

2
engl

Notes on Revolution and the Southern Question: Gramsci with Lenin

Lorenzo Chiesa

*Director of Genoa School of Humanities
Via Giuseppe Parini, 10, Genova, Italy, 16145
E-mail: l.chiesa@gsh-education.com*

Notes on Revolution and the Southern Question: Gramsci with Lenin¹

Abstract

In this article I argue that Gramsci's answer to the so-called Southern Question is a proletarian revolution and the creation of a proletarian state in Italy that closely follow the Bolshevik model. I aim at showing that Gramsci's stance is therefore unequivocally Leninist and can be correctly understood only by means of an analysis of Lenin's own stance on the role of the peasantry in the socialist revolution and the ensuing dictatorship of the proletariat. I further claim that Gramsci's Leninism has been repressed in academic debates, especially

¹ A first draft of this article was presented at *The Southern Question* conference held at the American University of Beirut in November 2017. I wish to thank Angela Harutyunyan for her invitation and all the speakers and participants for the lively discussions.

in the context of post-colonial and subaltern studies, and that the latter would benefit from considering the way in which Lenin treats the relation between the proletarian revolution/state and the “oppressed people” of the world at large.

Keywords

Gramsci, Lenin, revolution, Southern Question, proletariat, subalternity

“Lenin represents the socialist becoming, and we are with him with all our courage”
Antonio Gramsci, September 2017

1

The so-called “Southern Question” (*questione meridionale*) has been at the centre of Italian politics ever since Italy’s unification as a nation-state in 1861. It remains to date an unsolved problem. As the young Gramsci puts it very clearly in a 1916 article for the socialist newspaper *Il Grido del Popolo* (The Cry of the People), the Southern Question basically concerns the fact that “the unification of the Italian regions under a centralising regime” – the Northern Kingdom of Piedmont – “had disastrous consequences for the South” (Gramsci 1966: 4). The fundamental reason for this was that Italy, reunited for the first time in more than a thousand years, suddenly brought together a North and a South that presented “absolutely antithetical” economic and sociopolitical conditions (Gramsci 1966: 4). More specifically, on the one hand, in the Northern part, “the tradition of a certain autonomy had created an audacious and resourceful bourgeoisie,” which enabled the establishment of an “economic organisation similar to that of other [Northern] European states” along capitalist lines (Gramsci 1966: 4). On the other, in the Southern part, “there was no bourgeoisie and agriculture was primitive” (Gramsci 1966: 4). A market-driven national centralisation, Italy’s belated colonialism in Africa, and the militarised economy of the First World War only exacerbated existing disparities. In this early article Gramsci concludes that it is far too easy to accuse Southerners of a “lack of initiative”; such a barely disguised racist bias actually masks the truth that “capital always finds the safest and most profitable forms of investment,” which further marginalises the South (Gramsci 1966: 4). Under capital-

ism, the South thus remains caught in a vicious circle; it certainly cannot break it by means of the external imposition of “special laws and treatments” — like those the Italian state has regularly continued to implement in vain throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Gramsci 1966: 5).

2

Starting from his 1919 article “Factory Workers and Peasants” — written for the newly founded communist newspaper *L’Ordine Nuovo* (The New Order) — Gramsci proposes an answer to the Southern Question. His views will be further developed and partly modified in later writings, including the *Prison Notebooks*, yet they all preserve the same general political framework. In short, the Southern Question can be unravelled only thanks to a proletarian revolution and the creation of a proletarian state in Italy. Conversely, such a revolution and new state cannot succeed without adequately dealing with the Southern Question. In Gramsci’s eloquent words, “factory workers” from the North and “poor peasants” from the South amount to the “two forces of the proletarian revolution”; the “industrial transformation of [southern] agriculture can only take place with the agreement of poor peasants through the dictatorship of the proletariat,” that is, a “Socialist state”; even more conclusively, “the economical and political regeneration” of southern peasants is to be sought in “the solidarity of the industrial proletariat, which in turn necessitates the solidarity of peasants” (Gramsci 1966: 9, 11).²

3

Gramsci’s stance with regard to the “Southern Question” is therefore thoroughly, unequivocally, and consistently Leninist. We should bear this in mind whenever we consider his work in the context of postcolonial and/or subaltern studies — not to mention try to apply it to these academic fields. To put it bluntly — and provocatively given the hegemony of recent revisionist appropriations of Gramsci — should Lenin be deemed incompatible with the anti-substantialist and history-from-below study of people of “inferior” rank and station because of a presumed opposition

² Even the later Gramsci’s apparently less intransigent insistence on the formation of a national Constituent Assembly clearly indicates that the latter should not be regarded as “an end in itself” but — under the Fascist dictatorship of the 1930s — as a strategic “means” meant to pave the way for a “proletarian revolution” and a “republic of peasant and worker soviets in Italy” (Lisa 1973: 81–89). Gramsci is still speaking as an unrepentant Bolshevik.

between “masses” and “leaders,” so is Gramsci³. Here it is also important to add that, in Gramsci, the “South” almost invariably refers to the particular geographical situation of the south of Italy in a particular historical period. While at times he speaks of the *Mezzogiorno* as a “colony” — “the Northern bourgeoisie has subjected southern Italy and the islands reducing them to exploited colonies;” “the toiling masses of the South [have] a position analogous to that of a colonial population” (Gramsci 1966: 11; 2000: 144) — Gramsci does not really advance a generalised notion of the “South” with a capital “S” (unless we decide to pay disproportional attention to isolated passages such as “today flames of revolt are being fanned throughout the colonial world. This is the class struggle of the coloured peoples against the white exploiters and murderers” [Gramsci 2000: 113]). As we will see, it is rather Lenin who — surprisingly for some — more often dwells on the relation between the proletarian revolution/state and the “oppressed peoples” of the world at large (Lenin 1943: 292).

4

Let us consider Gramsci’s arguments in “Factory Workers and Peasants” more closely. The starting point of his reasoning is that, like Russia (and France — surprisingly, given Marx’s statements to the contrary), Italy is a backward country in terms of capitalist development precisely insofar as there persists a “neat separation between the city and countryside, factory workers *and* peasants” (Gramsci 1966: 8). Until recently, peasants conceived of economic and political institutions as “perpetual, irreducible, and natural categories,” against which they violently rebelled from time to time (Gramsci 1966: 8). In other words, class struggle was

³ I take Gayatri Spivak’s position as emblematic of this politically and theoretically untenable orientation. On the one hand, she explicitly borrows the term “subaltern” from Gramsci, for whom, as she acknowledges, it is synonymous with “proletariat.” On the other hand, for her, subalternity would refer to “everything that does *not* fall under strict class analysis” (Spivak 1990: 141, own emphasis added) and Gramsci “realized that if one was talking on Southern Italy, just class-formation questions were not going to solve anything” (Spivak 1992: 45). From this follows, even more perplexingly, that “the working class is oppressed. It is not subaltern” (Spivak 1992: 45–46). By Spivak’s own admission, the notion of subalternity “lacks theoretical rigor,” which she says she “likes” (Spivak 1990: 141). Similarly, according to Stuart Hall, “Gramsci was never a ‘Marxist’ in either a doctrinal, orthodox or ‘religious’ sense”; he practiced a “genuinely ‘open’ Marxism” and “was not a ‘general theorist’” (Hall 1986: 5–6). Unsurprisingly, Hall pitches Gramsci *against* those Marxists “who have continued to be obsessed by the ‘Winter Palace’ model of revolution and politics” (Hall 1986: 17).

confused with “a form of elementary terrorism” and “banditry” (Gramsci 1966: 8). However, the compulsory conscriptions of World War I, the bloodshed of life in the trenches, and summary executions for desertions, have fundamentally changed this “serf” mentality. Now peasants themselves do “conceive the [capitalist] State in its complex monstrosity,” which they resist for the first time as members of a collective, but they still lack sufficient organisation and discipline (Gramsci 1966: 9). Thus, for the proletarian revolution to be able to seize and maintain power in Italy, it is “necessary to bond the [Northern] cities with the [Southern] countryside” and establish a “fraternity” between them (Gramsci 1966: 10, 12). The proletariat comprises urban industrial workers and poor agricultural workers. It is indispensable that the socialist leaders of the Second International comprehend this and avoid singling out a red aristocracy of factory workers (as they did). Yet, at the same time and without contradiction, the vanguard “protagonists” of the revolution will inevitably be “the industrial cities” due to their greater class-consciousness (Gramsci 1966: 10). Gramsci makes the same point in an earlier article — “it is up to the urban proletariat [...] to undo the age-old mafia machine that, in the end, equally oppresses the entire proletariat” (Gramsci 1966: 6) — and will restate it throughout his later writings. At least at this stage, he also believes that the *Russian* Bolshevik model can fully be applied to Italy: “The historical conditions of Italy were and are not very different from those of Russia [...] the problem of the class unification of factory workers and peasants is presented in the very same terms” (Gramsci 1966: 9). If organised, “peasants will become an element of order and progress” (Gramsci 1966: 10). More concretely and dialectically, the urban proletariat should “promote in the countryside institutions of poor peasants” on which the antiparliamentarian socialist state can itself be founded and developed as the dictatorship of the proletariat (Gramsci 1966: 10).

5

Gramsci concludes “Factory Workers and Peasants” by correctly noticing how the October proletarian revolution in Russia was “preceded by irresistible revolutionary movements in the countryside” (Gramsci 1966: 14). In his seminal 1975 *Lénine, les paysans*, Taylor, French sociologist Robert Linhart conclusively examines this underestimated historical fact. Linhart most convincingly speaks of a veritable “anti-Leninist legend” created for the purpose of separating the allegedly elitist Bolshevik coup d’état from the peasant mass movement, while, in truth, in 1917, “only Lenin and the Bolsheviks were actually on the side of peasants,” and regarded them as the “real basis of the insurrection” (Linhart 1975: 34–35). Linhart also details how in the years following the seizure of pow-

er and of so-called War Communism a — complicated and far from linear — involution unfolded whereby the revolutionary agency of the poor peasantry was significantly undermined by the Bolsheviks. First — and in line with Gramsci’s own directives — the rural masses were unconditionally supported in that they amounted to the “essence of the revolution” (Linhart 1975: 38). Second — and also in line with Gramsci — they were nevertheless entrusted with a “subordinate role,” namely, “the [urban] proletariat relied on the poor peasants for its actions in villages” (Linhart 1975: 52), including the repression of affluent peasants, or kulaks. Third — and beyond Gramsci’s optimism — the poor peasantry was increasingly disassociated from the subject of the revolutionary movement and became “the *object* of an agrarian politics originating in the cities” based on coercion and expropriation that was no longer targeting only the kulaks (Linhart 1975: 58; own emphasis added). While Linhart’s account suffers at times from an ultra-Maoist bias, it is difficult to disagree with him that with regard to the city/countryside divide concrete Leninism is the “unity of two extreme positions” unable to come to terms with the fact that “the fundamental attitudes of social classes” — urban factory workers and young intellectuals on the one hand, poor peasants on the other — “cannot be transformed overnight” (Linhart 1975: 64, 81). Lenin was profoundly aware of this problem and the whole idea of a socialist transition toward communism as the maturation of new classless “habits” revolves around such a difficult process. Still in 1920, addressing the members of the youth leagues about the “ethics” of communism, he exhorts them to “go into the countryside to abolish illiteracy” and “work on the vegetable farms” (Lenin 1937: 480–81). However, this call for, in his own words, a “cultural revolution” (Lenin 1937: 408) aimed at merging urban and rural proletariat remained mostly unheard, and the wider question of how to reconcile the different degrees of class-consciousness among the toilers unsolved. I believe that a similar objection — which is, for me at least, far from amounting to a refutation of Leninism — could be moved to the distinctively Leninist way in which Gramsci tackles the Southern Question.

6

Gramsci treats the Southern Question most extensively in a homonymous and unfinished 1925 article, written shortly before being imprisoned by the Fascist regime for the remainder of his life. Although it is difficult to abstract his views from the historical and sociopolitical specificity of Italy in those terrible years (which saw the suppression of the occupation of Northern factories; the Fascists’ March on Rome; their quasi-constitutional seizure of power; and their increasingly violent

reinforcement of control over the bourgeois state), we can nonetheless extrapolate some general points that substantiate and further develop his previous interventions on the topic. The article is structured as a polemic against a group of young left-wing communists who criticised and misinterpreted the stance on the South adopted by Gramsci and the majority of the newly founded Partito Comunista Italiano — by then aligned with Lenin's Third International. Gramsci insists that his objective is not simply dividing lands and allocating them to poor Southern peasants. This might well be a necessary transitional measure, but, as anticipated in "Factory Workers and Peasants," "the motto 'land to the peasants' should be understood in the sense that modern farms need to be controlled by agricultural workers" through a form of Sovietized self-management already practiced concretely during the red years of 1919 to 1920 in the occupied factories of the North (Gramsci 1966: 11). In other words, *mutatis mutandis* the revolutionary model for the agricultural South should be the same as that for the industrial North. Consequently, the most impellent task for the Italian Communist Party is, again, to create a "political alliance between Northern factory workers and Southern peasants;" the proletariat can become the dominant class only by means of a "system of alliances" with other classes (Gramsci 1966: 39). Here Gramsci seems thus to imply that in order to achieve hegemony, the proletariat as a quasi-universal class of the oppressed masses that *includes* the poor peasants must first strategically implement an alliance with the poor peasants as a *separate* class. On the other hand, for this to be possible, the "first problem to be solved" is that of the existing "ideology" imbuing the Northern proletariat itself (Gramsci 1966: 39). Gramsci stresses that the urban proletariat is unwittingly subjected to a deep-seated bourgeois brainwashing — transmitted by the school system and newspapers — for which Southerners are "biologically inferior beings," and the cause of their backwardness does not depend on capitalist exploitation but "nature" (Gramsci 1966: 39). This ideology can be liquidated if the proletariat renounces its "corporative" selfishness and "incrusted trade-unionism" (Gramsci 1966: 42). More specifically, "the metalworker, the joiner, the building worker, etc., must not only think as proletarians, and no longer as metalworker, joiner, building worker, etc.; they must also take a further step. They must think as workers who are members of a class which aims to lead the peasants" (Gramsci 1966: 42). It is only in this way that the proletariat will "win the trust and consent of the peasants," which are far from granted, since the peasants in turn see the entirety of Northern Italy ideologically as an "enemy block" of rich masters (Gramsci 1966: 42, 36). To sum up, Gramsci here refines his overall argument about the communist superseding of the Southern Question: strictly speaking, there is no proletariat as such without Southern agricultural proletarians, yet the latter must nonetheless be led by the greater class-

consciousness of the Northern industrial proletarians who, importantly, have disposed of any lingering ideological class elitism with regard to Southern peasants. If, following Marx, the condition of the proletariat within capitalism is already that of a class that is no longer really a class (Marx 1975: 256), the enhanced class-consciousness of the proletarian vanguard required by the socialist revolution and its aftermath ultimately stands just as a means to obtain the communist obliteration of class differences as such.

7

An unprejudiced survey of Lenin's stance on these issues, especially as expressed in his policy-oriented speeches and writings subsequent to the Bolsheviks' seizure of power, confirms that he almost unconditionally agrees with Gramsci. It is certainly no coincidence if in his 1926 famous address to the — exiled — third congress of the Italian Communist Party, Gramsci explicitly invokes a “Leninist solution” to the “agrarian question” and that of the Southern “peasant masses” in particular (Gramsci 1966: 34). In spite of some noticeable changes in his directives during the period between October 1917 and March 1923 — roughly coinciding with the passage from War Communism to the New Economic Policy and the ensuing critique of it — which Gramsci was mostly unaware of and we cannot spell out here, Lenin never tires of repeating that the construction of socialism (i.e., the dictatorship of the proletariat) as a transition to full, or classless, communism relies structurally on a military and economic “alliance with the peasantry” (Lenin 1937: 232-33).⁴ But politically too, the “fundamental question concerning the relations between town and country [...] is of decisive importance for the whole of our revolution,” and a right approach to it involves *not* “immediately propagating pure and strictly communist ideas in the rural districts” (Lenin 1937: 489). In a rare instance of unmitigated condemnation of Trotsky's positions, Lenin vehemently attacks him for speaking of the “workers' state.” Against this “abstraction,” the Soviet state is a “workers' and peasants' state” (Lenin 1937: 8-9); the “worker in general” does not exist, since the elimination of the bourgeoisie as an exploiting class has in fact left socialist Russia with “two different classes” (Lenin 1937: 125, 207). A “number of transitional stages” will be re-

⁴ Antonio Negri rightly highlights this as crucial: “There are two main aspects in Leninist strategy: the problem of the relationship between democracy and socialism, struggle for democracy, and struggle for socialism; and the problem of alliances, in particular, the alliance between the working class and peasants” (Negri 2014: 51).

quired to achieve a classless communist society in which factory workers and peasants will become undifferentiated “producers” (Lenin 1937: 124).

8

Like Gramsci — who significantly refers to the future Italian socialist state as a “federal republic of workers and peasants” (Gramsci 1966: 15) — Lenin denounces every proletarian “craft interests” that overshadows the interests of the proletariat as a class; stresses the importance of distinguishing peasant owners from “peasant toilers,” since the latter should themselves be regarded as proletarian “agricultural wage-workers;” and nonetheless highlights the leading role of the urban proletariat (Lenin 1937: 107-08, 177; Lenin 1943: 9-10; Lenin 1946: 153, 222, 409-10). With regard to the last point, Lenin himself believes that it is a matter of “organising the village poor around yourselves” with the ultimate aim of “leading the peasantry [...] towards the abolition of classes” (Lenin 1946: 406; Lenin 1937: 222). Again, the — only apparently paradoxical — rationale for this unbalance within proletarian class rule has to do with the greater class-consciousness of the urban proletariat, which is in the end for Lenin just a consequence of the far from enviable fact that it has already been “‘schooled’ by capitalism” (Lenin 1946: 222). But more openly than Gramsci, who remains silent on what the *active* role of the peasants may be in the construction of socialism except for their anarchic yet malleable insurrectional propensity, Lenin appreciates that the — however asymmetrical — relationship between urban and rural proletariat is one of reciprocal solidarity and mutual necessity. This is not only valid in the sense that the cities “need a link with the peasant’s economy” in terms of food supplies, and, conversely, soviet power will achieve complete communism through the “electrification of the whole country” (“every electric power station we build shall actually become a stronghold of enlightenment and [...] be devoted, so to speak, to the electrical education of the masses”) (Lenin 1943: 276-77). Lenin’s position on the rural masses has also a strongly *political* connotation, which is usually overlooked by detractors and sympathisers alike. Whenever, in his later years, he attempts to read the October Revolution as a turning point in a series of emancipatory sequences, he more often than not refers to it as the “conclusion” of the “*bourgeois* revolution” (Lenin 1946: 192) — initiated in France in 1789, continued through the Paris Commune of 1870, and equally exacerbated and compromised beyond repair by the Russian “renegade” revolution of February 1917. Already in November 1918, Lenin unexpectedly calls the October Revolution the “first revolution,” because it essentially involved an alliance with “the ‘whole’ of the peasantry against the monarchy, the landlords,

and the mediaeval regime (and to that extent, the revolution remains bourgeois, bourgeois-democratic)” (Lenin 1946: 191). The second and *socialist* revolution only begins for Lenin at the time he is writing as an alliance with “the poorest peasants” but also with “the semi-proletarians, with all the exploited, *against capitalism*, including the rural rich” (Lenin 1946: 191). As spelled out in a report of March 1919, this second revolution mostly takes place in the countryside through the establishment of the Committees of Poor Peasants, and it is with the organisation of the latter that “our revolution became a *proletarian* revolution” (Lenin 1943: 37). Crucially, this and only this second revolution is the, first but not last, “real people’s revolution” (Lenin 1946: 191). As stated beyond doubt in another text of August 1921, the October Revolution was still a bourgeois — or non-proletarian qua non-popular — revolution, since “there was not yet any class struggle among the ‘peasantry’” (Lenin 1937: 245). The real people’s revolution as a proletarian revolution that *unites* the urban and rural proletariat necessitates a *division* between poor peasants and rich peasants. Concomitantly, the urban proletariat’s control and strengthening have a meaning only if they eventually lead to an urban-rural “popular control” that does not privilege the city over the countryside (Lenin 1937: 74).⁵

9

Lenin always supported a stratified notion of the proletariat. The “vanguard,” or party, must be distinguished from “the masses of the advanced class,” or industrial proletariat, which is in turn not the same as the peasant “masses of the toilers” (Lenin 1937: 5–6). Yet this hierarchy always presents a profoundly dialectical character. “Socialism cannot be introduced by a minority, a party. It can be introduced by tens of millions of people” when they are “assisted” by the vanguard (Lenin 1943: 320–21). This assistance involves not only training the whole toiling population in the administration of the state but also, against childish “leftist” slogans, “*convincing* the backward elements” that the local Soviets “embrace *all* workers, [...], *all* the soldiers, and *all* the toiling and poorest sections of the rural population” (Lenin 1943: 331; 1938: 95; 1946: 151). Such a universalistic dimension also applies to the Soviet *state*

⁵ Negri speaks of a “shift [...] from the call for an establishment of peasant revolutionary committees to what can be a new phase of revolutionary struggle between the agricultural workers and peasant owners” (2014: 64). I do not think that there really is a shift here; for Lenin these are two simultaneous aspects of the same issue. However, I fully agree with Negri when he claims that, according to Lenin, the emergence of the struggle among the peasantry goes together with the fact that “communist finality” now “appears in the form of an *unending revolution*” (Negri 2014: 64).

itself, whose quintessence Lenin defines as the “mass organisation” of those who were “oppressed” by capitalism (1946: 231). As will become increasingly clear in his late interventions against the emerging Soviet bureaucracy, protecting the socialist state thus equally means, without contradiction, protecting the people from their own state. But, conversely and importantly, the “now ‘fashionable’” — Lenin says — opposition of the term “masses” to the term “leaders” is “evidence of the most incredible and hopeless confusion of mind,” and eventually only leads to the putting forth of new leaders “under cover of the slogan: ‘Down with the leaders!’” (Lenin 1938: 80–82).⁶ I believe that current supposedly horizontal/rhizomatic and more or less wittingly quasi-anarchic attempts at resurrecting the idea of communism in the twenty-first century should take this warning very seriously.⁷

10

In a report of March 1919 devoted to unmasking the structural hypocrisy of bourgeois democracy — of which, as stated elsewhere, both the “dictatorship of Churchill” and the liberals of the Manchester *Guardian* are intrinsic components (Lenin 1938: 130, 152) — Lenin proudly declares that the Soviet state as a mass organization of the oppressed grants equality to all its citizens “irrespective of sex, religion, race or nationality” (Lenin 1946: 231). In Lenin’s work, the question of so-called subalternity acquires a distinctiveness that Gramsci’s work lacks. We should be outraged and alarmed by the extent to which one century of anticommunist ideologies have effectively succeeded in silencing such a prominent aspect of Leninism, including in academia. In this light,

⁶ Lenin’s attack on “left-wing communists” turns out to be, in these precise terms, very close to Jacques Lacan’s critique of the 1968 protesters as hysterically in search of a “new master” (Lacan 2007: 207), which far from reflects a liberal-cynical attitude on Lacan’s part, as often vacuously stated. Curiously, Lenin often refers to left-wing communism as “hysteria” (see, for example Lenin 1946: 350). The “infantile disorder,” or “impotent desire,” of “the lovers of ‘left’ phrases” (Lenin 1937: 244, 247) diagnosed by Lenin should be interpreted more literally than is usually done. I am currently working on these questions.

⁷ This does not only apply to a widespread post-Deleuzian/Guattarian consensus that actually oversimplifies Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s quite complex stance on Leninism (for instance, Guattari clearly spells out that, while “authoritarian disciplines, formal hierarchies, orders of priorities decreed from above, and compulsory ideological references” should strongly be opposed, there is nonetheless a need for “centres of decision” [Guattari 2010: 124]). As I have argued elsewhere, Alain Badiou’s at times unconditional rejection of the state is also liable to a similar criticism (Chiesa 2017: 127–33, 139–42).

the very existence of loosely Gramscian — as disloyally more moderate — cultural, subaltern, postcolonial, or gender studies becomes as such suspect. One should instead dwell at length on Lenin’s observations on the “semi-slavery of Negroes in America” or the “double slavery” (domestic and wage) of women throughout the “most democratic” of bourgeois republics — quite bluntly, for him, “it is impossible to draw the masses into politics without also drawing in women” (Lenin 1937: 437, 494, 500).⁸ As for what we could still generally call, in dialogue with Gramsci, the “Southern Question,” a summary appraisal of Lenin’s writings is sufficient to conclude that he no longer confines it to the condition of the poor peasantry in one or more countries; the — not always geographically determined — South acquires a truly worldwide validity that concerns the vast majority of the population of the globe. On this issue Lenin is even prepared to challenge Marx (and there are very few occasions on which he does so). In a speech to the Bolshevik’s party nuclei secretaries in November 1920, he reminds them that not only do they represent the Russian proletarians and “the proletarians of all countries,” but also “the entire mass of the oppressed population of the earth” (Lenin 1943: 292). Although it contradicts Marx’s and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto*, “which was written in entirely different conditions,” the slogan “proletarians of the world and the oppressed people, unite!” advanced by the communist journal *The Peoples of the East* is totally correct (Lenin: 1943: 292–93, own emphasis added). Lenin even proposes an — optimistic with hindsight — estimated number of the terrestrially oppressed: “seventy per cent” of the world’s population (Lenin 1943: 293). In other texts, he is aware of the fact that the revolutionary forces in the colonies will first come forward as “national liberation” movements and only subsequently “turn against capitalism” (Lenin 1937: 229). Yet, at the same time, he remains convinced that, as shown by the Russian example (and again against Marx), international socialism may be more straightforwardly implementable in poorer countries, or better, “in those coun-

⁸ Of course, my call for a rediscovery of the “subaltern” Lenin does not exhaust the treatment of what a comprehensive Leninist take on race and gender could be. The latter should also carefully consider more recent developments on Marxist approaches to how capitalist exploitation meets other forms of domination — which, I add, are dependent on it. However, methodologically, it is far from necessary, and even misleading, to start off by using a feminist-postcolonial and vaguely Marxist prism to retroactively read Lenin, especially in that it more often than not dogmatically rejects any Leninist legacy (“Marxism, filtered through *Leninism* and social-democracy, has expressed the interests of a limited sector of the world proletariat, that of white, adult, male workers.” Federici 2012: 97, own emphasis added). Positing that this kind of pre-emptive and supposedly critical move is instead inevitable completely misses the point and only reinforces the current ideological assumption that the very idea of “Leninist subaltern studies” is a contradiction in terms.

tries which are not exploiting countries, which have no opportunities of robbing easily” (Lenin 1946: 281). As made clear in what could be regarded as his political testament of March 1923 (the, in this regard, deceptively titled article “Better Fewer, But Better”), it is primarily the “orientally backward countries” of China and India that Lenin has in mind; the outcome of the proletarian struggle for emancipation “will be determined by the fact that Russia, India, China, etc., constitute the overwhelming majority of the population of the globe” (Lenin 1937: 400). Gramsci’s — however accurately tackled but still parochial — Southern Question turns here into nothing other than the proletarian question writ large.⁹

11

If the ultimate objective of Leninism is, following Marx, the establishment of a classless society of “producers” precisely through an intensification of the class struggle (now extended also to the struggle between poor and rich peasants), its immediate and more realistic aim is, also in line with Marx, “easing the lives of the toilers” (Lenin 1946: 389). At bottom, the oppressed seventy percent majority of the world’s population coincides with the masses of exhausted — manual and intellectual — workers. Generic proletarian humankind shares suffering irrespective of sex, religion, race or nationality. Although it has so far received little attention, this onto-anthropological leitmotif runs through the entirety of Lenin’s work and dictates his most practical instructions.¹⁰ Ethically,

⁹ A comparison of Lenin’s stance on the alliance with the peasantry and, more broadly, the Southern Question with Mao Zedong’s elaborations on the same issues would obviously require a book of its own. Suffice to say, in passing, that Lenin’s notion of the “entire mass of the oppressed population of the earth” is far more comprehensive than the Maoist — *Realpolitik* — idea of the “Third World” (Mao Zedong 1974; Deng Xiaoping 1974). With regard to Marxism in general, the universalistic Lenin I am outlining here both develops the “universal suffering” of the proletariat as already sketched by the early Marx (1975: 256) and anticipates Frantz Fanon’s (underestimated) stress on the fact that “the native and the underdeveloped men are today political animals in the most universal sense of the word” (Fanon 1991: 81) — not to mention our current tendency to rethink the kernel of anticapitalist resistance, with a revived penchant for planetary statistics, as the “99%.”

¹⁰ I think the phrase “class humanism” could still persuasively be applied to this context. Althusser explicitly and approvingly derives it from Lenin: “Here I am using ‘class humanism’ in the sense of Lenin’s statement that the October socialist revolution had given power to the working classes, the workers and the poor peasants, and that, *on their behalf*, it had secured conditions of life, action and development that they had never known before: democracy *for* the working classes, dictatorship *over* the oppressors” (Althusser 1969: 221). However, the problem with Althusser is that he im-

the “essence of socialism” is that “he who toils not, neither shall he eat,” and one out of ten bourgeois idlers (including the kulaks) should be shot on the spot (Lenin 1943: 14; Lenin 1937: 421). Economically, as already anticipated by Marx in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, socialism fundamentally consists of a “distribution of privation” (Lenin 1937: 235; Marx 1933: 40). At this basic but also supremely biopolitical level, the very relation between the urban working class and the poor peasantry can socialistically function only if the Bolsheviks’ holding of power is set out as what I would call a careful *management of suffering*. As Lenin puts it in a far from ironic speech on the food tax of April 1921, “a certain amount of underfeeding of the peasantry” is necessary “in order to ensure an existence of semi-starvation for the army and industry” (Lenin 1937: 157). On close inspection, the same overall logic also underlies Lenin’s attempts at settling the incipient fratricidal fights among senior party members; all in all, independently from conceptual disputes, it is really a matter of “dividing our work a little more fairly” (Lenin 1937: 374).

12

One of the chief lessons we can today learn from Lenin, at a time when history seems to have finally “reawakened” (Badiou 2012), is that the first task for the overcoming of capitalism does not in the least lie in a self-pitying yet fiercely competitive taxonomy of which “minorities” suffer — or suffered — the most, but in a pragmatic and by all means feasible “spreading out of want” (Lenin 1937: 157). We would be terribly wrong to consider the latter as obsolete in our age of supposed post-scarcity and of what Lenin presciently called the “acrobatics of bourgeois philanthropy” (Lenin 1937: 441).

References

- Althusser, Louis (1969). “Marxism and Humanism.” *In For Marx*, 219–47. London: Penguin Press.
- Badiou, Alain (2012). *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*. London: Verso.
- Chiesa, Lorenzo (2016). *The Virtual Point of Freedom. Essays on Politics, Aesthetics, and Religion*. Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press.

mediately opposes Lenin’s class humanism to Marx’s early humanism, which would be for him essentialist and ultimately “religious” (Althusser 1969: 221). For a discussion of how Marx’s early humanism is neither essentialist nor religious, see Chiesa (2016: 82–99, 108–10).

- Chiesa, Lorenzo (2017). "The State of Communism: Badiou, Lenin, Stalin." In *Badiou and the State*, ed. Dominik Finkelde, 127-50. Baden Baden: Nomos Verlag.
- Deng, Xiaoping (1974). "Speech by Chairman of the Delegation of the People's Republic of China at the Special Session of the U.N. General assembly." <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/deng-xiaoping/1974/04/10.htm>
- Fanon, Frantz (1991). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Federici, Silvia (2012). *Revolution at Point Zero. Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Gramsci, Antonio (1966). *La questione meridionale*. Rome: Editori Riuniti.
- Gramsci, Antonio (2000). *The Gramsci Reader. Selected Writings 1916–1935*. Trans David Forgacs. New York: New York University Press.
- Guattari, Félix (2010). "The New Spaces of Freedom." In *New Lines of Alliance, New Spaces of Liberty*, eds. Félix Guattari and Antonio Negri, 116-27 Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.
- Hall, Stuart (1986). "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10.5: 5–27.
- Lacan, Jacques (2007). *Seminar XVII. The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Lenin, Vladimir Ilych (1937). *Selected Works. Volume IX*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Lenin, Vladimir Ilych (1938). *Selected Works. Volume X*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Lenin, Vladimir Ilych (1943). *Selected Works. Volume VIII*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Lenin, Vladimir Ilych (1946). *Selected Works. Volume VII*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Lisa, Athos (1973). *Memorie. In carcere con Gramsci*. Milan: Feltrinelli.
- Mao, Zedong (1974). "On the Question of the Differentiation of the Three Worlds." <http://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv10n1/mao.htm>
- Marx, Karl (1933). *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. London: Martin Lawrence.
- Marx, Karl (1975). "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction." In *Early Writings*, 243-58. London: Penguin.
- Negri, Antonio (2014). *Factory of Strategy. 33 Lessons on Lenin*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1990). "Negotiating the Structures of Violence." In *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, 138-51. London: Routledge.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1992). "Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 23:3: 29-47.