Lenin is a-coming

Camillo Berneri

26 June 1920

For those wishing to delve into "crowd psychology", the people's songs and anthems are a rich field to study.

In the whirlwind of history in which we find ourselves, revolt shows itself in the people's poetry and song. This is a symptom that carries a certain value. Among the best known subversive songs of late, there is the song "*Lenin is a-coming*" in which the soldier, the ashen-faced prostitute and the convict's son invoke Lenin who is referred to as "a beacon of justice and freedom", all of it wrapped up in two clichéd thoughts and formats.

There is no point pressing a popular singer too hard and, given his good intentions and the zeal evident in his verses, we can readily forgive him his venial poetical sins. But as I see it, we must prevent the spread of songs that can peddle certain false notions of revolution. One such notion, indeed, is the very one encapsulated by the refrain of "*Lenin is a-coming*". We have always had a tendency to highlight the thought and actions of the individual rather than the collective and to resist the rigid, one-sided historical materialism of those Marxists who tread the byways of determinism and arrive at a sort of fatalistic view of the deeds and handiwork of peoples. Not that this means standing in the way of a Carlyle who turned the history of peoples into a collection of famous lives that reduced the complex, far-reaching factors in revolution and evolution to the genius and handiwork of heroes. And if we acknowledge that apostles, heroes and martyrs and the greatest agitators of ideas and men, we nevertheless know, and would have the crowd know also, that they should not be looking to the top of a rostrum nor to the scaffold for redemption, but rather to themselves, as the message would be like the seed cast upon stony ground and among weeds, as mentioned in the Gospel parable, unless it reaches minds and hearts prepared to absorb it and make it their own, since redemption would still be left as a potentiality unless the masses have the good will and spirit of sacrifice to carry it out. We must avoid a situation where the masses wait for Lenin like some red prophet, or await a human redeemer the way the Jews wait for their son of God-redeemer, since waiting for a redeemer amounts to thinking of redemption as something that comes from without and independently of the will and sacrifice on the part of those craving it. The masses have not yet understood that one does not wait for the revolution to arrive; if we want it, we want it and we make it. "*Lenin is a-coming*!" is on a par with "*The Revolution is a-coming*!"; both are nonsensical, albeit that they are rooted in the fatalism of Italians and in that underlying religious sense of expectation that is one of the most powerful factors preserving the current state of affairs. The working man needs to be told that

Lenin will not be crossing the Alps like some *great red bear* to liberate Italy, to borrow the by now stereotypical and unfortunate oratorical phrase Bombacci is so fond of repeating, and that he ought not to wait for the revolution to sweep across the Alps the way the people used to hope for liberation from the armies of foreign tyrants back in the feudal times, but rather lay the groundwork for it and carry it through in Italy with all our might and all our creative daring.

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