

Lenin's cultural internationalism

Flo Menezes

One of the striking democratic traits of Lenin's spirit is his notorious discretion in the arts. Unlike authoritarian personalities, who immediately seek to impose their own conception on all fields of human activity, generally without accepting any dissent and directing them towards strengthening their own power – either through themselves or through their agents – an authentic revolutionary leader will always know how to encourage freedom of artistic thought and creation, and when we look at Lenin's attitude towards art throughout his life, this notable difference between the way he saw culture and the truculence that followed him in the bureaucratic command of the Russian Revolution, leading to Stalinist Socialist Realism, mainly formulated and postulated in strict rules of artistic conduct by Andrei Alexandrovich Jdanov, Stalin's close collaborator, stands out. The coercions that many artists suffered under Jdanov, a fact that led such impositions to be categorized as typical of "Jdanovism", in reality loosened not with Jdanov's death in August 1948, but only with the disappearance of Stalin himself in March 1953, which proves the above all *Stalinist* character of Socialist Realism, having generated one of the most embarrassing phases in the arts, such was the low level of the works produced under the tutelage of the Soviet usurper who, paradoxically, used "Leninism" as one of the arguments for maintaining and strengthening his authoritarian power.

The way in which art and culture were treated in the Stalinist era is one of the clearest proofs of how contradictory Stalin's claim to a "Leninist" heritage was, because as Anatoli Lunatcharski, People's Commissar for Education and Culture

after the October Revolution of 1917, rightly said, “throughout his life, Lenin had very little time to devote to art. In this respect, he always confessed to being a layman and, as he always considered dilettantism to be something odious, he didn’t like to give opinions on art” (Lunatcharski 1975, p. 9). It was clear that, for Lenin, art required specific and careful consideration, and serious expression in this regard could only come from people who considered themselves sufficiently competent in artistic languages: “[Lenin] declared that he could not speak seriously about those questions [about art], because he did not consider himself to have the necessary competence” (Lunatcharski 1975, p. 13).¹ From this fundamental attitude, which shows respect and restraint in the face of creation and invention in the arts, comes a logical consequence in keeping with the revolutionary spirit: art and culture should not be imposed by the Revolution, and a revolutionary leader, however much he might naturally have his own predilections, and even if he thought he had the necessary competence to pronounce on art, should not exert any coercion on the artist. And as much as Lenin was the supreme leader of the Russian Revolution, enjoying greater prestige and power than his greatest companion in directing the course of the Revolution, Leon Trotsky, his occasional opinions would never serve as an argument to formulate guidelines to be followed by cultural agents. This fact is proven and reinforced by Lunatcharski himself who, constantly dispatching Lenin on matters related to education and culture and respectfully asking him, quite often, about his opinions on the directions to be adopted in his section, vehemently attests: “Vladimir Ilyich never converted his aesthetic sympathies and antipathies into guiding ideas” (Lunatcharski 1975, p. 15).

Trotsky’s resourcefulness in dealing with artistic issues, and more specifically with literature, the main (but not the only) fruit of which was his volume bringing together essays written mainly between 1922 and 1923 under the title *Literature and Revolution*, leads us to conjecture that there was a certain distinction between Lenin and Trotsky: while the former is characterized, as we have attested above, by a manifest restraint in the face of artistic issues, the latter seemed more involved, resourceful and dedicated to these issues, possessing, it seems, a broader and more critical culture in relation above all to literary works, to the point of manifesting himself through these critical essays that ended up constituting one of the most precious contributions of 20th century Marxism in the field of the arts. Not to mention his later involvement, in the final years of his life (in 1938, to be precise), with one of the main strands of the artistic avant-garde, namely Surrealism – especially as a result of his very friendly relations with the French writer André Breton, one of the movement’s leaders and an avowed Trotskyist –, even if he was equally critical of this current, which Trotsky viewed with a certain amount of caution because he understood that, through the so-called *automatic writing*, Surrealism was perhaps misinterpreting the still emerging Freudian psychoanalysis. This was Trotsky’s reservation about “objective chance”, which had become a sacred principle of the

¹ In an important text from 1932, *On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Alexandrinsky Theatre*, Lunatcharski reproduces a line that Lenin allegedly addressed to him: “I do not pretend to be an expert in artistic matters” (Lenin *apud* Lunatcharski, 1980, p. 246).

Surrealist movement.²Therefore, this distinction between Lenin and Trotsky seems indisputable to us, i.e., in terms of their involvement with artistic issues and their resourcefulness in this very specific field, but the convergences are no less important. For, in an important text of May 9, 1924, *The Party and the Artists*, Trotsky, in full accordance with Leninian discretion (I prefer this term here to “Leninist”), states:

Yes, we must deal with art as art and literature as literature, in other words, as an entirely specific sector of human activity. We do, of course, have class criteria that also apply to the artistic field, but these class criteria must, in this case, be subjected to a kind of artistic refraction, in other words, they must be adapted to ***the absolutely specific character of the sphere of activity to which we apply them.*** (Trotsky 1973, p. 137; our emphasis)

Trotsky's statement, in the midst of the affirmation phase of the Russian Revolution and already in the process of degeneration – since it dates from four months after Lenin's death – echoes his already visionary formulation of 1910, when, in a text entitled *The Intelligentsia and Socialism*, he stated that

regardless of the class character of any movement (for that is only the way!), and regardless of its current party-political physiognomy (for that is only the means!), socialism, by its very essence, as a universal social ideal, means the liberation of all types of intellectual labor from all social-historical limitations and obstacles. (Trotsky 1973, p. 38)

Now, was not this liberation of intellectual work as one of the fundamental goals of socialism precisely what Lenin wrote as one of his basic precepts in relation to artists? Rosa Luxemburg's great friend Clara Zetkin, in her *Memories of Lenin* (1955), reproduces a statement by Lenin that leaves us in no doubt about this:

In a society based on private property, artists produce goods for the market, they need buyers. Our revolution freed artists from the yoke of such prosaic conditions. It made the Soviet state their defender and their client. ***Every artist, everyone who considers themselves an artist, has the right to create freely according to their ideal, without depending on anything.*** (Lenin *apud* Zetkin, in: Lenin 1980, p. 231; our emphasis)

As we can see, Lenin's stance was not without its contradictions. For in the heat of the moment, he sometimes appealed to Lunatcharski to guide cultural production as *propaganda* for the Revolution.³ Now, if the artist should not “depend on anything”, why should art serve as “propaganda”? The heat of the hours to which

² Breton himself quotes Trotsky in his text about his visit to the revolutionary leader during his exile in Mexico: “Comrade Breton, your interest in the phenomena of objective chance doesn't seem clear to me. I know very well that Engels appealed to this notion, but I wonder if, in your case, there isn't something else. It seems to me that you have some concern to keep – your hands were marking out a fragile space in the air – a little window open to the ***beyond***” (Trotsky *apud* Breton, in: Trotsky & Breton 1985, p. 62; original emphasis).

³ “In 1918 Vladimir Ilyich called me and told me that it was necessary to develop art as a means of propaganda” (Lunatcharski 1975, p. 11).

we refer does not only date back to the October Revolution: as early as the *first*, unsuccessful Russian Revolution of 1905, in a text entitled “The Organization of the Party and Party Literature”, written on November 13 (26)⁴, Lenin even formulates that “publishing houses, stores, bookshops and reading rooms, libraries and other establishments must be Party enterprises, subject to its control” (Lenin 1975, p. 73), a formulation that would fit like a glove in the iron grip of the Jdanovists/Stalinists in their strict and authoritarian control of cultural production.

But even here, contradictions exist and can play a positive role. In the very same text from 1905, Lenin recognized that the Party’s relationship with art could in no way be mechanical, defending the individual freedom of the creator precisely in the field of literature, which, in dealing with words, makes the meaning of its formulations and the ideology of its authors clearer than any other art:

It is indisputable that literature lends itself less than anything else to this mechanical equation, to leveling, to the domination of the majority over the minority. It is indisputable that it is absolutely necessary in this field to give a greater place to personal initiative, to individual inclinations, to thought and imagination, to form and content. All this is indisputable, but all this only proves that the literary sector of the Party’s work cannot be identified mechanically with the other sectors of its work. (Lenin 1975, p. 73)

In any case, the congruence between Lenin and Trotsky manifested itself more and more categorically, not only in practical questions of an eminently political nature, but also ideologically. Maturity also comes to great geniuses, and already in the construction of the socialism that had been victorious until then, both Lenin and Trotsky defended a non-mechanistic relationship between the Party and art, or between Marxism itself and culture, because it was clear to both of them that the methods of art acquire a certain autonomy, differing from the eminently Marxist methods of analysis. This is precisely what Trotsky refers to in his text “Party politics in art”, part of *Literature and Revolution*:

Marxism offers several possibilities: it evaluates the development of the new art, follows all its changes and variations through criticism, encourages progressive currents, but does no more than that. ***Art must blaze its own trail. The methods of Marxism are not the same as those of art.*** (Trotsky 1980, p. 187; our emphasis)

The fact is that, no matter how much one wants to affirm, in a genuinely Marxist stance, the supervalence of historical factors over individuals, the thesis of a *historical substitutionism*, whereby individuals are seen as essentially weaker than their macro-structural conditions, must be challenged and questioned, because we see that, depending on *who* this or that historical circumstance depends on, the course of events turns out to be completely different. In the oscillations of such formulations on the ambivalent relationship between Party and culture, we see that some of them do not run the risk of becoming authoritarian weapons as long as they are in the hands of individuals of upright character like Lenin, but already in the hands

⁴ The difference in dates refers to the difference between the Western and Russian calendars.

of personalities like Stalin... Lenin certainly wasn't counting on his own death when he insisted on the propagandistic nature of art, because making propaganda for a revolutionary regime is completely different from making propaganda for a despotic regime. If propaganda is necessary, it is only revolutionary if it is "controlled" by revolutionaries, otherwise it becomes a lethal weapon for the Revolution itself!

In this sense, the defense of an *anarchic* condition for artistic creation, absolutely free of all coercion and consequently of all obligation in the face of a presumed and inescapable commitment to ideological propaganda itself, as Trotsky had made a point of stating in the definitive wording of the Manifesto of the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Artists, founded by him, Breton and Diego Rivera in 1938, is symptomatic. In the provisional draft, written by Breton and Rivera, the statement that emphasizes this precept did not exist, but it is included in the finished text and corrected by Trotsky:

If, for the development of the material productive forces, it is up to the revolution to erect a *socialist* regime with a centralized plan, for intellectual creation it must, right from the start, establish and ensure an *anarchist* regime of individual freedom. (Trotsky & Breton 1985, pp. 42-43)⁵

In a hermeneutic analysis of the origin of this essay, it becomes clear that the insistence and emphasis on the *anarchist* character of artistic creation comes from the hands of Trotsky himself, which at first may seem surprising. How, in the midst of building the Fourth International, could there be any concession to *anarchism* as a concept, even if it was strictly confined to artistic creation? Maturity – as we have already said – also comes to great geniuses...

And another aspect that is no less surprising is precisely the appeal to this concept considered by the supposedly Marxist orthodoxy to be so... bourgeois! In his 1910-1911 essays on Leon Tolstoy, in one of the few digressions that Lenin had made into the realm of art – motivated above all by the death of the great Russian writer – Lenin appealed to the concept of *genius*⁶ that sought to place Tolstoy's personality beyond any thesis of historical substitutionism, attributing to him a unique role in the history of Russian literature: "Leon Tolstoy belongs to an era that was reflected in masterly relief both in his *ingenious* artistic works and in his doctrine, an era that extends from 1861 to 1905" ("Leon Tolstoy and his epoch", essay written on January 22 (February 4), 1911: Lenin 1975, p. 60; our emphasis). The same concept is evoked in an earlier text, dated November 28 (December 11) 1910, entitled "Leon Tolstoy and the contemporary workers' movement":

5 In the original French: "Si, pour le développement des forces productives matérielles, la révolution est tenue d'ériger un régime *socialiste* de plan centralisé, pour la création intellectuelle elle doit dès le début même établir et assurer un régime *anarchiste* de liberté individuelle." ("Pour un art révolutionnaire indépendant" (Manifesto of July 25, 1938), signed by André Breton and Diego Rivera, but also written by Trotsky, in: *Dossier André Breton – Surréalisme et Politique*, Les Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne. Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2016, p. 106).

6 Although I have a basic knowledge of the Russian language, I haven't had access to Lenin's texts in the original Russian, but I'm using the seriousness of the translations I've read (in Spanish, Portuguese...), based on the assumption that Lenin did indeed appeal to the concept of *genius* or *geniality* in its corresponding word in Russian.

Tolstoy's criticism is not new [...]. But the originality of Tolstoy's criticism, its historical importance, lies in the fact that it translates, with a vigor of which only *genius* artists are capable, the transformation of the mentality of the broadest masses of the people of Russia in the period in question, and precisely of rural and peasant Russia. (Lenin 1975, p. 50; our emphasis)

Much more bourgeois (or petty-bourgeois) than evoking the term is ignoring its original meaning, as formulated with great skill by Arthur Schopenhauer. The concept of *geniality* refers to special circumstances in which an individual, acting with high *objectivity* in the face of the facts of his world and its structural orderings, manages to *transcend* the specific historical conditions that surround him and ends up erecting works that manage to be transplanted, with permanent value, to other later eras with the same or perhaps even greater artistic and aesthetic value than at the time they were conceived. For Schopenhauer, it is precisely in Art that *genius* reveals itself in all its fullness:

It is **ART**, the work of genius. It repeats the eternal Ideas apprehended by pure contemplation, the essential and permanent phenomena of the world, which, depending on the form in which it is repeated, is displayed as plastic art, poetry or music. Its only origin is the knowledge of Ideas, its only end is the communication of this knowledge. – Science follows the endless and incessant stream of the various forms from foundation to consequence: from each end achieved, it is thrown forward again, never reaching a final end, or complete satisfaction, just as running can reach the point where the clouds touch the horizon. Art, on the other hand, finds its end everywhere. For the object of its contemplation it removes from the torrent of the world's course and isolates it before itself. And this particular, which in the fleeting torrent of the world was a tiny part disappearing, becomes a representative of the whole, an equivalent in space and time of the infinite. Art stops at this particular. The wheel of time stops. Relationships disappear. Only the essential, the Idea, is the object of art. (Schopenhauer 2005, pp. 253-254; original emphasis)⁷

In this sense, far from interpreting *geniality* as something of an absolutely *subjective* nature – which would effectively make the concept fit in perfectly with the properly *bourgeois* and above all romantic spirit – the concept is imbued with an *objective* nature, leaning much more towards a *Marxist* interpretation of its meaning:

⁷ Given the importance of the philosophical formulation, we reproduce the passage in the original German: “Es ist *die Kunst*, das Werk des Genius. Sie wiederholt die durch reine Kontemplation aufgefaßten ewigen Ideen, das Wesentliche und Bleibende aller Erscheinungen der Welt, und je nachdem der Stoff ist, in welchem sie wiederholt, ist sie bildende Kunst; Poesie oder Musik. Ihr einziger Ursprung ist die Erkenntnis der Ideen; ihr einziges Ziel Mittheilung dieser Erkenntnis. – Während die Wissenschaft, dem rast- und bestandlosen Strom vierfach gestalteter Gründe und Folgen nachgehend, bei jedem erreichten Ziel immer wieder weiter gewiesen wird und nie ein letztes Ziel, noch völlige Befriedigung finden kann, so wenig als man durch Laufen den Punkt erreicht, wo die Wolken den Horizont berühren; so ist dagegen die Kunst überall am Ziel. Denn sie reißt das Objekt ihrer Kontemplation heraus aus dem Strome des Weltlaufs und hat es isoliert vor sich: und dieses Einzelne, was in jenem Strom ein verschwindend kleiner Teil war, wird ihr ein Repräsentant des Ganzen, ein Äquivalent des in Raum und Zeit unendlich vielen: sie bleibt daher bei diesem einzelnen stehen: das Rad der Zeit hält sie an: die Relationen verschwinden ihr: nur das Wesentliche, die Idee, ist ihr Objekt.” (Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Drittes Buch, § 36, in: Schopenhauer 2014, pp. 199-200; original emphasis).

“It follows that GENIALITY is nothing but the most perfect OBJECTIVITY, that is, the objective orientation of the spirit, as opposed to the subjective one that goes hand in hand with the person himself, that is, with the will” (Schopenhauer 2005, p. 254; original emphasis)⁸. And it is to this objective character, which transcends its time while still referring to it with all its sharpness, that Lenin refers when he refers to Tolstoy.

Contrary to what one might expect, Lenin did not openly combat Tolstoy's *pacifism*, nor his moralism. Recognizing the Russian writer's noble origins, he praised the transcendent character that transpires in his writings, especially in his final works:

Tolstoy belonged, by birth and upbringing, to the high nobility of the Russian countryside; he broke with all the current opinions in that milieu and, in his last works, vehemently criticized the current political, ecclesiastical, social and economic regime, based on the enslavement of the masses, their misery, the ruin of the peasants and small landowners in general, the violence and hypocrisy that permeate contemporary life from top to bottom. (Lenin 1975, p. 50)⁹

More than that: he comes out in defense of Tolstoy, declaring the Socialist Revolution as the only necessary and possible way for the work of the Russian master to become accessible to everyone:

The artist Tolstoy is only known, even in Russia, by a minority. In order for his great works to become accessible to everyone, it is necessary to fight, to continue fighting against the social order that has condemned millions, tens of millions of men, to ignorance, brutalization, forced labor, misery; the socialist revolution is necessary. (Lenin 1975, p. 43; original emphasis)¹⁰

Faced with this “transcendence”, this *objectivity* of which the “genius” work is capable, Lenin made a curious comment in one of his essays on the Russian writer, dated January 22 (February 4) 1911 and entitled “Leon Tolstoy and his time”, in which he highlighted the progressive aspects present in great works of art, regardless of their time. The “curiosity” lies in the fact that, instead of “progressive”, Lenin uses the term... *socialist*! This reminds us of an answer that the great Brazilian communist literary critic Antônio Candido gave when asked if he was disappointed by the collapse of socialism in the face of capitalist hegemony. More or less with these words, Antônio Candido surprised the interviewer and returned the question with another initial question, followed by a categorical statement: “The collapse of socialism? But socialism is a winner! All the social conquests within capitalism, the most progressive things in it, are due to the socialist ideology and its struggles!”¹¹

⁸ In the original German: “[...] So ist *Genialität* nichts anderes als die vollkommenste *Objektivität*, d. h. objektive Richtung des Geistes, entgegengesetzt der subjektiven, auf die eigene Person, d. i., den Willen, gehenden.” (Schopenhauer *idem*, 2014, p. 200; original emphasis).

⁹ This excerpt is taken from his essay “Leon Tolstoy and the contemporary workers' movement”, dated November 28 (December 11), 1910.

¹⁰ This excerpt is taken from the essay that Lenin wrote on the occasion of the Russian writer's death: “Leon Tolstoy”, November 16 (29), 1910.

¹¹ I'm reproducing the great critic's statement from memory, but I can vouch for the truth of its

In his essay, Lenin states that there is socialism and socialism, praising, as if in apology for the *minimal programs* that are still trapped by conditions that were once feudal and then capitalist, every progressive element as fundamentally *socialist* in nature:

There is no doubt that Tolstoy's teachings are utopian and reactionary, in the most exact and profound sense of the term, in their content. But this in no way means that this doctrine is not socialist, nor that it does not contain critical elements capable of providing valuable material for the instruction of the advanced classes. There is socialism and socialism. In all countries where there is a capitalist mode of production, there is a socialism that expresses the ideology of the class called upon to replace the bourgeoisie, and there is another socialism that corresponds to the ideology of the classes that the bourgeoisie has replaced. Feudal socialism, for example, falls into the latter category, and its character was defined many years ago, more than sixty years ago, by Marx, along with the other varieties of socialism. (Lenin 1975, pp. 63-64)

Obviously, there is a certain freedom in the use of the term here, but what is evident is the importance of not closing the doors to the creations of the past, coming out in defense of the cultural and historical legacy of all humanity, something that viscerally united, once again, the thought and erudition of both Lenin and Trotsky, in stark opposition to the truculence and ignorance of Stalin.

In "Lenin on Culture", an article written for *Pravda* on January 21, 1930, Lunatcharski stresses that

Lenin strongly emphasized that it would be much easier for us to fight and build if we had inherited a more developed bourgeois culture after the overthrow of the monarchy and the ruling classes. He repeated several times that this bourgeois culture would make it easier for the proletariat of the countries of the West to accelerate, after its victory, the effective and complete realization of socialism. (Lunatcharski in Lenin 1980, p. 247)

It was in this sense that, making an analogy with the use of officers from the old regime as members of the Red Army organized by Trotsky, Lenin stated in his 1919 text "Successes and difficulties of Soviet power" that the edifice of socialism should be built with the stones inherited from the bourgeoisie:

When comrade Trotsky recently told me that the number of officers in the army was in the tens of thousands, I had a concrete idea of what the secret of using our enemy is, how we must force those who were our enemies to build communism, how we must build communism with the bricks that the capitalists chose to use against us. No other bricks were given to us! And with these bricks, under the leadership of the proletariat, we must force the bourgeois experts to erect our building. This is the most difficult thing, but it is also the guarantee of success. (Lenin 1980, p. 63)¹²

content.

¹² It is also in this sense that Lenin also states, in *Leftism, the infantile disease of communism*, that "bourgeois intellectuals cannot be banished or destroyed, they must be defeated, transformed,

Through this defense of the bourgeois cultural heritage, Lenin strongly identified with Trotsky's vision of art and culture, because for both of them, socialism would not represent the negation of historical culture, but rather *the historical emancipation of thought*, finally making accessible to the masses the most important things that man has managed to build, even in the midst of the market conditions of capitalism, or even before, in the midst of feudalism, in the fields of science, philosophy and the arts. Hence their strong reservations about the imminent *proletarian culture* – the *Proletkult*, advocated by Alexander Bogdanov, his great friend Lunatcharski and others. In the draft resolution on proletarian culture, whose unfinished manuscript of October 9, 1920 was only published for the first time in 1945, Lenin leaves no doubt when he states in his second point how he saw the issue:

Not the *invention* of a new proletarian culture, but the *development* of the best models, traditions and results of the *existing culture from the point of view* of the Marxist conception of the world and the conditions of life and struggle of the proletariat at the time of its dictatorship. (Lenin 1980, p. 152; original emphasis)

It is nuclear in this context how a Marxist conception of the world could serve as a point of view for such a development from the models of the bourgeois past, but there is an unequivocal understanding that *inventing* a new proletarian culture would be a task that is not only inadvisable, but unfeasible, since in the dictatorship of the proletariat, the proletariat itself would cease to be a class. No one could have predicted the direction the arts would take in the long and assured construction of socialism – a fact that could not be verified, as the October Revolution itself began its process of degeneration, notably from 1923 onwards, with Lenin's illness and, above all, the definitive defeat of the German Revolution –, but for both Lenin and Trotsky it was certain that one of the means to be appropriated by the proletariat in the revolutionary process was the means of intellectual production: the historical cultural legacy of humanity¹³.

In the cultural field, there was no need to make a *tabula rasa*. Ruptures of this kind, if they were to occur, should come from eminently artistic positions, as a free choice of the creator, not as an imposition of the Party, and even less as a fundamental guideline of the Revolution. In his magnificent essay on the great poet Vladimir Mayakovsky¹⁴, considered by Jean-Michel Palmier in his immense study

merged again, re-educated, just as the proletarians themselves must be re-educated on the basis of the dictatorship of the proletariat, at the cost of a long-term struggle, for neither will they be able to rid themselves of their petty-bourgeois prejudices suddenly, by a miracle, by the intervention of the Blessed Virgin, by an order, a resolution or a decree, but only at the cost of a long and difficult mass struggle against petty-bourgeois influences on the masses" (Lenin 1975, p. 149).

13 In *The Plastic Arts and Politics in the U.S.S.R.*, Lunatcharski, who was at odds with Lenin for advocating *Proletkult*, says: "Vladimir Ilyich also disagreed with my opinion of *Proletkult*. [...] He feared that *Proletkult* would also try to deal with the 'elaboration' of a proletarian science and, in general, a total proletarian culture. [...] He thought that with these initiatives, which for the moment were immature, the proletariat would turn its back on studying and assimilating the scientific and cultural elements that already existed" (Lunatcharski 1975, pp. 15-16).

14 Both the essay on Mayakovsky and the one on Fyodor Dostoevsky (in which the author develops the idea of the *polyphonic novel* in the Russian writer's work) are proof of Lunatcharski's great critical talent. The essay on Mayakovsky, however, reveals Lunatcharski's rather questionable side in

on Lenin and art to be the greatest poet of the Russian Revolution¹⁵, Lunatcharski states that

Mayakovsky understood very well that humanity's past held immense values, but he feared that if he accepted them, he would be forced to accept everything else as well. Therefore, it was better to rebel against everything and say: "We are our own ancestors". (Lunatcharski 2018, p. 186)

But Lenin, quite the opposite – and with certain reservations, perhaps without much reason, about the poetic work of the *metal poet* (as Mayakovsky defined himself) –, and just like Trotsky, did not hesitate to defend the bourgeois heritage, even calling for its systematic study by the victorious proletariat. Resolution 4 of the text "Proletarian culture", dated October 9, 1920, clearly states this:

Marxism gained its universal historical significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because it in no way rejected the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, but, on the contrary, assimilated and reformulated everything that was of value in more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture. Only further work on this basis and in this direction, inspired by the practical existence of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the struggle of the proletariat against all exploitation, can be regarded as the development of a truly proletarian culture. (Lenin 1979, p. 271)

In the aforementioned text by Trotsky from 1924, "The Party and the artists", there is an enunciation that finds great identity with the Leninist formulation, when Trotsky states that

the bourgeoisie took power and created its own culture; the proletariat, having taken power, will create a proletarian culture. But the bourgeoisie is a wealthy and

its conclusion, when he vehemently opposed Trotsky, claiming that, for Trotsky, the poet's suicide in 1930 was due to the course of the Revolution, which was already in full degeneracy. Lunatcharski writes: "Trotsky wrote that the poet's tragedy is to have loved the revolution with all his might, to have gone to meet it, when that revolution was no longer authentic, losing itself in its love and its journey. Of course, how could the revolution be authentic if Trotsky didn't take part in it? That alone is enough to demonstrate that it is a 'false' revolution! Trotsky also says that Mayakovsky took his own life because the revolution didn't follow the Trotskyist path. [...] Thus, in the interests of his small, insignificant and bankrupt political group, Trotsky welcomes everything that is hostile to the progressive elements of the socialist world we are creating" (Lunatcharski 2018, p. 199). This did not prevent Trotsky, with his unwavering intellectual honesty, from writing a posthumous tribute to Lunatcharski on January 1, 1933, recognizing his cultural and intellectual merits by drawing, with his acute pen, a shrewd psychological portrait of the militant who, from a friend and comrade, became, in his words, an "honest adversary". The short essay, which didn't appear in any edition of *Literature and Revolution* during his lifetime, ended up being added to the posthumous editions of this fundamental book for Marxist culture. In any case, it must be acknowledged that Trotsky's claim about the motives that drove Mayakovsky to suicide did not necessarily correspond to reality, since, as Palmier rightly describes, suicide was an idea that had haunted the poet for a long time: "On April 14, 1930, a tragedy occurred. Mayakovsky shot himself in the heart. Many people tried to find a political reason for this suicide, trying to read into it the result of the divorce between the new regime and himself [...]. Others saw it as the culmination of all the criticism he had received and, above all, the lack of enthusiasm for his last works. In reality, Mayakovsky, this hypersensitive giant, had been haunted by death and suicide ever since he was young" (Palmier 1975, pp. 406-407).
15 See Palmier 1975, p. 423.

therefore educated class. Bourgeois culture existed even before the bourgeoisie formally took power. [...] In bourgeois society, the proletariat is a disinherited class, which owns nothing and is therefore not in a position to create its own culture. When it takes power, it sees clearly for the first time the real situation of its terrible cultural backwardness. (Trotsky 1973, p. 140)

This crude realization, evident in minds with intellectual honesty and frankness, prompts us to reflect on the situation of culture today, in the midst of the hegemony of capital. The situation, however, is different: with the delay of the proletarian revolutions and the relative “socializing” advance of some populist measures of a social nature within capitalism itself (advances of the “minimal program” type to which we have already referred), the proletariat, even in the midst of late capitalism, ends up erecting its own “marginal” culture, doing so, however, in extremely precarious conditions and *under strong ideological imposition, at the specific level of artistic languages*. The result is cultural products of a very low standard, defended tooth and nail by the “ideology of empowerment”, very common nowadays, which tends to confuse the legitimacy of such initiatives with an irresponsible attitude, from a Marxist point of view, in defense of the quality of these cultural by-products of capitalist society, simply because they come from the most exploited classes in society. We therefore have a veritable *apology for cultural misery*. What we are simply seeing is the supremacy and apology of the capitalist *cultural industry* itself (as Theodor W. Adorno defined it). From a cultural point of view, we are living through humanity's most critical period. We have to have the courage to denounce a critical situation like this, in the face of the risk of lynching by pseudo-leftists (in general, petty-bourgeois with a shallow cultural background), *and fight, even within the framework of capitalism, for access for disadvantaged populations to culture and the study of artistic languages, with all their technical specificities*. This without abandoning the defense of the artistic avant-garde, because the character of resistance in the face of cultural barbarism comes to the fore in the midst of its manifestations, in a battle that revives the struggle waged by Mayakovsky for the New. Referring to Mayakovsky's stance, Lunatcharski states:

The poet must take part in the production of new things, that is, his works, even if they are not utilitarian in themselves, must provide stimuli, methods or instructions for producing useful things. The purpose of all this is the transfiguration of circumstances and, consequently, the transformation of society as a whole. (Lunatcharski 2018, p. 189)

What is being defended here is *aesthetic sensibility*, something systematically fought against by late capitalism and the cultural industry.

However, Lenin didn't always know how to follow or even appreciate this New that the metal poet championed. “Regarding Futurism”, for example, “his opinion was frankly negative” (Lunatcharski 1975, p. 13), and he had great difficulty assimilating or letting himself be carried away by the musical sensibility. The abstraction of music, which despite all its technicality (which certainly makes it the most difficult of the arts) has the potential, through the force of its tensions and

relaxations and its time course, to move, to provoke emotions, bothered Lenin¹⁶. Perhaps because of this difficulty he preferred Beethoven's music, especially the *Appassionata* Sonata, as his wife Nadejda Krupskaya attests in her *Memories of Lenin*¹⁷.

This episode is symptomatic because Beethoven's work is obviously not the only one in which this occurs, but it is a very clear example of how bourgeois technical progress has a direct impact on artistic creation, and at the same time in a direction that is sometimes opposed to the bourgeois spirit itself. In his curious analysis and reflection on the sounds of the world – his book *The Tuning of the World* – the creator of the term *soundscape*, Canadian Murray Schafer, observes that

the substitution of the harpsichord, with its clamped string, for the piano, with its hammered string, typifies the greater aggressiveness of an era in which clamped or hammered objects came into existence thanks to new industrial processes. [...] The power allowed by these new technical developments was harnessed for the first time by Beethoven [...] his aggressive temperament made the “offensive” character of the new instruments especially significant for him [...]. In principle, there is little difference between Beethoven's attempts to *épater les bourgeois*, with the effects in *sforzando* with clenched fists, and those of the modern teenager with his motorcycle. The former is the embryo of the latter (Schafer 2011, p. 159).

Of all the Leninist conceptions of art, however, the one that is most strikingly up-to-date is the defense of *internationalism*! This aspect is relevant because, in addition to defending the entire legacy of humanity in the cultural field, it helps to clarify Lenin's position on nationalism in his very important polemic with Rosa Luxemburg.

As is widely known, the debate around the national question came to a head when, in her *Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis of German Social Democracy*, written between February and April 1915 and published just a year later, in April 1916, Rosa Luxemburg stated as Task 5 at the end of her text: “In this age of unbridled imperialism, there can no longer be national wars. National interests serve only as a pretext for placing the working masses of the people under the domination of their mortal enemy, imperialism” (Luxemburg 1979, Volume II, p. 176). In line with this formulation, Rosa concludes in his Principle 6, in a categorical manner, that “the immediate mission of socialism is the spiritual liberation of the proletariat from the tutelage of the bourgeoisie, which is expressed through the influence of nationalist ideology” (Luxemburg 1979, Volume II, p. 180).

Rosa Luxemburg's position is assertive and leaves no room for doubt: she rightly identifies in nationalist ideology the essence of bourgeois ideology itself. Her vision is based on *radical internationalism*, without any concession, and from this point of view, Rosa was, of all the great Marxists, the most consistent personality

16 “Music was very pleasing to Vladimir Ilyich, but it changed him. [...] One day he told me frankly: ‘Listening to music is very pleasant, no one doubts that, but imagine, it changes my mood. In a way, I endure it painfully’. [...] The music pleased Lenin very much, but [it] made him visibly nervous.” (Lunatcharski 1975, p. 14)

17 In Lenin 1975, p. 246. The Trotskyist Juan Posadas, in his naive book on Beethoven's music, reaffirms Lenin's predilection for this Beethoven Sonata: see Posadas 2020, p. 45.

regarding the most essential precepts of Marxism itself, since she claimed that radical internationalism was the main goal to be achieved by the international revolutionary movement. Thus, at the same time as it was in line, *avant la lettre*, with the Trotskyist conception that criticized the isolation of *socialism in a single country* (a Stalinist theory that would serve as the basis for strengthening the Soviet bureaucracy), that is, within national borders (something that, as we know, would only become increasingly evident later on, during the process of degeneration of the Soviet state, in diametrically opposing Trotsky to Stalin), it was also identified, in an anticipatory and premonitory way, with the theory of the (perhaps utopian) dissolution of the State as an instrument of power and social organization of the ruling classes, so well formulated by Lenin in *The State and the Revolution*, conceived a year after the publication of the *Junius Pamphlet*, that is, between August and September 1917, on the eve of the October Revolution.

Rosa was therefore a great visionary, and would soon establish herself as the main leader of the German Revolution of 1918, alongside Karl Liebknecht, whose negative outcome, with the assassination of both in January 1919 by the militias that preceded Hitler's rise to power in Germany¹⁸, would be the main blow suffered by the international communist movement in the 20th century, because if the German Revolution had been victorious under the leadership of Rosa and Liebknecht, the Russian Revolution would have found strong and immediate support in Europe and in the most geographically and politically important European country at the beginning of the 20th century, and the whole course of the last century would have been completely different, with a likely overwhelming advance of the communist movement across the globe! In reality, the collapse of the new German revolutionary uprising in 1923, sealing off any possibility of a communist revolution on German soil, frustrating the German revolutionary movement of 1918 once and for all and opening the way for the rise of the Nazis, represented, alongside Lenin's death at the beginning of 1924, the two great disasters suffered by the international revolutionary movement: the first, due to political circumstances; the second, due to bad luck, a fatality that, for health reasons, took away from the victorious Revolution in Russia, just at its most critical moment, its main leader, Lenin. It was too bad an omen to have worked...

In any case, on learning of the *Junius Pamphlet*, Lenin, recognizing the very high standard of the (genuinely Marxist) drafting of the text, and not knowing that Junius was a pseudonym and that it was written by the brilliant Rosa Luxemburg, was surprised by the content of the text, precisely with regard to the *Junius Pamphlet's* opposition to the thesis of the *self-determination of peoples*, contrasting this precept, held (to this day) by the majority of Marxists as an almost sacred principle, with the basic principle of the *class struggle*, by identifying the ideological roots of national

18 The fatal blow from the pre-Hitler right culminated shortly afterwards in the assassination of Kurt Eisner in Bavaria on February 21, 1919, a personality who mediated between the workers' movement and the bourgeois parliament and who defended the maintenance of private property, but who still represented, after the disappearance of the two great German revolutionary leaders, a glimmer of hope for some minimally progressive advances in German society. On the German Revolution, see Isabel Loureiro's indispensable book: Loureiro 2020.

movements with bourgeois ideology itself: “Lenin (who didn’t know that Junius was Rosa Luxemburg) was shocked to read in the same text that analysis which opposed national self-determination and counterposed to it the ‘class struggle’” (Dunayevskaya 2017, p. 140).

Lenin obviously relied on the progressive character and transitional strategy that was evident in the defense of anti-colonial struggles, supported by the history of evaluations of the struggles for independence in colonial countries since Marx and Engels. Already in a letter to Kautsky dated February 7, 1882, Friedrich Engels stated:

In no case do we have the task of diverting the Poles from their efforts to fight for the vital conditions of their future development, or of persuading them that national independence is a very secondary issue from an international point of view. On the contrary, independence is the basis of all common international action [...].” (Engels *apud* Dunayevskaya 2017, pp. 136-137)

But Rosa Luxemburg did not accept any concessions, and we understand her well as radical artists: Rosa’s position, radically *internationalist*, is, in the eyes of the radical artist (and here I say that I am one of them), and alongside the defense of his *anarchic* condition (as Trotsky defended in his 1938 text conceived jointly with Breton and Rivera), the most coherent with the most fundamental precepts of communist and revolutionary ideology, and even with regard to the self-determination of peoples, Rosa was skeptical, because behind this principle there was, as a rule, a trail of bourgeois ideology that would certainly have a strong propensity to slow down the revolutionary movement and restrict national emancipation within the regulatory frameworks of classist society. For Rosa, only a movement whose fundamental motto was *revolutionary internationalism* could carry out the radical communist project without losing its way and falling into a dramatic capitulation. As Dunayevskaya says, “the outbreak of the First World War did not dampen Luxemburg’s opposition to self-determination. [...] His conviction was that internationalism and ‘nationalism’, even the question of self-determination, were absolute opposites” (Dunayevskaya 2017, p. 139). Lenin opposed Rosa’s position, however – and not without reason from his point of view – to the fact that “Marxist dialectics requires a correct analysis of each specific situation [...]. Civil war against the bourgeoisie is also a form of class struggle” (Lenin *apud* Dunayevskaya 2017, p. 141).

There is nothing more perverse and opposed to Marxist dialectics than dualistic thinking that wants to decree one side right when, from their respective perspectives and points of view, ***both sides were right!*** A Marxism that wants to be permanently evolving, in an invigorating update, needs to air itself out and understand that the differences between great revolutionaries can result in a healthy maturing in the face of the strategies and tactics to be put into continuous movement, in permanent (r) evolution, and if Lenin’s position concerned local decisions, concrete assessments of each situation of struggle, it was precisely in the field of culture, in his open opposition to “national cultures”, that Lenin’s radical internationalism is more than evident. For already in his “Critical notes on the national question” of November

1913, Lenin stated:

The slogan of national culture is bourgeois arrogance (and often also ultra-reactionary and clerical). Our slogan is the international culture of democracy and the global workers' movement.

[...] Whoever wants to serve the proletariat must unite the workers of all nations, invariably fighting against bourgeois nationalism, both his own and that of others. Whoever defends the slogan of national culture has no place among Marxists, his place is among the nationalist philistines. (Lenin 1975, pp. 157 and 159)

A brief assessment of the reactionary role played by nationalist currents in art – especially, in my personal context, Brazilian nationalist music, against which I struggle as a radical composer – would suffice to make sure that both Rosa and Lenin were right: if socialism wants to emerge as effectively emancipatory, it will do so in defense of the entire cultural legacy of humanity, sweeping away any national borders that seek to imprison artistic, cultural and scientific facts, opposing the peoples of this tiny planet.

And so, from his discretion in the face of artistic phenomena to his struggle for radical access to the masses to the entire cultural legacy of humanity, including his uncompromising defense of creative freedom, the transcendence of great (genius) works of art, the assimilation and study of the bourgeois cultural heritage and cultural internationalism, we can glimpse the *integrity* of genuinely *Leninist* thought.

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