

# Introduction

## *Does Lenin Have a Future?*

ALLA IVANCHIKOVA

### From Post–Cold War Leninology to the “Rebirth of History”

In October 2017, I attended a conference titled “the future of revolution,” organized by the European University at St. Petersburg. This conference, which drew scholars from around the globe, took place not too far from the famous Winter Palace, which, in 1917, had been stormed by soldiers and workers—the same palace where the cabinet ministers of the Provisional Government bunkered, awaiting their fate. The lack of official commemoration of the October Revolution’s centennial in Russia was palpable in St. Petersburg that week: while there were numerous events (conferences, museum exhibitions, readings) in celebration of the centennial, they all were happening indoors, while the outside—the public space—remained unmarked. I was aware of the official explanation of that fact: the October Revolution, it was said, was still too “controversial” an event in Russian public consciousness and memory. But the effect was still eerie. I could not help but remember cities awash with red flags on Revolution’s Day every year in my childhood. The mood at the conference was energizing—rooms overflowing with attendees, presenters brimming with excitement. None of the presentations were nostalgic in their orientation or tone—it was future-oriented. And yet, there was also a yearning for the past: in the evenings, the crowd

dispersed and most of us walked around the city looking for the memory of the revolution to come alive. And it did: on the evening of October 25, the Winter Palace suddenly glowed red. This change in lighting was subtle but powerful. I don't recall it being announced in the press, and perhaps it was, but it caught me off guard. The Revolution, I remember thinking that moment, will never leave this place. The Winter Palace will always remain a testament to the fact that things can change radically, the new replacing centuries-old, in a matter of months.

This edited collection of essays came out of this feeling, this sense of looking forward while also seeking inspiration in the past. It answers the following questions: Why do we still wander restlessly, looking for Lenin's ghost? What does "Lenin" and "Leninism" signify today and how has this changed in recent years? What does the future of Leninism look like? Why, after thirty years of iconoclasm (that involved the removal of statues of Lenin throughout the former socialist world), in spite of concerted efforts to demote, deconstruct, and discredit Leninist modes of thinking, does the figure of Lenin return to haunt our turbulent political present? The short answer is this: we are witnessing the end of what Alain Badiou, in *The Rebirth of History* calls "intervallic time."<sup>1</sup> Intervallic times are ones of reaction during which revolutionary energies become latent—rivers of lava flowing, invisibly, below ground. In 2021, when I am writing this, it is clear that the world-historical crises have arrived sooner than anticipated and are shaking up the post-Cold War global order, revealing its multiple cracks. Against the *longue durée* background of climate crisis and amid the immediate catastrophe of the coronavirus pandemic, the old world still struggles to reassert itself, but it is becoming clear that the postpolitical consensus and apathy of the post-Cold War era has come to an end, for better *and* for worse. Both those on the left and on the right are mobilizing, building capacity. This book, put together 150 years after the Bolshevik leader's birth, shows the actuality of Lenin, who has come back, for these new times. Whether arguing against, for, or with Lenin, the essays in this collection show that Lenin is our contemporary.

To many, this current return of Lenin comes as a surprise. Consider, for instance, Brian C. Anderson's essay, published in *National Review* in response to Slavoj Žižek's book *Lenin 2017*. Titled "Zombie Lenin," the essay invokes *The Simpsons* 1998 episode where both Lenin and the Soviet Union figure, quite literally, as zombies. A conservative thinker, Anderson finds Žižek's defense of, in Anderson's words, "Lenin's turgid and hate-ridden

late writings” “preposterous and chilling.” Anderson, for whom Lenin figures only as a symbol of political violence, repression, fanaticism, and gulags, insists, contra Žižek, that there was “no ‘emancipatory potential’ in Lenin’s revolution.”<sup>2</sup> In many ways, his surprise at Lenin’s return is warranted. For the larger part of the last three decades, scholars and cultural commentators mostly agreed on what Ken Jowitt, in his eponymously titled 1989 essay, called “the Leninist extinction”: the complete and final eradication of Leninism as a political form or a mode of thinking in the post–Cold War era.<sup>3</sup> Statues of Lenin were taken down everywhere throughout the former socialist world, his portraits destroyed or sold to private collectors as cultural oddities on the black market. As a teenager in the 1990s Russia, I personally witnessed ordinary citizens, institutions, and libraries taking their beautifully produced, meticulously annotated fifty-two volume collections of Lenin’s writing to garbage dumps. In 1994, Boris Yeltsin ordered the removal of the famous “Lenin’s Cabinet in the Kremlin” from the Kremlin, in an act of iconoclastic violence—a *coup d’état*, a symbol of the counterrevolution’s victory over the Bolsheviks (the artifacts were salvaged and relocated to the Gorki museum in a suburb of Moscow). The iconic black marble statue of a brooding Lenin in the Kremlin was also removed in October 1994. The 1990s was the decade that Macedonian philosopher Jasna Koteska refers to as “Lenin’s shame.”<sup>4</sup> Koteska coined this phrase after having observed her five-year-old son, who had stumbled upon a statue of Lenin lying in the grass, proceeding to shake Lenin’s hand and kiss Lenin’s cheek—a gesture that she interprets as an attempt by the child to “restore” Lenin from his shameful state. This phrase captures the aspect of ritual humiliation that underlies acts of iconoclasm—the desire to not only remove symbols of communism from public spaces, but to also denigrate its very idea by shaming and punishing the body of the Bolshevik leader. As Russian philosopher Gleb Pavlovsky recalls, in the 1990s, Lenin was not to be argued with or refuted; he was to be laughed at.<sup>5</sup> Prominent thinkers on the Left distanced themselves from Lenin. Franco Bifo Berardi wrote, for instance: “I’m convinced that the twentieth century would have been a better century had Lenin not existed.”<sup>6</sup> It is impressive that it is not Hitler, Mussolini, or, as a matter of fact, Reagan that Berardi singles out as the twentieth century’s chief culprit. Instead of arguing with Lenin, Berardi psychologizes him: relying on a 1998 biographical source, he presents Lenin as melancholic and resentful, who, in Berardi’s words, exemplifies “male narcissism . . . confronted with the infinite power of capital and emerg[ing] from it frustrated, humiliated, and depressed.”<sup>7</sup>

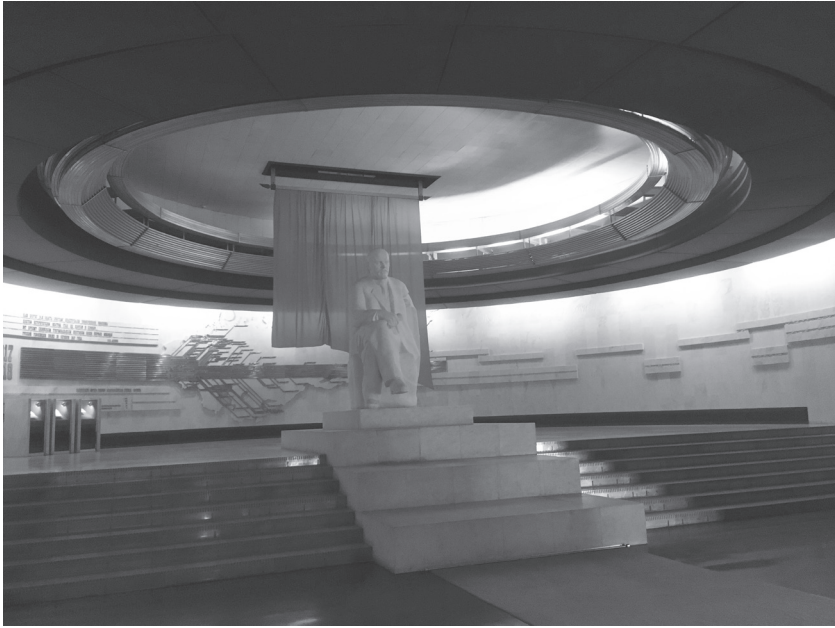


Figure I.1.

What does the future of Lenin look like today? Built in 1989, on the eve of the Soviet Union's disintegration, the Lenin Museum in the Gorki complex outside of Moscow is a time machine. The monumental building is visible from afar, and as you walk from the parking lot, it dominates the horizon as if it were an alien spaceship, disconnected from the surrounding landscape. Upon entering, a visitor will walk up white marble steps, eventually glimpsing a circular opening where Lenin's statue appears, as if descending from a spacecraft hovering above (Fig. I.1). The museum's architecture and design capture the fantasy world of the late Soviet era—the fantasy of the revolutionary state as futuristic and of Lenin as an extraterrestrial, arriving on Earth from a faraway galaxy, or perhaps, from the future. The fantasy of Lenin we encounter in the 1989 museum contrasts starkly with the Lenin presented by the other, more terrestrial museum in the same complex—a museum commemorating Lenin's presence in the Gorki complex in 1921–24 (Fig. I.2). A small room, a single bed, a simple writing desk, and a modest library paint an image of Lenin as most comfortable in a humble environment—an ascetic, a workaholic, a writer, a revolutionary who despised luxury and excess.



Figure I.2.

A hundred years ago, in 1920, Lenin was visited by science fiction writer H. G. Wells, the author of *The Time Machine*. Lenin himself, however, is a time machine. He traveled through the twentieth century in various guises—as a revolutionary, a statesman, a cult figure, an extraterrestrial, a zombie, a figure of defeat and shame. And now he is back yet again—in what form? We assert, with and through the works in this collection, that Lenin belongs to the future. It is, of course, not the same future as seen from the depths of the Soviet era, in which the certainty of communism’s arrival dominated the anticipatory horizon. This collection seeks to discern the contours of the future Lenin in various ways—by reclaiming the image of Lenin as future-oriented, flexible (despite the stereotype of the “rigid” Bolsheviks), and as a figure of survival and persistence in the struggle for a just world, rather than as a figure of melancholy and extinction. The Lenin of our collection is the opposite of the nostalgic Lenin of postsocialist studies: he is the figure of anticipatory hope that allows us to imagine something wholly other than the perpetual neoliberal present. Even those in this collection who argue against Lenin’s ideas show a trend of renewed engagement that takes Lenin on a different set of terms, in the moment of capitalism’s

decline, as someone to be reckoned with. In the twilight of the intervallic era, Lenin resurfaces as a revolutionary figure once again—a human-sized figure, an analyst of the real conditions on the ground, a theorist of state and revolution, and one who provides manuals and blueprints for how to build a mass movement.

Lenin is also a political and intellectual giant to whom we must return, perhaps, every decade. By staging a conversation among a diverse group of scholars, we show that Lenin's thought today, as it was a century ago, sparks hope, raises controversy, and promotes intellectual debates. Aiming to produce an interdisciplinary collection of essays, we invited political theorists, activists, cultural and literary studies scholars, scholars of education, rhetoric scholars, and historians to assess the relevance of the Leninist legacy. Collectively, the authors in this collection debate whether Lenin's thought allows us to rethink political strategy for the Left, bring into view the rich yet silenced history of Black Leninism (both in the United States and on the African continent), and examine contemporary developments, such as right-wing Leninism (Steve Bannon) and the Bernie Sanders movement in the United States. Our scholars engage with specific concepts, such as "vanguard," "revolution," "withering away," "revolutionary state," "romantic anticapitalism," and "national self-determination"; they address specific texts, such as *State and Revolution*, "April's Theses," *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, among many others; and they talk about the ways in which Lenin can be adopted, adapted, and re-envisioned for our times.

### Lenin in Post-2008 Politics

This book also emerged as part of a continuation of the work started by *Lenin Reloaded*—a collection edited by Sebastian Budgen and Slavoj Žižek in 2007. The collection was groundbreaking at that time in that it sought to bring Lenin back from his shameful state and restore (reload) him as an interlocutor. From the perspective of the 2020s, however, it seems as if a vast epoch separates us from *Lenin Reloaded*, which was put together, as the editors note, during a time of profound disorientation when alternatives to capitalism seemed unimaginable to most, even on the Left. The collection's very title, the editors state, was somewhat scandalous in the context of post-Cold War capitalist-realist hegemony. Times have changed, however. The financial crisis of 2008 created the first ripples of mobilization on the otherwise smooth postpolitical surface. In *The Rebirth of History*, Badiou

called the post-2008 moment “the time of riots”—a moment of “glorious but defeated mass mobilizations.”<sup>8</sup> He writes: “As yet blind, naïve, scattered and lacking a powerful concept of durable organization,” they nevertheless signal “a rebirth of History, as opposed to the pure and simple repetition of the worst.”<sup>9</sup> Out of that crisis came the successes, failures, and contradictions of Syriza and Podemos; the mass Occupy protests of 2011; mass outrage at the banks, insurance companies, and the governments that bailed them out; Black Lives Matter; and the mass mobilizations around Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn that signaled the renewed visibility of the socialist alternative. Thomas Piketty’s 2013 *Capital* became a *New York Times* best-seller in 2014. No longer in the age of postpolitical consensus, we are also no longer in the post-Cold War epoch. Some called the new era “the post-post-cold War,”<sup>10</sup> but surely a better term is needed.

The advent of Trump’s presidency brought a new wave of popular mobilizations, with women’s marches and antifascist protests. In upstate New York where I live and work, curators of the Women’s Rights National Historic Park in the sleepy town of Seneca Falls, N.Y. (considered the birthplace of the U.S. women’s suffrage movement) were awed, in January 2016, by the sight of almost twenty thousand people who poured into Seneca Falls’ three-block downtown to protest Trump’s inauguration. International Women’s Day—a socialist holiday—is now marked by marches in U.S. cities and worldwide. In the 2017 centennial of the October Revolution, the time was ripe to rethink and revive the memory of October. The year saw a slew of publications—Slavoj Žižek (*Lenin*), Tariq Ali (*The Dilemmas of Lenin*), China Miéville (*October*), and Michael Hardt (“October! To Commemorate the Future”), among others—that assessed Lenin’s thought and the legacy of the October Revolution of 1917.<sup>11</sup> Testifying to the potential for the return of Leninism today are also the critiques of the limits of horizontality and spontaneity that emerged in the aftermath of the Occupy movement (Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams) and the calls to return to the party form in political struggle (Jodi Dean). We have reasons to believe that the time of reaction, apathy, and Left retreat—where, in the absence of political organization, riots were the primary form that opposed, chaotically, the status quo—has ended. We are witnessing the return of both small- and large-scale Left organizing, and this is one of the reasons for Lenin’s renewed actuality. Socialist organizations, such as The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and The Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL) in the United States have reported exponential growth. Bernie Sanders’s campaign drew into its vortex thousands of organizers while exposing at the same time the limits

of elections as a vehicle of change. In 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic brought the global economy to a grinding halt, mass protests against racist police violence erupted all over the United States, shaking the system to the core. Reading Lenin in 2020, the 150th anniversary of his birthday, is instructive, as these overlapping crises expose the fragility of the current world system, similarly to the crisis unleashed, in Lenin's time, by World War I. For most of our authors, the actuality of Lenin seems beyond doubt, although it remains a point of debate as to which parts of his legacy we are to revisit, and to what ends. This collection starts precisely there: Which aspects of Lenin's thought are particularly relevant today, and for whom? Who has a legitimate claim to Lenin?

The first section of this collection maps the field of contemporary politics by charting four positions: a left-wing anti-Leninist, a left-wing Leninist, a right-wing Leninist, and a romantic anticapitalist. The left-wing anti-Leninist position is exemplified by David J. Ost, the left-wing Leninist position is articulated by Jodi Dean and Daniel Egan, the right-wing Leninist stance is described by Alexandar Mihailovic, and finally, the romantic anticapitalist position is examined by Christian Sorace and Kai Heron.

The first essay of this section begins by questioning whether a return to Lenin is warranted, and to what end. David J. Ost, a lifelong scholar of popular movements in Eastern Europe, and a self-described Left anti-Leninist, argues strongly that Lenin is more relevant to today's Right, who find inspiration in Lenin's program for taking over and dismantling the state, than to those on the Left, who, in fact, would have much to lose if the democratic institutions that exist today were dismantled. The contemporary Left, Ost believes, must continue on the Gramscian, reformist path that over the course of the post-World War II era proved successful. "Indeed, that the Left has succeeded with the Gramscian push is why the Right is today so enamored of Lenin: to smash those institutions and effect a (counter) revolution against the gains the Left has made," Ost asserts. He cautions against the temptation on the Left to return to Lenin, which he worries is already occurring: such return would be an act of self-betrayal. "[T]he resurrection of Lenin," he writes, "runs in the face of all the reasons why the Left abandoned Lenin in recent generations." Among these reasons are the rise of the *nomenklatura* in twentieth-century state socialist societies, in which the bureaucracy of the party assumed the rule over the proletariat and the people; the intolerance of dissent; and the generally antidemocratic outcomes of the October Revolution. The contemporary Left must learn from the failures of real existing socialism, argues Ost, and forcefully "object



to parties with centralized leadership claiming a monopoly of knowledge that justifies efforts to limit opposition, and assigns to itself the sole right to decide not just the correct paths anti-capitalist practice should take but the nature of the political regime and what is or is not allowed once success is achieved.”

We chose to begin this collection with Ost’s provocative and rhetorically powerful essay, because it makes explicit the position that is shared implicitly by many on the Left: the belief that Leninism must be repudiated and purged from the Left’s ranks in the aftermath of the collapse of large-scale state socialist projects. Leninism, for many, is associated with political violence, rejection of reformism, purges of opposition, and with such unsavory terms as dictatorship (of the proletariat). Moreover, Ost brings to the surface a sentiment, common to 1960s leftists but also to many of our contemporaries, namely, that Leninism seems rather straightlaced and old-fashioned when compared with the sexier, more nuanced pedagogies of anticapitalism developed from the 1960s on—by Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, and many other post-Marxists—who were, some would argue, more radical in their analyses of power. Without providing definitive answers, we seek to start a debate about these shared assumptions and believe that Left anti-Leninism is a position we need to seriously engage.

It should be noted, however, that Ost’s analysis, as he makes clear, focuses on the European and American intellectual currents that found their expression in the turmoil of the 1960s and resulted in the Velvet Revolutions of 1989. The Left that rejected Lenin, for Ost, is, consequently, the American and European Left. This qualification of the argument’s scope is important: anticolonial movements in the global South that emerged victorious in the 1960-’70s, were more inspired by Lenin than Foucault or Deleuze. Zeyad el Nabolsy—an Egyptian Canadian scholar whose essay appears in Part 2, draws attention to the centrality of Lenin’s thought for East African Marxists of that era. To add another example, the leader of Afghanistan’s communist party, which was formed in 1965 and came to power in the Saur (April) Revolution of 1978, Nur Muhammad Taraki, was a proud Leninist who liked to boast that he had been born in 1917, in the days of the Russian Revolution.<sup>12</sup> In short, a global view of the 1960s–1970s era indexes that the Left rejection of Lenin in the Euro-American core was accompanied by political successes of revolutionary Leninism in the colonized world. And correspondingly, 1989 marks the advent of a dark era in the global South: while Velvet Revolutions were happening in Eastern Europe, many socialist countries in the formerly colonized world spiraled into civil wars as socialist

governments were toppled by ultra-Right illiberal forces.<sup>13</sup> Fidel Castro, in his 1989 speech, said, in relation to these global changes: “Now imperialism wants the East European socialist countries to join in the colossal looting [of the Third World]. This apparently does not bother the theorists of capitalist reforms one bit. This is why in many of those countries nobody mentions the Third World’s tragedy.”<sup>14</sup>

Following Ost’s provocative piece is an interview with Jodi Dean, titled “What is Leninist Thinking?” Dean, a self-identified Left Leninist and author of *The Communist Horizon* and more recently, *Comrade*, questions whether it is possible both to support Left politics *and* reject Lenin today. In contrast to Ost, Dean upholds the immediate importance of Lenin for the Left as an antidote to acceptable versions of Marx—“Marxism defanged, Marxism for liberalism, a Marxism without state and revolution.” Lenin, for Dean, is also a vehicle of addressing large-scale, widely distributed crises, such as the climate crisis, that require scalable organizational forms. A theorist of the party organization as well as of communicative capitalism, Dean argues that Leninist thinking—with its focus on organizational capacity, whether it is building a mass movement or building a proletarian state—is both counterintuitive and especially valuable in the era of network-mediated communicative capitalism, where the hierarchies of followers that emerge through the seeming “democracy” of social media interactions mimic the larger social inequalities (and are produced by similar forces). Central to Leninist thinking, for Dean, is the idea of the future understood as the actuality of revolution—a paradoxical temporality that determines what needs to be done in the present. To think like Lenin is to take the revolution seriously, as a *future fact*; the Leninist party “anticipates the revolution, materializing the belief that makes revolution possible.” The party, thus, is not, merely, an organization, but a force that makes the future present in revolutionary anticipation and concrete struggle. Attesting to the Left’s re-energization in recent years, Dean believes that Lenin has much to offer to the contemporary “multinational, multigenerational, multigendered” working-class struggle.

No analysis of post-2008 Left politics would be complete without an engagement with the U.S. presidential election campaigns of Bernie Sanders (2016 and 2020), which popularized the idea of socialism in the U.S. context, galvanizing a progressive movement, especially among the millennial generation. In their chapter, “We’re All (Romantic) Socialists,” Kai Heron and Christian Sorace offer an analysis of Sanders’s campaign by deploying Lenin’s critique of the Russian Narodniks of the 1890s. Sanders’s focus on mitigating the excesses of capitalism, they argue, is reminiscent of

what Lenin calls “romantic anticapitalism”—an attitude that fails to think beyond a moral condemnation of capitalism. “[I]n both Lenin’s time and in our own,” write Heron and Sorace, “the pervasive dissatisfaction with capitalism tends to take the form of a sentimental anticapitalism through which capitalism is *simultaneously repudiated and preserved*.” While recognizing the significance of Sanders for U.S. politics, they are skeptical of his promises to mitigate capitalism’s excess—via regulation, redistribution, and limited climate change interventions. Undergirding such hopes is the failure to recognize capitalism’s inherent instability—brought into sharp relief by Marx, Engels, and Lenin—where excess and disruption (financial greed, environmental exploitation, necropolitical experiments) are constitutive of the very system and thus cannot be regulated away. By tracing Lenin’s critique of Sismondi, the authors show that “Lenin demands that revolutionaries stay analytically within the *excesses of capitalism*, and refuse the temptation of seeking an imaginary resolution, whether *within* capitalism or *beyond* it.” The desire to mitigate or escape capitalism, they remind us, with Lenin, can only be utopian and reactionary.

A curious issue that surfaced post-2016 is that of right-wing Leninism. Does Lenin belong to the Left only? Does the Right have a legitimate claim to Lenin, and what is the nature of that claim? In his fascinating chapter on the right-wing Leninism of Steve Bannon, Alexandar Mihailovic answers the question in the affirmative: the Right, he argues, does have a claim to Lenin. He then gives us a glimpse into the vast archives of right-wing Leniniana—a corpus of works, literary and theoretical, that, throughout much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, adapt Lenin for right-wing use. For many of us, the phenomenon of right-wing Leninism became visible after Steve Bannon claimed, in an interview with historian Ronald Radosh in 2013, that he was a Leninist. In this chapter, we learn of the history behind what seemed, to many, an odd claim. Lenin’s revolutionary zeal and his belligerent, uncompromising stance appeal to the twenty-first-century “right-wing international” who see themselves not as traditionalists or defenders of the status quo, but rather as radical, countercultural, and against the status quo.<sup>15</sup> Paul Gottfried—the conservative thinker who coined the term *alternative right*—calls himself proudly “a Leninist of the Right,” aiming to rouse the masses to bring on the “collapse” of the current regime.<sup>16</sup> Mihailovic explains the logic behind such statements. “Rebellion,” Mihailovic writes, “now becomes the domain of the public-school scions of a ‘decadent and dilettante political elite,’ fully expressed by [Boris] Johnson’s often puerile if not violent demeanor, and the deliberately fey yet strangely unembarrassed

media maunderings of his pro-Brexit confederate Jacob Rees-Mogg. This is a push for revolution that is driven by the resolutely undemocratic impulse of *droit de seigneur*.” Tory anarchists today share “many affinities with ‘punk nihilism’ from Thatcher-era England” and embody the rage of the disaffected white working class against the system that failed them. The list of things that those on the right adopt from the ultimate leftist revolutionary include his pathos, countercultural affect (“the drama of decision”), and his anti-statism, combined, paradoxically, with his willingness to take and hold on to state power. Among the aspects of Lenin’s thought that right-wing ideologues have to dispense with to make him useful for their goals is his Marxist core: his commitment to universal equality, anti-imperialism, and working-class power. The Lenin of Bannon, who, according to Mihailovic, is drawn to “the negative core of Leninism,” is thus a hollowed-out Lenin, hailed as a strategist and a warrior, above all, and a highly effective one. From this insightful chapter we draw the conclusion that anyone interested in twenty-first-century politics would be wise to take very seriously the Right’s claim to, and fascination with, the Bolshevik leader.

The last chapter in this section returns us to the question of the party form. Lenin frequently talks about the party as a military force. In “A Letter to a Comrade on Our Organizational Tasks,” he stresses the importance of “military discipline,” noting that party members working in key areas such as factories should view themselves as soldiers “obliged to submit to all its orders and to observe all the ‘laws and customs’ of the ‘army in the field’ which [they have] joined and from which in time of war [they have] no right to absent [themselves] without official leave.”<sup>17</sup> Later on, in the turbulent days of the February Revolution, as Lenin began to develop ideas about the proletarian state while still in exile, he imagined the entire victorious class of the working masses drawn into armed militias—an organization that “would enjoy the *boundless* respect and confidence of the people, for it itself would be an organization of the entire people.”<sup>18</sup> The essay by Daniel Egan, “Saving the Vanguard,” brings into view the technical and practical significance of Lenin’s military metaphors. Specifically, Egan is interested in Lenin’s concept of the vanguard, which he reads literally, as a military metaphor, explaining, with great nuance, its role in political struggle. “The vanguard,” he writes, “keeps the memory of historical struggles alive during periods in which the masses, either out of exhaustion, disillusionment, or fear of repression, pull back from the revolutionary process—in other words, the vanguard ensures that a revolutionary movement’s retreat is orderly and preserves its ability to fight another day.” The vanguard thus is needed both in times

of revolutionary offense and in times of defense, ensuring that the defeats suffered are tactical and temporary, and not a total capitulation resulting in a scattering of forces. In what amounts to a Left Leninist position, he argues against the turn to spontaneity that characterized much of post–Cold War left thought, where the party was viewed as necessarily authoritarian. While the way a vanguard functions in the twenty-first century might need to be rethought, revolutionary change will remain impossible without a vanguard, and various struggles will only have tactical significance, argues Egan.

### Black Leninism and Anti-imperialism

Historian Carole Boyce Davies, in her 2007 book on Claudia Jones, finds an apt metaphor in the fact that Claudia Jones, a tricontinental Black revolutionary, is buried, in England, to the left of Karl Marx.<sup>19</sup> An immigrant from Trinidad and a prominent member of CPUSA, Jones was extraordinary, Davies argues, in her ability (widely recognized by her peers at the time) to theorize the superexploitation of the Black woman worker, linking “decolonization struggles internally and externally, and [challenging] U.S. racism, gender subordination, class exploitation, and imperialist aggression simultaneously.”<sup>20</sup> She was clearly the model, Davies argues, for Angela Davis—another Black communist who, decades later, would theorize the “triple jeopardy” of the Black woman worker.<sup>21</sup> Like many other Black radicals, Jones paid a heavy price for her political organizing: arrested in 1948 for being a member of the Communist Party, she spent time in prison before being deported from the United States to England. The second section of our collection echoes and is in dialogue with the ongoing collective work of recovering the legacy of Black communism in the United States and beyond. As we turn to the past, we remain future-oriented, however: the three essays in this section construct a lineage, a legacy, and a past that is meant to inform and inspire the newly resurgent struggle for Black liberation in the United States and beyond. These chapters describe the moment where the history of tricontinental Black liberation struggle aligned with the organized Marxist Left in the aftermath of the October Revolution of 1917—an encounter of world-historical significance. The authors don’t just assert that the story of Leninism and the twentieth century is *incomplete* without a chapter on Black Leninism. Their claim is much stronger: that the struggle for antiracism and anti-imperialism was *central* to twentieth-century revolutionary history.

How do we conceptualize this rich legacy of twentieth-century Black Leninism? The section opens with an essay by Black Studies scholar Charisse Burden-Stelly who proposes the term “the Tradition of Radical Blackness” to capture a lineage of “Black anticapitalist thought and activism rooted in and attendant to local, national, and global anti-Black political economies.” This tradition, she argues, is conceptually distinct from the “Black radical tradition”—a term used by Cedric Robinson. This essay thus engages the theoretical debates stirring contemporary Black studies. Much of the latter is inspired by Robinson’s concept of the “Black radical tradition” that he advances in his *Black Marxism*—a book that is, in part, a critique of Marxism and especially Marxism-Leninism.<sup>22</sup> While Robinson states that Marxism was at a certain point useful to Black radical thought and practice, overall, he detaches the Black radical tradition from Marxist thought, exposing, in turn, Marxism as a parochial European doctrine whose scope was circumscribed by its unique historical context and its Enlightenment prejudices, and thus unable to see the racial character of European capital accumulation. Marxism, and Leninism, in short, cannot provide the foundation for Black revolutionary struggle against what Robinson dubbed “racial capitalism.”

Burden-Stelly’s essay intervenes in this debate: it outlines the contours of what she proposes to call “the Tradition of Radical Blackness” through discussing the work of Black Communists, such as Harry Haywood, Doxey Wilkerson, Kwame Nkrumah, James Ford, Sojourners for Truth and Justice, and Claudia Jones. She traces how these twentieth-century intellectuals engaged with Marxism-Leninism, using it to frame their political views and to guide their analysis of racial capitalism. These thinkers deployed Marxist-Leninist vocabularies and epistemologies, while updating and deepening Leninist views on capitalist accumulation, imperialist war, and the national question, among other issues. The Tradition of Radical Blackness, as it emerges, Burden-Stelly argues, in their political and intellectual work, “theorizes Blackness as a special relationship to the capitalist mode of production; considers intraracial class conflict and antagonism; and strives for the eventual overthrow of racial capitalism.” These thinkers placed particular emphasis on the specific character of Black oppression as *superexploitation* within the planetary capitalist formation, developing theories of worker organization attuned to this fact. Some of these Black communists used Lenin’s pamphlet on the right of nations to self-determination<sup>23</sup> as they conceived of African American people in the U.S. South as a nationally oppressed group that must demand full emancipation and self-determination (the Black Belt thesis eventually formulated by Haywood). Others developed new

theoretical paradigms in close connection to immediate political struggles, such as Kwame Nkrumah, who expanded Lenin's analysis of imperialism to U.S.-led neocolonialism after the political program of pan-Africanism and indigenous development he pursued as Ghana's first president was overthrown by a coup. These analyses thus connected the multiple local, national, and regional struggles to the global conditions that sustain racial and economic domination. Because the Tradition of Radical Blackness powerfully defies the regimes of superexploitation and dispossession, it has been, writes Burden-Stelly, "systematically targeted, often through discourses of anticommunism, by statist and imperial authorities as extremism, authoritarianism, and/or terrorism to rationalize the use of extraordinary force, violence, and exception."

In his chapter "Black Leninist Internationalism: The Anticolonial Center," Robert R. Maclean argues that there was an epoch of Black Leninism that to a certain extent spanned, and defined, the twentieth century. "As a thesis and a program," Maclean asserts, Black Leninism is "a necessary *restatement* of the subject of Black Communism that insists on the historiographic and conceptual overlap of mid-century Black struggle and Marxism-Leninism." Maclean insists that this juncture, in turn, is central to the historiography of twentieth-century communism. In centering Black Leninism as *the* subject of twentieth-century communism, Maclean's essay suggests that one cannot understand the twentieth-century worldwide communist movement without comprehending the centrality of the tricontinental Black anticolonial struggle, one that drew into its ranks Black intellectuals, revolutionaries, community organizers, militants, and artists, who analyzed the cataclysms of late colonial Europe as deeply rooted in (and rooted through) violent expropriations on the African continent and beyond. Maclean's is an effort to retheorize the revolutionary subject of Marxism as Black, anti-imperialist, pan-African—one that moved not only the struggle, but revolutionary thought forward by forcing a confrontation between Black revolutionary desire and the basic historical and philosophical principles of Marxism. Maclean asks what it would mean to view the short twentieth century—an epoch that includes countless anticolonial revolutions and antiracist mass movements—some successful, others defeated—as defined by the struggles (over, for, and against) Black Leninism around the world, sustained by an international formation of overlapping Black diasporas.

Zeyad el Nabolsy's "Lenin and East African Marxism" is fueled by a similar impulse—to center the conceptual and political legacy of Black Leninists. To the charge of Eurocentrism in relation to Leninist thought,

el Nabolsy responds: We can only utter this accusation if we deliberately ignore the revolutionary and intellectual contribution of Black Leninist leaders, especially those from the formerly colonized world. By discussing the work of two such East African thinkers—the Zanzibari Marxist revolutionary Abdul Rahman Mohammed Babu (1924–1996) and the Ugandan Marxist theorist Dani Wadada Nabudere (1932–2011)—el Nabolsy shows that Marxism-Leninism was central to their struggle for African liberation; moreover, these African Marxists were not passive “adopters” of Marxism-Leninism but refined and expanded Lenin’s ideas in relation to the African continent and beyond. First, Lenin’s analysis of imperialism and the national question, el Nabolsy shows, provided a theoretical basis for their formulation of Pan-Africanism where the latter figured as “the expression of African nationalism vis-à-vis a racialized imperialism.” Second, Lenin’s critique of the Narodniks program allowed Babu and Nabudere to develop a comprehensive critique of “African socialism”—a doctrine that saw traditional *Ujamaa* (“familyhood,” extended family) as the foundation for African socialism. While African socialism idealized the African village as communal and naturally socialist, stressed the lack of developed class relations in Africa, and charted a path for African liberation that, they believed, could avoid class struggle, Babu and Nabudere argued, via Lenin, that “the claim to uniqueness is not itself unique” but is a result of a certain stage of development in the relations of production. Nabudere wrote: “There is nothing uniquely African in an era where finance capital has united all the peoples of the world under its rule. An African proletariat is no less international than an Asian one or a European one. They are all exploited by the same monopolies, the same class, the same capital, only in different measure.”<sup>24</sup> In contrast to the proponents of African socialism who argued that Marxism was a foreign ideological import into Africa, Babu and Nabudere used Marxist-Leninist methodologies to formulate their vision of African liberation.

The essays in this section thus center the Leninist tradition within the anticolonial, non-European tradition and canon—an important correction to the Eurocentric tilt of many accounts of Leninist thought, including those published in the recent decade. We decided to foreground Black Leninism specifically as it is particularly pertinent to today’s struggles for Black liberation, of which the ongoing fight against racist police violence in the United States is an example. However, it needs to be noted that Leninist thought was important to countless other liberation movements around the world—in Asia, Central and Latin America, and in the Muslim world. Lenin



was the first among his comrades to recognize the potential world-historical importance of non-Western countries in what he believed was going to be the inevitable march of workers' power in the twentieth century. And while the relation between communism and anticolonialism throughout the twentieth century was fraught with tensions and contradictions, anti-imperialism became a central tenet of global revolutionary struggle. Taken together, the three essays in this section present an argument that in the twentieth century the geographical reach of Marxism-Leninism was indeed planetary, anti-imperialist, and that Black struggles against superexploitation were central to twentieth-century communism.

### The Actuality of Lenin's Thought

What are some of the other ways in which Lenin continues to be our contemporary? What other concepts, ideas, and analyses are particularly useful for today's political struggles and intellectual debates? The essays in this section focus on the following: Lenin's theory of the state, his theory of bourgeois law, and his theory of the party. We begin this section with Giovanni Zanotti's essay on "the two states" in Lenin's 1917 *State and Revolution*. *State and Revolution* and Lenin's conceptualization of the withering away of the state continue to spur debates among scholars.<sup>25</sup> For Badiou (*The Communist Hypothesis*) and Hardt, it is precisely the Leninist party's inability to bring about such withering away of the state that serves as evidence of the failure not only of twentieth-century socialism but of the party form more generally. As we saw in the chapter by Mihailovic, the ideologues of the Right find in Lenin's *State and Revolution* both an inspiration and guidance for their attacks on the state. "Criticized from the Right as utopian (since it allegedly postulates a full redemption of human nature)," writes Zanotti, "and from the Left as authoritarian (since it maintains the necessity of a state, however transitional, instead of invoking its *immediate* suppression), [the withering away thesis] touches the deepest layers of Marxist political theory and practice and has never ceased to challenge both of them." The question of the state, Zanotti argues, has acquired renewed significance in the current era of neoliberalism's crisis, where Left cosmopolitanism that previously celebrated the passing of nation-states into a globalized multitude is eclipsed, almost improbably, by the Left's defensive neo-statism, which now sees the state as not only "pivotal, but also as the proper space for democracy and even class struggle." Lenin's theory, for Zanotti, provides

a key to some of these debates: Lenin's state always splits into two states, one that cannot wither away (the bourgeois state) and the other that *cannot but wither away* (the transitional revolutionary state). Via a careful reading of Lenin, supplemented by the conceptual apparatus borrowed from "New Marx Reading," Zanotti defends the "fundamental correctness and actuality" of Lenin's theory of the state.

Camila Vergara's essay on law argues, similarly, for the actuality of Lenin's theory of law. For Lenin, once again, there is not one law but always at least two juridical regimes: bourgeois law and proletarian law. By engaging with Lenin's three early essays, "Explanation of the Law on Fines Imposed on Factory Workers" (1895), "Draft and Explanation of a Programme for the Social-Democratic Party" (1895), and "The New Factory Law" (1897), Vergara asks, with Lenin, whether bourgeois labor laws offer protection to workers or whether they in fact serve to formalize exploitation. She argues, with and through Lenin, that within the context where workers are in a relation of dependence upon their employer, labor legislation becomes a form of legal domination: a legal "protection" formalizes a power relation, making it more intractable. A legal scholar, Vergara makes capacious connections across space and time, bringing into proximity today's platform capitalism and nineteenth-century factories discussed by Lenin. Within the gig economy, legal struggles surrounding megaplatforms such as Uber (a ride sharing service) and Handy (a housekeeping service), risk legalizing, via regulation, existing practices that are uniquely exploitative and disadvantageous to workers. For instance, Vergara shows, contracts in the new gig economy allows employers "to hire workers as 'independent contractors' but to discipline them as 'employees.'" In addition, Vergara points to and critiques the persistence of bourgeois laws in state socialist societies, highlighting how absenteeism laws, formulated in the late nineteenth century and critiqued by Lenin, persisted, in modified form, in the USSR, reflecting workers' subordination, not to the employer, but to the state.

In his essay "Facing the Test: The Leninist Party as Proctor," Derek R. Ford offers an insightful, dynamic account of Lenin's thinking about the Party—as "a kind of *teacher who teaches totally to the test: the test of revolution.*" Throughout the twentieth century, the Communist Party served as an educational institution for the masses. An education scholar, Ford argues that all revolutionary struggles are necessarily educational processes; yet in radical politics and research on Lenin these educational concepts are never brought into the foreground or deeply contextualized. Here, he fleshes out one pedagogical mode that figures prominently in Lenin's writings and that,

he argues, undergirds his theory of the party: the protest as a test for the Party. Does the Party have the necessary capacity to organize a protest? Is the protest itself timely? Is there mass support for the action outside of the Party? What, essentially, is the role of protests in revolutionary struggle? These are the questions that Lenin had to answer, again and again, in 1917, as his thinking changed and adapted to the rapidly shifting conditions in the months preceding the October Revolution. These are the questions that are urgent today as well. In his 2017 *New Yorker* piece “Is There Any Point to Protesting?” Nathan Heller asks whether protests are a useful form of political action or a waste of everyone’s energy and time. He recalls the president’s inauguration day of 2016: “The boulevards in cities including New York, Washington, London—even L.A., where humans rarely walk—were riverine with marches. It was said to be the largest single-day demonstration in the history of the United States. Then Monday came, and the new Administration went about its work as planned.”<sup>26</sup>

Lenin’s theory of the Party as proctor preparing itself and the masses for the ultimate test—the revolution—allows us, according to Ford, to understand the significance of protests in the longer arc of revolutionary struggle. “Conceptualizing the revolution as a test and the revolutionary process as a series of pre-tests,” writes Ford, “enables the Party to build its internal organization, learn the shifting coordinates within which it is operating, and intervene and push forward the revolution in response to these shifts.” Most fundamentally, for Ford, Lenin’s focus on protests evidences the dialectical nature of Lenin’s conception of spontaneity and organization, centralization and decentralization, and theory and practice. Ultimately, Ford makes a case against depictions of Lenin as authoritarian, fleshing out the relation between the “iron discipline” of a political program and the “flexibility” or nimbleness Lenin demanded of a revolutionary organization: *embracing the test*, Ford insists, means effectively relinquishing control.

Zhivka Valiavicharska’s essay, “The Production of ‘Leninism’ and Its Political Journeys,” revisits Lenin to intervene in the debates surrounding the split between Western and Eastern Marxisms. By tracing the discursive production of Marxism-Leninism in Stalin’s era, and by describing the ways in which Eastern Marxists from the 1950s on critiqued that doctrine and recovered an increasingly complex, dialectical Lenin and Marx, Valiavicharska demonstrates, with great effectiveness, that Eastern Marxism was a dynamic, evolving tradition. She draws attention to the Orientalizing view, prevalent among Western Marxists, of Eastern European and Soviet Marxism as dogmatic and unchanging—a view that is predicated on the continued erasure

of thought that emerged from within the experience of actually existing socialism. In this, Valiavicharska is in the company of Alexei Penzin, Keti Chukhrov, and Maria Chehonadskih—contemporary Russian philosophers who have brought to the Western publics, for the first time, translations of some of these Eastern Marxist texts. Valiavicharska argues that “the disavowal of Lenin is foundational to the broadly accepted divisions between the ‘good’ Western Marxism and its bad, dogmatic, static, and historically catastrophic counterpart, Soviet Marxism.” Ultimately, she states, her essay is an attempt at decolonizing Lenin and Eastern Marxism by tracing how Eastern Marxists, since the 1950s, recovered Lenin as a complex situational thinker and a dialectical philosopher (which, she points out, was recognized by Lukacs by 1967, when he became aware of Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*). This essay is an important, timely contribution to the dialogue between these two currents of Marxism that is just beginning.

The collection ends with a photographic essay about material memory as two artists set out on a quest to find Lenin’s statues in Bishkek, the capital city of Kyrgyzstan. I’d like to supplement this lyrical essay with some additional context. Not everyone knows that Kyrgyzstan occupies a unique place among post-Soviet states: In contrast to other former Soviet republics—for instance, its neighbor Uzbekistan—Kyrgyzstan maintains a positive view on its Soviet history and has not tried to erase its communist past. The country’s central monument in Bishkek—which mimics the one in front of the Finland Station in St. Petersburg—is adorned with flowers every year in April, to commemorate Lenin’s birthday.<sup>27</sup> This attitude is generally shared by officials, experts, and ordinary people. Bakyt Bakhchiev, a history museum director in Bishkek, says: “Perhaps, we are the only country that did not demolish a single monument of Lenin.”<sup>28</sup> Faculty of History of Osh State University chair Sydyk Smadiyarov says, in relation to Lenin’s statue on Osh’s central square: “Some young historians want to demolish Lenin, saying, it is in the way when the prayer takes place, but I told my students: it shouldn’t be done because Lenin did a tremendous lot for the Kyrgyz people.”<sup>29</sup> The October event is still referred to as a “revolution” rather than a “coup”; history museums maintain their collections of Lenin memorabilia; and the official position states that the formation of the Soviet era brought forth the revival of Kyrgyz statehood. Streets with Soviet-era names still populate the landscape: almost every town has a street named after Lenin. For those looking to see the remnants of the Soviet era untouched by post-1991 iconoclasm, Kyrgyzstan is a place to visit. By using a 35 mm