

Humor

Lenin and Geology

by Jonathan Crewe

The cherry tree, like almost all fruit trees, was, as is well known, only a few centuries ago transplanted by commerce into our zone . . .

[Marx, *The German Ideology*]

Lenin, we know, was no geologist. The reason why we know this is *incredibly simple*: at no point in any of his works does he evince the *slightest interest* in constituting as a science the *radically* idealist problematic of Sir Charles Lyell—nor to speak of the epigoni whom Engels dismissed in a trenchant phrase as ‘Victorian geologists’. We are confronted in Lenin’s texts by a *massive silence*, to which, without exception, bourgeois geologists have responded with their own ‘silence’. Let us be very frank: Marxist geology has itself abandoned the field as ‘untenable’, and compromised itself in a thousand ‘rear-guard actions’ defending Lenin’s so called revolutionary leadership, contribution to Marxist dialectics, etc. *Not one* single ‘Marxist’ has yet attempted to situate Lenin’s silence within the theoretical space in which it loses its *abstract* character, and (taking a phrase from the *unfailingly alert* proletarian militant), ‘speaks louder than words’.

Even if we do not ‘know’ it already, the vacuous silence of bourgeois commentaries will tell us that Lenin ‘was not trained geologists’, and that *consequently* we are entitled to expect from him no more than ‘amateur’ natural history, or *pre-scientific* (ideological) *ruminations*. Bourgeois geology will, of course, ignore Lenin’s work *in its entirety*. Employing its habitual mystifications, it will conceal—even if only from *itself*—the truth that it *lacks its own object*, and that its *function* is nothing but the production of surplus value (oil wells, gold deposits, etc.). It *does not* recognise Lenin’s epochal intervention because it *cannot afford to*. As a preliminary step, any future Marxist geology must constitute itself by reading Lenin’s works *at least six times*, and it must then *think* Lenin’s silence and not merely *reproduce* it. It must, in any event, draw an *absolute* line of demarcation between the silent vacuity which is the product of contemplative idealism and the terribly *concrete* silence which mercilessly opposes it.

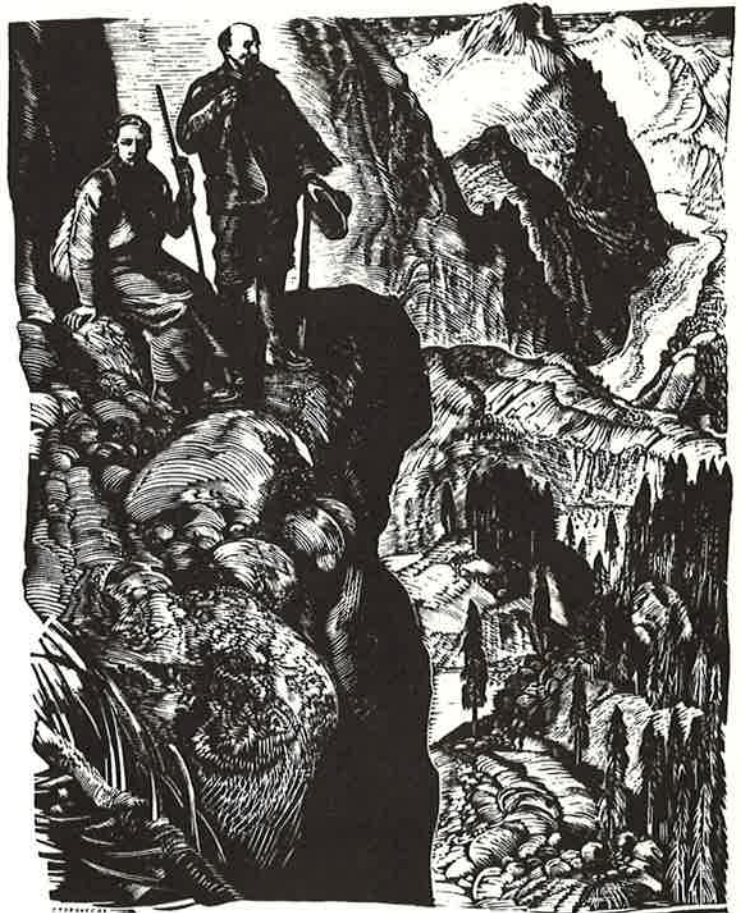
With due respect to my English readers, I must pause briefly to offer some advice on *reading* Lenin. This advice, which I should perhaps characterise as mandatory, must be followed *exactly* and *without the slightest deviation* or the reading of Lenin’s texts will be found impossible.

1. *Open* the book.

2. Read from *left to right*, and from *top to bottom*.

I *guarantee* that any reader who follows this advice will advance rapidly, *on condition that he or she is not confronted by a Chinese text*. In the latter case *enormous mystification* is unavoidable, and can *only* be dispelled by the most rigorous and sustained application.

We are *now* in a position—seventy years *post festum!*—to pose the question of ‘Lenin’s geology’. Krupskaya tells us that, on an afternoon walk on Lake Geneva, Lenin turned to a group of mill-hands drawn by his magnetism, and asked: “Can anyone see the summit of Mont Blanc?” Chuckling richly at the workers on whom this question had fallen like a thunderbolt, Lenin added: “I’ll bet you can all see the base!” In a single luminous sentence, Lenin settles accounts *once and for*



Lenin and Krupskaya in the Alps

(From an engraving by P. Sturonosov)

all with 'geological science'. The 'mountain as such', with its *horizontal strata*, 'naturally' established from 'time immemorial', is revealed in its true essence as the *reflection in the superstructure* of the class interests of the Swiss bourgeoisie. And not only this: it is the militant workers *alone* who cannot 'see' the *permanently clouded* summit, which constitutes at once the *illusion* and *sole object* of bourgeois aesthetics and technology. It is the workers who *live* the base, as Lenin *thinks* the base, and, in thinking it, appropriates it for Marxist science.

It remains, then, for Marxist geology to write the unwritten volumes of Leninist silence, which *authentically extends* the silence of Marx and Engels. Lenin's silence is to be understood *symptomatically* as the pure *negation* of bourgeois 'geology' (i.e., 'theology'), and as the *absolute precondition* to the discourse in which Lenin confronts the militant Swiss with their *historic* interests. It is not in the *imaginary* science of 'natural formations', but in the *real* science of social formations that a Marxist geology must conduct its *theoretical practice*.

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⁵ Ibid.

⁶ E. H. Phelps-Brown and S. J. Handfield-Jones, "The Climacteric of the 1890s," in *The Experience of Economic Growth*, ed. Barry E. Supple, New York: Random House, 1963, p. 208.

⁷ Dobb, p. 310.

⁸ Ibid., p. 312.

⁹ See Carl Schorske, *German Social Democracy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, 1955.

¹⁰ Richard Edwards, "Capital Accumulation and Corporate Power in the Transition to Monopoly Capital," mimeo, Department of Economics, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

¹¹ Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain*. New York: Basic Books, 1979.

¹² James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State 1900-1918*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.

¹³ Paul Sweezy, *Theory of Capitalist Development*. New York and London: Modern Reader, 1942, pp. 193-4.

¹⁴ Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*. New York: Schocken, 1961, p. 203.

¹⁵ Karl Kautsky, "Bernstein und das sozialdemokratische Programm." P. 42, cited in Fernando Claudin, "Kautsky versus Lenin," in *New Left Review*, No. 106, Nov.-Dec. 1977.

¹⁶ Sweezy, p. 54.

¹⁷ James Joll, *The Second International 1889-1914*. New York: Praeger, 1956, p. 4.

¹⁸ Lucio Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin*. New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972, pp. 55-6, our emphasis.

¹⁹ Sweezy, p. 198.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Quoted in Bernstein, p. 80.

²² Ibid., p. 59.

²³ Wasily Leontiev, quoted in Colletti, p. 53.

²⁴ Bernstein, p. 50.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 103.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 82-3.

²⁸ See Hyman Minsky, *John Maynard Keynes*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1975.

²⁹ Bernstein, p. 87.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

³¹ Ibid., p. 96.

³² Ibid., pp. 142-4.

³³ Ibid., p. 144.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 149.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 163.

³⁶ Karl Kautsky, *The Social Revolution*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1902, p. 38.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 53.

⁴⁰ As noted earlier, this is not the only possible origin of revisionist thought and practice.

⁴¹ The Ann Arbor Collective. "Against Dogmatism and Revisionism; Toward a Genuine Communist Party (1976)," *Theoretical Review*, No. 20, Jan.-Feb. 1981.

⁴² Louis Althusser, "The Crisis of Marxism," *The Theoretical Review*, No. 7, Sept.-Oct. 1978.

⁴³ See especially Michael Harrington, *Twilight of Capitalism*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976; and *Socialism*, New York: Saturday Review Press, 1970.

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Grasping the specificity of class struggle, political practice and the rising tide of militarism under socialism is a task which will require an enormous amount of theoretical study and political struggle. Just as important, and just as difficult, will be the effort to begin to explain our emerging understanding of the socialist countries in a new and popular way. If the "military road to socialism" has done anything it has made more urgent these tasks. By forcing us to confront this problem squarely, we will be that much more urgently compelled to take up the struggle to revitalize Marxist theory and redefine socialist politics and goals. If the crisis of the East provides the impetus, certainly the crisis in the West is daily providing us with the opportunities to create and practice a new vision of socialism.

¹ Robin Blackburn in Eric Hobsbawm, ed., *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (Verso, 1981), pp. 160-61. The phrase "stalinism" has been changed to "Stalinian Marxism" for publication in the *TR*.

² Reprinted in *The Nation*, February 27, 1982.

³ "The Historic Significance of the 22nd Congress," in Balibar, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (NLB, 1977), p. 204; emphasis in the original.

⁴ *Theoretical Review*, No. 19.