

# Lenin and Electricity

## Jean Luc Nancy

**Abstract:** This short article takes its starting point from a very important speech given by Lenin in November 1920, in which he developed one of his understandings of Communism in relation to the Soviets. Based on this, this article will explore the connection between political emancipation and industrial progress in the Soviets (and soviet power) and its consequences in the modern world.

**Keywords:** Lenin, electricity, Communism, Soviet power

Lenin has perhaps never uttered a more striking phrase, nor one destined to a future so abundant with commentaries, citations, or even artistic productions, than the one known in the form:

“Communism is Soviet power plus electrification.”<sup>1</sup>

This success is well deserved. This phrase contains a major meaning (*sens*) of the Russian Revolution, and, consequently, also of the sense (*sens*) that the word “revolution” took on after it – unless it had already been impregnated much sooner; which I don’t want to consider here, but that should be examined.

This meaning (*sens*) can be articulated in this manner: political emancipation is inseparable from industrial progress.

This is what can be read very clearly in Lenin’s speech in which one finds the original form of the phrase (the speech from the 21<sup>st</sup> of November 1920 at the conference of the province of Moscow of the Bolshevik Communist Party of Russia):

“There can be no question of rehabilitating the national economy [*la vie économique*] or of communism unless Russia is put on a different and a higher technical basis than that which has existed up to now. Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country, since industry cannot be developed without electrification. This is a long-term task which will take at least ten years to accomplish, provided a great number of technical experts are drawn into the work. A number of printed documents in which this project has been worked out in detail by technical experts will be presented to the Congress. We cannot achieve the main objects of this plan—create so large [*les 30 grandes*] regions of electric power stations which would enable us to

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<sup>1</sup> Lenin 1920a

modernise our industry—in less than ten years. Without this reconstruction of all industry on lines of large-scale machine production, socialist construction will obviously remain only a set of decrees, a political link between the working class and the peasantry, and a means of saving the peasants from the rule by Kolchak and Denikin; it will remain an example to all powers of the world, but it will not have its own basis.”<sup>2</sup>

The documents prepared by the technicians and then again handed to the Congress of the Soviets formed a complete plan for the electrification of Russia which had to be put to work according to the so called GOELRO plan (the State Commission for the Electrification of Russia).

Without retracing the political, industrial, and cultural history of this period in any way – something for which I do have not any competence – I would simply underline the stakes [*l'enjeu*] of the extremely narrow and powerful conjunction of emancipation with technification.

First of all, it is manifest that it is more than a conjunction. If Lenin's words add electricity to the soviets (“plus”), this addition is however far from being an adjunction. It recovers the consciousness and the will of an essential identity between the industrial revolution and the political revolution: together and only together they compose a complete revolution of humanity, that is an access of the latter to its entire autonomy and to the liberation of all its own value, freed from any exchange value and even use value.

This is perfectly conforming with the Marxist inspiration. Value for Marx is not a use-value liberated from the masks of the commodity value: it is value in itself – value or *sens* (*sens*), this is here the same thing – of human existence as transformation of nature and creation of a second nature. As badly determined as such a thinking might today appear, it stood no less than at the heart of revolutionary thinking in its different aspects.

There is no happenstance in the fact that the expression “industrial revolution” had appeared (inter alia in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848) as a sort of verbal and conceptual link between the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution. The technique in turmoil in the deployment of the triumphant industry forms the counterpart of the division of classes by wage-earnings and exploitation.

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2 Lenin 1920a

In 1900, Paul Morand could write: “electricity is the religion of 1900.” It is also, twenty years later, the energy of the revolution – without wanting to linger on the already much discussed relations between “religion” and “revolution.”

It is indeed not about attributing to Lenin any political opium which he would have imparted to the revolutionaries [*faire absorber*] to put the soviets to sleep under the charm of the “electric fairy”. I will not take up the interminable discussion about the relation of Lenin to the Soviets. It is without a doubt that he discerned the necessity of the Party and of a strong government to allow to bring oneself “to the level of modern technique” and for this sake to assign to the engineers a place more important than to those doing politics: this is what one reads in the speech of 1920 where, at the same time, the words “modern” and “contemporary” resonate as synonyms of “communist” – or more precisely as names of the time-space, that only inside of which the communist apotheosis can arise.

In 1920, it had been almost forty years that Wall Street in New York benefitted from a subterranean network of electric distribution. Moscow had to mend its electric factory.

This epoch was also that of the futurists and constructivists celebrating “the infallible ways of electricity” (Marinetti) as opposed to human weaknesses. It is not excessive to affirm that the ideal of a humanity returned to itself was outlined on the ground of a sovereign technification.

Lenin understood perfectly the necessities and possibilities that were present in a Russia struggling with its own modern transformation. The question is thus much less about knowing to what degree he did or did not clear the way to Stalinism than to know to what extent what was thought of as the emancipation of humanity was not in reality – independent of the protagonists, national rivalries, imperial ambitions and the enthusiasms as well as the panics – conforming with a movement that was long since engaged under the aegis of rationality and of the mastering of so much natural and social forces. If the French Revolution was that of the bourgeoisie against what remained of feudalism, the Russian Revolution has perhaps been that of technique against what remained of politics. It so prefaced in a remarkable way even that which appeared as its failure: the troubling and troubled order of and by global techno-capitalism.

But it opened also under the name of the *Soviet – this name which “is not even translated into other languages, but it is pronounced everywhere in Russian”* (Lenin in 1920 at the session of the Moscow Soviet for the anniversary of the Third International<sup>3</sup>) – the affirmation of a necessity that with the modern world became irrepressible and which is still ours: that man could live together without gods or master – not even those of their own techniques.

Translated by Frank Ruda

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<sup>3</sup> Lenin 1920b