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Lenin on Tolstoy: Between Imaginary Resolution and Revolutionary Christian Communism

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ABSTRACT: Lenin's criticisms of Tolstoy, spread over half a dozen articles, provide both an anticipatory insight and a blind spot. The insight is that they offer the first example of what would later be called an imaginary resolution of real social and economic conditions. The contradictions of Tolstoy's works are manifested as, on the one hand, incisive critiques of the depredations of the transition between feudalism and capitalism, and, on the other, as inadequate and unarticulated solutions. But these contradictions give voice to the contradictory political situation of the peasants. The blind spot is that Lenin dismisses Tolstoy's response — non-resistance to evil and the recovery of the simple life of Christian devotion and poverty — as reactionary and misguided. What Lenin fails to register is that both elements of Tolstoy's works — the simplicity of collective life as well as the incisive and revolutionary critiques (which Lenin wished to appropriate for the socialists) — come out of the tradition of revolutionary Christian communism.

Lenin, in his magnificent works on Tolstoy, which no Marxist literary critic can afford to ignore . . .

— Lunacharsky, 1973, 171

I WISH TO REASSESS Lenin's half-dozen articles on Tolstoy for two reasons. First, a careful reading of Lenin's arguments reveals a complex understanding of literary contradiction, which may be seen as a precursor to what would later be called the "imaginary resolution" of real contradictions, championed by Fredric Jameson in heavy dependence on Claude Lévi-Strauss (who in turn acknowledges his dependence on Marx but not Lenin). For Lenin, the greatness and power of Tolstoy's artistic achievement is due to its contradictions, or

rather, the fact that he responds to, attempts to resolve and thereby replicates at another, artistic, level the social and economic contradictions that he experienced at such an intense and personal level.¹ Second, I argue that in making his argument Lenin blocks out the revolutionary, communist potential of a religion like Christianity. The only role he allows Christian influence is in Tolstoy's regressive utopia, with its simple living, asceticism, vegetarianism and pacifism. He does not see any such influence on the incisive criticisms of the depredations of feudalism and capitalism, criticisms Lenin wishes to take up for socialism without acknowledging their theological motivation.

My argument proceeds by outlining briefly the theory of imaginary resolutions, through the work of Lévi-Strauss and Jameson. There follows a detailed analysis of Lenin's interpretation of Tolstoy, focusing on the crucial role of contradiction in that analysis in order to highlight how much that approach is an unacknowledged precursor of later Marxist literary theory. The final section explores the blind spot in Lenin's analysis: the inability to acknowledge that Tolstoy's devastating social and economic criticism are due to his radical Christian heritage. Crucially, this insight was already in the Marxist tradition bequeathed to Lenin, from Engels, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky.

Before outlaying the argument in detail, a brief comment on context: in the year 1908 Leo Tolstoy turned 80. Already, he was the subject of varying assessments and political appropriations. Not only had the Slavophiles (Grigor'ev, Strakhov, and Dostoevsky), or the aesthetes (Turgenev), or the Symbolists (Merezhkovsky) made claims to him; so also had radicals since the 1850s, such as Chernyshevsky and Pisarev, and Narodniks, especially Mikhailovsky (Sorokin, 1979). The appeal for the latter two groups came from Tolstoy's advocacy of peasant values, feeding into a romanticization of peasant life and the village-commune (*mir*, or *obshchina*) as offering a peculiarly Russian and thereby alternative path to socialism. Lenin had already attacked such positions on numerous occasions, pointing to the feudal and exploitative nature of the village-commune (Lenin, 1960a, 176, 494–5; 1960b, 238–9, 245, 264–5; 1963c, 34–5; 1963a, 1963d; Miliukov, 1962, 250–1). Closer to home, the Mensheviks, especially Neviadomsky and Bazarov (in *Nasha Zaria*), had argued that Tolstoy represented the

1 For a reading of Gorky inspired by Lenin's interpretation of Tolstoy, see Lunacharsky's "Maxim Gorky" (Lunacharsky, 1973, 170–185), as also Lunacharsky's discussion of Tolstoy's variation on Christian communism (Lunacharsky, 1985, 161–3).

misdirected aspirations of the Russian intelligentsia, constructing a vast synthesis based on the position of non-resistance to evil (Morawski, 1965, 8). With a similar socio-biological and ideological focus, Plekhanov had suggested Tolstoy was an extreme representative of idealist individualism, even siding with the oppressors, but that he was at least able to show up — episodically — the undesirability of the present situation, without understanding at all the struggle for transformation of social conditions (Plekhanov, 2004, 559–61, 572–89).

Handing Tolstoy over so easily to his romantic admirers made it easy for the government newspapers, both liberal and conservative (*Russkoe Znamia*, *Novoe Vremia* and *Rech'*), to claim Tolstoy enthusiastically as one of their own. He was a great seeker after God, a prophet expressing the Russian soul. Not so Lenin; not only did he seek to counter such celebration, but he also wished to provide an analysis as a direct counter to Plekhanov, and far more sustained than the latter's (Morawski, 1965, 8). Lenin penned the first of half a dozen articles on Tolstoy on the occasion of the latter's 80th birthday. A couple of years later, after Tolstoy's death, the remainder were written (Lenin, 1963b, 1963f, 1963g, 1963h, 1963e, 1963i). Yet this was not the first time Lenin had encountered Tolstoy, for already his knowledge of the latter was deep and extensive. This is obvious not only from the easy citation of the latter's works, but also from Krupskaya's comment that during their "exile" in the village of Shushenskoye in Siberia, Lenin counted Tolstoy among his favorite authors and read him avidly.² ✓

*Imaginary Resolutions: Between Incisive Critique
and Christian Solution*

In order to see how far Lenin anticipates the theory of imaginary resolutions, let me outline its later, fully-fledged form, especially in the hands of Claude Lévi-Strauss and then Fredric Jameson, who in his turn framed this theory of literature in Althusserian language (Lévi-Strauss, 1989, 229–56; Jameson, 1981, 77–80; Althusser,

2 Mentioning an early rumor in St. Petersburg that Lenin had never read a novel in his life, Krupskaya writes that when they were married in Siberia, she soon found the story a sheer invention: "Vladimir Ilyich had not only read Turgenev, L. Tolstoy, Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?*, but reread them many times and was generally fond of the classics, which he knew intimately" (Krupskaya 1960, 40; see also Rubinstein, 1995, 369–73).

1971, 127–86). The key is that the cultural products of a society invariably attempt to resolve intractable social and economic tensions at an ideological and cultural level, especially when no resolution is available at a socio-economic level. Lévi-Strauss' key example is drawn from his research among indigenous tribes in South America. His interest was drawn to the facial decorations of the tribes he visited, especially the Caduveo. He noticed that the Caduveo use those decorations to ameliorate and repress the social tensions among social groups within the tribe. But those decorations indicate a tension, for they are based upon an axis at an oblique angle to the face. That is, rather than use the natural lines of nose, mouth and eyes, the Caduveo patterns follow another axis at an angle to these natural lines. There are, in other words, two axes in these face decorations. The reason: unlike the neighboring Guana and Bororo, who have the social checks and balances of moieties to mitigate their caste system, the Caduveo have no such social solution. Their art then becomes another means of dealing with social tensions. The catch is that in the very effort to deal with such a tension, the art shows up the tension at a formal level. Even though Lévi-Strauss acknowledged his debts to Marx in this theory, Jameson was to provide a more explicit Marxist terminology (with debts to Althusser) — imaginary resolution of real social contradictions that reproduces those contradictions at another, cultural and ideological level. Examples include production of alternative realities (as in science fiction or utopian works); stories that violently break through the tensions (as in many works that solve the story's problems through a violent conflagration at the end); or efforts at formal innovation (new genres in the mixture of old ones, new styles of painting, and so on). In other words, the key lies not in the representation of a particular ideology, not in the overt content of the text, but in the contradictory intersections between the form and content of a cultural product — what Jameson calls the “ideologeme” or what Morawski calls the “artistic–cognitive” dimension of a work (Morawski, 1965). Until I read Lenin, I had assumed that this insightful approach to cultural products — which I have deployed on a number of occasions (Boer, 1996, 2003, 2013) — owed its origin to Lévi-Strauss and Jameson. But now all those assumptions fall away, for Lenin in his reading of Tolstoy offers an analysis that anticipates not so

much Lévi-Strauss' limited anthropological analysis, but the Marxist criticism of Jameson.³

In the articles from 1908–11 Lenin argues that Tolstoy's response or answer to his situation is to offer both an incisive critique of that situation and provide an essentially religious solution, with its non-resistance to evil, vegetarianism, simplicity of life and claims to have recovered the authentic nature of early Christianity. That contradictory response has a number of overlays, such as the universalizing move in response to a historically specific situation, as well as the progressive and reactionary features of Tolstoy's answers, the former of which may actually be appropriated by the socialist movement. In other words, Tolstoy may offer a moving diagnosis of the situation but his prognosis is wayward and backward looking. Thus far Lenin may seem to agree with the most sympathetic element of Plekhanov's analysis.⁴ But now he goes a significant step further. Instead of dismissing Tolstoy, he asks: How to make sense of this complex pattern of contradictory responses? Lenin argues that they reveal an equally complex answer to a situation riven with tensions: the peasants' own political aspirations, which Tolstoy expresses with intense clarity; the contradictions of the Russian revolution of 1905; the class contradictions of Tolstoy's own situation; and above all the passage from feudal economic relations to capitalist ones, especially between the abolition of serfdom in 1861 and the revolution of 1905. I will consider each item in more detail.

To begin with, Tolstoy's work is riven with a deeply contradictory feature: his artistic power lies in the devastating criticisms he levels at both feudal and capitalist patterns of exploitation, yet his

3 Although Macherey's reading (1992, 105–35) of Lenin's essays on Tolstoy is the most insightful of the sparse recent literature available, it is at heart a reading inspired by Althusser and Barthes. Lenin thereby becomes a means for developing Macherey's own theory of literature, with no room for the crucial religious element upon which I focus. Less useful are items by Lomunov, 1983, Sánchez, 1979, and Rubinstein, 1995.

4 Unfortunately, Lukács veers closer to Plekhanov on this point than to Lenin, despite claiming to base his lengthy reading of Tolstoy on Lenin's interpretation. In the end, Lukács flattens Lenin's analysis, seeking to find more grist for his realist mill. Thus, Tolstoy is much like Balzac, a reactionary who is brilliant enough to provide insights into the decay of the ruling class (Lukács, 1972, 126–205). On this matter, Lukács attempts to follow what is by then a long tradition of reflections — stemming from Engels — on Balzac and his realist insights into bourgeois life, despite his own reactionary opinions (Engels, 2001a). Rubinstein's brief engagement attempts to follow Lukács, suggesting that Tolstoy's confusion is a marker of the confused perspectives of the peasants and calling his solution a thin veil covering his insights into social chaos (Rubinstein, 1995, 379–82).

solution of a simplified, ascetic Christian spirituality disengaged from politics is highly problematic. These two sides of the contradiction may be designated the critical and the constructive. On the critical side, Tolstoy registers economic exploitation with uncanny and heart-rending genius. Not only does he expose the inexorable trend of ever-increasing destitution among the peasantry, but he also shows with utmost realism the evils of capitalism, government repression, corruption of the courts, and even the way the growth of wealth is concomitant with increasing poverty.⁵ As for peasants, while they continue to use primitive methods on allotments of land that had been reduced after 1861, the landlords adroitly turn to their own advantage the abolition of serfdom and giving of land to peasants: now landlords demand peasant labor and their tools and animals in exchange for access to “cut-off lands,” namely, meadows, watering-places and so on. At the same time, ruined peasants flock to the towns, rapidly swelling the ranks of the working class by feeding exploited labor into the boom in railway construction, mills and factories.⁶ In each situation, exploitation, destitution, hunger and want are evident. All of which leads to the “mountains of hatred” piled up against both the system of landlords and the ravages of capitalism — expressed so well by Tolstoy’s pen.

How does one offer a constructive solution? For Tolstoy, the answer is an exceedingly conventional one: recover the simple forms of earliest Christianity. Why conventional? The internal dynamic of Christianity is a perpetual cycle of reforming an apparently corrupt and otiose institutional form. And one justifies that reform in the name of an authentic original Christianity, without the accretions of institutional time. So also with Tolstoy, for over against the dirty little relationship between the church and the ruling class, in which the church provides the theological bulwark of feudal and capitalist economic depredations, Tolstoy turns against this current form of Christianity in the name a simpler spirituality. One lives ascetically,

- 5 On this matter, some very useful contemporary sources on the rapid and disruptive spread of capitalist relations in rural areas after 1861 include those by Olgin and Alexinsky, the latter an erstwhile comrade of Lenin (Alexinsky, 1913, 114–61; Olgin, 1917, 3–36). It is also worth noting that from the time of *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* onwards, Lenin argued for a more dialectical appreciation of capitalism, especially in light of its useful breaking down of restrictive feudal social and economic relations (Lenin, 1960c).
- 6 An excellent contemporary source for such transitions is the autobiography of Kanatchikov, who moves from his village to the city, gaining various skills as he moves from factory to factory, shedding his religious belief as a crucial part of the worldview of village life and becoming a socialist activist (Kanatchikov, 1986).

becomes vegetarian, withdraws from politics, eschews violence and seeks inner peace.⁷ Tolstoy finds the immediate resources for such a life in the rapidly disappearing village-commune of the peasants, reinforced by a deeply moral Christianity that follows the precepts of an anarchist Christ and unfettered by the weight of the church's odious history. In this light, we may understand his famous "commandments," distilled from the Gospels: do not be angry; do not lust; do not bind yourself by oaths; resist not him who is evil; be good to the just and the unjust (Tolstoy, 2009, 45–71).

Even more, Tolstoy asserts that his answer calls upon the "eternal principles of morality, the eternal truths of religion" (Lenin, 1963i, 50), without realizing that this putative universal is merely the expression of his own particular circumstance, caught as he is in the maelstrom of a world turned upside down. What that circumstance is I will discuss in a moment, although Lenin traces the presence of this "Universal Spirit" through a range of Tolstoy's writings, especially *The Slavery of Our Times*, *Lucerne*, *Kreutzer Sonata*, "Progress and the Definition of Education," and "The Meaning of Life" (Tolstoy, 1972, 2011, 2012, 2010).

Why the Contradiction?

Already we have begun to see that Lenin finds this "solution" woefully inadequate, although the reasons take some unfolding. And already we have witnessed the dialectical tenor of Lenin's arguments in these six pieces on Tolstoy. Although that tenor waxes and wanes, its greatest strength emerges when he moves to explicate the reasons for Tolstoy's contradictory position, caught as it is between his incisive analysis of the current situation and his dreadfully inadequate solution.⁸ Lenin offers four overlapping explanations of this artistic and

7 Or, as Lunacharsky puts it, Tolstoy sought out the man "born of God," the "quiet, meek little angel" who divides the land up into little gardens: "He can grow cabbages there, eat them, fertilize his garden and plant more cabbage, and thus, sustaining himself self-sufficiently and ever so sweetly, he will have no need for his neighbor, except for soul-saving talks or mutual prayer" (Lunacharsky, 1973, 180).

8 Lenin's extensive exploration of Tolstoy's contradictions may be seen as a comprehensive effort to deepen and render far more complex Engels' passing comments on the contradictions of writers such as Balzac, who uncannily exposed the failings of a fading nobility with whom he was in sympathy and the promise of the masses to whom he was opposed (Engels, 2001a; see also Engels, 1995). The difference for Lenin is that Tolstoy is no mere reactionary like Balzac who reveals the truth despite himself; rather, Tolstoy himself embodies a progressive critique and speaks on behalf of the peasantry.

indeed political contradiction. First, Tolstoy gives voice both to the peasants' economic despair and to their political aspirations: "The ancient foundations of peasant economy and peasant life, foundations that had really held for centuries, were broken up for scrap with extraordinary rapidity" (Lenin, 1963b, 206). In his greatness as a writer, Tolstoy registers the shock of the changes experienced by the peasants, voicing their collective anger and dissatisfaction; centuries of hatred of the landlords, priests and tsar turn against the capitalist bosses and tax collectors. Yet, despite all this protest, the peasants have not yet found an adequate political answer: "Through his lips there spoke that multitudinous mass of the Russian people who *already* detest the masters of modern life but have not *yet* advanced to the point of intelligent, consistent, thoroughgoing, implacable struggle against them" (Lenin, 1963h, 353). Why? The peasants found themselves caught in a contradictory position, halfway between the class-conscious proletariat and the defenders of the old regime. The peasantry may have been spontaneously revolutionary in its hatred of the old regime, but it was not yet politically conscious enough for a full revolution. So also Tolstoy.

Second, this analysis has profound implications for the 1905 Revolution: "It was a peasant bourgeois revolution because the objective conditions put in the forefront the problem of changing the basic conditions of life for the peasantry, of breaking up the old, medieval system of land ownership, of 'clearing the ground' for capitalism; the objective conditions were responsible for the appearance of the peasant masses on the arena of more or less independent historic action" (Lenin, 1963f, 324). The significance of that revolution is that the peasantry emerges as a political force. It seeks to sweep away all the old and new forms of oppression and to replace them with communities of free and equal citizens. And this is precisely the locus of their backwardness, for the image of that new society is an old and patriarchal one, with the equality of the village-commune reinforced by a deeply moral Christianity, following the precepts of an anarchist Christ and unfettered by the weight of the church's odious history. Here we find the source of Tolstoy's utopian image of religiously inspired peasant life, providing a model for living in a rapidly changing world. Yet it can be only backward looking, a reactionary utopia. Tolstoy as voice of peasant aspirations can only look to a mythical past rather than toward really qualitative change. Thus, the response

to the existing structures is not a militant one, seeking to destroy all that oppresses them. Instead, the peasants and Tolstoy weep and pray, moralize and dream, write petitions to the authorities to grant their wishes. After all, one must show non-resistance to evil, “which was a most serious cause of the defeat of the first revolutionary campaign” (Lenin, 1963b, 208). No wonder the autocracy took advantage of the peasants and imposed even harsher conditions of life in a vicious counter-revolution, condemning the peasants to live at the edges of the lowest strata of society.

Thus far Lenin has argued for two closely related reasons for Tolstoy’s contradictory position, both relating to the problems inherent in peasant politics.⁹ The third reason both shifts ground a little and is less articulated in Lenin’s argument. Mostly he assumes that Tolstoy speaks movingly from a peasant perspective, this despite that fact that Tolstoy himself was a landlord. Yet on a couple of occasions Lenin registers this crucial feature of Tolstoy’s own class formation. On one occasion, Lenin registers that a dimension of Tolstoy’s contradictions may be inherent in his personal views, but then moves on to argue that those personal views actually reflect much deeper social and economic tensions (Lenin, 1963f, 325). On the other occasion, Lenin recognizes the importance of this issue of class location, pointing out that “by birth and education Tolstoy belonged to the highest landed nobility in Russia” (Lenin, 1963g, 331), but that he sought to break with all the customary views of this environment. Was that break complete? Did Tolstoy really manage to discard all of those assumptions and fully express the travails of peasants? At times Lenin suggests so, but at the moments I have just identified he comes closest to the crucial point that the contradictions in Tolstoy’s art are also due to his tension-ridden class location. Or as he puts it: “Despair is typical of the classes which are perishing” (Lenin, 1963g, 332).

Lenin is at his strongest with the fourth point, namely, that the deep contradictions of Tolstoy’s art are due to the profound *transition between modes of production*, with all of its dislocation, violence and exploitation, along with the sheer release from encrusted and

9 Macherey (1992, 120–34) focuses on these two features, drawing out the implications of what it means for Tolstoy to be both a “mirror” and an “expression” of peasant aspirations and the 1905 revolution. Like Morawski (1965), he downplays Tolstoy’s own class location as a landlord, not least because this has a superficial resemblance to the socio-biological position of Plekhanov, in which Tolstoy merely expresses the ideology of the aristocracy.

apparently unassailable ways of life of the system now falling to pieces (Lenin, 1963f, 1963i). Here Lenin uncannily anticipates a central element of Jameson's literary method, for the tensions in cultural products are ultimately, and in complex, unexpected and indirect fashions, manifestations of the profound contradictions that appear in the long passage from one mode of production to another (Jameson, 1990, 1991, 1992, 2005). For Lenin, Tolstoy's artistic production is a comprehensive effort to solve at a cultural level the deep contradictions embodied in the brutal shift of modes of production.¹⁰ This is not to say that the ancient patterns have entirely disappeared, for the relics of feudalism are everywhere to be found. The state is still autocratic, the church still asserts its monopoly, the landlords still exploit peasants in an official policy of tyranny and robbery. It is as though the feudal system lives on in a modified and suspended form between 1861 and 1905. Yet at the same time capitalism leaps all over the old system. This is stated succinctly in a key phrase from *Anna Karenina*, where the character Levin is talking about arrangements for the harvest: "Here in Russia everything has now been turned upside down and is only just taking shape" (Lenin, 1963i, 49; Tolstoy, 2008, 870). All of which is to state that Tolstoy offers an imaginary resolution of real social and economic contradictions. However, since culture is never able to offer a real resolution to those contradictions, the cultural response perpetuates those contradictions, albeit transposed and reconfigured. That response is, as we have seen, a juxtaposition of searing incisive criticism and retreat to a simple Christian life infused with non-resistance to evil. It is a desperate effort to resolve at a cultural level the seismic shift of modes of production.

Lenin's final move is to draw out from Tolstoy's work what is positive for the socialist movement. Not unexpectedly, it turns out not to be his retreat into inner contemplation and a purified Christianity (for which Tolstoy was excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church), but his incisive criticism of both crumbling feudalism and rampant capitalism. This critique provides an immeasurable service to the socialist movement, for Tolstoy expresses so well the "mountains of hatred" against both the system of landlords and the ravages of capitalism experienced by everyone. Seen from the class perspective

10 Here my assessment differs sharply from Macherey (1992, 131–5), who wishes to develop the position that the text mediates between ideology and the world.

of the proletariat — in contrast to the liberals and conservatives who write of a “great conscience,” which is to focus on his backwardness yet miss the concrete criticisms he leveled (Lenin, 1963b, 2025; 1963e) — Tolstoy’s criticisms provide fertile ground for socialist agitation and point forward to a world in which that exploitation is no more. Deploying a dialectical mode of analysis that would become central to Ernst Bloch’s work, Lenin suggests that these eminently useful socialist elements appear in the midst of the reactionary nature of Tolstoy’s project. In other words, precisely because Tolstoy expresses the pain and desire of a class that is being replaced by the bourgeoisie, he thereby provides insights for the class that is going to replace the bourgeoisie. Feudal socialism may be passing, finding a great voice in Tolstoy, but it is the dialectical harbinger of proletarian socialism. In short, Tolstoy contributed, no matter how unwittingly, to the “epoch of preparation” (Lenin, 1963f, 323). For these reasons, Lenin can write, in an extraordinary moment of prescience, that although Tolstoy is known at that moment only to a minority, after the revolution he will be known by all — his time is to come (Lenin, 1963i).

Blind Spot: Revolutionary Christian Communism

What are we to make of Lenin’s analysis? I have already argued that his argument is an intriguing precursor to the theory of imaginary resolutions to real, social contradictions. Here the formulation of Macherey is initially helpful: “If there is a contradiction in the work it must thus be a different kind of contradiction, obeying the laws of a more subtle contradiction” (1992, 125). Yet for Macherey the “subtle contradiction” is that between a contradictory ideology and the world, mediated by the text, which is itself a mirror that displaces the objects it reflects and thereby offers a critique of the contradictory ideology it mediates. Instead, as I have suggested, the theory of imaginary resolutions offers a better elaboration of Lenin’s approach to these subtle contradictions, for here the social and economic contradictions of real life are manifested and displaced in the text through its structural and formal features, if not also in the ideological and political tensions of the work. In his effort to account for the tensions in Tolstoy’s literary production, Lenin seeks its links with the profound and brutal transitions under way in Russia between feudalism and capitalism. He may not have provided the full theoretical elaboration of Lévi-Strauss

and especially Jameson, his analysis may have waxed and waned in its insight, but precursor it is.

However, here I wish to focus on the role of Christian communism and thereby draw upon Jameson's notion of the "ideologeme." Through such a notion it is possible to move beyond a distinct tension in Lenin's analysis, between his insight and a significant blind-spot. He may have identified the regressive nature of Tolstoy's simplified Christianity, but he fails to see that the depth of his critique of economic exploitation is also part of the tradition of revolutionary Christian communism. It is precisely the ideologeme that is able to hold such a tension together. An ideologeme is a building block of ideology and narrative, comprising "the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes" (Jameson, 1981, 76; developed from Bakhtin/Voloshinov — Jameson, 1986:87). The ultimate purpose of locating and analysing ideologemes is to decode their social and historical content or message. This task is achieved by grasping the ideologeme as a symbolic resolution to a specific historical contradiction, which the ideologeme registers in terms of antinomy.

As for Christian communism, some explanation is in order. With its emphasis on simplicity, pacifism, vegetarianism, and communal life modeled on an idealized peasant village-commune, Tolstoy's model and personal example draw upon elements of the tradition of Christian communism that is first expressed in the Acts of the Apostles. The key text reads: "And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44–5).¹¹ The nature of this Christian communism may be sketched easily: a common belief in the resurrection of Christ, communal living, communism of goods, with those owning possessions selling them so that the proceeds may be redistributed, and thereby absence of need. I should add to these

¹¹ Acts 4:32–5 provides a little more detail: "Now the company of all those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need." More than one reader has detected in these verses a precursor of the famous slogan, "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his need!" (Marx, 1989, 87; 1973b, 21).

items the practices of having meals in common and the abolition of family life (through both communal living and tendencies towards asceticism), as well as the story of the rich young man from the Gospels, where Jesus tells him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Mark, 10:21; see Matthew, 19:21, and Luke, 18:22).

Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky were the first to give this tradition the title of "Christian communism," both stressing that it was a communism of goods rather than production (Luxemburg, 1970, 1982; Kautsky, 2007, 2002). However, they differ concerning its fate, with Luxemburg arguing that it petered out, since no fundamental change was effected on the mode of production. Thus, communism of goods became alms from the rich and communal life transformed into hierarchical structures. While Kautsky agrees with this initial analysis, he also emphasizes that Christian communism did not fade away so easily. Relegated to the margins of a triumphant and powerful church after Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, it remained an inspiration for the monastic movement, which both sought to recreate that initial community time and again and offered sustained critiques of the church's increasing power and privilege.

Tolstoy does indeed seem to draw on this tradition identified later by Kautsky and Luxemburg (in part), for movements of reform typically resorted to the critiques of otiose church structures embodied in monasticism, if not monastic orders themselves that had become far too comfortable. Here too may be found simplicity bordering on asceticism, invocations of the early life of Christian communities and the eschewing of power for the sake of retreat from an evil world. However, the problem with this form of Christian communism is that it tends to remain on the margins, failing to capture the imagination of the bulk of Christianity, often because it is has always been a retrogressive response to times of trouble. It may (although not always) invoke a fading way of life, now idealized and transposed into a largely mythical past that one needs to recover (Boer, 2011a). In this sense it remains a reactionary utopia, despite its great appeal. It may also of course offer a critique of the present order and at the same look forward to its destruction and replacement with a better world — in the sense of classical utopianism. Lenin's criticisms of Tolstoy recognize at least the regressive side of Christian communism.

However, another dimension of Christian communism may also be identified, a revolutionary tradition that offers trenchant critiques of a corrupt and oppressive status quo, seeking not to retreat from the world but to change it. As we have seen, Lenin attempts to drive a wedge between Tolstoy's retreat from the world, which he identifies as Christian, and his criticisms of a brutal and oppressive status quo, which Lenin sees as eminently useful for socialist agitation but which he does not regard as Christian. Here is Lenin's blind spot in regard to Tolstoy, for this prophetic, revolutionary element is also part of the ideologeme that forms the basis of the Christian communist tradition. The key to that ideologeme is that at a symbolic level it manifests precisely the tension between reaction and revolution, between longing for a simpler Golden Age and desire for a better world, between retirement and action.¹² The revolutionary element was first identified clearly by Engels already in his early twenties, coming to full articulation in his later work, *On the History of Early Christianity*, albeit not without significant preliminary statements (Engels, 1990b, 1972b, 1978, 1973a, 1989, 1973b, 1990a, 1973c). The most succinct statement may be found in Engels' Preface to a reissue of Marx's *The Class Struggles in France*:

It is now, almost to the year, sixteen centuries since a dangerous party of overthrow was likewise active in the Roman empire. It undermined religion and all the foundations of the state; it flatly denied that Caesar's will was the supreme law; it was without a fatherland, was international; it spread over the whole empire, from Gaul to Asia, and beyond the frontiers of the empire. It had long carried on seditious activities underground in secret; for a considerable time, however, it had felt strong enough to come out into the open. This party of overthrow, which was known by the name of Christians. . . . (Engels, 1990c, 523; 1972a, 526).¹³

Unable to explore in full the promising line of research opened up by this insight, the aging Engels requested Kautsky to do so, as a series of communications between them shows (Engels, 2001b, 174; 1968a,

12 That particular ideologeme is of course a complex response to the socio-economic tensions during the initial formation of Christianity, which at an ideological level sought to provide a passage from the fading mode of production characteristic of the ancient Near East (variously called the Asiatic mode of production, tributary, or sacred economy), to the slave-based mode of production brutally introduced by the Romans (see Boer, 2011a, 2011b).

13 See also Marx's late acknowledgement of Engels' position (Marx, 1992, 67; 1973a, 161).

88; 2001c, 200; 1968b, 114; 2001d; 1968c; 2001e, 493–4; 1968d, 422–3; 2004a; 1973d; 2004b, 321; 1973e, 268; 2004c, 328–9; 1973f, 276). The result of Kautsky's labors was not so much his *Foundations of Christianity* as the multi-volume *Forerunners of Modern Socialism*, which he too was unable to complete (Kautsky, 1947a, 1947b; Kautsky and Lafargue, 1977; Lindemann and Hillquit, 1977; Kautsky, 2002).¹⁴ Here Kautsky and those who completed the series traced the perpetual pattern of revolutionary movements inspired by Christianity, running through from the early Middle Ages until the eve of Marxist socialism. The dilemma of such a project is that one must mediate between claims to the novelty of the Marxist moment and the sense that it is heir to a long tradition of revolutionary upsurges by the downtrodden. Stress the break too much and you lose any sense of the many threads that led to the break; stress continuity and you risk discarding the novelty of the break. Kautsky typically attempts to resolve this dilemma in evolutionary terms, arguing for Marxism's completion of a historical progression, fulfilling the unrealized potential of all these earlier revolutions. But is not a dialectical approach more useful, in which the rupture of Marxism is through its very ruptural moment dependent upon continuity with Christian communism? That is, those ruptures and breaks are determinative of the tradition itself.¹⁵

Heir of Tolstoy?

The upshot of all this is that Lenin has identified only one dimension of the heritage of Christian communism embodied in Tolstoy. All Lenin sees is nostalgia rather than hope, quietism rather than action, retreat rather than advance, communal life rather than revolution. And so he castigates this regressive dimension of Tolstoy's thought and life, assuming that this is the sole locus of the latter's Christianity. But Lenin fails to identify the other dimension of the ideologue at the core of the Christian communism to which Tolstoy is heir, namely, the revolutionary push for a better world. I would suggest that the inspiration for Tolstoy's resounding critiques of devastating exploitation relies not only on the profound sense of a life that is passing, but also in the anticipation of a better life that lays in the future. In

14 Tellingly, when Lenin produces a narrative of revolutionary forerunners, he does so with a studied avoidance of the religious component (Lenin, 1963j).

15 John Roberts calls this tradition "invariant communism" (Roberts, 2008a, 2008b).

that respect it may well be that implicit within Tolstoy's critiques is precisely that revolutionary anticipation.¹⁶ On that score, Lenin was perhaps more an heir of Tolstoy than he may have cared to admit.

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¹⁶ Is it possible to read a similarly muted revolutionary element in Tolstoy's own evocation of simple communes, in that they anticipate the moment when such communities may well be established after a revolution?

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