

Lessons from Lenin's Approach to the Revolutionary Peasant Movement

1) The Democratic Tasks of the Revolutionary Proletariat.

It would perhaps be worthwhile to begin by posing the question: 'What do the communists have to do with the agrarian question and the peasant movement? Is it not the case that the proletariat and the communists fight for the complete abolition of private ownership of the means production (including land) in general and the establishment of public ownership and socialist relations of production? Is it not the case that the agrarian question is, in its economic content, a question of determining the form of private property in land and, consequently, its solution cannot, economically, go beyond a bourgeois framework? Moreover, is it not the case that what the proletariat and the communists are striving for, in the political arena, is the conquest of political power and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat whereas the political ideals of the peasant movement are, at the most, confined to a struggle for bourgeois democracy? And hence should not the proletariat remain neutral in the confrontation between the peasants and the landlords and in the historical choice between the peasant-bourgeois, feudal, or landlord-bourgeois forms of agrarian relations?

This is certainly an abstract and deviationist way of posing the question a "leftist" approach from which at least the Iranian communist movement surely does not suffer. Nevertheless, a critique of this deviationist attitude is useful as ground for pondering over Lenin's approach to the agrarian question.

It is indeed true that the proletariat's and the communists ideal is establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat and abolishing all kinds of private ownership of the means of production. But this socialist cause should be realized through the escalation and the expansion of the class struggle of the proletariat in the context of concrete socio-economic objective conditions, and through confrontation with the political forces of other social classes, each of which seeks its own specific interests. The proletariat must, through a lively class struggle, change the existing social order into its desired social order, and will therefore have to actively confront all class forces which in one way or another insist on changing or maintaining the status quo. For, the proletariat seeks to bring about the objective and subjective conditions which facilitate the struggle for socialism, and which at each step make the conquest of political power by the working class more feasible. The struggle of the peasants against the landlords, of women for equal rights in society, of the oppressed nationalities for the right to self-determination, of the religious minorities, etc., are neither immediately nor in and of themselves struggles for socialism; they are carried out for the expansion of democratic rights within the framework of a bourgeois society and aimed at making changes within the framework of the existing relations (to what extent these demands can objectively be realized in the framework of bourgeois system is not of our concern here). But to restrain the proletariat from taking part in these issues and from actively confronting the class and political forces involved, and calling it to "neutrality" under

the pretext that this or that struggle is "not directly for socialism" amounts to leaving the fate of the objective changes in society to the balance of power of the non-proletarian forces and their policies and programs, and depriving the proletariat of putting its own stamp on every ongoing democratic struggle within the bourgeois system, as a way of bringing about the changes which facilitate and hasten its final move towards socialism. Hence, the proletariat and its communist vanguards have undeniable democratic tasks under specific circumstances:

"The Social Democratic Party, as the conscious exponent of the working-class movement, aims at the complete liberation of the toiling masses from every form of oppression and exploitation. The achievement of this objective - and the abolition of private property in the means of production and the creation of the socialist society - calls for a very high development of the productive forces of capitalism and a high degree of organisation of the working class. The full development of the productive forces in modern bourgeois society, a broad, free, and open class struggle, and the political education, training, and rallying of the masses of the proletariat are inconceivable without political freedom. Therefore it has always been the aim of the class-conscious proletariat to wage a determined struggle for complete political freedom and the democratic revolution."
(*The Democratic Tasks of the Revolutionary Proletariat*, Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 8, p.511)

In other words, for the liberation of the toiling masses from the yoke of oppression and exploitation the proletariat shows one and only one way socialism whose precondition is the conquest of the political power by the proletariat. To acquire political power, the proletariat requires such conditions under which the class struggle may develop and expand "broadly, freely, and openly" on the basis of the "political education, training and rallying of the masses of the proletariat". Thus the struggle for preparing such conditions, as the prerequisites for the ultimate move towards socialism, is placed on the agenda of the revolutionary proletariat. From this standpoint, it is evident that the proletariat views the democratic struggles not as the ultimate aim or ends in themselves, but as a link in the general process of its independent class struggle for socialism; and it is only on this basis that these struggles acquire significance.

It should be emphasized here that it is a vital and specific task of the communists of every country to specifically appraise, according to the particular conditions prevailing in a society at any given moment in the course of the class struggle, the extent to which the prerequisites for the final move towards socialism are at hand; they should also attempt to assess the barriers hindering the "broad, free and open class struggle, and the political education, training and mobilization of the masses of the proletariat"; most important of all, they should analyse the material bases of these barriers, and the logjams to the escalation of the class struggle of the proletariat and to recognize those political forces which at every juncture are capable of waging a struggle alongside the proletariat for the removal of these barriers. It goes without saying that from this standpoint there are no pre-determined and universal prescriptions on the ins and outs of the democratic questions of all societies, nor on the degree to which they assume significance in the proletariat's class struggle. That "the agrarian question is always and everywhere central to every democratic revolution" is a petty-bourgeois stereotyping which in many cases serves as a facile substitute to the concrete analysis of the concrete situation. Lenin and the Bolsheviks drew

their conclusions on the importance of the agrarian question and the peasant movement from their analysis of the economic class conditions of the Russia of the late 19th and the early 20th century, of the economic-class bases of Tsarism, the liberal bourgeoisie and the revolutionary movement of the peasants, and by a specific study of the policies and the methods of struggle adopted by the peasant movement in Russia. Lenin and the Bolsheviks illustrated how and why the agrarian question had turned into the core issue of the Russian revolution, and showed that in the democratic struggle the Russian proletariat should look for its allies not in the ranks of the liberal bourgeoisie but in the revolutionary movement of the peasantry.

But can one deduce from the fact that the proletariat has much to gain from the democratic struggles, that the democratic tasks of the proletariat are limited to an unconditional support for the democratic struggles of the non-proletarian revolutionary classes? For instance, regarding the agrarian question and the peasant movement, should the proletariat unconditionally support the peasants against the landlords and unquestionably underwrite their economic and political demands and slogans?

The answer is certainly in the negative. If the former deviation by denying the democratic tasks of the proletariat, left the fate of the democratic struggles (and hence that of the democratic revolution) entirely to the political forces of the non-proletarian classes and their policies and programs, the latter, by accepting, and submitting to, the democratism of the non-proletarian classes, practically arrives at the same conclusion. If the first deviation, by virtue of its idealist and abstract approach to the class struggle, fails completely to understand the place and significance of the democratic tasks of the revolutionary proletariat in its advance towards socialism, the second deviation by obscuring the line between the proletarian democratism which is rooted in the proletariat's struggle for socialism and the non-proletarian and petty-bourgeois democratism which in the final analysis, cannot go beyond the economy and politics of the bourgeois society in practice drives the proletariat into tail-ending the bourgeoisie.

It is, therefore, clear that the proletariat's attitude towards any non-proletarian democratic movement must assume a two-fold character; for the proletariat supports every revolutionary-democratic movement only and in so far as these movements and the economic and political changes they seek to realize serve to provide the preconditions of the final move of the working class towards socialism. Lenin and the Bolsheviks always persistently stressed the two-fold and conditional character of their support for the peasant's revolutionary movement:

"Actually, however, there are three classes, all of which differ in their immediate and ultimate aims: The landlords, the well-to-do peasantry and partly the middle peasantry, and, finally the proletariat. Actually, the task of the proletariat under these circumstances is necessarily twofold. The entire difficulty of a Social-Democratic agrarian programme and agrarian policy in Russia lies in defining, as clearly and precisely as possible, the conditions under which the proletariat must observe neutrality and the conditions under which support and 'incitement' are necessary.

"There can be only one solution to this problem: with the peasant bourgeoisie against all manner of serfdom and against the serf-owning landlords; with the urban proletariat

against the peasant bourgeoisie and every other bourgeoisie such is the 'line of the rural proletariat and of its ideologists...'

Or to put it still differently:

"Aid to the peasant when his struggle with the landlord contributes to the development and strengthening of the democratic forces; neutrality towards the peasant when his struggle with the landlord is merely a matter of squaring accounts between two factions of the landowning class, a matter to which the proletariat and the democrats (1) are indifferent." (Lenin, Collected Works, Vol.8 p.231 our emphases)

2) The assessment of the economic content of the agrarian question.

How is it possible to draw the decisive line between proletarian democratism and the revolutionary peasant's democratism in practice, and to overcome the major difficulty of "drawing up a Social-Democratic agrarian programme and policy"? The first step is undoubtedly the analysis and the understanding of the economic content of the agrarian question. It was such an understanding that enabled the Bolsheviks firstly to make a precise assessment of the place of the agrarian question in the course of the development of society, secondly, to recognise the material bases and the economic content of the ideals of the peasant movements, thirdly, by criticizing the bourgeois (and in some cases utopian) character of the economic demands of the peasant movement, to protect the rural proletariat from petty-bourgeois illusions, and to call upon it to wage a struggle for socialism along with the urban proletariat through its independent social-democratic organisation and, finally, to intensify their ideological struggle against the forces and currents which spread these illusions.

The Russian Social-Democracy appraised the agrarian question as a problem whose solution would pave the way for the development and expansion of capitalism in Tsarist Russia; i.e., the eradication of the old feudal relations and the expansion and establishment of bourgeois relations in the rural areas. Lenin and the Bolsheviks had no illusions on this: the solution of the agrarian question in Russia would accelerate the expansion of bourgeois relations no matter which classes (the peasantry or the bourgeois landlords) should succeed in accomplishing it. They were also fully aware of the fact that not only would these bourgeois relations not eliminate the exploitation of the toiling masses in the countryside, but would intensify it manifold. Lenin and the Bolsheviks not only did not evade the recognition of the capitalist character of the solutions to the agrarian question (be it of peasant or of landlord-bourgeois character), but, on the contrary, emphasized it. It was only by the recognition of this fact that they could, on the one hand, distinguish proletarian democratism and the proletarian position on the agrarian question (which stem from the struggle of the proletariat for socialism), from the bourgeois (either the peasant or the landlord-bourgeois) solutions to the agrarian question, and, on the other hand,

to differentiate between the various bourgeois solutions of the agrarian question and point to that specific bourgeois force (the peasantry) which must have the support of the proletariat in the democratic revolution of Russia, without attempting to conceal the bourgeois character of the peasant movement and without falling into utopianism and populist and above-class deviationist positions.

"The workers and peasants, the Social-Democrats and the Narodniks ... are all agreed that there should be a capitalist 'cleansing' of the decaying agrarian system in Russia by means of the forcible abolition of the landed property of the landlords. They differ in this, that the Social-Democrats understand the capitalist character in present society of any agrarian revolution, however ultra radical it may be - municipalisation and nationalisation, socialisation and division - while the Narodniks do not understand this, and wrap up their struggle for peasant-bourgeois agrarian evolution against landlord-bourgeois evolution in philistine and utopian phrases about equalisation." (Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 1 5, pp.43-44)

Lenin emphasizes that the peasant solution to the agrarian question also is a capitalist solution and from this point of view it does not differ in the least from the Stolypin solution. Nevertheless, he suggests that the proletariat must support the revolt of the peasants against the landlords not because he is interested in the development of capitalism in Russia as an end in itself, not because he anticipates an improvement in the living conditions of the toiling masses as a result of the development of capitalism in Russia, but because it may "leave stand no stone of this old, accursed, feudal, autocratic, and slavish Russia; so that it may create a new generation of free and courageous people, a new republican country in which our proletarian struggle for socialism will be able freely to expand." (Lenin, Collected Works, vol.8, p. 329, our emphasis)

"To the Social-Democrats, shifts within the classes and categories of farmers and proprietors are of no consequence unless accompanied by a political gain that facilitates the class struggle of the proletariat." (Lenin, Collected Works, vol.8, p.321, Lenin's emphasis)

But which social forces have the ability of solving this problem? And in what way or ways are they able to do so?

Firstly,

"because within our peasantry, capitalist development has long ago brought into being two hostile classes: a peasant bourgeoisie and a peasant proletariat". Stolypin's policy for the solution of the agrarian question, i.e., for the "preservation of landed property" and for "the final (up until the proletarian revolution) consolidation of private property over all lands, both that of the landlords and that of the peasants" is feasible, and not only feasible, but "very radical, since it is radically breaking up the old village commune and the old agrarian system in Russia".

Secondly, for Russia another capitalist path of agrarian development is objectively possible, i.e., the peasant-bourgeois evolution instead of the landlord-bourgeois evolution: "forcible abolition

of landed property", that is the capitalist cleansing of the decaying agrarian system in Russia by means of the abolition of big land ownership and the revolutionary confiscation of the lands by the peasantry.

These two ways will certainly ensure the development of capitalism in Russia.

"The real difference between the peasant solution of the agrarian question in the Russian bourgeois revolution, and the Stolypin-Cadet solution, is that the first destroys the landlords' private property in the land beyond question, and the peasant private property very probably". (ibid)

But the first one will change the feudal relations through a revolutionary and rapid action accompanied by political-democratic gains, while the second will do so through gradual reforms and gradual changes, accompanied by poverty and backwardness of the proletariat and the peasantry. The Stolypin-Cadet solution of the agrarian question

"will certainly ensure the capitalist development of Russia, but an incredibly slow development" (our emphasis) and "a thousand times more agonising for the proletariat and the peasantry than the other, objectively possible and also capitalist solution of the agrarian question".

It is on the basis of such reality that the proletariat supports the attempts of the poor peasantry in seizing land from big landlords. Having a Marxist perception of the "content and economic significance of the peasants' struggle for land", the proletariat does not fail to notice "the struggle of the real forces in society for one or the other objectively possible road to capitalist agrarian development", nor does it, like F.Dan on the one hand, and the Narodniks, on the other, fall into rhetorical fantasies about equalization in the agrarian system.

Without resorting to empty and "democratic" phraseology, the proletariat admits that Stolypin's success in resolving the agrarian question is possible, but the proletariat has the task of, first, explaining to the people "at what a price such a success is won" and, secondly, fighting, by means of a peasant revolution, for a shorter and quicker capitalist path of agrarian development. But "what if, in spite of the struggle of the masses, Stolypin's policy holds good long enough for the 'Prussian' (bourgeois-landlord) way to succeed?" Would then Lenin, like a vast section of the communist movement in Iran, have ignored such an historical reality by branding it as "mandatory", "imperial" or "imposed from above", and go on repeating the lifeless and worn-out dictums? No. Lenin would recognize it as an undeniable fact, analyse it, and determine the tactics of the communists accordingly: "Then the agrarian system in Russia will become completely bourgeois, the big peasants will grab nearly all the allotment land, agriculture will become capitalist, and no 'solution' of the agrarian question under capitalism - whether radical or non-radical- will be possible any more. Then Marxists who are honest with themselves will straightforwardly and openly throw all 'agrarian programmes' on the scrap-heap altogether, and will say to the masses: 'The workers have done all they could to give Russia not a Junker but an American capitalism. The workers call you now to join in the social revolution of the proletariat, for after the 'solution' of the agrarian question in the Stolypin spirit there can be no

other revolution capable of making a serious change in the economic conditions of life of the peasant masses". (Lenin, Collected Works, Vol.15, p.45)

Thirdly: since the "Social-Democrats understand the capitalist character in present society of any agrarian revolution, however ultra-radical it may be", they will never fall into adventurism in a proletarian programme and will never allow the golden and dazzling horizon of change in the agrarian system as equalization, nationalisation, municipalisation, etc., gloss over the class struggle against property in general. "Narodniks don't understand this, and wrap up their struggle for peasant-bourgeois agrarian evolution against landlord-bourgeois evolution in philistine and utopian phrases about equalisation." As the representatives of the class interests of the agricultural wage-labourers, Social-Democracy asserts, without any reservations, that it will resolve all such problems along with the working class as a whole in a new struggle. For "until there has been a complete socialist revolution, not even the most radical and most revolutionary measures for agrarian reform will eliminate the class of agricultural wage-workers. The dream of making all people petty bourgeois is a reactionary platitude." (Lenin, Collected works, Vol.8, p.319)

3) The attitude of Social-Democracy to the peasant movement

"To try to calculate now what the combination of forces will be within the peasantry 'on the day after' the (democratic) revolution is empty utopianism". Social-Democracy, of course, never loses sight of "the possessive tendencies of the peasant proprietor - tendencies whose antagonism to the proletariat will be all the more rapidly and sharply revealed the more rapidly the revolution advances." The ignorance and the backwardness of the peasants, their failure to understand the political aspects of the movement, i.e., the fact that without a radical and democratic change in the "entire political structure of the entire state" the realisation of their demands are impossible, and their spontaneous and instinctive actions, which stem from their political ignorance, are all facts which the Social-Democracy takes into account in its attitude towards the peasant movement. "The peasant needs land, and his revolutionary feeling, his instinctive, primitive sense of democracy cannot express itself otherwise than by laying hands on the landlords' land." (Lenin, Collected Works, vol. 8, p. 247)

"Indeed, it is the revolutionary-democratic aspect of the peasant uprisings and a particular organisation of the rural proletariat in a class party that at present form the crux of the matter for us, as distinct from the petty-bourgeois Socialist-Revolutionaries. It is not the schemes of a 'general redistribution' or nationalisation that is the kernel of the question; the essential thing is that the peasantry see the need for, and accomplish, the revolutionary demolition of the old order. That is why the Socialist-Revolutionaries are pressing for 'socialisation', etc., while we are pressing for revolutionary peasant committees." (Lenin, Collected Works, vol.9, p.235)

Firstly, Social Democracy, without giving up its class viewpoint, without seeking a universal solution of the problem applicable at all times, without losing sight of the dual nature of the well-to-do and the middle peasants, adopts a two-fold attitude in regard to the peasant movement.

"Under certain circumstances, in certain situations, this attitude must be one not only of sympathy, but of direct support, and not merely support, but actual 'incitement'. Under other circumstances, the attitude can and should be neutral." (Lenin, Collected Works, Vol.8, p.233)

The revolutionary proletariat supports, and attempts to expand and escalate, the peasant movement, only to the extent that it is a revolutionary-democratic movement; but as soon as this movement becomes a reactionary one, i.e., when it stands against the interests of the rural proletariat, the proletariat will wage a struggle against it. The proletariat's support for the peasant movement is not an above-class or a blind support; rather, it is based on a class analysis: "With the peasant bourgeoisie against all manners of serfdom and against the serf-owning landlords; with the urban proletariat against the peasant bourgeoisie and every other bourgeoisie." Hence the proletariat supports the peasant movement to the extent of, and including, land seizures "... but certainly not including all sorts of petty-bourgeois schemes". "We support the peasant movement to the extent that it is revolutionary-democratic. We are making ready (doing so now, at once) to fight it when and to the extent that, it becomes reactionary and anti-proletarian. The essence of Marxism lies in that double task, which only those who do not understand Marxism can vulgarise or compress into a single and simple task." (Lenin, Collected Works, Vol.9, p.235)

Secondly, Social-Democracy always and under all circumstances considers itself duty-bound to organise the rural proletariat and to strengthen its union with the urban proletariat. The support of Social-Democracy for the peasant movement and aid to the peasants to carry out their democratic struggle assumes significance only by virtue of facilitating and speeding up the passage to a new and higher task - the socialist revolution. "For from the democratic revolution we shall at once, and precisely in accordance with the measure of our strength, the strength of the class-conscious and organised proletariat, begin to pass to the socialist revolution. We stand for uninterrupted revolution. (Lenin, Collected Works, Vol.9, p.237our emphasis)

Social-Democracy, as the political party of the proletariat, decisively and unswervingly maintaining the proletarian class point of view, strives to organise the rural proletariat, and to explain that its interests are antagonistic to those of bourgeois peasantry. 'We must cull upon it to fight for the socialist revolution: and point out to it that liberation from oppression and poverty lies, not in turning several sections of the peasantry into petty bourgeois, but only in replacing the entire bourgeois system, by the socialist system.'" (Lenin, Collected Works, Vol.8, p.231)

Thirdly, "There is only one way to make the agrarian reform, which is unavoidable in present-day Russia, play a revolutionary-democratic role: it must be effected on the revolutionary initiative of the peasants themselves, despite the landlords and the bureaucracy, and despite the state, i.e., it must be effected by revolutionary means. The very worst distribution of land after a reform of this sort will be better from all stand-points than what we have at present' (Lenin, Collected Works, Vol.9, p.315) Social-Democracy will not indulge in project-mongering for all manner of land-reform schemes; this is what is pointed out, directly or indirectly, in all Lenin's writings on the agrarian question and in the attitude to the peasant movement, on the basis of the critique of the prevalent deviationist and utopian views. But it is incumbent upon the party of the proletariat to adopt a "thoroughly definite and concrete slogan" in respect of the peasant movement: "... the present revolutionary moment plainly calls for a thoroughly definite and concrete slogan": the formation of revolutionary peasant committees, or as formulated in the

party programme: "(4) the formation of revolutionary peasant committees for the purpose of eliminating all remnants of the serf-owning system, transforming all rural relations in general along democratic lines, taking revolutionary measures to improve the lot of the peasantry even to the extent of taking the land away from the landlords." (Lenin, Collected Works, Vol.8, p.248)

"Social-Democracy aims at forming purely Social-Democratic committees in all rural districts; committees which entirely consist of Social-Democrats, and none but Social-Democrats, that is, those who have adopted the proletarian ideology. And then agreement between them and all revolutionary-democratic elements, groups, and circles of the peasantry for the purpose of establishing revolutionary committees. Social-Democracy is in favour of leading all the revolutionary-democrats towards insurrection; it will march shoulder to shoulder with them, but 'without merging with them', to the barricades in the cities, and against the landlords and the police in the villages. The revolutionary peasant committees are organizations which formulate the peasants' demands, but without these committees no reform may have any meaning. These committees and relying on them make possible the victory of the peasant insurrection."

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SOME NOTES ABOUT THE BOOK

This article was initially intended to be written as an introduction to Lenin's Seven Articles on the Agrarian Question (Lenin Translation Series No.3*). However, due to the length and elaborateness of the article, and because it contained details which went beyond the scope of an introduction, and examined aspects of the theses contained in the pamphlet The Iranian Revolution and the Role of the Proletariat (The Main Lines) more carefully, the Seven Articles was published with a shorter introduction and it was thought more appropriate to publish the present article separately. The first part of this article which contains a synopsis of Lenin's approach to the agrarian question and the peasant movement, has kept the look of an introduction. While our principal aim in this text has been to introduce an analysis, and present certain conclusions on the agrarian question in Iran and its economic content, and on the objective bases of the peasant movement under the specific conditions of Iran, and the way in which communists should tackle the problem, we have also briefly dealt with some deviations of the communist movement of Iran in this area with reference to the literature published by the "Revolutionary Union for the Emancipation of Labour"

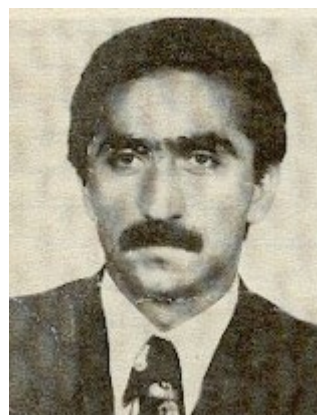
(Zahmat), the Union of Iranian Communists" (Haghighat) and the "Organisation of Peykar on the Path to Emancipate the Working Class". This may in turn prove useful in elucidating the theoretical discussions put forward in this article. All quotations in the text, without reference to the source or denoted by "ibid", are from the above-mentioned book by Lenin.

* i.e., the translation series of the works of Lenin (into Farsi) published by the organisation of Unity of Communist Militants in Iran-Tr.

Note

The present book was first published in Iran in Farsi in January 1980 by the Unity of Communist Militants, one of the two main organisations which founded the Communist Party of Iran in September 1983. The first part of the book is jointly written by comrades Mansoor Hekmat (now member of the Political Bureau of the CPI) and Mehdi Mirshahzadeh, member of the Central Committee of the UCM. The text is by comrade Hekmat. Comrade Mirshahzadeh was arrested by the Islamic regime's police in autumn 1982 and after one and a half years of severe tortures was executed on May 13, 1984.

The German translation of this book was published in 1982.



Mehdi Mirshahzadeh
1950 - 1984

**COMMUNIST PARTY OF IRAN - THE
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