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# Lecture three: The origins of Bolshevism and *What Is To Be Done?*

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## The origins of Russian Marxism

Today's lecture will be devoted to an analysis of one of the most important, profound and, without question, revolutionary works of political theory ever written, Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* Few works have ever been subjected to such a degree of misrepresentation and falsification. To the innumerable Lenin-haters of the bourgeois academy—some of whom professed to be until 1991 great admirers of Lenin—this is the book that is ultimately responsible for many if not all of the evils of the twentieth century. I intend to reply to these denunciations, and also explain why this work—written in 1902 for a small socialist movement operating within the political environment of tsarist Russia—retains such an extraordinary level of theoretical and practical relevance for the socialist movement in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

When speaking of the development of the Marxist movement in Germany during the last third of the nineteenth century, I stressed the stormy and apparently unstoppable character of its development. Within an amazingly short period of time, the Social Democratic Party emerged as the mass organization of the working class. Its victories could not have been won without real struggle and sacrifices, but one cannot avoid the impression that German socialists worked in an environment that was, at least when compared to that which confronted Russian revolutionaries, relatively benign.

In one of his later works, seeking to explain the reasons for the emergence within Russia of what proved to be the most powerful revolutionary socialist organization, Lenin wrote that Russia “achieved Marxism, the only correct revolutionary theory, virtually through *suffering*, by a half century of unprecedented torment and sacrifice, of unprecedented revolutionary heroism, incredible energy, devoted searching, study, testing in practice, disappointment, verification and comparison with European experience.”[1]

Beginning in 1825, with the unsuccessful attempt by a group of high-ranking officers in the imperial Army to overthrow the tsarist autocracy, a tradition of self-sacrifice, incorruptibility and fearless passion emerged within Russia. The search for a way to transform the terrible and degrading reality of tsarist autocracy and the social backwardness over which it presided assumed the dimension of a crusade that underlay the emergence of the extraordinary social and cultural phenomenon of the Russian intelligentsia, from which arose the Russian novel and literary criticism, and the Russian revolutionary movement.

In a very fine passage in his biography of *The Young Trotsky*, Max Eastman (in what were still his socialist years) gave us this description of the Russian revolutionary personality:

“A wonderful generation of men and women was born to fulfill this revolution in Russia. You may be traveling in any remote part of that country, and you will see some quiet, strong, thoughtful face in your coach or omnibus—a middle-aged man with white, philosophic forehead and a soft brown beard, or an elderly woman with sharply arching eyebrows and a stern motherliness about her mouth, or perhaps a middle-aged man, or a younger woman who is still sensuously beautiful, but carries herself as though she had walked up a cannon—you will inquire, and you will find out that they are the ‘old party workers.’ Reared in the tradition of the Terrorist movement, a stern and sublime heritage of martyr-faith, taught in infancy to love mankind, and to think without sentimentality, and to be masters of themselves, and to admit death into their company, they learned in youth a new thing—to think practically. And they were tempered in the fires of goal and exile. They became almost a noble order, a selected stock of men and women who could be relied upon to be heroic, like the Knights of the Round Table or the Samurai, but with the patents of their nobility in the future, not the past.”[2]

The Russian revolutionary movement did not in its initial stages direct itself to the working class. Rather, it was oriented to the peasantry, of which the overwhelming majority of the population was comprised. The formal liberation of the peasants from serfdom, proclaimed by Tsar Alexander II in 1861, intensified the contradictions of the socio-political structure of the Russian Empire. The 1870s saw the beginning of a significant movement of student youth, who went out among the peasants to educate and draw them into conscious social and political life. The major political influence in these movements came from the theorists of anarchism, principally Lavrov and Bakunin. The latter especially envisaged the revolutionary transformation of Russia emerging out of an uprising of the peasant masses. The combination of peasant indifference and state repression drove the movement to adopt conspiratorial and terrorist methods of struggle. The most significant of the terrorist organizations was Narodnaia Volya, the People's Will.

## The contribution of Plekhanov

The theoretical and political foundations for the Marxist movement in Russia were laid in the 1880s in the struggle waged by G.V. Plekhanov against the dominant influence of populism and its terrorist orientation. The essential issue that underlay the conflict between the populists and the new Marxist tendency was one of historical perspective: Was Russia's path to socialism to be realized through a peasant revolution, in which traditional communal forms of peasant property would provide the basis for socialism? Or would the overthrow of tsarism, the establishment

of a democratic republic and the beginning of the transition to socialism proceed on the basis of the growth of Russian capitalism and the emergence of a modern industrial proletariat?

In arguing against terrorism and the populist characterization of the peasantry as the decisive revolutionary force, Plekhanov—who had himself been a leading member of the populist movement—insisted that Russia was developing along capitalist lines, that the growth of an industrial proletariat would be an inevitable consequence of this process, and that this new social class would be of necessity the decisive force in the revolutionary overthrow of the autocracy, the democratization of Russia and the wiping away of all political and economic remnants of feudalism, and the beginning of the transition to socialism.

Plekhanov's founding of the Emancipation of Labor Group in 1883, the year of Marx's death, was an act of immense political foresight, not to mention intellectual and physical courage. Moreover, the arguments advanced by Plekhanov against the Russian populists of his day not only established the programmatic foundations upon which the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party would later be based. Plekhanov also anticipated many of the critical issues of class orientation and revolutionary strategy that would continue to bedevil the socialist movement throughout the twentieth century and, indeed, up to the present day.

Today, Plekhanov is remembered principally—but generally without sufficient appreciation—as one of the most important interpreters of Marxist philosophy in the era of the Second International (1889-1914). In this capacity, much of his work is subjected to bitter and generally ignorant criticism—especially from those who claim that Plekhanov failed to appreciate the significance of Hegel and the dialectical method. One can only wish, when reading such polemical rants, that their authors would take the time to study Plekhanov's works before proceeding to denounce them. I will come back somewhat later to the issue of Plekhanov's intellectual relationship to Marxist philosophy, though it must be stated frankly that this is a subject that requires more time than we presently have.

I wish, at this point, to place emphasis on another aspect of Plekhanov's contribution to revolutionary strategy that is generally underestimated, if not ignored—that is, his insistence on the development of the proletariat's consciousness of the significance of its independent political struggle against the bourgeoisie as a critical and indispensable driving force in the formation of socialist consciousness.

In his most important early work, *Socialism and the Political Struggle*, written not long after he had founded the Emancipation of Labor movement, Plekhanov opposed the views of the Russian anarchists, who rejected the importance of politics and went so far as to insist that the workers should not contaminate themselves with political interests. Plekhanov noted that “not a single class which has achieved political domination has had cause to regret its interest in ‘politics,’ but on the contrary ... each of them attained the highest, the culminating point of its development only after it had acquired political domination... we must admit that the political struggle is an instrument of social reconstruction whose effectiveness is proved by history.”

Plekhanov then traced the main stages in the development of class consciousness. A lengthy citation is justified by the intrinsic

and enduring significance of this passage:

“Only gradually does the oppressed class become clear about the connection between its *economic* position and its *political* role in the state. For a long time it does not understand even its economic task to the full. The individuals composing it wage a hard struggle for their daily subsistence without even thinking which aspects of the social organization they owe their wretched condition to. They try to avoid the blows aimed at them without asking where they came from or by whom, in the final analysis, they are aimed. As yet they have no class consciousness and there is no guiding idea in their struggle against individual oppressors. The oppressed class does not yet exist *for itself*; in time it *will* be the advanced class in society, but it is not yet *becoming* such. Facing the consciously organized power of the ruling class are separate individual strivings of isolated individuals or isolated groups of individuals. Even now, for example, we frequently enough meet a worker who hates the particularly intensive exploiter but does not yet suspect that the whole class of exploiters must be fought and the very possibility of exploitation of man by man removed.

“Little by little, however, the process of generalization takes effect, and the oppressed begin to be conscious of themselves as a class. But their understanding of the specific features of their class position remains too one-sided: the springs and motive forces of the social mechanism as a whole are still hidden from their mind's eye. The class of exploiters appears to them as the simple sum of individual employers, not connected by the threads of political *organization*. At this stage of development it is not yet clear in the minds of the oppressed... what connection exists between ‘society’ and ‘state.’ State power is presumed to stand above the antagonisms of the classes; its representatives appear to be the natural judges and conciliators of the hostile sides. The oppressed have complete trust in them and are extremely surprised when their requests for help remain unanswered by them. Without dwelling on particular examples, we will merely note that such confusion of concepts was displayed even recently by the British workers, who waged quite an energetic struggle in the economic field and yet considered it possible to belong to one of the bourgeois political parties.

“Only in the next and last stage of development does the oppressed class come to a thorough realization of its position. It now realizes the connection between society and state, and it does not appeal for the curbing of its exploiters to those who constitute the political organ of that exploitation. It knows that the state is a fortress which the oppressed can and must capture and reorganize for their own defense and which they cannot bypass, counting on its neutrality. Relying only on themselves, the oppressed begin to understand that ‘*political* self-help,’ as Lange says, ‘is the most important form of *social* self-help.’ They then fight for political domination in order to help themselves by changing the existing social relations and adapting the social system to the conditions of their own development and welfare. Neither do they, of course, achieve domination immediately; they only gradually become a formidable power precluding all thought of resistance by their opponents. For a long time they fight only for concessions, demand only such reforms as would give them not domination, but merely the possibility to develop and mature

for future domination; reforms which would satisfy the most urgent and immediate of their demands and extend, if only slightly, the sphere of their influence over the country's social life. Only by going through the hard school of the struggle for separate little pieces of enemy territory does the oppressed class acquire the persistence, the daring, and the development necessary for the decisive battle. But once it has acquired those qualities it can look at its opponents as at a class finally condemned by history; it need have no doubt about its victory. What is called the revolution is only the last act in the long drama of revolutionary class struggle which becomes conscious only insofar as it becomes a *political* struggle.

“The question is now: would it be expedient for the socialists to hold the workers back from ‘politics’ on the grounds that the structure of society is determined by its economic relations? Of course not! They would be depriving the workers of a fulcrum in their struggle, they would be depriving them of the possibility of concentrating their efforts and aiming their blows at the social organization set up by the exploiters. Instead, the workers would have to wage guerrilla warfare against individual exploiters or at most separate groups of those exploiters, who would always have on their side the organized power of the state.” [3]

The struggle waged by Plekhanov defined the essential tasks of those who would call themselves socialists—to concentrate all their efforts on the development of the political class consciousness of the working class and to prepare it for its historical role as the leader of the socialist revolution. Implicit in this definition is the historical significance of the party itself, which is the instrument through which this consciousness is aroused and developed and organized on the basis of a definite political program.

The writings of Plekhanov threw the populists into crisis. By the late 1880s they were clearly on the defensive before the blows of the man they had just a decade earlier denounced as a renegade from the “people’s” cause. The political bankruptcy of terrorism was becoming increasingly evident. Showing that the aim of terrorism was to frighten the Tsarist regime and persuade it to change its ways, Plekhanov and the growing legion of Marxists dubbed the terrorists “liberals with bombs”—a description which is as apt today as it was a century ago. Moreover, Plekhanov insisted their terrorism, which ignored the protracted struggle to raise the consciousness of the working class, instead, in striving to electrify the masses with the avenging blows of heroic individuals, served only to stupefy and demoralize them.

### **The emergence of Ulyanov-Lenin**

The pioneering work of Plekhanov influenced an entire generation of intellectuals and youth who entered into revolutionary struggle during the late 1880s and early 1890s. The impact of his polemics was all the greater as the social transformations in the city and the countryside more and more corresponded to the analysis made by Plekhanov.

By the 1890s it was increasingly apparent that Russia was undergoing a rapid economic development, with the growth of industry producing an increasingly powerful working class. These were the conditions under which Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov, the

younger brother of a martyred revolutionary terrorist, entered into the revolutionary movement. By 1893 he established his reputation as a powerful theoretician with a remarkable critique of the populist movement which he entitled *What the “Friends of the People” Are and How They Fight the Social Democrats*. There are certain features of this work which made it a major contribution to the revolutionary workers’ movement and which, despite its preoccupation with the specific conditions of the Russia of the 1890s, endow it with an enduring relevance.

Ulyanov-Lenin devoted a large portion of his work to attacking what he termed the subjective sociology of Mikhailovsky, demonstrating that the politics of the narodnik (populist) movement was not based on a scientific study of the social relations that existed in Russia. He showed that they refused to confront the fact that commodity production had become highly developed and that large-scale industry had been established and concentrated in the hands of individuals who bought and exploited the labor-power of a mass of workers who were without any property. But even more important than the economic analysis—which was much further developed in his next major work, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*—was Lenin’s characterization of the class nature of the narodnik movement. He explained that the narodniks, in essence, were petty-bourgeois democrats whose views reflected the social position of the peasantry.

While Lenin insisted on the great importance of the democratic questions—i.e., those related to the abolition of the Tsarist autocracy, the destruction of the remnants of feudalism in the countryside, the nationalization of the land—he held no less passionately that it was fundamentally wrong to ignore the distinction between the democratic and socialist movement. The greatest hindrance to the development of the class consciousness of the proletariat was the tendency to subordinate the proletariat to the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois democratic opponents of the autocracy.

In his savage attack upon the views of Mikhailovsky, Lenin was determined to prove that the so-called “socialism” of the petty-bourgeois democrat has nothing whatsoever in common with the socialism of the proletariat. At best, the “socialism” of the petty-bourgeoisie reflects its frustration in the face of the powerful growth of capital and its concentration in the hands of the magnates of banking and industry. Petty-bourgeois socialism is incapable of making a scientific and historical analysis of the development of capitalism in as much as such an analysis would demonstrate the hopeless position of the petty-bourgeoisie itself, which, far from being a rising class, represents the surviving fragments of the economic past.

The main conclusion that Lenin drew for the revolutionary socialist movement is that it must wage a relentless struggle against the influence of petty-bourgeois democratic ideology within the workers’ movement. It had to be educated to understand that there was nothing intrinsically socialist about democratic demands, and that the abolition of the autocracy and the destruction of feudal estates, while in one sense historically progressive, did not at all imply the end of the exploitation of the working class. In fact, the outcome of the realization of these demands would, in themselves, merely facilitate the development

of capitalism and the intensified exploitation of wage-labor. This did not mean that the working class should not support the democratic struggle. Quite the opposite: the working class must be in the vanguard of the democratic struggle. But under no conditions does it wage that struggle under the banner of the bourgeoisie or petty-bourgeoisie. Rather, it must wage the struggle for democracy only in order to facilitate the struggle against the bourgeoisie itself.

He denounced the “amalgamators” and “alliance advocates” who proposed that the workers should, in the name of fighting against Tsarism, play down their independent class aims and, without concerning themselves with programmatic issues, form alliances with all the political opponents of the regime.

Marxists advance the democratic struggle not by adapting to the liberals and petty-bourgeois democrats, but by organizing the workers into an independent political party of their own, based on a revolutionary socialist program. Summing up the nature of Russian populism, Lenin wrote: “If you refuse to believe the flowery talk about the ‘interests of the people’ and try to delve deeper, you will find that you are dealing with the out-and-out ideologists of the petty-bourgeoisie...”

In bringing his work to a conclusion, Lenin stressed that the work of the revolutionary party must be directed toward making the worker “understand the political and economic structure of the system that oppresses him, and the necessity and inevitability of class antagonism under this system.... When its advanced representatives have mastered the ideas of scientific socialism, the idea of the historical role of the Russian worker, when these ideas become widespread, and when stable organizations are formed among the workers to transform the workers’ present sporadic economic war into conscious class struggle—then the Russian WORKER, rising at the head of all the democratic elements, will overthrow absolutism and lead the RUSSIAN PROLETARIAT (side by side with the proletarians of ALL COUNTRIES) along the straight road of open political struggle to THE VICTORIOUS COMMUNIST REVOLUTION.”

Already, in this seminal work, Lenin presented in a fairly developed form the conceptions that were to guide the construction of the Bolshevik Party. Lenin did not invent the concept of the party or of the independent political organization of the working class. But he endowed these concepts with a political and ideological concreteness of unequalled intensity. He was convinced that the political organization of the working class proceeds not merely through measures of a practical character, but through a ruthless theoretical and political struggle against all the ideological forms through which the bourgeoisie seeks to influence and dominate the working class. The political unity of the working class required an unrelenting struggle against all theories and programs which reflected the interests of alien class forces. In other words, the political homogeneity of the working class could be realized only on the basis of the highest theoretical consciousness.

In 1900, in an article on “The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement,” Lenin wrote the following:

“Social Democracy is the combination of the working class movement and socialism. Its task is not to serve the working class movement passively at each of its separate stages, but to

represent the interests of the movement as a whole, to point out to this movement its ultimate aim and its political tasks, and to safeguard its political and ideological independence. Isolated from Social Democracy, the working class movement becomes petty and inevitably becomes bourgeois. In waging only the economic struggle, the working class loses its political independence; it becomes the tail of other parties and betrays the great principle: ‘The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.’ In every country there has been a period in which the working class movement existed apart from socialism, each going its own way; and in every country this isolation has weakened both socialism and the working class movement. Only the fusion of socialism with the working class movement has in all countries created a durable basis for both.”[4]

When Lenin wrote those words, he was waging a bitter struggle against a new tendency that had emerged inside Russian Social Democracy, known as Economism, whose existence was bound up with the growth of Bernsteinite revisionism in Germany. The gist of the economists’ views was the belittling of the revolutionary political struggle. Instead, adapting themselves to the spontaneous working class movement in the mid-1890s, the economists proposed that the social democratic movement concentrate on the development of the strike struggles and other aspects of the economic struggle of the working class. The implication of this outlook was that the labor movement should renounce as a practical goal its revolutionary socialist aims. Pride of place in the political struggle against the autocracy was to be conceded to the liberal democratic bourgeois opposition. The independent revolutionary program that had been proclaimed by Plekhanov and Lenin was to be abandoned in favor of trade union activity aimed at improving the economic conditions of the working class within the framework of capitalist society. Or, as E.D. Kuskova proposed in the infamous *Credo* published in 1899:

“Intolerant Marxism, negative Marxism, primitive Marxism (which holds to too schematic a concept of the class division of society) will give way to democratic Marxism, and the social position of the party in contemporary society will have to change drastically. The party will recognize society; its narrow corporative and, in the majority of cases, sectarian tasks will broaden into social tasks and its striving to seize power will be transformed into a desire for change, for the reform of contemporary society along democratic lines that are adapted to the present state of affairs, with the object of protecting, in the most complete and effective way, (all) the rights of the laboring classes.”[5]

That was not all: the *Credo* declared that “Talk of an independent workers’ political party is nothing but the result of transplanting alien aims and alien achievements on to our soil.”[6]

The emergence of Economism was part of an international phenomenon: under conditions in which Marxism had become the dominant political and ideological force in the labor movement of Western Europe, there developed within that labor movement what amounted to a bourgeois opposition to Marxism. In other words, the growth of revisionism represented, as I have already explained, the attempt by the petty-bourgeois ideologists of capitalism to counteract and undermine the expansion of Marxist influence inside the workers’ movement. By 1899, the implications of this revisionism had become fairly clear, when

the French socialist Millerand entered a bourgeois government.

The eruption of opportunism provoked a crisis inside international Social Democracy. As I've already noted, the first to come out against it was Plekhanov. Later, Rosa Luxemburg contributed to the struggle with her magnificent pamphlet, *Reform or Revolution?* Reluctantly, the German social democrats were drawn into the fray. But nowhere was the struggle against opportunism so fully developed as it was in Russia under the leadership of Lenin.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Russian socialist movement was not a unified political organization. There existed numerous tendencies and groups which identified themselves as socialist, even Marxist, but which conducted their political and practical work on a local basis, or as the representative of a specific ethnic or religious group within the working class. The Jewish Bund was the most famous of the latter type of organization.

As the Russian workers' movement gathered strength in the second half of the 1890s, the need for programmatic and organizational coherence became evident and urgent. The first attempt to hold a congress of all Russian social democrats, in Minsk in 1898, was aborted as a result of police repression and the arrests of delegates. In the aftermath of this setback, the plans for the convening of a congress were complicated by the increasingly heterogeneous character of the Russian socialist movement, of which the emergence of the Economist tendency was a significant expression.

Although Plekhanov was still the revered theoretical leader of Russian socialism, Ulyanov-Lenin emerged as the major figure in the course of the intense preparatory work for the convening of a unifying congress of Russian social democrats. The basis of his influence was his leading role in the publication of the new political newspaper of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, *Iskra* (The Spark). Within the émigré movement and among Marxists engaged in practical revolutionary activity in Russia, *Iskra* gained immense stature as it provided theoretical, political and organizational coherence, on an all-Russia basis, for what would have remained in its absence a disparate movement.

The first issue of *Iskra* was published in December 1900. Lenin explained in a major statement published on its front page that "Our principal and fundamental task is to facilitate the political development and the political organization of the working class. Those who push this task into the background, who refuse to subordinate to it all the special tasks and particular methods of struggle, are following a false path and causing serious harm to the movement."

In words which remain, even after the passage of a century, extraordinarily relevant to contemporary conditions, Lenin harshly criticized those "who think it fit and proper to treat the workers to 'politics' only at exceptional moments in their lives, only on festive occasions..." Excoriating the representatives of the Economist tendency, for whom militant trade unionism and agitation over economic demands represented the alpha and omega of radical activity in the working class, Lenin insisted that the decisive task that confronted socialists was the political education of the working class and the formation of its independent socialist political party. "Not a single class in history," Lenin wrote, "has achieved power without producing its political

leaders, its prominent representatives able to organize a movement and lead it." In conclusion, Lenin proposed somewhat laconically "to devote a series of articles in forthcoming issues to questions of organization, which are among the most burning problems confronting us." [7]

What emerged from this proposal was perhaps the most brilliant, influential and controversial political tract of the twentieth century, Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* Given the bitter controversy provoked by this book, especially in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, it is a remarkable fact that *What Is To Be Done?*, when it was first published in 1902, was accepted by leading Russian social democrats—most importantly, by Plekhanov—as a statement of party principles on questions of political tasks and organization. This is of some political significance insofar as many of the denunciations of Lenin's pamphlet assert that *What Is To Be Done?* introduced a conspiratorial and totalitarian element into socialism that had no basis in classical Marxism. We will address these criticisms in the course of our review of this work.

### *What Is To Be Done?*

Lenin's pamphlet begins by examining the demand raised by the Economist tendency—that is, the Russian followers of Eduard Bernstein—for "Freedom of Criticism." He places this slogan—which, at first hearing, seems eminently democratic and appealing—within the context of the dispute raging within the ranks of international Social Democracy between the defenders of orthodox Marxism and the revisionists, who had undertaken a systematic theoretical and political attack on that orthodoxy.

Noting that Bernstein's theoretical revisions of the programmatic foundations of the German Social Democratic Party found their logical political expression in the entrance of the French socialist Alexander Millerand into the government of President Waldeck-Rousseau, Lenin states that the slogan "'Freedom of Criticism' means freedom for an opportunist trend in Social Democracy, freedom to convert Social Democracy into a democratic party of reform, freedom to introduce bourgeois ideas and bourgeois elements into socialism." [8]

To this demand Lenin replies that no one is denying the right of the revisionists to criticize. But Marxists, he insists, have no less a right to reject their criticisms and to fight the attempt to convert revolutionary Social Democracy into a reformist movement.

After briefly reviewing the origins of the Economist tendency in Russia, Lenin notes its general indifference to critical issues of theory. He states that the Economists' "much vaunted freedom of criticism does not imply substitution of one theory for another, but freedom from all integral and pondered theory; it implies eclecticism and lack of principle." [9] Lenin observes that this theoretical indifference is justified by revisionists who quote, out of context, Marx's statement that the real practical advances of the socialist movement are more important than a dozen programs. "To repeat these words in a period of theoretical confusion," Lenin replies, "is like wishing mourners at a funeral many happy returns of the day."

He then declares, in words that cannot be quoted too frequently,

“Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement. This idea cannot be insisted upon too strongly at a time when the fashionable preaching of opportunism goes hand in hand with an infatuation for the narrowest forms of practical activity.”[10] He argues that only “*a party that is guided by the most advanced theory*” will be able to provide the working class with revolutionary leadership, and recalls that Friedrich Engels had recognized “*not two forms of the great struggle of Social Democracy (political and economic), as is the fashion among us, but three, placing the theoretical struggle on a par with the first two.*”[11] Lenin quotes Engels’ statement that “Without German philosophy, which preceded it, particularly that of Hegel, German scientific socialism—the only scientific socialism that has ever existed—would never have come into being. Without a sense of theory among the workers, this scientific socialism would never have entered into their flesh and blood as much as is the case.”[12]

The second section of *What Is To Be Done?* is entitled “The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social Democrats.” This is, undoubtedly, the most important section of Lenin’s pamphlet, and, inevitably, the section that has been subjected to the most unrelenting attacks and misrepresentation. It is in this section, we have been frequently told, that Lenin exposes himself as an arrogant elitist, contemptuous of the mass of workers, disdainful of their aspirations, hostile to their daily struggles, lusting for personal power and dreaming only of the day when he and his accursed party will impose their iron-fisted totalitarian dictatorship over the unsuspecting Russian working class. It is worth our while to examine this section with special care.

The critical issue analyzed by Lenin is the nature of the relationship between Marxism and the revolutionary party on the one side and, on the other, the spontaneous movement of the working class and the forms of social consciousness that develop among workers in the course of that movement. He begins by tracing the evolution of the forms of consciousness among Russian workers, beginning with the initial manifestations of class conflict in the 1860s and 1870s.

Those struggles were of an extremely primitive character, involving the destruction of machinery by workers. Driven by desperation, lacking any awareness of the social and class nature of their revolt, these spontaneous eruptions manifested class consciousness only in an “embryonic” form. The situation that developed three decades later was significantly more advanced. Compared to the early struggles, the strikes of the 1890s manifested a significantly higher level of consciousness among the workers. The strikes were far more organized and even advanced quite detailed demands. But the consciousness exhibited by workers in these struggles was of a trade unionist rather than social democratic character. That is, the strikes did not raise demands of a political character, nor did they express an awareness of the deeper and irreconcilable nature of the conflict between the workers and the existing socio-economic and political order. The workers, rather, sought only to improve their situation within the framework of the existing social system.

This limitation was inevitable, in the sense that the spontaneous movement of the working class could not develop on its own, “spontaneously,” social democratic, i.e., revolutionary,

consciousness. It is at this point that Lenin introduces the argument that has provoked so many denunciations. He writes:

“We have said that *there could not have been* Social Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. By their social status, the founders of modern socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. In the same way, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social Democracy arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working class movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia.”[13]

In support of his interpretation of the relationship between Marxism and the spontaneously developing trade unionist, i.e., bourgeois, consciousness of the working class, Lenin cites—along with approving comments by Karl Kautsky—the draft program of the Austrian Social Democratic Party:

“The more capitalist development increases the numbers of the proletariat, the more the proletariat is compelled and becomes fit to fight against capitalism. The proletariat becomes conscious of the possibility and necessity for socialism. In this connection socialist consciousness appears to be a necessary and direct result of the proletarian class struggle. But this is absolutely untrue. Of course, socialism, as a doctrine, has its roots in modern economic relationships just as the class struggle of the proletariat has, and, like the latter, emerges from the struggle against the capitalist-created poverty and misery of the masses. But socialism and the class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other; each arises under different conditions. Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. Indeed, modern economic science is as much a condition for socialist production as, say, modern technology, and the proletariat can create neither the one nor the other, no matter how much it may desire to do so; both arise out of the modern social process. The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the *bourgeois intelligentsia* [K.K.’s italics]: it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated it to the more intellectually developed proletarians who, in their turn, introduce it into the proletarian class struggle where conditions allow that to be done. Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle [*von Aussen Hineingretagenes*] and not something that arose within it spontaneously [*urwuchsig*]. Accordingly, the old Hainfeld program quite rightly stated that the task of Social-Democracy is to imbue the proletariat [literally: saturate the proletariat] with the *consciousness* of its position and the consciousness of its task. There would be no need for this if consciousness arose of itself from the class struggle.”[14]

Lenin draws from this passage the following conclusion:

“Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology

formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the *only* choice is—either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for mankind has not created a ‘third’ ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or above-class ideology). Hence, to belittle the socialist ideology *in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree* means to strengthen bourgeois ideology. There is much talk of spontaneity. But the spontaneous development of the working class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology, *to its development along the lines of the Credo program*; for the spontaneous working class movement is trade unionism, is *Nur-Gewerkschaftlerei*, and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie. Hence, our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is *to combat spontaneity, to divert the working class from this spontaneous, trade unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social-Democracy.*”[15]

### **Bourgeois criticism of *What Is To Be Done?***

These passages have been denounced again and again as the quintessential expression of Bolshevik “elitism” wherein, moreover, lie the germs of its future totalitarian evolution. In a book entitled *The Seeds of Evil*, Robin Blick, an ex-Trotskyist, refers to the last sentence quoted above (in which Lenin speaks of the “trade unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie”) as “an absolutely extraordinary formulation for someone usually so concerned to be seen defending Marxist ‘orthodoxy’, and certainly equaling in its audacity any of the revisions of Marxism then being undertaken by the German Social Democrat Eduard Bernstein... what Marx and Engels never did was to expound in their writings a worked-out doctrine of political *elitism* and organizational manipulation.”[16]

This argument is developed more substantially in the very well known work by the academic philosopher, Leszek Kolakowski, entitled *Main Currents of Marxism*, a three-volume work originally published in 1978. He dismisses as a “novelty” Lenin’s assertion that the spontaneous workers’ movement cannot develop a socialist ideology, and that it must therefore have a bourgeois ideology. Even more disturbing, according to Kolakowski, is the inference that the workers’ movement must assume a bourgeois character if it is not led by a socialist party. “This is supplemented by a second inference: the working class movement in the true sense of the term, i.e., a political revolutionary movement, is defined not by being a movement of workers but by possessing the right ideology, i.e., the Marxist one, which is ‘proletarian’ by definition. In other words, the class composition of a revolutionary party has no significance in defining its class character.”[17]

Kolakowski continues with a few snide and cynical comments, mocking the claim that the party “knows what is in the ‘historical’ interest of the proletariat and what the latter’s authentic consciousness ought to be at any particular moment, although its empirical consciousness will generally be found lagging behind.”[18] Remarks of this sort are supposed by their author to be incredibly clever, exposing the absurd conceit of a small

political party that its program articulates the interests of the working class, even if the mass of workers do not agree with, or even understand that program. But arguments of this sort appear clever only as long as one does not bother to think too carefully about them.

If Kolakowski’s argument is correct, what need is there for any political party, whether of the working class or, for that matter, the bourgeoisie? After all, is it not the case that all political parties and their leaders claim to speak in the name of and articulate the interests of broader social communities? If one takes the history of the bourgeoisie, its interests as a class have been identified, defined, and articulated by political parties—whose leaders were not infrequently compelled to work in opposition, as a small minority faction and even in illegality, until they won over their class, or at least the most critical elements within it, to the perspective and program for which they fought.

Puritanism existed as a religious-political tendency in England for a half-century before it emerged as the dominant tendency within the rising bourgeoisie and secured, under the leadership of Cromwell, the victory of the Revolution over the Stuart monarchy. One hundred and fifty years later, the Jacobin Party of politicized Rousseauists emerged out of the bitter factional fights within the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie between 1789 and 1792 as the leadership of the French Revolution. No less pertinent examples could be given from American history, from the pre-Revolutionary period up until the present time.

Policies which express the “objective” interests of a class—that is, which identify and programmatically formulate the means of establishing the conditions required for the advancement of a particular class’ political, social and economic interests—may not be recognized by a majority, or even any substantial section of a class at any given point. The abolition of slavery, as history was to conclusively demonstrate, certainly led to the consolidation of the American national state and a vast acceleration of the industrial and economic growth of capitalism. And yet, the political vanguard of the fight against slavery, the abolitionists, were compelled to wage a bitter struggle that spanned several decades against powerful resistance within the bourgeoisie of the Northern states which opposed and feared a confrontation with the South. The small number of abolitionists understood far better than the vast majority of Northern businessmen, merchants, farmers, and, for that matter, urban workers what was in the best interests of the long-term development of the American national state and northern capitalism. Of course, the abolitionists of the early nineteenth century did not explain their program and actions in such explicit class terms. But this does not change the fact that they expressed, in the language appropriate to their times, the interests of the rising Northern bourgeoisie as perceived by the most politically far-sighted sections of that class.

A more recent example of a political party defining and fighting for the objective interests of the bourgeoisie in opposition to large portions of that class is the Democratic Party under Roosevelt. He represented that faction within the American bourgeoisie—most definitely a minority—that became convinced that the salvation of capitalism in the United States was not possible without major social reforms, which entailed considerable concessions to the working class.

Let me also point out that the ruling elites employ the services of hundreds of thousands of specialists in politics, sociology, economics, international affairs, etc., to help them understand what their objective interests are. Even though it is, for reasons I will explain, far easier for the average bourgeois to perceive where his true interests lie than for the average worker, the formulation of ruling class policy can never be merely a direct reflection of what the “average” American businessman, or even the “average” multi-millionaire corporate executive, thinks.

Kolakowski’s claim that Lenin’s conception of the relation between the socialist party and the development of consciousness had no foundation in Marxism requires that he simply ignore what Marx and Engels actually wrote on this subject. In *The Holy Family*, written in 1844, they explained that in the formulation of the socialist program:

“It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action are visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation as well as in the whole organization of bourgeois society today.”[19]

In another book attacking *What Is To Be Done?*, the above-quoted passage is cited—but not, as in the case of Kolakowski, to discredit only Lenin. The position of British historian Neil Harding is that Lenin was, in fact, an orthodox Marxist. The conceptions advanced in *What Is To Be Done?* were based on what Marx himself had written in *The Holy Family*. Therefore, according to Harding, “The privileged role allotted to the socialist intelligentsia in organizing and articulating the grievances of the proletariat and leading their political struggle, far from being a Leninist deviation from Marxism, is central to the arrogance of Marxism as a whole. Marx (and all subsequent Marxists) had to assert that he had a more profound awareness of the long-term interests and objectives of the proletariat than any proletarian, or group of proletarians could themselves possess.” [20]

While Kolakowski maintains that Lenin revised Marx, and Harding insists that Lenin based himself on Marx, their denunciation of *What Is To Be Done?* proceeds from a rejection of the claim that socialist class consciousness needs to be brought into the working class by a political party, and that any party can claim that its program represents the objective interests of the working class. The Marxist affirmation of objective truth is derived from an infatuation with science, the belief that the world is, in an objective sense, both knowable and law-bound, “and that the systematic, generalized (or ‘objective’) knowledge of science was privileged over the ‘subjective’ knowledge conveyed by immediate experience.”[21] Harding attacks the Marxist conception that objective truth is something that should be considered apart from, and even opposed to, the results derived from a canvass of public opinion. Harding writes:

“Leninism is wholly a child of Marxism in respect to the basic foundations of its theory of the party. It bases itself on a similar claim to a special sort of knowledge and a similar arrogant contention that the proletarian cause cannot be discovered merely by taking a poll among workers.”[22]

Armed with the fashionable post-modernist jargon so beloved

by contemporary ex-leftist academics—in which scientific knowledge is redefined as merely a “privileged” mode of discourse which has managed, for reasons wholly unrelated to the intrinsic quality of its content, to assert its preeminence over other less culturally-favored forms of expression—Harding rejects what he refers to as “the shadowy notion of historical imminence” to which both Marx and Lenin subscribed; that is, the notion “that thorough study of the development of society would disclose certain general tendencies which, once established and dominant, propelled men to act in given ways.”[23]

### Science, society and the working class

This brings us to the central theoretical and philosophical issue that underlies not only Lenin’s conception of the role of the party, but the whole Marxist project. If, as Harding maintains, the perceptions and opinions generated in the minds of workers on the basis of their immediate experience are no less valid and legitimate than knowledge developed on the basis of an insight into the laws of social development, then workers have no need for a political party that strives to bring their practice into alignment with the law-governed tendencies disclosed by science. Let me point out that one can, based on Harding’s arguments, deny that there is any need for science in any form. Science proceeds from the distinction between reality as it manifests itself in immediate sense perception, and reality as it emerges through a complex and protracted process of analysis and theoretical abstraction.

The essential question with which we are confronted is: Can objective social reality—assuming the acceptance of the existence of such a reality (which for academics is a big if)—be understood by the individual workers, or by the working class as a whole—on the basis of immediate experience? This is a question to which Lenin devoted an extraordinary amount of study, especially when he was engaged, several years later, in the writing of the theoretical tract *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Lenin wrote: “In all social formations of any complexity—and in the capitalist social formation in particular—people in their intercourse are *not conscious* of what kind of social relations are being formed, in accordance with what laws they develop, etc. For instance, a peasant when he sells his grain enters into ‘intercourse’ with the world producers of grain in the world market, but he is not conscious of it; nor is he conscious of what kind of social relations are formed on the basis of exchange. Social consciousness *reflects* social being—that is Marx’s teaching. A reflection may be an approximately true copy of the reflected, but to speak of identity is absurd.”[24]

“... Every individual producer in the world economic system realizes that he is introducing this or that change into the technique of production; every owner realizes that he exchanges certain products for others; but these producers and these owners do not realize that in doing so they are thereby changing *social being*. The sum-total of these changes in all their ramifications in the capitalist world economy could not be grasped even by seventy Marxes. The most important thing is that the *objective* logic of these changes and of their historical development has in its chief and basic features been disclosed—objective, not in the

sense that a society of conscious beings, of people, could exist and develop independently of the existence of conscious beings (and it is only such trifles that Bogdanov *stresses* by his ‘theory’), but in the sense that social being is *independent of the social consciousness* of people. The fact that you live and conduct your business, beget children, produce products and exchange them, gives rise to an objectively necessary chain of development, which is independent of your *social* consciousness, and is never grasped by the latter completely. The highest task of humanity is to comprehend this objective logic of economic evolution (the evolution of social life) in its general and fundamental features, so that it may be possible to adapt *to it* one’s social consciousness and the consciousness of the advanced classes of all capitalist countries in as definite, clear and critical fashion as possible.”[25]

When people go to work, to what extent are they aware of the vast network of global economic interconnections of which their own job is a minute element? One can reasonably assume that even the most intelligent worker would have only the vaguest sense of the relationship of his job, or his company, to the immensely complex processes of modern transnational production and exchange of goods and services. Nor is the individual worker in a position to penetrate the mysteries of international capitalist finance, the role of global hedge funds, and the secret and often impenetrable ways (even to experts in the field) that tens of billions of dollars in financial assets are moved across international borders every day. The realities of modern capitalist production, trade and finance are so complex that corporate and political leaders are dependent upon the analyses and advice of major academic institutions, which, more often than not, are divided among themselves as to the meaning of data at their disposal.

But the problem of class consciousness goes beyond the obvious difficulty of assimilating and mastering the complex phenomena of modern economic life. At a more basic and essential level, the precise nature of the social relationship between an individual worker and his employer, let alone between the entire working class and the bourgeoisie, is not and cannot be grasped at the level of sense perception and immediate experience.

Even a worker who is convinced that he or she is being exploited cannot, on the basis of his or her own bitter personal experience, perceive the underlying socio-economic mechanism of that exploitation. Moreover, the concept of exploitation is not one that is easily understood, let alone derived directly from the instinctive sense that one is not being paid enough. The worker who fills out an application form upon applying for a job does not perceive that she is offering to sell her labor power, or that the unique quality of that labor power is its capacity to produce a sum of value greater than the price (the wage) at which it has been purchased; and that profit is derived from this differential between the cost of labor power and the value that it creates.

Nor is a worker aware that when he purchases a commodity for a definite sum of money, the essence of that exchange is a relation not between things (a coat or some other commodity for a definite amount of money) but between people. Indeed, he does not understand the nature of money, how it emerged historically as the expression of the value form, and how it serves to mask, in a society in which the production and exchange of commodities

have been universalized, the underlying social relations of capitalist society.

What I have just been speaking about might serve as a general introduction to what might be considered the theoretical-epistemological foundation of Marx’s most important work, *Capital*. In the concluding section of the critical chapter one of volume one, Marx introduces his theory of commodity fetishism, which explains the objective source of the mystification of social relations within capitalist society—that is, the reason why in this particular economic system social relations between people necessarily appear as relations between things. It is not, and cannot be apparent to workers, on the basis of sense perception and immediate experience, that any given commodity’s value is the crystallized expression of the sum of human labor expended in its production. The discovery of the objective essence of the value form represented a historical milestone in scientific thought. Without this discovery, neither the objective socio-economic foundations of the class struggle nor their revolutionary implications could have been understood.

However the worker may dislike the social consequences of the system in which he lives, he is not in a position to grasp, on the basis of immediate experience, either its origins, its internal contradictions or the historically-limited character of its existence. The understanding of the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, of the exploitative relationship between capital and wage-labor, of the inevitability of class struggle and its revolutionary consequences, arose on the basis of real scientific work, with which the name of Marx will be forever linked. The knowledge obtained through this science, and the method of analysis involved in the achievement and extension of this knowledge, must be introduced into the working class. That is the task of the revolutionary party.

If Lenin was an élitist, then the same label must be affixed to all those who have fought under the banner of scientific truth against innumerable forms of obscurantism. Did not Thomas Jefferson write that he had sworn eternal opposition to every form of ignorance and tyranny over the minds of men? The charge of élitism should be leveled against those who denigrate and oppose the political and cultural enlightenment of the working class, and thereby leave it at the mercy of its exploiters.

Finally, let us deal with the charge that Lenin’s insistence on the necessity of a struggle against the forms of working class consciousness generated spontaneously within capitalist society and his hostility to vulgar public opinion as it takes shape under the bombardment of the propaganda organs of the mass media was “undemocratic,” even “totalitarian.” Underlying this accusation is a form of social bitterness, deeply embedded in class interests and social prejudices, evoked by the effort of the socialist movement to create a different, non-bourgeois form of public opinion, in which the real political and historical interests of the working class find expression.

There is no more profoundly democratic project than that expressed in the effort of the Marxist movement to develop the class consciousness of the working class. Lenin did not “impose” his scientifically-grounded program on the working class. Rather, all his political work over more than a quarter-century prior to the events of 1917 sought to raise the social thought of the

advanced sections of the Russian working class to the level of science. And in that he and the Bolshevik Party succeeded. In the achievement of this task Lenin represented, as John Reed noted, “A strange popular leader—a leader purely by virtue of intellect... with the power of explaining profound ideas in simple terms, of analyzing a concrete situation. And combined with shrewdness, the greatest intellectual audacity.” [26]

It was not Lenin who first proclaimed the necessity of bringing socialist consciousness into the working class. His denunciations of the economists’ glorification of the ‘spontaneous element’ were certainly informed by a profound reading of Marx’s *Capital* and an understanding of the manner in which capitalism, as a system of production relations established among people, conceals the real socially-rooted mechanisms of exploitation. Lenin’s originality as a political thinker found expression not in his insistence upon the need to introduce consciousness into the working class—this was widely accepted by Marxists throughout Europe—but in the consistency and persistence with which he applied this precept and in the far-reaching political and organizational conclusions he drew from it.

### Class consciousness and “political exposures”

How, then, was the political consciousness of the working class to be developed? The answer which was given by Lenin to this question bears careful study. For the economists, agitation related to economic “bread and butter” issues and immediate problems encountered in the factory served as the principal means of developing class consciousness. Lenin explicitly rejected the conception that genuine class consciousness could be developed on such a narrow economic basis. Agitation on immediate economic concerns was sufficient only for the development of trade union consciousness, i.e., the bourgeois consciousness of the working class. The development of revolutionary class consciousness, Lenin insisted, required that socialists concentrate their agitation on what he referred to as *political exposures*.

“In no way except by means of such exposures *can* the masses be trained in political consciousness and revolutionary activity. Hence, activity of this kind is one of the most important functions of international Social Democracy as a whole, for even political freedom does not in any way eliminate exposures; it merely shifts somewhat their sphere of direction.” [27]

In words that have lost none of their relevance—or, which, due to the staggering decline in our own period of the nature and significance of socialist consciousness, have actually grown in significance—Lenin wrote:

“Working class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter *what class* is affected—unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a Social Democratic [i.e., revolutionary] point of view and no other. The consciousness of the working class cannot be genuine class consciousness unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical political facts and events to observe *every* other social class in *all* the manifestations of its

intellectual, ethical and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist estimate of *all* aspects of the life and activity of *all* classes, strata, and groups of the population. Those who concentrate the attention, observation, and consciousness of the working class exclusively, or even mainly, upon itself alone are not Social Democrats; for the self-knowledge of the working class is indissolubly bound up, not solely with a fully clear theoretical understanding—it would be even truer to say, not so much with the theoretical, as with the practical understanding—of the relationships between *all* the various classes of modern society, acquired through the experience of political life. For this reason the conception of economic struggle as the most widely applicable means of drawing the masses into the political movement, which our Economists preach, is so extremely harmful and reactionary in its practical significance.” [28]

Lenin stressed that the revisionists who insisted that the fastest and easiest way to attract the attention of workers and win their support was to concentrate on economic and “shop-floor” issues—and that the principal activity of socialists should be in the day-to-day economic struggles of workers—were really contributing nothing of importance, in terms of the development of socialist consciousness, to the spontaneous workers’ movement. In fact, they were acting not as revolutionary socialists but as *mere* trade unionists. The really essential task of socialists was not to talk to workers about what they already know—day-to-day factory and on-the-job issues—but, rather, about what they cannot acquire from their immediate economic experience—political knowledge.

“You intellectuals can acquire this knowledge,” wrote Lenin, affecting the voice of a worker, “and it is your *duty* to bring it to us in a hundred- and a thousand-fold greater measure than you’ve done to now; and you must bring it to us, not only in the form of discussion, pamphlets, and articles (which very often—pardon our frankness—are rather dull), but precisely in the form of vivid *exposures* of what our government and our governing classes are doing at this very moment in all spheres of life.” [29]

Of course, Lenin did not counsel indifference, let alone abstention, from the economic struggles of the working class. But what he did oppose was the unwarranted and harmful fixation of socialists on such struggles, their tendency to limit their agitation and practical activity to economic issues and trade unionist struggles, and their neglect and avoidance of the critical and fundamental political issues that confront the working class as the revolutionary force within society. Moreover, when socialists intervened in trade union struggles, their real responsibility was, as Lenin wrote, “*to utilize* the sparks of political consciousness which the economic struggle generates among workers, for the purpose of *raising* the workers to the level of *Social Democratic* political consciousness.” [30]

I have devoted such a great deal of time to this review of *What Is To Be Done?* because—and I hope that this is clear to all of you—what we actually have been talking about is the theory and perspective of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

### Notes:

[1] “*Left-Wing*” *Communism, An Infantile Disorder* (New York:

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- International Publishers, 1969), p. 11.
- [2] London: New Park, 1980, pp. 53-54
- [3] *Selected Philosophical Works*, Volume I (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), pp. 76-80.
- [4] *Collected Works*, Volume 4 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), p. 368.
- [5] *Marxism in Russia*, Key documents, 1879-1906, edited by Neil Harding (Cambridge 1983) p. 251.
- [6] *Ibid*, p. 252.
- [7] *Ibid*, p. 369-70.
- [8] *Collected Works*, Volume 5 (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1961), p. 335.
- [9] *Ibid*, p. 369.
- [10] *Ibid*, p. 369.
- [11] *Ibid*, p. 370 (italics in the original).
- [12] *Ibid*, p. 371.
- [13] *Ibid*, pp. 375-76.
- [14] *Ibid*, p. 383-84.
- [15] *Ibid*, p. 384 (italics in the original).
- [16] London: Steyne Publications, 1995, p. 17.
- [17] London: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 389-90.
- [18] *Ibid*, p. 390.
- [19] *Collected Works*, Volume 4 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 37.
- [20] *Leninism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 34.
- [21] *Ibid*, p. 173.
- [22] *Ibid*, p. 174.
- [23] *Ibid*, p. 172.
- [24] *Collected Works*, Volume 14 (Progress Publishers, 1977), p. 323 (italics in the original).
- [25] *Ibid*, p. 325 (italics in the original).
- [26] *Ten Days That Shook the World* (Penguin, 1977), p. 128.
- [27] Vol. 5, p. 412 (italics in the original).
- [28] *Ibid*, pp. 412-13 (italics in the original).
- [29] *Ibid*, p. 417 (italics in the original).
- [30] *Ibid*, p. 416 (italics in the original).

poetry in the USSR from 1921 to 1927, when he was removed from the editorship by Stalin's Politburo.

His name is invariably associated with the work of the so-called "fellow travelers," a term coined by Trotsky to describe a disparate group of literary figures who generally sympathized with the revolution, or accepted it, but maintained their distance from the Bolsheviks and Marxism.

Voronsky's attitude, and the attitude of Lenin, Trotsky, Lunacharsky and others, combined ideological firmness with great patience and flexibility. After all, Voronsky's concern was not with scoring immediate political points, like his vulgarizing opponents, but with the emergence of a critical-minded and elevated culture that would make a difference in the lives of millions. He encouraged those writers who honestly and artistically shed light on Soviet reality, warts and all.

Voronsky resolutely stood his ground against ferocious and increasingly vile criticism, admitting the fellow travelers' "ideological jumble and confusion" [50] but insisting, "artistically they are honest; their works give pieces of real life, and not saccharine legends... These fellow-travelers were the first to aim their blows at wooden agitation pieces... They approached the *Russian* revolution, and not revolution in general, outside of time and space." [51]

We have much to learn from this work. Of course, we have very few "fellow travelers" in the literal sense at the moment, i.e., artists who sympathize with our program of socialist revolution. But there are certainly many "fellow critics" of capitalist society, some of whom will become "fellow travelers," or perhaps more, as the political situation matures. And there are plenty of semi-critics, one-quarter critics, as well as quasi-critics and pseudo-critics.

Adopting the proper approach and tone, that balance of criticism, ideological sharpness, friendly advice, encouragement, "shots across the bow" and so forth, is no small matter. It takes a considerable amount of political and artistic experience. Mistakes are sometimes made. But Voronsky's (and Trotsky's) work along these lines is invaluable.

In conclusion, I simply want to bring your attention to the work of Voronsky as the *de facto* leader and certainly ideological guide of the *Pereval* [*Mountain Pass*] group, composed of younger writers. Here, perhaps, Voronsky found the most receptive audience of artists, talented and sensitive young people, committed to the revolution and hostile to the banalities and empty-headed rhetoric of the proletcultists and budding Stalinists.

As one of the *Perevalist* writers, Abram Lezhnev, wrote, "For us, socialism is not an enormous workers' dormitory, as it is for the maniacs of productionism and advocates of factography... For us, it is the great epoch of freeing man from all the chains which bind him, when all the capabilities in his nature are revealed with full force." [52]

The 1927 platform of the group, on the eve of the catastrophe for Soviet art, is another tragic reminder of what was lost to Stalinism. Historian Robert Maguire sums up the *Pereval* platform: "There was strong disapproval of the notion that any one literary group, however distinguished, should enjoy 'hegemony'; support for the principle of 'free creative competition' in all the arts; a definition of literature's task as 'the continual recording of the

human personality in its inexhaustible variety'; a protest against 'any attempts to schematize man, vulgar oversimplification of any kind, deadening standardization, any belittling of the writer's personality... ; an insistence that literature must link itself to the classical heritage, not only of Russia but of the world; a concept of the work of art as a unique organic individuality 'where elements of thought and feeling are recast esthetically'; an emphasis on high standards of literary craftsmanship; and a suggestion of the 'sincerity' doctrine in the insistence on the 'revolutionary conscience of each artist' which 'does not permit him to conceal his inner world.'" [53]

We would be happy, I think, to accept these principles as a general guide to our own work today.

## Notes:

- [1] *Problems of Everyday Life* (New York and London, 2004), p. 18.
- [2] *The Revolution Betrayed* (Detroit, 1991), pp. 155-156.
- [3] [www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/06/korolenko.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/06/korolenko.htm)
- [4] *Trotsky's Notebooks: 1933-1935* (New York, 1986), p. 104.
- [5] "The Art of Seeing the World" in *Art as the Cognition of Life: Selected Writings: 1911-1936* (Oak Park, Michigan, 1998), p. 367.
- [6] *New Left Review*, January-February 2000.
- [7] Neville Wakefield, *Postmodernism: the Twilight of the Real* (London and Winchester, Massachusetts, 1990), p. 140.
- [8] [www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/texts/america.html](http://www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/texts/america.html)
- [9] [www.mun.ca/phil/codgito/vol4/v4doc2.html](http://www.mun.ca/phil/codgito/vol4/v4doc2.html)
- [10] *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, North Carolina, 1992), p. 46.
- [11] *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana, 1995), p. 3.
- [12] [www.mun.ca/phil/codgito/vol4/v4doc2.html](http://www.mun.ca/phil/codgito/vol4/v4doc2.html)
- [13] *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 16.
- [14] "Leninism and Workers' Clubs" in *Problems of Everyday Life* (New York and London, 2004), p. 365.
- [15] "A Few Words on How to Raise a Human Being" in *Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 172.
- [16] *The Condition of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex and New York, 1987), p. 245.
- [17] *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (New York and Oxford, 1985), p. 148.
- [18] *Ibid*, p. 138.
- [19] [www.marxists.org/archive/mehring/1918/marx/tranpref.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/mehring/1918/marx/tranpref.htm)
- [20] [www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1903/misc/stagnation.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1903/misc/stagnation.htm)
- [21] Foreword, *Art as the Cognition of Life* (Oak Park, Michigan, 1998), p. x.
- [22] V.I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (New York, 1972), p. 36.
- [23] Zenovia A. Sochor, *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy* (Ithaca and London, 1988), p. 31.
- [24] *Ibid*, p. 39.
- [25] *Ibid*, pp. 40-41.

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- [26] *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, p. 337.
- [27] *German Ideology* excerpted in *Marx and Engels on The Socialist Revolution* (Moscow, 1978), p. 44.
- [28] Maurice Parijanine, “Proletarian Literature,” appendix to *Writings of Leon Trotsky: 1932* (New York, 1973), p. 352.
- [29] *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*, p. 148.
- [30] Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990), p. 131.
- [31] *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*, p. 172.
- [32] “On Proletarian Culture” in *Lenin On Culture and Cultural Revolution* (Moscow, 1978), p. 147.
- [33] *Art as the Cognition of Life*, Appendix 1, p. 436.
- [34] *Ibid*, p. 439.
- [35] “Art as the Cognition of Life” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 136.
- [36] Katerina Clark, “The ‘Quiet Revolution’ in Soviet Intellectual Life,” in *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana, 1991), p. 226.
- [37] *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*, p. 169.
- [38] “On Proletarian Art and the Artistic Policy of Our Party” in *Art as the Cognition of Life* (Oak Park, Michigan, 1998), p. 148.
- [39] *Literature and Revolution* (London, 1991), p. 217.
- [40] *Ibid*, pp. 219-220.
- [41] *Ibid*, p. 222.
- [42] “On Proletarian Art and the Artistic Policy of Our Party” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, pp. 160-161.
- [43] “In Memory of Esenin” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 244.
- [44] “Literature and Revolution” in *Collected Writings on Literature and Revolution* (London, 2004), p. 88.
- [45] “On Art” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 208.
- [46] “Art as the Cognition of Life” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 96.
- [47] “On Artistic Truth” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 324.
- [48] *Ibid*, p. 324.
- [49] “The Art of Seeing the World” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 375.
- [50] “On Proletarian Art and the Artistic Policy of Our Party” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 167.
- [51] “Art as the Cognition of Life” in *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 125.
- [52] Foreword, *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. xix.
- [53] *Red Virgin Soil: Soviet Literature in the 1920s* (Ithaca and London, 1987), p. 401.