miraculous yet increasingly normal, radical yet anti-ideological, forceful but peaceful, mass-based but elite-managed, generally favorable to liberal democracy and widely successful at achieving it – had established a new «default» model of how to deal with dictatorial systems and foreign occupation⁴. It marked both «the return of revolutionary democratic liberalism» to a stature not seen since the 1848 wave, and a purge of Leninist doctrine from the modern revolutionary's toolkit⁵.

There were certainly setbacks – the failure of Burma's «8888 Uprising» (1988-1990) and the trauma of China's 1989 Tiananmen protests come to mind. But broadly speaking the scope of successful non-violent revolution was global, and its success sustained for three decades. Especially after 1989, folk wisdom traced the non-violent wave back to Portugal's 1974 Carnation Revolution, and subsequently through the Philippines' 1986 People Power Revolution, Eastern Europe's 1989, the end of South African apartheid in the early 1990's, and the 'color revolutions' in Serbia (2000, Bulldozer), Georgia (2003, Rose), Ukraine (2004, Orange), and Kyrgyzstan (2005, Tulip), among others. And a proliferation of works – from large-n scientific studies documenting the superior political strength of non-violence⁶, to century-long historical narratives putting nonviolent power on display⁷, to revolutionary handbooks explaining in steps

² T. G. Ash, *Velvet Revolution: The Prospects*, «The New York Review of Books», December 3, 2009.

³ B. Ackerman, *The Future of Liberal Revolution*, cit., p. 1.

⁴ A. Roberts, T. Garton Ash (ed. by), *Civil Resistance & Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present*, Oxford 2011, p. ix. On the social and political theory of 1989-style revolutions, see K. Kumar, *1989: Revolutionary Ideas and Ideals*, Minneapolis 2001.

⁵ B. Ackerman, *The Future of Liberal Revolution*, cit., p. 1.

⁶ E. Chenoweth, M. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, New York 2013. For a more comprehensive bibliography of recent works on non-violence than is provided here, see pp. 18-26 of this book.

⁷ P. Ackerman, J. Duvall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Non-violent Conflict*, New York 2000.

how strategic non-violence can lead «from dictatorship to democracy»⁸ – argued powerfully for the efficacy (and normative priority) of civil over violent resistance to achieve revolutionary goals.

But scholarly analysis is at best a rough indicator of popular mythology, and in recent years the mythos surrounding non-violent revolution has suffered several moments of crisis. In the first place, the mythos of non-violent revolution has come to associate revolutionary mass movements *ipso facto* with liberal democratic ideals and aspirations. The theory is intuitive – the more massive, active, and diverse the movement, the more inclusive and democratic a new regime must be to meet its demands. And this appears to be backed by recent history. In a large-sample study, for example, Chenoweth and Stephan (2013) observed that «nonviolent campaigns have a participation advantage over violent insurgencies» because the «moral, physical, informational, and commitment barriers to participation are much lower for nonviolent resistance than for violent insurgency». Moreover because of this «the transitions that occur in the wake of successful nonviolent resistance movements create much more durable and internally peaceful democracies»⁹.

But as the authors also noted, this is hardly an iron law. Mass-based revolutions have often turned dictatorial, and not necessarily by accident. And on this point one must highlight that if the Revolutions of 1989 abandoned the terror and violence of 1789 or 1917-style revolution, their model also inherited the same reliance on ‘democratic’ mass protest and support which was the ‘nonviolent’ basis of the legitimate rise of dictatorial regimes in these same cases. Jonathan Schell has argued this at length, that both the French Third Estate and Lenin’s Bolsheviks in practical terms «did not use violence to *win* power», even if «they used it, instantly and lavishly, to *keep* power»¹⁰ – that the effective seizure of power was relatively bloodless *precisely* because they were already established as legitimate representatives of, at minimum, the most vocal masses in the most influential centers of state power. They credibly represented what Schell calls the *mass minority* in the major cities, even if their claims to representation extended further. The same could be said of Iran’s 1979 Revolution, which saw «mass participation from nearly every segment of Iranian society» to oust the Shah, then a charismatic Khomeini positioned to represent the «mass minority» and assume power on their behalf, followed by an Islamist crackdown by Khomeini’s Islamic Republican Party in which an estimated 20,000 people were liquidated¹¹.

⁸ G. Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation*, London 2012. See also Sharp’s classic *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Boston 1973 (published in three volumes); and S. Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works*, London 2015.

⁹ E. Chenoweth, M. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, cit., p. 10.

¹⁰ See J. Schell, *Ch.6: The Mass Minority in Action: France and Russia*, in *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People*, New York 2004, pp. 164-185. The quoted passage is from p. 179, emphasis added.

¹¹ E. Chenoweth, M. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, cit., p. 111.

«Despite the final outcome», writes one observer of Khomeini's Revolution, «its main dynamics would have won the admiration of... even Mahatma Gandhi»¹².

The figures of Lenin, Khomeini, and even Robespierre draw us towards a second crisis of non-violent revolutions found at the nexus of leadership and mass participation which stands at the heart of most modern revolutions. It is hard to find a successful revolution without leadership of some sort, personal or party. But because charismatic leadership has so often led to violent, dictatorial, and ideologically intolerant revolutionary outcomes, the proper role of revolutionary leaders constitutes a problem for the revolutionary democrat. A classical statement was made by Sidney Hook: «If the hero is defined as an event-making individual», wrote Hook in 1943, «it follows at once that a democratic community must be eternally on guard against him», for even «the greater his faith in himself, the more disinterested his intentions, the more fateful the issue to which his heroic vision drives him, the more insidious is the menace to the whole rationale of democracy»¹³. Hook's words resonated as the Allied forces – the charismatic de Gaulle's among them – fought the demagogic Hitler's and Mussolini's armies. And he placed them deliberately beside a chapter-long analysis of Lenin's 'heroic' actions in October 1917.

On the other hand, a summary rejection of charismatic or revolutionary leadership risks throwing the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Certainly, this was not the case in 1989, where indicatively in Poland the charismatic leadership of Lech Walesa and Solidarity was crucial not only for pressuring the PUWP regime into negotiations, but for making those negotiations powerful. The same could be said for Vaclav Havel and the Civic Forum in Czechoslovakia, and the role of other party organizations in the many Eastern European round table negotiations¹⁴. Nor was such leadership absent or unimportant in the preponderance of aforementioned successful non-violent revolutions – from Aquino in the Philippines and Mandela in South Africa, to the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, Saakashvili and the UMN in Georgia, and Yushchenko and Tymoshenko in the Ukraine.

But for the last decade or so pressure has come to bear on this leadership question in the wake of the global rise of what Ivan Krastev calls a protest ethic of «participation without representation». Eyeing a range of movements from Global Occupy and Madrid's Los Indignados to the 2011 Egyptian Revolution and recent civic movements in places like Russia, Bulgaria, Thailand, and Turkey, Krastev writes that:

What strikes any observer of the new wave of revolutionary politics is that it is a revolution without an ideology or a project. Protesting itself seems to be the strategic

¹² E. Abrahamian, *Mass Protests in the Iranian Revolution, 1977-79*, in *Civil Resistance & Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present*, ed. by A. Roberts and T. Garton Ash, Oxford 2011, pp. 162-178: 163.

¹³ S. Hook, *The Hero in History* [1943], Boston 1955, pp. 229, 234.

¹⁴ See J. Elster (ed. by), *The Roundtable Talks and the Breakdown of Communism*, Chicago 1996.

goal of many of the protests. Failing to offer political alternatives, they are an explosion of moral indignation... They preach participation without representation. The protest movements bypass established political parties, distrust the mainstream media, refuse to recognize any specific leadership, and reject all formal organizations, relying instead on the Internet and local assemblies for collective debate and decision making¹⁵.

Such politics, argues Krastev, has failed to produce substantial political outcomes for two broad reasons. First is a lack of political responsibility manifest in a rejection of representation: «Mistrusting as a rule, the protestors are plainly uninterested in taking power» but instead «any time people perceive that their interests are endangered, they plan on returning to the streets»¹⁶. Second is a lack of guiding principles and strategic vision: «Revolutions need ideology as oxygen and fuel, and the protestors have no ideology or alternative vision of the future to speak of»¹⁷. These circumstances render politics revolutionary in the most ironic sense – a routine exercise of futile cycles of angry protest.

In recent years the most consequential example of this has been Egypt, where an initial wave of largely Internet-driven street demonstrations led to the ousting of long-time autocrat Hosni Mubarak by the Egyptian military on February 11, 2011. A brief honeymoon period was followed by a succession of anti-military protests from mid-2011 to mid-2012. This in turn was followed by victories of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties in late-2011 parliamentary elections, and by the Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi in Egypt's first free and fair Presidential election in June 2012. The subsequent year witnessed a swelling tide of anti-Morsi and anti-Brotherhood protests waged by secular youths and Egyptian liberals, which culminated in a forceful and widely supported military coup to oust Morsi on July 3, 2013¹⁸. The 2013 coup brought General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to power, and was subsequently consolidated in a May 2014 presidential election in which Sisi won over 96% of the vote¹⁹. By now Egyptian politics had come full circle, back to something which looked like a military dictatorship. And after a resumption of Mubarak era-like crackdowns on Islamists and political activists – the same activists who had brought about the February revolution – it was unclear how democracy had been served²⁰.

Retrospective analysis has done much to suggest that a crucial weakness of the Egyptian opposition – what made a military takeover perhaps *the* most likely outcome – was the lack of a cohesive and unified leadership to represent

¹⁵ I. Krastev, *Democracy Disrupted: The Global Politics of Protest*, Philadelphia 2014, p. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

¹⁸ A useful summary of these events is N. Brown, *Egypt's Failed Transition*, «Journal of Democracy», XXIV, 2013, 4, pp. 45-58.

¹⁹ Turnout for the election was 47.5% of Egypt's 53 million eligible voters. Reported in: *Abdel Fatah al-Sisi Won 96.1% of Vote in Egypt Presidential Election, Say Officials*, «The Guardian» (online), June 3, 2014. Accessed at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/03/abdel-fatah-al-sisi-presidential-election-vote-egypt>.

²⁰ See U. Lindsey, *Cairo: A Museum of Ghosts*, «The Nation», March 2, 2016.

the incredibly diverse mass movement on the ground. Indicatively, Egyptian activist-professor Khaled Fahmy called the revolutionary masses a ‘third faction’ in Egyptian politics which, unlike the first two (the military/old regime and Islamist parties) lacked credible representation:

[W]hat makes Egypt unique is that we also have a third faction, which is the revolution. This is the result of the fact that the revolution of January/February 2011 that was youth-led managed to topple the regime but did not manage to end up in power. So when the elections were run, parliamentary and presidential, they did not win. The people who won were the people who were poised to win, which is the Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists. [...] We ended up with a very peculiar situation whereby the old regime had not really completely disappeared, the new regime is not revolutionary and does not really believe in the revolution as such, and the revolution that managed to make this political opening is disaffected and bewildered and out in the streets again²¹.

In Fahmy’s language, ‘poised to win’ means having organization and representation with the capacity to harness if not steer the groundswell energy of the masses. Where Fahmy is matter-of-fact, Nathan Brown is more critical: «By showing disdain for politics and ceding control to the military», he writes, «those who pulled off the revolution revealed that they lack a common understanding of how to overcome authoritarianism’s malign legacies»²². And Azma Bishara put it simply –Egypt was «Devoid of an organized revolution»²³.

In light of these criticisms of post-2010 protest generally and Egypt’s 2011 revolution specifically, it would be ironic if wisdom might yet be gleaned from the very source which 1989 seemed to outmode – Lenin himself. Indeed, Lenin’s penchant for class-based violence and dictatorship are largely responsible for today’s absolute reaction in the other direction. And in this respect the words of Wael Ghonim, the Google executive whose Facebook page *Kullena Khaled Said* catalyzed Egypt’s 18-day revolution, are indicative of a distinctly anti-Leninist strain in today’s liberal-democratic revolutionary thought: «Using the pronoun *I*», writes Ghonim, «was critical to establishing the fact that the [*Kullena Khaled Said*] page was not managed by an organization, political party, or movement of any kind»²⁴. This language is recurrent throughout his memoir of the revolution: «Please carry the Egyptian flag and refrain from carrying any signs of a political party, movement, group, organization, or religious sect.

²¹ S. Childress, *Khaled Fahmy: Sisi Is ‘Much More Dangerous’*, «Frontline», September 17, 2013. The interview was conducted on July 18, 2013. See <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/khaled-fahmy-sisi-is-much-more-dangerous/>

²² N. Brown, *Egypt’s Failed Transition*, cit., p. 58.

²³ A. Bishara, *Revolution against Revolution, the Street against the People, and Counter-Revolution*, Research paper published by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, September 2013, p. 15. See https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/revolution_and_revolution.pdf

²⁴ W. Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power*, New York 2012, p. 61.

Jan25 is for all Egyptians»²⁵, Ghonim told protestors on Jan. 25. «Revolutions of the past have usually had charismatic leaders who were politically savvy and sometimes even military geniuses», but «the revolution in Egypt was different: it was truly a spontaneous movement led by nothing other than the wisdom of the crowd»²⁶. In this «leaderless revolution... no one was *the* hero because *everyone* was a hero»²⁷.

And yet, since a consensus has emerged that a lack of leadership and representation left a critical authority vacuum which Egypt's military was able to fill, it makes sense to critique Egypt's spontaneous revolution from the standpoint of revolutionary leadership tactics.

Liberal-democratic revolutionaries may need Lenin after all. In what follows I examine Lenin's leadership tactics with an eye towards the democratic stumbling of Egypt's revolution. Such an investigation, however brief here, is useful for three reasons: First, it helps us better understand the Egyptian revolution. Second, it helps us better understand what elements of Lenin's leadership theory are *essentially* Marxist, and what elements are generalizable to revolutions as a whole. And third, it facilitates an interesting comparison of the Egyptian and Russian revolutions. We pursue this in the next section.

2. Lenin, Russia, and the Egyptian Revolution

In this section I tackle Lenin's relevance for contemporary revolutionary thought, particularly liberal revolutionary thought. I proceed in two steps – (1) Revolutionary Agitation; and (2) Revolutionary Situations – to contrast Lenin's approach with the «participation without representation» ethic I also call «liberal-democratic spontaneity», and to apply his theory of «revolutionary situations» to Egypt's 2011 revolution. I make two broad arguments: first, the liberal-democratic revolutionary can learn from Lenin without embracing the violent, dictatorial, class-based elements that make his reputation; and second, Lenin's tactical leadership insights apply to liberal as well as Marxist revolutions.

Revolutionary Agitation

The problem of leadership facing contemporary democratic revolutionaries echoes a controversy waged within Marxism in the early 20th century. The battle lines were drawn between Rosa Luxemburg, the champion of workers' 'spontaneity', and V. I. Lenin, the champion of organized party leadership. Paul Mattick summarized their contrast neatly:

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

Although Lenin counted on, he simultaneously feared, spontaneous movements. He justified the need for conscious interferences in spontaneously-arising revolutions by citing the backwardness of the masses and saw in spontaneity an important destructive but not constructive element. In Lenin's view, the more forceful the spontaneous movement, the greater would be the need to supplement and direct it with organised, planned party-activity. The workers had to be guarded against themselves, so to speak, or they might defeat their own cause through ignorance, and, by dissipating their powers, open the way for counter-revolution.

Rosa Luxemburg thought differently because she saw the counter-revolution not only lurking in the traditional powers and organisations but capable of developing within the revolutionary movement itself. She hoped that spontaneous movements would delimit the influence of those organisations that aspired to centralise power in their own hands [...] Organisations, in Luxemburg's view, should merely help release the creative forces inherent in mass actions and should integrate themselves in the independent proletarian attempts to organise a new society²⁸.

The «participation without representation» ethic sides with Luxemburg. It rejects Lenin's organizational-leadership approach and instead embraces the «wisdom of the crowd». But unlike Luxemburg it lacks a theory of *why* we expect the crowd to coordinate on any political outcome. Luxemburg's concept of spontaneity was class-based. It presupposed «a highly-developed working class, capable of discovering by its own efforts ways and means of utilizing the productive apparatus and its own capacities for a socialist society»²⁹. But liberal-democratic spontaneity rejects this Marxist framework, and in lieu of Luxemburg's industrial-capitalist-crisis mechanisms which trigger class consciousness, its hope rests on a basic belief that «the people want»³⁰ democracy instead of dictatorship, and thus will support it. But this is not a revolutionary theory, and the assumption that broad-based, highly mobilized revolutionary masses will spontaneously gather around a liberal democratic alternative begs for serious theoretical argument. A host of social and contextual factors – level of economic inequality, broader class relations, ethnic tensions, historical and ideological context, may all affect peoples' preferences for or against a range of democratic alternatives. The masses may well find authoritarianism more attractive.

In a critical way, then, liberal-democratic spontaneity shares with Lenin a kind of faith in the revolutionary outcome, albeit via a different ideological framework. For Lenin the relevant framework is class – the socialists will win, but the question is how – while for liberal-democratic spontaneity the framework is neo-Hegelian – the people want democracy, and it will come. Both anticipate a final outcome, but crucially, a chasm divides them on how to coordinate it.

²⁸ P. Mattick, *Spontaneity and Organisation*, 1949. See <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mattick-paul/1949/spontaneity.htm> (accessed July 7, 2017).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ G. Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, Berkeley 2013.

And here is Lenin's first tactical contribution to liberal revolution – his theory of revolutionary propaganda as a coordinating mechanism.

Fifteen years before Russia's 1917 Revolution, Lenin described this problem in *What is to Be Done?* (1902) as one of transforming a *mass of people* into a *people*:

The critical, transitional state of our movement... may be formulated as follows: *There are no people – yet there is a mass of people*. There is a mass of people, because the working class and increasingly varied social strata, year after year, produce from their ranks an increasing number of discontented people... At the same time, we have no people, because we have no leaders, no political leaders, no talented organizers capable of arranging extensive and at the same time uniform and harmonious work³¹.

«Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement»³², writes Lenin, because a *mass of people* is different from a *people*. A *mass of people* can collectively destroy, but it cannot cooperatively create. It can enter the streets and temporarily disrupt the functioning of government, but it cannot coordinate on a new one. Absent common leadership – an organizational, ideological, strategic center of gravity – its sporadic protests amount to little more than scattered «outbursts of desperation and vengeance»³³.

For this reason, then, Lenin insists upon a propaganda campaign that involves *both* a consciousness-building campaign of 'exposure' among varied social strata, *and* a preparation for revolution which offers its readers a strategic plan or vision³⁴. The first prepares the fall of one political system; the second lays foundation of a new one. Exposure involves the publicizing, narrating, and explaining of particular instances of government abuse and revolutionary political action. It is news and narrative – ensuring that important facts are shared by a multitude of people, and that this multitude understands the facts in terms of a common political narrative. «[I]t is possible to begin», Lenin writes, «*only* by inducing people to *think* about all these things, to summarize and generalize all the diverse signs of ferment and active struggle»³⁵, and to incorporate as many social strata as possible:

Indeed, is there a single social class in which there are no individuals, groups, or circles that are discontented with the lack of rights and with tyranny and, therefore, accessible to the propaganda of Social Democrats as the spokesmen of the most pressing general democratic needs... [W]e would point to *political exposures* in the broad sense of the word as the principal... form of this agitation³⁶.

³¹ V. I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?: Burning Questions of Our Movement*, in *The Lenin Anthology*, ed. by R. C. Tucker, New York 1975, pp. 12-114: 80.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁴ The discussion that follows is greatly informed by T. Strong, *Ch. 5: Lenin and the Calling of the Party*, in *Politics Without Vision: Thinking Without a Banister in the Twentieth Century*, Chicago 2012, pp. 184-217.

³⁵ V. I. Lenin, *What is to Be Done?*, cit., p. 101, emphasis in original.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55, emphasis in original.

A coordinated, national exposure campaign by a national paper – one propagating a singular and coherent narrative of events – erodes ruling class authority even outside of the working class. They «serve as a powerful instrument for *disintegrating* the system we oppose, as a means for diverting from the enemy his casual or temporary allies, as a means for spreading hostility and distrust among the permanent partners of the autocracy»³⁷.

A critical aspect of this is what one might call its *centralized populism* – classically associated with dictatorship, but here associated with democratic legitimacy. Lenin insists that this propaganda be produced by a *centralized* body of *professional revolutionaries* who will determine its ‘line’ or narrative. The work should not be left to local papers. And against the criticism that this renders the Party «an uncontrolled autocratic law-maker for the entire practical revolutionary struggle»³⁸, he argues to the contrary that *any* propaganda (centralized or not) will only take root where the seeds and soil are fertile: «Let them shout that in stretching out the line, we want to command», he writes, but «we wanted our line, if properly laid, to be respected because it was correct, and not because it had been laid by an official organ»³⁹. The Party only wins adherents if it accurately taps the latent consciousness of the masses, and clarifies to the masses in intellectual terms what they already know from experience. And it only wins the revolution if it reinforces the universal character of their sentiments, and makes this mutually known among them.

Tracy Strong summarizes this approach as follows: «The Party does not try and make the revolution: rather, it tries to make for as much coherence of understanding and action as may be possible at any given moment»⁴⁰. Coherence of understanding dovetails with the strategic coordination of forces, even where local gains are at stake. And this is the critical difference between spontaneity and centralization. «Pray tell me», writes Lenin:

[W]hen bricklayers lay bricks in various parts of an enormous, unprecedentedly large structure, is it ‘paper’ work to use a line to help them find the correct place for the bricklaying; to indicate to them the ultimate goal of the common work... And are we not now passing through precisely such a period in our Party life when we have bricks and bricklayers, but lack the guide line for all to see and follow?⁴¹

A centralized, All-Russia propaganda newspaper will «*stimulate* people to march forward untiringly along *all* the innumerable paths leading to revolution, in the same way as all roads lead to Rome»⁴². The march towards Rome – the vision of Rome which informs a broader strategic plan – represents the difference

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56, emphasis in original.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁴⁰ T. Strong, *Politics Without Vision: Thinking Without a Banister in the Twentieth Century*, Chicago 2012, p. 202, emphasis added.

⁴¹ V. I. Lenin, *What is to Be Done?*, cit., p. 101.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

between a mere trade-union strike and, what may look the same from above, the strike as a tactical form of revolutionary struggle.

Placing Egypt's 2011 revolution beside *What is to Be Done?* gives relief to the revolution's tactical strengths and strategic weaknesses. Mubarak's overthrow has often been called a 'Facebook Revolution', and beneath the cachet is an element of wisdom. The call for massive revolutionary demonstrations on Jan. 25, 2011 was popularized by a small number of coordinating Facebook pages, including that of the April 6 Movement and, most importantly, Wael Ghonim's *Kullena Khaled Said* page. Ghonim's site in particular was the center of a «surrogate form of journalism that circumvented the censorship laws in Egypt» in which «YouTube videos, show with shaky cell phone cameras, of innocent Egyptians tortured and violated for crimes they never committed were a regular feature»⁴³. No image was more powerful in this regard than the brutally disfigured Khaled Said which inspired Wael Ghonim to start a Facebook page and inspire others to post similar abuses. Prior to Jan. 25 Ghonim also successfully used his website to coordinate nationwide 'Silent Stand' protests which ultimately persuaded the government to arrest Said's killers.

How to evaluate this use of Facebook is complex. On one hand, the revolution was enabled *precisely* because the Facebook platform established in Egypt the same kind of de facto 'All-Egypt newspaper' which Lenin thought essential for Russia. In effect, Ghonim (and one might add the April 6 Movement with which he coordinated) established an All-Egypt exposure campaign in which incredibly large numbers of Egyptians, from all walks of life, both shared and read about government abuses in a continuous 24-hour cycle (Lenin was hoping for four issues a month!). When calls for the Jan. 25 protest came, then – on National Police Day and in the wake of the recent democratic revolution in Tunisia – the mass participation that resulted was enabled by a preparatory 'All-Egypt' propaganda which did not dictate to the masses what to think, but resonated with what they thought.

On the other hand, crucial differences from Lenin's platform may have also undermined the long-term success of the demonstrations. The most important, I would suggest, was a lack of *political* (as opposed to *protest*) coordination. Both the April 6 Youth Movement and Ghonim (via *Kullena Khaled Said*) issued specific demands via their websites. But in Ghonim's case these demands – addressing the poverty problem; annulling the emergency law; firing the Minister of Interior; a two-term limit on the presidency⁴⁴ – did nothing to establish a plan of action or a credible political representation of the masses capable of consolidating their revolutionary gains *should the opportunity present itself*. On February 6, 2011, the April 6 Movement published a revolutionary set of demands including Mubarak's resignation, the dissolution of the current national assembly and senate, and:

⁴³ S. Mahmood, *The Architects of the Egyptian Revolution*, «The Nation» (online), February 15, 2011.

⁴⁴ W. Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0*, cit., pp. 166-167.

Establishment of a ‘national salvation group’ that includes all public and political personalities, intellectuals, constitutional and legal experts, and representatives of youth groups who called for the demonstrations on the 25th and 28th of January. This group is to be commissioned to form a transitional coalition government that is mandated to govern the country during a transitional period. The group should form a transitional presidential council until the next presidential elections...

We also announce that there is not any connection between us and what is known as ‘The Committee of Wise Men’ who have suggested ending the demonstrations and beginning negotiations while Mubarak is still in power⁴⁵.

Given that the April 6 Movement and Ghonim were coordinating their activities, it is ironic to contrast the former’s obstinate political stance on February 6 – its political demands for leadership, representation, and a formal transfer of power to a ‘national salvation group’ – to Ghonim’s consistent refrain that the movement eschew reference to party, group, organization. For now, as calls for a ‘national salvation group’ indicated, this was precisely what the revolution needed, but lacked – a legitimate, well-known, centralized leadership of the revolutionary masses to pick up the power when it was lying in the streets, and do so with the mandate to implement a specific political plan which the masses both anticipated and demanded, because the ‘All Egypt’ agitation campaign had prepared them to do so.

Thus, when scholar Saba Mahmood argues that «the rebellion was so effective precisely *because* there was no central and singular political authority organizing it», and rejects the notion that a lack of centralization hindered the task of forging a new government, and subsequently counters that «many of the young men and women who participated in this rebellion... are savvy and experienced organizers», this is tactically beside the point. By embracing ‘spontaneity’ the Facebook movement garnered a *mass of people* to overthrow a dictator. But it failed to lead, constitute, or represent a *people*.

Revolutionary Crisis and Picking up Power

If any figure was positioned to pick up power between the Jan. 25, 2011 outbreak of protests and February 11 when the military seized the initiative, it was Egyptian diplomat and 2005 Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohamed El Baradei. El Baradei was Egypt’s most widely recognized democracy advocate. From 1997-2009 he headed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and in February 2010 returned to Egypt after a 27-year absence to great enthusiasm to establish the National Association for Change (NAC), a broad opposition coalition with representatives from most of Egypt’s major opposition parties

⁴⁵ April 6 Movement, *Statement of the April 6 Movement Regarding the Demands of the Youth and the Refusal to Negotiate with Any Side*, trans. by F. Adely & A. Haddad, «Jadaliyya Reports», published online at www.jadaliyya.com.

and protest groups – from the April 6 Movement and Revolutionary Socialists, to the Muslim Brotherhood and Egyptian Women for Change, among others – and including other prominent Egyptian politicians like Al-Ghad's Ayman Nour, who was the last to challenge Mubarak in 2005. Some anticipated El Baradei was preparing a charismatic 2011 Presidential run aimed not only at winning office, but transforming Egyptian politics⁴⁶.

El Baradei arrived in Cairo two-days after the National Police Day protest and immediately before the massive Jan. 28 protest that would establish a permanent occupation of Tahrir Square. Upon arriving he gave an impromptu press conference saying: «If people, in particular young people, if they want me to lead the transition, I will not let them down. My priority right now... is to see a new Egypt through peaceful transition». Responses were mixed. One 24-year-old Egyptian defended El Baradei from criticisms of timidity and parachuting: «It's not his job to be protesting on the streets, it's our job... His role is to be a leader, a figurehead for what comes after, because that's what we're lacking at the moment». Others were more tepid, even resentful of El Baradei's potential role: «Is he coming for a photoshoot, or does he actually have something to offer? The fact is he's done nothing concrete... if he does get involved it will just look shallow and crass»⁴⁷.

El Baradei's popularity had waned by early 2011, but he remained the most viable leader of any legitimate democratic coalition. In an unplanned coincidence, the weeks immediately preceding the Jan. 25 protest saw the creation of a 100-legislator 'shadow parliament' by many of the same opposition groups and political figures in the NAC. Most of Egypt's major opposition parties and their recognized political leaders – like Ayman Nour of Al-Ghad and Mohammed Al-Baltagi of the Muslim Brotherhood – were there⁴⁸. The shadow parliament, established after an especially corrupt November 2010 election season, was an exploratory response to Mubarak's regime, and had already held «dozens of meetings lasting more than 100 hours»⁴⁹. After the Jan. 25 protests it moved quickly to seize the initiative. Within days it established a 10-person steering committee and made El Baradei their official representative in negotiations with Mubarak's government. It also called on youth activist groups to pick three to five representatives to join the committee.

At the time of the Jan.-Feb. 2011 revolution, then, Egypt's opposition boasted both a mass movement and a political opposition. The latter was a

⁴⁶ A. Hauslohner, *Will El Baradei Run for President of Egypt?*, «Time» (online), February 20, 2010; *El Baradei to Form 'National Association for Change*, «BBC News» (online), February 24, 2010.

⁴⁷ All quotes in this paragraph are from J. Shenker, *Mohamed El Baradei Lands in Cairo: 'There's No Going Back'*, «The Guardian» (online), January 27, 2011.

⁴⁸ C. Levinson, *El Baradei's Role Cast in Doubt*, «The Wall Street Journal» (online), February 3, 2011. See also J.M. Sharp, *Egypt: The January 25 Revolution and Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy*, published by the Congressional Research Service in Washington, D.C., February 11, 2011.

⁴⁹ C. Levinson, *El Baradei's Role Cast in Doubt*, cit.

widely recognized political body which credibly represented the broadest strata of Egyptian society, with the country's most charismatic democratic figure at its helm. The former was a sustained mass of protestors effectively paralyzing Mubarak's regime, and doing so at the central points of real and symbolic political power – Cairo and Tahrir Square. Meanwhile the military in Cairo's vacillating presence signaled, at most, a tepid loyalty to Mubarak. On the evening of Jan. 30 El Baradei spoke at Tahrir Square as one with a broad negotiating mandate, and by Feb. 1 he had clearly occupied this role, if only to publically reject negotiations with the old regime until Mubarak himself stepped down⁵⁰.

How, then, did the power of Egypt's revolution fall into the hands of Egypt's military? At the critical moment, was there a more decisive role for El Baradei and this shadow parliament's steering committee to play in the pursuit of a stable Egyptian democracy? What was to be done, and when? Any answers to these questions will be speculative – and to proffer alternative courses of action in retrospect is easily unfair to the courageous actors involved, like El Baradei and Ghonim, who risked their lives to participate under fluid and increasingly chaotic circumstances. But in what follows I do ask what *might* be learned from stylized parallels with the Russian Revolution of 1917, and from Lenin's real-time analysis of Russia's own revolutionary situation in 1917. Due to space constraints, I limit discussion to two topics: (a) dual power and (b) picking up power.

If there is one superficial resemblance between Egypt's 2011 Revolution and Russia's 1917 Revolution, both experienced an extended period of unstable political authority in the wake of the ruling regime's collapse. In Russia, this period from February to October 1917 was called 'dual power'. The Provisional Government, which nominally governed and bore responsibility for Russia's war effort, emerged spontaneously from the old Imperial Duma as the monarchy collapsed. Its members represented Russia's bourgeois and elite voting class. The Soviet congress arose at the same time, when calls from Menshevik Duma members and other left-wing leaders gathered delegates from soldier and worker (and eventually peasant) units. Though based in Petrograd, a linked Soviet system spread throughout the country, and in theory their political role was supervisory⁵¹.

In Egypt while the political blocs were less numerous than in Russia – after Feb. 11, there were (1) the old regime holdovers, (2) the military, (3) the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties, and (4) "the crowd" (mostly secular-liberal) – the 'dual power' dynamics were more fluid institutionally. In this respect two moments are especially worth highlighting for comparative and theoretical reasons.

⁵⁰ J. Shenker, *Egypt Protests: Parties Reject Talks and Try to Restore Credibility*, «The Guardian» (online), February 1, 2011; Id., *Mohamed El Baradei Urges World Leaders to Abandon Hosni Mubarak*, «The Guardian» (online), February 2, 2011.

⁵¹ On the events of February 23-7 which led to the creation of 'dual power', see esp. L. Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, trans. by M. Eastman., Chicago 2008, pp. 75-130.

First is the period between Jan. 30 and Feb. 11, 2011. At this time Mubarak and his associates faced a serious political challenge from El Baradei's coalition, which had a credible (if contestable) claim to represent the revolutionary masses. Mubarak in turn needed traditional military support to weather the storm, but soldiers in the streets appeared to vacillate. On the surface it appeared there were two political contenders – El Baradei's coalition and Mubarak's government – and all ultimately hinged on the military. Which side would it support – Mubarak's or El Baradei's? The answer was neither.

A second crucial period occurred between the late 2011 and July 2013, during which Egypt saw parliamentary elections, a presidential election, selection of a Constituent Assembly, and all of these undermined in one form or another by Egypt's military leadership and Mubarak-regime bureaucracy. Immediately after the February revolution El Baradei's coalition (briefly called the National Committee for Following up the People's Demands⁵²) fizzled to nothing, leaving three major political blocs: (1) the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) (often in tandem with old regime elites); (2) the Muslim Brotherhood, and (3) the protesting liberal-secular masses now represented by no one. When the Islamist parties then dominated parliamentary elections, and Mohamed Morsi's presidency confirmed secular liberals' worst fears about Brotherhood politics, the crowd leaned on its only champion left — ascendant military commander Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

What options were available to El Baradei in February 2011? And what alternative courses were available to democratic activists in the interregnum between Mubarak's fall and Sisi's rise? In response to the first question, a passage Lenin wrote during the abortive 1905 Revolution is instructive:

Revolutions are the locomotives of history, said Marx. Revolutions are festivals of the oppressed and exploited... At such times the people are capable of performing miracles... But it is essential that leaders of the revolutionary parties, too, should advance their aims more comprehensively and boldly at such a time, so that their slogans should always be in advance of the revolutionary initiative of the masses, serve as a beacon, reveal to them our democratic and socialist ideal in all its magnitude and splendor, and show them the shortest and most direct route to complete, absolute and decisive victory⁵³.

This passage suggests that an open call for power on Tahrir Square by El Baradei – effectively offering his coalition committee as a Revolutionary Provisional Government – was likely to fail, because while the coalition did boast links to a range of political parties, El Baradei's sway over the *revolutionary masses* remained questionable. As early as Feb. 1, ground-level reports indicated that El Baradei's opposition «had been weakened by its inability to control the protestors, who have acted without any prompting from established political

⁵²J. Shenker, *Egypt Protests: Parties Reject Talks and Try to Restore Credibility*, cit.

⁵³V. I. Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*, in *The Lenin Anthology*, cit., pp. 120-147: 140-141.

forces». As one protestor put it, «If I was [newly appointed Vice-President] Omar Suleiman and I was serious about negotiating with an opposition figure, I would say, ‘First, call the crowds off’, which of course ElBaradei can’t – barely anyone listened to him in Tahrir the other day, and they’re not going to listen now»⁵⁴. The core problem, Lenin suggests, was not only that the coalition had few organizational ties to the revolutionary masses – this was problem enough – but it offered the masses no revolutionary beacon because, prior to Jan.25, it never presented itself as a leader of a *revolutionary* movement.

Nonetheless, although Lenin’s writings and experience suggest that such leadership positioning can take years, and ought to precede the revolution by a significant amount of time, one reasonably wonders – had Egypt’s shadow government (or for that matter El Baradei’s NAC) linked itself specifically to revolutionary agitation from its inception, actively linking itself with the online agitation movement, and had El Baradei in turn *then* offered his revolutionary leadership on the Square in late Jan.-early Feb. 2011 – whether the calculations of a vacillating military (perhaps with a nudge from the United States which annually subsidizes it) would have steered more readily towards this alternative.

In the event, the SCAF did assume power: So what alternatives were *then* available to democratic revolutionaries beyond spontaneous demonstrations? Here the lessons of February through October 1917 resonate in surprising and ironic ways. First, as discussed above, what facilitated the Bolsheviks’ initial rise to power was not an overwhelming use of force – it was, rather, Lenin’s insistence from the April Theses through October, that the path towards fully overthrowing the old regime was through *winning over an alternative and more legitimate set of institutions* – namely the Soviets. Recall that in the Russian Revolution’s early months the Bolsheviks constituted a paltry minority of Soviet delegates, but Lenin’s drew confidence from his belief that – in the context of the World War I crisis – both the bourgeois parties in the Provisional Government and (the opportunist) Socialist parties in the Soviets would be exposed as hypocrites and counterrevolutionaries. Because the authority situation was fluid the Bolsheviks could, and should wait until they controlled the most important Soviets – which would also help them win the army – and then move.

Approached from this perspective, the sequence of events from Feb. 2011 through July 2013 strikes one as a Leninist exposure campaign turned on its head. There were no Soviets in Egypt, but there were parliamentary and presidential elections and the formation of a constituent assembly. On one hand, the lack of pre-revolutionary organization or credible revolutionary representation weakened secular liberal representation in these elections considerably. Thus the new political organization which delegates of the revolutionary masses might have co-opted over time was never seriously in play; while on the other hand, when powerful political actors *were* exposed one-by-one for anti-democratic tendencies during the period of fluid authority in Egypt – first the military for

⁵⁴J. Shenker, *Egypt Protests: Parties Reject Talks and Try to Restore Credibility*, cit.

postponing elections, then the Muslim Brotherhood for using electoral victories to pursue what appeared like narrow and sectarian interests – there was no credible representative of the revolutionary masses waiting to fill the legitimacy void. This is what Russia and the Bolsheviks had, which Egypt's secular liberals didn't – a leader whose April Theses encouraged continued agitation and organization aimed at eventually winning and consolidating power through the newly established political body. The Bolsheviks started small in February – and so, perhaps, would have El Baradei's coalition. But Lenin's strategy worked, and by October, after most other parties in Russia had sullied themselves with the war, the Bolsheviks were the only credible representative of the revolutionary masses left standing/ In Egypt, on the other hand, the secular liberal masses lacked such a champion or party, and the democratic institution in Egypt which might have formed an alternate and more credible basis of political authority was not only resented and distrusted, but ultimately overthrown by the military with the support of liberal democratic spontaneity.

If anyone played the Leninist game of exposure to perfection, it was arguably El Sisi, who recognized that Morsi's presidency would likely incite more protest to create a political void which only he was positioned to fill. In this context, one again wonders what might have happened if, after Feb. 10, 2011, El Baradei's coalition had resolved to stick together for revolutionary democratic outcomes until the end – if, instead of pulling out of the Presidential election of 2012, El Baradei had led a broad coalition to dominate them, continuously exposing any party or organization evincing a design to subvert them. This is not only the Leninist plan – this was the plan executed by Otpor and the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, by Saakashvili and the UMN in Georgia, and the other successful color revolutions. Indeed, it was Otpor and their 'horizontalist' approach to revolutionary organization which first inspired the April 6 Movement⁵⁵. But clearly *they* read Lenin, too.

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⁵⁵ D. A. Kirkpatrick, D. E. Sanger, *A Tunisian-Egyptian Link That Shook Arab History*, «The New York Times» (online), February 13, 2011.