

Marx and Violent Revolution

Jonathan Haggerty, Lynchburg College

Revolution is and has always been a staple of civil society. When governments abuse or no longer represent their citizens, it has often resulted in their overthrow in a bloody or, less commonly, peaceable revolution. A primary and modern tool for many violent revolutions is the theory of communism. Communism was invented by Karl Marx with the help of Frederick Engels in the middle of the nineteenth century. This ideology, which would prove to shake human history to its core, centered around the idea that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,” as Marx explains in the *Communist Manifesto*, where he outlines the Communist philosophy (12). According to Marx, because of private property, class distinctions based on wealth arose and divided societies into two distinct and perpetual warring classes—the working proletariat class, who were oppressed, and the capital owning bourgeoisie, who did the oppressing. Marx holds that gradual progress in the position of the proletariat occurs over the epochs of history, resulting in an almost scientifically certain development from slave, to plebeian, to serf, and now currently to wage laborers; the proletariat has seen a slow increase of power as a result of revolutions that have reconstructed society (Marx, Engels, and Hobsbawm, 13).

As a result of these observations and the injustice that wage slavery has wrought on the proletariat in capitalist systems, Marx calls for a revolution in the last paragraph of *The Communist Manifesto*: “The Communists openly declare that their ends can only be attained by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a

world to win” (Marx, Engels, and Hobsbawm, 60). The ambiguity of the word “forcible” and the fact that Marx does not outright avow violent means of revolution have given rise to a variety of interpretations of the Marxist role of violence in carrying out revolution. An analysis of Marx’s writings and a critical examination of the beliefs of the most famous follower of Marx, Vladimir Lenin, indicate that non-violent revolution may be the only viable option for Communism. If an interpretation of the writing of Karl Marx (arguably one of the world’s most famous fathers of revolution) as a promoter of non-violent revolution can be established, then much more credence must be given to pacifist ideology. This thesis, that violent revolutions make Communism impractical and unsustainable, is demonstrated in two novels, *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler and *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair.

All throughout the writings of Marx, one can find the idea of revolution. In the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx refers to the “social revolution,” in which the proletariat will replace the “special repressive force” of the bourgeoisie with a repressive force of its own (Marx, Engels, and Hobsbawm 29). Through “the abolition of private property,” a “Communist revolution” can be achieved (*The German Ideology*). However, nowhere in Marx’s work can there be found an explicit avowal of violence as a means for this revolution. On the contrary, Marx claims that “the bourgeoisie itself, therefore, supplies the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education, in other words, it furnishes the proletariat with weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie” (Marx, Engels, and Hobsbawm, 26). In this passage, Marx equates education, or “the political arena,” with weapons and fighting (26). Not only does Marx never mention violence as the mechanism of social reform, but he also uses explicitly non-violent analogies. This choice of language would lead one to believe that

at the very least, Marx thought that political means could suffice as an instrument of revolution, especially when he claims that “every class struggle is a political struggle” (Marx, Engels, and Hobsbawm 25). Moreover, Marx points out the fact that the wage laborers far outnumber their exploiters, and that they “form an incoherent mass scattered over the whole country” (Marx, Engels, and Hobsbawm 24). He then explains that once the proletariat has developed communication skills and mass consciousness, they will be so powerful that the bourgeoisie will be forced to bow to them.

To further this point, Marx references the inevitability of the “victory of the proletariat” in many of his writings (Marx, Engels, and Hobsbawm 30). If it is such a scientific certainty that “the bourgeoisie has sown the seeds of its own destruction,” then it makes no sense that death and excessive casualties would be required to bring about this destruction. Rather, it makes sense that the ruling class would naturally act as its own grave digger, as Marx points out.

However, a fellow Communist, Vladimir Lenin disagrees and claims that those who advocate non-violent means are “distorting” the true aims of Marx and Engels (Lenin 4). In fact, according to Lenin, “The supersession of the bourgeoisie state by the proletariat state is impossible without violent revolution” (13). Lenin argues two main points in his essay *The State and Revolution*: First, he claims that violent revolution is the only means by which the bourgeois state can be overthrown, and second, he claims that a proletariat dictatorship will be a temporary necessity and an intermediate stage between bourgeois capitalism and classless society, before government ultimately withers away. However, for the purposes of this paper, only the first point will be examined. To support his claims that the founders of Communism advocated violent means of social revolution, Lenin quotes Frederick Engels: “Society has split

into irreconcilable opposites” (2). Lenin then argues that this irreconcilable split in society necessitates violence as a way of abolishing bourgeois oppression. However, this interpretation of Lenin is merely an inference, and it is important to note that Engels never explicitly claims that violence is necessary for revolution; some readers have simply inferred it. Lenin’s next point lies in quoting Engels’ observation that the exploiting class in most societies gains full control of “a standing army and police, which are the chief instruments of force of the state power” (Lenin 4). Lenin then exclaims that this sort of power is unshakeable, and the only way to deprive the exploiting class of military control is to confront the military in the same way it would confront proletarian resistance—with violence. Once again there is an example of putting words in the mouth of Engels. Never does he say, or is he quoted as saying, that because of the powerful grip that the bourgeoisie has over the proletariat with its military control, the only way to counter them is through militaristic action.

In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin cites Marx, saying “It is only with sighs and groans that he [Marx] admits the possibility that force will perhaps be necessary for the overthrow of the economy based on exploitation” (12). This quote may seem to defeat my point—that Lenin makes a heavy claim about the beliefs of Marx and Engels without sufficient backing; however, the irony abounds in this point of Lenin because, although this is Marx’s most explicit avowal of violent revolution, it is only with *sighs* that he admits the *possibility* that force will *perhaps* be necessary for the overthrow. Lenin’s argument here is hardly very strong; instead, it appears that the evidence we have shows that not only do Marx and Engels seem to support a revolution based on education, the political arena, and proletariat consciousness of its

advantage in numbers, but they are extremely hesitant even to mention violence in their writings—and if they do, it is accompanied by grief and sighs.

Now that it is established that non-violence is a viable option inherent within the Marxist doctrine, it is necessary to explore whether or not this principle would work in practice because, if violence would be a more practical means to revolution than peaceable overthrow, then whatever Marx has to say is irrelevant. To this end, we will dive into two novels that are based loosely on historical events.

The first novel is by Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*, which follows the journey of the main character Jurgis Rudkus, a Lithuanian immigrant, from his home country to the land of opportunity. However, much to Jurgis' dismay, he is introduced to the harsh and unforgiving industrial center of Chicago, where corporate corruption runs rampant and upward mobility for wage laborers is impossible. Jurgis has a nearly impossible time trying to find work, and the work he does find is filled with "an elemental odor, raw and crude; it is rich, almost rancid, sensual and strong" (Sinclair 28). The working conditions are hazardous; he is paid barely enough to feed his family, and when he retaliates against the manager who rapes his wife, Jurgis is blacklisted and stands no chance against the political weight of the rapist who is able to manipulate the corrupt system. Jurgis comments on the broken system around him when he says, "So from the top to bottom the place is simply a seething cauldron of jealousies and hatreds; there is no loyalty or decency anywhere about it; there is no place in it where a man counted for anything against a dollar" (Sinclair 70). The system subjects him to a life of crime simply to provide for his family members, who are constantly succumbing to starvation and disease. This situation is exactly the evil system that Marx depicts as deserving to be

overthrown. Jurgis has every right to pursue the destruction of the bourgeoisie-run sham, so when he runs into a populist speaker who turns out to be a socialist politician, Jurgis is presented with some hope for reform, “a message of salvation” (Sinclair 361).

The politician on whom Jurgis bases his entire hope for liberation and equality promises this reform through election. In no way does this socialist promise the destruction of the American government through the citizens taking up arms. Rather, he asks the citizens to pick up pens and vote him into public office. In this way, Sinclair provides a prime example of ballots over bullets and represents non-violence as the method that Lenin disapproved of and that Marx allowed. In Sinclair’s novel, there is no definitive outcome of this election; however, the last words of the novel end with the politician crying out, “And we shall organize them for the victory! We shall bear down the opposition! We shall sweep it before us--and Chicago will be ours! Chicago will be ours! CHICAGO WILL BE OURS!” (Sinclair 413). This jubilant cry promotes the idea that the only real hope for Communist reform is through the ballot box, for if Jurgis and this politician had attempted to take on the entire three-headed monster of the American government with violence, their hopes would have been crushed by an intricately interwoven political superstructure and mighty military. However, if they can infiltrate this structure from within through non-violent means, then there is a light at the end of the tunnel that such massive corruption can be terminated.

A second novel that shows the potential negative consequence of violent methods of Socialist reform is *Darkness At Noon*, written by Arthur Koestler. Koestler based this work on his role in the Bolshevik revolution and the subsequent course of action stemming from the Proletariat Dictatorship that took over in the Soviet Union. The plot revolves around a Socialist

Party member, Rubashov, who dedicates his entire life to the cause of the Party and is asked to give a false self-incriminating testimony in order to scare potential counter revolutionaries away from their attempted assassination of the Party leader, dubbed 'No.1.' Out of a combination of his guilt for those whom, under his command, he let die for things they did not do and for the sake of taking his philosophy of 'party before individual' to its logical end, Rubashov agrees to confess to a crime he did not commit. Throughout the revolution going on in Russia, Rubashov conforms to the Party ideology that "the sole object of revolution was the abolition of senseless suffering" (Koestler 260). However he believes that this absence of suffering would take place in the future classless society of Communist utopia, and that in order to achieve this goal, there would have to be some temporary suffering. Here Rubashov is following the doctrine of utilitarianism, that the end justifies the means. This doctrine is no doubt what Lenin would claim as the justification of violence in the revolution. However, Rubashov has trouble reconciling this tenet with the other Party belief that the collective is more important than the individual, as seen in the Party's use of 'we' in place of 'I.' Rubashov, awaiting his death in his jail cell, asks, "Was such an operation justified? Obviously it was, if one spoke in the abstract of "mankind"; but, applied to "man" in the singular, to the cipher 2-4, the real being of bone and flesh and blood and skin, the principle led to absurdity" (Koestler 260). Rubashov comes to the conclusion that sacrificing a certain 'I' for a future 'we' is absurd because this 'operation' has the sole purpose of ending the life of many 'I's. The massive amount of death and suffering that Rubashov observes disillusion him to the point that, while awaiting his execution in his cell, "he asked himself, for what actually are you dying? But he found no answer" (Koestler 263).

From revolutions in the Muslim world that dominate today's news to the prediction of Thomas Jefferson that democracy can survive only through frequent revolution in the tense political atmosphere of America, it is important to establish the role that violence should have in revolution. We can see that violence not only did not work in Koestler's novel—as the party seems not to be getting any closer to utopia—but its self-contradictory claims disillusion even the most avid supporters of Proletarian overthrow. Koestler's novel about the Soviet Union sends a sharp message: violence for the sake of the abolition of violence is not only absurd, but also it is perhaps not at all what Marx argued for and most likely will result only in more suffering.

Works Cited

Koestler, Arthur. *Darkness at Noon*. London: Macmillan, 1940. Print.

Lenin, Vladimir Il'ich. *State and Revolution*. New York: International, 1932. Print.

Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Moscow: Progress, 1977. Print.

Marx, Karl, Friedrich Engels, and E. J. Hobsbawm. *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Verso, 1998. Print.

Marx, Karl. *The German Ideology*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1996. Print.

Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle*. Cambridge, MA: R. Bentley, 1971. Print.