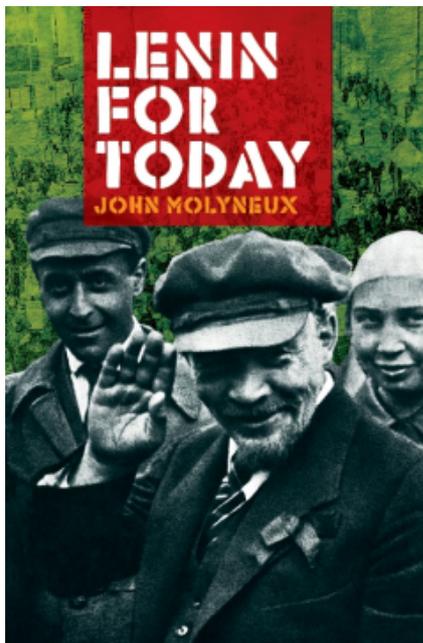


Review: John Molyneux, *Lenin for Today*

Barney Doherty



John Molyneux, *Lenin for Today*, Bookmarks 2017 \$16.95

As the commemorations of the Russian revolutionary year of 1917 unfold, old debates and controversies are once again revived. Interpretations of the Russian Revolution and its legacy not only divide the broad political spectrum but also magnify the splits of opinion on the left.

There is no more controversial figure from this period than Lenin; he is one of the most misunderstood leaders of the twentieth century. Thanks, in part, to the crude abuses of his name during the Cold War period, Lenin has come to represent for many people either a tyrannical dictator or the founder of what would become known as Stalinism.

These interpretations bend and manipulate Lenin's writing and history to fit their propaganda. This has led many on the left to doubt the relevance of Lenin's work in the 21st century. It is exactly this doubt that John Molyneux in his book *Lenin For Today* wishes to challenge.

Molyneux does not set out to offer a new

interpretation of Lenin but rather seeks to prove the relevance of Leninist politics for today's political landscape. In a systemic manner the author deals with a core principle of Leninism in each chapter, along with strong rebuttals of its main critiques and misinterpretations.

From Lenin's views on imperialism and war to his theory of the party, Molyneux guides the reader through debates, that while complex and often niche, have resounding implications for the left. The point of this though is to illustrate how these principles are not only applicable but required for contemporary revolutionary politics.

Revolution

Molyneux begins his book with an outline of what he calls the 'morally indefensible' present state of the world. (p. 3) Inequality, imperial conflicts, global recession and imminent climate change are but symptoms of the capitalist pursuit of profit. The socialist goal remains the same today as it did for Lenin, that is the fundamentally change the capitalist system. Revolutionary change therefore remains the starting point of all Leninist thinking. This, Molyneux claims, is the relevance of Lenin:

Lenin is relevant in the 21st century because the Russian Revolution is relevant. The Russian Revolution is relevant because the revolution of the 21st century will be a workers' revolution and the Russian Revolution was a workers' revolution.' (p. 12) What principles of Leninist politics then must revolutionaries engage with in the struggle for socialism?

Working Class

The first principle Molyneux looks at in his book is the relevance of the working class today.

If it is true that Leninism is still relevant, then the revolutionary potential of the working class must remain a factor. A fundamental confidence in the power of the working class underscores Leninist politics.

Of course, the global working class is vastly different in 2017 as they were in 1917. It has grown massively, Molyneux estimates it at '70 per cent or more of the population in advanced capitalist countries'. (p. 13) Why then has there been a growing tendency on the Marxist left to downplay the significance of the workers in the fight against capitalism?

Molyneux confronts these deviations by breaking down the social forces in today's society and analysing where the 'potential economic, social and political power' lies to change the system. (p. 17) It is this materialist analysis that Molyneux employs to judge the relevance of the Leninist principles which gives his arguments such weight.

The Party

Building from an understanding of class and economic power Molyneux asks how would Leninists engage with this mass? In other words, is a Leninist party still necessary? There is no doubt that the role of the party is a controversial element of Lenin's political practice. Often the term Leninist conjures images of an authoritarian top-down party, with no room for debate or disagreement.

Molyneux offers a thorough overview of the nature of the Bolshevik party from its regular dissent to its 'democratic centralism'. The primary point of the chapter though is his argument that there are two core principles that can sum up Lenin's views on the role of the party.

The first is simply that it is a necessity to build a dedicated revolutionary party, one that is 'committed to socialist revolu-

tion'. (p. 137) The second principle is that the revolutionary party can only be built on the 'basis of establishing the closest possible relationship with the mass of the working class through participation in its day to day struggles'. (p. 141) For Lenin this meant sinking roots in working class communities by merging the activities of the party 'with the practical, everyday questions of working-class life'. (p. 141)

Leninist parties should therefore be built on a commitment to the working class and their ability to transform society, it is the vehicle for revolutionaries to engage in a mutual relationship of agitation and education with workers.

Lenin For Today does not dwell hypothetical and historical debate, as is often the case when dealing with Leninism, but rather on the practical implications for modern revolutionaries that arise from Leninist theory.

State

One hundred years on it seems unlikely that Lenin's theoretical work can hold its significance. Especially considering he was known for writing for very particular contexts. Yet as we see the growth again of radical reformism on the left, Lenin's writings can be powerful reminders to revolutionaries not to fall for the attraction of electoralism.

Lenin's book *State and Revolution* is without doubt his most well-known, and for good reason too. It is a powerful political work that re-examines the Marxist understanding of role of the state at a time when there was increasing revisions in the Second International. Today we find ourselves in a similar situation, many on the radical left have moved away from what they see as an out-dated analysis of a state. One which was perhaps relevant in Tsarist Russia but not modern Western democratic countries.

These are the important debates of our time as leftist parties inspired by these deviations from a Leninist understanding gain major support and even political power,

Corbyn's Labour and Syriza for example. We have returned to the major question of socialist politics, reform or revolution?

Molyneux begins with what Leninist theory of the state argues and uses it to explain the recent failures of Eurocommunism and the limits of anarchism. The point is not simply to vindicate Lenin's name but instead to return to a materialist understanding of the nature of our society and the limitations of parliament.

The conclusion of course remains what Lenin outlined in 1917. That the existing state 'is an organ of class rule' and cannot be 'taken over by the working class but must be smashed'. (p. 132) In a moment of somewhat understandable hype surrounding reformist projects this is a required reminder for socialists.

Leninism today

This is more than a book on theoretical debates. It is a call to action from an activist to the revolutionary left. Molyneux focuses on the politics not the man precisely because he wants to see the political project Leninism is based on revitalised. The final chapter of *Lenin For Today* is where Molyneux attempts to outline some concrete ways in which socialists can adopt Leninist politics in the 21st century.

The author takes a sober look at the current state of revolutionary parties and acknowledges that many have slipped into an 'institutionalised sectarianism'. (p. 127) There is a tendency for Leninist parties to hold political purity above the 'fear of contamination' that may come from building roots in working class communities. (p. 219) This isolation is not intended but the result of decades of decline.

In an era of political polarisation though when most on the left are turning to left reformism, Molyneux reaffirms the need to sink roots in working class communities. A compelling argument is made for revolutionaries to include community struggle as a vi-

tal component of their work. To go to where the masses are politically and work alongside them to move leftwards through shared struggle. Molyneux proposes a 'transitional organisation... somewhere between traditional reformist parties and outright revolutionary parties' be used to engage with the mass of working people. (p. 219)

This is of course a difficult undertaking and one fraught with dangers (i.e. the lure of reformism) however if we take seriously our desire for radical change it is an essential endeavour.

'To avert the barbaric response to climate change it will be necessary, as Lenin understood with unmatched clarity, to build revolutionary workers' parties, defeat imperialism, smash the state and establish workers' power. That in turn means finding ways to relate these ideas to working class people where they are at now'. (p. 222)

Leninist's should be prepared to take up the 'practical, everyday questions of working-class life' not simply comment from afar. While this model has its risks, the state of affairs that Molyneux outlined in his opening chapter 'makes the efforts necessary'. (p. 221)

There are other key aspects of this book which could not be touched upon due to the confines of a review, such as Leninist positions on oppression, imperialism and Stalinism. This is a fantastic resource for revolutionaries, particularly those new to Lenin, as it moves beyond the debates over personality and Cold War propaganda to reassess the core principles that Leninist politics are built on.

In short, this book is a practical call for socialists today to re-examine Leninist politics. This does not mean merely mimicking Lenin's work as the vastly different political circumstances would make this futile. Instead begin with the basic Leninist goal of building a revolutionary party that seeks to engage in a genuine manner with the working class.