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## Faulty Vision and Political Realism

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# **Faulty Vision and Political Realism**

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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## Introduction.

In his later years, the democratic theorist, Sheldon Wolin, published the second edition of a project he had completed over forty years prior, his magnum opus, *Politics and Vision*. As Wolin readily admits, he felt compelled to revisit his book, because political developments since its original publication had “rendered obsolete the terms that were invoked in the conclusion of Part One.”<sup>1</sup> This second edition chronicles the transformation of the United States, through the Cold War, from a conventional, though powerful nation state into a postmodern Superpower. In the manner of certain regimes from the twentieth century, this mutant power tends toward totality, but does so in seemingly the reverse manner. Whereas the Third Reich or Stalinist Russia were characterized not only by harsh repression but the mobilization of their citizens, Superpower rules through engendered apathy and self-interest born from a general feeling of instability endemic to capitalism:

“[Superpower] might drown out or marginalize opposition rather than hunt it down, pacify public space by fostering communications monopolies rather than by unleashing storm troopers. Its leaders might dominate society, not to fulfill a mythic mission, but simply to make money and control power. It might project power beyond its borders, not in order to occupy foreign lands but to gain access to new markets and resources. Such a regime might discriminate, even repress, but not persecute.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 2016 ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 605.

<sup>2</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 459.



The impetus for Superpower to resort to this kind of repression, which Wolin terms “inverted totalitarianism,” is in order to maintain a passive, yet tacitly consenting public, while expanding its empire around the globe. It is neoliberal in the sense that citizens hold rights, but are discouraged from participating in any meaningful democratic activity. Rather, rule under Superpower is delegated to technocrats in conjunction with the owners of capital.

Wolin’s portrait of inverted totalitarianism, modern hopelessness, apathy, and the degradation of democracy are so eloquently executed, they make his subsequent prescriptive solutions appear inadequate in comparison. He ultimately advocates for a kind of democratic localism in which everyday people are able to experience and participate in the processes of collective power. This sentiment in itself is inoffensive, even beautiful, however, he tacks onto it the lofty pretense that creating such democracy on its own has the potential to subvert the oppressive structures of Superpower. Furthermore, he rejects theories of organization, in favor of an idealized vision of democracy as an organic experience, without clear power to support it. In *What Revolutionary Action Means Today*, he better articulates this rejectionist philosophy with a fervently anti-institutional argument.<sup>3</sup> He writes, “Instead of imitating most other political theories and adopting the state as the primary structure and then adapting the activity of the citizen to the state, democratic thinking should renounce the state paradigm and, along with it, the liberal legal corruption of the citizen.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted this article was written in the ‘60s.

<sup>4</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin, "What Revolutionary Action Means Today," *Democracy 2* (October 1982): 27, [https://democracyjournalarchive.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/wolin\\_what-revolutionary-action-means-today-democracy-2-4\\_-oct-1982.pdf](https://democracyjournalarchive.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/wolin_what-revolutionary-action-means-today-democracy-2-4_-oct-1982.pdf).

Wolin's reluctance to engage with state, or any other institutional form for that matter, poses a number practical issues for his vision. He hopes that democracy on a local level will provide enough continuity to people's lives to counteract the disruptive influence of late capitalism, however neglects to address how this return to the localism will come about, nor how it will sustain itself. This is, in part, due to his conviction that democracy *cannot* be sustained. To him, democracy is "ephemeral" and "amorphous," unable to be tamed or systematized. As a result, his solution lies not in the reshaping of institutions, but in a psychological transformation of society. This philosophy in many ways mirrors what the author Jodi Dean terms "new left realism," the intellectual movement which rejected the state and party as organizational forms in reaction to the Soviet Union. She writes of the new left realists, "They reject revolution, prioritizing democracy in citizenship. In effect, they fear politics..."<sup>5</sup> The parallels with Wolin are clear; he is indeed expressly against revolution, and does continuously reiterate his despair at the relegation of the citizen to the "occasional voter."

However, Wolin does demonstrate a degree self-awareness further on in the above mentioned article:

"While it is of the utmost importance that democrats support and encourage political activity at the grassroots level, it is equally necessary that the political limitations of such activity be recognized. *It is politically incomplete...* There are major problems in our society that are general in nature and necessitate modes of vision and action that are comprehensive rather than parochial."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 2018 ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2016), 55.

<sup>6</sup> Wolin, "What Revolutionary," 27.

Though it conspicuously does not appear in *Politics*, “politically incomplete” is a vital phrase. As much as grassroots, non-institutional movements are important and appealing, there are “real problems” which need to be countered on their own terms and at an appropriate scale.

So what does a politically complete movement look like? Drawing on the work of two prominent historical organizers, V.I. Lenin and Saul Alinsky, this project intends to address the issue of Wolin’s incompleteness through political realist mindset, as well as delve into the question of whether democracy and organization can ever be reconciled. Political realism for the left is a critical tool, which has been underutilized over the past few decades. Peering through its lense, we are able to see the deficiencies of works like Wolin’s, and go about addressing them practically. Hopefully this tool can be expanded to apply to the modern Left’s struggles.

### **Literature Review.**

Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*:

The realism Raymond Geuss outlines in *Philosophy and Real Politics* serves as a helpful complement to Wolin’s mostly conjectural style. Both are similarly fed up with the state of liberal academia, and level parallel critiques against the legitimizing nature of its philosophy to a corrupt status quo. Unlike Wolin, however, Geuss’s aim is not to provide a comprehensive theory or in-depth cultural analysis, but rather to sketch out the basis of a political realist framework. Geuss does not have a political agenda, nor does he explicitly

express his political views other than in occasional comments about neoliberal depravity. Despite being a self-described neo-Leninist, he makes a point to say that this label does not as much represent his personal views or values, as it does his frame of mind. He sets the stage for the kind of political realism this project will focus on, while not acting upon it himself.

Geuss describes political realism as the inverse of the kind of idealism that has become commonplace in political philosophy. In contrast to politics as “applied ethics,” Geuss’s realism is designed around the perception that morality, in the ideal sense, does not drive action, and therefore is not a suitable as a means of analysis. Rather, it is more productive to consider “real motivations” when discussing politics, hence “realism.” Realism is an attempt to view the world through the fewest ideological lenses possible in order to accomplish a specific goal. The more effectively one can extricate oneself from ideology, the higher likelihood one’s decisions will not be mired in unjustified assumptions, and therefore the more informed one’s decisions can be. This means *not* starting with an ideal (e.g.: Rawls's conception of justice), and attempting to force it into being, but rather examining what is possible to achieve within the limits of circumstance, “Thus politics is not about doing what is good or rational or beneficial *simpliciter*...but about the pursuit of *what is good in a particular concrete case by agents with limited powers and resources*, where choice of one thing to pursue means failure to choose and pursue another.”<sup>7</sup> Geuss warns of the dangers of projecting one’s own beliefs onto others and expecting them to act accordingly, which he sees as a common error among idealists. To him, realism is “not

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 30.

[concerned] with how people ought ideally (or ought 'rationally') to act, what they ought to desire, or value, the kind of people they ought to be, etc., but, rather, with the way the social, economic, political, etc., institutions actually operate in some society at some given time, and what really does move human beings to act in given circumstances"<sup>8</sup>. With this, Geuss does away with traditional notions about human nature (e.g: humans are inherently good, bad, rational, self-interested, etc.), to say instead that humans are above all inconsistent.

Another point Geuss emphasizes is the connection between power and politics, going so far as to claim that power is the first principle of politics. Again this critique is directed at idealist philosophers, namely John Rawls,<sup>9</sup> who avoid the subject of power altogether—to broach it would mean to acknowledge a deep inequality in liberal society. He expands upon traditional views of power (e.g.: Max Weber's conception of the state as the holder of a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence<sup>10</sup>), cautioning that viewing power as purely coercive discounts its other forms (e.g.: persuasive, perceived, collective). Power, he argues, should be treated not as a homogeneous substance that functions identically in each situation, but as irregular, particular, and coming from various sources. Power and ideology, for instance, are complexly intertwined; dangerously, hegemonic powers preserve themselves through the manipulation of ideology to make them appear, "...as if they were universal, necessary, invariant, or natural features of all forms of human social life, or as if they *arose spontaneously and uncoercedly by free human action.*"<sup>11</sup> As with

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<sup>8</sup> Geuss, *Philosophy and Real*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>10</sup> Geuss, *Philosophy and Real*, 34.

<sup>11</sup> Geuss, *Philosophy and Real*, 52.

his descriptions of human behavior, power for Geuss is nebulous, and has few universalities. Though this may appear to be an unhelpful conclusion at first glance, Geuss maintains that it is in fact integral to political realism. Lenin understood power's variance when he conceived of the analytical question, "Who whom?" which Geuss expands to "Who does/*could* do what to whom for whose benefit?"<sup>12</sup> It's a question designed to address the loci of power in a given situation—who has it or is perceived to have it, who is subject to it, and who benefits from that subjugation. As Geuss demonstrates in this thought experiment, questions of power are certainly complicated, but any attempt to view society without them is incomplete.

Finally, Geuss echoes, or rather takes directly, the Leninist principle, "Politics is a craft or skill, and ought precisely *not* to be analysed...as the mastery of a set of principles or theories."<sup>13</sup> This sentiment is expressed by other political organizers, such as Saul Alinsky; it is a truth that any political realist must come to terms with, i.e., politics is not a science, despite it being touted as one. Politics is contextual, Geuss says, it has no eternal questions, and therefore no eternal truths. Instead one can only inherit a method of interpreting one's circumstances, a means through which to pinpoint baseless ideological assumptions, and make the better judgements as a result.

Geuss establishes for this project the structure of political realism in possibly its most basic, academic form. Although this could be construed as contradictory to his central criticism, this is precisely where his value lies. Whereas Lenin and Alinsky were steeped in the conflicts of their times, Geuss has synthesized their logic as an observer and in no

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<sup>12</sup> Geuss, *Philosophy and Real*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Geuss, *Philosophy and Real*, 97.

uncertain terms. Lenin, for instance, was writing to the Party, to the proletariat, and ultimately to the cause. He is an example of realism in action, and is therefore useful to observe, but it is also less clear what should be taken away from him. Geuss has extracted that message, and brought it to the modern day, inspiring a revival of political realism on the Left.<sup>1415</sup> His realism can help us analyze our own problems and devise suitable solutions. He affirms an intuition clearly felt by many others, that liberal idealist politics have failed in the face of their opposition, that history has not ended, and therefore must be approached as it is, rather than as it ought to be.

Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party*:

Jodi Dean's book, *Crowds and Party*, contributes to this project in a number of ways. First, she affirms the need for direct action in politics, particularly in electoral politics—a topic which no other source addresses. Second, she provides an interesting contemporary anthropological analysis, which will be used to complement Wolin's.

The central thesis of Dean's is that the creation of a communist party would not only consolidate left power into a formidable force, but also provide a space under capitalism within to view the world from a non-capitalist perspective. Obviously Dean's book is a work of political theory, and accordingly does not lay out how exactly her vision of the Party would be organized other than that it would operate at "multiple levels." If I one

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<sup>14</sup> William Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (October 22, 2010): <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885110374001>.

<sup>15</sup> Vijay Phulwani, "The Poor Man's Machiavelli: Saul Alinsky and the Morality of Power," *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 4 (November 16, 2016): <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055416000459>.

weakness with *Crowds and Party* had to be selected, it would be this, “The problem the Left encounters today is less a matter of organizational details than it is of solidary political will.”<sup>16</sup> Dean is right to point to the disunity of the Left as a major problem for any effective political action, but her phrasing raises a paradox: which came first solidarity or the Party? As any political realist would say (even Wolin mentions it), and as Dean recounts many times, revolutions do not come about spontaneously, rather they are built. Without the proper organization, movements, protests, and social critiques will all be forgotten as time moves on. It takes the organizing force of the Party to overcome the transience of any individual movement in order to turn them into a consistent communist politic. As much as the Left is in need of solidarity in this moment, its answer lies first and foremost in the Party, as the Party is the means of building solidarity. Lenin knew this, which is precisely why he proposed the Party as a vanguard, and as Dean puts it herself, “Such a concentration would let people who want to be engaged in radical politics but aren’t sure what to do have a place to go, a place to start.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 262.

<sup>17</sup> Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 262.



## **Chapter 1: Lenin.**

Vladimir Lenin, inarguably one of the most significant political figures of the twentieth century, played a leading role in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. He was a prolific writer, as well as a gifted politician and organizer. Due to his monumental legacy, the Marxism-Leninism branch of thought was formed, which incorporated the many innovations to traditional Marxism which Lenin both theorized and put into practice. His unrelentingly practical take on Marxist materialism, his grasp of the art of politics, and his strategy of vanguardism, together form a particular incarnation of political realism which still has much to offer the Left today in its political struggles.

### **Lenin's Marxist Materialism:**

Lenin certainly ranks among the greatest Marxist scholars. Indeed he dedicates many pages toward (re)affirming his faith in the science of dialectical materialism, and condemning those who he believes pervert its teachings. Nevertheless, while Lenin rarely expressly criticized Marx, whether through the distorting effects of subjective interpretation or as an intentionally subtle critique, the Marxism Lenin portrays is uniquely his own. His two most famous deviations from the original Marxist doctrine were, first, his ambition to skip over the capitalist phase of development in Russia in favor of a leap

directly to communism—in contrast to the more measured march of history Marx proposes; and second, in the addition of the vanguard party as a revolutionary vehicle. These are, no doubt, significant modifications to Marxism, likely ones Marx himself would have contested, and thus could be considered adequate grounds on their own to constitute the inauguration of the Marxist-Leninist branch of thought. However, to do so based solely on their existence would miss precisely why Lenin developed them in the first place, that both are, in fact, conclusions reached through Lenin’s particularly pragmatic approach to revolution.

For Lenin, materialism is not merely a theory to be dispassionately pondered, but an invaluable tactical tool, replacing the “chaos and arbitrariness” of previous philosophy with a “strikingly integral and harmonious scientific theory.”<sup>18</sup> What it presents is a world grounded in systems for the distribution of resources, systems divided into classes possessing distinct class identities, identities harboring their own interests, both conflicting and aligning depending on the fluctuation of material conditions. The bourgeoisie, the tsarists, the proletariat, the peasants, the semi-proletariat, the petty bourgeoisie, and so on, can all be characterized by their relationships to private property, to production, to the state, and to each other. Class for Lenin is a means of breaking down the confounding complexity of society into component parts capable of being analyzed, more or less accurately, as discrete actors. Doing so allows him to define his enemies as well as allies in convenient terms. He can then speculate on their fears, desires, and guiding ideologies, in order to better predict their movements. Understanding these relationships can in turn,

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<sup>18</sup> V.I. Lenin, "The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism," 1913, in *Lenin: Selected Works* (New York, Ny: International Publishers, 1971), 21.

Lenin professes, inform the astute revolutionary of the correct path to take given the forces at play.

An excellent example of this method of evaluation comes from Lenin's *Letters from Afar* written in March of 1917.<sup>19</sup> In this series, Lenin issues an analysis of the contemporaneous February Revolution<sup>20</sup> from his position of exile. Over a period of only eight days, Lenin could but read accounts in Swiss newspapers of the Russian revolutionaries' defeat of the historic Romanov Dynasty, and their establishment of a system of dual rule in its place, divided between the bourgeois Provisional Government and the proletarian Soviet of Workers' Deputies. To explain the speed and ease with which the revolution was carried out, Lenin determined that it the result as an unlikely alignment interests between inconsonant classes, "an extremely unique historical situation, *absolutely dissimilar currents, absolutely heterogeneous class interests, absolutely contrary political and social strivings have merged, and in a strikingly 'harmonious' manner.*"<sup>21</sup> What Lenin is referring to is the brief alliance formed between the bourgeoisie (landlords, Octobrist-Cadets, and petty bourgeois included), and the proletariat (including the poor peasantry) for the purposes of finally deposing the Romanovs.

While both the bourgeoisie and proletariat were invested in the death of tsarism, they held conflicting visions of what would follow suit. For the proletariat, revolution meant the end of a brutal and archaic regime, and an opening for the possibility of a more equitable society. The bourgeoisie, on the other hand, was not as much concerned with

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<sup>19</sup> Written during his period of exile in Switzerland, the *Letters from Afar* came only six months before the October Revolution.

<sup>20</sup> Also known as the March Revolution.

<sup>21</sup> V.I. Lenin, *The April Theses or The Tasks of of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution and Letters from Afar*, trans. Bernard Isaacs (Brooklyn, NY, 2016), 27.

social progress in Russia, as it was in the perpetuation of the “imperialist war,” WWI, and its promise of colonial spoils.<sup>22</sup> Further incentive for bourgeois revolt came from the influence of Anglo-French capital—it too invested in the continuation of war—which financially supported the Russian bourgeoisie in its quest for political power, “...the Anglo-French imperialists and the Guchkovs and the Milyukovs<sup>23</sup> aimed at deposing the ‘chief warrior’, Nicholas Romanov, and putting more energetic, fresh and more capable *warriors* in his place.”<sup>24</sup> Thus both the bourgeoisie and proletariat found each other miraculously on the same side, if only for a short time, and with their combined forces—noting that the masses had remained mobilized in the wake of the first Russian Revolution ending in 1907—they faced little difficulty in overthrowing the tsars.

This portrait Lenin paints of Russia’s tumultuous environment in 1917, particularly the interplay of classes and their situation within a greater global crisis, is clearly materialist in its origin. What Lenin wishes his fellow revolutionaries to understand is that this conflict is not one of abstract ideas but of concrete interests. In this moment of upheaval, the bourgeoisie and proletariat found a mutual use in one another, and thus were able to make peace for a time, however, Lenin warns, it would mistake to believe that this peace can last. By nature of their relationship to property and production, the bourgeoisie and proletariat are fundamentally enemies. An opposition to tsarism cannot overshadow the fact that the bourgeoisie, being capitalists, benefit from imperialist war, whereas the

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<sup>22</sup> Lenin mentions that the Russians, “might obtain Constantinople” (28) as a spoil of war.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Guchkov was a liberal, chairman of the Third Duma, and eventually the Minister of War for the Provisional Government. Pavel Milyukov, another duma representative, as well as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Provisional government. Lenin uses the names of various liberal leaders as pejoratives for the liberal faction in general.

<sup>24</sup> V.I. Lenin, *The April Theses or The Tasks of of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution and Letters from Afar*, trans. Bernard Isaacs (Brooklyn, NY, 2016), 27.

proletariat face ruin because of it—these are irreconcilable differences. Consequently, to appeal to the bourgeoisie on a moral or intellectual level to cooperate in the long term (i.e., to ask for peace) would be either the naïve gesture of an idealist misinformed on the principles of materialism, or a deliberate betrayal of the revolutionary cause. Lenin writes:

“Such, and only such, is the way the situation developed. Such, and only such, in the view that can be taken by a politician who does not fear the truth, who soberly weighs the balance of social forces in the revolution, who appraises every ‘current situation’ not only from the standpoint of all its present, current peculiarities, but also from the standpoint of the more fundamental motivations, the deeper interest-relationship of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, both in Russia and throughout the world.”<sup>25</sup>

It speaks to his mindset that Lenin so often invokes sobriety as the mark of a prudent revolutionary, as the term itself could easily be substituted for ‘realism.’ One way to interpret its reoccurrence is as a call to leave revolutionary passion (and sentimentality) behind when evaluating one’s circumstances. This means not only seeing through “sugary diplomatic and ministerial lies” of the bourgeoisie, but also being able to get past one’s own fantastical projections, in order to arrive at the material reality of a situation. Being well situated in reality provides a stable basis for subsequent action, “...we must first endeavour to define with the greatest possible objective precision, in order that Marxist tactics may be based upon the only possible solid foundation—the foundation of *facts*.”<sup>26</sup> Though Lenin

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<sup>25</sup> V.I. Lenin, "Marxism and Revisionism," 1908, in *Lenin: Selected Works* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1971), 29.

<sup>26</sup> V.I. Lenin, "Marxism and Revisionism," 1908, in *Lenin: Selected Works* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1971), 32.

admits to the limitations of theory, Marxist materialism, for many of his purposes, provides a mostly factual account of social reality, and thereby an adequate foundation upon which to build tactics.

In order to further explore the topic of sobriety for Lenin, it is useful to understand how he conceives of the idealist/materialist divide. Raymond Geuss, a self-described neo-leninist, characterizes idealism as philosophy based on abstract principles (e.g.: right/wrong, rational/irrational) deemed innately true, and therefore retaining of their moral authority regardless of context. The common postmodernist critique of idealism, originating famously with Nietzsche, takes issue with the very notion of “truth,” however this is by no means Lenin’s perspective. While he disagrees with much of the substance of idealist philosophy, Lenin explicitly confirms that he holds certain principles to be true, namely those of Marxism, though he maintains that it is not a frozen doctrine.<sup>27</sup> More interesting, and informative to the nature of his own thinking, is the issue he takes with idealism’s applicability to the real world, where morals rarely take precedence. He writes in 1919, two years after the October Revolution:

“General talk about freedom, equality and democracy is in fact a blind repetition of concepts shaped by the relations of commodity production. To attempt to solve the concrete problems of the dictatorship of the proletariat by such generalities is tantamount to accepting the theories and principles of the bourgeoisie in their entirety. From the point of view of the proletariat, the question can be put only in the following way: *freedom from oppression by which class? equality of which class*

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<sup>27</sup> “Marxism is omnipotent, because it is true.”

*with which? democracy based on private property, or on a struggle for the abolition of private property?—and so forth.*"<sup>28</sup> [italics added]

As demonstrated in this excerpt, it is not that Lenin necessarily opposes the ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy—these ideals in fact drive much of his revolutionary ardor—however he is critical of their nebulousness when proffered with neither a clear goal nor a pragmatic means of attaining it. The ideal of “freedom,” for instance, is practically meaningless when untethered from any earthly form—to paraphrase the above quote, freedom from what? Though ideals may aspire to change, they are fundamentally unachievable, and to be concerned with such abstractions is bourgeois. Lenin implores his more idealistic comrades to consider *soberly* how to bring their convictions into being; that is, to ask specific questions, develop specific goals, and generally take a materialist approach to politics, which examines progress not by its relationship to metaphysical concepts but to an observable reality.

### **Lenin’s Art of Politics:**

What does Lenin mean when he writes, in a letter from September 1917, “it is impossible to remain loyal to Marxism, to remain loyal to the revolution *unless insurrection is treated as an art*”? This sentiment, that insurrection (and politics) must be dealt with artfully surfaces repeatedly through Lenin’s work, accompanied each time with new

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<sup>28</sup> V.I. Lenin, "Economics and Politics in Era of Dictatorship of Proletariat," 1919, in *Lenin: Selected Works* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1971), 505.

additions to its ever-expanding character.<sup>29</sup> What becomes clear is that, in characteristic fashion, Lenin has again appropriated an old Marxist idea to expand upon via pragmatism. As both politics and art are messy affairs, so too is the art of politics; in the most concise terms, the art of politics can be described as the practice of skillfully managing the innumerable variables involved in a politics struggle through careful analysis, organization, and action.

To begin with, a point Lenin stresses over and over is that a movement *must* possess a tangible goal, or else risk falling into the trap of idealism or, worse still, be left floundering with no clear direction. A definite goal orients a movement, acting as a lighthouse in the fog of class struggle. Not only does a goal provide a measure of progress, it mitigates the insecurity inspired by uncertainty, as well as combats idealist moralism by explicitly defining what concern (the revolution) reigns supreme. On a purely practical level, a definite goal provides an ends around which to craft a strategy. Much of Lenin's actions are explained once one realizes that his ultimate goal is *not* to overthrow of the bourgeoisie, but to establish lasting socialism, "We must prove worth executors of this most difficult (and most gratifying) task of the socialist revolution. We must *fully realise* that in order to administer successfully, *besides* being able to convince people, besides being able to win a civil war, we must be able to do *practical organizational work*."<sup>30</sup> Though he admits that the violence of class insurrection is exhilarating, and indeed a necessity in the course of events,

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<sup>29</sup> In this particular letter, he refers to four aspects of the art of insurrection: 1) the power of stringing successes along as a form of momentum for a movement; 2) the necessity to rely on the "advanced class" in revolution; 3) the ability to channel the "revolutionary upsurge of the people"; 4) the value of taking advantage of enemy vacillations as a time to strike.

<sup>30</sup> V.I. Lenin, "The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government," 1918, in *Lenin: Selected Works* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1971), 404.



he views it as only one step on a longer path. Lenin urges his fellow revolutionaries to consider what will happen *after* the revolution, so that they may conceive of a way to differentiate themselves from countless failed revolts, and thus consummate something genuinely new, “Undoubtedly, the revolution will teach us, and will teach the masses of the people. But the question that now confronts a militant political party is: shall we be able to teach the revolution anything?”<sup>31</sup>

The difference between “tactics” and “strategy” is frequently muddled, and it appears that Lenin too often neglects to linguistically distinguish between them—though this may be the product of mistranslation. The fact of the matter is that there is an important distinction to be made; whereas strategy describes the approach/design of an entire movement, tactics apply to specific objectives as they arise. Despite his potential overuse of the term tactics, it is not difficult to see these two sides emerge in his discourse across different texts. What is indisputable is that Lenin believes wholeheartedly in the import of maintaining a consistent strategy through the duration of a movement, which he grounds in a well-organized, core revolutionary party (referred to by many aliases, most famously the vanguard). In a sense, the vanguard reflects Lenin’s conviction in strategic consistency, as it is intended to act as a revolutionary anchor under ever-fluctuating circumstances. As conditions change, so do tactics, that is unavoidable; in order to combat the movement from fraying, the vanguard remains an assured constant—competent, disciplined, well-organized, and ever-ready. He describes, “a strong and centralised organisation of revolutionaries capable of leading the preparatory struggle, every

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<sup>31</sup> V.I. Lenin, “Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution,” 1905, in *Lenin: Selected Works* (New York, NY: International Publishers, n.d.), 51.

unexpected outbreak, and, finally, the decisive assault.”<sup>32</sup> In an article titled *Where to Begin?*, published in 1901, Lenin responds to a group of overzealous revolutionaries propagating the sentiment “If the circumstances change within twenty-four hours, then the tactics must be changed within twenty-four hours.” He writes:

“‘Change the tactics within twenty-four hours!’ But in order to change tactics it is first necessary to have tactics; without a strong organisation skilled in waging political struggle under all circumstances and at all times, there can be no question of that systematic plan of action, illumined by firm principles and steadfastly carried out, which alone is worth of the name tactics.”<sup>33</sup> (38)

Strategy follows tactics; it is logical stance, particularly when the strategy, the party, is the architect of tactics. The implications of the vanguard serving such a central, directorial role in revolution will be explored further later, but its practical and strategic role should be obvious for the time being.

On a specific tactical level, it becomes somewhat harder to generalize Lenin’s theory due to their being, by nature, contingent to their circumstances. However what does remain consistent throughout his writings is a rough formula for tactical analysis. For instance, Lenin continuously uses terms like “general conditions,” “special conditions,” “concrete peculiarities,” and “the political situation.” Though these phrases hold slightly different meanings, all concern the unique factors which inform the tactics of a given political situation. Further on in the article referenced above, Lenin makes a specific tactical argument for why the party should hold off on revolution, despite the massive peasant

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<sup>32</sup> V.I. Lenin, *The April Theses or The Tasks of of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution and Letters from Afar*, trans. Bernard Isaacs (Brooklyn, NY, 2016), 48.

<sup>33</sup> Lenin, “Where to Begin?,” in *Lenin: Selected*, 38.

uprisings going on at the time, "...anyone who is capable of appreciating the *general conditions* of our struggle and who is mindful of them at every 'turn' in the historical course of events that at the present moment our slogan cannot be 'To the assault', but has to be, 'Lay siege to the enemy fortress'." <sup>34</sup> While some saw the passion of the peasants as a signal to surge forward, Lenin insisted that the Social Democrats' core revolutionary force was in fact neither large enough nor competent enough to channel this power toward meaningful ends, "The mass (spontaneous) movement lacks 'ideologists' <sup>35</sup> sufficiently trained theoretically to be proof against all vacillations; it lacks leaders with such a broad political outlook...such organisational talent as to create a militant political party on the basis of the new movement." <sup>36</sup> He argues that rather than seeking full-on revolution straightaway, the Social Democrats should instead focus their energy on improving their own organization, and taking such pre-insurrectionary measures as printing a party newspaper and producing a wide-scale propaganda campaign. By his calculations, the conditions in 1901 were not right; the vanguard was not ready to lead an insurrection, the masses not sufficiently politically conscious; all these factors indicated to Lenin that the party should bide its time, lest it risk the fall out of a premature altercation. As per his prediction, only four years later the first Russian revolution came.

This display of restraint transitions into a major theme of Lenin's tactical approach: timing. Lenin stresses often how different times call for different measures, and that the intelligent political actor must be able to distinguish between them. There are times for

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<sup>34</sup> Lenin, "Where to Begin?," in *Lenin: Selected*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> "Ideologists" is a reference to an earlier conversation which juxtaposed the "spontaneous" masses to the "ideological" or "conscious" revolutionaries, i.e., the Social-Democratic Party.

<sup>36</sup> V.I. Lenin, *The April Theses or The Tasks of of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution and Letters from Afar*, trans. Bernard Isaacs (Brooklyn, NY, 2016), 47.

action and times for active growth, times for compromise and times when no compromise must be accepted. Most important of all is knowing the exact moment when to strike—a subtle but crucial point. Lenin writes:

“The art of politics (and the Communist’s correct understanding of his tasks) consists in correctly gauging the conditions and the moment when the vanguard of the proletariat can successfully assume power, when it is able—during and after the seizure of power—to win adequate support from sufficiently broad strata of the working class and of the non-proletarian working masses, and when it is able thereafter to maintain, consolidate and extend its rule by educating, training and attracting ever broader masses of the working people.”<sup>37</sup>

The way he describes it here, this “moment” fits securely within a greater sequence of events *only if* it is engaged at the correct time; striking too early might mean a movement is never able to gain momentum, too late and the public may have lost interest. Overcoming the opponent means little if power cannot be maintained. After all, what would the point of all this violence be if the opponent were to promptly regain power? We have observed this sentiment at multiple points in Lenin’s writing already. He repeatedly implores his comrades to be patient, despite the presence of revolutionary passion in the air. Lenin considers not only the moment of insurrection but the revolution in its entirety, include both its build up and consolidation, “The socialist revolution is not a single act, it is not one battle on one front, but a whole epoch of acute class conflicts, a long series of battles on all fronts, i.e., on all questions of economics and politics, battles that can only end in the

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<sup>37</sup> Lenin, “‘Left-Wing’ Communism—An,” in *Lenin: Selected*, 540.

expropriation of the bourgeoisie.”<sup>38</sup> This demonstrates not only his commitment to socialism, but his keen awareness that success is not guaranteed. Though a movement may have potential, its period of ripeness is fleeting.

On the topic of compromises, Lenin displays his nuanced position as a political actor in responding to party doctrinaires—mostly inexperienced revolutionaries who refused to give ground—that compromise itself does not betray the revolution—that is determined by the conditions under which the compromise is made. By Lenin’s estimation, there are roughly two types of compromises:

“...a compromise enforced by objective conditions (such as a lack of strike funds, no outside support, starvation and exhaustion)—a compromise which in no way minimises the revolutionary devotion and readiness to carry on the struggle on the part of the workers who have agreed to such a compromise—and, on the other hand, a compromise by traitors who try to ascribe to objective causes their self-interest..., their cowardice, desire to toady to the capitalists, and readiness to yield to intimidation, sometimes to persuasion, sometimes to sops, and sometimes to flattery from capitalists.”<sup>39</sup>

In those moments of exhaustion and isolation, the savvy political actor does not obstinately stick by their ideals, but rather *tactically* negotiates a compromise with their opponents as a means forward. The implication is that though the idealist revolutionary may believe they are being principled in their refusal to compromise, their naïve actions are in fact hurting

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<sup>38</sup> V.I. Lenin, "The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination," 1916, in *Lenin: Selected* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1971), 157.

<sup>39</sup> Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Communism—An," in *Lenin: Selected*, 553.

the greater movement. The more principled option is in fact to deal with the enemy agreeably, so that the revolution may live another day.

We encounter a much less agreeable Lenin in his writings on the dictatorship of the proletariat. As opposed to the moments of desperation mentioned above, the period after the revolution in which the dictatorship of the proletariat is formed is no time to compromise, but rather is a time to act “dictatorially.” The dictatorship, according to Lenin, must smash the remnants of the bourgeois state apparatus, so as to deny them the chance for recourse, and thus “complete” the revolution. One can witness in this instance Lenin’s harsh realism. In times of weakness, when the power does not rest in the hands of the people, compromise is acceptable, that is, as long as it comes under sufficient duress. This dynamic is reversed in times of strength. Once the dictatorship of the proletariat exists making compromises with reactionaries serves no purpose; the power is with the dictatorship, and actions must be made to retain it, therefore the reactionaries must be expelled. It is a calculation built upon a commitment to the ultimate aim, socialism, above all else. While this could be seen as a hypocritical reversal of stances, to Lenin, the unabashed realist, such an accusation means very little, “...in nature and in society *all* distinctions are fluid and up to a certain point conventional.”<sup>40</sup> This is an example of Lenin’s political relativism.

The moment of insurrection, the time for action, portrays possibly Lenin’s most compelling side, and represents the completion of his political realism. As much as Lenin talks incessantly about the need to plan, to evaluate, to be cautious, he readily admits that,

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<sup>40</sup> Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Communism—An," in *Lenin: Selected*, 554.

in the frenzied moment of insurrection, these considerations are of little use. For one, the urgent demands of the moment make such a meticulous approach impossible, because there simply is not time to stop and think. However, more damning to the planning method is the fact that whatever conclusions may be reached about current conditions, and the appropriate tactical responses, will be just as soon become outdated, either due to the rapidly evolving nature of the situation, or due to the fact that putting theory into practice naturally changes the objective conditions themselves, causing those original calculations to lose their objective basis. Poignantly Lenin admits that there are indeed innate limitations to knowledge, but he does not lament this fact. Rather Lenin concludes, in his typical pragmatic manner, that this lack of knowledge should be taken in stride. One will never be omniscient, therefore to procrastinate in action, because of a perceived dearth of information, particularly in an urgent moment, is a weak excuse. At some point, one is forced to act, regardless of how uncomfortable they might feel doing so. For the revolutionary, to be afraid of acting is to negate oneself, and, ““If the situation were not exceptionally complicated there would be no revolution. If you are afraid of wolves don’t go into the forest.”<sup>41</sup> Theory is only a guide to action, Lenin says.

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<sup>41</sup> 386

## Chapter 2: Alinsky.

Saul Alinsky was part of a distinguished line of organizers America produced in the twentieth century. He was, by trade, a community organizer based in Chicago, who spent much of his time traveling around the US, organizing whichever communities were required his help. Among his accomplishments, he successfully brought together Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood, a meat-packing district notorious for its heinous living conditions, creating a neighborhood council which survives to this day. In general he sought to empower communities through the creation of democratic organizations capable of addressing residents' issues via direct action. Pertinent to our purposes, Alinsky described himself as "political realist," an attitude which came to define his approach to community organizing. Alinsky employed political realism in a radically democratic way, repurposing concepts normally associated with social strife (e.g.: self-interest and power politics), which are generally regarded with distaste by the liberal tradition, toward democratic ends. His particular brand of political realism, similar but distinct from Lenin's, teaches us that realism is not the exclusive domain of revolutionaries, but rather is a shared mindset among some of the most effective organizers in history. It is through the contrasts between Lenin and Alinsky that we are able to uncover the generalizable principles of realism, clarifying what it has to offer mass movements today.

The very first parallel between Lenin and Alinsky, arguably the first divergence as well, is their prolific use of a class terminology in a tactical context. Whereas Lenin employs traditional Marxist language, i.e.: bourgeoisie, proletariat, including also iterations and



additions peculiar to early twentieth century Russia (e.g.: semi-proletariat, peasantry, petty bourgeoisie, monarchists/aristocracy), Alinsky makes use of the modified terms: the Haves, Have-Nots, Have-a-Little, Wants Mores, and, for different but related purposes, the Doers/Non-Doers. While it would be unfair to insinuate that Marxists have the exclusive right to class based terminology, in practice Alinsky's application of these peculiar terms does reveal his strikingly similar appreciation for political economy to Lenin's, one that is both practical as well as materialist in origin. Using these terms, Alinsky very succinctly sets up the class struggle dialectic long agonized over by Marxists, "The purpose of the Haves is to keep what they have. Therefore, the Haves want to maintain the status quo and the Have-Nots to change it."<sup>42</sup> As he so plainly states, the Haves, the rough equivalent of the bourgeoisie, are motivated to preserve the system from which they benefit materially; the Have-Nots, the workers, take the inverse position. Alinsky uses this relatively straightforward to illustrate a greater realist principle, what he refers to as a "duality," "This grasp of the duality of all phenomena is vital in our understanding of politics. It frees one from the myth that one approach is positive and another negative. There is no such thing in life. One man's positive is another man's negative."<sup>43</sup> Duality is, according to Alinsky, not simply a rare occurrence, but part of the very nature of politics.

Once an organizer is able to grasp all-pervasiveness of dualities, they are all the more equipped to deconstruct political language. Lenin portrays an awareness of dual meanings within rhetoric, in an attack on the liberals within the Social Democratic party, who were attempting to convince workers to be satisfied with limited representation in the

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<sup>42</sup>Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 42.

<sup>43</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 17.

new government by stuffing them “the ideas of (bourgeois) sober-mindedness, (liberal) practicalness, (opportunist) realism, (Brentano) class struggle, (Hirsch-Duncker) trade unions, etc.”<sup>44</sup> As indicated by the parentheses, sober-mindedness to the bourgeoisie is *not* the same as sober-mindedness to the proletariat; while one benefits from stasis and apathy, the other is wholly on the side of action. Such value judgements are, in fact, subjective, relative to the class interests behind them, they possess no categorical truth.

Seeing the material interests behind one’s opponents’ words relates to one of Alinsky’s most powerful assertions, “As an organizer I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be. That we accept the world as it is does not in any sense weaken our desire to change it into what we believe it should be—it is necessary to begin where the world is if we are going to change it to what we think it should be.”<sup>45</sup> As much as Lenin reiterated the need to examine objective conditions, so as to be under no illusions when acting, he never quite so elegantly articulated the drive behind realist objectivity. Alinsky communicates that the perceived cynicism of realism must not be confused for pessimism; refusing to look at the world romantically is not the sign of morbid nihilism, but rather of a realist serious about creating change. This is why the grittier aspects of politics should not be shied away from, as they do not cease to exist when gone unobserved.

This sentiment comes out in full force in his discussion of power. Alinsky clearly despises polite society’s avoidance of the word “power” due to its unseemly connotations, “It evokes images of cruelty, dishonesty, selfishness, arrogance, dictatorship, and abject suffering. The word *power* is associated with conflict; it is unacceptable in our present

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<sup>44</sup> V.I. Lenin, “Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution,” 1905, in *Lenin: Selected Works* (New York, NY: International Publishers, n.d.), 129.

<sup>45</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, xix.

Madison Avenue deodorized hygiene..."<sup>46</sup> Not only does he see power as an unavoidable reality, but as the vital essence of change, neither inherently good nor evil, "Power is an essential life force always in operation, either changing the world or resisting change."<sup>47</sup> Power is both constitutive of the structure of our institutions and our relationships, while also being the only means by which to change them. Change and power go together, Alinsky writes, "*To know power and not fear it is essential to its constructive use and control.*"<sup>48</sup>

As much overlap as there is between Alinsky and Lenin, they do diverge in certain areas. Much of this divergence can be attributed to their differing aims, contexts, and philosophies. As opposed to Lenin, who dreamed of establishing socialism in Russia, Alinsky had no ultimate goal other than an intentionally vague vision of a "free and open society." Alinsky abhorred displays of fully crystallized ideology, rejected centralization beyond community organizations, and distrusted leaders and representatives. These beliefs developed in part due to his experiences organizing, as well as his brief time interning in the Chicago mob, and in part through an wide array of intellectual influences. Alinsky read, along with the Greek classics, a range of democratic theorists from John Dewey, to James Madison, to Alexis de Tocqueville, and even took from some Christian theology.<sup>49</sup> From these sources, Alinsky synthesized an unmistakably American outlook, liberal in its commitment to individual rights, but skeptical of the democratic capacities of representative democracy. Regardless of his education, however, it is hard to imagine that Alinsky would have developed as revolutionary of a philosophy as Lenin's simply due to

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<sup>46</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 51.

<sup>47</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 51.

<sup>48</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 52.

<sup>49</sup> Vijay Phulwani, "The Poor Man's Machiavelli: Saul Alinsky and the Morality of Power," *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 4 (November 2016): 866.

their vastly different contexts; revolution in early twentieth century Russia was the only viable path toward ending tsarism, which, suffice it to say, was not the case for Alinsky.

The first major difference between the two is the question of violence versus compromise. Though Lenin was not a blood thirsty man, being a revolutionary by trade, violence was part of his profession. Alinsky's view on violence is somewhat harder to pin down. While on one hand, he aspires toward a "free and open society," one which might be contradicted by the use of violent coercion, on the other, he never makes an unequivocal disavowal of it. He openly lauds generals from the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, as well as Lenin himself, for their tactical uses of violence, while equally praising Mahatma Gandhi for his strategy of pacifism. According to Vijay Phulwani, violence in the abstract did not conflict with Alinsky's realist principles, however, for practical purposes he saw little use in it, "His suspicion of violence came from his doubts about its value as a means for expanding a democratic organization's power, rather than from a moral commitment to nonviolence."

<sup>50</sup> Not only was he wary of the unwieldiness of violence, he was dubious of its chances of success, considering that the state holds the greatest capacity for force. So while Alinsky was mostly ambivalent toward violence, he was in practice a peaceful organizer. Of compromise, on the other hand, he spoke glowingly, "to the organizer, compromise is a key and beautiful word. It is always present in the pragmatics of operation. It is making the deal, getting that vital breather, usually the victory."<sup>51</sup> Compromise, to a non-revolutionary organizer such as Alinsky, is the embodiment of progress, as it demonstrates that the other side was compelled to respond to one's demands. In a world that is constantly changing,

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<sup>50</sup> Phulwani, "The Poor," 868.

<sup>51</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 57.

these small victories are sometimes all that one can hope for.

Another point which Alinsky makes a great deal out of that Lenin seems to gloss over, is the centrality of communication to the organizer's job. Certainly Lenin was an effective communicator both orally and via text, possibly even a masterful one, but he only ever indirectly alluded to communication in reference to the revolutionary cause. For Alinsky, communication is key, as he views it as the organizer's best means of entering into and engaging with a community—thus opening the possibility for organization. He stresses from the outset that communication is a “two-way process.” It is not a matter of condescending to community members and giving orders, nor of feigning interest, but actually sharing a meaningful exchange—something which he believed would strengthen connections. Another principle he repeats is that, above all else, an effective communicator must stay within the experience of their conversational partner; to step outside of their experience is to deprive them of a point of reference, and thus diminish the impact of your words. “Issues” must be specific, “[Issues] cannot be generalities like sin or immorality or the good life or morals. They must be *this* immorality of *this* slum landlord with *this* slum tenement where *these* people suffer.”<sup>52</sup> Specificity in turn lends relevance to people's lives, as well as establishes a concrete point of interest; the more is communicated, the closer they come to radicalization, “...communication occurs concretely, by means of one's specific experience. General theories become meaningful only when one has absorbed and understood the specific constituents and then related them back to a general concept.”<sup>53</sup> And so communication is the basis of any organization trying to pursue change through

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<sup>52</sup>Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 97.

<sup>53</sup>Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 97.

democratic means.

A complicated topic for Alinsky is morality within politics. We will explore the democratic implications of Alinsky's "morality of power"—his particular political ethics—later, but for now we will focus on Alinsky's instrumentalization of morality for political purposes. Principally, Alinsky described himself as a moral relativist. He believed that actors' decisions must be judged in the context in which they were made; the more strenuous the situation, the more ethical leeway the actor is allowed—the extreme case being war, "in war the end justifies almost any means."<sup>54</sup> Like Lenin, Alinsky was against idealist claims about the existence of a universal morality categorically true regardless of context. To him, morality is not only contextual, but personal; it is up to individual parties to determine what they consider to be the moral path. However, this subjectivity does not preclude morality from being a valuable tactical tool. This is where Alinsky comes to one of his greater innovations, what he finds to be a deficiency in Machiavelli's realism, "Moral rationalization is indispensable at all times of action whether to justify the selection or the use of ends or means. Machiavelli's blindness to the necessity for moral clothing to all acts and motives—he said "politics has no relation to morals"—was his major weakness."<sup>55</sup> The phrase "moral clothing" perfectly captures the political realist understanding of morality, that is, not as some intrinsic quality, but rather as a political device employed for self-interested reasons.

As has demonstrated, despite being a relatively small-scale community organizer acting in a vastly different context, Saul Alinsky operates in much the same level as Lenin.

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<sup>54</sup>Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 29.

<sup>55</sup>Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 43.

Even their most glaring incongruities, for instance, their respective views of violence, are not as much fundamental conflicts, as they are contextual ones. Alinsky is strictly non-institutional, decentralized, anti-ideological, nonviolent, seemingly the opposite of Lenin, yet their tactical realist approaches to politics are almost identical. From their similarities we are able to glimpse the true general principles of political realism, while their differences illustrate the various ways and various contexts under which it can be employed. Particularly compelling, and a theme that will be explored later, is their shared democratic conceptions of organizing.

### **Chapter 3: Wolin and the Organizers.**

Returning to the present day, Wolin's bleak description of a hammered and helpless American people, torn apart by the various contradicting forces of late capitalism, takes on a different tenor in the wake of Alinsky and Lenin. Though Wolin's ideas of Superpower and inverted totalitarianism are conceptually novel, after reading about Lenin's struggles orchestrating a revolution against both an entrenched monarchy and a bourgeoisie funded by foreign capital, as well as about Alinsky's efforts to organize poor, often minority communities before and during the civil rights era, one cannot help but feel that the world Wolin describes is not uniquely miserable, but rather one more example of a miserable situation begging for political action—after all, a point our organizers have impressed over and over again, people are most ready for change when they are most disaffected. Yet Wolin comes to no such conclusion. In the final few chapters of *Politics and Vision*, he

continues to lament the brutalization of democracy in the US, as corporations and government steadily blend together to create a streamlined corporate-state alien to the average person. He cries for the people, not the myth of “the people” used to legitimize state authority, but the people whose lives have been upturned by unstable work and the messages of fear propagated by the media. Yet, in the face of all of this discontent, Wolin sees only one option, to retreat.

To appreciate Wolin’s conclusions, it helps to understand what exactly he sees as Superpower’s, or postmodern power’s, most negative effects. According to him, the development of the “advanced” economy meant that the small-scale producers, which characterized an earlier, simpler form of capitalism, came to be replaced by enormous corporate structures of unprecedented scale and influence:

“In postmodernity power-language is not only appropriate but necessary in the analysis of the economic and cultural institutions and relationships that form a system ever more comprehensive, pervading all spheres of life, and affecting the fate of virtually every individual in the society.”<sup>56</sup>

This is what Wolin terms the “political economy,” that is, a system in which economic and political lines have blurred to the extent that they are nearly indistinguishable from one another. Within it, principles of efficiency and rationality rule, thus “Economy sets the norm for all practices concerned with significant stakes of power, wealth, or status.”<sup>57</sup>

Such a specialized system, Wolin observes, can only accommodate a limited amount of democracy, as democracy is by nature irrational, unpredictable, and dangerous to a

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<sup>56</sup>Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 563.

<sup>57</sup>Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 564.



status quo that favors a small elite. Representative democracy, itself already a device meant to mitigate populism, had to be further rationalized, systematized, and bureaucratized. It was confined to “procedural guarantees,” such as equal rights, free elections, and regularized administration, with little room for the average person to participate. Government became the *business* of specialists, consultants, and strategists, all working together to create a “predictable, manipulable realm of politics”<sup>58</sup> funneled to the public through the media. The goal was to separate the public as far from the reigns of power as possible, while engaging them enough to retain their passive consent. Wolin writes, “The citizen is shrunk to the voter: periodically courted, warned, and confused but otherwise kept at a distance from actual decision-making...”<sup>59</sup> In contrast to the ideal of an active and engaged American people, wholesomely involved in their communities’ and country’s affairs, this new mode of operation is centralized, technocratic, and anti-political—in many way the antithesis of democracy. As Wolin declares, “These developments represent not simple modifications of a ‘civic culture’ but its reconstitution.”<sup>60</sup>

It should be of no surprise that Wolin, being chiefly a democratic theorist, is horrified to witness democracy’s decline as it is replaced by voracious Superpower. However, his reaction to this dire predicament reveals an untenable vision of the future, which grates against the more vital proclamations of his activist days. Though he has remained consistently anti-institution over the course of his career, preaching that democracy can only ever occur in spite of the structures that might enable it, this sentiment is pushed to its morbid conclusion in *Politics*. Wolin is not simply worried about the

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<sup>58</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 565.

<sup>59</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 565.

<sup>60</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 565.

diminishing role of the demos in the affairs of government, as he is convinced that money and power will inevitably prevail in politics, but rather goes further to question the very notion of democracy as a form of self-rule at all. Rule, to him, implies ugly dynamics of power in conflict with the cooperative ideals of the democratic experience, “Governing means manning and accommodating to bureaucratize institutions that, *ipso facto*, are hierarchical in structure and elitist, permanent rather than fugitive—in short, anti-democratic.”<sup>61</sup> He describes democracy as “fugitive” in the sense that it cannot be captured; it is necessarily occasional and fleeting, a “moment of experience,” as opposed to a organized process.

Given the weakness of the Many in the face of Superpower, Wolin concludes that democracy should only ever be sought on small scales, in local institutions and governments (e.g.: schools, public services, cultural centers), where people have the opportunity to exercise their ingenuity to service themselves. He argues that, due to the demanding circumstances of late capitalism, democracy must necessarily become disjointed; being a citizen in the modern day entails for most, “doing the best one can to take part in common tasks, the deliberations that define them, and the responsibilities that follow.”<sup>62</sup> These are, he admits, modest aims, but in many ways that is precisely what he hopes to preserve: the modest, the honest, and the ordinary. Essentially, he desires to uphold the democratic experience as it pertains to the *ordinary* person.

But why is Wolin so convinced that democracy must be momentary? He reveals to us part of his motivation when he describes the “multiplicity” of forms democracy must

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<sup>61</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 603.

<sup>62</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 603.

take, “Multiplicity is *anti-totality* politics: small politics, small projects, small business, much improvisation, and hence anathema to centralization, whether of the centralized state or of the huge corporation.”<sup>63</sup> Here we see that Wolin’s search for democracy is, in actuality, a search for the *opposite* of totalitarianism, that is, a politics which is entirely decentralized, non-institutional, free, and undemanding. Perhaps this is why Wolin is unwilling to define democracy’s form—because his image of it is less of a coherent theory, than a reaction to his greatest fears. This fear is perhaps no clearer than in his commentary on Lenin.

Interestingly enough, Wolin appears to have a generally solid grasp of Leninist principles. He clearly appreciates why Lenin was so fixated on organization—as he puts it, Lenin viewed organization as an “Archimedean lever” for social change—as well as recognizes the function of the vanguard within his framework of revolution, “organization provided pre-conceived direction and form to the bubbling ferment of ‘spontaneous’ revolutionary forces; it maintained ‘a systematic plan of activity’ over time and preserved ‘the energy, the stability and continuity of the political struggle.’”<sup>64</sup> The image Wolin paints of Lenin as an expert organizer is compelling, yet he promptly *rejects* it, accusing the revolutionary’s methods of being elitist and anti-democratic. With undisguised contempt, he writes:

“[Lenin] began to look upon the ‘apparatus’ with the jealous pride of the artist, heaping scorn on those who would ‘degrade’ the organization by turning it towards tawdry economic objectives and ‘immediate goals,’ bemoaning the ‘primitiveness’ of

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<sup>63</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 603; italics added.

<sup>64</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 380.

the existing organization which had 'lowered the prestige of revolutionaries in Russia.' The task of the organization was to raise the workers 'to the level of revolutionaries,' not to degrade the organization to the level of 'the average worker.'"<sup>65</sup>

Evidently, Wolin detests what he perceives to be an air of condescension emanating from Lenin's writing, an impression which only intensifies in his treatment of the vanguard. According to him, the vanguard, in its role as a "core" revolutionary force, represents nothing more than an elitist inner circle meant to exclude the masses from decision making. It must maintain a well-regulated membership, Wolin claims, in order to preserve the ideological unity required to protect the status quo from dissenters, in essence, from plurality.

Besides the vanguard's elevated status, Wolin takes issue with Lenin's greater vision of democracy. By his interpretation, Lenin conceived of democracy, following socialist revolution, as occurring "within the premises of organization," so that "the perfection of organization would be identical with true democracy."<sup>66</sup> Unsurprisingly, Wolin regards this proposal as practically oxymoronic, as, for him, not only is democracy innately anti-institutional, but the suggestion that democracy *could be achieved through organization* is absurd—this is only made worse by the fact that Lenin was such an admirer of the power of bureaucracy.

Many of Wolin's accusations are preemptively addressed in the earlier chapter on Lenin. Concerning, for instance, Lenin's patronizing tone toward "tawdry" economic

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<sup>65</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 381.

<sup>66</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 383.

objectives, this point would be well complemented by an understanding of how Lenin defines the difference between “economic” struggle—workers against individual capitalists, seeking to improve working conditions—versus “political” struggle—workers against the government, seeking to expand people’s rights, and broaden proletarian political power—as well as the knowledge that Lenin *always* supported economic struggle, but warned of its limitations, “to forget the political struggle for the economic would mean...to forget what the entire history of the labour movement teaches us.”<sup>67</sup> The history he is referring to, is the history of minor concessions used by capitalists to quell popular uprisings.

As for the elitism of the vanguard, we are aware from our previous discussion that the impetus for keeping a core revolutionary force is tactical, something which Wolin appeared at first to grasp. In a battle against the monarchy and the bourgeoisie, Lenin admits, the dissonant oppressed groups of society must be brought together, trained, and directed, or else face defeat by more powerful, well-resourced opponents. This feat requires a “strong organisation” able to cope with “all circumstances” at “all times,” possessing strategic skills that are not natural or intrinsic, but rather acquired. The elitiness of the vanguard, with this in mind, may better be ascribed to their competency and function within the greater movement, than to snobbish privilege or arbitrary exclusivity.

Finally, while Lenin’s democratic convictions were unusual and certainly illiberal, they are far stronger and more prevalent than Wolin portrays them, both in terms of ethos

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<sup>67</sup> Lenin, *The April*, 35.

and organizational structure. For instance, in the *Letters from Afar*, Lenin envisions the creation of a universal proletarian militia (seemingly the evolution of the vanguard), which would replace state apparatus, “in order that they *themselves* should take the organs of state power directly into their own hands, in order that *they themselves should constitute* these organs of state power.”<sup>68</sup> This people’s militia would embody their new, propertyless society, educating people through the experience of being a truly participatory constituency, and transforming “democracy from a beautiful signboard, which covers up the enslavement and torment of the people by the capitalists, into a means of actually *training the masses* for participation in *all* affairs of the state.”<sup>69</sup> Lenin clearly abhorred representative politics, and was consistently critical of Social-Democrats who would have the workers “act only from without.”<sup>70</sup> Still more revealing of Lenin’s democratic persuasions are his moments of humility; for example, he admits that his outline for the proletarian militia is only a rough idea, “Needless to say...when the workers and the entire people set about it practically, on a truly mass scale, they will work it out and organize it a hundred times better than any theoretician.”<sup>71</sup> Clearly Lenin held democratic principles at heart.

If one is not convinced that democracy is achievable through organization by Lenin’s account, Alinsky, the quintessential American organizer, provides us with a potentially more palatable, liberal argument, which even Wolin could not easily dismiss. Alinsky’s democracy can be conceived of as somewhere in between Wolin’s and Lenin’s, for while he,

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<sup>68</sup> Lenin, *The April*, 77.

<sup>69</sup> Lenin, *The April*, 82.

<sup>70</sup> Lenin, "The Socialist," in *Lenin: Selected*, 117.

<sup>71</sup> Lenin, *The April*, 81.

like Wolin, was suspicious of the kind of bureaucracy that Lenin venerated, his vision of democracy is wholly entwined with organization. This is the case for two reasons. First, Alinsky recognized that power is the elemental language of politics, thus if any greater aspirations for progress are to be realized, they must be reinforced by some form of power—this is what organization provides. Second, the process of organizing power for those who don't have it, the Have-Nots, is, or should be, a democratic experience, where the formerly dispossessed learn what it is like to exercise such autonomy. Phulwani writes about Alinsky's perspective, "Organizing is not just about building power; it is also a form of political education for developing the democratic character and capacities of people."<sup>72</sup> In these ways, organization is both the provider, protector, and promoter of democracy.

Though Alinsky's dream of a "free and open society" is certainly amenable to Wolin's localism, they approach the topic from different angles. This is in part due to the peculiarities of Alinsky's political realism, particularly with regard to his views on how self-interest, morality, and democracy interconnect through the medium of politics. Self-interest was, to Alinsky, not synonymous with aggressive individualism, but rather, unconventionally, he considered it the most straightforward route to the realization that collectivity, or the common good, is in fact to one's greatest personal benefit—this is not true for the Haves, of course, as they benefit from others' exploitation. Organization, in turn, provides those without power, who often feel demoralized and isolated, the opportunity to witness and take part in the activities and potentials of collective action, with luck expanding their sense of self. To this theory, Phulwani applies the notion of

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<sup>72</sup> Phulwani, "The Poor," 872.

“thick” self-interest, writing about how organization functions by “broadening the sense of self to include as many of the social relations that define an agent’s sense of self as possible.”<sup>73</sup> Thus organization can foster social cooperation through what is traditionally viewed as an anti-social attitude. Once self-interested is broadened and thickened, and by extension the collective strengthen, an organization then possesses the human power necessary to take on larger opponents.

On the question of who will bring this into being, Alinsky, like Lenin, had no illusions about spontaneous organization. Much in vain of the vanguard, organizers exist to agitate communities, disorganizing the old and organizing for the new; by disrupting the prevailing patterns of power, people are given the chance to step outside of their usual lives, and apprehend the injustices around them from a fresh perspective. Though Organizers provide the technical knowhow, competence, and tactical understanding necessary to build an effective movement, they never infringe upon a community’s right to self-determination. To violate a community in such a way, Alinsky warned, would be to make an organizer “simply the substitution of one power group for another.”<sup>74</sup> Organizers place the “scaffolding,” to borrow a word from Lenin, around which the people can build towards their own ends, in the process of which, Phulwani writes, “they would be driven by necessity to confront, step by step, the larger structures that limited the exercise of their newly acquired power, building their own freedom from the bottom up.”<sup>75</sup> Empowering the disempowered, by this account, may indeed ignite a struggle that engulfs the whole of society.

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<sup>73</sup> Phulwani, "The Poor," 869.

<sup>74</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 125.

<sup>75</sup> Phulwani, "The Poor," 867.



Now compare this confrontational stance from Alinsky with a strikingly similar, yet far less ambitious passage from *Politics*, in which Wolin describes the purpose of localism:

“The aim is not to level in the name of equality or to cherish nostalgia but, by gaining some measure of control over the conditions and decisions intimately affecting the everyday lives of ordinary citizens, *to relieve the serious and remediable distress* and to extend inclusion beyond the enjoyment of equal civil rights by making access to educational and cultural experiences and healthy living conditions a normal expectation.”<sup>76</sup> [italics added]

Though the sentiment is uncontroversial, one can't help but feel as though Wolin is speaking from the perspective of a doctor outlining care options for a terminally ill patient. It might be unfair to accuse Wolin of being too soft simply because he is not calling for a revolution, however, on a strictly practical basis, i.e., from the perspective of a political realist, his conclusions are just that. The notion that, in this time of widespread alienation and discontent *that he so vividly describes*, people will suddenly realize the value of their communal lives, and come together to nurture a vibrant, though ever-fleeing democracy feels far fetched, particularly when considering the oppressive forces actively attempting to dismantle anything of the sort.

Wolin cannot devise a solution to the problems he lays out, because his ultimate aim is not progressive, in the sense that he aims to create something new, but regressive, in the sense that he wishes to return to a way of life that will soon be extinct. By refusing to clarify an objective, and instead defining his politics as the negation of the dominant forces in the

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<sup>76</sup>Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 604.

world, Wolin spurns the possibility for any movement forward, and ultimately dooms his vision to be ever in retreat from the forces it cannot confront. Jodi Dean characterizes well Wolin's generation of the Left, "Wary of 'totalizing visions,' [the Left] cede society and the state to a capitalist class that acts as a global political class intent on extending its reach into and strengthening its hold over our lives and futures."<sup>77</sup> As both Alinsky and Lenin have demonstrated, democracy is not *fated* to be "fugitive," rather this is a self-inflicted condition brought upon by a man who would rather bask in the last remaining pockets of his ideal, than organize for power.

### **Conclusion.**

Though Wolin's conclusions prove to be somewhat disappointing, this does not diminish the value or poignancy of his observations of our modern world. If he manages to capture anything of the modern condition, it is the feeling of bewilderment which seemingly pervades all levels of society. How can any individual cope with the complexities of global capitalism, which have eroded the notion of the independent nation state, and undercut the simplicity of the public/private divide? This development is, in part, the unavoidable side effect of globalization, but, as Wolin boldly points out, it is equally intentional. The neoliberal economy and democracy contradict one another, and thus the institution of the former required the drastic reduction of the latter. This was, he correctly diagnoses, to a significant extent the motivation behind the liberal political philosophy of

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<sup>77</sup> Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 264.

the 1980s and 90s, that is, the attempt to equate democracy with rights and freedoms, rather than participation. Even more sinister, however, is the partnership between state and corporation, so powerful and hegemonic, that it has come to resemble the totalitarian regimes of the past only flipped on their heads. Inverted totalitarianism, with its unpredictable and often conflicting actions and rhetoric, has plunged the masses into confusion, disillusionment, and an accompanying apathy, allowing the corporatist state the room to act as it pleases without the fear of popular interference. In light of these oppressive systems, the question remains, what is to be done?

Let us follow Alinsky's example and consider the world as it is. Though *Politics* remains a generally accurate assessment of the state of American life and politics, being published in 2004, it has aged. It feels as though the enterprise of Superpower has, in many ways, expanded and extended beyond Wolin's initial conception, which has in turn produced a noticeable psychic effect. Tellingly, Jodi Dean, writing in 2015, does not characterize the American public as simply apathetic, but as "psychotic," a survivalist mentality developed in reaction to an even harsher, more competitive form of capitalism, "The survivor is a compelling identity under conditions of extreme competition and inequality. It validates surviving by any means necessary. Survival is its own reward."<sup>78</sup> Even Dean could not have predicted the crescendo of social movements which came only months after her book was published. If anything, the madness has only increased. Among the most intriguing are the development of the Black Lives Matter movement and the ascendance of the Democratic Socialists of America. Both are of a generation of social

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<sup>78</sup>Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 48.

movements attempting to approach politics in novel and creative ways, as there exists a feeling that old forms of protest have become overly predictable, and thus manageable by the institutions they are directed at.

The Black Lives Matter movement spawned from the social media hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which rose to popularity as a rallying cry against police brutality towards African Americans around 2013. As a result of its origin, but also due to a conscious ideological commitment, the movement is notably decentralized, and thus cannot be characterized accurately by any one leader or organization. Various factions have produced various lists of demands, for instance, Project Zero produced a list of demands (and solutions) surrounding police violence, including the end of militarized policing, the empowerment of prosecutors independent of the police in criminal cases, etc..<sup>79</sup> Encouragingly these demands are coupled with tangible policy proposals. There is, to take another example, Black Youth Project 100 based in Chicago, which focuses on the recruitment of 18-35 year old activists,<sup>80</sup> and the Black Lives Matter website itself has 24 chapters from around the country listed.<sup>81</sup>

As it is hard to get a grasp what/who actually constitutes the Black Lives Matter movement, it is nearly impossible to gauge its “effectiveness.” There is certainly a lot to be critiqued within the movement, for instance, is over reliance on “demands” as a form of negotiation—Alinsky would have contended that demands mean nothing if not backed up by power. In fairness, BLM does have a wide reach, and has managed to achieve a longevity

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<sup>79</sup> Black Lives Matter, *Solutions*, [Page #], 2016, <https://www.joincampaignzero.org/solutions/#solutionsoverview>.

<sup>80</sup> "About BYP100," Black Youth Project 100, accessed April 25, 2019, <https://byp100.org/about-byp100/>.

<sup>81</sup> "Find a Chapter," Black Lives Matter, accessed April 25, 2019, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/take-action/find-a-chapter/>.

rarely seen among social media causes. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor bluntly put it, “The movement is confronted with many challenges, but it has also shown that it will not go away easily. This has less to do with the organizing genius of organizers than with deep anger among ordinary Blacks...”<sup>82</sup> However, it cannot be denied that BLM has changed and enlivened the discourse on race in America; even, as Alinsky would have approved of, created conflict—the only real path to change.

At the same time as #BLM was taking off, the DSA was in the process of revitalizing itself around the beginning of the Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign, which began in 2014.<sup>83</sup> As part of this reorganization, in 2018, the DSA initiated a new electoral strategy, which intends to run true DSA candidates around the US in both local, state, and national elections, rather than simply endorsing left leaning, but otherwise independent politicians.<sup>84</sup> Importantly, also, on higher stakes tickets, candidates will run as democrats, in order to avoid the inherent disadvantages of being from a third party. The intention behind this electoral strategy is to give the DSA more control over the candidates they endorse, so as to avoid divergence from the party line. It is an intriguing strategy, and so far has shown success.

In light of the principles of political realism we have gathered, both the DSA and BLM show their own strengths. BLM is truly a social media movement; it has managed to communicate successful on a mass scale with a simple but effective message, “Black Lives

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<sup>82</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016), 189.

<sup>83</sup> Joseph M. Schwartz, "A History of Democratic Socialists of America 1971-2017," Democratic Socialists of America, accessed April 25, 2019, <https://www.dsausa.org/about-us/history/>.

<sup>84</sup> Democracy Socialists of America, *Our Electoral Strategy*, [Page #], 2018, <https://electoral.dsausa.org/national-electoral-strategy/>.

Matter.” To not take notice of their success would be a mistake; as Lenin wrote, “There is nothing more dangerous in a revolutionary period than belittling the importance of tactical slogans that are sound in principle.”<sup>85</sup> The DSA, on the other hand, is consolidating power in a much more direct, almost traditional way, attacking the establishment via its own institutions. No doubt Jodi Dean would approve, as she both advocates for the construction of a communist party, and acknowledges the necessity that the left to confront state power, “At some point, however, an encounter with the state or the economy becomes unavoidable as one or the other becomes a barrier to movement ideals.”<sup>86</sup>

The future of these movements remains to be seen, however, their examples bode well for their successors. Both show a political savviness, and a willingness to take politics seriously that have not been popular among the left for many decades. Hopefully this propensity to organization, and potentially political realist undertones, will lead to a truly powerful left in the future, capable of taking on the force of Superpower on its own terms.

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<sup>85</sup> V.I. Lenin, "Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution," 1905, in *Lenin: Selected Works* (New York, NY: International Publishers, n.d.), 52.

<sup>86</sup> Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 164.

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