



## Chapter 11

# Embracing the Test of Revolution

### *A Leninist Theory of the Test*

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## Introduction

At the First All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies in June 1917, Lenin makes a scandalous speech. He is responding to a claim made by Tsereteli, the Menshevik leader serving as the minister of posts and telegraphs in the Provisional Government. Tsereteli "said there was no political party in Russia expressing its readiness to assume full power. I reply: 'Yes, there is. No party can refuse this, and our Party certainly doesn't. It is ready to take over full power at any moment.'" <sup>1</sup> The crowd erupts in applause and laughter. "You can laugh as much as you please," Lenin retorts, but "no party can refuse this."<sup>2</sup> A few minutes later, when the chair announces Lenin's time is up, the crowd intervenes and forces the chair to allow him to finish. The speech is scandalous in part because the Bolsheviks are admittedly a minority in the Soviets at this time. Moreover, it marks pointedly the distinction between the Bolsheviks and the other two main "opposition" parties of what Lenin calls the "near-socialists," the Mensheviks and the Socialist-Revolutionaries (Narodniks): Lenin makes clear that any real communist party has to be organized around what Georg Lukács calls the *actuality of revolution*.<sup>3</sup>



1 That the revolution is actual does not mean it is guaranteed or inev-  
 2 itable; it is not an empirical claim but an organizing theory. Jodi Dean  
 3 calls it “*anticipation*, the capacity of the future revolution to coordinate the  
 4 actions that will bring it about.”<sup>4</sup> As an organization of advanced elements  
 5 of the proletariat and allied sections of other classes, the role of the Lenin-  
 6 ist Party is to provide leadership based on the actuality of the revolution.  
 7 Leadership, however, is a vague term. It is more helpful to think of the  
 8 Party as a kind of *teacher* who *teaches totally to the test: the test of revolution*.  
 9 The Party, premised on the actuality of revolution, must always stand ready  
 10 for the test of revolution.

11 That revolutions and social movements are educational is an implicit  
 12 assumption of radical political theory. It is hard to find a revolutionary or  
 13 even reformist text that does not make some mention of learning, teach-  
 14 ing, studying, critical reflection, pedagogy, transformation, and so on. Yet  
 15 rarely are these educational components explicated or interrogated closely,  
 16 particularly at the general level of theory. What learning is and how it  
 17 happens in such contexts is left unexamined. As such, the links between  
 18 revolutionary and educational practice and theory remain implicit. This  
 19 is not merely an interesting research gap; unexamined assumptions about  
 20 teaching and learning can create practical problems for those who organize  
 21 with the purpose of achieving social transformation. It is quite possible to  
 22 sneak reactionary conceptions of teaching and learning into revolutionary  
 23 struggles. It is also possible to eschew useful educational dynamics, such as  
 24 the test, because of their contemporary association with reactionary educa-  
 25 tional systems and practices that increase inequality, alienate students, and  
 26 facilitate the privatization of education.

27 In recent years, educational scholars and activists have been examining  
 28 the varied educational processes and logics at work in reproducing or challeng-  
 29 ing capitalism, rather than merely attending to the *content* of education and  
 30 politics.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I want to explore the relationship between testing  
 31 and revolutionary struggle by working toward a Leninist theory of testing.  
 32 I do this through an examination of Lenin’s writings in the early months  
 33 of the Russian Revolution with a focus on the operation of testing during  
 34 protests. The Leninist Party, I argue, does not write the test, but *preps* for  
 35 and *proctors* it. The Party knows that the test will come and organizes itself  
 36 entirely around teaching to the upcoming test. Seen from this perspective,  
 37 Lenin is therefore not a free agent, but a teacher confined to the changing  
 38 and opaque determinations of the test. The test will determine every word  
 39 and deed, every polemic, every slogan, every demonstration. Testing is both  
 40

a means and an end. When protests reveal a weakness within the Party's internal organization, Lenin works to promptly identify and remedy the particular faults that prevented the Party from passing the test. Lenin, for example, viewed the turbulent days of April 1917 as a test that revealed weaknesses in the Party's organization. In response, he writes that the Party's internal "ties must be permanent, must be strengthened and tested every day and every hour."<sup>6</sup> The Party has to continually embrace the test.

Unlike the standardized testing regime that dominates so many educational systems, the content, form, and time of arrival of the revolutionary test is not known. Yet, the revolutionary teacher who teaches to that ultimate test is not stripped of agency or judgment. On the contrary: teaching to the revolutionary test requires that the teacher constantly anticipate potential content of the future test and try out, assess, and revise the pedagogical strategies. In the field of education, one of the most important parts of test preparation is the pre-test. The revolutionary equivalent is the pro-test. As a pre-test of a sort, the protest allows the Party to test itself, the masses, its opponents, and to examine the political landscape of the moment. Where do the masses stand? How about the Party's organization, slogans, and pedagogy? How intense is the force of the state? What is the content of the test? To develop a Leninist theory of the test, I draw from Avital Ronell's writing on testing, which identifies a general *test drive* that, according to Ronell, both affirms and produces reality. Unlike in Ronell, for Lenin there is no testing for the sake of testing, however. Lenin's theory of the test, I argue, is a particular appropriation of the test drive, not a general but a *partisan drive*. To begin, we will briefly examine the history of the test and some contemporary debates about the use of testing in education, which can help us identify the ontology of testing and clear the way for a Leninist reconceptualization of the test.

### Toward a Revolutionary Test Drive

Today, testing has a bad rap. Testing is associated almost exclusively with soul-crushing high-stakes standardized tests in schools, those forms of bubbles we fill in that abstract knowledge and subjectivity from the world, produce educational inequality, and facilitate the privatization of public education. In the United States, impressive grassroots movements have erupted against the test, the "opt-out" movement being the most significant. There are few progressives today who would defend testing as a form of assessment—let

1 alone embrace it—and critical theorists within and around the field of edu-  
 2 cation have on the whole rejected testing in favor of alternative assessments  
 3 such as portfolio reviews. While the struggle against these tests in schools  
 4 is surely important and progressive, we can't collapse one particular man-  
 5 ifestation of testing together with the general educational logic of testing.

6 Ronell shows us that testing has an ontological status and force.  
 7 What she terms the test drive is a “*nearly* unavoidable” condition of human  
 8 being.<sup>7</sup> The test drive is “a kind of questioning, a structure of incessant  
 9 research . . . [that] scans the walls of experience, measuring, probing, deter-  
 10 mining the ‘what is’ of the lived world.”<sup>8</sup> As it scans the world, it both  
 11 affirms and undermines what is. To test means to push, and sometimes when  
 12 you push, you break. And when you break, you discover something else.  
 13 This something else only holds until it, too, is tested. This is why testing  
 14 is a *drive*—an evolving loop determining and challenging the contours of  
 15 reality. At one point she puts it even more radically: “It is not clear even  
 16 that something is known until there is a test for it.”<sup>9</sup>

17 The test drive can be avoided or short-circuited. On the one hand,  
 18 dogmatism tries to hold the test drive at bay with its own legitimating  
 19 claims on truth. It is, in part, the modern era that gives birth to the impetus  
 20 to test, to experiment. With the Reformation's challenge to the Church,  
 21 authority began to need proof, had to submit itself to questioning. As the  
 22 scientific pursuit overtook the church, it required that not just religious truth,  
 23 but truth in general, must submit to the test. On the other hand, Ronell  
 24 points out that the scientific regime itself tries to escape the test drive by  
 25 fixing the rules of the test. The scientific test becomes a methodological and  
 26 epistemological form of restraint. This is exemplified in Popper, who poses  
 27 the test as “the answer to the answer” that “is never considered from the  
 28 angle of a possible collapse.”<sup>10</sup> What does it really mean to test? Are there  
 29 different kinds of tests, and if so, do these produce different kinds of truths?  
 30 If a hypothesis passes one kind of a test but fails another, what is its status?

31 While modernity entails liberating the truth (via the test) from the  
 32 Church, it also encloses and fixes it within the scientific method. Science  
 33 becomes the arbiter of truth, eclipsing philosophy. As science as such  
 34 becomes an untestable maxim, Ronell argues, the test drive is taken over  
 35 by the “normatively secured test,” which “does not generate knowledge but  
 36 confirms what already exists as ‘knowable.’”<sup>11</sup> A key task for Ronell is thus  
 37 to reassert the role of philosophical questioning, a practice that, building  
 38 on Nietzsche, she argues shares an affinity with the test drive. “Rather than  
 39 describing and merely computing,” she writes, “the genuine philosopher  
 40 tests the limits of intelligibility, making things happen with decisive pos-

ittings that are by no means enslaved to what is.”<sup>12</sup> Failure is the lifeblood of the philosopher, who risks everything—even themselves—in the process. There is literally nothing sacred here, no final ground that cannot be swept away or principles that cannot be broken. The test is aggressive, attacking “epistemological meaning with a kind of ontological fervor.”<sup>13</sup> She wants to reclaim this fervor, use it to attack the juridico-scientific appropriation of the test drive. To do this, she points to the aporetic ethos of the test: “If the test really tested, then we would not need the test.”<sup>14</sup>

How can we use Ronell’s theory of the test drive to develop a Leninist concept of testing? Seen as drive, the test’s impulse has no direction or content. We can view the Leninist test as a particular appropriation of the test drive, a *partisan* drive that both unleashes the impulse for change and gives it form or shape. While Lenin’s teaching will be disciplined to the test, the test itself will be disciplined to the communist project. It is not that communism is a predetermined standard to be achieved. Instead, communism is the matrix—or, better, a rubric—for engaging and transforming reality. To make this clearer and more specific, let us turn to Lenin’s writings during the early months of the 1917 Revolution as the Party faced several key pretests during which they tested their Party, the masses, and their enemies. Along the way, we can extract a Leninist appropriation of the test drive that can wrest the test away from its reactionary manifestations and inform Left organizing in the twenty-first century. For the prerevolutionary Party, the ultimate test is the revolution: Will we overthrow the bourgeoisie or not? Yet the revolutionary process as a movement of testing is not readily transparent. The Party has to deploy testing as a framework to assess its own capacities and strengths and to evaluate the character and relative power of the different social forces at play. The Party is thus both a proctor and a subject of testing. Conceptualizing the revolution as a test and the revolutionary process as a series of pre-tests enables the Party to build its internal organization, learn the shifting coordinates within which its operating, and intervene and push forward the revolution in response in response to these shifts. The concept of protest as a pre-test is especially useful today: it allows us to understand the role mass protests can play when they are disciplined to the test of the coming revolution.

### Testing the April Theses

Lenin arrived in Petrograd on April 3, 1917, just weeks after the February Revolution overthrew the Tsar and his monarchy. What arose in its place was

1 what Lenin—for a while—diagnosed as “dual power,” a situation wherein  
 2 power was shared between the Provisional Government and the Soviets of  
 3 Workers’ and Soldier’s Deputies. This was a unique situation of interlaced  
 4 power, in which the two independent forms of state existed together and,  
 5 to varying degrees, depended on each other. The Provisional Government  
 6 emerged out of the Duma (The House of Representatives) immediately after  
 7 the February Revolution to organize a Constituent Assembly and govern in  
 8 the interim. The *Soviets* (councils) were an organic form of sovereign and  
 9 direct rule of the masses that first emerged in the 1905 revolution.

10 The day after Lenin’s arrival, he was asked to report to a meeting of  
 11 the Bolshevik delegates to the All-Russia Conference of Soviets of Workers’  
 12 and Soldiers’ Deputies. The meeting’s chairman then asked Lenin to repeat  
 13 the report to a meeting of Bolshevik and Menshevik delegates. This report  
 14 contained a series of “personal theses” today known as the April Theses,  
 15 which cover a range of topics: the communist position on the war, the stage  
 16 of revolutionary Russia, the Party’s immediate program, and the Socialist  
 17 International, among others.<sup>15</sup> The Theses sparked controversy even within  
 18 the Bolsheviks, and the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party decided to  
 19 host a public debate on them. Their controversial nature notwithstanding,  
 20 as theses, they needed to be tested both in theory and practice, and over  
 21 the course of the next four months some would stand and others would  
 22 fall. The theses were an attempt to deduce the nature of the situation in  
 23 Russia to provide a basis for communist tactics and strategies. It was Lenin’s  
 24 first attempt to ask and answer: What is the nature of the upcoming test?  
 25 What questions will be on it? What are the standards? How do we prepare  
 26 the Party, Soviets, and the broader masses for it? In this section, I isolate  
 27 the first four theses, which speak most broadly to Lenin’s test-driven revo-  
 28 lutionary pedagogy.<sup>16</sup>

29 The first thesis concerns the war. The war is going to be part of the  
 30 test. What is the nature of the war? What is the nature of annexations?  
 31 How do we end the war? The war, Lenin says, is imperialist and predatory  
 32 *because the capitalist class is waging it*. There can thus be no “concession  
 33 to ‘revolutionary defencism’”—an idea propagated by Menshevik Tsereteli  
 34 and others that Russia must continue the war in order to defend the rev-  
 35 olution—but that it must reject any annexations or territorial expansions.  
 36 “Revolutionary defencism,” Lenin argues, is nothing but an alliance with  
 37 the bourgeoisie, a way to provide “socialist” support for an imperialist war.  
 38 The Bolsheviks have to “*prove* that without overthrowing capital” the war  
 39 will not end.<sup>17</sup> The second thesis confirms that Russia is in a transitional  
 40

period between revolutionary stages. Tsarism has been overthrown and the bourgeoisie has been empowered. Now the bourgeoisie must be overthrown and the workers empowered. With the bourgeois-democratic revolution there is unprecedented freedom in Russia, which allows for the third thesis: a refusal to support the Provisional Government. All support, all power, must be to the Soviets. Yet, and this is the fourth thesis, the Bolsheviks are a minority in the Soviets. “As long as we are in the minority,” Lenin says, “we carry on the work of criticizing and exposing errors and at the same time we preach the necessity of transferring the entire state power to the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies, so that the people may overcome their mistakes by experience.”<sup>18</sup>

With the situation of legal openness in which revolutionaries could openly organize and agitate, teaching to the test meant two things: patient explanation and experience of the moment’s contradictions. Recognizing the lack of control they have over the situation and doubling down on the faith they have in the masses, Lenin again calls for power to the Soviets even though that, in essence, means power to the “near-socialists.” The Mensheviks and Narodniks are positioned between the proletariat and bourgeoisie, and thus don’t deserve the scorn the Bolshevik leader dishes out to the Provisional Government. As organs of power, Soviets are where the masses teach themselves how to govern. Through participating in the Soviets, the Bolsheviks’ explanation and critique will give meaning, form, and direction to the experiences in the struggle in the months to come. This will prepare the masses for the test.

The first pre-test takes place just a few weeks later, and allows the Party to assess and evaluate their internal organization, their slogans, and their pedagogy. On April 18, the Provisional Government’s foreign minister, Paul Milyukov, sends a note to Russia’s allies reaffirming its commitment to fighting and winning World War I and reinforcing the annexations. On April 20, after the note leaks, the streets of Petrograd erupt for two days, during which the streets are packed with meetings, marches, and battling demonstrations. During the crisis, the masses instinctively gravitate away from the capitalists and toward the workers. Soldiers are the first in the streets. While the poorer sections of town and the suburbs fill with workers, reactionary elements that supported the Czar, led by military officers and The Black Hundreds, group in the rich areas. Street demonstrations erupt into violence and reports of shootings and deaths trickle in. As the crisis intensifies, the Soviets—under the leadership of the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries—crack under the pressure and capitulate: they vote

1 confidence in the government and ban street demonstrations for two days.  
 2 Through reflections and debate in resolutions, newspaper articles, speeches,  
 3 and Party conference, Lenin and the Bolsheviks grade the pre-test and draw  
 4 appropriate lessons. How did the Party, the Provisional Government, and  
 5 the masses do on the pre-test?

6 The results showed first of all that the masses were opposed to the  
 7 war, and that this was “strong enough to be a *decisive* factor, that caused  
 8 the crisis.”<sup>19</sup> The events also vindicated the Bolsheviks’ distinction within  
 9 the “defencist” camp between the masses and the leaders. The masses, Lenin  
 10 concluded, do not understand the nature of the war, “that wars are waged  
 11 by *governments*, that governments represent the interests of certain *classes*,”  
 12 and that the current war is a capitalist war.<sup>20</sup> The Provisional Government’s  
 13 April 18 note was a betrayal, they “were surprised, shocked, indignant. They  
 14 *felt*—they did not understand it quite clearly, but they felt that they had  
 15 been tricked.”<sup>21</sup> Lenin inferred that the imperialists were well aware of the  
 16 nature of the war while the “revolutionary defencist” leaders, by contrast,  
 17 refused to admit its true nature, and so vacillated between the imperialists  
 18 and the workers. The crisis confirmed the accuracy of the Bolsheviks’ lead-  
 19 er’s thesis on both the war and the government’s inability to end it all—let  
 20 alone without annexations.

21 There were also serious ways in which the Party failed the pre-test of  
 22 the crisis. Party resolution on the morning of April 22 boldly states: “The  
 23 organisation of our Party, the consolidation of the proletarian forces, clearly  
 24 proved inadequate at the time of the crisis.”<sup>22</sup> Even as their political opponents  
 25 taunted them, the Bolsheviks embraced their failures. “We have no reason to  
 26 fear the truth,” Lenin wrote a few days later, “the crisis has revealed certain  
 27 shortcomings in our organisation. We must set about to correct them!”<sup>23</sup>  
 28 The primary error was a lack of centralization, which prevented an effective  
 29 coordinated intervention. Because they weren’t properly centralized, the Bol-  
 30 sheviks were not able to correctly ascertain the exact dimensions of worker  
 31 support in different areas. The Central Committee “advanced the slogan  
 32 for peaceful demonstrations,” but the Petrograd Committee put forward a  
 33 different slogan, “Down with the Provisional Government.”<sup>24</sup> The second  
 34 slogan was cancelled, but not before some workers got behind it. This showed  
 35 a deficiency in intra-Party communication and unity. The Petrograd slogan  
 36 was premature and made the Party vulnerable to accusations of adventurism  
 37 and insurrectionism. There were also too many unknowns. Lenin said that  
 38 the Party wanted “a peaceful reconnoitering of the enemy’s forces; we did  
 39 not want to give battle.”<sup>25</sup> The goal of the protest was reconnaissance—to  
 40

determine the size, strength, composition, and determination of the enemy. 1  
 What forces are in the enemy camp in what numbers? How far will they 2  
 go? The lack of coordination between various parts in the Party led to a 3  
 failure that exposed the Party's vulnerability and taught the Party how to 4  
 correct its errors. 5

The Party had to readjust. For instance, they needed to withdraw 6  
 their slogan, "Turn the imperialist war into a civil war." The slogan was 7  
 still correct in general and the retraction was only temporary, tactical. 8  
 The only way out of the imperialist war was still through a revolutionary 9  
 transfer of power from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat and its allies. 10  
 However, the country was right now *in between* civil wars, and in fact the 11  
 Provisional Government *needed* the Soviets and thus could not resort to 12  
 violence against the workers. While the government could not repress the 13  
 workers and soldiers, it could and wanted to repress the Bolsheviks, precisely 14  
 because the Bolsheviks represented the revolutionary point of view. This 15  
 was all the more reason for the temporary withdrawal of the slogan. "The 16  
 government," Lenin said to the Congress, "would like to see us make the 17  
 first imprudent move towards revolutionary action, as this would be to its 18  
 advantage. It is exasperated because our Party has put forward the slogan 19  
 of peaceful demonstrations."<sup>26</sup> Despite the fact that the Bolsheviks wanted 20  
 a revolutionary struggle, they concluded that they should not be getting 21  
 ahead of the objective conditions. 22

What about pedagogy? The Menshevik- and SR-guided Soviets capit- 23  
 ulated, during the April protests, to the bourgeoisie. They corralled the 24  
 workers, directing them out of the streets with the imperialists' promises that 25  
 they would end the war. The pedagogical form of explanation, patience, and 26  
 experience were once again affirmed by the Bolsheviks. The Party needed to 27  
 engage in "peaceful, prolonged, and patient class propaganda."<sup>27</sup> Comrades 28  
 needed to "explain more precisely, more clearly, more widely the proletariat's 29  
 policy, *its* way of terminating the war."<sup>28</sup> The same went with dual power. 30  
 The Soviets, Lenin claimed, *are* a real form of power, an embryonic socialist 31  
 state. They "stand at the centre of the revolution," yet Lenin noted "that we 32  
 have not sufficiently studied or understood them."<sup>29</sup> By this he meant that 33  
 both the Bolsheviks and the broader struggle needed a better understanding 34  
 of what the Soviets represent as a new kind of state, a workers' state along 35  
 the lines of the Paris Commune. As if to provide an example of what it 36  
 means to study the Soviets, Lenin offered the story of a coal miner who, 37  
 speaking plainly, relayed how the miners took over the mine: "They seized 38  
 the mine, and the important question to them was how to keep the cables 39  
 40

1 intact so that production might not be interrupted. Then came the question  
 2 of bread, which was scarce, and the miners also agreed on the method of  
 3 obtaining it. Now that is a real programme of the revolution, not directed  
 4 from books.”<sup>30</sup> The “programme” came not from the enlightened Lenin but  
 5 from the enlightened coal miner. The Party was a conduit through which  
 6 the working class as a whole learned not only analysis but also about and  
 7 through their own experience. “The Soviets must take power,” and, “in this  
 8 respect fear is the worst enemy.”<sup>31</sup> It was not only the absence of a proper  
 9 conception of imperialism and dual power, but also of the self-confidence  
 10 of the masses. Or, it was the combination of these two aspects: without  
 11 consciousness of class dynamics, the oppressed classes could not experience  
 12 and flex their own power. The illusion that the imperialists could end the  
 13 war was the illusion that the oppressed could not run their own affairs.

14 Finally, Lenin urged patience. “So far we are in the minority; the  
 15 masses still do not believe us. We can wait.”<sup>32</sup> There would be more pre-tests.  
 16 Dual power, as a “state of unstable equilibrium,” necessitated them.<sup>33</sup> Part  
 17 of the revolutionary teacher’s task is to affirm this again and again, to  
 18 maintain momentum and keep pushing and preparing for the test. Others  
 19 want to avoid or prevent the test, or keep the workers ill-prepared. There  
 20 were three answers circulating after the April 20–21 crisis: (1) make no  
 21 changes and give the government more time, (2) form a coalition govern-  
 22 ment with representatives of the workers’ parties, and (3) give all power to  
 23 the Soviets. As it goes, answer 2 won, and the Mensheviks and Narodniks  
 24 joined in a coalition government on May 6. This was another victory for  
 25 the bourgeoisie, and another failed opportunity for the Soviets. What Lenin  
 26 called the “near-socialists”—or what today we might call the left wing of  
 27 imperialism—moved farther into the camp of the bourgeoisie.

28 The answer, of course, was wrong, and it was not long before it was  
 29 exposed as such. Not even a month later, the government announced an  
 30 upcoming offensive in the war. In response to a series of strikes, the Bol-  
 31 sheviks mobilized against the offensive and called for a peaceful demonstra-  
 32 tion on June 10. The night before, however, the First All-Russia Congress  
 33 of Soviets headed them off by banning demonstrations for the next three  
 34 days. The “near-socialists” said the Bolsheviks were planning a coup and  
 35 that counterrevolutionaries were going to infiltrate the protests and cause  
 36 violence. The Bolsheviks disciplined themselves to the Soviets and called  
 37 off the demonstration. Comrades were understandably upset, but Lenin  
 38 said that it was a strategically necessary retreat. The struggle was height-  
 39 ening and entering a new period. Tsereteli moved to ban the Bolsheviks  
 40

from participating in the Congress. The war offensive was coupled with an offensive against the Bolsheviks. This was a vindication of the Bolsheviks' position, a testament that they really were the revolutionary opposition to imperialism. Lenin called for restraint and caution. As he suggested that the time for peaceful demonstrations had passed, he called for a change in agitation. The Mensheviks and Narodniks formed the ruling bloc and they had majority support. This means that *they were responsible* for the present situation, for the war offensive and the increasing economic disaster. They had shifted even further into the camp of the bourgeoisie.

Unable to contain the outrage at the offensive and the economic crisis, the Soviets called for a "general demonstration" of all parties for June 18, the day the war offensive was launched. This was another key pre-test for the Party, and one that the Party *administered*: A planned action with multiple parties would allow them to test their slogans on the masses, to see where they stood right then relative to other classes and parties. This time the Bolsheviks passed. Their standing increased. This pre-test showed they had a higher standing with the masses, and moreover, that the masses were *learning the content*. Although the action only lasted a few hours, the Party's slogans prevailed among the workers and soldiers.<sup>34</sup> Yet as a test of the struggle's state, it showed something new. It was the first protest that was forward-looking, "the first political demonstration of *action*, an explanation of how the various classes act . . . an explanation not given in a book or newspaper, but on the streets, not through leaders, but through the people."<sup>35</sup> Whereas previous actions emerged as reactions or reflections, this one was planned as a pre-test. The "near-socialists" had put their slogans up and failed.

The offensive went forward. While initially successful, it ended in absolute failure with around sixty thousand people dead within ten days. It sparked a new round of revolt with an insurrectionary character. Armed soldiers and workers took to the streets. They called on the Bolsheviks to take power. The Bolsheviks, after initially helping protest committees organize, quickly withdrew their support. The time was not right for insurrection. The protests were too concentrated in Petrograd and the Bolsheviks still did not have the majority of the Soviets. A severe reaction set in, as military forces loyal to the bourgeoisie repressed the protests and burned down the Bolsheviks' printing press and headquarters. Bolshevik leaders were accused of conspiracy. Some were successfully arrested while others were driven underground. The "near-socialists" were in complete support of the repression. The events signaled another major turning point: the coordinates of the revolutionary test had changed.

1 Reflecting on the three pre-tests, Lenin says each had unique features.  
 2 While the first was spontaneous and chaotic, the second one was organized  
 3 and orderly, and the third ushered in a counterrevolution. More important,  
 4 however, were the continuities and what, taken together, they revealed. For  
 5 one, each showed an increasing opposition to the Provisional Government  
 6 and its inability to end the war and solve the economic crisis. For two, they  
 7 were all demonstrations or protests. They were “something considerably more  
 8 than a demonstration, but less than a revolution.”<sup>36</sup> They were an eruption  
 9 “of revolution and counterrevolution *together*, a sharp, sometimes almost  
 10 sudden elimination of the middle elements.”<sup>37</sup> The first four April theses no  
 11 longer held. A military dictatorship now reigned as the counterrevolutionaries  
 12 have consolidated power. The “near-socialists” have completely betrayed the  
 13 revolution. No peaceful transfer of power was possible. The Soviets were with  
 14 the counterrevolution. The Bolsheviks must prepare for violent insurrection,  
 15 combining legal and illegal activity: “Let us muster our forces, reorganize  
 16 them, and resolutely prepare for the armed uprising, *if* the course of the  
 17 crisis permits it on a really mass, country-wide scale.”<sup>38</sup> Propaganda must  
 18 shift and intensify against the “near-socialists.” The slogan, “All power to  
 19 the Soviets” must be withdrawn. The era of the protest as a pre-test was  
 20 over, was no longer an effective method of test preparation.

### 21 22 23 The Leninist Test 24

25 We witness the test drive each time the masses take to the streets to challenge  
 26 and push at the boundaries of what is, every time political factions put for-  
 27 ward their slogans and banners in a protest, and each time the Provisional  
 28 Government takes another step toward war or against the Bolsheviks. At each  
 29 juncture, the Bolsheviks utilized demonstrations or protests as pre-tests in  
 30 which they tested their own slogans, internal organization, the composition  
 31 and strength of their supporters and enemies, the different classes taking to  
 32 the streets, and the coordinates in which the struggle was unfolding. That the  
 33 Bolsheviks embraced the test drive means that they did not try to control  
 34 it, but ride it, so to speak, and orient it into a revolutionary direction by  
 35 assessing the states and trends of the objective and subjective forces. Only  
 36 by submitting to the test drive did they have any chance of passing the  
 37 ultimate revolutionary test.

38 As drive, the test drive has a permanent kind of consistency and is not  
 39 the product of one particular mode of production, stage of social develop-  
 40

ment, and so on. The political implication that follows is that the drive needs direction and organization. Any system can be tested in a variety of ways from any number of orientations. As pre-tests, protests do not presuppose any particular content. Thus, not only before but after the revolutionary event the Party has to continually reorient the test drive, directing it toward egalitarian ends. It has to become a permanent mechanism of the Party's outlook. It is not surprising, then, that in his political report to the Bolshevik Central Committee at the Eleventh Congress of the Russian Communist Party in 1922, we find Lenin framing the New Economic Policy also as a test, or a series of tests. Instituted one year prior, the NEP was a widely criticized retreat from socialism—one that instituted capitalist reforms to energize and expand productive capacities. Lenin frames the NEP *in the first instance* as a test: "First, the New Economic Policy is important for us primarily as a means of testing whether we are really establishing a link with the peasant economy."<sup>39</sup> Because the NEP allows for capitalist enterprises, the new state enterprises are put to the test as well. The NEP puts the entire revolution "to the test from the point of view of the entire economy."<sup>40</sup> The Party has launched a grand experiment and is relinquishing control of the test, which will ultimately be evaluated by an entire class (the peasants) and a rather abstract entity (the entire economy).

Just as in the heated moments in 1917, Lenin urged his comrades to *embrace the test*. "We need a real test," he said, "not the kind the Central Control Commission makes when it censures somebody . . . we want a real test from the viewpoint of the national economy."<sup>41</sup> It all came down to this test: "Either we pass this test in competition with private capital, or we fail completely."<sup>42</sup> Even once the working class and the Bolsheviks held state power, they still could not predict or control the outcome of this test. The Party must continue to test itself. Yet the Party was not only the proctor of testing, but the subject of it as well. After the revolutionary seizure of power, the Party continued to be tested by competing social forces and organizations. Immediately after October 1917, internal counterrevolutionary forces colluded with foreign imperialists who, through more than a dozen invasions, tried to overthrow Soviet power. At the same time, the Party had to completely reorganize society and the economy. It did not only look inward, however, but also began to help reconfigure the entire socialist movement. By passing the test of revolution, the Party verified and produced a new reality that came with new coordinates of testing. With state power, the Party's ability to test itself and others changed as well. They had to defend the results of the revolutionary test and continue to

1 test themselves and the new order of things as they were subjected to the  
2 tests of rival forces and objective conditions.

3       The actuality of revolution is a framework for understanding the Party's  
4 role in building revolutionary momentum and organization. The Revolution  
5 is a test for which the Party—and their enemies—prepare. Yet the particular  
6 components of the test are impossible to tell in advance. The moment of  
7 insurrection cannot be determined in advance. Viewing the revolutionary  
8 process as a series of pre-tests helps the Party build itself and the move-  
9 ment. If the actuality of revolution is the test the organized Left is in fact  
10 preparing for, then everything leading up to it can be conceptualized as a  
11 pre-test. If we understand mass protests as pre-tests, we can more explicitly  
12 and precisely draw appropriate lessons about the Party, the relation of forces  
13 between competing leadership bodies, the consciousness and activity of the  
14 masses, and the overall objective conditions for the struggle. Where does mass  
15 consciousness stand? Who is in the streets, what banners are they following,  
16 and what slogans are they chanting? What forces and tactics is the state  
17 deploying? How did the movement's leadership respond? Were our tactics  
18 appropriate, were they too timid, or were they too radical? If a revolutionary  
19 crisis broke out right now, where would the various factions in society stand?  
20 Viewed through the test drive, each protest and action—whether organized  
21 by the Party or the spontaneous result of broader crises—can be placed  
22 in an overarching development sequence and can help us determine the  
23 evolution of that sequence. We can assess and evaluate the different factors  
24 at play, decipher the strengths and weaknesses of competing organizations  
25 and ideologies, and anticipate future developments. Protests and struggles  
26 are not isolated or singular events but rather part of an unfolding process  
27 of revolution.

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## Notes

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32       1. V. I. Lenin, "First All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers'  
33 Deputies," in *Lenin: Collected Works (Vol. 25)*, trans. and ed. S. Apresyan and J.  
34 Riordan, 15–24 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1980), 20.

34

2. Ibid.

35

36       3. Georg Lukács, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of his Thought* (London:  
Verso, 2009), 26.

37

38       4. Jodi Dean, "The Actuality of Revolution," in *Storming the Gates: How  
39 the Russian Revolution Changed the World*, ed. J. Cutter (San Francisco: Liberation  
40 Media, 2017), 129.

40

5. See, for example, Tyson E. Lewis, *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and Educational Potentiality* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Derek R. Ford, *Communist Study: Education for the Commons* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016); Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Los Angeles: Autonomedia, 2013); David I. Backer, *Elements of Discussion* (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2015). 1
6. V. I. Lenin, "Foolish Gloating," in *Lenin: Collected Works (Vol. 24)*, trans. Bernard Isaacs (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1980), 224. 2
7. Avital Ronell, *The Test Drive* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 5; emphasis added. 3
8. Ibid. 4
9. Ibid., 187. 5
10. Ibid., 41–42. 6
11. Ibid., 187. 7
12. Ibid., 137. 8
13. Ibid., 186. 9
14. Ibid., 224. 10
15. V. I. Lenin, "The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution," in *Lenin: Collected Works (Vol. 24)*, trans. Bernard Isaacs (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1980), 21. 11
16. Theses 5–9 address programmatic issues, while thesis 10 contains the same content as thesis 1 in a different context. 12
17. Ibid., 22; emphasis added. 13
18. Ibid., 23. 14
19. V. I. Lenin, "Lessons of the Crisis," in *Lenin: Collected Works (Vol. 24)*, trans. Bernard Isaacs (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1980), 214. 15
20. V. I. Lenin, "Honest Defencism Reveals Itself," in *ibid.*, 205. 16
21. Ibid. 17
22. V. I. Lenin, "Resolution of the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P. (Bolsheviks) Adopted in the Morning of April 22 (May 5), 1917," in *ibid.*, 211. 18
23. V. I. Lenin, "Foolish Gloating," in *ibid.*, 223. 19
24. "The Seventh (April) All-Russia Conference of the R.S.D.L.P.(B.)," in *ibid.*, 244. 20
25. Ibid. 21
26. Ibid., 237. 22
27. Ibid., 236. 23
28. Lenin, "Lessons of the Crisis," 216. 24
29. Lenin, "The Seventh (April) All-Russia Conference of the R.S.D.L.P.(B.)," 241. 25
30. Ibid., 243. 26
31. Ibid. 27
32. Ibid., 232. 28

- 1 33. V. I. Lenin, "The 'Crisis of Power,'" in *Lenin: Collected Works (Vol. 24)*,  
2 trans. Bernard Isaacs (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1980), 332.
- 3 34. V. I. Lenin, "The Eighteenth of June" in *Lenin: Collected Works (Vol. 25)*,  
4 trans. Stepan Apresyan and Jim Riordan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1980), 110.
- 5 35. Ibid., 111.
- 6 36. V. I. Lenin, "Three Crises" in *ibid.*, 173.
- 7 37. Ibid.
- 8 38. V. I. Lenin, "The Political Situation" in *ibid.*, 180.
- 9 39. V. I. Lenin, "Eleventh Congress of the R.C.P.(B.)," in *Lenin: Collected*  
10 *Works (Vol. 33)*, trans. David Skvirsky and George Hanna (Moscow: Progress  
11 Publishers, 1980), 267.
- 12 40. Ibid., 272.
- 13 41. Ibid., 273.
- 14 42. Ibid., 277.

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