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## LENIN AND THE PARTY

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, soon after he made his acquaintance with Marxism, became a disciple of Plekhanov. Plekhanov was widely respected, perhaps revered, by many of the generation of the 1890s who increasingly turned to Marxism, and who formed the basis of the Marxist groups which sprang up on Russian soil. Lenin's eventful revolutionary career and his theoretical development and innovations have been the subjects of many histories and interpretations,<sup>1</sup> not all of which sufficiently emphasize his debt to Plekhanov. I propose simply to examine the theoretical work of Lenin in so far as it relates to the question of opposition; a question which arises sharply in the debates over the issue of party organization, around 1902–4, and in the debates over the political organization of the Soviet state after 1917. In both debates, and during both periods, and probably for his entire revolutionary career, Lenin consistently held two positions which coloured his views about everything else. The first position was that he alone, and often with his faction of Russian Social Democracy (although sometimes against it), embodied and represented the true interests of the proletariat. This position was not negotiable. The second was that any and all opposition to Lenin, on almost any matter, was class, that is, non-proletarian or bourgeois, opposition. Lenin adopted, at times, a more flexible approach to his opponents than this position might suggest; but the non-proletarian nature of opposition was implicit in all of Lenin's alliances and tactical manoeuvres.

Lenin inherited directly certain fundamental assumptions of Russian Marxism made by Plekhanov. He accepted that capitalism was advancing rapidly within Russia, and that the future belonged to the proletariat. He also accepted that the proletariat must lead the movement for the democratization of Russia. These assumptions

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distinguished Russian Marxists from Populists of all shades. P. Akselrod had drawn the correct inference from Plekhanov's two-stage theory of revolution, that

if there is no possibility of assigning to the Russian proletariat an independent, pre-eminent role in the struggle against police-tsarism, autocracy and arbitrariness, then Russian Social Democracy has no historical right to exist.<sup>2</sup>

The Russian Marxists were naturally drawn to Marx's works on the 1848 Revolutions, particularly the German Revolution, for they perceived significant similarities between 1848 Germany and their Russia. Marx's work convinced them that the liberal bourgeoisie was an uncertain ally in the struggle for liberalism. For had not the German, and even French, bourgeoisie in 1848–50 sought refuge from the demands of the proletariat behind the autocracy which it had set out to destroy? In March 1898, the First Congress of Russian Social Democrats delegated Struve to draft a programme in the group's name. The resulting 'Manifesto of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party' (RSDLP) declared, *inter alia*, that

the further east one goes in Europe, the more cowardly, mean, and politically weak is the bourgeoisie, and the greater are the cultural and political tasks confronting the proletariat. The Russian working class must and will bear on its own sturdy shoulders the cause of winning political freedom. . . .<sup>3</sup>

The Manifesto maintained that it was the proletariat which would 'throw off the yoke of autocracy', and then continue the struggle against the bourgeoisie to attain socialism. This Russian Marxist orthodoxy raised questions of enormous implication. With whom, for example, would the proletariat make alliances in the struggle against absolutism? What would the regime which followed the overthrow of absolutism look like? But while these questions divided Russian Marxists especially after 1905, the immediate task was the organization of a Russian Marxist Party which had not been achieved by the 1898 Congress.

The issue of Party unity and organization proved ironically divisive. It was zealously prosecuted by Lenin, one of the leaders of the new generation of Russian Marxists. Lenin emerged as a prominent figure in debates against the Narodniks. His early works, to about 1899, do not seem particularly exceptional, except perhaps that his major economic *opus*, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899), was dedicated to the proposition that Russian capitalism

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had not simply entered its initial phase, but was firmly and irrevocably established, and based on the large-scale enterprises of advanced capitalism. Replete with detailed statistics, this work established Lenin as a formidable Marxist theorist. Furthermore, in an appendix to his 1897 *The Tasks of Russian Social Democrats*, Lenin urged Social Democrats to tighten up their organization, to be more secretive. These ideas on the formation of a Russian Social Democratic Party were developed during Lenin's three-year internal exile (1897–1900), and were begun to be put into effect upon his release as he travelled Russia establishing contacts for his proposed all-Russian, unifying, newspaper. Lenin's efforts were directed, in particular, against the so-called 'Economists'. 'Economism' was a sympathetic response by some Russian Social Democrats to the upsurge in trade union action in the late 1890s, a response which, according to many, including Lenin and Plekhanov, led to a denial of the need for an independent working-class party. Kuskova's 'Credo', an extreme statement of the Economist position, would mean, according to its opponents, the participation of Russian Marxists simply in economic struggles of the working class for immediate gains. In effect, they argued, Economism denied the leading role of the working class in the coming democratic revolution; it denied this basic tenet of orthodox Russian Marxism.

In the context of this debate, Lenin determined to use his long-planned, all-Russian newspaper *Iskra* (Spark) to forge a party free from the disorganizing tendencies he saw as the product of Economism. He united with the nucleus of the old Emancipation of Labour Group, Plekhanov, P. Akselrod and Zasulich, to produce his newspaper and to fight Economism. In *Iskra*'s first issue of December 1900, Lenin stressed two crucial ideas: first, that 'isolated from Social-Democracy, the working-class movement ... inevitably becomes bourgeois';<sup>4</sup> and second, that the revolutionaries must 'devote the whole of their lives, not only their spare evenings, to the revolution'.<sup>5</sup> One of the earliest documents on the actual organization of the party which Lenin advocated was his *Where to Begin* (May 1901). From the outset, he argued that the scope of his contribution would be limited to tactical questions of organization, and would not be raising general programmatic questions:

It is not a question of what path we must choose (as was the case in the late eighties and early nineties), but of what practical steps we must take upon

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the known path and how they shall be taken. It is a question of a system and plan of practical work.<sup>6</sup>

This idea was Lenin's guiding thread in the disputes over the nature of the Party, from his *Where to Begin* (1901), through *What is to Be Done?* (1902), to *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (1904). Lenin maintained, in other words, that the political strategy of Russian Social Democracy was fixed and agreed, and that he took up the cudgels on behalf of the organization most suited to achieve that goal. But this was not entirely so, for Economism's challenge to Russian Marxism was primarily on the question of political strategy and aims. No doubt Lenin believed strongly in the merits and appropriateness of his proposed organization, but he used the question of organization to make what were more properly political and strategic points against his opponents.

Lenin consciously modelled his party organization on the experiences of the Russian revolutionary tradition:

the magnificent organisation that the revolutionaries had in the seventies and that should serve us as a model, was not established by the *Narodnaya Volia*, but by the *Zemlia i Volia*. . . . [N]o revolutionary trend, if it seriously thinks of struggle, can dispense with such an organization.<sup>7</sup>

But the question of organization was a tactical one, not one of principle. Lenin concedes that the model party for all Social Democrats was the SPD; but Russia was not Germany, and such an organization was impossible. Plekhanov himself, in *Our Differences*, had taken account of the lessons of the Russian revolutionary tradition on the question of organization. He, however, had recommended the 'absolutely necessary and highly useful organisation' of the *Narodnaya Volia*.<sup>8</sup> But Lenin went one step further. If questions of organization were merely tactical, differences over these questions revealed 'a deplorable ideological instability and vacillation'.<sup>9</sup> Differences over tactics are surreptitiously linked, by Lenin, to differences of principle. Similarly, when Lenin discusses the vital role that an all-Russian newspaper would play, he introduces the question of principle. A newspaper, Lenin declared, 'is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organiser'.<sup>10</sup> The 'network of agents' required to distribute the paper would form the 'skeleton' of the organization.<sup>11</sup> But this merely tactical device would somehow 'render impossible unprincipled and

opportunist deviations from revolutionary Marxism . . . which must inevitably lead to the conversion of the labour movement into an instrument of bourgeois democracy'.<sup>12</sup> Lenin took the proposition, widely accepted among Russian Marxists, that the working class left to its own devices would not develop socialist consciousness, and transformed it into the proposition that the working class, without the organizational recipe of the *Iskra*-ites, would not develop socialist consciousness. He transformed a general proposition about the role of Social Democracy, however arguable, into a particular proposition aimed against his opponents within Russian Social Democracy. Lenin's innovation is not on the question of the role of Social Democracy in bringing consciousness to the working class, but the unwarranted link between views on organization opposed to his and the failure to introduce socialist consciousness into the working class.

Lenin's best-known and most influential statement of his organization views is his *What is to Be Done?*,<sup>13</sup> directed against his Economist, terrorist, and federationist opponents within Russian Social Democracy. There are two fundamental trends in international Social Democracy, Lenin begins. There is revolutionary Marxism, and the 'new', 'critical' trend, which 'has been clearly enough *presented* by Bernstein and *demonstrated* by Millerand'.<sup>14</sup> Lenin places all Social Democratic disputes within these two categories. He considered that Economism represented Revisionist opportunism in the Russian context. The Economists differed from Lenin over their appreciation of workers' struggles and the proper Social Democratic reaction to them. The strikes of the 1890s, Lenin argues, merely 'represented the class struggle in embryo'.<sup>15</sup> They were not yet Social Democratic struggles; the workers had not yet realized their irreconcilable antagonism towards capitalism:

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. . . . The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the . . . theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals.<sup>16</sup>

Economism is characterized, he argues, by a '*slavish cringing before spontaneity*'.<sup>17</sup> But it is a mistake to believe that the labour movement will spontaneously discover socialism. In fact, Lenin believed

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that the 'spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology',<sup>18</sup> since bourgeois ideology is older than socialist ideology, more fully developed, and is disseminated by innumerable means. Social Democrats must not confine themselves to the economic struggle; 'We must take up actively the political education of the working class and the development of its political consciousness.'<sup>19</sup> Even if economic struggles bring workers into conflict with the government, Lenin contends that they remain at the level of 'trade-unionist politics':

Working-class consciousness cannot be a 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 point of view and no other.<sup>20</sup>

Socialist consciousness was quite different from working-class consciousness. Socialist consciousness was in the possession of Social Democrats who were not opportunists; and opportunists were beginning to be defined by Lenin as those who did not share his organizational views. The Social Democrat must aim to be a 'tribune of the people',<sup>21</sup> agitating among all strata of the population. Social Democrats are to be drawn from all classes. The task, as Lenin saw it, was to lead the forces for the democratic revolution. So to what extent did Lenin's conception of the Russian revolution need the working class at all, except as a beast of burden? After all, Social Democratic consciousness was possessed by the party, it was not a peculiarly working-class attainment; indeed, the working class was at a distinct disadvantage in acquiring it.

The two ideas on which Lenin hinges his argument were, for Russian Social Democrats, generally unexceptionable. The first was the idea that the workers themselves could not achieve a socialist consciousness, which would have to be brought to them by Social Democracy. The second was that left to their own economic devices, the workers would invariably come under the sway of bourgeois ideology. In 1898, for example, Akselrod had argued in his *Present Tasks and Tactics* that Western experience demonstrated that economic struggle did not automatically lead to the growth of political consciousness among the workers, and that the political strivings of the workers usually fell under the sway of the bourgeoisie.<sup>22</sup> Plekhanov, since 1883, had urged a role for the socialist intelligentsia in

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introducing socialist consciousness to the workers. His Preface to the '*Vademecum*' for the Editorial Board of *Rabochee Delo* (1900), directed against the Economists, also spoke of the workers' lag of consciousness.<sup>23</sup> But Lenin used directly the argument of Karl Kautsky which declared that socialist consciousness was something which came easily to intellectuals, who have the time to ponder and reflect, that

socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without and not something that arose within it spontaneously.<sup>24</sup>

Though these ideas were, as I have said, generally unexceptionable at the time, there was some opposition to them (from the Economist Vladimir Akimov, among others). They were not, in any case, Lenin's innovation. His innovation was to link his organizational views with revolutionary Marxism, and those of his opponents with opportunism.

Under Russian conditions, Lenin argued with some justification, Social Democracy could not be organized like a trade union. It must be organized by professional revolutionaries, and its organization 'must perforce not be very extensive and must be as secret as possible'.<sup>25</sup> It would thus be able to maintain itself as against the political police, and be able to attract members from all social classes. The movement, Lenin claimed, would not survive without this type of organization.<sup>26</sup> *What is to be Done?* is no practical manual, but it does exclude democracy because it contradicts the prime imperative of the organization: secrecy. Democracy 'in Party organization, amidst the gloom of the autocracy and the domination of the gendarmerie, is nothing more than a *useless and harmful toy*'.<sup>27</sup> With secrecy, Lenin argues, strong bonds can be formed between the party and workers. And 'something even more than "democratism" would be guaranteed to us, namely, complete, comradely, mutual confidence among revolutionaries'.<sup>28</sup> Secrecy and complete confidence, however, are rarely found together. In summary of *What is to Be Done?*, Lenin writes:

All without exception now talk of the importance of unity, of the necessity for 'gathering and organising', but in the majority of cases what is lacking is a definite idea of where to begin and how to bring about this unity.<sup>29</sup>

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But Lenin's entire discussion is a substitute for addressing the major political differences which were beginning to emerge among the Russian Social Democrats. These problems are merely alluded to as a background to the organizational debate. Nevertheless, Lenin tries to place his opponents on the organizational question outside revolutionary Marxism, and trusts through his organizational proposals to place them effectively outside the yet-to-be formed RSDLP.

In September 1902, in his 'Letter to a Comrade on Our Organizational Tasks', Lenin conceded that in a secret organization an 'incapable' person may concentrate great power into his hands, but this

cannot be obviated by the elective principle and decentralization, the application of which is absolutely impermissible to any wide degree.<sup>30</sup>

If the elective principle cannot 'obviate' such events, however, it can at least 'correct' them. Yet Lenin continued to stress centralization and secrecy.

Armed with Lenin's views on organization, the *Iskra* group came to the Second Congress of the RSDLP in 1903 determined to form a party. Major division occurred, rather unexpectedly, over the first Article of the proposed 'Organizational Rules of the RSDLP'. The formulation eventually adopted was modelled on the membership article of the SDP, and read:

A member of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party is one who accepts its Programme, supports it financially, and extends it regular personal assistance under the guidance of one of its organizations.<sup>31</sup>

This paragraph was at the centre of an important debate during that part of the Congress held in London, which helped to dash the hopes for unity. The so-called Third Party Congress, convened by Lenin in April 1905 and consisting exclusively of Bolsheviks,<sup>32</sup> revised the membership article to read:

A member of the party is one who accepts its Programme, supports the party financially, and participates through personal work in one of its organizations.<sup>33</sup>

This was the alternative debated in 1903 and, ironically, it was accepted by the Menshevik-dominated Fourth (or Unity) Congress of the RSDLP in 1906. Why did the Party split if, as it seemed, there was no question of principle at stake? Many European Social



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Democrats asked the same question. The issues dividing Russian Social Democrats were not at all clear to most of their European colleagues. Even the split itself came not explicitly over the question of professional revolutionaries, but over Lenin's plan for a three-man editorial board of *Iskra* and a three-man Central Committee. Furthermore, the split took place largely among the *Iskra*-ites. Both sides appealed to their European colleagues for support, but most of the latter, including Kautsky, refused to take sides. Kautsky explained:

I do not see any difference in principle between proletarian and intellectual tendencies, nor between 'democracy' and 'dictatorship'; it [the question or organization] is simply a question of expediency.<sup>34</sup>

In some ways Kautsky even favoured Lenin's Bolsheviks. Adolf Braun (an editor of the SPD's *Der Kampf*) probably best summed up the European feeling of puzzlement and helplessness when he wrote to Akselrod in 1911 that differences 'of all dimensions' seemed to be the prime concern of the Russian émigrés, who squandered their energies on struggle between comrades. 'For those of us who do not know Russian this is an extraordinarily painful experience.'<sup>35</sup> Only in 1914 did the International Socialist Bureau of the Second International declare of the factions of the RSDLP that 'there are no tactical disagreements between them which are sufficiently important to justify a split',<sup>36</sup> but war intervened before unity could be attempted, or imposed.

What was the cause of the split at the Second Congress? And why was there such vehemence over the question of Party membership? After all, Lenin's *What is to Be Done?* did not represent a departure from orthodoxy on the issue of socialist consciousness, as Plekhanov and the other *Iskra* editors realized when they supported Lenin's views on it. It was when Lenin proposed that Zasulich and Akselrod should be dropped from the editorial board of *Iskra* that the *Iskra*-ites split, with Zasulich, Akselrod, and the young leader Martov declaring their opposition to Lenin (and Plekhanov). The Congress revealed a great deal of bitter enmity towards Lenin, not just, or even primarily, towards his views on Party organization. As Neil Harding argues:

Lenin's views of the Party as presented in his writings from 1899 to 1902 are not to be regarded as extraordinary, innovatory, perverse, essentially

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Jacobin or unorthodox. On the contrary, they had long been canvassed in *Iskra* and accepted by Lenin's co-editors who were the only ones who could reasonably be described as having a claim to expressing the orthodoxy of Russian Marxism.<sup>37</sup>

Thus Plekhanov broke with Lenin only after the Second Congress, and the *Iskra*-ites supported Lenin's formulation on Party membership. The Mensheviks themselves adopted Lenin's formulation at the Fourth Congress in 1906.

The 'organizational question' has been given unwarranted significance in the split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Underlying the personal antagonisms, and whatever organizational differences there were, or came to be, were differences over political strategy and the objectives of the democratic revolution which emerged fully only in 1905 and 1906. The emergence of these differences suited Lenin's consistent attempts to turn the question of organization into a question of principle, either directly or by association. And while the Mensheviks split away from the Bolsheviks, it was only Lenin who took the organizational question seriously enough to make a split. Lenin's ends were achieved, and his hands were still clean – even if they were grubbied later by the affairs of the Schmidt inheritance and the Caucasus 'expropriations'.

The attempt to translate organizational differences into differences of principle was made once again in Lenin's next major statement on the question, published in May 1904 after the Second Congress. His *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back (The Crisis in Our Party)* reviewed the dispute and the resulting division. By 1904, Lenin claims, the 'central and fundamental points at issue' had emerged.<sup>38</sup> They concerned, according to him, primarily organizational questions (not those of programme or strategy), and his opponents were accused of 'opportunism in matters of organization'. But are these matters of principle? Taken by itself, Lenin explained, the debate over paragraph one at the Second Congress revealed 'shades of principle', yet it was not a matter of 'life or death'.<sup>39</sup> Lenin equivocates over whether the question of organization is a matter of principle. He first moves to link the differences with the swing towards mistaken views:

Every *little* difference may assume *tremendous* importance if it serves as the starting-point for a *swing* towards definite mistaken views.<sup>40</sup>

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Differences over organizational questions, he implies, may lead to mistaken political views. But little differences do not necessarily lead to major differences, and we have no reliable method of determining the relationship between the two. Nevertheless, Lenin insists that the debate over paragraph one 'started the swing towards the opportunist profundities and anarchistic phrase-mongering of the minority'.<sup>41</sup>

Lenin soon overcame his hesitation, and assigned to types of organization a class character in a formulation as ingenuous as it is unfounded:

*In words*, Martov's formulation [of paragraph one, adopted at the Second Congress] defends the interests of the broad strata of the proletariat, but *in fact* it serves the interests of the *bourgeois intellectuals*, who fight shy of proletarian discipline and organisation.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps for the first time in this, or any debate, 'discipline and organisation' were assigned a class character. Lenin's organizational views were proletarian; Martov's were bourgeois. Whether or not Lenin was right to see intellectuals as dilettantes who wish to avoid disciplined activity is beside the point. How did Lenin ascertain the class character of a type of organization, or even of an actual organization? By its organization, by its composition, or by its programme? It is not so much Lenin's type of organization which is objectionable and bound to lead to authoritarianism, for the character of the political system is more important than the character of the parties which compose it, but his insistence on ascribing to organization a class character and on ascribing to his organization a proletarian character.

The question of organization was naturally connected to the political tasks of Russian Social Democrats. If the goal was to lead the overthrow of tsarism, and to seize power under conditions imposed by the autocracy, then the type of organization Lenin advocated had considerable justification. If it had to lead liberals and other anti-autocratic forces against tsarism, then again it had some justification. But what would take the place of tsarism? Even Lenin did not believe, until at least 1914, that socialism was on the agenda for Russia. But the precise character of the new regime was a point of contention among Russian Social Democrats from about 1905. Lenin, however, on the basis of his organizational views, held that the Party minority was opportunist, and represented a continuation

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of the international division of Social Democracy into revolutionary and opportunist wings.<sup>43</sup> Lenin even argued that a revolutionary Social Democrat was defined by his relationship to organization:

Who is it that insists that the worker is not afraid of organisation, that the proletariat has no sympathy for anarchy, that he values the incentive to organise? ... *The Jacobins of Social-Democracy*.<sup>44</sup>

Lenin took no offence at being called a Jacobin; he considered it to be a compliment. He continued to focus on the charge of opportunism when the only explicit difference between him and the Mensheviks was over questions of organization:

opportunism in programme is naturally connected with opportunism in tactics and opportunism in organisation.<sup>45</sup>

Yet the Mensheviks accepted the same programme as Lenin did at the Second Congress. Lenin remained undeterred; in the debate over party organization he established the principle by which all later disagreement with him would be judged: opposition was opportunism, which was class opposition. Even though Lenin maintained that party organization was a tactical matter, to be decided by prevailing conditions (and thus changing his views about the openness of the Party in 1905 and 1917), he connected opposing organizational views with deviations from Marxism.

His organizational views did not go unchallenged. As members of the *Iskra* group fell out with Lenin they cast about for arguments to use against him. But the arguments generally lacked conviction, for they were arguments against positions which the *Iskra* group had shared. It was also generally unclear how far the Mensheviks differed from the Bolsheviks; 'democratic centralism', after all, was an expression coined by the Mensheviks.<sup>46</sup> Two of the most interesting and substantial critiques of Lenin's views came from Russian Marxists not directly connected with either of the factions: Vladimir Akimov and Leon Trotsky. Akimov, an Economist delegate to the Second Congress, was ridiculed by the united *Iskra*-ists, so he published his comments after the Congress. Not being party to the split over the organizational question, which he considered subsidiary, Akimov turned his attention to the *Iskra*-ite Programme, drawn up largely by Plekhanov. Akimov claimed that compared with the Erfurt Programme, the *Iskra*-ite Programme was a 'remark-

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ably complete expression' of a 'sharply divergent' philosophy.<sup>47</sup> Where the former had set down both material and spiritual preconditions for the proletariat's emancipation, the Russian programme included only the material conditions. The proletariat was regarded by the *Iskra*-ites, he declared, merely as instruments of revolution. What of the class consciousness of the proletariat, he asked? How could a Social Democratic programme not 'find it necessary to note the conscious, revolutionary, and class character of the proletarian struggle?'<sup>48</sup> Lenin regarded the proletariat as a 'passive medium in which the bacillus of socialism, introduced from without, can develop'.<sup>49</sup> Akimov, however, insists that Social Democracy has no need to divert the proletariat from what Lenin considers a false path:

*Consciousness* within the movement of the proletariat is the *essential precondition* of social revolution, and this must be stated in our programme. As long as only 'professional revolutionaries' approach the struggle consciously, we shall see repetitions of the sad events of 1848.<sup>50</sup>

Akimov may have recalled Engels' interpretation of 1848 as a 'revolution carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses'.<sup>51</sup> That time, Engels had argued, had passed.

Akimov also reviewed the concept of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. He complained that since it was not included in any other Social Democratic programme,<sup>52</sup> its inclusion in the Russian programme required some justification which was not forthcoming. This is a more interesting observation than Akimov realized, as he was not likely to have seen Lenin's 'Notes on Plekhanov's First Draft Programme' for the Second Congress. In fiery language, Plekhanov had concluded that the 'dictatorship of the proletariat is an essential political condition of the social revolution'.<sup>53</sup> Lenin noted alongside this passage:

Page 9. 'Master of the situation', 'ruthlessly to smash', 'dictatorship'???' (The social revolution is enough for us.)<sup>54</sup>

Curiously, when Lenin presented his own draft programme a few weeks later, the formulation about the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' remained the same as Plekhanov's, and only the phrase 'ruthlessly to smash' was removed.<sup>55</sup> However, when criticizing

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Plekhanov's second draft programme, Lenin indicted the absence of the dictatorship concept:

the concept of 'dictatorship' is incompatible with *positive* recognition of outside support for the proletariat. If we really knew positively that the petty bourgeoisie will support the proletariat in the accomplishment of its, the proletariat's, revolution it would be pointless to speak of a 'dictatorship', for we would then be fully guaranteed so overwhelming a majority that we could get on very well without a dictatorship. . . . The recognition of the necessity for the *dictatorship* of the proletariat is *most closely and inseparably* bound up with the thesis of the *Communist Manifesto* that the proletariat *alone* is a really revolutionary class.<sup>56</sup>

Lenin's remarks indicate not only that he conceived of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a coercive political form for an embattled and minority proletariat, a position he would maintain hereafter, but that he regarded such a dictatorship as being possible in Russia. It was no doubt this coercive and minority conception of dictatorship which prompted Vera Zasulich, in the 1901–2 discussions among *Iskra* editors, to make light of Lenin's threats of force: 'On millions! Just try! You'll have to take the trouble to persuade them and that's all there is to it.'<sup>57</sup>

Akimov explains that 'the word "dictatorship" denotes a special form of government'.<sup>58</sup> Even if we assume that the proletariat elects this government, 'it would be a dictatorship of the revolutionary government over the proletariat'.<sup>59</sup> Was the Second Congress aware of these implications of the dictatorship concept? Akimov criticized the concept as inappropriate on two grounds: (i) it expresses an idea that cannot be realized, that is, the direct rule of an entire class over another; or (ii) it expresses a Blanquist idea of the investment of absolute, unlimited power in a provisional revolutionary government. If, Akimov writes, the *Iskra*-ites intended to use 'dictatorship' to mean class rule, or the political power of the proletariat, there was no need to use dictatorship with all its ambiguities.<sup>60</sup> Besides, the dictatorship concept harbours distinct dangers for post-revolutionary society. Plekhanov had written that

the dictatorship of a given class is . . . the rule of this class which enables it to wield the organized force of society in order to defend its own interests and to suppress all social movements which directly or indirectly threaten these interests.<sup>61</sup>

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What are we to make of the idea of suppressing movements which 'indirectly' threaten proletarian interests? Akimov warned that such an interpretation of dictatorship could only bring disaster to the proletariat. The most 'dangerous' movements, he added, might well be formed among the proletariat itself. 'They will then be branded "not truly proletarian", "not conscious", and so on, and to them will be opposed the "enlightened despotism" of the revolutionary government.'<sup>62</sup> Akimov had perceptively exposed the implications and limitations of Lenin's view that class interests, consciousness, and even class membership depend upon an ideological position rather than an economic, or material, position. For Akimov, the heterogeneity of the proletariat is a guarantee of democratic socialism:

The proletariat needs a broadly democratic organization of power and a guarantee of non-intervention by this power into the sphere of individual and social freedom. It needs what is embraced by a single term – democracy.<sup>63</sup>

If the *Iskra*-ites attempted to smuggle in a non-democratic conception of proletarian rule, they must be reproached, according to Akimov, for advocating in essence a conspiratorial seizure of power, a non-Marxist, Blanquist idea.<sup>64</sup> The major thrust of his analysis of the Second Congress was not concerned with the debate over membership, in itself merely a symptom, but with an as yet unarticulated difference between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks over programme. Such a difference should have been apparent from just one highly significant exchange at the Congress. Pasadovskii, Akimov relates, declared that 'there are no democratic principles that we should not subordinate to the *interests of our Party*'.<sup>65</sup> Plekhanov took the floor in support:

If the success of the revolution should demand temporary curtailment of this or that democratic principle, it would be criminal to stop short of such curtailment... [E]ven the principle of universal suffrage ought to be approached from the point of view of the basic principle of democracy I have indicated – *Salus populi suprema lex est*. The revolutionary proletariat can restrict the political rights of the upper classes as the upper classes once restricted its political rights.<sup>66</sup>

Akimov argued that such a principle led to 'Nechaevism'. Lenin, moreover, 'is a Blanquist, and nothing Blanquist is alien to him'.<sup>67</sup>

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For Akimov, the incongruous feature of the Second Congress was that the Mensheviks agreed to an essentially Blanquist programme, but then refused to accept the Blanquist organizational principles which complemented it. The Mensheviks sense that this is wrong, that it should not be so. And yet, instead of re-evaluating the premises underlying the conclusion, they declare the premises correct. They accept the programme and declare that it is not they who deviate from it, but Lenin.<sup>68</sup>

Subsequent reactions to the results of the Second Congress were neither immediate nor precise, nor did they take Akimov's route and criticize the Party programme. The result was a rather lame response to Lenin's supposed organizational deviations, which, for example, were dubbed 'bureaucratic centralism' in P. Akselrod's 1903 pamphlet 'The Unification of Russian Social Democracy and its Tasks'. Akselrod saw Lenin as a 'fetishist of centralization';<sup>69</sup> he later claimed that the Leninist party would never lead to the maturation of the proletariat as a class. According to Akselrod, the choice was between the intelligentsia using the labour movement as an instrument of revolution – a conspiratorial party of superior technique – and a working-class party basing its strength on the political maturity and initiative of the proletariat.<sup>70</sup> Martov, who had also formerly agreed with Lenin's *What is to Be Done?*, now criticized the 'state of siege' that had beset the Party.<sup>71</sup> Many former Economists now joined with the Mensheviks, basing their union partly on a shared enmity towards Lenin and his views of the nature and consequent organization of the Party.

To this nebulous opposition to Lenin among the Mensheviks were introduced Trotsky's reflections on the Second Congress and on the organizational question. Some of Trotsky's earliest political works, Baruch Knei-Paz reminds us, concerned the question of organization.<sup>72</sup> In his 'Report of the Siberian Delegation' (1903) on the Second Congress, and in *Our Political Tasks* (August 1904), Trotsky 'emerged as a supporter of centralism, but a centralism governed by scrupulous democratic arrangements';<sup>73</sup> he opposed the idea of an organization becoming the master, instead of a servant, that is, a leadership becoming separated from the movement and outside its control. Trotsky, too, condemned Lenin's 'state of siege' mentality, which bred 'organized mistrust'.<sup>74</sup> He considered that Lenin's drive for power was not personal ambition, but the logical



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outcome of his whole system. Lenin's 'ego-centrism', Trotsky feared, would devour independent thinking, since independent thinking might lead to opposition. Lenin's planned Central Committee would be 'an all-mighty Committee of Public Safety so that he may play the role of an "incorrupt" Robespierre',<sup>75</sup> and maintain internal control. Trotsky was concerned that this 'caricature Robespierre' would destroy the Party when his inevitable downfall came.

*Our Political Tasks* was even more strident in its anti-Leninism. Trotsky claimed that Leninism would lead to conspiracy, unjustifiably claiming to represent working-class interests. Lenin's organization would 'make it far more difficult for workers to join the party than for the intellectuals'.<sup>76</sup> Thus it was not just organization, but the character of the entire movement that was at stake. Trotsky dubbed as 'substitutionism' the relationship which would obtain between Lenin's Party and the proletariat, the class whom he felt Lenin had abandoned:

In one case, we have a system of *thinking* for the proletariat, of the political *substitution* of the proletariat; in the other, a system of *educating* politically the proletariat, *mobilizing* it, so that it may exercise effective pressure on the will of all groups and parties. These two systems produce political results which are, objectively, totally different.<sup>77</sup>

The Party did not exist to call upon the workers to recognize their objective interests when the Party deemed the time ripe for revolution. The Party existed, Trotsky considered, to develop the proletariat's interests from an objective fact into a subjective reality so that the proletariat could emancipate itself. Substitutionism, however, was a short-cut to revolution. As Plekhanov had said many years earlier,<sup>78</sup> so Trotsky now concurred, if the Social Democratic movement was to succeed, it would succeed as a movement of the working class. The pervasive logic of substitutionism prevented this:

In inner-party politics, these methods [of Lenin] lead, as we shall yet see, to this: the party organization substitutes itself for the party, the Central Committee substitutes itself for the organization and, finally, a 'dictator' substitutes himself for the Central Committee.<sup>79</sup>

Although this is one of Trotsky's best-known statements (which he later repudiated), and deserves more than most others to be considered prophetic, it expressed an idea which was familiar at the time. The internal life of the Party seemed in grave danger. Could it

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tolerate a regime of 'terror', led by a 'dictator'? Surely this would result in a 'dictatorship over the proletariat'.<sup>80</sup> Trotsky was complacent, however, believing that Leninism would inevitably disintegrate.

Plekhanov, after co-operating with Lenin as co-editor of *Iskra* for some months after the Second Congress, joined the Mensheviks. Considering Party unity close at hand, he argued that to split over mere organizational differences would be 'a heinous *political crime*'.<sup>81</sup> But when Lenin left the *Iskra* editorial board, and Plekhanov had recalled those former editors who had been excluded from the board by the Congress or by their own choice, Plekhanov's criticisms of 'Lenin's' organizing principles followed the Menshevik pattern. Even Rosa Luxemburg contributed to the debate against Lenin, arguing that his was an 'ultra-centralist' solution, and that Lenin was a Blanquist centralist.<sup>82</sup> Yet as Nettel relates, Luxemburg herself was no model democratic leader within her own Party.<sup>83</sup>

Lenin had an inclination for turning peripheral questions into questions of principle, of class division. Any aspect of life, from philosophy to literature and art, could become a question of principle for Lenin when he so chose. Four years after his collaboration with the philosopher Bogdanov had begun, for example, Lenin decided to campaign against the philosophical trend of 'empirio-criticism' which he knew had been held by Bogdanov from the start.<sup>84</sup> In 1908 he published his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, a (prolix) restatement of the philosophical views of Engels and Plekhanov. Without philosophical significance (except in so far as it dominated Soviet epistemology until the late 1950s, when Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* supplanted it), this work is a monument not just to Lenin's relentless pursuit of 'error', but to his skill at turning all questions into questions of principle. He declared:

behind the epistemological scholasticism of empirio-criticism one must not fail to see the struggle of parties in philosophy, a struggle which in the last analysis reflects the tendencies and ideology of the antagonistic classes in modern society.<sup>85</sup>

Bogdanov had been placed outside of Lenin's 'proletariat' at a stroke.

Social Democrats, both Menshevik and Bolshevik agreed, must lead the struggle against Russian absolutism. But what would become of the Party after the revolution? Before 1914 Lenin stopped

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short of advocating socialism. 'Marxists', he wrote in 1905, 'are absolutely convinced of the bourgeois character of the Russian revolution.'<sup>86</sup> The revolution must open the way for a rapid development of capitalism and of the working class. It must not 'overstep the bounds of bourgeois social and economic relationships',<sup>87</sup> but their political forms should be stretched to the limit. Lenin saw the task of Social Democracy as establishing a revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. It was a strategy based on the commonly held, Social Democratic belief in the 'treachery of the [Russian] democratic bourgeoisie',<sup>88</sup> but also on Lenin's particular evaluation of the peasant contribution to revolutionary struggle which he observed in 1905. Lenin's rather curious formula of the 'revolutionary-democratic dictatorship' was meant to suggest the victory over tsarism carried out by the 'revolutionary people – the proletariat and the peasantry',<sup>89</sup> although the bourgeoisie would become the new 'ruling class'.<sup>90</sup> This outcome was not quite according to the European model of capitalism, Lenin conceded,<sup>91</sup> but it was not socialism: 'if Social-Democracy sought to make the socialist revolution its immediate aim, it would assuredly discredit itself'.<sup>92</sup>

Nevertheless, Lenin had firmly established a unique Bolshevik political strategy, based on the potential of the peasant rebellion. 'The agrarian question is the basis of the bourgeois revolution in Russia',<sup>93</sup> he argued, but because of the peasants' conditions of work, their narrowness and disunity, a '*peasant* revolution ... is possible only under the leadership of the proletariat [i.e., Social Democracy]'.<sup>94</sup> For Lenin, the lesson of the 1905 Revolution was that:

The tactics of Social-Democracy in the Russian bourgeois revolution are determined not by the task of supporting the liberal bourgeoisie, as the opportunists think, but by the task of supporting the fighting peasantry.<sup>95</sup>

Lenin's strategy fell somewhere between Plekhanov's 'two-stage revolution', and Trotsky's and Parvus' 'permanent revolution' strategies, which respectively separated and telescoped the bourgeois and socialist stages of the revolution. More than either of its competitors, Lenin's strategy relied upon two features of the Russian revolutionary tradition: a centralized party of professional revolutionaries, and a keen appreciation of the peasantry as the decisive material factor of the revolution. These ideas were crucial to Lenin's

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success, and to the character and later development of the Soviet state. But we should not be too quick to make these suggestive parallels definite links between Lenin and figures of the Russian revolutionary tradition. Such a move has spawned the 'guilt by association' school which has linked Lenin variously with Nechaev,<sup>96</sup> Tkachev,<sup>97</sup> and Ogarev.<sup>98</sup> Soviet historiography itself during the 1920s stressed the link between Bolshevism and the Russian revolutionary heritage. In 1926, for example, Steklov proclaimed Bakunin 'the founder of the concept of Soviet power, the political form of the dictatorship of the proletariat'.<sup>99</sup> Of course, Lenin himself openly acknowledged his debt to Chernyshevsky (whose novel *What Is To Be Done?* 'completely transformed my outlook'),<sup>100</sup> and to the party organization of *Zemlia i Volia*. But there is little evidence to suggest that Lenin was primarily or directly influenced by the Russian Jacobins.

Rather, it was Plekhanov and Plekhanov's interpretation of Marxism which decisively influenced Lenin. The assumptions which Plekhanov brought to Marxism, and the tasks of Social Democracy as he conceived them, represent the influences of the Russian revolutionary tradition. Lenin, it might be said, experienced that tradition vicariously through Plekhanov. The 'father of Russian Marxism' was father to both Bolshevism and Menshevism; the author of the programme of 'unified' Social Democracy left a divided legacy.<sup>101</sup> If he recognized the need for political freedoms for the development of the working class, and if he recognized the dangers of revolutionary coups, Plekhanov could also be authoritarian in his conception of the role of the Party and of the socialist revolution and its transition period. Voden wrote the following after a meeting with Engels in 1893:

Engels inquired about Plekhanov's personal attitude to the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat. I [Voden] had to confess that G. V. Plekhanov had often told me he was convinced that, of course once 'we' had come to power, 'we' would grant freedom to no one else but 'ourselves'... In response to my question of whom one should understand more precisely as enjoying the right to this monopoly of freedom, Plekhanov replied: the working class, led by comrades who correctly understand the teaching of Marx and draw from it the correct conclusions.<sup>102</sup>

Plekhanov does not seem to have elaborated upon who should decide what was the 'correct' understanding of Marx, but the

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authoritarian implications are obvious. Plekhanov had also, as we noted above, stressed the intelligentsia's role in bringing socialism to the workers. Harding argues that Plekhanov sometimes adopted 'a positively instrumental view of *intelligentsia* designs';<sup>103</sup> and Baron has seen clearly what we only glimpsed above: that Plekhanov's work 'bristled' with expression such as 'dictatorship of the proletariat', and 'seizure of power'.<sup>104</sup> With his mechanistic conception of historical development, and his attachment to the methods of West European Social Democracy, Plekhanov combined a Jacobin and cynical element. Up to 1900, Lenin held a great respect for Plekhanov,<sup>105</sup> whose influence over him seems to have been decisive. Certain of Plekhanov's attitudes remained with him, as Valentinov indirectly attests:

Plekhanov once said to me about a critic of Marxism . . . 'First, let's stick the convict's badge on him, and then after that we'll examine his case.'<sup>106</sup>

The organizational dispute and split at the Second Congress was symptomatic of a much deeper ambivalence in Russian Marxism which was embodied in Plekhanov's works.