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## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# Lenin may be no longer, but his fetid disease lingers

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM November 3, 2017

“Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live!” proclaimed the banners in the Moscow mausoleum as Lenin's embalmed body was laid to rest; but 100 years after the storming of the Winter Palace, all that remains of the communist utopia the Bolsheviks promised when they seized power on November 7, 1917, is the dust and ashes of its victims.

There are, of course, regimes that still call themselves socialist, most importantly in China. However, if they are marching anywhere, it is towards a grimly authoritarian and corrupt form of capitalism, rather than to the “leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom” that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels claimed would tame “the wicked passions of man” and inaugurate the “withering away” of the state.

The chances of those prophecies being realised had proven to be poor even before Marx and Engels put pen to paper. Etienne Cabet, the French visionary who coined the term communism in 1841, tried to implement it in a settlement he established in Texas. Riven by dissent and decimated by disease, the commune promptly collapsed, with the settlers Cabet had lured from France suing him for fraud in the Paris courts.

Marx nonetheless took the term and built a towering edifice around it. However, pervasive inconsistencies made the structure he created no more useful as a blueprint for a better future than Cabet's had been.

On the one hand, Marx's version of Hegelian idealism stressed that “men make their own history”, albeit in circumstances not of their choosing. But his analysis presented historical development as the result of impersonal forces that inexorably propelled society from one stage to the next.

Individual action played no role in this framework. Instead, historical vocations were ascribed to broad social categories, with “the bourgeoisie” and “the proletariat” playing their part in history's predetermined script without regard to what “this or that member (of these groups) considers his aim”.

Nor was there any role for individual rights — which Marx dismissed as simply “a right to self-interest” — or for the clash of opinions, since the “riddle of history” had already been solved. Universal suffrage and parliamentary democracy were therefore “worth nothing”, while the British constitution was just “a big lie”.

Yet this obviously begged the question of quite how the radiant future would come into being. Although Marx never resolved that question, he and Engels reacted furiously when the German social democrats — who considered themselves Marxists — suggested it was merely a matter of waiting for capitalism's collapse.

Rather, Marx and Engels replied, only revolution — “the locomotive of history” — could pull humanity's train to the next station.

As for what happened then, the sole certainty was that the post-revolutionary state “can be nothing but a dictatorship of the proletariat” until social development reaches the point at which “state interference in social relations dies out of itself”.

It was on those ideological foundations that Lenin justified the seizure of power and constructed the Soviet state.

No doubt, the savage civil war that followed the revolution, causing twice as many combat-related deaths as Russia suffered in the first world war, made it inevitable that the new state would emerge drenched in blood. But the Bolsheviks never resiled from Leon Trotsky's statement that “who aims at the end cannot reject the means”; and since “repression (is) the necessary means of breaking the will of the opposing side, not the fortress but the guillotine await our opponents”.

The Bolsheviks' consolidation of power was therefore accompanied by the intensification of repression, including the mass deportation in 1920 of the Terek Cossacks (in which the telltale word *istrebleniye*, which means extermination, made its official debut), the banning of organised dissent within the party after the Kronstadt rebellion in February 1921, the execution later that year of Petrograd poet Nikolai Gumilev, which marked a crackdown on intellectuals, and the first show trials of priests, missionaries and political opponents in the spring and summer of 1922.

Underpinning that wave of repression was an institutionalisation of the paranoia that became the regime's hallmark. The rhetoric of “class against class” served to demonise “objective enemies” who, irrespective of their actual conduct, were guilty because of their social status.

Raised to fever pitch after 1928, this world view was translated by Joseph Stalin into the doctrine that the closer one came to realising socialism, the more ferociously the exploiting classes would fight back. It was Mao Zedong who drew the logical conclusion: socialism's struggle with its enemies, he told a sympathetic Pol Pot in 1975, “would last 10,000 years”, and so must

the party's dictatorship.

All that makes it astonishing that Australian intellectuals such as John Manifold could idolise Stalin, with Manifold writing a funeral ode in which “like a fighter plane / straining dauntless towards a friendly dome / of communism, Uncle Joe reaches home”.

But while Marxism has lost its shine, the Manichean “class against class” view that lies at the heart of the crimes committed in its name has not.

On the contrary, Chantal Mouffe and her husband Ernesto Laclau, who died in 2014, perhaps the most influential political philosophers of today's radical left, make “agonistic politics”, based on an irreconcilable conflict between opposing camps, the supreme form of political contest.

Reducing politics to little more than a civil war, their acolytes cast “the 1 per cent” — who presumably deserve no better a fate than the bloodsuckers, capitalist-roaders and kulaks of earlier times — as the “objective enemies” of “the people”.

There is, in the vehemence of this demagoguery, a whiff of violence which, in Australia too, has become increasingly accepted on the left as memories of communism fade.

Yes, Lenin is dead. But a century after the revolution that shook the world, his disease still rages.