

Proposed Course: Twentieth Century Communist Theories of Revolution and State-Building

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How course relates to Theory and Criticism:

There is a notable Marxist tradition in both theory and criticism. A casual look at the list of graduate students at the Centre and their research interests shows how many are fascinated by this tradition. Leninism is often seen as the starting point for many twentieth century evolutions, while also serving as its own important theoretical approach to Marxism in and of itself. Stalinism meanwhile is an interesting chronological successor – much ink has been spilled about whether Stalin *was* a theorist and one worth considering in the Marxist canon, along with its relationship to Leninism. This course, starting with the Soviet approach to organized communism, will then expand to look at how various other thinkers of the “communist tradition” have responded to or built from the Leninist or Stalinist traditions. This will be explored by focusing particularly on the issue of how revolution and statebuilding are theorized, allowing focused discussions on key concepts from communist approaches to self-determination, to differing ideas of the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” to the means to achieve revolution, to the political, social, and cultural features of communist states. Furthermore, these discussions all happened in certain contexts which will also be explored to determine the broader relevance of these theories in context, but also as theories in and of themselves.

Course Description:

Marxism-Leninism remains a prominent feature of many “communist” regimes today and has influenced a worldwide movement, and a variety of spin-off ideas. Yet, the term Marxism-Leninism in the Soviet context can be seen to be a specific brand of “communism,” namely one promoted by the Soviet Union and other influential states. In some analyses, Marxism-Leninism reflects the doctrine Joseph Stalin developed following Lenin’s death in 1924, lionizing Lenin’s theoretical and political contributions, tying them explicitly to Marxism, and seeking to add himself in the canon of Marxist figures, enhancing his legitimacy in the eyes of the Bolshevik party and international communist movement.

Leninism represents the corpus of ideas that came from the writings of V.I. Lenin. Influenced by Marxism, social democracy, and the Russian radical tradition, he called for a vanguard party, promoted the dictatorship of the proletariat, and expanded his corpus of ideas to try and revive revolutionary Marxism during the First World War, developing a theory of imperialism, of self-determination, and of how Marxism could apply to the Russian context, among other ideas.

Upon the Bolsheviks coming to power, Lenin’s theoretical approaches were now tested by the practical realities of trying to govern in the former Russian empire and the need to fight to consolidate the revolution. As a result, many of Lenin’s theories before the Bolshevik Revolution evolved to reflect these realities; historians have reconsidered Lenin’s theories in light of the practical decisions the Bolsheviks made. Lenin also was forced to reconsider his theories in the service of protecting the revolution and its gains. Following Lenin’s death, although Stalin

sought to link his leadership and ideas to Lenin, historians, and theorists, disagree to what extent Stalinism was an extension of Leninism or something different. Regardless, these ideas that came out of the Soviet Union took on new significance in a fight for global revolution and often these theories were reimagined or reconsidered in a variety of local contexts. The result is multiple different forms of communism inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution, yet sometimes taking different approaches in different regions in the world, leading to a variety of “camps” in the Communist tradition.

This proposed class aims to introduce students to a deeper reading of the writings and theory of Lenin, Stalin, and other prominent communist thinkers around the world and to consider them on their own, in context, and, where relevant, implemented into actual policy. What *was* Leninism? How did it evolve through the words of different theorists in different parts of the world? To what extent can we speak of a global “Communist” movement, and to what extent to different regional and local realities lead to new understandings? How did the realities of needing to consolidate power change theory? Did it inform the broader ideology, or did practical considerations drive ideological evolution? Should Lenin or Stalin be deemed linked ideologically and theoretically, or are they their own distinct theoretical approaches? To what extent did Stalinism also lead to new evolutions internationally? What is the Communist state? What is a Communist nation? How is the proletariat understood, especially after Lenin’s interventions? This course will provide an understanding of the myriad of theories that are understood to be “communist” while emphasizing their role in defining how communist regimes built their states and staged revolutions.

Texts potentially to be studied (This list would be revised and whittled down before the full syllabus, but should give a taste of what themes could be discussed):

Potential theoretical works to be discussed:

V.I. Lenin

- *What is to be Done?*
- *The Right to Nations to Self-Determination*
- *State and Revolution*
- *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*

Joseph Stalin:

- *Marxism and the National Question*
- *Foundations of Leninism*
- *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course*

Lev Trotsky:

- *The Lessons of October*
- *Revolution Betrayed*

Rosa Luxemburg, *The National Question*

Karl Kautsky, *Ultra-Imperialism*

Mao Zedong, *On Practice*

Mao Zedong, *On Contradiction*

Mao Zedong, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*

Jose Carlos Mariategui, *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality*

Documents and Discussions from the Communist International

- Debates on the National and Colonial Questions at the Second Comintern Congress
- Debates on the Native Republic Thesis at the Sixth Comintern Congress

Ho Chi Minh, *The Imperialist Aggressors Can Never Enslave the Heroic Vietnamese People*

Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Aime Cesaire, *Discourses on Colonialism*

George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism*

Julius Nyerere, *The Arusha Declaration*

Other works or published debates by other major communists and communist-aligned figures such as Alexandra Kollontai, Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, Fidel Castro, Enver Hoxha, Josip Broz Tito, Kwame Nkrumah, and more, will be included based on the subtopics to be explored.

Excerpts from Potential Secondary works to be discussed:

- Andrzej Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom*
- Lars Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*
- Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*
- Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light*
- Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*
- David Brandenberger, *Stalin's Master Narrative*
- Jeremy Friedman, *Ripe for Revolution*
- Walter Rodney, *The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World*
- Julie Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History*
- Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology*
- Enzo Traverso, *Revolution*

Term:

No preference