



THE OCTOBER
REVOLUTION

IN PROSPECT AND RETROSPECT

Interventions in Russian and Soviet History

— John Eric Marot —

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By

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UCLA awarded me my PhD in 1987 but it was not until 2011 that I obtained a full-time position at Keimyung University in Daegu, Korea. In the interim, I had very limited opportunities to attend conferences, do archival research abroad, establish personal rapport with colleagues; in sum, to make friends and influence people. Like thousands of others, I joined the ranks of part-time, throw-away faculty, working in a variety of post-secondary institutions. Even that has proved elusive for many since the onset of the Great Recession in 2008. On the other hand, I have had the good fortune to know and work with Robert Brenner.

I took Bob's undergraduate course on the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the early 1970s. I was struck – thunderstruck, really – by the analytical rigour of his lectures. 'So *this* is Marxism' I said to myself. I took all his courses. Ever since I have consulted with him on just about everything I have written. He is more than an academic advisor to me. He is also a comrade and a friend.

I thank Ted Stolze for his friendship and for the many hours we spent together at a nearby fast-food restaurant discussing life, politics and Spinoza. Ted, others and I were members of the union negotiating team defending the interests of faculty and students at a local college. As union-president, Ted displayed great gifts of collective leadership. I am glad to be his friend.

But if not for Sebastian Budgen, this book would never have seen the light of day. Thanks, Sebastian.

Finally, I salute the men and women of the October Revolution. May twenty-first century socialists draw tempered inspiration from them.

Apart from Chapter One, which appears in print for the first time, the other chapters are reprints, with few changes, of essays published elsewhere over the past two decades: Chapter Two is reprinted from *Historical Materialism*, 14: 3 (2005), pp. 175–206; Chapter Three from *Revolutionary Russia*, 7 (1994), pp. 111–63; Chapter Four from *Revolutionary Russia* (1996), pp. 114–28

Chapter Five from *The Russian Review* 54 (1994), pp. 260–4, Chapter Six from *The Russian Review* 49 (1990), pp. 241–64, Chapter Seven from *The Russian Review* (1990), pp. 457–65, Chapter Eight from *Studies in Eastern European Thought* 45 (1993), pp. 147–67; Chapter Nine from *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 33 (1991) pp. 263–84.

Introduction

The seminal event of the twentieth century was not the victory of the October Revolution in 1917 but its final destruction between 1929–33, through the policies of forced industrialisation and forced collectivisation. Stalin and Stalinism – not Lenin and Bolshevism – set their imprimatur on the workers' movement internationally for the balance of the century, and beyond.

Materialist historians generally and Marxists particularly have historically deployed two analytically distinct arguments to explain the ultimate failure of a democratic socialism to take root in the Soviet Union in the wake of the October Revolution. One is the argument from class-structure and the other is the argument from historical conjuncture.

In the quarter century leading up to the October Revolution, all Second-International Marxists, including the Bolsheviks, subscribed to the class-structure argument against building socialism in a predominantly agrarian country. The argument straightforwardly took as its point of departure the cardinal fact that Russia had 100 million peasants and three million proletarians. There was no significant class-basis for socialism because there was no significant working-class presence. The material premises of socialism in Russia were not there. These premises would be established through the action of the capitalist mode of production, which would complete the transformation of peasants into workers as expressed in the law of 'primitive-capitalist accumulation' – the ruthless exploitation of the direct producers, the forcible

separation of peasants from their means of production, the conversion of the former into wage-workers and the latter into capital, and their subsequent reunification in a socialised division of labour spanning the whole globe. Such was capitalism's dirty business, its world-historical mission, Marx and Engels had declared in the *Communist Manifesto*.

The successful outcome of the Civil War in defence of the October Revolution prompted the Bolshevik leadership substantially to reject the relevance of this argument to Russian conditions.

After the October Revolution, Lenin, Trotsky and the rest of the party-leadership, including Stalin and Bukharin, thought their New Economic Policy, adopted in 1921, could at least begin, if not complete, a transition to socialism. Now, if we are to understand, as they did at that time, that building socialism in Russia meant, at the very least, the uncoerced conversion of peasants into workers, gradually establishing the proper class-basis to socialism, then the Bolsheviks' new position, and all those who have accepted it, repudiates a cornerstone of the class-structure argument. The repudiation has two aspects.

First, the Bolsheviks held that the agrarian policy of 'primitive-socialist accumulation', implemented by a workers' state, whose temporarily isolated existence no Marxist had foreseen before 1917, could *substitute* itself for the action of the capitalist mode of production. Second, they held that workers and peasants would voluntarily support the transformation of individualised peasant-property into socialised workers' property under the NEP because that transformation would materially benefit both classes. The Bolsheviks were wrong on both counts. In Chapter One, 'The Peasant-Question and the Origins of Stalinism: Rethinking the Destruction of the October Revolution', I resurrect the class-structure argument while modifying and further developing that argument.

Against the party-leadership, I argue that a workers' state could not substitute itself for the operation of capitalism in the Russian countryside because capitalism was not operating there in the first place. That is the first point. The second point: because the Russian peasantry was not subject to operating in a capitalist manner, it was, perforce, organising its life in a non-capitalist manner. The workers' state attempt to freely and without coercion effect a transition in agriculture from a non-capitalist to a socialist mode of production had failed by the late 1920s. This was manifested in the grain-marketing crises of that period. Economically, the agrarian crisis signalled that no significant development of the forces of production, in either industry or agriculture, could take place along free, democratic, socialist lines. Politically, the shortfall in grain-deliveries to the cities threatened to alienate the working class from the peasantry, imperilling the peasant-worker alliance or *smychka*, an alliance

the Bolsheviks thought was indispensable to maintaining the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. Without peasant-support, 'the political power of the proletariat is impossible, its preservation is inconceivable' Lenin had declared in 1921.¹

Stalin's ultimate response to the crisis of underproduction in agriculture is well known: declare war on the immediate producers, peasants and workers alike, and develop the forces of production through violence on a scale beyond anything anyone, including Stalin, had thought possible.

Was then the victory of Stalinism inevitable *just because* the material premises of socialism were absent? Certainly not! There can be no question here of an objectivist understanding of class-structure that would preclude any outcome other than the Stalinist one. The fact is that the party-leadership did not automatically genuflect before the alleged 'imperatives' of industrialisation and 'modernisation'. Instead, it divided. Bukharin and the 'Right Opposition' tried to stop Stalin's counter-revolutionary resolution of the grain-crisis. Bukharin saw at first-hand what a 'madman' Stalin was and how his policies would destroy everything the Bolsheviks had hitherto stood for. His course, he warned, would irrevocably destroy any support remaining among workers and peasants for the 'bureaucratically deformed' (Lenin) workers' state. Opposing Stalin, Bukharin and his co-thinkers basically proposed to *ride out* the crisis, postponing industrialisation and collectivisation for the duration, the only alternative to Stalinism. Stopping Stalin in his tracks and preserving the NEP would automatically have been the better outcome; for who can imagine an outcome worse than Stalin's victory?

Why did Bukharin and his associates not prevail against Stalin and change the course of twentieth-century history? There are many reasons. Nevertheless, it is safe to say this, at least: *contributing* to the defeat of Bukharin and the Right Opposition was Trotsky and the Left Opposition, which chose to ally with Stalin at this critical juncture. It stands to reason that, had Trotsky and the Left Opposition chosen to join forces with the Right Opposition instead, they would have contributed to Stalin's defeat. Could they have contributed enough to have halted Stalin? No one could have answered that question with any certainty then, before the struggle, without appearing foolish. To demand an unequivocal answer now is still foolish. Only the course of this hypothetical struggle would have determined the outcome.

And, so, the question presents itself: why did Trotsky and the Left Opposition not resist Stalin's counter-revolution? Because, I argue, they incorrectly

1. Lenin 1965b, p. 490.

theorised the peasantry's self-movement. A bloc with Bukharin, they thought, would help realise the greater evil of a *kulak*-led capitalist restoration, first in agriculture and then in industry, rather than help realise the lesser evil of Stalin's bureaucratised development of the forces of production in both industry and agriculture.

Trotsky never called into question his analysis of the grain-marketing crises as the product of Bukharin and Stalin's mistaken agrarian policies. Consequently, Trotsky reasoned, correct policies – Trotsky's policies – could overcome the crisis. Trotsky was wrong. It was the peasantry's self-movement, constrained by the structure of peasant-property, which generated a crisis of underproduction, erecting a barrier to any further development of the forces of production. No policy could remove that barrier without destroying the peasant-way of life.

Never having come to terms with the actual nature of the agrarian crisis of the late 1920s, which immediately conditioned but did not directly determine Stalin's victory, Trotsky developed the historical-conjuncture argument in the 1930s to explain this outcome, displacing class-structure from the centre of analysis. Trotsky foregrounded a series of historical events, conditions and processes in the post-1917 period – Civil War between the Red and White armies, foreign intervention, the 'destruction' of the working class, the 'bureaucratisation' of the ruling party, the vicissitudes of inner-party conflicts, the mistaken agrarian policies of the leadership, the isolation of the Revolution – to explain Stalin's victory as the contingent outcome of circumstances. However, the *logic* of the argument from agrarian class-structure, resting, as it does, on the political economy of small-peasant proprietorship, dictates that the peasant-question and the tremendous difficulties it posed to economic development and socialist construction would have remained alive and well *even if these events, conditions and processes had not taken place*. This is because the events, conditions and processes noted by Trotsky did nothing to diminish the importance of the peasantry, whose inability to generate ever-larger food-surpluses in the late 1920s placed an insuperable obstacle to the formation of an ever-larger working class in the cities and, consequently, to an ever-wider material basis for socialism.

Today, Marxists downplay the class-structure argument against building socialism in Russia because they think the history of post-October Russia was uniquely *determined* by class-structure. And, if Stalinism was inevitable, then, many conclude, the Bolsheviks should not have taken power. Since most Marxists do not want to call into question the *raison d'être* of the October Revolution, and since they do not want to appear as inevitabilists, they have adopted Trotsky's argument from historical conjuncture, or variants of it, to

explain the rise of Stalinism. But, in so doing, they (and Trotsky) have gone to the other extreme and have made it appear that Trotsky's (or Bukharin's) policies could have transformed Russia's agrarian class-structure, that the grain-crises could have been overcome, and that economic development could have been resumed. In short – and here is the supreme irony – *Stalin's policies* alone stood in the way to building socialism in one country; at least up until the eve of its 'complete' construction, when the international dimension finally kicks in. Here, material premises matter little, because class-structure no longer constrains the range of policy-choices to effect social transformation but is itself the product of policy-choices: an unacceptably subjectivist, non-materialist treatment of class- and property-relations.

Had Trotsky and his co-thinkers integrated essential elements of the pre-1917 argument against building socialism in peasant-Russia into their post-1921 political perspectives, they would have understood the utter futility of trying to combine economic development with collective control of production, laying the basis for an alliance with Bukharin against Stalin.

In Chapter Two, I detail the failure of the Left Opposition to oppose Stalin's policies of collectivisation and industrialisation through a serried critique of Tony Cliff's biography of Trotsky. I agree with Cliff's chronicle of the Left's failure to resist the birth of Stalinism but disagree with Cliff's exculpation of Trotsky in that failure. The political differences that emerged between Trotsky and other leaders of the Left Opposition were tactical, I show, not strategic, as Cliff thought. I argue that Cliff's exclusion of Trotsky from the pro-Stalin political 'logic' of Trotskyism in this critical period has no basis in fact or theory.

Puzzlingly, my critique of Trotsky's policies, originally published in *Historical Materialism*, raised no controversy and elicited no printed response from those who might have been expected to defend Trotsky's political legacy. In 2005, I attended the *Historical Materialism* conference in London, where I chanced to encounter the late and very-much missed Chris Harman. I mentioned the silence with which my intervention had been met. I thought that strange, I said. After all, I had not written 'trash'. No, indeed, Chris responded, I had not written trash at all. The brief exchange trailed off to a desultory conclusion.

Chapter Three assesses the social-historical interpretation of the October Revolution, which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, displacing the political interpretation, which had dominated accounts in the 1950s and 1960s. First published in 1995, the arguments I deploy are as valid now as they were then. However, things have changed for the worse in the last fifteen years. The social-historical interpretation has seen its best days, and the political

historians have largely regained their positions of supremacy. The collapse of the Soviet Union has vindicated, somehow, the latter. Many things could be said about this great reversal of fortunes. I will only say the following.

Morally and intellectually, the social historians held the higher ground relative to the political historians exemplified by Richard Pipes. The social movements of the 60s and 70s, civil rights, anti-war, gay and lesbian, had influenced them. They could see that these movements arose from deeply felt needs and wants, not from the antics of outside agitators. That sensibility appeared in their works on the Russian Revolution, where ordinary men and women play a central role in the process of social transformation. As long as the moral and intellectual spirit of the times prevailed, so would the social-historical interpretation of the Russian Revolution.

Those times have not prevailed and neither has the social-historical interpretation. The political historians have thrown the field back fifty years, back to the Cold-War stereotypes of Lenin and the Bolshevik Party as the conspiratorial progenitors of Stalinism and, quite possibly, the Fount of All Evil.

It would be wrong, however, to think adverse political times *alone* are responsible for the discomfiture of the social historians today. Their opponents took advantage of a major analytical weakness in the social-historical account of the Russian Revolution: namely, that of its omission of any consequent treatment of political parties generally and of the Bolshevik Party particularly.

Why this omission? Because, I would suggest, the social historians, like the political historians, are in the thrall of a teleological conception of the Soviet epoch. Fundamentally at issue is the relationship between 'Leninism' and 'Stalinism'. The political historians asserted continuity in kind, if not in degree, between the two; the social historians, discontinuity in kind, a rupture. Yet, Stalinism did succeed Leninism. How to account for this salient fact? What mechanism was responsible for bridging what both social and political historians commonsensically recognised were two empirically quite distinct periods in the Soviet Union?

The answer, I think, is this: both fell back on the Bolshevik Party as the organisation structurally linking the two epochs, although they fell back in completely different ways. The political historians conceived this vanguard-organisation as the homunculus of the Stalinist state, teleologically leading the way from Leninism to Stalinism. They talked incessantly about the beginning of the transition in 1917, when Lenin's partisans manipulated the people to do their nefarious bidding. The social historians accepted this essentialist conception of the Bolshevik Party but held that it was irrelevant to understanding the outcome of class-conflict in 1917. Therefore, the Bolshevik Party

could be *ignored*: see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil. Here is where the social historians made their mistake. The role of the Bolsheviks had to be integrated into the workers' movement but not at all in the absurd manner of the political historians. Chapters Four and Five deal polemically with three historians' efforts to address this issue.

Chapters Six, Seven, and Nine are interrelated because they treat various aspects of Alexander Bogdanov's political and philosophical views. Bogdanov was the subject of my dissertation. An underlying theme of all three chapters is Bogdanov's relationship to Lenin and to Bolshevism. Viewed from this angle, aspects of the latter appear in a somewhat novel light.

In Chapter Six, I argue that Bogdanov and Lenin went their separate ways in 1909 because both men now antithetically conceptualised how the working class could achieve revolutionary, Social-Democratic consciousness. In *What Is to Be Done?* Lenin had argued – among other arguments on other issues – that, because working-class self-activity could never transcend trade-union activity and progress to revolutionary activity, neither could its political consciousness transcend trade-union consciousness and progress to revolutionary consciousness. However, the party, armed with its scientific worldview, would make up for this deficit in revolutionary activity and bring Social-Democratic consciousness to the workers 'from the outside'.

The 1905 Revolution transformed Lenin's views. Lenin now saw that workers could spontaneously engage in revolutionary self-activity so that there was now a practical basis for revolutionary, Social-Democratic consciousness. In contrast, despite the experience of the 1905 Revolution, Bogdanov held fast to the party's tutelary role; although, for reasons of his own, reasons that would propel him far beyond the orbit of Second-International Social Democracy. In Chapter Seven I defend my thesis against the criticisms raised by Andrzej Walicki, Aileen Kelly, and Zenovia Sochor.

My explanation of the conflict between Lenin and Bogdanov is, retrospectively, a polemic with one aspect of Lars Lih's exhaustive analysis of Lenin's treatment of the relationship between party and class in *Lenin Rediscovered: 'What Is to Be Done?' in Context*.²

Let me first spell out where I agree with Lih. Lenin was indeed an Erfurtian Marxist through and through. *What Is to Be Done?* was not the foundational document of Bolshevism. Lenin developed no special 'Leninist' theory of the party there. Lenin looked, instead, to the German Social-Democratic Party as a model to be emulated as soon as political freedom is realised in Russia, after

2. Lih 2006.

the destruction of tsardom by a bourgeois-democratic revolution. Lenin never 'worried' about working-class self-activity, he always welcomed it. On these issues, Lih has done a great job demolishing the 'textbook-interpretation' of *What Is to Be Done?* However, I believe Lih fails to make the case that Lenin did *not* have a tutelary conception of the party's role. Lenin's writings about its necessity are plain as a pikestaff. Here, *too*, Lenin was an Erfurtian Marxist through and through. Lenin said nothing specifically Leninist about this matter. He got it all from Kautsky and made sure everyone knew it.

Bogdanov serves as an illuminating example of what happens in Russian political conditions when you hold fast for the rest of your life to a pre-1905, strictly Erfurtian conception of the relationship between party and class: you get *nowhere*. You end up with an abstentionist, sectarian politics that cuts you off from the workers' movement. On the other hand, a proper understanding of that relationship offers the possibility of intervening fruitfully in that movement, as Bolshevism shows. Nevertheless, that proper understanding alone cannot guarantee success, otherwise the socialist revolution would have been victorious throughout the advanced capitalist world a long time ago, and many times over. What the experience of the twentieth century has shown – and what the experience of the twenty-first century will continue to show – is that a correct, 'Leninist' understanding of the role and function of the party to realise socialist revolution is, to use the sacramental phrase, necessary but insufficient.

In Chapter Eight, I take up Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, published in 1909, and establish its relationship to the political conjuncture. A number of Marxist commentators have recently assessed Lenin as philosopher, in *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*.³ They argue for the relevance of his philosophical views, particularly his *Philosophical Notebooks* of 1914–15, for socialist activists today. While this initiative is certainly welcome, had Lenin had the opportunity to read what is said about his philosophical writings today, I make bold to speculate that he would have exclaimed: 'I would rather be praised less and understood more!' I will limit myself to the following remarks.

Many commentators establish an antagonistic relationship between *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, on the one hand, and the *Philosophical Notebooks*, on the other. A mechanical copy-theory of knowledge hobbles the former, which cannot hold a candle to the dialectical conception of knowledge presented in the latter. Some speak of a rupture between the two.

3. Budgen, Kouvelakis, Žižek (eds.) 2007.

Despite all the praise for dialectics, the assessment is thoroughly... un-dialectical. Lenin never saw the mechanical opposition his partisans today see between the two works because Lenin republished *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* in 1920. He never disowned the materialist epistemology espoused there. He may have been wrong to do so, but the critics need to explain why he was wrong, not simply ignore this or explain it away.

A careful, critical reading of Lenin effortlessly dissolves the incompatibility that allegedly exists between the *Philosophical Notebooks* and *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*. Lenin's dictum – 'an intelligent idealism is closer to an intelligent materialism than an unintelligent materialism'⁴ – holds the key to resolving the *opposed emphases* of the two works, while preserving the opposition throughout the resolution.

In *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, Lenin thinks he is dealing with a fourth category: an *unintelligent idealism*. Now, in Lenin's eyes, an unintelligent, 'vulgar' materialism suffices to conquer an unintelligent 'vulgar' idealism because the latter does away, philosophically speaking, with the *objectivity* of the world, its externality to the thinking subject. Indeed, all materialisms, whether sophisticated like Marx's or unsophisticated like Feuerbach's, whether intelligent or unintelligent, assert the existence of the object independently of the cognising subject: they take the object 'as the *immediately* given, as the starting point of epistemology',⁵ whereas all idealisms repudiate this starting point.

Today's critics of Lenin's 1909 work pay no heed to the conjunctural element in Lenin's intervention, namely, the arguments of his opponents. Lenin believed the 'Machists' gave a one-sidedly starring role to thought and reason in actively rendering form and meaning to experience. Because of this one-sidedness, Lenin felt he had no choice but to stress the 'other side', the passive, 'photographic' or purely sensory element in cognition.

'Bearing this circumstance in mind', I write in Chapter Seven,

explains why Lenin had occasionally a tendency, especially evident in his discussion of Kant, to defend a direct or naive realism, as opposed to a representational one. In Lenin's view, the 'Machists' were outflanking Kant 'on the right', from an idealist position, by retracting Kant's sole 'concession' to materialism, the existence of things-in-themselves. When Lenin criticised the 'Machists' *through* Kant, he did so from the 'left', from a naively realist position so that Lenin inevitably emphasised *in* Kant the existence of things-in-themselves which, of course, was not *Kant's* emphasis. Because

4. Lenin 1972, p. 276.

5. Lenin 1964, p. 214.

the 'Machists' privileged the subject's role in the formation of knowledge Lenin saw no need to similarly stress the active faculty of reason to create knowledge.... Clarifying epistemological issues for himself in *Philosophical Notebooks*, written in 1915–16, Lenin recognised fully the value of an 'intelligent idealism' broadly speaking for the development of an integral materialist epistemology. He did not, however, disown *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, and had the book reprinted in 1920.⁶

One last point on this thematic. Some think the *Philosophical Notebooks* provides an indispensable key to understanding Lenin's post-1914 politics, centrally, his break with the Second International. But their position, as I read it, appears to amount to little more than *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. They might have established a causal connection if they could have shown that Lenin's break with the Second International was uniquely Leninist, arising specially from Lenin's special study of Hegel. However, Lenin was one of many revolutionary socialists, in different countries, among them Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Trotsky, Gorter, Pannekoek, to break with this organisation. These revolutionaries did not make a close study of Hegel's dialectics in 1914, yet this proved no handicap to their taking part fully in the debates around the modalities of this break, how it was to be done, when it was to be done, under what conditions. The Notes were for Lenin's self-clarification. If he had thought they were important enough to help clarify the minds of others, he would have whipped them up into a published work. He did not.

Chapter Nine deals with Bogdanov once more. I show how Bogdanov's uniquely empiriomonistic interpretation of Marx's theory of commodity-fetishism provided the necessary social-theoretical link between his 'Machist' epistemological views, on the one hand, and the politics of 'proletarian culture' on the other. Bogdanov's philosophical standpoint suited a conception of politics that gave pride of place to paedagogy as the chief means to transform the social consciousness of workers. I contrast this intellectualist, idealist conception of politics to the non-intellectualist, materialist one held by Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and 'orthodox' Marxists generally.

6. See below, page 234.

Chapter One

The Peasant-Question and the Origins of Stalinism: Rethinking the Destruction of the October Revolution

Without correct theory, there cannot be correct politics

Trotsky

Introduction: The problem and the argument

The self-movement of the peasantry in Russia in the late 1920s created a crisis of production in agriculture that led to chronic shortfalls in the supply of food to the cities and towns, threatening the urban citizenry with malnutrition, if not famine. The cause of this major economic contraction lay in millions of peasant-households freely deciding to safeguard their material well-being; decisions the Bolsheviks were quite powerless to influence in any meaningful way so long as they chose to respect peasant self-determination, the *sine qua non* of the New Economic Policy. For this socio-economic crisis signalled the presence of a barrier to the development of the forces of production built into peasant-proprietorship. No wing of the leadership, Trotskyist 'Left', Bukharinist 'Right' and Stalinist 'Centre', could overcome that barrier and go on developing the economy collectively and democratically – build socialism – without forcibly destroying the peasant-way of life.¹ In December 1929,

1. Bukharin, Trotsky and, until 1929, Stalin, represented emerging eponymous policy-trends that were not fully homogenous. Nevertheless, there was sufficient accord on

Stalin began to do just that. He imposed collectivisation on the peasantry, breaking their most desperate resistance. In the cities, Stalin gutted democratically-elected factory-committees, last redoubts of workers' power at the point of production, and embarked on a crash-course of forced industrialisation. On the ruins of the October Revolution, Stalin re-established a class-divided, exploitative society very much akin to the late tsarist order with respect to class- and property-relations but substituting the ideology and iconography of 'Marxism-Leninism' for that of Russian Orthodoxy, the hammer and sickle for the double-headed tsarist Imperial Eagle.²

This sombre outcome was not foreordained. But its theoretical possibility had been negatively inscribed in Marx's precept that socialism required definite material premises: minimally, a capitalist economy that had moved beyond the stage of primitive-capitalist accumulation and, therefore, could reproduce itself on bases continually posited by its own existence, manifested by the rapid formation of a proletariat, the sole agent of socialism. Without those premises, socialism became a utopian project, all efforts to develop it doomed to fail. This chapter revalorises Marx's precept *without* arguing that Stalinism became inevitable simply because those premises were absent in Russia. The alternative to Stalinism, however, was not Trotskyism or Bukharinism taken as *viable* programmes for economic development. In this regard, both Trotskyism and Bukharinism were variants of NEP-premised programmes of economic advance. As such, they proved to be utter failures, not because of the particular characteristics of either, but because both chose to operate within the framework of the NEP. That framework mandated no use of coercion against the immediate producers, peasants and workers alike,

fundamental issues relevant to this paper that differences between individuals within these trends were not crucial: they may be ignored without prejudice.

2. Parenthetically, unlike developments in coastal China, the disaggregation of the USSR in 1991 marked less a transition to capitalism than preservation of existing class- and property-relations at a lower level of political aggregation, based on the revival of long-repressed national, ethnic and/or religious ties. Demagogic ex-CP leaders become born-again 'democrats' derailed the working-class response to the crisis taking embryonic shape in the great coal-strikes of 1989, strikes which were cross-national, inter-ethnic and supra-religious, consistent with nature of the economic crisis itself. In lieu of the suppressed democratic-socialist alternative blackjack-democracy now dominates in Russia, where the leadership has disestablished the *ersatz* religion of 'Marxism-Leninism' to make room for the triumphant return of the genuine article, Russian Orthodoxy. Meanwhile, the tsarist coat of arms, symbol of Russian imperialism, again adorns the corridors and banquet halls of the Kremlin, displacing the hammer and sickle. While oligarchs flaunt their wealth, wages, hours and working conditions for the vast majority have collapsed, expressed in the stunning fall of life-expectancy. The Bourbon Restoration did not undo the French Revolution, and this Restoration did not undo the Russian Revolution either, because Stalin had undone it long before. See Kotz 2001 for the facts.

to advance the forces of production. However, so long as the party-leadership operated within the limits set by the NEP, no significant development of the forces of production could take place. Ergo, the development of the forces of production within the geographical confines of the Soviet Union could occur only by destroying the NEP, by flouting the self-determination of the immediate producers at the point of production so that they could be exploited. That is what Stalin did.

From this perspective, the alternative to Stalinism was, first and foremost, a largely negative one: opposition to Stalin and to policies that irremediably undermined the NEP. In 1928 and 1929, only Bukharin and the Right Opposition opposed Stalin's policies which, they thought, presaged the end of the NEP and the peasant-worker alliance. Thus, 'Bukharinism' was the only alternative to Stalinism not, again, because it promised a competing programme of successful economic development, but because Bukharin and the Right Opposition were prepared to subordinate the development of the forces of production to the more important goal of preserving the NEP, preserving the *smychka*, respecting the self-determination of the immediate producers at the point of production, *even* if this meant *not* developing the forces of production *at all*. In contrast, the Left Opposition was not prepared to sacrifice economic development to the political necessities of maintaining the NEP, and ended up, willy-nilly, 'critically' supporting what it characterised as Stalin's 'left' turn.³

The crisis of under-production in agriculture in NEP – Russia – a crisis that immediately conditioned but did not directly determine the victory of Stalinism – sheds retrospective light on the highly peculiar, perhaps unique, nature of tsarist industrialisation, whose results the Bolsheviks inherited: the last tsars initiated a state-sponsored and state-led industrial revolution in Russia's cities without a previous revolutionary transformation of peasant-proprietorship in a capitalist direction, a 'primitive-capitalist accumulation' ultimately divorcing peasants from possession of the land and creating an agricultural proletariat; Lenin's contrary view in *The Development of Capitalism in Agriculture* notwithstanding.⁴ The peasantry retained sufficient land to remain self-sufficient throughout late-Imperial Russia's economic advance.

3. See Chapter Two below.

4. Lenin 1956. See also Perry Anderson's discussion of Lenin in Anderson 1975, pp. 348–60. Anderson concludes, in agreement with Lenin and most Marxists, that the Russian 'social formation' was dominated by the capitalist mode of production' (p. 353). However, Anderson also writes: 'The predominant sector of Russian agriculture in 1917 was...characterized by feudal relations of production' and the 'Russian State remained a feudal Absolutism' (pp. 352, 353). I agree. Anderson's handling of the category capitalist 'social formation' in the Russian case apparently leaves out the character of the state and property-relations in agriculture. Unfortunately, Anderson

As subsistence-producers providing for their needs largely through their own labour, the peasants understandably had no compelling need to sell on the market or to purchase their necessities on the market. This shielded them from competitive market-pressures to innovate, engage in larger-scale farming, raise productivity and lower costs; in sum, to develop the forces of production. Drawing on the work of E.H. Carr, R.W. Davies, Teodor Shanin, Moshe Lewin, Victor Danilov and Robert Brenner especially,⁵ I shall try to show the non-capitalist peasant-strategy of production for subsistence led to the pulverisation of peasant-holdings, stagnant productivity-growth, and the preservation of the self-sufficiency of the diminutive individual peasant-household through diversification; a triptych of trends built into the property-relations of the peasantry, trends that no wing of the party-leadership was prepared to recognise. These trends manifested themselves under the tsars, in the war-communist period, as well as in the period of the NEP from 1921 to 1929. So conceptualised, the self-movement of one hundred million communally-organised peasants could not open the way to economic development under the NEP simply because agriculture could not supply adequate food and raw materials to grow industry, along with a growing proletariat, let alone leave a surplus to import advanced means of production from the capitalist West.

In fact, the situation facing the Bolsheviks was direr than they imagined. Little did they suspect that the basic problem confronting them at home was not so much how to assure expanded reproduction of industry as how to forestall contracted reproduction in agriculture. Indeed, viewed in the very long run, the failure of the peasantry to significantly develop the forces of production on the land or, more accurately, their success in redirecting those forces in their interests under the NEP, had the potential to blur the town-country division of labour itself in Russia, triggering a process of de-industrialisation and dissolution of the working class into the peasantry. Astonishingly, A.V. Chayanov, the great student of the Russian peasantry, foresaw this very possibility, in his own way, and welcomed it, in his futuristic novel *The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant-Utopia*, published in 1920, at the height of war-communism and the struggle of the Communist Party and Red Army to forcibly appropriate the peasants' grain. In his novel Chayanov envisions peasants organising in 1932 to obtain in the soviets 'parity of voting

offers no justification for omitting these crucial social dimensions. Without them, does not Anderson jeopardise the analytical usefulness of this category, at least in this instance?

5. Carr & Davies 1950–89, Shanin 1970, Lewin 1968, Danilov 1988, Brenner 1976, 1985, 1989, 1993, 2007.

power with townspeople'. Then, peasants use their 'permanent majority' in the soviets to advance their interests. In 1934, the working class revolts. The peasants defeat the workers' uprising and decree the dissolution of towns and cities.⁶ Chayanov's bucolic utopia never materialised; but Stalin's feral dystopia did.

I have divided this chapter into five sections. In Section One, I try to lay the basis for a paradigm-shift in the field by closely interrogating certain aspects of Trotsky's world-historical outlook. For the past 70 years, Trotsky has set the parameters of politico-scientific debate among serious scholars and socialist activists concerning 'alternatives' to Stalinism.⁷ This is not surprising. The victory of Stalinism apparently vindicated Trotsky's critique of socialism in one country and his theory of permanent revolution.⁸ On closer inspection, Trotsky's prescience is not so clear-cut, in two key respects.

First, the economic difficulties on the road to socialist construction were not those forecast by Trotsky; nor were they foreseen by Bukharin or by Stalin. Specifically, the *kulaks* were not specifically responsible for the critical shortfalls in grain-marketings in 1927 and 1928, as was universally held then. Nor were the shortfalls the result of mistaken policies adopted by Stalin, as Bukharin implicitly⁹ and Trotsky explicitly¹⁰ held, shortfalls that could be redressed by conjunctural measures.¹¹ Instead, chronic food-shortages in the cities were the aggregate result of agricultural involution built into peasant free-holding, whether 'kulak' or non-'kulak', whether 'poor' 'middle' or 'rich' peasant.

6. Chayanov 1976, p. 87.

7. Even this chapter is subject to some of those parameters. I adopt the tripartite division of party-trends with the corresponding labels of Right, Left and Centre from Trotsky much as I would prefer to rearrange matters and, at least in domestic affairs, affix the label 'Left' to Bukharin because he would oppose Stalin's turn toward forced collectivisation and forced industrialisation, 'Right' to Trotsky because he falsely characterised Stalin's turn as 'left' and supported it, with Stalin belonging elsewhere than anywhere on the spectrum between Left and Right: Stalin, more precisely, *Stalinism*, needs its own spectrum. If I stick to Trotsky's nomenclature it is only because it represents familiar and commonly accepted categorial landmarks around which readers may find their bearings. Re-labelling the signposts any time soon is unlikely though, even if the thesis defended here meets with favour, because Trotsky's conceptual roadmap is so firmly embedded in the minds of so many.

8. Mandel 1995, Callinicos 1990.

9. 'Notes of an Economist', April 1928, in Bukharin 1982, pp. 301–30.

10. 'At a New Stage', December 1927, in Trotsky 1980, pp. 488–509.

11. Not only by latter-day Trotskyists and Bukharinists, but the (now defunct) Maoist school shares this view as well: '[T]he procurement crisis of 1927–1928 thus appears as not at all the result of an "inevitable economic crisis" but as the outcome of *political mistakes*'. Bettelheim 1978, Volume 2, p. 107.

Second, Trotsky never thought it likely that Stalin, of all people, should ultimately respond to this agrarian crisis by taking the most decisive, resolute and barbaric action imaginable – imposing collectivisation and industrialisation on peasants and workers – even if this meant destroying the lives of millions through shootings, mass-deportations and starvation. Only Bukharin had a premonition of this nightmarish scenario. Trotsky’s erroneous appraisal of Stalin’s orientation lay in his theory that Stalin was the embodiment of ‘centrism’, a man forever tossed to and fro by the pressures of class-interests alien to the ‘centrist’ bureaucracy Stalin led: the proletariat on Stalin’s left, whose interests the Left Opposition defended against the agrarian capitalist; the ‘kulak’ backed by world-capitalism on Stalin’s right, represented by the Right Opposition. Though Stalin’s faction had come to represent the bureaucracy within the Party by the mid-twenties, Trotsky rejected the view that Stalin could ever strike out on his own and transform the bureaucracy itself into a ruling class based on state-ownership of property.¹² This colossal error entailed catastrophic political consequences. Thinking there could be either capitalist restoration or progress toward socialism, Trotsky critically supported Stalin’s ‘left’ turn, rejecting Bukharin’s overtures to form a political bloc linking the ‘Right Opposition’ and Trotsky’s followers to battle furiously against the Stalinist ‘Centre’. Trotsky feared that unity with the Right potentially opened the way to the greater evil of capitalist restoration.

‘Without correct theory, there cannot be correct politics’. I take Trotsky at his word. Trotsky’s incorrect politics toward Stalin, which contributed to the victory of Stalinism, speaks to the incorrect theory underlying them. Specifically, I examine Trotsky’s questionable theorisation of the relationship between the Soviet economy and the capitalist world-market by investigating the historical origins of that relationship in the economic development of late-Imperial Russia, within the broader context of classical-Marxist theory concerning the material premises of socialism.

In Section Two, I track the evolution of the Bolshevik understanding of the peasant-question between 1917 and 1921. The Bolsheviks, along with the Mensheviks and all European Social Democrats, had long believed that capitalism was developing in Russia and that a bourgeois-democratic revolution would help it develop fully, eventually establishing the material premises of

12. See Shachtman 1962 for the ‘bureaucratic-collectivist’ critique of Trotsky’s ‘degenerated workers’ state’ position, and Cliff 1974 for the ‘state-capitalist’ variant of that critique. Since this chapter is concerned first and foremost with the emplacement of the Stalinist mode of production, the question of how, once in place, this mode reproduced itself – whether in a bureaucratic-collectivist, state-capitalist or degenerated workers’ state fashion – is secondary.

socialism. The October Revolution altered this scenario. The Bolsheviks came around to the view that the domestic economic policies of a workers' state under the NEP could substitute themselves for the action of the capitalist mode of production, particularly in agriculture, to begin to create, if still not fully realise, the premises of socialism. To be more precise, they thought that putatively capitalist development among the peasantry could be turned into socialist-economic development via what Preobrazhensky called 'primitive-socialist accumulation', or the transfer of surpluses generated by 'private', 'individualised', 'small-scale' production – what the Bolsheviks thought was capitalism – to state-run, socialised, large-scale production, leading to the dominance of the latter in the economy while diminishing the importance of the former.¹³

In Section Three, I provide a detailed narrative of the period 1921–9, when the Bolsheviks thought they could move toward large-scale agriculture by accumulating surpluses via unequal exchange with the peasantry, on the basis of the voluntary principle, through economic incentives, by manipulating prices on the grain-market. The state would then export these surpluses for advanced means of production from the capitalist West, helping speed the industrialisation of the country. However, the leadership's manifest failure to reorient the peasant-strategy of production for subsistence toward that of production for exchange, expressed in the grain-marketing crises of 1927 and 1928, confronted the Bolsheviks with a stark choice. They had two options.

One option: preserve the remaining conquests of the October Revolution – a free peasantry and workers' control at the point of production – by giving up on economic development for the duration and working for the internationalisation of workers' rule to establish the material premises of socialism on a world-scale. The other option: force economic development within the national borders of the Soviet Union, forsake any serious effort to spread revolution abroad; and destroy what was left of the October Revolution. The grain-crises of the late 1920s forced them to choose one or the other. Confronted with this imperative choice, the Bolsheviks split.

Stalin opted to resolve the agrarian crisis in a way that would consolidate the bureaucracy he led into a full-fledged ruling class, Stalin's paramount if unspoken goal. At this juncture, developing the forces of production in city and country through extra-economic measures proved to be the only way to secure adequate surpluses from peasants and workers to realise Stalin's ultimate objective. The means – industrialisation and collectivisation – if not the end – a new exploitative society – earned Stalin the support of the Left

13. Preobrazhensky 1926.

Opposition. In this process, Stalin defeated the Right Opposition, which, instead, moved to defend the existing, NEP-relations of production in industry and agriculture.

In Section Four, the empirical heart of this chapter and its claim to analytical novelty in the Russian context, I show how the NEP could never provide a basis for economic development. Drawing on the work of Robert Brenner, I demonstrate how the peasantry would invest the surpluses generated by the peasant-mode of production to perpetuate that mode. To do so, peasant-relations of production would assure the development of the forces of production only within limits compatible with those relations, the peasants resisting tooth and nail any attempt, whether of the Trotskyist or Bukharinist variety, to transform those relations through ‘primitive-socialist accumulation’.

In Section Five, I briefly discuss why resistance to Stalinism failed.

I European Social Democracy and the material premises of socialism

In the quarter-century preceding the October Revolution, virtually all Second-International Social Democrats thought Russia was scheduled for a ‘bourgeois-democratic’ revolution that would sweep away the tsarist-feudal order and establish in its place the necessary conditions for the untrammelled development of capitalism: capitalist relations of property and class. Socialism would then become an objectively realisable project in proportion as capitalism created in Russia that project’s material premises: the socialisation of production. These premises would not be an empirical given, an actually existing point of departure, but a theoretical terminus to be reached, at some point in the future, through the anti-democratic development to maturity of the capitalist mode of production. All Social Democrats, European and Russian, were in accord on this elementary point of Marxist sociology, including Trotsky, of course.

If, theory notwithstanding, workers chose to make a socialist revolution in the course of overthrowing tsarism before Russia had completed the phase of primitive accumulation, they would soon enough openly clash with the peasantry, whose massive presence testified both to the woefully incomplete development of capitalism, and whose class-interests – defence of their Lilliputian-sized property – presented a politically intractable obstacle to the construction of a democratic socialism based on large-scale, cooperative property. As all Social Democrats took it for granted that the development of socialism was inseparable from the development of democracy – not for nothing did they call themselves ‘Social Democrats’ – any attempt by a minority working

class to build socialism would necessarily clash with the interests of the peasant-majority, and would therefore be anti-democratic and anti-socialist. Lenin summed up the views of nearly all members of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour-Party, in the midst of the 1905 Revolution: There 'is not, nor can there be, any other path to real [socialist] freedom than the path of bourgeois freedom, bourgeois progress,' no 'other means of bringing socialism nearer than complete political liberty' he wrote in *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*.¹⁴ Consequently, both Menshevik and Bolshevik wings of the RSDLP, in consonance with Second-International Marxism, drew the appropriate political/economic conclusion: capitalism needed room to grow, and a 'bourgeois-democratic' revolution would create such room. This revolution would destroy the feudal-tsarist state and set up, ideally, a republic, the most democratic form of the capitalist state, a superior political order allowing freedom of speech, assembly and press. These freedoms would be indispensable to the workers' movement in its struggle for better wages, hours and working conditions. The RSDLP, too, would greatly benefit from these freedoms: they would allow the Party to struggle for socialism openly and democratically, just like its German counterpart, the SPD.¹⁵

In the cities, the revolution would consolidate capitalist proprietorship of industry, while, in the countryside, it would free the peasantry to market its surpluses as it saw fit, speeding the development of capitalism in agriculture by shunting it onto the smooth, feudal-free 'American' path rather than have it continue to develop in fits and starts along the rough, feudal-ridden 'Prussian' path, as Lenin put it.¹⁶ Of course, Trotsky dissented from the prediction that a bourgeois-democratic revolution alone was next on the agenda. Workers would not overthrow the autocracy only to hand over power to a feckless and impotent bourgeoisie, though he did agree with Lenin that the proletariat would play a hegemonic role in the struggle against tsarism. The revolution, Trotsky predicted, would be proletarian, socialist and international, accomplishing the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution along the way.¹⁷ Still, Trotsky recognised, with every other Marxist, that either imperialist intervention or peasant-opposition, or both, would prevent a lone workers' state from building socialism in Russia.¹⁸

14. Lenin 1962c, p. 112.

15. Lih 2006.

16. Lenin 1962f, p. 356. For a more detailed consideration of Lenin's views, see Harding 1977, Volume 1, Chapter 4.

17. Trotsky 1971.

18. Trotsky 1972.

It is on the point of Marxist sociology regarding the premises of socialism that not just Trotsky, but Lenin, Stalin, Bukharin and all the Bolsheviks changed their minds, as expressed in the implementation of the NEP in 1921. What changed their minds was precisely the historically unprecedented ‘collective experience’ assimilated by the Party since October 1917, Trotsky noted.¹⁹ Despite the delay in socialist revolution abroad, Trotsky, Stalin, Bukharin and Lenin all agreed that building socialism in Russia – *stroit’ sotsializm* – was what they were already doing under the NEP and would continue to do for the foreseeable future. Shortly after Lenin’s death, Stalin and Bukharin went further and declared that *postroit’ sotsializm* – building socialism to completion – was feasible as well. Here, Trotsky eventually parted ways with Stalin and Bukharin. But, at no point, did Trotsky affirm that socialist construction could no longer proceed, as Stalin and Bukharin insisted in their polemics against Trotsky, just because it could not be completed in Russia alone.

In *The Third International after Lenin*, written in June 1928, Trotsky submitted to searching analysis Stalin-Bukharin’s Draft Programme for the upcoming Sixth Congress of the Third International. As part of his analysis, Trotsky fully developed his internationalist critique of building socialism in one country. Fundamentally in question is not Trotsky’s conclusion that building socialism to completion in Russia alone was utopian, but the questionable arguments Trotsky deployed to arrive at this correct conclusion. What I argue to be his faulty understanding of the actual relationship between the Soviet economy and the capitalist world led Trotsky to a dubious appraisal of the material basis – the rational core – of the doctrine of socialism in one country, and how to fight it politically at home. Let us follow this strand – and only this strand – in Trotsky’s reasoning.

*Peculiarities of Tsarist economic development and the world-economy:
A discussion with Trotsky*

Trotsky’s point of departure in *The Third International after Lenin* was this:

World economy has become a mighty reality, which holds sway over the economic life of individual countries and continents. This basic fact alone invests the idea of a world communist party with supreme reality.... Without grasping the meaning of this proposition, which was vividly revealed to mankind during the last imperialist war, we cannot take a single

19. Trotsky 1975a, p. 298.

step towards the solution of the major problems of world politics and revolutionary struggle.²⁰

The world-market subordinated individual countries to itself at an uneven pace owing to the different levels of economic development of each country. Trotsky drew attention to the unevenness of historical development between America and Europe, for example.²¹ But the scale of unevenness could never be so uneven as to permit any one country to 'develop independently' of all the others. Trotsky drew out one necessary implication if one challenged his thinking on this point:

If the historical process were such that some countries developed not only unevenly but even *independently of each other*, isolated from each other, then from the law of uneven development would indubitably follow the possibility of building socialism in one capitalist country – at first in the most advanced country and then as they mature in the more backward ones.²²

Here is the crux of the difference in perspective between Trotsky and myself. I shall argue that, for *Western Europe and America*, there was indeed one scale of unevenness, yet, for *Russia*, there was another, because that unevenness *was* an expression of tsarist Russia's independent, *non-capitalist* economic development; independent, that is, of world-capitalism, though not in isolation from it. This is doubtless a highly controversial proposition, at odds with Trotsky's thinking, and not his alone, of course. It will require careful attention to matters of fact and theory to persuade the un-persuaded that the Russian economy as a whole, though *involved* on the capitalist world-market, was not *dependent* on it as were other national economies in Western Europe.²³ The distinction is vital and will have to be borne in mind at all times to avoid misunderstandings. In the perspective adopted in this essay, then, tsarist Russia was not on the last rung of the ladder of world-capitalist development, as Trotsky and all Social Democrats thought. Rather, it was on the latest rung of an altogether different, incommensurable ladder of non-capitalist development.

To be sure, Trotsky noted many peculiarities of tsarist economic development, which he tried to grasp through his general theory of 'combined and uneven development' whereby a 'backward' country can leap over organic

20. Trotsky 1970, p. 5.

21. Trotsky 1970, p. 19.

22. Trotsky 1970, p. 21.

23. The United States may be the exception. Its continental-sized economy constituted an exceptionally large segment of the world-market, perhaps a world-market unto itself.

stages of development in certain respects but not in others, generating a unique combination of 'archaic' precapitalist social forms with 'modern' capitalist ones. However, Trotsky did not adequately evaluate one peculiarity of that 'combination' in the tsarist case, namely, the precise nature of the tsarist economy's participation in the emerging capitalist world-market of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I leave Trotsky now to examine this peculiarity.

The export of an agrarian surplus, produced largely under non-capitalist conditions and appropriated from a landowning peasantry by the tsarist state through essentially extra-economic, non-market mechanisms, founded Russia's participation in the world-market. In exchange, the tsarist state imported advanced means of production from the capitalist West, which were deployed in Russia to further build up the politico-military capacity of the tsarist state directly, subordinating capital-accumulation to that end. In the precapitalist epoch, of course, such 'political accumulation' had also characterised every other European state, and, as long as this had been the case, the Russian state could successfully compete on the geopolitical arena, and did so right through the Napoleonic era.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the development of capitalism in Western Europe and America had so progressed that successful political/military competition for *all* states became increasingly tied to and dependent on capital-accumulation. Russia's failure to compete successfully on the battlefield, in the Crimean War (1853–6), along with peasant-resistance to lordly imposition of labour-dues and dues in kind, did lead the landed aristocracy to abolish serfdom in 1861. Yet, this marked no transformation of feudal class- and property-relations, no transition toward capitalism and a free labour-market to better compete. Instead, the gentry strengthened political controls over the peasantry at the national level to secure surpluses from the peasantry via increasingly generalised taxation without representation. Other 'counter-reforms' implemented by Alexander III (1881–94) worked to assure the same end, particularly the formation of Land Captains in 1889, drawn exclusively from the gentry and endowed with great and arbitrary police-authority over the rural population.²⁴

Meanwhile, the state imported great quantities of technologically-advanced means of production from the West. Nevertheless, capitalist relations of production did not accompany the new technology. Once up and running in Russia, there was little further technological transformation of these imported means of production because state-purchases guaranteed a market for the output of these industries, virtually extinguishing all pressures to fur-

24. Pipes 1974, pp. 311, 166.

ther innovate and lower costs to stay in business. 'Examples of indigenous technical developments are the exception rather than the rule'.²⁵ Subordinating Russia's industrialisation to political requirements of self-preservation, the tsarist state had no choice but to adopt economic policies inimical to systematic, productive investment of surpluses, thorough specialisation of productive techniques, and regular technical innovation characteristic of a capitalist economy. Ultimately constrained by feudal relations of production underlying their state, the last tsars continued, as before, to subordinate capital-accumulation to the imperative of political accumulation. Strengthening the state – the police in relation to the immediate producers and the army in relation to other states – was the prime mover of industrial development and agricultural under-development in tsarist Russia.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the capitalist West could now clearly out-produce Russia with respect to both guns and butter, and Russia's relative military strength declined because there was no powerful capitalist economy to support it.²⁶ The disastrous consequences in the international arena became manifest in 1905, when Japan defeated Russia, and especially during World-War One, when Russia could not hold off the Kaiser's armies. 'In 1913, national income per head of population in Russia was two-fifths of the French national income, one-third of the German, one-fifth of the British, and only one-eighth of the United States'.²⁷ Russia had become 'backward' in terms of per capita output of both armaments and consumer-goods, and was not catching up.²⁸

Meanwhile, the landed aristocracy kept on flexibly innovating, reforming and developing the political institutions of its feudal state. In the 1905 Revolution, a mobilised working class and peasantry forced the gentry to establish a Duma, a parliamentary form. Yet, even after the defeat of the 1905 Revolution, when the gentry could have abolished this institution, it chose not to do so. Instead, it kept the parliamentary form but invested it with a non-capitalist and non-democratic class-content thanks to Prime Minister Stolypin's *coup*

25. J.M. Cooper and R.A. Lewis, Chapter 10, 'Research and Technology', p. 191 in Davies (ed.) 1990.

26. In 1900, Russian oil-production contributed 50 per cent to world-production. By 1913, it had fallen to 20 per cent. 'Technological change in the industry was virtually non-existent.' The coal-industry was technically backward as well, relying on the 'physical strength and abundance of manual labour'. Peter Gatrell and R.W. Davies, Chapter 7, 'The Industrial Economy', p. 132 in Davies (ed.) 1990.

27. Davies, 'Introduction: From Tsarism to NEP', p. 10 in Davies (ed.) 1990.

28. The theory that capitalist development beyond England arose from the competitive pressure of the British state on other, non-capitalist states, compelling the latter to induce, from above, state-led capitalist transformations of the economy below, has an inadequate factual basis in the case of Russia. For the theory's latest and most ambitious exponent, see Teschke 2003.

of June 1907, which guaranteed landlords a permanent majority there. With this daring, innovative and highly astute political manoeuvre, the landed aristocracy had moved swiftly to assist its chief-executive officer Tsar Nicholas II to represent and defend the gentry's collective interests over and against those of workers and peasants.²⁹ None of this political 'modernisation' had anything to do with a capitalist transformation of the feudal state, a transition toward a *Rechtstaat* or 'constitutional' state on the Western model.

The October Revolution overturned the tsarist state through which the surplus had been exchanged with capitalist states, severing the pre-eminently *political* link that had connected the Russian economy to the world-market. Whereas trade-relations quickly rebounded in the post-World-War-One capitalist world,³⁰ in Russia the 'fundamental mechanism of the tsarist foreign sector, and hence of Russian industrial growth, could not be put back together'.³¹ The statistics on grain-exports are devastatingly revelatory:

Table One: Grain-exports, 1913 and 1921/22–1929 (thousands of tons)³²

1913	9182
1921/22	0
1922/23	729
1923/24	2576
1924/25	569
1925/26	2016
1926/27	2099
1927/28	289
1929	178

Clearly, the collapse of grain-exports at the outbreak of World-War One persisted throughout the NEP and cut off the possibility of significant trade-relations with the West, as the tsarist state had once enjoyed; trade-relations that had provided late-Imperial Russia the economic wherewithal to industrialise and to enhance its military power. The loss of the Russian market caused barely a ripple in the capitalist economies of Western Europe, let alone America.

Stalin and Bukharin's acceptance of the fact of Russia's autarchy – the singular fact that grounded the doctrine of socialism in one country – was no

29. Manning 1982. Unfortunately, Manning's book is conceptually weak.

30. Mitchell 1998, pp. 576–80.

31. M.R. Dohan 'Foreign Trade', p. 233 in Davies (ed.) 1990.

32. Davies, Harrison, Wheatcroft 1994, Table 48, p. 316.

'act of faith...dispensing with the need for proof'.³³ No. The doctrine had a purchase on a significant chunk of reality. I return now to Trotsky.

According to Trotsky, Stalin and Bukharin were mistaken to assert Russia's self-sufficiency. To deny, as they did, the 'close organic bond'³⁴ between Russia and Europe on the world-market had dangerous political implications for the communist movement abroad: it made it appear that the victory of workers' revolution internationally was no longer such a pressing matter after all, or, at least, far less pressing than it had been in Lenin's time. But, Trotsky insisted, the revolutionary epoch would not last forever and time was of the essence. Only internationalisation of workers' rule could open the way for the first workers' state to build socialism to completion, in cooperation with other workers' states.

What was the fundamental threat coming from abroad? In Trotsky's view, the danger in delaying socialist revolution abroad owing to faulty leadership resided not so much in the threat of military intervention from without, as Bukharin and Stalin thought, as from the Soviet Union's domestic economic backwardness, which founded Russia's military weakness. For Stalin and Bukharin had completely overlooked what Trotsky deemed was a fact of decisive, paramount, all-embracing importance: the Soviet economy's dependence on the world-market. At stake on a world-historical scale 'was a life and death struggle between two social systems' joined on the capitalist world-market on which the Soviet economy was '*directly dependent*'. 'To the extent that productivity of labour and the productivity of a social system as a whole are measured on the market by the correlation of prices,' Trotsky wrote, 'it is not so much military intervention as the intervention of cheaper capitalist commodities that constitutes perhaps the greatest immediate menace to Soviet economy.'³⁵

[A] Ford tractor is just as dangerous as a Creusot gun, with the sole difference that while a gun can function only from time to time, the tractor brings its pressure to bear upon us constantly. Besides, the tractor knows that a gun stands behind it as a last resort.³⁶

33. Lewin 1968, p. 162. Here, Lewin reproduces Trotsky's dismissive stance toward the theory. Despite Lewin's marked intellectual and moral sympathies for Bukharin, his analytical frame of reference is often closer to Trotsky's than to Bukharin's. Indeed, Trotsky has strongly influenced most analysts, regardless of their sympathies, more than they care to admit.

34. Trotsky 1970, p. 15.

35. Trotsky 1970, p. 47.

36. Trotsky 1970, p. 48. Addressing Bukharin, Stalin and the party-leadership in 1926, Preobrazhensky wrote along similarly alarming lines: 'Not to see... the huge and threatening shadow of the world market; not to see the thinness of the wall which

Contra Trotsky, the 'greatest immediate menace' facing the first workers' state lay more in the self-movement of the peasantry and less in the movement of the capitalist world-market armed with its cheaper commodities. The latter represented the lesser threat because, as I have shown, the October Revolution destroyed the tsarist economy's connection to the world-market by destroying the tsarist state.

Specifically, a massive peasantry producing mainly for subsistence, not for exchange on the market, whether domestic or foreign, shielded the Soviet economy from the pressure of 'cheaper commodity-prices' to transform property-relations in capitalist direction and subject it to the logic of capitalist profit-making. The structure of peasant-possession placed the output of the peasantry beyond the reach of capitalists through investment and/or trade, affording far greater 'protection' to Soviet rule than the Soviet state-monopoly on the negligible foreign trade of the NEP-era.

But peasant-possession was double-edged: a virtually indestructible shield against the pressures of foreign competition, it would prove to be a dangerous obstacle in relation to developing the forces of production at home. The harvest-failures of 1927 and 1928 menaced socialist construction and the workers' state far more seriously than any foreign threat. Their depth, breath and persistence caught not just Trotsky but the entire leadership flatfooted. Stalin especially re-broadcast Trotsky and the Left's diagnosis of the crisis in grain-marketings by blaming the *kulaks* or better-off 'capitalist' elements of the peasantry for organising a 'grain-strike' against the Soviet state, in the vague hope of overthrowing it and linking up with capitalists abroad. This diagnosis was way off the mark. In Section Four, I shall show how the crisis of under-production in agriculture, so typical of non-capitalist economic formations, was the spontaneous result of the peasantry's self-movement in its entirety, not the movement of a small *kulak*-minority consciously aiming to tear down the broader worker-peasant alliance and capsize the Soviet state.

For now, I point out that the non-capitalist character of Russia's economy both in tsarist times and under the NEP equally characterised that economy's relationship to the capitalist world-market. The Bolsheviks could not decree a fundamental change to that autarchic, non-capitalist relationship. The economic crises that would convulse the capitalist world in the interwar-period,

separates this from the hundred-million-headed mass of our peasant population; not to see... the ceaseless struggle of one system against another is to keep [the working class] in the dark about the dangers which threaten it, and to weaken its will... in this period when it needs to continue to wage the heroic struggle of October – only now against the whole world economy, on the economic front, under the slogan of industrialising the country'. Preobrazhensky 1965, p. 39.

especially in the 1930s, were largely a consequence of the Western-European and American economies seizing up, not building 'socialism' in Russia. Economic development in Russia thus had far less significance, its economic consequences minimal for the rest of the European continent precisely because of its closed, non-capitalist character. What political consequences for the international workers' movement followed from this fact?

Counterfactually, had Russian workers seized power in an advanced capitalist Russia, not only would the peasant-question never have appeared and this chapter never have been written, but an 'organic bond' would *truly* have existed on the world-market between the Soviet Union and the rest of the world, removing any material basis for building socialism autarchically, in one country. The economic policies of the Soviet Union would then have had mighty economic consequences for its Western-European neighbours and this would *actually* have invested the 'idea of a world communist party with supreme reality'³⁷ by affording such a party a 'natural' economic basis for the closest political cooperation between the revolutionary representatives of the working class from each capitalist country, on the one hand, and representatives from the one economically-advanced socialist country, on the other. Here, the economic interdependence of these countries would have buttressed the political internationalism of the worker's movement.

Unfortunately, and factually, the Third International lacked this natural economic basis, making it far easier – though not inevitable – for Stalin to substitute for it an ever-increasingly bureaucratic, mechanical subordination of Communist parties abroad to the political dictates of the Kremlin inspired by building 'socialism' at home. These dictates did not require paying the closest attention to the working-class movement in Western Europe and America to help it develop fruitfully precisely because the fate of the Soviet economy was not directly intertwined with that of the capitalist economies abroad.

The Russian Revolution thus had direct significance for Western Europe less, I would suggest, because of Russia's 'organic' ties through the world-market to the advanced capitalist countries, as Trotsky held, but more, I think, because the Bolsheviks themselves, for a moment, in Lenin's time especially, strove mightily to create, virtually from scratch, an 'organic bond' on another plane – the plane of world-politics – by reaching out to Western Europe's revolutionaries through the Third International; an effort reciprocated by emerging communist parties in the West in the immediate postwar-period. This early attempted political unification of the revolutionary workers' movement remained analytically distinct from the all-round economic

37. Trotsky 1970, p. 5.

interdependence of national economies enmeshed in the world-market. The former was not grounded in the latter. This proved to be the Third International's Achilles heel.

Trotsky no doubt interpreted Lenin's writings correctly regarding the issue of building socialism to completion in one country. But the issue could not and was not decided by appeal to Lenin's texts because Bukharin and Stalin could and did make a defensible argument in favour of constructing 'socialism' in Russia (whether to completion or not) independently of Lenin's thinking, by appeal to Russia's real insubordination to the world-market. At stake was much more than Stalin and Bukharin's mere 'sophistic interpretations of several lines from Lenin on the one hand, and to a scholastic interpretation of the "law of uneven development" on the other', nourished by 'metaphysical methodology,' as Trotsky superficially held in 1928.³⁸ The doctrine of building 'socialism' in a closed economy had a weightier material basis than Trotsky allowed because the doctrine reflected the very real insulation of the Soviet economy from the vagaries of world-capitalist accumulation, in the 1920s and beyond. Trotsky's grave underestimation of the rational core at the heart of the theory of an autarchic economy left him ill-prepared to deal with the real problems of building socialism in Russia, problems far more intimately connected to the peasant-question than to Russia's meagre economic relations with the capitalist world.

Nevertheless, on the argument mounted here, Trotsky was still right to work with might and main for the internationalisation of workers' rule. In the long run, if building socialism in Russia meant transforming the peasants' way of life through 'primitive accumulation' then this accumulation would be socialist only if the peasantry saw material benefits accruing to it at the *beginning* of this process, not at its *conclusion*, because only in this way could the peasantry's *consent* to initiate this process be obtained. In turn, Russia could reap such benefits only if it could immediately draw on the resources of advanced-socialist economies in the formerly capitalist heartlands, as the Bolsheviks had held from April 1917 and through the Civil War. In the short run, socialist economies abroad could easily have sent grain to the Soviet Union to help it weather the agrarian crisis of the late 1920s. These hypothetical scenarios aside, by 1921 the ebb-tide of revolution convinced the Bolsheviks to defer their expectations of an imminent socialist transformation. At the same time, the actual experience of the post-1921 NEP-period would show that, without social revolution abroad, no such aid would be forthcoming. Thus, the overthrow of world-capitalism was still necessary in the near future; again, not

38. Trotsky 1970, p. 43.

so much to put an end to the putatively menacing competitive pressures of this unprecedentedly dynamic economic system, as Trotsky believed, as to provide a permanent democratic solution to the ever-more pressing peasant-question in Russia, as I hope to demonstrate.

It follows that Trotsky's criticisms of the policies of the Sixth Congress of the Third International from 1928 on still retain their full value, notably the pernicious, criminal 'theory' that fascism and Social Democracy were 'twins'. These Comintern policies, adopted at Stalin's behest, facilitated the victory of Nazism in Germany, equally prolonging world-capitalism and 'socialism' in one country for an entire epoch, and then some. The resulting defeat of workers' struggles in the West short-circuited a democratic-socialist solution to the peasant-question in Russia, helping clear the way for an undemocratic, Stalinist one. However, here is the obverse of the medal: Trotsky's inability fully to fathom the peasantry's capacity to reproduce itself in a non-capitalist and non-socialist manner left him ill-prepared to deal with Stalinism, a class-system of surplus-extraction that was also neither capitalist nor socialist. With no class to target, Trotsky could not systematically target Stalin's politics. And so, in supporting Stalin's 'left' turn in 1929, Trotsky contributed not just to the victory of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, but also to the epochal defeat of the workers' movement in Western Europe: a victorious Stalin in Russia was in a position to dictate the policies adopted by the leaderships of the Communist parties elsewhere, particularly in Germany, France and Spain. Had Stalin been toppled in Russia, on the eve of the Great Depression, the chances of stopping the ascent of the Nazis in Germany would have been that much greater. Such is the reciprocal action of the dialectic: what goes around comes around.

I do not wish to be misinterpreted. Trotsky was not the demiurge of the twentieth century, channelling the course of the workers' movement by what he did or did not do, say or did not say. Yet, historically, he did voluntarily assume a great duty towards the workers' movement, and shouldered correspondingly great responsibilities, and, here, it may be well and truly said: To whom much has been given, much is demanded.

Turning briefly to the theory of permanent revolution, it is customary in the literature to consider it a critique of socialism in one country in positive form. In fact, the two theories were asymmetrical because they dealt with historically interrelated but analytically distinct matters.

Throughout the 1920s, Trotsky simply denied the relevance of the permanent revolution to the problem of socialist construction in the Soviet Union,³⁹

39. Day 1973 is one of the very few (the only one?) to rightly bring out this important and rarely noticed point.

asserting its significance only with respect to the dynamic of social transformation in the Third World, where workers' revolutions solve 'bourgeois-democratic' tasks such as agrarian reform, political freedom, etc. The Russian context was altogether different: the workers' revolution had actualised the theory of permanent revolution. Permanent revolution had 'reflected a stage in our development that we have long since passed through', Trotsky explained in 1924. 'Theoretical reflections about how, in such and such a year, I expected the Russian revolution to develop' were not germane in presently determining Trotsky's (or anybody else's) current prescriptive policies toward the peasantry and economic development.⁴⁰

In any event, Trotsky favourably assessed the prospects for peaceful socialist construction under the NEP from the vantage-point of an extant workers' state, a state whose isolated existence Trotsky's permanent revolution theory had not foreseen when he had first elaborated it. The Party would confidently go on building socialism subject only to its leadership adopting correct policies toward the peasantry in good time, policies whose success did not directly depend on the success of workers' revolution abroad. Trotsky flatly rejected Stalin and Bukharin's charge that he relied on international revolution alone and 'underestimated' peasant-support for socialist-economic development. Speaking at the 15th Party-Conference in November 1926, Trotsky declared that the newly formed United Opposition was 'working toward the socialist state of society... with all possible energy'.

[I]f we did not believe that our development was socialist; if we did not believe that our country possesses adequate means for the furtherance of socialist economics; if we were not convinced of our complete and final victory; then, it need not be said, our place would not be in the ranks of the Communist Party.⁴¹

To sum up: Trotsky thought Russia could overcome the barrier to the complete realisation of socialism only on a world-scale. He excoriated Stalin and Bukharin for holding otherwise. He forecast dire economic difficulties on the road to socialist construction owing to its overly gradual pace and needlessly isolated character, under Stalin and Bukharin's direction. This analysis, I have stated, was faulty on a capital-point. Scanning the far horizons, Trotsky overlooked or seriously underestimated domestic limits to on-going socialist-economic development in the Soviet Union placed by a massive peasantry producing for subsistence; limits no leadership could transcend

40. Trotsky 1975a, p. 298.

41. Trotsky 1980, pp. 162–3.

without breaking the NEP and breaking apart the worker-peasant alliance. As between world-capitalism abroad and the peasantry at home, the peasantry presented the greater and more immediate danger to the existence of an isolated workers' state and the construction of socialism in Russia, owing to the potential for massive agricultural crisis built into peasant-proprietorship, a potential realised in the late 1920s, while world-capitalism represented the lesser and more distant danger. My argument, in effect, inverts Trotsky's hierarchy of dangers besetting the socio-political order issuing from the October Revolution. I hope to lend further substance to this admittedly somewhat abstract argument in the pages that follow.

II From the February Revolution of 1917 to the New Economic Policy of 1921

In 1917, independent working-class activity not only overthrew tsarism but also formed the material basis for the Bolsheviki to go beyond the bourgeois-democratic revolution and win the proletariat over to socialist revolution and socialism that very year. 'All Power to the Soviets' proved the only way to secure land for the peasantry, bread for the working class, and peace for both, vindicating Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, and brilliantly confirming Marx's sociological dictum that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the task of the working class itself'; a dictum that Lenin's Bolsheviki masterfully converted into the language of politics. But Soviet power raised a huge problem: the proletarian-socialist October Revolution overtook the bourgeois-democratic February Revolution with such alacrity that capitalism never had the chance to posit itself as a self-sustaining mode of production long enough to transform the bulk of the property-owning peasantry into a property-less working class engaged in socialised production, thereby establishing the material premises of socialism.

The Bolsheviki's long-standing orthodox-Marxist thinking about the material premises to building socialism did not change in 1917; that would come only in 1921. However, the self-movement of the peasantry, from February on, did teach the Bolsheviki something new because they were willing to learn from the peasantry: it taught the Bolsheviki to jettison their agrarian programme of the nationalisation of the land.

The Bolsheviki had originally predicted that, once the bourgeois-democratic revolution had destroyed the (quasi)-feudal political constraints on peasants' productive activity, the peasants would be free to respond to market-opportunities. They would do so by moving swiftly to dismantle their age-old institution of self-rule, the *mir*, privatise the land, consolidate their scattered

holdings into a single contiguous block of land, and begin to compete in earnest on the market as owner-operators by specialising output, introducing new techniques and accumulating land, thereby fostering the rapid growth of capitalist agriculture. To facilitate this prospective capitalist-economic development, the Bolsheviks had called for nationalisation of the land to divert absolute ground-rent from idle landlords to an enterprising bourgeois state. 'In the Russian revolution the struggle for the land is nothing else than a struggle for the renovated path of capitalist development. The consistent slogan of such renovation is – nationalisation of the land.'⁴² The course of events in 1917 utterly spoiled Lenin and the Bolsheviks' prognoses.

When the February–October 'bourgeois-democratic' phase of the 1917 Revolution came around and put the Bolshevik theory to the test of practice, the peasantry showed no sign of even beginning to behave as predicted by Lenin's theory. Far from dismantling the *mir*, the peasants used it to independently seize the landed aristocracy's property, and bring it under full, peasant-communal possession, rounding out their self-sufficient holdings.⁴³ Belatedly acknowledging this fact, the Bolsheviks gave up on land-nationalisation in 1917 and made the Socialist-Revolutionary programme their own: all land to the peasants. The SR agrarian programme faithfully reflected what the peasants were doing in practice: dividing the land. The peasants disregarded Lenin's view that the 'division of the land is an entirely wrong expression of the aims of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia...'.⁴⁴ Indeed, the aims of Lenin's bourgeois-democratic revolution were never realised in the countryside. Instead, dividing the land turned out to be the correct expression of the 'aims' of a '*peasant-democratic*' revolution in 1917–18.⁴⁵

42. For Lenin's theoretical treatment of absolute and differential ground-rent, drawn from Marx, see Lenin 1962g, pp. 294–323. The theory's applicability to Russian conditions presupposed the development of capitalism in the Russian countryside. This is where Lenin went astray.

43. Figs 1990, provides an excellent summary.

44. Lenin 1962g, p. 293.

45. The category of peasant-democratic revolution did not exist in the Bolshevik lexicon. This is largely because they believed that, while the peasantry could be self-acting, it could never be self-leading. The 'city' would have to lead the countryside. The 'colossal peasant movements of past ages', wrote Trotsky, 'did not lead to the democratisation of social relations in Russia – without cities to lead them, that was unattainable!' Trotsky 1980, p. 408. Here, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks never quite gasped the importance of the distinction between the 'city' destroying the coordinating centres of the feudal state, nationally, on the one hand, and the peasants leading the struggle locally, in the village. Only the city can do the first, but once accomplished, the peasants are free to organise and lead the struggle against the local feudal lord since the latter can no longer call on their just-destroyed feudal state to defend them. This is what happened in France in 1789 and in Russia in 1917–18. In contrast, an intact

What the peasants achieved under the protective umbrella of Soviet power was no bourgeois revolution in the English manner, where an epochal capitalist transformation of property- and class-relations in the sixteenth century led to the dispossession of the peasantry, the formation of an agricultural proletariat, an uninterrupted rise in the productivity of labour in agriculture, paving the way for the Industrial Revolution.⁴⁶ Rather, it was a bourgeois revolution in the opposite, French, manner, when peasants consolidated their possession of land and control of production, slowing the development of capitalism there to a crawl.⁴⁷ The October Revolution preserved the peasant-mode of production upon which the feudal mode had rested; a material inheritance that would severely constrain the range of economic policies available to the leadership.

Peasant-validation of the SR agrarian platform still did not prompt the Bolsheviks to question, let alone disavow, their long-held conception of the *dynamic* of peasant-development. *In time*, the Bolsheviks thought, the peasants would finally begin to behave as a proto-capitalist class, begin to do all the things it had failed to do in 1917–18, and therefore present a growing internal ‘capitalist’ threat to the workers’ state and its socialist orientation.⁴⁸ Driven by this conception of the peasantry, the Bolsheviks organised committees of landless and poor peasants [*kombedy*] soon after the outbreak of civil war in June 1918 to carry forward the ‘class-struggle’ against the wealthy

feudal state defeated the great servile insurrections in Russia’s past, notably Razin’s in 1670–1 and Pugachev’s in 1773–4.

46. Brenner 1993.

47. Comninel 1987. Of course, to use the concept ‘bourgeois revolution’ to cover opposite processes is to create confusion, calling into question the concept’s analytical usefulness. Brenner 1989 has called the practical value of the concept into question on this and other grounds as well.

48. The Bolsheviks never forsook this view of the peasant-economic dynamic. As Trotsky expressed it: ‘The fact that the peasantry as a whole found it possible once more – for the last time in their history – to act as a revolutionary factor in 1917 testifies at once to the weakness of capitalist relations in the country and to their strength’, because the Revolution revealed ‘for a brief moment but with extraordinary force, the superiority of caste ties of the peasantry over the capitalistic antagonisms’. But ‘the most audacious of agrarian revolutions has never yet by itself overstepped the bounds of the bourgeois regime’. The SR-programme ‘which was to guarantee to each toiler his “right to the land,” was with the preservation of unrestricted market relations, an utter utopia!’ Trotsky 1980, pp. 407–8. *Pace* Trotsky, the practical realisation of this utopia in post-revolutionary NEP-Russia, which guaranteed the peasants’ ‘right to the land’, also upheld ‘restrictions’ on the development of market-relations, particularly with respect to the purchase and sale of land, revealing the superiority of ‘caste ties’ over ‘capitalist antagonisms’ well beyond the ‘brief’ moment of revolution. The peasant-agrarian revolution of 1917–18 most definitely never ‘overstepped the bounds’ of a bourgeois régime because it never stepped inside those bounds in the first place.

agrarian 'petty bourgeoisie' from which twentieth-century Cavaignacs could draw support. At the same time, the *kombedy* would thwart the evolution of putatively capitalist relations of production responsible for generating this counter-revolutionary petty bourgeoisie in the first place.

Promoting class-struggle in the countryside was but part of the Bolsheviks' programme at this time. Far more importantly, the Bolsheviks pressed very hard for the internationalisation of workers' power by founding the Third International to prompt revolutionary currents then emerging inside and outside the reformist Social-Democratic parties in the West to quickly unite and form independent, revolutionary-communist parties. Two considerations motivated the Bolsheviks to pursue this internationalist policy.

First, only workers' power in the capitalist world would allow backward Russia (and countries like it) to skip the process of 'primitive accumulation' by drawing on the already-accumulated wealth of the West instead. This would obviate the peasantry's ostensible tendency to appropriate the agricultural surplus in its own, capitalist-interests-to-be and, collaterally, permit democratic, civilised development of the forces of production, to wit: the enlarged reproduction of the working class itself.

Second, in the short run, immediate socialist revolution abroad would pre-empt the threat of military intervention by economically more powerful capitalist states, or make their defeat more likely should intervention nonetheless occur, in the Bolshevik view. The latter scenario, which actually did materialise, unexpectedly required the Bolsheviks to adopt a supplementary, non-programmatic, empirically-driven emergency-measure, grandly but confusingly called war-'communism': forcibly appropriating grain from the peasantry to feed the cities and the Red Army in its struggle against the Whites.⁴⁹

The policies of war-communism at the same time quashed what little intra-peasant class-struggle the Bolsheviks had artificially fostered through the *kombedy*. The committees of poor peasants disappeared as soon as the Bolsheviks stopped sponsoring them, in November 1918; proof positive that the *kombedy* had no organic links to any actually existing segment of the peasantry.⁵⁰

Contrary to Bolshevik expectations... the ties between fellow villagers of unequal economic status proved stronger than the general, class ties between poor peasants in opposition to their 'kulak masters.' It was for this reason

49. Incidentally, Lih 1997 shows that most Bolsheviks never thought the war-communist measures they took represented the fulfilment of the communist utopia as Isaac Deutscher, E.H. Carr, Martin Malia, Sheila Fitzpatrick and many others have argued.

50. Moon 1999, p. 356.

that the *kombedy* failed to develop a 'proletarian' consciousness... The smallholding peasantry did not welcome the idea of a separate organization for the village poor. The land commune... reflected the general interests of the peasant farmers, who saw no need to add superfluous political forms that would only encourage social and institutional dissension.⁵¹

As one SR later expressed it: 'There was no class war... The peasantry acted as one...'.⁵² The real struggle of the peasantry as a whole against the war-communist predations of the workers' state soon supplanted the illusory 'class'-struggle between 'rich' and 'poor' peasants.

Under Trotsky's masterful generalship, the Red Army gained victory in the Civil War, though at the cost of alienating the peasantry through the emergency-policy of war-communism, the price the Bolsheviks paid for the untimely failure of workers' revolutions abroad, in Germany notably. The unexpected delay of socialist revolutions in the capitalist world forced the Bolsheviks more or less consciously to reconsider, in the interim, the problem of building socialism in a country where the material preconditions for it were lacking.

Peasant-success in strengthening their social position *as peasants* soon posed a supremely challenging political problem for the Bolsheviks. How to square the socialist rule of three million workers with the rule of the majority when the majority consisted of peasants with little or no interest in socialism, and little or no interest in the collective organisation of production and distribution beyond the confines of the village? Clearly, only by transforming peasants into workers via industrialisation could peasant-democracy, organised in thousands of *miry* dotting the countryside, transition to workers' democracy, organised in soviets and factory-committees in the cities and towns. Only then could formal democracy – the rule of the majority – and socialism – workers' rule – actively and durably coexist, like two peas in a pod. Yet this transformation posed an equally challenging economic problem. How could scattered small-peasant property be the basis for developing social labour on a national and, eventually, international scale; manifested in the development of industry and industrialised agriculture?

As we have seen, the Bolsheviks never thought they would have to face this double-barrelled challenge by themselves for any significant length of

51. Figes 1990, p. 249. Trotsky admitted as much in his *History of the Russian Revolution*. 'The soviets of farm-hand deputies attained significance only in a few localities, chiefly the Baltic provinces. The land committees, on the contrary, became the instruments of the whole peasantry... weapons of agrarian revolution.' Trotsky 1980b p. 407.

52. Cited in White 2005, p. 54.

time once Soviet power was in the saddle. They looked to the coming outbreak of world-socialist revolution to establish the proper material basis to socialism internationally. However, the temporary reflux of revolution in the West coupled with growing peasant-resistance to war-communism caused the Bolsheviks to defer their expectations of an imminent worldwide advance toward socialism, forcing them, instead, to find virtue in the necessity of a potentially long-lived worker-peasant alliance on the home-front. The New Economic Policy, announced in 1921, envisioned a series of measures to begin the transition toward socialism. Central to the NEP was the abolition of forced grain-requisitions in favour of a fixed tax on the peasantry. After payment, the peasants were free to dispose of their surpluses as they saw fit.

The Bolsheviks now tacitly rejected the view they and all Social Democrats had espoused for so long that only the free development of capitalism, made possible by a bourgeois-democratic revolution, could resolve the peasantry/proletariat antagonism in Russia. Having won the Civil War and jumped over an entire epoch of capitalist development – but not succoured by workers’ revolution elsewhere – Lenin and the Bolsheviks now concluded that the proletariat/peasantry antagonism *was* solvable along democratic and socialist lines, subject only to keeping the external capitalist threat at bay. The Bolsheviks now thought they could design and implement politically democratic, non-coercive means to resolve, more or less indefinitely, the conflict of interests that the Bolsheviks had hitherto highlighted between peasants and proletarians, within the context of a developing economy, in transit toward socialism, while steadfastly working for the cause of world-socialism.

Speaking to the 10th Congress of the Communist Party in March 1921, Lenin said, ‘We know that so long as there is no revolution in other countries only agreement with the peasantry can save the socialist revolution in Russia’. Only ‘in highly developed capitalist countries where wage workers in industry and agriculture make up the vast majority... is it possible to pass directly from capitalism to socialism, without any country-wide transitional measures’. However, in a country ‘where the overwhelming majority of the population consists of small agricultural producers’ such transitional measures were indispensable. In Russia

The socialist revolution... can triumph only on two conditions: first, if it is given timely support by a socialist revolution in one or several advanced countries.... The second condition is agreement between the proletariat... and the majority of the peasant population.⁵³

53. Lenin 1965a, p. 215.

Helping to fulfil the first condition was the job of the Third International, fulfilling the second, that of the NEP. Marxists have tended to focus on the first virtually to the exclusion of the second; a grave imbalance this intervention seeks to redress.

Lenin had occasion to blurt out his and the Bolsheviks' new, broader understanding of the material premises of socialist construction by explicitly contrasting it to the old, narrower 'orthodox'-Marxist view they had previously held. In an exasperated 1923 review of the Menshevik N. Sukhanov's book, *Notes on the Revolution*, Lenin chided its author, and all the 'heroes' of the Second International, for 'harping' on the old 'incontrovertible proposition' that the "'development of the productive forces of Russia has not attained the level that makes socialism possible'". Before 1917, this had been the 'decisive criterion' for thinking that the coming revolution in Russia would be a bourgeois-democratic one. Lenin presently affirmed that this old proposition, previously 'incontrovertible', was now controvertible, indeed, controverted by history. The workers' seizure of power in Russia had opened up new, hitherto-concealed, perspectives of historical advance. The fresh experience of the NEP was showing to all who would but open their eyes that socialist construction in one country was feasible after all.⁵⁴ To be sure, Lenin and Trotsky always understood that only future generations would complete socialist construction, and only on a global scale, as subsequent generations of Marxists have insistently reminded us. Until that blessed day however, Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin, Stalin and every party-leader of note in the 1920s believed that correct relations between the working class and the peasantry could assure steady economic development and successful socialist construction in Russia, within the context of the NEP. As long as 'agreement with the peasantry' could be secured, the socialist revolution at home could be 'saved', even in the absence of socialist revolution abroad. A temporally indefinite reprieve was at hand.

Preserving a democratic workers' state now meant, at the very least, preserving peasant-support. For the question of democracy in the very broadest, 'popular' sense of the term – support of the majority for the gains of the October Revolution – came down, in the final analysis, to retaining the support of the peasant-majority. Speaking to delegates meeting in July 1921 for the Third Congress of the Third International, Lenin reiterated this cardinal point before an internationalist audience: 'We are helping the peasants because without an alliance with them the political power of the proletariat is impossible, its preservation is inconceivable'.⁵⁵ The NEP was a calculated bid to renew

54. Lenin 1965c, pp. 476–79.

55. Lenin 1965b, p. 490.

the working class's alliance with the peasantry, originally forged in a common struggle against tsarism but progressively undermined and ultimately shattered by the Civil War, and designed to move forward the process of socialist construction.

III Preserving the worker-peasant alliance and promoting economic advance, 1921–9: a labour of Sisyphus

Having achieved economic recovery by 1925, the Bolsheviks henceforth thought they faced, for some undetermined period, the difficult but not impossible task of industrialising the country further, beyond the level attained under the tsars. Of course, they disagreed about tempos of economic development and the kind of economic and political relations the Soviet Union should have with the capitalist world in this period. By the late 1920s, however, the surprising and highly dismaying domestic reality concentrating the minds of all Bolsheviks was a severe crisis in grain-marketing to the towns and cities that threatened to stall, even reverse, the industrial progress hitherto made. The peasants were renegeing on their 'agreement' to ally with the workers' state, threatening 'the political power of the proletariat', and conceivably making it 'impossible' to sustain it, as Lenin had warned.⁵⁶

In the conventional view, Marxist and non-Marxist, the faulty application of the NEP triggered the grain-marketing shortfalls of 1927 and, again, in large part, those of 1928. Analysts have focused on the unequal terms of trade between agriculture and industry, graphically represented by the two divergent blades – 'scissors' – of low and falling grain-prices and high and rising prices of manufactured goods. They object that state-set grain-prices were not high enough to attract large holders of grain, the '*kulaks*', to market their surpluses.⁵⁷

No doubt, higher prices would have encouraged additional marketings. In fact, the grain-shortage itself would eventually generate higher food-prices relative to manufactures.⁵⁸ Yet, increasingly favourable terms of trade between town and country did little reverse the decline in marketings. This is because the traditional focus on disturbances in the sphere of circulation fails to bring out enough disturbing production-shortages lying behind marketing shortfalls in the first place. The 'scissors-crisis' of the late 1920s was quite different from the scissors-crises of 1923 and 1925.

56. Lenin 1965b, p. 490.

57. For example Lewin 1968, Nove 1992, pp. 137, 147.

58. See Table 3, below, p. 65.

The scissors-crisis of 1923 had been 'due primarily not to a failure to produce, but a failure to establish terms of trade to bring about a flow of goods from factory-worker to peasant and vice versa'.⁵⁹ Then, the industrial trusts had used their monopoly-position to hold on to their goods until the owners of expected substantial surpluses of agricultural products appeared on the market to purchase higher-priced but still market-clearing quantities of manufactured goods on sale. The Supreme Council of the Economy, Vesenkha, which retained control of industry, had made this speculative strategy possible by the according easy credits to keep production rolling, despite the lack of sales. Soon, Gosbank intervened to put an end to this practice and the scissors closed quickly. From now on, the state, not factory-managers, set prices.⁶⁰

The scissors-crisis of 1925 also related to terms of trade, not production-shortfalls. 1925 saw a bumper-harvest, the peasants cleaned out store-shelves, creating a 'goods-famine' because the state had fixed prices of consumer-goods too low, allowing better-off peasants – the '*kulaks*' – to engage in speculative operations with grain still in their possession.⁶¹ In 1923 and 1925, factory-managers and enterprising peasants respectively were redistributing the pie of goodies by gaming the market. No increase or decrease in the size of the pie resulted in either case. In 1927, however, the pie was shrinking; a far more serious matter. The decline in marketed production reflected a decline in un-marketed production. The resulting scissors-crisis thus fundamentally differed from previous scissors-crises, a difference that the literature does not adequately register.

Bad weather caused total grain-production to fall 6 per cent for 1927. Poor harvests were the largest single contributor to a catastrophic 30 per cent reduction in grain-marketings for the last three months of 1927 compared to the same period the year before.⁶² Worse was yet to come. The winter of 1927–8 destroyed much of the wheat in the Ukraine and the Northern Caucasus, making re-sowing necessary, and by a belated spring, which increased the demand for fodder. Poor harvests continued into the fall of 1928. Harvests were either late or failed in new areas, the Central Black-Earth, North-Caucasian and Middle- and Lower-Volga regions, and failed again in the critically important steppe-regions of the Ukraine, the breadbasket of the Soviet

59. Carr 1954, p. 87.

60. Carr 1954, pp. 91, 98–9.

61. Carr 1970, Volume 2, pp. 315–19.

62. Atkinson 1983, p. 316.

Union.⁶³ Poor harvests two years in a row could easily lead to famine because peasants would draw on grain-reserves to cover shortfalls in the first year, shredding the safety-net for the second. This had been the case under the tsars, and it threatened to be so again under the NEP.⁶⁴

In the wake of the grain-procurement crisis in late 1927, the state took a series of steps to appease the majority of the peasantry and keep alive the worker-peasant alliance; even if this meant diverting resources from industrial development. In December 1927, the Politburo ordered industrial goods ‘strip[ped] from cities and non-grain growing areas’ and dispatched to grain-growing areas.⁶⁵ To coax the peasantry to sell on the market, the state raised official purchasing prices for grain by approximately 20 per cent,⁶⁶ though state-procurement prices in the localities were in practice quite often higher in a bid to compete with still higher prices on private markets. Further, the state shifted investment and current resources towards the consumer-goods industry, increasing the supply of cotton notably.⁶⁷ It also applied the just-recently enacted three seven-hour shift-system in industry most fully to the textile-sector, concentrated in the Ivanovo Industrial Region, the Russian ‘Manchester’, to promote the supply of textiles to the peasantry at a more advantageous price.⁶⁸ Ominously, textile-workers there responded to these peasant-friendly measures by protesting, through strikes and mass-demonstrations, the elevated workloads and sharp deterioration in working and living standards they entailed, threatening to unravel the worker-peasant alliance from the opposite, workers’ end.⁶⁹ If ever there was a catch-22 situation, maintaining the worker-peasant alliance was it.

Carr and Davies summed up the continuing efforts to appease the peasantry at the start of 1928, when the leadership launched a campaign to

Increase the production of industrial consumer goods and their delivery to agricultural areas. The campaign prevented the seasonal decline in production that had occurred in the previous two years. In January 1928 the production of industrial consumer goods, measured in pre-war prices, was

63. Carr and Davies 1969, p. 63. A delegate from the region reported ‘peasants tearing down straw from the roofs of their houses to feed cattle dying of hunger in the severe spring frosts’, pp. 63–4.

64. Moon 1999, p. 28. Storage-facilities for longer-term protection were too costly for peasants to maintain. Besides, had these reserves existed in tsarist times, the tsarist state would have been sorely tempted to get its hands on them for its own purposes.

65. Viola 2005, p. 32.

66. Carr and Davies 1969, p. 695.

67. Carr and Davies 1969, p. 49.

68. Carr and Davies 1969, p. 500.

69. Rossman 2005.

26 percent greater than in the corresponding month of the previous year, as compared with a corresponding increase of 14 percent in December 1927.⁷⁰

These efforts persisted all the way into the second half 1929, when supplies of cotton- and woollen fabrics, leather-goods, leather-footwear, finished clothing, metals and window-glass were more than 40 per cent above the 1928 level, while supplies of these scarce commodities to the towns fell in absolute terms.⁷¹ Yet grain-procurements kept falling short. The important increase in the supply of industrial consumer-goods to the peasants could not make up for the sharp decline in the supply of food in peasant-households. As between exchanging the products of their labour to install window-glass to improve their humble dwellings, or using their labour directly to produce wheat and put bread on their tables, the peasants chose the latter.

By markedly shifting policy in early 1928 toward that of Trotsky and the Left Opposition, a shift characterised as such by the latter, Stalin intended to shore up the peasant's end of the worker-peasant alliance. Stalin tried to isolate the source of the problem by isolating the wealthy *kulak*-minority and assorted speculators and bagmen from the rest of the less well-off peasant-majority. He charged that the grasping *kulaks* were engaged in a 'grain-strike': withholding grain until the state caved in and raised grain-prices further, a theme sounded by the Left Opposition (though Stalin would never admit his debt) and often repeated in the scholarly literature as if it were a self-evident proposition.⁷² The notion of an offensive 'strike' presupposed a nationwide level of conscious organisation that Marxists had hitherto thought was possible only for the working class, not the peasantry. Rather than acknowledging that the 'strike' was but the aggregated result of millions of peasants – *kulaks* and non-*kulaks* – acting in their self-interest, the *kulaks* became the sole culprits, a politically more manageable quantity for the Stalinist leadership; or so the leadership thought.⁷³

Stalin began forcibly to requisition grain from the '*kulaks*' – dubbed the 'Ural-Siberian' method – much to the growing discomfort of Bukharin and the emerging 'Right Opposition', which feared that attacking the '*kulaks*' could

70. Carr and Davies 1969, Volume 1, p. 308.

71. Davies 1980, pp. 78–9.

72. Writers as diverse as Bettelheim 1976, Mandel 1995 and Cliff 1974 take the growth of the *kulaks*' influence for granted, again explaining the cause of this growth much as Bukharin and Trotsky did, as a result of 'mistakes' made by the Party in its peasant-policy, only differing about the kind of mistake made. Stalin was closer to the truth for once when he stated the policy of the Central Committee had 'nothing to do' with promoting this influence, citing weather induced harvest failure instead as the root cause of the grain procurement crisis. Stalin 1954a p. 53.

73. This is not to deny that once the state attacked the peasantry, the peasants did organise locally to resist, a resistance that was often planned and 'conscious'.

easily spill over into an attack on their neighbours, eventually escalating into an all-out war with the entire peasantry. Stalin denounced this alarmist forecast as the ‘most rotten idea of all the rotten ideas that exist in the minds of some communists’.⁷⁴

Stalin prominently associated himself with the Ural-Siberian method. He went to Siberia to spur-on local party-officials of agricultural ‘soviets’. These officials had been markedly reluctant to expropriate surplus-grain, owing to ties of comity with influential peasant-leaders acting through the *mir*, the real power in the countryside.⁷⁵ A conciliatory approach recommended itself to them, ‘objectively’ making them Bukharin supporters, as Stalin would later accurately insist. However, Stalin’s smash-and-grab method worked there, in January–February 1928, only because there was no harvest-failure and, therefore, surpluses were at hand to seize. Elsewhere, in regions affected by the poor harvests, armed shakedown-operations yielded little because there was little or no surplus-grain to steal: bureaucratic plenipotentiaries sent to the Ukraine and the Caucasus came back to Moscow empty handed.⁷⁶

Trotsky, whom Stalin and Bukharin derided as a ‘superindustrialiser’, especially welcomed Stalin’s manoeuvres to rally the ‘middle’ and ‘poor’ peasant-majority against the wealthy *kulak*-minority as a very first, small step toward collectivisation and accelerated economic development, complaining only of ‘bureaucratic methods’. However, Stalin could not get much beyond the ABCs of Trotsky’s programme. As urban party-workers fanned out into the countryside on search-and-seizure missions against *kulaks*, the peasantry as a whole quickly closed ranks behind their better-off neighbours. Class-solidarity founded on common possession of land kept overriding quantitative differences in income-levels permitted by relatively minor variations in the quantities of land, animals and tools owned by individual peasant-households. Nor were methods other than ‘bureaucratic’ – i.e., at gunpoint – available because Stalin could not obtain the peasants’ consent to part with their surpluses without payment.

As noted, Trotsky critically endorsed Stalin’s short-term strategy to rally the peasant-majority against the *kulak*-minority. But even if Stalin had pursued this course in the medium- and long term, neither he nor, by implication, Trotsky, could have offered a medium- or long-term solution to grain-marketing shortfalls, since the latter were merely symptomatic of a deeper problem: declining total grain-production and marketings affecting, to varying degrees, all categories of peasant-households. Fanning ‘class-struggle’

74. Cited in Viola 2005, p. 55.

75. Lewin 1968, pp. 85–3.

76. Lewin 1968, p. 240.

in the countryside could and did exacerbate this problem because it deprived all peasants of security in their ownership of surpluses. Such well-founded fears naturally caused them to minimise their exposure to a marauding state simply by minimising the production of surpluses, indeed, by reducing total production. Taking precautionary measures in anticipation of a second edition of war-communism, peasants sowed 4.5 per cent less land in the fall of 1928, prolonging and exacerbating the crisis.⁷⁷

1928, then, was truly a 'Year of Drift'.⁷⁸ Stalin repeatedly tacked and veered, pursuing a delicate balancing act by intermittently maintaining some kind of pressure on the *kulak*-minority while striving mightily to avoid a showdown with the peasantry as a whole. The pronouncements of the leadership at this time

were the utterances, not of men who had made a calculated move to the Right, and still less of men who believed that the mass collectivisation of the peasantry was a practical policy for the near future, but of men hesitant and bewildered in face of an intractable problem and still hoping to muddle through.⁷⁹

Trotsky agreed. Surveying the scene from his exile in Alma-Ata, Trotsky kept up a barrage of criticism against these vacillating, 'centrist' policies. He mocked the Stalinists' insufficient hardness on the *kulaks*, ruefully noting how, in the summer of 1928, the Right Opposition had buried the Stalinist Centre's 'left' turn by annulling the 'extraordinary measures' taken against

77. Lewin 1968, p. 286.

78. The title of Lewin's chapter on the year 1928.

79. Carr and Davies 1969, p. 85. It is worth emphasising here that Carr and Davies failed to reconcile this summary, and others like it, with teleological generalisations, scattered throughout their work, about the intent of the leadership to get on with industrialisation come hell or high water. Thus Carr: 'In the years after 1925 socialism in one country... came to mean the opposite of NEP. Nor was this illogical; for it was the recovery and the growing strength of the Soviet economy in the middle nineteen-twenties, which pointed the way both to the superseding of NEP and to socialism in one country. What was now at stake was not appeasement of the peasant, but the drive for industrialisation'. Carr 1970, p. 59. Hindsight warps Carr's perspective. Carr himself details how, in 1926 and again in 1927 and once more in 1928, Stalin and Bukharin repeatedly invoked the doctrine to defend the worker-peasant alliance – the essence of the NEP – by 'appeasing' the bulk of the peasantry and proceeding slowly with economic development. Everything in those years was 'logically' 'pointing the way to socialism in one country' alright, as Trotsky well understood; but definitely not the supersession of the NEP, as Carr over-generalised. The differences of interpretation and perspective between myself and the sources cited are major and founded on making necessary, vital, factually-based distinctions, distinctions that tend to be smudged over or erased entirely by teleological perspectives that plague summaries and conclusions of so many works in the field but whose detailed contents afford little factual basis for them.

the *kulak* the previous winter. Caving in once more to the Right simply proved the political spinelessness of Stalin and his centrist followers.⁸⁰ Trotsky counselled the Left Opposition not to be taken in by Stalin's right 'zigzag' because Stalin would immediately follow it by a left 'zigzag'; counsel the oppositionists were ever less inclined to heed as Stalin unexpectedly renewed his offensive against Bukharin and the Right in the fall of 1928 against a background of continuing procurement-shortfalls. Despite Trotsky's warnings, the number of Left-Oppositionists applauding Stalin's 'Leninist' turn soon began to swell because the turn was promising to become permanent and irrevocable.

Meanwhile, in the cities, bread-lines began to form at the beginning of 1929, compelling the leadership to ration bread to workers. Trotsky, for his part, witnessed a 300 per cent increase in the free-market price of bread in Alma-Ata.⁸¹ By summer, the leadership was rationing tea and sugar as well, adding meat later in the year.⁸² These were the delayed results of another weather-induced harvest-failure for November and December 1928, which further reduced total grain-marketing from an already paltry 10.3 million tons the year before down to 8.3 million tons.⁸³ Exports of grain, already extremely low, fell even further. Incredibly, the state *imported* 250,000 tons 1928 to offset a similar amount exported that year because of previously executed grain-contracts.⁸⁴ Ominously, in the summer and autumn of 1928, real wages of workers began to fall significantly for the first time since the end of war-communism; the price workers paid for the rising cost of bread. With state-granaries emptying and no end in sight to the perils of famine looming over the cities and towns of Russia, the strategy of periodically squeezing the *kulak*-minority, conciliating the peasant-majority, and maintaining the worker-peasant alliance bore all the earmarks of an on-going failure.

Meanwhile, the state restores industry but fails to develop it much further

The on-going agrarian crisis stymied the development of industry much beyond economic restoration because food-reserves to feed the existing labour-force, let alone a significantly expanded one, were stagnant or declin-

80. Carr and Davies 1969, p. 81, and especially note 3.

81. Deutscher 1959, p. 397.

82. Atkinson 1983, p. 350.

83. Carr and Davies 1969, p. 103.

84. Lewin 1968, p. 242. How striking a contrast with the policies of the tsarist state! When famine stalked the countryside in 1891, the portly minister of finance, Vyshnegradsky, declared, 'We shall starve but we shall export'. The contrast speaks volumes about the pro-peasant, pro-worker orientation of the workers' state – even in this late 'degenerative' phase of its existence, the penultimate one before it went under, with condign finality, in 1929–33.

ing. Further, low productivity-levels in industry generated minimal surpluses, severely limiting investment in new plant and equipment to preserve workers' living standards, still less to raise them, or, in the alternative, to provide peasants with supplementary and better tools and machines without simultaneously lowering workers' living standards. In 1926/27, the average industrial worker produced only one-half as much as a British worker, and only one-seventh as much as an American worker.⁸⁵

Throughout the NEP, raising the productivity of labour in industry came to mean 'primarily or exclusively' raising the 'intensity of individual effort. The capital element of productivity, greatly limited by scarce resources, was treated as a constant; the variable was the intensity of labour'.⁸⁶ In other words, NEP-industrial expansion, at least in its initial, pump-priming period, would be financed by larger surpluses generated by expanding what Marx called absolute surplus-labour – adding workers, extending the working day, accelerating the pace of work – as opposed to expanding relative surplus-labour – equipping workers with better tools and machines to raise their productivity and generate larger surpluses without cutting workers' living standards by reducing, through improved technique, the socially-necessary labour-time required to reproduce that standard.

However, no significant development of industry could take place either through the expansion of absolute or relative surplus-labour in the cities as long as the political and economic constraints of the NEP remained in effect. In the next section, I shall try to show how the structure of the peasant-mode of production ruled out systematic gains in the productivity of agricultural labour, thus systematically ruling out regularly transferring labour from agriculture to industry – adding workers – undermining the growth of the urban economy. For the moment, the political conditions under which state-industry operated ruled out systematically increasing the intensity of work and/or the length of the working day with the existing labour-force because of the opposition of the working class. Under the NEP, the workers' state, though 'bureaucratically deformed' remained, all the same, a workers' state precisely because the latter largely abided by the working class's refusal to sacrifice its present-day, actually-existing material interests for the sake of potential material benefits arising from future economic development. Indeed, wages rose faster than productivity in 1924–5 and 1926–7⁸⁷ and the average number of hours per day worked in industry fell slightly, from 7.6 to 7.4 between

85. Davies (ed.) 1990, p. 155.

86. Carr 1969, pp. 485–6.

87. Carr and Davies 1969, p. 507.

1925 and 1928.⁸⁸ Virtually all campaigns to increase production and to lower costs in industry by introducing piece-rate norms, encouraging workers to participate in production-conferences, tightening labour-discipline, promoting economical use of fuel and raw materials (the 'régime of economy') ran aground owing to worker-resistance, organised by their factory-committees and trade-unions.⁸⁹ Workers' opposition was itself a serious and dangerous sign of the working class's growing alienation from its own state.

Even if factory-management had overcome worker-resistance, the measures of economy proposed were little more than cheese-paring exercises and would not have significantly raised productivity-levels. Only substantial investments in new plant and equipment would have done the job.⁹⁰ Finally, factory-managers had little incentive to overcome worker-opposition and forcefully impose sacrifices, since there was no requirement to maximise profits in the face of external competitive pressures. The property-relations of NEP-industry were not organised along capitalist lines. No firm produced for an unknown market and subject to competitive pressures to raise productivity, cut costs and stay in business. Rather, the state's planning-organisms mediated the relationship of each firm to all the others. The state set prices and wages, allocating the resulting 'profit' to certain sectors of the economy, according to politically determined criteria. The state maintained economically bankrupt but politically vital enterprises through 'direct subvention', allowing no politically important firm to live or die by the market.⁹¹

88. Carr and Davies 1969, p. 495n. citing Strumilin.

89. See Murphy 2005. A case in point is the Guzhon Factory, the largest metalworks-factory in Moscow. In 1929, production was a paltry 8 per cent above 1914 levels, despite a stupendous 60 per cent rise in the number of workers, from 3,000 to 5,000. Murphy, 2005, p. 83. Samuel Farber has argued that the 'NEP approach combining economic concessions' with political repression 'made it very difficult' for workers and peasants to 'organize and defend themselves against...exploitative and oppressive activities of both bureaucrats and born again capitalists'. Farber 1990, p. 208. Farber offers no evidence to back up this assertion.

90. Visiting the fabled Putilov Steel-Works in 1929, the head of the Ford Motor Delegation, Charles E. Sorenson remarked, 'They had no modern equipment such as open hearths or Bessemer plants.... The rolling mills would have been fine specimens for a museum. I was amazed at the manual labour carried on in these operations.' Sorenson, 1956, p. 201. Sorenson unwittingly highlights the *artisanal* character of much of tsarist and Soviet industry. (Engineers in Britain invented Bessemer steel-converter in 1854, followed by the Siemens-Martin open-hearth method of steel-production, invented in Germany in 1864. Both revolutionised steel-production processes and had become standard in the industry well before the turn of the twentieth century).

91. Filtzer 1986, p. 16.

If NEP-industry worked according to 'market-principles' then these principles did not reflect a clearly capitalist structure.⁹²

Stalin destroys the smychka

By the late 1920s, Bukharin had lost his 'wager' to let the wealthier, 'capitalist' layer of the peasantry lead the rest of the peasantry to accumulate and promote economic development in the countryside. The peasantry's self-movement, ever-vulnerable to inclement weather, had generated harvest-failure and a drastic fall in the supply of grain to the towns and cities.

This economic crisis detonated, in turn, a political crisis of the worker-peasant alliance itself, the linchpin of the NEP. The Left Opposition thought it could reap political benefits from this crisis because it appeared to have forecast its nature, if not its timing or its intensity. In fact, it had not understood its nature because it had not understood its deeper causes. I shall examine these causes in the following section. In any event, had Stalin heeded the Left Opposition's faulty solution to the problem of marketing shortfalls – Trotsky's call to interfere with the peasantry's self-movement earlier by bringing greater administrative/economic pressure to bear on *kulaks* earlier – the peasant-worker alliance would have unravelled that much earlier, creating a political crisis followed by an economic crisis, i.e. reversing their actual historical sequence. Thus, like its Bukharinist predecessor of 1921–7, the Trotskyist variant of the NEP, adopted in 1927–9, ran into grave political/economic difficulties. Since the notion that Stalin attempted to implement Trotsky's programme in this period and not a bloody version of it after 1929 is jarring in the extreme, running, as it does, counter to what everyone believes, it bears briefly recalling the facts once more, repetition being the mother of learning.

Between late 1927 and late 1929, Stalin sought to resolve or at least minimise the economic crisis within the context of the NEP by adopting the indispensable minimum of the Left Opposition's programme. He unabashedly repeated Preobrazhensky's views without mentioning their paternity. 'There were two sources of accumulation, the working class and the peasantry', Stalin declared in July 1928. He went on:

92. For state-capitalist theorists, the absence of competition between 'capitals' or firms on the market is irrelevant because their definition of 'state-capitalism' inflates the notion of competition beyond measure to include political/military competition between states in the geo-political arena, a *passe-partout* notion if there ever was one because such competition can be tracked to the time of the Pharaohs and beyond, long before there was any state-capitalism and any accumulation of capital.

The way matters stand with the peasantry in this respect is as follows: it not only pays the state the usual taxes, direct and indirect; it also *overpays* in the relatively high prices for manufactured goods – that is in the first place, and it is more or less *underpaid* in the prices for agricultural produce – that is in the second place.

This is an additional tax levied on the peasantry for the sake of promoting industry, which caters for the whole country, the peasantry included. It is something in the nature of a ‘tribute,’ of a supertax, which we are compelled to levy for the time being... It is an unpalatable business, there is no denying.⁹³

Stalin’s unpalatable move to the ‘left’ in this period uncovered the presence of a ‘Right’ Opposition led by Bukharin. Bukharin had not moved Right but had remained in a fixed position. It was Stalin who was moving to the left, which the Left Opposition welcomed. Joining Bukharin was trade-union chief Tomsky and his comrades who, in the name of maintaining the NEP, also opposed Stalin’s new slogan for the trade-unions – ‘Face to Production!’ – the associated preparations for an accelerated development of industry within the context of the NEP and the ‘heighten[ed] pressure it would place on workers’ material well-being’.⁹⁴

In the countryside, Stalin followed Trotsky’s prescriptions. He squeezed the *kulaks* and tried to cajole the ‘middle’- and ‘poor’ peasantry to develop the forces of production in cooperation with the working class. This turned out to be a fiasco: the peasantry – ‘rich’, ‘middle’- and ‘poor’ – rallied to form a united front against forced grain-requisitions, demolishing the strategy of the Left Opposition. The peasant-response instead vindicated the ‘rotten communists’ of the Right Opposition, who were warning that the peasantry was closing ranks against the state’s predations, just as it had under war-communism.

To sum up: having given up on the Bukharinist variant of the NEP by the winter of 1927–8, Stalin for the next 24 months turned to the Trotskyist variant of the NEP, or at least a reasonable facsimile of it, to overcome the crisis. By the winter of 1929–30, however, Stalin gave up on Trotsky’s variant as well because, by then, Stalin had given up on the NEP *altogether* in favour of an entirely *new* programme: *forced* collectivisation and *forced* industrialisation.

Stalin’s new programme annulled the last remaining achievement of the October Revolution in the countryside, a free peasantry, and ushered the final metamorphosis of the Bolshevik Party into a new dictatorial ruling class based on state-ownership of property. Over sixty years later, in 1993, Stalin’s satrap,

93. Stalin 1954a, p. 167.

94. Filtzer 1986, p. 24.

Molotov, explained the cause of this 'Great Turn' very simply and very truly: 'To survive, the [Stalinist] state needed the grain. Otherwise, it would crack up....So we pumped away...from everyone who had grain'.⁹⁵

Before providing a theory-sensitive explanation of economic developments in the 1920s in the next section, it might be useful at this stage to bring out how the foregoing narrative lays the basis, I think, to respond to commonly raised objections by many, more conventional accounts.

Did the Bolsheviks prematurely take power?

Crystal-ball gazers and teleologues 'argue' that, because Stalinism was victorious in 1929, the Bolsheviks should not have taken power in 1917. But there is no documentary evidence that the Bolsheviks had this outcome in mind. What are the facts? A majority of workers in Russia supported 'All Power to the Soviets' in 1917 because the Bolsheviks convinced them that the Provisional Government would not bring an end to a senseless war, would not support the peasants' seizure of land, and would not uphold the rights of factory-committees at the expense of management. 'Peace, Land and Bread': these were immediate and pressing demands, the Bolsheviks reasoned, and there was nothing 'premature' about satisfying them. Rosa Luxemburg adopted the proper approach to the question of prematurity. Her reasoning in defence of the October Revolution is as valid now as it was when Luxemburg first deployed it. Indeed, I write this essay in its spirit.

Luxemburg wrote her essay on the Russian Revolution from the perspective of a fundamental solidarity with the Bolsheviks.⁹⁶ That solidarity, though critical, was absolute and irrevocable. In sharp contrast, Luxemburg unconditionally condemned the leadership of Second-International Social Democracy. This side of her essay is less well known. It should be better known – rebroadcast *urbi et orbi* – because she wrote her essay principally to advance the political education of revolutionary socialists in the West, not those in Russia.

What socialist militants in the West needed to understand was that the 'freeing of Russia had its roots deep in the soil of its own land and was fully matured internally'; a 'decisive refutation of the doctrinaire theory', upheld by Kautsky and others, according to which Russia 'was supposed not to be ripe for social revolution and proletarian dictatorship'.⁹⁷

'Practically' – and this political dimension was absolutely crucial for Luxemburg, far surpassing any other consideration – 'this same doctrine

95. Cited in Viola 2005, p. 22.

96. Luxemburg 1970, pp. 367–95.

97. Luxemburg 1970, p. 367.

represents an attempt' by Kautsky and other unthinking observers [and their latter-day imitators – J.M.]

to get rid of any responsibility for the course of the Russian Revolution, so far as that responsibility concerns the international, and especially the German, proletariat, and to deny the international connections of this revolution. It is not Russia's un-ripeness that has been proved by the events of the war and the Russian Revolution, but the un-ripeness of the German proletariat for the fulfilment of its historic tasks.⁹⁸

The German proletariat's un-ripeness was not its fault. Responsibility for this shocking state of affairs lay squarely with German Social Democracy, whose leadership had for decades 'systematically killed' the masses' 'capacity for critical judgment', preventing them from maturing politically. In contrast, the Bolsheviks had done their utmost to help the masses mature politically because the Bolsheviks embodied such political maturity in action, by 'basing their policy entirely upon the world proletarian revolution', and this was the 'clearest proof of their political farsightedness and firmness of principle and of the bold scope of their policies'.⁹⁹ Every revolutionary Marxist was duty-bound to help workers develop their class-consciousness, to foster in them a 'genuine capacity for historical action' and thus prepare the 'German and the international working class for the tasks which confront them'. As part of their political maturation, workers needed to achieve a 'critical analysis of the Russian Revolution in all its connections'.¹⁰⁰

Did Stalin steal the Left Opposition's banner, bathing it in blood?

Trotsky was not the 'authentic inspirer and prompter'¹⁰¹ of Stalinist industrialisation because he never called for an end to the NEP and the voluntary principle. This point cannot be emphasised enough. Historians tend to identify the NEP with particular economic policies – taxation-rates, banking measures, a certain mix of the 'market' and 'planning', policies associated with this or that party-leader, etc. – instead of the more general or abstract background political condition of peasant and worker self-determination under which economic policies, whatever they may have been, were to have been implemented. Had the Five-Year Plan and collectivisation proceeded under the voluntary principle, the NEP would still have been in effect.

98. Luxemburg 1970, p. 368.

99. *Ibid.*

100. Luxemburg 1970, pp. 369–70.

101. Deutscher 1965, p. 158.

Still, the view that Stalin somehow carried out the Left Opposition's programme after 1929 dies hard. In *The Revolution Betrayed*, published in 1937, Trotsky ambiguously laid the basis for this view with his theory of the degenerated workers' state which still owned of the means of production, preserving what he thought was the core-conquest of the October Revolution, even if workers did not own (run) the state. Less ambiguously, the view that Stalin followed in Trotsky's footsteps telescopes two, politically and economically very different periods. To be precise: when the 'rightist' Bukharin began to protest at Stalin's 'left' attacks on the *kulaks* in the winter and spring of 1928, the Left Opposition at once took notice and started to align itself with Stalin. By the summer of 1929, *after* Stalin had routed the Right Opposition the Left, minus a few holdouts, including Trotsky, had completed its realignment with Stalin. But this realignment came roughly six months *before* Stalin issued marching orders to collectivise agriculture, in December 1929.

Now, Stalin's previous defeat of Bukharin and the Right Opposition had never been a matter of controversy among Left Oppositionists. They had welcomed it. That is why most justified their initial embrace of Stalin's 'Leninist course' with a clear conscience. Trotsky's repeated admonitions that rallying to Stalin at this point removed the only force pressuring Stalin to the left carried ever-diminishing weight among Trotsky's erstwhile followers because the course of events was refuting it. However, destroying the NEP and the voluntary principle was an altogether different matter from routing the Bukharinists. In the winter of 1929–30 and beyond, the quondam Left now had to make *another* decision on this *separate* question: whether to support Stalin's destruction of the NEP, which is what forced collectivisation and forced industrialisation amounted to. To make a long story short, the quondam left oppositionists overcame whatever misgivings they may have had on this cardinal issue and tacitly endorsed Stalin's destruction of the NEP, whistling in the dark that forcible collectivisation and industrialisation – the bird in the hand – was worth the two in the bush: party-democracy and internationalism. Indeed, the latter two, somehow, would ultimately beckon from the bush because Stalin was establishing the material premises of socialism in Russia, as Trotsky himself would later argue.¹⁰²

102. What finally condemned Stalin forever in Trotsky's eyes was Stalin's role in helping organise the defeat of the working class in Germany, paving the way for Hitler's victory in 1933, not Stalin's domestic economic policies, which still 'objectively' marked progress, however blood-soaked, toward socialism. For more on the character of the Left's 'opposition' to Stalin in this period see Chapter Two of this work.

Was Stalin necessary?

Was Stalin necessary for industrialisation and collectivisation? Many ask.¹⁰³ And they give an answer. However, they rarely, if ever, clearly pose the antecedent, threshold-question: for whom was Stalin necessary? Clearly, collectivisation was not necessary for the peasantry and that is why they put up the most desperate, the most fearful resistance to it. The same is true, by and large, of the working class, 'revisionist' social historians of Stalinism notwithstanding.¹⁰⁴ Workers did not see the necessity of industrialising because they did not see it in their interests to do so.¹⁰⁵ But Stalin and the emergent ruling class behind him did see it in their interests to resolve the agrarian crisis via forced collectivisation and forced industrialisation because only in this way could Stalin foist the costs of this resolution on workers and peasants exclusively, while consolidating his position as head of a new ruling class. The Great Turn was an evil, but the Stalinists would be running the evil and reaping benefits from it in their role as taskmasters and slave-drivers.

Because materialist historians and Marxists in particular should – but do not – adopt the foregoing what-is-in-it-for-whom approach sharply enough, they end up discussing *how* the development of the forces of production

103. Nove 1964.

104. Fitzpatrick 1998 is the standard-bearer of this regressive trend in the historiography. As between this trend, emerging in the eighties, and the 'unrevised' Cold-War accounts of Stalinism, originally published in the fifties and sixties, the latter are to be preferred hands down because they grasped the essentially coercive character of Stalin's murderous régime, or the manner in which Stalinism *reproduced* itself. Where the cold warriors and their revisionist successors fall woefully short is accounting for the *initial production* of that system. Here, both schools become indistinguishable because both recruit the usual suspects to explain the rise of Stalinism: 'modernising' Marxist ideology, apparently correctly understood by Stalin alone, not his opponents, and/or Lenin's ostensibly Nietzschean, beer-hall conception of an all-powerful party that can will 'modernisation' into existence.

105. Rossman 2005. This noteworthy work unearths how workers in the textile industry mobilised repeatedly to oppose the first Five-Year Plan, from 1929 on. Its findings and conclusions seriously undermine those of the revisionist 'social' historians of Stalinism, for whom Stalin's policies represented 'upward social mobility' for the working class, supported by the latter. This work also deals a blow to Trotsky's notorious assertion, accepted by many historians of the totalitarian school as well as most Trotskyists, that workers were uniformly atomised, demoralised, apathetic and helpless before the Stalinist onslaught. Actually, if there was demoralisation among those workers looking to the Left Opposition for leadership then it came from workers seeing the leaders of the Left Opposition not just jump on Stalin's bandwagon, but turn against those among the *rank and file* of their *own tendency* who opposed the support their leaders were giving to Stalin. See Gusev 2005 for this episode, which makes a mockery of the widespread notion that the leadership of the Left mounted 'opposition' to Stalin in this period. I used an earlier, Russian-language version of Gusev's article in Marot 2006.

could have taken place (the Bukharinist way, the Trotskyist way, etc.) not *whether* the support of the direct producers to develop those forces could have been obtained in the first place. Thus, Lewin's belief that the history of the Soviet Union 'would have, or might well have, taken a different course',¹⁰⁶ had Bukharin and Trotsky put into practice their theories of industrial and agricultural development, is puzzling in the extreme. This is not just because both approaches were tested in practice, as I have shown, but also because Lewin's own analysis largely undermined the idea that the agrarian theory of the two men grasped the basic dynamics of peasant-life.¹⁰⁷ Equally puzzling is Cohen's assertion that official party-policy in 1929 jettisoned Bukharin's 'reasoning', which remained by and large 'unrefuted and untried'; an assertion that is difficult to reconcile with Cohen's view that 'Bukharinism' was tried and tested for much of the NEP.¹⁰⁸

Was Stalin an agent of the development of the forces of production?

The answer to this question should be apparent by now. The forces of production did not seize Stalin by the scruff of the neck and compel him to develop these forces by coercively transforming the relations of production. Rather, the NEP-relations of production were transformed as a non-predetermined result of class-conflict between the direct producers, peasants and workers, on the one hand, for whom such transformation was not in their interests, and the bureaucracy, on the other hand, for whom such transformation was in its interests because only in this way could it consolidate its position as a ruling class. The development of the forces of production was an *indirect consequence* of the bureaucracy transforming the relations of production; the bureaucracy did not arise *for the purpose* of transforming those relations in order to accumulate.

Nor is there any compelling factual basis for asserting that the military-political pressures of the advanced-capitalist West caused a social transformation in order to competitively accumulate 'capital', build industry and defend the country.¹⁰⁹ No one in the leadership responded to this long-standing and on-going threat by advocating an end to the NEP. The consensus, regardless of tendency, was that a rupture with the peasantry would cause such grave instability, a veritable upheaval, as to render the Soviet Union even more

106. Lewin p. 159.

107. Lewin 1975.

108. Cohen 1974, p. 318.

109. In the Marxist camp, the 'state-capitalist' interpretation of Soviet history, inspired by Tony Cliff, is especially keen to advance and defend this position.

vulnerable to outside pressures. Certainly, Trotsky denounced the majority-leadership not because it envisaged abolishing the NEP but because it wanted to broaden the NEP thereby, Trotsky thought, undermining the foundation of Soviet power by placing the economic development of the country at the mercy of international capital.¹¹⁰

In any event, the grain-crisis *overrode* the foreign threat, which, moreover, had considerably diminished by 1929.¹¹¹ Even then, there was no unanimity of opinion that destroying the NEP was the way to solve this crisis. Had the bureaucracy and its chief, Stalin, been able to consolidate itself as a ruling class based on the existing relations of production, circumscribing the development the forces of production within limits set by those relations, it would have done so. And that, indeed, was what the tsarist ruling class had been able to do right down to 1917; and it is what Stalin tried to do until 1929. The conflict between classes, not between states, drove social transformation.

Only *post festum*, once collectivisation and industrialisation were in full swing, did Stalin justify his course in terms of the foreign threat: 'We are fifty or a hundred years behind' warning that Russia had to catch up otherwise the advanced countries will 'crush us', he declared in an oft-noted February, 1931 speech.¹¹² It was Stalin's good fortune – incredible good luck really – that the capitalist West was then entering a period of profound economic crisis and social upheaval, which concentrated the minds of the ruling bourgeoisies, particularly in Germany, to work on restoring order at home rather than engage in military adventures abroad. But, for the Great Depression, the likelihood of military attack on the Soviet Union in its moment of supreme vulnerability would have been that much greater.¹¹³

Summing up, the Stalinist state managed to industrialise the country to a qualitatively higher degree than its agrarian-based tsarist predecessor did by once again politically subjugating the direct producers and enforcing their 'military-feudal exploitation', as Bukharin had feared. Stalin bound the ex-peasant to the *kolkhoz*, the collective farm, and he linked the collective farm sufficiently tightly to the state to allow the bureaucracy to take a surplus on a regular basis. Similarly, Stalin destroyed the factory-committees and trade-unions, which, under the NEP, had remained largely effective instruments of

110. Trotsky 1980, p. 379.

111. In 1927, a crisis in diplomatic relations broke out with the West, notably with England and its conservative Baldwin government. By 1929, the crisis had long passed, with a friendly Labour government taking up residence at 10 Downing Street.

112. Cited in Deutscher 1966, p. 328.

113. Stalin acknowledged as much. Churchill asked him to compare collectivisation with the Nazi invasion. There was no comparison, Stalin exclaimed. In the 1930s, the enemy was everywhere and there was no front. Churchill 1950, p. 498.

workers' defence, and bound workers to their factories, unable to leave unless given permission by management.¹¹⁴ Here, too, Stalin welded the factory to the state to extract a surplus on a regular basis.

How and why during the NEP Stalin successfully constructed a political apparatus *outside* the immediate sphere of production sufficiently powerful to destroy workers' and peasants' power *inside* the sphere of production is beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice to say for the moment that, as an urban-anchored version of the agrarian-rooted tsarist state, the Stalinist state necessarily rested on a surplus-extraction or property-relationship common to both, indeed, to all non-capitalist modes of production: where the direct producers are merged, in some form or another, with the means of production, the relationship between a class of surplus-appropriators, where and when the latter exists in opposition to a class of producers, 'must appear at the same time as a direct relationship of domination and servitude, and the direct producer therefore as an unfree person'.¹¹⁵

Where had the Bolsheviks gone wrong?

IV How the Bolsheviks understood the peasant-question in NEP-Russia

By the twentieth century, the transformation of peasants into workers in Western Europe was largely complete, while it was still in its very earliest stages in Russia, where 90 per cent of the population retained possession of the land, producing primarily for subsistence and only secondarily for the market. In England, the homeland of capitalism, the landed aristocracy had used what had remained of its feudal powers to short-circuit the peasants' drive to retain ownership of the land by reducing them, at first, to lease-holders, then rent-paying tenants, then to a class of landless producers, proletarians, a process Marx memorialised in his chapter 'On the So-called Primitive Accumulation' in *Capital*. In Russia, at the conclusion of the Civil War, the Bolsheviks thought they, too, at the very least, could pick up where the tsarist state had left off and go on transforming peasants into workers by adopting the New Economic Policy in 1921 to promote economic development and 'primitive-socialist accumulation'. Unlike the English or tsarist precedents however, the Bolsheviks thought they could effect this transformation with

114. In the spring of 1930, Stalinist 'shockworkers' seized control of 80 per cent of the factory-committees, transforming them into tools of management, and completing the rout of the Right Opposition at the rank-and-file level. Murphy 2005, p. 194.

115. Marx 1981, p. 926.

the support of the peasantry, never dreaming – as long as they remained Bolsheviks – that they could ever execute this transformation, or any phase of it, over and against the interests of the peasantry, as Stalin was ultimately to do. Thus, Bukharin and Trotsky thought a democratic road to socialism in NEP-Russia existed, and they identified that road with their policies.

Lenin and all the Bolsheviks had long agreed that ‘small scale production’ characteristic of the peasantry ‘continuously, daily, hourly, spontaneously, and on a mass scale engenders capitalism and the bourgeoisie’.¹¹⁶ Lenin had developed this view at great length in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, published in 1899. He continued to adhere to this view under the NEP as well. Under the NEP, however, the dictatorship of the proletariat could turn putatively capitalist-agrarian economic development around to serve socialism. Two inter-connected assumptions founded the view that the workers’ state could direct or influence the peasantry’s self-movement ‘from the outside’.

All Bolsheviks thought that market-exchange was an integral part or moment of the peasants’ system of production. As Bukharin expressed it: ‘In the connection’ between the state-sector and the ‘small scale peasant sector’ ‘market relations are decisive’, the ‘price category is decisive’ and price is a ‘regulator of production’.¹¹⁷ Peasants would purchase the means of production and consumer-goods from state-run industry because ‘large-scale production’ there assured low prices, driving out higher-cost ‘small-scale production’. Just as under capitalism, the ‘market struggle causes the number of competitors to fall and production in be concentrated into ever fewer hands’. Under socialism, however, the working class holds the commanding heights of industry, not the ‘great kings of industry and bankers’. ‘On the soil of these market relations...state industry and the cooperatives will gradually prevail over all other forms of economy and squeeze them out entirely’.¹¹⁸

Bukharin, like the Left (or ‘petty-bourgeois’ opposition, in the eyes of the leadership), looked to unequal exchange – socialist accumulation – to grow large-scale production at the expense of small-scale production. The question of how much should be pumped from the peasantry divided them. Bukharin stated:

It would be wrong to argue that industry should grow only on what is produced within the limits of this industry. But the whole question involves how much we can take from the peasantry....Here is the difference between us and the opposition. Comrades of the opposition stand for pumping

116. Lenin 1966, p. 24.

117. Cited in Viola 2005, p. 109.

118. Ibid.

excessively...Our position in no way renounces this pumping over; but we calculate much more soberly.¹¹⁹

As the 1920s progressed, the Bolsheviks did come to disagree with respect to the provenance of the initial demand-stimulus for enhanced production. The policy followed by the leadership until 1927, theorised most fully by Bukharin, looked to the development of agriculture first. Bukharin relied on the prosperous elements of the peasantry – *kulaks* in the eyes of Bukharin’s opponents – to accumulate surpluses generating from them greater demand for industrial products, tools and implements, spurring the production of the latter. Accumulation in the peasant-economy ‘constitutes the *market* for industry and represents an aggregate of economic units, waiting to be attracted into the state economy and gradually transformed’.¹²⁰ When ‘peasant farms have great weight’, accumulation in socialist industry is a ‘function of accumulation in the peasant economy’.¹²¹

The Left Opposition, in contrast, insisted that the initial demand-stimulus should come from the industrial sector. They stressed that monopolistic pricing of industrial goods, a hidden form of taxation, would render unequal exchange even more unequal and accelerate the shift to socialised production by siphoning the wealth of the richer peasants more quickly than the normal processes of socialist accumulation would allow. Preobrazhensky, Trotsky’s ally, vigorously touted this measure. Such pricing would decline *pari passu* with the growth of the socialist sector at the expense of the private. Once the transition was accomplished, accumulation based on the socialist sector alone would drive the economy forward. The net transfer of resources from agriculture to industry through unequal exchange would subsequently redound to agriculture’s benefit by a substantial flow of consumer-goods and agricultural tools produced by state-industry.¹²²

The Bolsheviks further premised the political-economic success of the NEP on the ostensibly growing differentiation of the peasantry owing to the effect of capitalist competition among them. Under capitalism and a capitalist state, producers with more advanced techniques and lower costs would cause producers with more backward techniques and higher costs to lose their land and become exploited wage-workers. However, a *workers’* state could channel these capitalist tendencies in a pro-socialist direction by taking advantage

119. Cited in Cohen 1973, p. 174.

120. Bukharin 1982, p. 168.

121. Bukharin 1982, p. 169.

122. Trotsky 1980, pp. 49–55.

of its benefits while shifting its costs onto the private sector. Bukharin, for his part, thought the richer peasants would accumulate and invest in means of production, providing a market for socialist industry and helping the working class grow. Within the peasant-economy, Bukharin continued, we 'prefer to allow the bourgeois peasant to develop his farm' but, (and echoing Trotsky), 'taking from him *considerably more* than from the middle peasant. The resources acquired in this way we shall then give in the form of credits to middle-peasant organizations, or in some other form to the poor peasants and farm labourers' to help finance a cooperative movement among them.¹²³ Pooling the resources of 'middle'- and 'poor' peasants in this manner would stunt the formation of a large agricultural proletariat exploited by richer peasants, yet help improve their productivity and standard of living in competition with them. Whoever saw in this policy the "'unleashing of the *kulak*'", as the Left Opposition did, was woefully mistaken. The 'struggle against the *kulak* farm' could not take an administrative form, as under war-communism, only an economic one. The 'struggle must *not* be a wager on the *kulak*', Bukharin insisted.¹²⁴

Here, again, the Left Opposition's programme was not very different. Trotsky conveniently summarised it:

*The growth of private proprietorship in the village must be offset by a more rapid development of collective farming. It is necessary systematically and from year to year to subsidize the efforts of the poor peasants to organize in collectives.... A much larger sum ought to be appropriated for the creation of Soviet and collective farms. Maximum advantages must be offered to the newly organised collective farms and other forms of collectivism. People deprived of elective rights must not be allowed to be members of the collective farms. All the work of the cooperatives ought to be inspired by the aim of transforming small-scale production into large-scale collective production.... Careful attention must be paid to land distribution; above all, land must be allotted to the collective farms and the farms of the poor, with a maximum protection of their interests.*¹²⁵

To further level the competitive playing field, the Left urged greater taxation of the *kulaks*, maintaining existing tax-rates for the middle-peasants, and freeing the poor peasants from all taxation. In April 1928, the Politburo followed suit: it raised the tax-rate on well-to-do elements of the peasantry from 25 to 30 per cent, supplemented by individually assessed surcharges on the

123. Bukharin 1982, pp. 199, 194, 205 (emphasis added).

124. Bukharin 1982, p. 197 (emphasis added).

125. Trotsky 1980, pp. 326–8.

very top strata of the peasantry, nearly doubling their taxes, while raising the percentage of peasants exempt from all taxes from 25 to 30 per cent, and lowering somewhat the tax-rates for the middle-peasantry.¹²⁶ Trotsky, like Bukharin, also supported the agricultural proletariat in the task of building cooperatives.¹²⁷

To sum up: Bukharin, Trotsky, Stalin and the Bolsheviks sharply debated how fast to promote pro-socialist economic development in the countryside, how much emphasis to give to one or another element of their common, NEP-premised programmes. The differences between them were of degree, not kind, around secondary, not fundamental matters, because they all agreed that: 1) peasants were compelled to trade on the market to purchase a portion of their means of subsistence (consumer-goods) and means of production (producer-goods) and 2) state-policies could channel the capitalist self-differentiation of the peasantry in a socialist direction. Finally, and most importantly, all participants presupposed that peasants, by and large, would always be free to act in their interests. Such freedom constituted the general background political condition of the NEP.¹²⁸

Introduction to a critique of the Bolshevik understanding of the peasant-question under the NEP

The point of departure of this chapter for understanding the peasantry in Russia is the radically different notion that the peasantry ‘continuously, daily, hourly, spontaneously, and on a mass scale engenders’ – not capitalism, as Lenin and the Bolsheviks believed – but *itself*, and little else. Its individual members seek to realise their interests *as peasants*, as who they are. As Marx adumbrated it:

126. Carr & Davies 1969, pp. 756–7.

127. Trotsky 1980, p. 329.

128. ‘The ideas of the Left...differed fundamentally from those of the Right’, declares Moshe Lewin (p. 142), apparently in direct opposition to my claim that no differences on fundamentals existed between the two. I believe the contrast can be reconciled. Lewin writes: ‘On the problem of social structures in the countryside, the attitudes of Trotsky and Bukharin were not fundamentally very different...’, p. 148. ‘The margin of disagreement between Left and Right over the question of peasant cooperation and collectivisation was...fairly small, and was to become even smaller in the course of’ 1926 and 1927, p. 154. ‘Above all, the Left had as little thought as Bukharin himself of using force to change the way of life and socio-economic structure of the peasantry. This emerges clearly from the analysis of the Left’s ideas on collectivisation’, p. 147. There was clearly agreement on these questions. But perhaps these questions were not fundamental, only secondary? Which question was fundamental then? It turns out that the Left and the Right woke up ‘too late’ to recognise that their ‘true adversary’ was...Stalin, from 1929 onwards. On this fundamental question, the only one relevant to this chapter, Lewin and I join hands.

The individual [peasant] is placed in such conditions as to make not the acquiring of wealth his object, but self-sustenance, his own reproduction as a member of the community; the reproduction of himself as proprietor of the parcel of ground, and, in that quality, as a member of the commune. The survival of the commune is the reproduction of all its members as self-sustaining peasants...¹²⁹

Contrary to the Bolsheviks' first assumption, the peasants could secure their existence independently of exchange on the market because they were in *full* – not partial – possession of the means of subsistence and production: land, animals, and tools. This does not mean the peasants were not *involved* in the market for, of course, they were, some, the *kulaks* especially, extensively so. The point is that, whether the peasant's participation in the market was large or small, no significant numbers of them *depended* on it for the purchase of essentials. Peasants did not depend on workers' labour to survive, but workers' survival did depend on the peasantry's labour.

The fall of the Bolsheviks' first assumption entails the fall of the second. Because no significant numbers of peasants were economically compelled to sell their output to each other or to the state at *competitive* prices, no capitalist self-differentiation, realised through cost-cutting measures of accumulation, specialisation and innovation, sifting out productive and unproductive peasants and creating capitalists and proletarians, could be expected to take place. And none did take place, cutting off the very possibility of socialised industry to take advantage of this (non-existent) process.

Peasant-rules for reproduction

The peasantry's reproduction, which was based on possession of the means of subsistence, compelled the great majority of peasant-households to adopt definite forms of rational economic behaviour which, taken together, led to a very constricted pattern of economic growth, even economic involution, expressed by declining labour-productivity and deteriorating terms of trade between industry and agriculture. Peasants found in their interest to follow these 'rules of reproduction', which I draw verbatim from Brenner:

A) Production for subsistence

Because... food markets were highly uncertain, peasants found it the better part of valour to adopt the rule for reproduction 'safety first' or 'produce for subsistence', diversifying to make sure they secured what they needed

129. Marx 1973, p. 476.

to survive and marketing only physical surpluses, rather than specializing to maximize exchange value. Subsistence crises were thus common but unpredictable....

B) Many children

Peasants had to provide for their own social insurance against old age and ill health and for the amplification of the family labour force. They therefore had little choice but to have as many children as possible, especially to make sure that their offspring survived into adulthood. Their doing so was, however, was incompatible with the requirements for profit maximization that went with specialisation, because children tended, for much of their lives, to cost more to support than they could contribute to the family economy.

C) Sub-dividing holdings

Peasants also had to respond to their (male) children's demands for the material basis to form a family, and their own interest in seeing to the continuation of the line. They were therefore obligated to subdivide. Nevertheless, doing so was again incompatible with the requirement of profit maximization that went with specialisation, because sub-division obviously undermined the productive effectiveness of the resulting productive units.

Simply put, peasants traded off some of the gains from trade they could have secured from specialisation in order to ensure their maintenance in infirmity and old age, as well as to provide for their children (sons) a base for family formation and to secure the continuation of the line. Had they chosen instead to specialize, they would automatically have become dependent on the market, subject to the competitive constraint, and have no choice but to maximize their exchange value...in which case they could not sensibly have chosen as rules of for reproduction having large families and subdividing their holdings.¹³⁰

The peasantries of tsarist and NEP-Russia empirically replicated the foregoing rules of reproduction. However, the operation of these rules under the NEP impacted the urban population very differently than when they operated under the tsars.

130. Brenner 2001, pp. 281–2.

The export-collapse continues under the NEP

As noted, the spectacular failure of grain-exports under the NEP to spring back to their pre-NEP levels strikingly confirms the peasant-drive to produce for subsistence and, correlatively, the Russian economy's relative isolation from the world-market.¹³¹

On-going peasant-possession of the means of subsistence meant that peasants could produce their necessary product without having to market their surplus-product, which the tsarist state had hitherto extorted from them for export-purposes through a combination of rents, taxes and, until 1906, redemption-payments. In exchange, the tsarist state imported means of production that were principally destined for armament and cognate industries, railroads notably, and luxury consumer-goods for the landed aristocracy. Neither workers nor peasants benefited much, as little of what was imported met their consumer-needs or, as far as peasants were concerned, ploughed back into means of production for agriculture. As a result, the peasants recovered from the depredations of the Civil War and restored their livelihoods without requiring a similar recovery in grain-exports. Lewin summed up:

By about 1928... the export of grain had practically ceased. The population was short of bread, and their numbers increasing. Since the annual rate of growth of the population was between 2 and 3 percent, an extra 4 million tons of grain was needed to feed them. In these circumstances, there was no grain for export...¹³²

Once peasants destroyed the surplus-extraction relationship by which the tsarist state had appropriated an unpaid-for part of the product from them, peasants came to control not only their necessary product, as before (within limits), but their surplus-product as well. Under the NEP, peasants could now decide what part of their total product was 'necessary' and what was

131. See Table One above p. 24. Day's failure to incorporate foreign trade statistics – Table One or a facsimile thereof is nowhere to be found in his book – renders problematic his entire discussion about the potential of economic gains inherent in foreign trade as a realistic policy-option for the Soviet leadership. Specifically, Day appears to consider the putative 'economic dichotomy' between Stalin's chosen policy of 'isolationism' and Trotsky's rejected policy of 'integrationism' in relation to the world-market under the NEP to be a matter of choosing one or the other on ideological grounds. Table One indicates it was not a matter of ideological choice. The Russian economy's exile from the world-market was an objective reality. That reality conditioned all policy-choices. No policy-choice determined that reality. Finally, the wild gyrations in the quantities of grain exported would appear to speak to the inability or unwillingness of the party-leadership consistently to implement a policy of 'isolationism', an inconsistency for which Day offers no explanation. Day 1973.

132. Lewin 1968, p. 177.

'surplus'. And they decided to keep in their hands much of the surplus formerly exported, converting it into extra meat, a few more eggs, more milk, larger reserves of grain in case of drought or flood, better footwear, sturdier housing, more free time, etc.

Between 1924 and 1928 the number of livestock rose both more quickly and more regularly than in the prewar years and cattle were heavier and better fed.¹³³ Peasants ate better, and, to round out the picture, so did workers. Workers' height, weight and chest-measurements substantially improved.¹³⁴ Because the direct producers, workers and peasant alike, enjoyed a higher standard of living and improved health, they were less subject to disease, a little publicised point that the following table brings into stark relief:

Table Two: Incidence of disease in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, 1913, 1929, 1930–4 (thousands).¹³⁵

Year	Smallpox	Typhus	Malaria	Typhoid Fever	Relapsing Fever
1913	120	424	30	67	3600
1929	40	170	6	8	3000
1930–4 (5-year average)	314	232	9	35	5295

The NEP-years were the healthiest; better than in tsarist times, and better than in the period of forced collectivisation and forced industrialisation under Stalin. The bottom-line: it paid (and pays) not to be exploited.

The Bolsheviks had at one time sharply debated the value of preserving a state-monopoly on foreign trade as a means to regulate politically their economic relations with the capitalist world. The export-collapse indicates the issue was rather moot. The Bolsheviks did not get to choose whether to have trade-relations with the capitalist world on the basis on some ideological preference for autarchy or integration into the world-market. Twenty-five million peasant-households made that decision for them and they chose autarchy. Before the War, 26 per cent of the agricultural production had gone to the domestic market; in the NEP-period, it fell by half, to 13 per cent.¹³⁶ For the monopoly in foreign trade to have meant something other than threshing a (relatively) empty straw, as it were, the Bolsheviks needed to override

133. Davies 1980, p. 4.

134. Carr and Davies 1969, Volume 1, pt. 2, pp. 697–8.

135. This is a modified version of Table Forty-Nine in Davies & Wheatcroft, 2004, p. 512. For the sake of concision, it omits the anomalous because catastrophic years 1918–22, as well as data for individual years between 1930 and 1936.

136. Lewin 1968, p. 176.

peasant self-determination and seize control of grain-production itself. Since they did not take this course throughout the twenties, grain-exports remained abysmally low, assuring only minimal economic relations with the capitalist world.

In sum, peasants could get along quite nicely without exporting abroad and, as we shall see, could even do without the output of domestic industrial labour if circumstances warranted, undermining the Bolshevik view that peasants needed workers to survive. Well into the twenties, the peasants enjoyed the fruits of their labour on their household-plots, making the NEP, all proportions maintained, a golden era for them. Peasants supported the NEP because it eliminated the arbitrary grain-confiscations characteristic of war-'communism' – and so reminiscent of tsarist times – and allowed them freely to market their physical surpluses subject to payment of a fixed tax.

The peasants' tendency to market – or not to market – their agricultural surpluses to the cities and town, according to their self-understood material interests, soon intersected with the issue of maintaining the worker-peasant alliance. If peasants chose not to market their surpluses, they placed in jeopardy the interests of the urban citizenry, workers and (emerging) bureaucrats alike, because both were dependent for their daily bread on the peasantry.

The grain-crises of 1927 and 1928: a closer look

Uncertain harvests pressured peasants not to further risk their relatively marginal livelihoods by marketing their necessary product and becoming dependent on the vagaries of price-movements on the market as well.¹³⁷ Thus, the harvest-failures of 1927 and 1928 drove peasants in the affected areas to compensate for the decline in their total product by converting all or part of the surplus-product into the necessary product. It also led them to change the mix of their necessary product as they cut back on raising crops to feed animals and ramped up those destined to feed people: peasants prepared to eat less meat and more bread and potatoes. From the summer of 1928 to the summer of 1929, the number of pigs and cattle declined substantially, the number of sheep and goats stagnated, while the number of horses grew far less quickly.¹³⁸ The lack of adequate fodder paradoxically created a temporary glut of meat on the market, pushing 'free' market-prices in some areas below already low official prices. Peasants sold their animals right away

137. Shanin notes that annual variations in yields in Russia were three times greater than those observed in Germany and the UK. Shanin, 1972, pp. 20–1.

138. Davies 1980, p. 44.

and at fire-sale prices before starvation and disease rendered them unfit for human consumption.¹³⁹

The crisis of 1927–8 also created a glut of non-food, manufactured items on the market; the opposite of a ‘goods-famine’. To contemporary observers, state-set industrial prices appeared ‘too high’ in relation to demand, unaffordable to both urban and rural consumers, an apparent throwback to the scissors-crises of 1923 and 1925. The Left Opposition energetically recommended lowering production-costs by implementing a ‘régime of economy’. However, the problem went much deeper than lowering prices of manufactured goods to market-clearing levels, a solution that had quickly resolved previous scissors-crises: it was a matter of *raising consumer-demand for them*. And *this*, in turn, was connected to increasing the supply of affordable food. As Brenner remarks:

Subsistence crises not only brought extremely high food prices over several years; but also because of the high food prices, they brought reduced discretionary spending for most of the population and thus *unusually low* [i.e. *market clearing* – J.M.] prices for non-essential, non-food items (emphasis added).¹⁴⁰

Thus, owing to food-shortages, the terms of trade for agricultural goods improved considerably and the blades of the scissors closed rapidly to the detriment of industrial goods. The blades joined in September 1928; and they then opened in the opposite direction, as the table below indicates:

Table Three: Ratio of prices of industrial goods to agricultural products¹⁴¹
(1913 = 100)

1 October 1926	1.18
1 April 1927	1.12
1 October 1927	1.07
1 April 1928	1.04
1 July 1928	0.97
1 July 1929	0.85
1 October 1929	0.88

Despite industrial prices falling below parity by the summer of 1928, the grain-crises continued unabated. Critically, since peasants could freely reallocate their diminishing surpluses in their favour, the working class bore

139. Carr and Davies 1969, p. 100.

140. Brenner 2007, p. 68.

141. Davies 1989, pp. 72–3, & footnote 60.

the brunt of the grain-crises of 1927–28. In tsarist times, grain-crises spared workers while peasants took it on the chin.

Peasants increase production by applying more labour

Peasants in tsarist Russia had achieved increases in grain-production by ploughing up grazing land reserved for livestock and engaging in more labour-intensive agrarian practices. This led to a shortage of fodder and decreased livestock-production per capita.¹⁴² Population-growth and the extension of production to less fertile land also led to smaller per capita holdings as peasants subdivided their lands. Between 1877 and 1905, the average size of household-allotments fell from 36 acres to 28.¹⁴³

The peasantry temporarily reversed the deteriorating peasant/land ratio in the great sharing out of gentry-land in 1917–18. The average size of the household-allotment rebounded to 33 acres; still below what it had been 40 years earlier. The number of households also rose by 20 per cent, from 21 million in the pre-Revolutionary era to 25 million after 1917. The demographic losses owing to World-War One, Civil War and famine had the unintended but salutary effect of removing production from the least-fertile land. Since the average land-fertility was now greater, along with its availability, it was now easier for the young to leave the parental nest earlier to set up their own households. Crucially, the starting size of the family-household declined, from 5.67 members in 1916 to 5.11 in 1927. Thus, the amount of land held per capita rose from 4.91 acres in 1916 to 6.47 acres in 1927, a spectacular jump of 31.7 per cent, despite the partitioning of 1917–18.¹⁴⁴

Because the gentry had previously rented much of the redistributed land in 1917–18 to peasants,¹⁴⁵ and since the peasants now paid no rent – performed no surplus-labour for the gentry – peasants could freely reallocate their surplus-labour to refurbish their holdings, raising land-productivity along with population-density at which demographic growth generated overpopulation relative to resources, as Table Four indicates.

142. Shanin 1972, p. 13.

143. Robinson 1960, p. 94. All units of land-measurement converted to acres.

144. Danilov 1988, pp. 214–15. Danilov and Shanin draw on statistics published in the 1920s.

145. Shanin 1972, p. 153.

Table Four: Peasant harvest-yields before and after 1917¹⁴⁶

Year	Yield (centner/hectare)	per cent increase since previous period
1861 to 1870	4.4	—
1871 to 1880	4.7	7
1881 to 1890	5.1	8
1891 to 1900	5.9	15
1901 to 1910	6.3	7
1922 to 1927	7.4	17

Table Five: Grain-harvests and yields, USSR (boundaries of 17 September 1939), 1909 to 1913 and 1917 to 1929¹⁴⁷

Year	Yield (centner/hectare)	Gross harvest (million centner)	per cent increase since previous period
1909 to 1913 (annual average)	6.9	651.8	—
1917	6.4	545.6	—
1918	6.0	495.3	-9.3
1919	6.2	504.5	2.0
1920	5.7	451.9	-10.5
1921	5.0	362.6	-19.7
1922	7.6	543.1	38.6
1923	7.2	565.9	12.5
1924	6.2	514.0	-9.2
1925	8.3	724.6	41
1926	8.2	768.3	6.3
1927	7.6	723.0	-5.9
1928	7.9	733.2	1.4
1929	7.5	717.4	-2.2
1924 to 1928 (annual average)	7.6	692.6	—
1925 to 1929 (annual average)	7.9	733.3	—

Table Five gives yearly trends in land-productivity for the post-October period.

Though the time-horizon is quite short for the NEP-period, the 1925–9 average of 7.9 centners/hectare, achieved after agriculture had fully recovered from the lingering effects of the Civil War and famine, compares very favourably to the 5.3 centner/average for the tsarist period 1861–1910, though

146. Danilov 1988, p. 275.

147. Danilov 1988, p. 276.

the improvement is less dramatic when compared to the immediate prewar years, when the harvest of 1913 proved to be exceptionally bountiful. Still, peasants raised land-yields under the NEP not by applying more advanced means of production but in much the same way that they had under the tsars: by raising the amount of labour that they applied to the land. In 1926, only 1.7 per cent of motive power was mechanical in NEP-agriculture, rising to an unprepossessing 2.8 per cent in 1929. In 1928, 10 per cent of the land was ploughed with wooden ploughs; 75 per cent was sown by hand; 50 per cent was harvested with scythe and sickle and 40 per cent threshed by hand.¹⁴⁸

In his novel, Chayanov reproduced – and magnified – the labour-intensive aspect of peasant-production: peasants achieved astounding increases in grain-output in their utopia because they are ‘practically looking after each ear of grain individually’.¹⁴⁹

In the absence of significant capital-investment and innovation, peasants could not regularly raise labour-productivity, as the following table indicates:

Table Six: Production of grain, centners/person¹⁵⁰

1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929
3.74	5.16	5.35	4.92	4.88	4.68

Using different figures, Lewin arrived at the same conclusion: ‘In 1914 grain production per head of the population had been 584 kg. In 1928–1929, it was only 484.4 kg’.¹⁵¹

Population-growth and declining per capita production jointly lay the basis for generalised demographic crisis in the very long run. Earlier, in tsarist times, famine had last hit the peasantry in the Volga region in 1911.¹⁵² Harvest failures recurred under the NEP in 1927 and 1928 but did not lead to famine among peasants, at least not in that period, because peasants reallocated their surpluses away from the towns and cities, shifting the food-crisis onto workers’ shoulders.

148. Carr and Davies 1969, p. 218.

149. Chayanov 1976, p. 84.

150. I generated this table by dividing the annual population, given by Danilov on page 40, by the gross harvest for the period 1924–9.

151. Lewin 1975, p. 174.

152. Robinson 1960, p. 245.

Peasants do not specialise

The peasants did respond, within limits consonant with production for subsistence, to favourable state-set prices for technical crops. The area sown with vegetable and melons in 1925 was 156.6 per cent greater than in 1916. The area sown with cotton- and tobacco-crops grew by 53.2 and 44.1 per cent respectively from 1913 to 1929, with similar increases in total harvests.¹⁵³ Peasants devoted far more land to potato-cultivation, the acreage rising over 80 per cent between 1913 and 1929. There was also a rapid increase in the cultivation of oil-yielding crops. The area sown with sunflower rose four-fold between 1913 and 1928. The average sunflower-harvest between 1924 and 1928 stood at 18.7 million centners compared to 7.4 million in 1913. Fibre-crop cultivation, hemp for example, increased by 25 per cent. Finally, sugar-beet production most clearly demonstrated what Danilov called the 'peasantisation' of technical crop-production. In tsarist times, the gentry cultivated 80 per cent of sugar-beet production on its estates, 20 per cent on peasant-lands. In 1927, peasant-households sowed 68 per cent of the area under sugar-beet, overshadowing the 32 per cent sowed in large-scale units run on state-farms by the Sugar-Trust, though sugar-beet production as a whole fluctuated very sharply. Only flax-production showed no appreciable increase from tsarist times.

Danilov summarised: 'The increasing cultivation of intensive crops by peasant-household was one of the most important agricultural developments of the 1920s...enabling peasants to enlarge their holding of cattle and tools and providing employment for surplus household labour'.¹⁵⁴ However, at no point did peasants *specialise* and become *dependent* on the sale of their outputs to purchase their inputs because this went against the peasantry's strategy of 'safety first'. This strategy ensured, in Danilov's words, the

extensive nature of the small-holding peasant economy with its backward material-technical base and low technological level. The problems of intensive cultivation heralded a general decline in the pace of agricultural development, since agricultural production remained parcellized in millions of tiny units and continued to be based upon peasant manual labour.¹⁵⁵

153. Danilov 1988, p. 286.

154. Danilov 1988, p. 284.

155. Danilov 1988, pp. 286-7.

Class-differentiation of the peasantry?

Of the misconceptions held about the peasantry by the Bolsheviks, the most egregious was the idea that, but for the NEP, the mass of the peasantry would slowly but surely have polarised into a rich, landed minority and a poor, landless majority. The facts show otherwise.

The peasantry was indeed differentiated. However, there was no growing self-differentiation such that, if left unchecked by state-policies, the peasantry would have cleaved into landed capitalists and landless proletarians. In fact, the peasants themselves were checking this (apparent) process and could do so because there was no capitalist competition among them. Peasants, 'rich' 'middle-' and 'poor' subordinated all of their productive activities to secure an adequate supply of food on their household-plots, not to maximise profit by maximising price/cost ratios. This strategic choice barred the development of more advanced productive techniques requiring more cooperative, less individualised forms of labour, i.e. large-scale agriculture. Moreover, the extant form of peasant-cooperation, via the *mir*, functioned to reproduce the extant relations of property, essentially by assuring a distribution of land proportional to the size of the peasant-household and regulating access to common lands. 'The long range prospect for Russian peasant-society therefore was the preservation of traditional patterns of landholding and wealth and distribution of wealth, rather than capitalist differentiation'.¹⁵⁶ Nor did the *mir* function to develop the forces of production.¹⁵⁷ This is why the Bolsheviks, especially Bukharin, thought they had to teach peasants another kind of cooperation in grain-production and livestock-raising, importuning them with their own state-sponsored schemes of cooperation. The peasants ignored Bukharin's cooperative nostrums because they were an illusory substitute for the real peasant-cooperative movement that was institutionally expressed by the *mir*.

From a straightforwardly empirical standpoint, Teodor Shanin has said all that needs to be said on the question of differentiation. In the *Awkward Class*, Shanin demonstrated, ample facts and figures to hand, that 'differentiation' was a strictly circumscribed, purely quantitative differentiation of productive powers within the peasantry, not the qualitative dissolution of the peasantry into two antagonistic classes. This basic truth caused endless headaches for the 'agrarian Marxists' of the Communist Academy, who

156. Lowe 1990, p. 191.

157. For the role of the *mir* in late-Imperial and NEP-Russia, see Mironov 1985, Lewin 1985, Confino 1985.

burned the midnight-oil throughout the 20s in a fruitless search for agrarian capitalism. Shanin's remarks on this score are worth citing at length:

The presupposition of polarization of the peasantry into capitalist entrepreneurs and proletarians made the presence or absence of wage-labour an ideal indicator of differentiation in Marxist terms. However, the relatively small amount of wage-labour reported among the Russian peasantry (and its further decline reported during the revolution) made this an inadequate index for scholars who presupposed considerable differentiation among the peasantry and were searching of signs of its increase. The majority of Marxists tended to rely on indices of wealth used by their ideological foes [the Neo-Populists or Organization and Production School led by A.V. Chayanov – J.M.] In these terms, peasant households were ranked by their holdings, using a scale relating to some major index of peasant wealth (land held, land sown, horses, estimated capital, manpower etc.) and then *arbitrarily divided by points along the scale into 'strata'*.¹⁵⁸

The Russians called these strata, from poor to rich, *batrak*, *bednyak*, *serednyak*, and *kulak*. *Batraks* constituted between 1 per cent and 3 per cent of the rural population in Russia, and were represented to be proletarians. However, these were strange proletarians. Most worked for wages because they did not have enough land to live on and had to supplement their income, not because they were landless. Even when they did work for wages, they did so periodically, not permanently. Moreover, when they periodically worked for wages, they never worked for capitalists: 25 per cent worked on a miniscule number of state-farms, *sovkhozy*, 35 per cent worked as shepherds for the peasant-commune, and the rest worked for *other peasants*. Stranger still, most *batraks* worked for poor and middle-peasants who were short of labour rather than the bigger and richer households, the *kulaks* or misnamed 'rural bourgeoisie': the *bête noir* of the Marxists.¹⁵⁹

Kulak-holdings, for their part, did not operate on a capitalist basis, subject to the cost-cutting imperatives of capitalist competition. Rather, they were distinguished by being 'bigger and more intensive in terms of capital per unit of land and per worker, by higher productivity and income per capita in money terms, rather than being based on capitalist farming and the exploitation of

158. Shanin 1972, p. 132. (emphasis added) Of course, the same chopping and mincing exercise could readily be done on the working class in a modern capitalist country. It, too, has strata – low, middle, high-income – workers who rent vs. those who own, workers with three, two, one, or no cars, workers with large families or small families, workers with toasters vs. those without, and so one, ad infinitum. But to conclude that one is dealing with different classes, or classes-in-formation, should give pause.

159. Lewin 1975, p. 50.

wage-workers'.¹⁶⁰ The *kulaks* were but an 'enlarged' version of the *serednyak* or middle-peasant.¹⁶¹ To be sure, these better-off peasants supplied proportionately more grain on the market than their less fortunate brethren. Very broadly speaking, *kulaks*, 5 per cent of peasant-households, could place 20 per cent of their production on the market, the average or 'middle'-peasant, 70 per cent of peasant-households, sold 12 per cent of their grain-production, and the 'poor' peasants 25 per cent of peasant-households, placed only 6 per cent of their grain-production on the market.¹⁶² Still, this did not make the well-to-do peasants into capitalists. As Brenner notes, in

the presence of peasant possession, larger, more efficient peasants can, by virtue of their greater productiveness, take a greater share of the market at the expense of their less-well-off counterparts, but they cannot put them out of business, appropriating their assets, and reducing them to the ranks of the proletariat. This is, again, because the latter are shielded from competition by their direct, non-market access to all the inputs they need to reproduce their families. As a result, wide swathes of the economy are impenetrable by the standard processes of capitalist natural selection, and potentially capitalist peasants can find only a limited market at best for proletarians to hire and/or commercial tenants to lease their land to.¹⁶³

In the spring of 1925, the leadership tweaked the NEP by lifting restrictions on the leasing of land and the hiring of labour by well-to-do peasants, with protections accorded to those hired as agricultural workers.¹⁶⁴ The Left Opposition viewed this measure with great alarm, as proof-positive that the leadership was capitulating to ever more powerful, anti-proletarian, *kulak*-led capitalist forces in the countryside. In light of the foregoing discussion, this could hardly have been the case. As we have seen, proletarians in the countryside enjoyed a largely spectral existence, not because the state had placed legal constraints on hiring prior to 1925, but because peasants would do whatever was necessary to maintain possession of the land as the foundation of their livelihood – a far weightier constraint. Correlatively, lifting restrictions on the hiring of labour would still not facilitate the formation of a landless proletariat after 1925, since peasants would not willingly give up possession of the land, the basis of peasant-reproduction. Thus, lifting

160. Shanin 1972, p. 173.

161. Lewin 1975, p. 77.

162. Carr 1969, Volume 1, p. 3 note 3, Lewin, p. 176. The placement of dividing lines precisely demarcating 'kulak', middle-, poor peasant from each other is inevitably arbitrary but the cross-sectional pattern of grain-marketings is not.

163. Brenner 2007, p. 87.

164. Carr 1970, pp. 276–7.

or retaining these restrictions, even if enforceable, could hardly have made much difference either way.

Resiliency of the 'middle'-peasantry

According to Danilov, there was a statistically measurable process of merger and partitioning of households among the mass of the peasantry. He concluded that 'mergers continued to be most common in poor peasant groups, which contributed to the growing influence of the middle peasants by way of upward mobility of poor peasants. Mergers also reduced the number of peasant households'. On the other hand, 'the proportion of households undergoing partition was higher among rich peasants'. Thus, poorer and richer peasants constantly replenished the ranks of the middle-peasantry, while the middle-peasantry constantly generated poorer and richer peasants:

The interrelation of these two contrary processes explains the levelling that took place in the Soviet countryside before collectivisation. The increasing number of peasant households during the NEP was connected to the fall in the number of rich and poor peasant households, together with a corresponding growth in the number of middle peasant households. The increasing influence of the middle peasantry was a manifestation of the quantitative growth in peasant households generally, during the transitional period of the NEP.¹⁶⁵

This levelling process enhanced peasant-power by perennially aligning ever more closely the peasant's individual interests with those of their class. This process was at work in tsarist times as well, stymieing the development of capitalist relations in agriculture then too. This process merits a closer look.

In the 1905 Revolution, the peasants put their solidarity, generated by their *collective* and egalitarian access to the land, organised through the *mir*, to good use by forcing the tsarist state to abolish redemption-payments. The tsarist state pushed backed in the wake of the defeat of the 1905 Revolution with the Stolypin reforms 1906–11, named after the Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, notorious for repressing the peasant-movement with the liberal use of the hangman's noose – Stolypin's 'neckties' dotted the countryside – and other means of repression.

Looking ahead, Stolypin encouraged the 'strong and sober' peasants to withdraw from the *mir* and set up their own, consolidated farms, using

165. Danilov 1988, pp. 257–8.

intimidation and force against peasants who had other ideas.¹⁶⁶ Stolypin aimed above all to undermine peasant-solidarity and peasant-power by individualising peasant-access to the land.¹⁶⁷ As Stolypin himself put it, providing the 'diligent farmer with a separate plot of land' would eventually lead to the development of an 'independent, prosperous husbandman, a stable citizen of the land'.¹⁶⁸ However, Stolypin's reforms made little headway because they came up against the peasantry's primary line of defence – the *mir* – the very institution Stolypin intended to destroy.¹⁶⁹

Beyond trying to achieve the direct goal of undermining peasant-solidarity and fostering 'stable citizens' loyal to the tsarist state – the chief function of the Ministry of the Interior – Stolypin may also have read Adam Smith and identified 'privatised' access to the land with private property, prosperous husbandry, and development of capitalism, laying the basis for tsarist Russia to catch up to Western-European powers. 'What if not the individualism of small farm ownership, so quickly brought America to the fore' Stolypin affirmed.¹⁷⁰ Certainly, Lenin looked upon the reforms in this 'modernising' light and many historians have followed Lenin's lead. This is wildly misleading.

The Stolypin reforms were not about *divorcing* the peasants from their means of subsistence and making them dependent on the market for the purchase of their necessities, leading to the formation of a market in land and labour, as happened in England. Stolypin sought only to *individualise* peasant-access to the land; a crucial distinction overlooked by many Marxists, starting with Lenin, and non-Marxists, notably Gerschenkron.¹⁷¹ Understood as such, the reforms could not introduce capitalism in agriculture.

166. Pallot 1999, pp. 143–6.

167. Brenner 1985 has shown how the peasantry overcame lordly opposition and destroyed serfdom in fourteenth century Western Europe in part because more collaborative agricultural practices there fostered greater peasant class-power. In contrast, the Eastern-European peasantry succumbed to the Second Serfdom in part because the 'communal aspects' of the village-economy there were less developed, as expressed, *inter alia*, by the tendency of peasants 'to lay out holdings within the fields in rather large, relatively consolidated strips', generating 'more of a tendency to individualistic farming' and erecting 'major barriers to the way of the emergence of peasant power and peasant self-government', pp. 42–3. Stolypin the gentry-politician and Brenner the Marxist historian see eye to eye in respect to the sources of peasant-power.

168. Cited in Pallot 1999, p. 1.

169. Pallot 1999, pp. 171–80.

170. Cited in Mosse 1965, p. 260. For a discussion of the American road to capitalism, see Post 1995.

171. Gerschenkron 1962. For Gerschenkron, retention of the communal form of peasant-property after the abolition of serfdom stymied the development of capitalism in the countryside. He looked to the Stolypin reforms as the magic bullet to remedy this defect. The reforms were succeeding, he thought, until the *diabolus ex machina*

The reforms would not have altered the peasant-mode of production even if they had been successful on their own terms. Stolypin's enclosed holdings, roughly 10 per cent of all holdings by 1914, only 'magnified' the 'dominant trends' toward soil-exhaustion and declining returns exhibited by non-enclosed, communally-run holdings.¹⁷² Further, in Siberia and other areas of the tsarist Empire, communal ownership of land was non-existent and privatised access to the land prevailed. Yet these significant differences of land-tenure determined no significant differences in productive powers.¹⁷³ That is why, under the Tsars, there was little sign of the competitive consolidation of agricultural production into ever fewer and larger units of production run by capitalist tenants – *kulaks* – leasing land from capitalist landlords and worked by wage-labour recruited from peasants who had lost or were about to lose their land. The same was true under the NEP.¹⁷⁴

In *Toward Socialism or Capitalism*, Trotsky admitted he had no data to back up his thesis of class-differentiation:

I do not provide statistical data about differentiation in the village because no figures have been collected which would make a general estimate of this process possible. This absence must be explained not so much by the defects of our statistics as by the peculiarities of the social process itself, which embraces the 'molecular' alterations of 22 million peasant establishments.¹⁷⁵

Pace Trotsky, the process was invisible to the naked eye, not because it was 'molecular', but because it was not actually happening. Trotsky took no stock of the statistical evidence marshalled by government-agencies, notably the Commissariat of Agriculture, which did 'make a general estimate of trends' in the peasant-economy 'possible'. Those trends confounded Trotsky and Bukharin's analysis of class-differentiation in the countryside.

of World-War One destroyed Stolypin's reforms by destroying the tsarist state, its chief sponsor.

172. Pallot 1999, p. 241.

173. Lewin 1990, remarks that the Polish peasantry at the turn of the century exhibited an 'astonishing number of traits in common with Russians, even if they did not know the Russian-style partitioning commune. Private ownership of land was the rule [in Poland]...', p. 25.

174. For a reform that really delivered the *coup de grâce* to a non-capitalist mode of production, look no further than the Dawes Severalty Act, passed by the US Congress in 1887. This act individualised access to land of certain North-American Indian tribes by limiting each tribal member to a fixed, contiguous 160 acres. Unlike the Stolypin reforms, this *did* separate the North-American Indians from their means of subsistence because their largely nomadic way of life mandated collective, tribal access to vast expanses of land. Ultimately, (white) capitalist farmers forced the Indians to sell these plots, the more or less conscious aim of Dawes's swindle.

175. Trotsky 1975a, p. 323.

Trotsky, for his part, invalidated these results on the specious grounds that the Commissariat's agrarian specialists had massaged the evidence from a 'kulak point of view'.¹⁷⁶

Facts notwithstanding, Left and Right premised their agrarian programmes on the class-differentiation of the peasantry. In Bukharin's view, the formation of *kulak*-farms worked with wage-labour would spur peasants still in possession of their land to form cooperatives to compete successfully, producing more grain.¹⁷⁷ However, as marketing-shortfalls became evident in the winter of 1927, even he began to have misgivings on this score. The Left harboured little confidence that peasant-cooperatives could withstand competition from capitalist farmers without additional state-intervention. The Platform of the Left Opposition, circulated in September 1927, warned the growth of the *kulak*-stratum at the expense of the majority of the peasantry would jeopardise the *smychka*. To respond to this putative danger, the Left called on the state to force the wealthiest 10 per cent of the peasantry to loan 2.7 million tons of grain to finance industrialisation, 'the most sweeping administrative measure that the Left ever called for'.¹⁷⁸ Ironically, Stalin would obtain precisely this sum a few months later, but only through the massive use of coercion – the 'Ural-Siberian' method – and in response to grain-procurement shortfalls due to poor harvests affecting all strata of the peasantry, *kulak* and non-*kulak*.¹⁷⁹ Both the Left and the Right Oppositions were responding to the illusory *kulak*-danger while offering no solution to the real one.

The data presented in this section largely confirm the peasant 'rules of reproduction' laid bare by Brenner:

[W]here labour is organised by the direct producers on the basis of their property in the means of production, as exemplified in peasant freeholder production, the tendency (general among all peasant producers) to relate their individual development of the productive forces to the goal of maintaining their family and keeping their property tends to fetter the development of cooperative labour, by keeping labour individuated and preventing the accumulation and concentration in one place of labour, land

176. Cited in Heinzen 2004, p. 155.

177. Lewin 1975, p. 139.

178. Lewin 1975, p. 148.

179. Lewin 1975, p. 251. Lewin remarks: 'It will be recalled that the Left suggested mobilizing this quantity as a compulsory loan. For this reason the figure was not made public at the time.' Lewin 1975, p. 265.

and means of production. Small property tends to dictate individualized and unspecialized production.¹⁸⁰

Transforming peasants into workers via 'primitive-socialist accumulation'?

Bolshevik economic theory ultimately could not adequately account for the difficulties that Bolshevik economic practice encountered with the peasantry in the late twenties, because their theory did not correctly reflect key aspects of peasant political economy. The Bolsheviks lacked the requisite categories of analysis to grasp these aspects. The fundamental conceptual problems can be best brought out by looking very closely at certain aspects of E.V. Preobrazhensky's contribution to the economic debates in this period, notably his famous law of 'primitive-socialist accumulation' and the problem of non-equivalent exchange between the peasant and state sectors of the Soviet economy.

Preobrazhensky developed his views most fully in the *New Economics*, published in 1926. He explained what non-equivalent exchange was to critics who objected to so characterising the exchange-relationship between 'private' agriculture and socialised industry in Russia. He made the following analogy to capitalism:

Under capitalism non-equivalent exchange between large-scale and small-scale production, in particular between capitalist industry and peasant agriculture, though forced to a certain extent to adjust itself in the price field to the value-relations of large-scale agriculture, is, in the sphere of purely economic relations and causes, a simple expression of the higher productivity of labour in large-scale as compared to small.¹⁸¹

Preobrazhensky ran a number of red lights in this paragraph. The first red light: there is no direct relationship between the 'scale' of the enterprise and

180. Brenner 1977, p. 16. For Day, Trotsky's programme to import the major share of industrial machinery 'would have avoided the complications which were destined to grow out of Stalin's programme for self-sufficiency'. Day 1973, p. 150. Day begs this question: what if there is little to export to pay for these imports? Day spares only a few cursory lines to the peasantry in connection to this key question, these: 'By comparison with the pre-war period Russia was experiencing a considerably higher rate of rural consumption of agricultural products. Poor peasants, who consumed the major share of their output... had increased substantially in number, creating a barrier to expansion of the marketed grain surplus.... Consequently the market alone would not suffice both to place adequate food at the disposal of industry and the cities and to leave a surplus for export as well', pp. 151-2. This was precisely the problem. Trotsky did not address it and neither does Day.

181. Preobrazhensky 1965, p. 5.

its productivity. A firm, no matter what its size, producing at lower cost, will force into bankruptcy a firm, no matter what *its* size, producing at higher cost. General Motors was not always large. It started out small and became large because it produced low-cost automobiles that drove its larger, higher-cost competitors out of business. General Motors declared bankruptcy at one point because originally small Japanese automobile firms, producing cars more cheaply, captured an ever-larger share of the market and became large (though still in trouble today for other reasons). This is because – and here Preobrazhensky is correct – under capitalism, the socially-necessary labour-time to produce a commodity will be a moving average of firms producing below, at and above the socially-necessary rate. Those firms that expend more labour than is socially necessary, i.e. produce at higher cost, will suffer a below average rate of return, those that expend less labour than necessary, i.e., produce at lower cost, will enjoy an above average rate of return. Since total returns at any given moment are fixed, the effect of competition will be to redistribute labour and means of production from high-cost to low-cost firms. As between these two sets of firms, the result is non-equivalent exchange, as Preobrazhensky rightly said.¹⁸²

Now, the strictly *political* element to the non-equivalent exchange between town and country, the element that *did* depend on the state-policies and was not a simple expression of higher productivity, was this, according to Preobrazhensky: thanks to the state's political monopoly on industrial production, the state could optionally raise prices of industrial goods above their value – a form of taxation – and so by political means not *create* the subsidy peasants yielded to large-scale industry owing to the lower productivity of small-scale agriculture, but *redistribute* to industry an enhanced *amount*; just as a capitalist monopoly, through politically organised price-fixing, could raise prices above otherwise competitively determined (non-political) market-prices, rea-

182. It appears that the physical dimensions of the unit of production mesmerised the Russian Marxists into thinking that it alone was an accurate measure of a firm's productive technique. In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky highlighted the fact that, in tsarist Russia, 41.4 per cent of workers worked in enterprises employing over 1,000 whereas only 17.8 per cent did so in the United States, thereby putatively proving that 'Russian industry in its technique and capitalist structure stood at the level of the advanced countries'. Trotsky 1980, p. 10. Unfortunately, this reasoning breaks down, if only because Stalin also built gargantuan factories, larger even than under the tsars, yet none of their output could be sold on the world-market at a competitive price because they were so inefficient. 'Made in the USSR' never became a selling point, apart from armaments, and even there only the AK-47 Kalashnikov became a best seller in the post-World-War Two era. The Kalashnikov, an assault-rifle, was simple to produce, simpler to maintain and operate, extremely reliable and virtually indestructible.

lise a higher-than-average rate of profit, and force other, non-monopolised segments of the economy to suffer from below-average rates of profit. This 'primitive', strictly politically-conditioned phase of accelerated accumulation would vanish *pari-passu* with the rise of the productivity of labour in agriculture to the level existing in industry. In other words, the industrialisation of agriculture would mean the disappearance of the antitheses between town and country, proletarian and peasant; in short, the advent of communism.

Here, again, the question is posed: can non-equivalent exchange, *on the basis of which* Preobrazhensky argues for political price-fixing, characterise the relationship between (large-scale) 'capitalist industry' and (small-scale) 'peasant-agriculture'? Only on condition that peasant-freeholders operate in the same manner as capitalist firms. Only on condition that they must produce at the socially-necessary rate or go out of business. This chapter has tried to show that neither condition obtains. Preobrazhensky has run another red light in thinking these conditions *are* present.

The peasant family-holding is incomprehensible in terms of market-forces alone because it is market-independent. Peasant-freeholders are in possession of the land and produce for subsistence, not for exchange on the market. They are not compelled to purchase their inputs by selling their output at competitive prices by specialising, accumulating surpluses and adopting lowest-cost techniques. Fellow peasants cannot put them out of business, no matter how productive these competitors may be. Nor can agricultural estates, whether large or small, whether worked by free labour, free wage-labour, serfs or slaves, undercut peasant-possession of the land through purely economic means.

Indeed, Preobrazhensky himself recognised, in theory, the peculiarities of a 'natural economy':

Capitalist production is not dangerous to natural economy when this has no points of contact with it, when the two systems constitute two completely non-communicating vessels. Natural economy simply does not accept battle... Capitalism then resembles an athlete who vainly calls on a weak opponent to fight while the latter remains silent and does not answer.¹⁸³

But Preobrazhensky forgot, ignored, or contradicted this crucial but isolated insight, bedevilling all of his subsequent conceptual operations: a claw ensnared and the bird is lost. Let us follow Preobrazhensky's reasoning to the next red light.

183. Preobrazhensky 1965, p. 126.

The inevitable development of 'points of contact' between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production, it turns out, is *not* a vain capitalist call on a weak non-capitalist opponent to fight, Preobrazhensky went on. On the contrary, this call will inevitably 'drag' the 'weaker' opponent 'into the capitalist arena, where it gets thrown on its back in the process of free competitive struggle'¹⁸⁴ (emphasis added). In Preobrazhensky's universe of competition, abstracted from any mode of production, indeed, from any *history*, the capitalist mode ultimately prevails. 'Capitalism conquers in open order, in conditions of free competition with pre-capitalist economic forms'.¹⁸⁵ The 'triumph' Preobrazhensky wrote, 'of the capitalist mode of production' over other, non-capitalist modes, such as the 'primitive natural economy or petty-bourgeois economy, could be brought about simply by those economic advantages which every capitalist enterprise, even in the manufacturing stage of capitalism, possesses over more primitive forms of economy. Force played, in the main, an auxiliary role'.¹⁸⁶

Universal competition ultimately generated the rise of 'monopoly capitalism' that abolished competition on a national scale, Preobrazhensky continued, and set the stage for planning production as a whole, socialism, the most productive system of all. Our 'state economy is historically the continuation and deepening of the monopoly tendencies of capitalism'.¹⁸⁷ But where, as in Russia, socialism had seized only that part of production fully transformed by capitalism, only industry and not agriculture, socialism 'possesses *its own particular form of relations with pre-capitalist forms*' in agriculture.¹⁸⁸ Here, non-equivalent exchange between socialist and non-socialist forms would take place as well. Bukharin also accepted that 'pumping over' from the peasantry would take place and through the same mechanisms that Preobrazhensky had laid out. The only difference is that Bukharin thought less, not more, should be taken from the peasantry.¹⁸⁹

184. Preobrazhensky 1965, p. 126. Similarly, Lenin's 'Marxism teaches us that at a certain stage of its development a society which is based on commodity production and has commercial intercourse with civilised capitalist nations must inevitably take the road of capitalism'. Lenin, 1962a p. 49.

185. Preobrazhensky 1965, p. 131.

186. Preobrazhensky 1965, p. 126.

187. Preobrazhensky 1965, p. 141.

188. Preobrazhensky 1965, p. 131.

189. Cited in Cohen 1973, p. 184.

Among the various sources of capitalist accumulation, Preobrazhensky again mentioned the one we have already highlighted with respect to socialist accumulation. The extraction of surpluses from the peasantry was

masked by a system of market exchange of quasi-equivalents, behind which was hidden the exchange of a smaller for a higher quantity of labour. In this case the peasant and the craftsmen are exploited by capital partly in the same way as the workers who receive wages, in the form of the market price of their labour-power, only part of their newly created product of their labour.¹⁹⁰

Bukharin accused Preobrazhensky of rooting for the military-feudal exploitation of the peasantry. To refute this baseless charge – and it was baseless – Preobrazhensky ran this red light. He again made a questionable analogy between NEP-industry and NEP-agriculture, on the one hand, and between capital and labour in a capitalist economy, on the other. In the latter relation, the worker could only realise the value of his labour-power, not the greater value of the product of his labour.¹⁹¹ Here, clearly, was a case of non-equivalent exchange yet *no politically coercive* or ‘military/feudal’ methods were necessary to transfer the surplus from labour to capital, Preobrazhensky correctly pointed out. Strictly economic means, via exchanges on the market between labour and capital through contractual agreements free of all political coercion, achieved this transfer. Analogously, according to Preobrazhensky, the same held true for the transfer of surpluses from the private, peasant-organised petty-production to worker-organised large-scale production characteristic of the industrialised sector of the economy. This was the law of socialist accumulation.

Once more, Preobrazhensky’s analogy raises doubts. The correct counter-position is not individually vs. cooperatively organised production, small-scale vs. large-scale production, but production for exchange resting on capitalist social-property relations vs. production for use resting on non-capitalist social-property relations. Only capitalist relations of class and property permit the realisation of surplus-value via ‘free’ exchange on the market because workers, divorced from the means of production, cannot realise their own labour-power directly as labour to make commodities and, by selling these commodities themselves, realise the full value of their labour. Their only alternative is to sell their capacity to labour to capitalists who use it to produce commodities. The use of that capacity in the sphere of production

190. Preobrazhensky 1965, p. 94.

191. *Ibid.*

creates more value than it consumes, a surplus-value in the form of profit, rent and interest. This is not the case with peasants.

The October Revolution freed peasants from any direct relation of domination. However, and in fundamental continuity with tsarist times, the Revolution preserved peasant-possession of the means of subsistence and production. Unlike proletarians, peasants can realise their labour directly in the sphere of production in the form of needed products for consumption. To the extent that peasants did place part of their surpluses for sale on the market, (with the other parts set aside for reserves, or appropriated free of charge through taxation) they did so only to obtain additional use-values such as textiles, nails, kerosene, matches and the like. This reflects the ‘simple circulation of commodities’ – C-M-C – selling in order buy. It ‘is a means to a final goal which lies outside of circulation, namely the appropriation of use values, the satisfaction of needs’.¹⁹²

Finally, unlike workers, peasants are not subject to the economic necessity of performing surplus-labour for someone else in the sphere of production as a *precondition* for performing necessary labour. It is only in the sphere of circulation that non-capitalist appropriators can transfer to themselves a part of production from economically self-sufficient producers. Contrary to Preobrazhensky, such would-be appropriators can only do so by political means: force. Thus did the tsarist landed aristocracy have politically to disenfranchise the direct producers – serfdom being but one form of rightlessness – to maintain their position as a ruling class. The disenfranchisement continued in another form after the abolition of serfdom in 1861. Stalin would assume the role of his tsarist predecessors in this regard: collectivisation may rightly be regarded as a second serfdom.

V No way out?

Stalin, Trotsky and Bukharin declined to track the economic impasse of the late 1920s to the fundamentals of peasant-economy. Bukharin was explicit on this score. In July 1928, Bukharin raised, and answered, a seemingly ‘too academic or almost superfluous’ question before the by this time rough-mannered and tough-talking (‘don’t taunt me please’) people of a Central Committee plenum:

Aren’t these difficulties a general law of our development in the period of reconstruction? Isn’t this something imposed on us by the very course of

192. Marx 1976, p. 253.

events, which we cannot escape under any circumstances? I must say that I personally answer this in the negative.¹⁹³

Bukharin distinguished two sets of causes, general and specific:

The big set of causes or, if you like the conditions for the appearance of difficulties: our economic backwardness, the fragmented state of agriculture, its small peasant character, etc.... These general causes realise the possibilities of the difficulties.¹⁹⁴

The leadership could do nothing to 'change the conditions for the appearance of possible difficulties'. They were 'objective in the sense of being independent of our policy'. Fortunately, specific causes were not independent of policy but arose precisely from policy. Only specific policies could transform 'possible difficulties' into 'actual ones'. Among these specific policies, Bukharin mentioned 'mistakes in planning leadership', 'shortcomings of procurement party, and soviet organization (the lack of common front, the lack of active work, a willingness to let events take their own course') which, combined, had allowed 'capitalist elements' in the city and the countryside to 'undermine grain procurements'. 'Hence', Bukharin concluded,

With more skilful economic leadership, since the specific causes of the difficulties depend on these factors, we will clearly obtain a different specific result and will not allow the insolent and growing '*kulaks*', who are the organizing source of the forces that oppose us, to manoeuvre the way they have manoeuvred during the period of time we are going through.¹⁹⁵

There is no need to belabour the point. Negatively, Bukharin's line of reasoning was at one with Stalin and Trotsky with respect to the 'objective' or 'general causes' of the crisis: all refused to *link* the crisis, the form of appearance, to the economic realities of peasant-production, realities lying beyond the reach of *any* policy resting on recognition of peasant self-determination as a supreme political value. Instead, Bukharin, Stalin and Trotsky engaged in exposing the other's lack of 'skilful leadership.'

Owing to his erroneous theorisation of the peasantry, Trotsky still believed a systematically and consistently 'left' course within the NEP, instead of Stalin's errant 'centrist' wavering, was still possible at the end of the 1920s. Trotsky insisted the Left Opposition's agrarian strategy would have permitted un-coerced collectivisation and industrialisation to begin, and to proceed promisingly along for some undetermined period even without the assistance

193. Cited in Viola 2005, p. 104.

194. Viola 2005, p. 106.

195. Viola 2005, p. 107.

of workers' revolution abroad. Bukharin also thought the same for his approach, only he urged that Stalin halt his periodic attacks on the peasantry and return to a systematically and consistently 'right' course of maintaining the worker-peasant alliance at all costs. Both men blamed Stalinist policy-errors for driving the economy into a ditch, errors they could correct by the timely implementation of an alternative political-economic programme toward the peasantry. Neither man recognized that Stalin's destruction of the *smychka* between 1929 and 1933 was the historically concrete expression of the *objective impossibility* of democratically responding to the interests of peasants and workers within an on-going process of economic development. This is the earthly meaning of Marx's dictum that socialism requires definite material premises. These premises must be created by a mode of production other than the socialist one, as, otherwise, they would not be premises but rather extant conditions, created along with socialist construction; construction that could, conceivably, take place anywhere and anytime: if there is a will, there is a way.

Nevertheless, Trotsky and Bukharin's perspectives embodied a critical, all-important political difference. As early as June 1928 Bukharin made overtures to Zinoviev and Kamenev and, through them, to Trotsky, for a political alliance against 'madmen' like Stalin. Bukharin confided to Kamenev that his current disagreements with Stalin on the peasant-question 'were many times more serious than were our disagreements' with the United Opposition in 1926–7. How right he was! Already, Bukharin understood, better than anyone else in the leadership (perhaps because he was part of that leadership), that the *substance* of Stalin's 'left' turn, *if it persisted*, would demolish the NEP, forever doom the worker-peasant alliance, 'destroy the Soviet Republic',¹⁹⁶ and go far beyond anything Trotsky and the Left Opposition were advocating (though Bukharin would not take the full measure of the barbarism that was to come until it had arrived). This stance – a saving grace – placed Bukharin politically heads and shoulders above Trotsky, who insisted only that the *form* of Stalin's policies were coercive, their implementation marred by 'bureaucratic methods'. Owing to this disastrous position, Trotsky rejected Bukharin's diffident overtures in the summer of 1928 to launch a common struggle against Stalin and forestall, or try to forestall, the emplacement of a new set of exploitative class and property-relations. Trotsky's slogan of 1928 admitted no ambiguity: 'With Stalin against Bukharin? – Yes. With Bukharin against Stalin? – Never'.¹⁹⁷ Thus, Trotsky steadfastly believed throughout the

196. Cohen 1973, p. 303.

197. Deutscher 1959, p. 314; Cohen 1973, p. 290. In March 1929, Trotsky wrote 'Against the Right Opposition'. 'Our struggle against centrism derives from the fact that centrism is semi-opportunist and covers up full-blown opportunism, despite temporary

period 1929–33 that Stalin's murderous programme 'objectively' meant socialist development, requiring all party-members to remain in the ranks of the Communist Party and loyally carry out its policies.

Nevertheless, the leadership of the Right Opposition, though opposed to Stalin, still neglected to make their opposition materially effective by mobilising the party and non-party trade-union rank and file. Trade-union leader Tomsky did little to encourage the 'workers' ability to act collectively as a combative force to defend their class position' against Stalin's onslaught.¹⁹⁸ They did not do so because a mobilised rank and file would tend to enforce democratic norms on its leadership, jeopardising, 'from below', the trade-union bureaucracy's privileged position, a risk the Tomsky leadership was not prepared to take, but which it just might have, had it known to what lengths the Stalinists were prepared to go to build 'socialism'. Indeed, Stalin had to sack Tomsky and his associates because they proved insufficiently servile when it came to implementing the Five-Year Plan in industry and exploiting the direct producers ruthlessly. The paradox, overlooked by many, is that, in discouraging worker-militancy, the Tomskyist trade-union bureaucracy found itself unable to hang on to its *own* relatively cushy positions against Stalin's all-encompassing assault.

Unlike the Right Opposition, the Left Opposition was far from the centres of power or apparent power. Stalin had exiled the bulk of its leadership in late 1927. Marxist theory motivated its chiefs Trotsky, Radek, Preobrazhensky and Rakovsky. But it was a mistaken theory. Since Trotsky especially would not allow any variety of empiricism to guide the Left Opposition, it seems not unreasonable to conclude that its leadership would change course only if in possession of a proper theory of the peasantry, a class with its own distinctive patterns of development and specific material interests. Only with such a theory could the Left Opposition have foreseen the futility of trying to develop the forces of production in conjunction with any significant segment of the peasantry. Only then, it seems, would it have been in a position to form a united front with the 'Right' opposition to resist Stalin – not letting disagreement on what policies should guide the Third International abroad stand in the way of a joint effort at home to save the worker-peasant alliance and postpone industrialisation and collectivisation for the duration – the only alternative to Stalinism.

and sharp disagreement with the latter. For this reason there cannot even be talk of a bloc between the Left Opposition and the Right Opposition. This requires no commentary'. Trotsky 1975b, p. 86.

198. Filtzer 1986, p. 23.

Epilogue

The Bolshevik-influenced and led class-struggles in 1917 had emplaced relatively free social relations: the same struggles would have been required to prevent their complete displacement a decade later. Only an active, mobilised working class with a very high level of political awareness, on a par with the working class of 1917, could have developed the potential to halt Stalin's incipient counter-revolution. To realise this potential, revolutionary Marxists would have raised workers and peasants' awareness through their struggle to expose the anti-worker and anti-peasant orientation of Stalin's 'party'. The support of the masses could be counted on in light of Stalin's objectively anti-popular policies. However, only in and through the struggle could the breadth and depth of that support have been ascertained, and victory or defeat determined. But such a struggle inevitably meant a readiness to break with the monopoly on political power exercised by the Communist Party; a towering order for Bukharin and Trotsky, for whom that monopoly was sacrosanct.¹⁹⁹

Had the Right Opposition been prepared to foster working-class activity independent of the Communist Party, with the Left Opposition making an about face and joining it, the worker-peasant alliance, upon which the workers' state own existence was predicated, as Lenin had rightly held, might have been preserved. Its preservation would have been quite difficult to sustain since it also meant preparing workers to ride out the crisis by accepting a potentially much lower standard of living. Yet, had not the working class made much greater sacrifices earlier, during the Civil War, and done so willingly because it had understood what it was fighting for? Besides, events were quickly to show that Stalin's hideous alternative made for a far lower, indeed, catastrophic fall in living standards for both workers and peasants.

Could this strategy have been successful? However long the odds of success, the strategy limned out above was the only one that might have spared the international working-class movement the world-historic disaster of Stalinism.

199. Cohen 1975, p. 322.

Chapter Two

Trotsky, the Left Opposition and the Rise of Stalinism: Theory and Practice

Introduction

This chapter proposes to re-evaluate the political character and historical significance of the Left Opposition through a detailed assessment of Tony Cliff's *Trotsky, 1923–1927: Fighting the Rising Stalinist Bureaucracy* and *Trotsky, 1927–1940: The Darker the Night the Brighter the Star*, which are, respectively, the third and fourth volumes of his Trotsky biography. In the pages that follow, I argue that Trotsky and the Left Opposition did not oppose Stalin's policies of forced industrialisation and collectivisation. Worse, they failed to support worker- and peasant-resistance to these policies. In fact, the political programme and worldview of the Left Opposition objectively contributed to the formation and consolidation 'from above' of a new class-society in the critical period of 1927–33.

The visceral reaction of many Marxists and perhaps all Trotskyists to anyone brazen or foolish enough to declare the traditional understanding of the Left Opposition's historical role incorrect might be to consider it absurd. And yet, none other than Cliff, in his comprehensive and probing study of Trotsky's life and politics, recognised this cardinal fact: the overwhelming majority of the Left Opposition's leadership believed that 'Stalin's policies of collectivisation and speedy industrialisation were

socialist policies, that there was no realistic alternative to them.¹ But if this was so – and it *was* so – how can this disturbing fact be reconciled with any notion that, at this critical juncture, Trotsky and the Left Opposition were ‘fighting the rising Stalinist bureaucracy’ and its policies? Cliff thought he could get around this contradiction by arguing that Trotsky kept up the fight while the Left Opposition ‘capitulated’ to Stalin. Moreover, Trotsky had begun the fight against Stalinism before the rise of the Left Opposition, and would continue fighting it after its fall.

There is no gainsaying that Trotsky’s worldview – Trotskyism – encompassed a range of the politics and perspectives far wider than those of the Left Opposition. Trotsky held many ideas before, during and after the period of 1927–33, which were not directly related to the question of how to develop the forces of production and what kind of relations the workers’ state should establish with the peasantry, so as to assure the on-going construction of socialism in the Russia of Lenin’s New Economic Policy. Everyone knows Trotsky developed his theory of permanent revolution long before the October Revolution, and that he attacked the Comintern’s ultra-left policy in Germany during the rise of Nazism; a period very roughly contemporaneous to the Left Opposition’s existence. Everyone knows that Trotsky developed a critique of the popular-front strategy in France and Spain after the Left Opposition had rallied to Stalin and, toward the end of his life, pursued his struggle against Stalin by founding the Fourth International in 1938. All this is very true. But Cliff’s effort to distinguish Trotsky’s strategic-political orientation from that of the Left Opposition in the indicated period and around the question of economic development has little factual foundation. Trotsky most clearly formulated the general political perspectives of the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union with respect to Stalin’s policies, and its leadership acknowledged Trotsky as *primus inter pares*.

However undemocratic and forceful the manner and means of Stalin’s turn, the Left Opposition generally welcomed the anti-*kulak*, anti-capitalist direction of Stalin’s policies. Nevertheless, what lends some semblance to Cliff’s idea that Trotsky and the Left Opposition went their separate ways is the fact that the Left Opposition divided over how best to compel Stalin to *complete* his turn to the ‘left’ against Bukharin and the Right Opposition; in other words, a *tactical* question. But it did not divide over whether the turn was a ‘left’ one or had *anything* to do with socialist politics at all – a *strategic* question.

Had a *strategic* debate taken place within the Left Opposition, a basis would have been established for principled disagreement between the opposing

1. Cliff 1991, p. 102.

sides revolving around the relationship between means and ends, between *workers' democracy* and *socialism*: could the road toward socialism be taken via undemocratic means, from above, even at the start of the journey? Had this debate taken place within the Left Opposition, I believe Cliff would have opposed Trotsky and the Left Opposition. But it is doubtful Cliff could ever have seen it that way.

A dedicated socialist militant and a Marxist revolutionary, Cliff never severed politically the link between socialism and workers' democracy. However, he also claimed that Trotsky never did so either. The 'central theme of [Trotsky's] life and struggle to the bitter end was that socialism could be achieved only by the workers, not for them'.² *Pace* Cliff, this is incorrect. In the period under question, Trotsky and the Left Opposition did not make this theme central in their politics, and their general perspectives were not informed by it. In fact, and contrary to Cliff, before the concept 'Stalinist', let alone that of 'Stalinism', had made their appearance, Trotsky had long believed, as early as 1921, that the road to socialism could be taken by substituting the political dictatorship of the Communist Party for the democratic self-organisation of the working class. In this, there was nothing to distinguish Trotsky from Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Stalin and other leading politicians throughout the 1920s and beyond.

To be sure, Trotsky dropped, without fanfare, his substitutionism in the *Revolution Betrayed*, published in 1937. There, at last, he declared, if still with some diffidence, the imperative necessity for multi-party soviet-democracy as the only means to realise the transition to socialism. Nevertheless, Cliff gravely misjudged just how disastrous Trotsky's substitutionist politics were in the interim. While Trotsky opposed the bureaucratisation of party and state in theory, it will be the burden of this chapter to show what Cliff did not show for hagiographical reasons: how Trotsky's substitutionist politics in practice unwittingly contributed to bureaucratisation in general, and to the victory of Stalinism in particular. I bring out the colossal political costs of Trotsky's failure to make at all times workers' democracy an integral part of his conception of the transition to socialism; costs which Cliff failed properly to tally.

Many other Marxists have written at great length about Trotsky. Yet the focus of the argument is on Cliff because only Cliff undertook a sustained, if woefully incomplete, critique of Trotsky's substitutionist politics; a critique that needs to be refined, amended, corrected and completed. No such sustained

2. Cliff 1989, p. 17.

critique is present in Isaac Deutscher,³ Ernest Mandel,⁴ Pierre Broué⁵ or Max Shachtman,⁶ for example.

Broué's is a work of hagiography: his *vieux maître* was never wrong about anything fundamental. Broué defends Trotsky against all criticism. Much the same can be said for Mandel, who confines his doubts and reservations regarding Trotsky's politics to matters he deems to be of secondary importance. As for Shachtman, he once remarked how Trotsky's failure to call for multi-party politics sharply hindered his struggle against Stalin,⁷ but he did not follow up on that insight with a detailed study of the period leading up to and including Stalin's turn to the 'left'. Finally, Deutscher's abstract, historiosophical critique of Trotsky's life and thought is ill-suited to serve as a basis for a politically concrete discussion of Trotsky's failings in the formative period of Stalinism in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Of course, there are many accounts of Trotsky written by non-Marxists. In another context and for other purposes, their contributions could not be safely ignored. However, since the socialist project is something of a utopia/dystopia for this camp, no serious discussion about the means to realise it can be expected from them; and none is given. There is no extant critique to amend, correct, refine or complete. With these preliminaries out of the way let us turn, now, to Cliff.

Trotsky's sociological interpretation of the left, centre, and right wings of the Party

In *Trotsky, 1923–1927: Fighting the Rising Stalinist Bureaucracy*, Cliff focuses almost exclusively on Trotsky's efforts to curb the bureaucratisation of the ruling party and of the Soviet state. This period opened with prominent party-leaders Kamenev, Zinoviev and Stalin allying against Trotsky. After quickly defeating Trotsky, the anti-Trotsky *troika* eventually fell out and a realignment of forces took place. In early 1925, Zinoviev and Kamenev turned on Stalin as well as Stalin's newfound ally, Bukharin. But, within a year, by early 1926, Stalin had demolished the Zinovievist opposition. Finally, in the spring of 1926, Trotsky, having stood on the side-lines for nearly 18 months, joined the leaders of the now organisationally-wrecked Zinovievist opposition to form the United Opposition against Stalin's rising dictatorship. Stalin,

3. Deutscher 1954, 1959, 1963.

4. Mandel 1995.

5. Broué 1988.

6. Schachtman 1962.

7. Shachtman 1962, p. 187.

undaunted, routed the United Opposition by late 1927, destroying in the process the last remnants of inner-party democracy.

Meanwhile, abroad, the international working-class movement suffered defeat after defeat, in the German Revolution of 1923, the British General Strike of 1926, and the Chinese Revolution of 1925–7. To understand how Trotsky carried out a struggle against this evolution within the upper echelons of the Communist Party, one must assess his analysis of the rising bureaucracy that he sought to combat, and also the political strategy that this analysis led him to pursue. It is Cliff's fundamental argument that Trotsky did not recognise in good time that the Russian Communist Party and the Third International were 'dead for the purposes of revolution'.⁸ In his Preface, Cliff presents Trotsky's general position and offers his critical appreciation of it. Trotsky came to believe, from the mid-20s on, that factional divisions within the ruling party correlated to, and expressed, the interests of classes outside it. According to Trotsky, the working class favoured democracy and socialism and had an objective interest in preserving the material basis of a democratic socialism: the state's ownership of the means of production. The faction of the Communist Party seeking to develop industry and collectivise agriculture, designated by Trotsky as the 'left' wing, objectively promoted the interests of workers. Trotsky placed himself in its ranks. The 'right' wing, in Trotsky's political lexicon, referred to the faction that sought to organise an economy run competitively by private individuals. Pressured by the incipient capitalist interests of millions-strong small-peasant owners in Russia, as well as already-developed capitalist interests abroad, this wing, led by Bukharin, favoured capitalist restoration even if its leader swore to the contrary. Bukharin and the Right sought to develop a socialist economy by fully developing the market-mechanisms of the NEP. This meant encouraging better-off peasants, the *kulaks*, to 'get rich' at the expense of their poorer neighbours, and by privileging the proto-capitalists in the cities, the *Nepmen*, to accumulate capital. To ensure these market-processes developed in an ostensibly pro-socialist direction Bukharin insisted on the Communist Party's monopoly on politics; a monopoly also upheld by Trotsky and Stalin.

The Stalinist 'Centre' wobbled between these two warring factions, vacillating now to the right, under pressure from non-proletarian classes and the right wing of the Communist Party, now to the left, under pressure from the working class and the left wing of the Communist Party, but never capable of striking out on its own in either domestic or foreign affairs.

8. Cliff 1991, p. 16.

According to Cliff, Trotsky's whole approach was disastrously misconceived. This became evident from 1929 on, when the 'centrist' Stalin, contrary to Trotsky's expectations, adopted the supposedly left-wing policies of developing state-owned industry and collectivised peasant-agriculture. In the process of executing this class-project of the bureaucracy, Stalin followed up his annihilation of the Trotskyist-Zinovievist 'Left' in late 1927 with the destruction of the pro-capitalist Bukharinist-Tomskyist 'Right' by the late spring of 1929, thereby permanently consolidating the power of his own 'Centre'-faction. Meanwhile, in international affairs, the consolidation of the bureaucracy into a ruling class also committed Stalin to a nationalist foreign policy under the guise of building 'socialism in one country'. At the same time, Stalin ruthlessly extirpated all vestiges of workers' democracy. But, even when Trotsky finally drew the new political conclusion, in 1933, that the Stalinist bureaucracy was not 'centrist' and could not be swayed to the left, only overthrown through the revolutionary self-activity of the working class, he still did not change his sociological analysis of the Soviet state. He continued to regard it as a 'workers' state' that preserved, by strictly bureaucratic means, socialised property over the means of production and, therefore, the basis of socialism.

Trotsky, Cliff writes, 'failed to understand the character of the bureaucracy as a ruling class bent on pursuing its own independent interests in fundamental opposition to both the working class and the peasantry'.⁹ The bureaucracy had its own specific goals, reflecting its distinct social place: it was neither centrist nor vacillating. But Trotsky continued to argue for the one-party state in this period, and accepted the banning of factions in the Party because he was convinced that the Russian Communist Party remained the authentic political custodian of the working class' historic interests. This attitude strategically disoriented Trotsky's followers because it 'created impossible barriers to any consistent policy of opposition: it forced Trotsky to retreat again and again whenever the [party-] leadership decided to ban his activities'.¹⁰

Trotsky's conciliationism

Cliff chronicles Trotsky's strategically misleading 'conciliationism' toward the nascent bureaucracy beginning in the summer of 1923, when industrial workers in the cities of Leningrad and Moscow struck in great numbers to protest against wage-arrears, unemployment, long hours and lack of shop-

9. Cliff 1991, p. 17.

10. Ibid.

floor democracy. Party-leaders ordered the arrest of the ringleaders and denounced workers as narrowly craft-oriented and selfish.

Trotsky responded to the workers' discontent by writing a private letter to his fellow Politburo-members, kept secret from the party rank and file, protesting at the 'unheard-of' bureaucratisation of the party-apparatus and the lack of democracy for the party-membership. But, crucially, Trotsky would not grant non-party workers full freedom of expression. He spelled out his views in *The New Course*; the 'hallmark' of 'Trotskyism', according to Cliff.¹¹

Published in January 1924, *The New Course* offered a thoroughgoing sociological critique of the Soviet bureaucracy. Referring to the recent industrial unrest, Trotsky warned that workers' discontent had assumed an 'extremely morbid form' in the appearance, inside the Party, of 'illegal groupings' that were 'directed by elements undeniably hostile to communism', such as the Workers' Group.¹² Suppressing political dissent by repression alone was ineffective in the long run, because such measures could not get at the root-causes of working-class restlessness; causes which lay in the 'heterogeneity of society, the difference between the daily and the fundamental interests of the various groups of the population', as well as in 'the lack of culture among the broad masses'.¹³ On Cliff's interpretation of it, *The New Course* also revealed the fundamental defect of Trotsky's political method, its Achilles heel. By advertising Trotsky and his co-thinkers 'as the best defenders of party-unity and the strongest opponent of inner-party factions', Trotsky supplied his opponents with the best argument in favour of the self-dissolution of the... Trotskyist opposition! Above all, Trotsky would remain in the 'grip' of the following 'contradiction': 'On the one hand the party was strangled by bureaucracy' writes Cliff, 'but on the other Trotsky was unwilling to call on social forces outside the party to combat the bureaucracy'.¹⁴ To have placed this 'contradiction' at the forefront of his study puts Cliff's biography of Trotsky analytically head and shoulders above the accounts given by Deutscher, Broué, Mandel, and Shachtman, for whom this contradiction merits no special consideration. Nevertheless, in my view, Cliff does not take this cogent analysis far enough. For the implications of Trotsky's sociological analysis of factional politics were even more politically problematic than Cliff allows. Trotsky's failure to see the bureaucracy as a social force with its own interests prevented him from seeing that the Party itself, especially its ever-more-dominant Stalinist faction, was becoming and, by the mid-1920s, had become the representative

11. Cliff 1991, p. 17.

12. Cliff 1991, p. 33.

13. Cliff 1991, p. 35.

14. Cliff 1991, p. 38.

of the bureaucracy. But Trotsky looked upon the undeniable hostility of workers to an overbearing bureaucracy *not* as a manifestation of an objective clash of class-interests, which politically experienced revolutionaries could nourish to advance the interests of the working class, but as a sign of workers' political immaturity and lack of culture, which counter-revolutionary elements – Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, etc. – were bound to exploit for their factional, anti-working-class ends. In short, Trotsky counter-posed the general historical interests of the working class, ostensibly embodied in the party-state, to the actually-existing working class with its vital, every day, material interests. In Trotsky's very conception of the relationship between *this* party and state, on the one hand, and the working class, on the other, lay the fatal politics of substitutionism to be carried out by an ideal substitute for the real working class: the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The Stalinist bureaucracy unambiguously presented itself as such a substitute, prepared to destroy all false pretenders: 'The cadres can only be removed by civil war',¹⁵ Stalin peremptorily threatened in 1927. However, because Trotsky failed to understand that the bureaucracy was a social force acting in its class-interests, he could not understand the politics of *this* substitutionism. So long as he held to his substitutionism, Trotsky's relationship to the Stalinist bureaucracy ultimately meant negotiating the terms of his political surrender. Trotsky's 'conciliationism' was systematically biased in favour of the party-state because the latter, somehow, was representative of the working class, despite its objectively anti-working-class policies.

Trotsky's political opposition toward the factional activity of the Workers' Group of 1923 outwardly expressed this firmly held and ideologically internalised insistence on unitary, single-party rule. The Workers' Group formed in the spring of 1923. It sought out alliances with elements of previous oppositions. Denouncing the New Economic Policy as the New Exploitation of the Proletariat by bureaucratically appointed factory-managers and directors of industry, the Workers' Group tried to recruit among party- and non-party workers. It strove to lend political definition and direction to the massive strike-wave rocking industry in August and September 1923. It even looked for support abroad, among left-wing elements of the German Communist Party led by A. Maslow, and among Gorter's Dutch Communists.¹⁶ Trotsky opposed the Workers' Group. He 'did not condemn their persecution' Cliff reports. 'He did not protest at the arrest of their supporters. He did not

15. Cited by Cliff 1989, p. 15.

16. Cliff 1991, pp. 25–6.

support their incitement of workers to industrial action.’ Trotsky even refused public solidarity with the over two-hundred party-members who had dared to participate actively in the workers’ strike-movement, and who had been subsequently expelled from the Party.¹⁷ Action speaks louder than words, public action louder still. Trotsky did not then appear to workers to be that redoubtable fighter against bureaucratic repression and hooliganism that Cliff today, despite Trotsky’s equivocation, would like socialist militants to believe that he ‘objectively’ always was.

Although Trotsky did next to nothing to lend political guidance to rank-and-file dissent outside the Communist Party, he was almost always prepared to respond favourably to invitations of political co-operation by one or another element of the party-leadership. In 1926, Trotsky justified his alliance with Zinoviev and Kamenev – the United Opposition – on the grounds of the recent turn of the two against Stalin, and because their defence of state-ownership of the means of production and a pro-industrialising policy was, in Trotsky’s words, a ‘bureaucratically distorted expression of the political anxiety felt by the most advanced sections of the proletariat’.¹⁸

Cliff seems to take at face-value Trotsky’s analysis of Kamenev and Zinoviev as leaders of a pro-working-class, industrialising, ‘new left’.¹⁹ Nonetheless, Cliff provides substantial empirical evidence undermining Trotsky’s class-based analysis. Kamenev and Zinoviev’s ‘anxiety’ developed only in 1926, in response to Stalin’s destruction of the two men’s bureaucratic fiefdoms in Leningrad and Moscow the previous year, and to the General Secretary’s relentless monopolisation of power in the party-state more generally. Before then, Trotsky had passively watched Stalin steadily destroy the Zinovievist opposition, because he then thought this conflict was a mere ‘intra-bureaucratic squabble’, and held Zinoviev to be head of an ‘unprincipled clique’.²⁰ Cliff cites the historian T.E. Nisonger to support the unprincipled, non-class character of this opposition. Nisonger drew these parallels between Stalinists and Zinovievists. Both

sought to create the impression that they were supported by the rank-and-file Communists, both undertook to remove hostile newspaper editors, both claimed that their opponents were violating party unity, both used to their own advantage the power of appointing and discharging party officials...²¹

17. Cliff 1991, p. 26.

18. Cliff 1991, p. 141.

19. Cliff 1991, p. 141.

20. Cliff 1991, p. 140.

21. Cliff 1991, p. 139.

The always-observant Victor Serge noted: 'Zinoviev, whose demagoguery was quite sincere, believed every word he said about the warm support of Leningrad's working-class masses for his own clique.'²² Only after Stalin had routed Zinoviev and Kamenev in early 1926, with Zinoviev ousted as chair of the Leningrad party-organisation and Kamenev from the presidency of the Moscow Soviet, did the defeated duo begin to cast about for a political alliance with Trotsky. As Kamenev and Zinoviev sent out peace-feelers in the interest of political self-preservation, Trotsky let bygones be bygones and shifted to a more engaging political characterisation of his former adversaries. No longer dismissing them as unprincipled intriguers, Trotsky came round to describing them as upright defenders of workers and of socialist construction. It was only a matter of time before the behind-the-scenes negotiations culminated with Trotsky, Kamenev and Zinoviev formally concluding an alliance against Stalin and Bukharin, in April 1926. The birth of the United Opposition appeared to the initiated – party-members – to be just another power-play on everybody's part, including Trotsky's; this despite Trotsky's laboured efforts to give his rapprochement with his erstwhile opponents the veneer of high-minded political principle. As for the non-party masses, the leaders kept them in the dark, as usual.

In the interests of preserving unity with Zinoviev and Kamenev, Cliff reports that Trotsky went out of his way to conciliate them on international issues. Trotsky declared the theory of permanent revolution irrelevant to the issues at stake, and no longer pressed for the united-front policy abroad. He did not call for the break-up of the Anglo-Russian Committee and the withdrawal of the Chinese Communist Party from the Kuomintang. As a result, the British Communists undermined their potential to gain a significant influence over their working class while, in China, it led to the outright destruction of the Revolution. Both defeats contributed mightily to the isolation of the Russian Revolution, whose ultimate salvation lay precisely abroad, as Cliff rightly recognises. But Trotsky, by acquiescing to policies he *knew* would help defeat the workers' movement abroad, undoubtedly helped to undermine his fight against Stalinist reaction at home. In its eighteen months of existence, the United Opposition made one – only one – more-or-less concerted effort to put in a public appearance before the non-party masses. Its leaders chose the Red Square Parade celebrating the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, 7 November 1927, to come out in the open. Victor Serge movingly described this heart-breaking scene. As they reached the platform on Red Square, where Trotsky and Zinoviev stood,

22. Cliff 1991, p. 136.

the demonstrators made a silent gesture by lingering on the spot, and thousands of hands were outstretched, waving handkerchiefs or caps. It was a dumb acclamation, futile but still overwhelming.... The masses are with us Trotsky and Zinoviev kept saying that night. Yet what possibilities were there in masses who were so submissive that they contained their emotions like this? As a matter of fact, everybody in the crowd knew that the slightest gesture endangered his own and his family's livelihood.²³

Cliff displays insufficient psycho-political insight when he points to this event merely to 'demonstrate the passivity of the mass of workers, their lack of will to fight for the Opposition'.²⁴ No. The leadership had done too little to prepare the minds of the non-party masses for a public demonstration of the Left Opposition, for whom it came as a bolt from the blue.

A few weeks after the Red Square incident, the State Political Directorate (GPU) arrested Trotsky for counter-revolutionary activity and deported him to distant Alma-Ata, near the Chinese frontier.

The fourth volume of Cliff's political biography, *Trotsky, 1927–1940: The Darker the Night the Brighter the Star*, chronicles Stalin's collectivisation of agriculture and forced-draft industrialisation between 1929 and 1933. In this book, Cliff examines how the exiled Trotsky responded to these epochal events, and then records the response of Trotsky's co-thinkers in the USSR. He concludes with an extended analysis of the 'centrist' Stalin's ultimate victory over and against the Trotskyist 'left' and Bukharinist 'right' wings of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Cliff also follows Trotsky's efforts to found oppositional groups in a number of European countries, as well the United States, from 1928 on. Cliff surveys the interventions of various Trotskyist organisations in the crucial events of the thirties, the victory of Nazism in Germany, the failure of the Popular Front in France, and the defeat of the Spanish Revolution. Cliff closes his account with the aborted foundation of the Fourth International, in 1938. In his conclusion, he assesses Trotsky's political legacy.

As already noted, Trotsky thought the 'centrist' Stalin could never industrialise the country based on state-ownership of the means of production; the very policy advocated by the 'Left' Opposition. But Stalin systematically destroyed Trotsky's analysis by systematically developing state-owned industry and collectivising peasant-agriculture. Stalin did exactly what Trotsky had said the irresolute Stalin, that 'grey blur', could not be expected to do: destroy the capitalist *kulaks* in the countryside by seizing their agricultural surpluses

23. Cliff 1991, pp. 259–60.

24. Cliff 1991, pp. 261–2.

without compensation – ‘primitive-socialist accumulation’ – and investing those surpluses to build gigantic new industrial concerns in the cities. These industrial concerns would, in turn, supply tractors and combines to the new *kolkhozy* [collective farms] in the countryside that were then being created through the consolidation of tens of millions of small-peasant plots into huge, multi-thousand-acred farms. Through industrialisation and collectivisation, Stalin consolidated a new ruling class in a new, bureaucratically run ‘state-capitalist’ society, according to Cliff. It matters little how Cliff characterises this new mode of production sociologically. Crucial politically was that the bureaucracy was a class, an independent social force with its own material interests, and that it extracted a surplus from the direct producers by means of a coercive state.

Stalin’s stunning, practical refutation of Trotsky’s sociology politically devastated Trotsky’s followers, according to Cliff. For, on what principled, strategic and long-term basis could the Left Opposition mount a revolutionary opposition to Stalin’s policies? Cliff shows how Trotsky’s followers could not find such a basis, despite searching high and low for one. Eventually, the overwhelming majority threw up their hands, convinced that ‘Stalin’s policies of collectivisation and speedy industrialisation were socialist policies, that there was no realistic alternative to them’,²⁵ despite the fact that it meant intensified exploitation of workers and peasants. This ‘ideological crisis’ left the Trotskyists politically disarmed before Stalin.

Capitulating to Stalin – or rallying to him?

Very quickly, thousands of Trotskyists ‘capitulated’ to Stalin. Or did they rally to him? For the ‘capitulations’, Cliff points out, were not the outcome of mere police-persecution, but arose from strongly held political conviction. In Cliff’s considered view, Stalin did not so much destroy the Left Opposition in the USSR from without as much as it collapsed from within, under the weight of the Trotskyists’ fundamentally faulty assumptions regarding the nature of the enemy, and, indeed, as to just *who* the enemy was. Cliff cogently analyses the political ramifications of the ideological crisis of the Left Opposition before the final victory of Stalinism. In my view, however, he has not fully examined the other side of this ideological crisis, namely, the Trotskyists’ political attitude before the final defeat of the working class and the peasantry. Most directly to this point, if, on Cliff’s account, the leadership of the

25. Cliff 1993, p. 102.

Left Opposition in the Soviet Union basically surrendered to the Stalinists without a serious fight because the Stalinists were doing what Trotskyists thought should be done, then what was the attitude of these Trotskyist leaders toward those workers and peasants who *did* unequivocally resist Stalin's murderously exploitative policies of industrialisation and collectivisation? Could the leadership of the Left Opposition have unreservedly supported *their* fight against Stalin and his policies?

Cliff does not pursue this politically explosive line of inquiry and so draws a veil over the political conclusions to be drawn from it. But this inquiry needs to be made for the sake of the truth. Since Stalin carried out an industrialisation-programme – the central plank in the platform of the Left Opposition to which, as events were to show, virtually every one of its members would subordinate everything else, including inner-party democracy and internationalism – it follows logically from Cliff's analysis that Trotsky had no firm basis for organising a political opposition to Stalin and, in turn, mass-activity against his régime. Moreover, if the top Trotskyist leadership could not define a programmatic basis for organising against the Stalinist régime, how could rank-and-file Trotskyists be expected to find such a basis from below, given their commitment to Trotsky's views? I make three interrelated points here. First, the Left Opposition could not organise a struggle against the bureaucracy, since it did not see the bureaucracy as a ruling class in its own right. It had no social opponent to target. Second, it could not organise against Stalin's programme, since his programme was to industrialise. Third, it could not organise on the issue of the Communist Party's monopoly of political power, since Trotskyists still acknowledged it to be the vanguard of the working class. As Cliff had earlier detailed in the third volume, Trotsky had come out explicitly against the formation of factions within the Party, and against free, multi-party elections in the country. Trotsky did not abandon the politics of 'non-factionalism' until 1933, and did not come out in favour of multi-party worker's democracy until 1937, in *The Revolution Betrayed*.

In light of the foregoing, the Left Opposition put itself in a very poor position to organise workers' resistance to Stalin, especially because any workers' opposition had to have two elements to it. Firstly, it had to affect the process of so-called primitive accumulation because workers, in pursuing their class-interests, would struggle to lower the rate of accumulation and, in effect, jeopardise the industrialisation of the country. Second, it had to take a democratic form. The Left Opposition was not prepared to accept either element. When the politics of the Left Opposition are more finely and rigorously analysed, strictly on the basis of incontrovertible facts presented by Cliff himself, one is inexorably led to the following conclusion: it could not and did not support

working-class opposition to Stalinism. More discriminatingly to this point, its *leaders* could not consistently support those *rank and filers*, active on the shop-floor, in the offices, and in the neighbourhoods, who might try to lead the 'actually existing' worker- (and peasant-) opposition against Stalin's dictatorship. Let us develop this argument fully.

Cliff examines the response of Trotsky and his followers to collectivisation and industrialisation largely through Trotsky's eyes, Cliff's field of vision. Like Trotsky, Cliff sharply condemns the successive waves of Trotskyist 'capitulatores' to the Stalin régime over a period of roughly five years: a period that begins with Preobrazhensky and 400 others in July 1929, and which concludes with the surrender of Christian Rakovsky, the last authoritative Trotskyist leader in the Soviet Union, in March of 1934. The hour of their capitulation is the gauge of their 'moral courage', according to Trotsky-Cliff. The earlier the surrender, the less 'steadfast'; the later, the more 'intransigent'. Trotsky, of course, never surrendered because 'his moral courage and intransigence had no bounds'.²⁶ Nevertheless, Cliff's moralising criticism is misplaced and misleading, because it bears little relation to the clearly stated political reasons given by Trotsky's followers as regards breaking with Trotsky, going their own way, and rallying to Stalin.

The Left Oppositionists pledged allegiance to Stalin's policies not out of a lack of moral courage but precisely out of the courage of their political convictions, as Cliff on occasion relevantly remarks, albeit reluctantly, and almost as an aside or an afterthought; for fear of making explicit the politically anti-democratic and economically pro-exploitative implications of those convictions. The specific date of their 'capitulation' marks the point in time at which certain leaders decided Stalin's policies of collectivisation and industrialisation had become *irreversible*. In retrospect, we may say that the sooner these leaders rallied to Stalin, the more far-sightedness they displayed. Indeed, as early as May 1928, Preobrazhensky had presciently written to Trotsky that Stalin and the majority of the Party were 'finding a way back to Leninist politics' and were showing their iron-determination to build socialism by beginning to undertake a resolute struggle against the Bukharinist right-wing of the Party and, through them, against the 'pro-capitalist' *kulaks* in the countryside.²⁷ Stalin, Preobrazhensky insisted, was not manoeuvring merely for short-term political gains. No. He was fully committed to socialist construction.

26. Cliff 1993, p. 101.

27. Cliff 1993, p. 77.

Many Left Oppositionists initially rejected Preobrazhensky's pro-Stalin orientation because they did not share Preobrazhensky's appraisal of Stalin's *determination* to stay the course, though they did agree with Preobrazhensky's assessment of the *direction* of Stalin's course. Most thought Preobrazhensky was jumping the gun. They cautioned that it was too early to join Stalin. However, as it became progressively clear that Stalin's policy was a strategy for the long haul, more Left Oppositionists rallied to Preobrazhensky. Preobrazhensky, sensing the groundswell of support for his pro-Stalin positions among them, became even more explicit in advancing these positions. The end came in July 1929 when he, Radek, Smilga, and 400 other Left Oppositionists crossed the Rubicon and publicly declared their solidarity with Stalin. Justifying their break with Trotsky, their *de facto* leader and spokesperson, this huge swathe of the Left Opposition leadership declared, plainly and directly:

We believe the policy of industrialisation of the country, translated into the concrete figures of the 5-Year Plan, is the programme for the construction of socialism and the consolidation of the class position of the proletariat... we believe it to be our Bolshevik duty to take an active part in the struggle for the implementation of the Plan.²⁸

Trotsky responded to Preobrazhensky and his followers' unreserved acceptance of Stalin's policies through Christian Rakovsky. From exile, Rakovsky wrote a lengthy critique of Preobrazhensky. So, let us first have a detailed look at this critique, written by this most intransigent of Trotskyists; one of the last to come around to Stalin's side, six years later, in 1934, and thus well after the conclusion of the initial pump-priming period of industrialisation and collectivisation, under the first Five-Year Plan.

Rakovsky's Declaration of 22 August 1928 formally addressed the Central Committee, i.e., Stalin, but substantially addressed fellow-members of the Left Opposition. Rakovsky enjoined Trotskyists "'to give the party and the Central Committee full and unconditional assistance in carrying out the plan for socialist construction by participating directly in the construction and by helping the party overcome the difficulties that are in the way"'.²⁹ Among the difficulties standing in the way was a recalcitrant working class with its tendencies toward "'workshop, localist and inward-looking moods"'. Rakovsky supported Stalin's struggle to 'increase labour discipline' to combat these moods.³⁰ The lack of political discipline was another difficulty that

28. Cliff 1993, p. 89.

29. Cliff 1993, p. 93.

30. Cliff 1993, p. 92.

stood in Rakovsky's way. Factional activity inside or outside the Party surely could not be tolerated, as this would impede the smooth and orderly progress of socialist construction.

Rakovsky was not explicit about what sort of political activity these factions might engage in. But is it unreasonable to suggest that at least one or more of these factions might give the aforementioned 'inward-looking moods of the working class' an explicitly anti-Stalinist, outward-looking, politically articulate voice? Cliff pretends not to notice this implication of the ban on factional politics. *This* type of factional activity was certainly 'harmful' to the Party because, according to Rakovsky, it "'injures its authority in the eyes of the workers and weakens the foundation of the proletarian dictatorship'" embodied by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.³¹ Rakovsky was logical and clear-sighted: the unity of the Communist Party had to be preserved because only through the Communist Party could the dictatorship of the proletariat be preserved, and so democracy was to be reserved to those who agreed with the party-line, set by the Central Committee. The ban on (non-Stalinist) factions, rigorously enforced by Stalin, obeyed the higher imperative of socialist construction, Rakovsky insisted.

Rakovsky's only disagreement with Preobrazhensky – the standard one among all Left Oppositionists who had yet to come over to the Stalinists at this time – was whether Stalin was truly dead-set on destroying the *kulaks* and proceeding with collectivisation and economic development. Rakovsky pulled out the yellow flag. He cautioned that Stalin's policies were still uncertain, unstable; they might not weaken the power of the *kulaks* enough or implement industrialisation full-blast. Rakovsky also added some strictly *pro forma*, commonplace sociological remarks about how the complete organisation of socialism could only be realised in the far future and on an international scale. Nevertheless, these ABCs of Marxism, while sociologically correct, were politically toothless and did not commit anyone anywhere to take a principled stand against Stalin in the here and now.

Cliff says Rakovsky's position 'revealed the real dilemma facing the Left Opposition: it was against capitulation to Stalin, but it used arguments that were very consonant with his policies'.³² *Pace* Cliff, there was no 'dilemma' here. Rakovsky's arguments were Stalin's own arguments minus some politically secondary reservations designed to justify a wait-and-see attitude toward Stalin, not an oppositional one. There was no political opposition to Stalin *here*, as Cliff declaims time and again with respect to this and other

31. Cliff 1993, p. 93.

32. Cliff 1993, p. 91.

documents of the Opposition. Cliff's declamations do not merely signal his refusal to come to terms with the actual political meaning of the Left's political platform, but his willingness to distort that meaning so as to preserve intact the collective historical memory of a determined 'opposition to Stalinism' conserved by present-day Trotskyists all over the world.

Rakovsky's critique precisely captured the fact that the 'opposition' Trotsky had to come up against and overcome in carrying out Trotsky's line was not Stalin's but that of *other members of the Left Opposition*. The Left Opposition, as a whole in the USSR, did not question whether Stalin's road was correct. It *was* the correct road. The issue was *how far down* the road of socialist construction Stalin was prepared to go. Rakovsky thought that if the Trotskyists prematurely abandoned their political independence *from the Left*, and joined Stalin, they would lose all political leverage independently to pressure the vacillating Stalin *to the left*; to press on with socialist construction without turning back or even looking back. This was the bone of contention among Trotskyists. Rakovsky chewed this bone and no other. Indeed, Rakovsky decried Stalin's abject failure to recruit Trotskyists to the Great Cause. Rakovsky pleaded with Stalin to free all Left Oppositionists and to recall Trotsky from exile, for the Left Opposition had to be allowed to prove, in practice, through loyal service to the Party, its loyal commitment to building industry and developing agriculture and, thereby, the foundations of the proletarian dictatorship.

Cliff is inconsistent in finding a lack of moral courage among Trotsky's supporters for rallying to Stalin when Trotsky had given them no secure political basis on which to maintain a political independence from Stalin. It is ludicrous for Cliff to condemn the Left Opposition for not sticking to Trotsky when its members were only following through the political 'imperatives' of Trotsky's views.

How did Trotsky assess Rakovsky's 22 August Declaration? He signed it. True, Trotsky signed with a 'certain unease' as Cliff says, but Cliff does not spell out fully the political meaning of this discomfort. Trotsky's uneasiness was strictly theoretical, not practical, for his reservations were above all designed to mask how Stalin's policies had thrust the Trotskyists into an unenviable political quandary and, simultaneously, to offer a face-saving manoeuvre to extricate themselves from it politically:

The coincidence, Trotsky wrote, of the many extremely important *practical* measures the [Stalinist] leadership has taken in its present policy with the slogans and formulations of our platform in no way removes for it the dissimilarity in the *theoretical principles* from which the [Stalinist] leadership and the Opposition set off in examining the problems of the day. To put it in other words, the [Stalinist] leadership, even after having absorbed officially a

good number of our tactical deductions, still maintains the *strategic principles* from which yesterday's right-centre [Bukharinist] tactic emerged.³³

No doubt, it was true, as Trotsky said, that Stalin viewed the construction of socialism – or at least of its alleged foundations – as the affair of a single country, whereas, in taking an internationalist perspective, the Opposition stressed that socialism could only be realised fully on an international scale. But these overridingly dissimilar theoretical principles were being overridden by short- and medium-term political practice. Trotsky tortuously admitted this. He agreed that, through industrialisation, Stalin was increasing the social weight of the working class, warding off the danger of capitalist restoration, and securing an expanded material basis for socialism.

Many Left Oppositionists repeatedly called Trotsky's attention to his tortuous admission – they nailed him on it – and concluded that, since ultimate theoretical differences could always be ironed out later, since there was now no practical reason to stand apart from Stalin, and since Trotskyists were not doctrinaires, then joining Stalin was the only reasonable and responsible course of action to take. They argued that those like Trotsky who valued theory above practice and did not rally to the Party were incorrigible. 'History' would thrust these doctrinaires aside. As Radek, former Trotskyist and recent recruit to Stalinism wrote:

If history [i.e., of industrialisation and collectivisation] shows that some of the Party leaders with whom yesterday we clashed words are better than their viewpoints they defended, nobody would find greater satisfaction in this than we shall.³⁴

The bottom-line, Cliff writes, was that the bulk of the Trotskyist leadership *did* find great satisfaction. They were 'full of praise for the collectivisation and industrialisation, although very critical of the methods Stalin used to carry it out'.³⁵ The caveat about Stalin's dictatorial methods is puzzling. Is Cliff talking about democratic methods as a viable alternative? Of winning the support of workers and peasants to develop industry and collectivise agriculture, as the Left Opposition had originally envisaged? If so, then Cliff lays the basis for arguing – he himself does not argue it – that it was possible to develop the economy and build a democratic socialism subject only to the formal requirements of, and respect for, institutionalised political democracy. The problem with this implication is that workers and peasants were already using demo-

33. Cliff 1993, pp. 94–5.

34. Cliff 1993, p. 82.

35. Cliff 1993, p. 53.

cratic methods, albeit in an informal, non-institutionalised way. They resisted, they protested, they sabotaged, they struck, and they cursed the Stalinists. The Stalinists disciplined, imprisoned, exiled and shot them. Had workers and peasants gotten their democratic way, they would have reversed the policies of collectivisation and industrialisation because, for them, economic development meant intensified exploitation, as many revolutionaries, including quondam Trotskyists, had once correctly predicted would take place if the construction of socialism in one country was insisted upon. However, the Left Opposition was now determined to forge ahead, to industrialise and collectivise and to continue building socialism in one country. He who wills the end must will the means. So, out with democracy and majority-rule. Rakovsky had said this, in so many words; so had Preobrazhensky and many other Left Oppositionists. And Trotsky had agreed with them throughout the first Five-Year Plan because, as he said, the Trotskyists were “‘the only conscious expression of the unconscious process of social transformation’”³⁶ embodied, in practice, by the Stalinists. The basic Trotskyist position, then, ratified by Trotsky himself, allowed no principled, firm political opposition to Stalin between 1927 and 1933. We must now examine how this basic position situated the Trotskyist majority leadership in relation to the workers (and peasants) who, by and large, *did* oppose Stalin.

Workers’ and peasants’ opposition to Stalinism

In the cities, Stalin’s Five-Year Plan exacerbated food-shortages, brought an increase in the length of the working day and intensified work. Workers’ living standards dropped catastrophically; by half, according to some estimates. In the countryside, the incipient Stalinist state launched a ferocious assault on the peasant-way of life, rich and poor alike, *kulak* and non-*kulak*. This social and economic landscape is thoroughly familiar because it has been fully explored. However, the political landscape – specifically, how the Left Opposition *responded* at the time to working-class opposition to Stalin’s policies – is *not* the response that most present-day analysts have traditionally reported; such traditional accounts have held instead that the Trotskyist leadership showed steadfast solidarity and unwavering support for workers’ (and peasants’) anti-Stalinist activity. In fact, the opposite was the case. I detail this controversial interpretation below, one based on the facts marshalled by Cliff.

36. Cliff 1993, p. 79.

Having chronicled the growth of working-class resistance to Stalin's policies in the period leading up to forced industrialisation and forced collectivisation, Cliff then automatically equates this with an increase in Trotskyist influence in the same period. Cliff's empirical correlation is nonetheless analytically far more complex and contradictory than he allows. To bring this out, certain analytically crucial distinctions must be made between a Trotskyist political vanguard, taken as a whole, in relation to the working class, also taken as a whole, and the internal relationship, within this Trotskyist political vanguard, between its Trotskyist leadership and its Trotskyist rank and file. Let us now systematically examine the dynamic interrelationships between the Trotskyist leadership, the Trotskyist rank and file, and the working class.

In response to Stalin's policies, many workers, most of them non-party, mobilised in self-defence by means of strikes, street-demonstrations, riots and sabotage. Cliff cites numerous instances of the Left-Opposition intervening in workers' struggles for better wages, improved working conditions, shorter hours and respect for collective-bargaining agreements. Cliff is not as precise as he should be about just what the Trotskyists had to say in these interventions. Cliff has a pronounced tendency to simply assimilate workers' opposition to Trotskyist politics. Still, it is fair to ask: in these interventions did the Trotskyists act as trade-union secretaries and call on workers to retreat to purely reformist, trade-union struggles? Or did they act as 'tribunes of the people' (Lenin) and urge workers to fight for these reforms by means of revolutionary, anti-Stalinist political activity? According to the historian Michael Reiman, whom Cliff cites at great length, at the outset of the first Five-Year Plan

opposition activity was spreading like a river in flood. The opposition organised mass meetings of industrial workers...at a chemical plant in Moscow shouts were heard: 'Down with Stalin's dictatorship! Down with the Politburo!'³⁷

Who shouted these subversive, revolutionary slogans? Non-party workers? Very likely. Rank-and-file Trotskyists? Possibly. But what is not possible, as we have just seen, is the Trotskyist *leadership*, beginning with Trotsky, *endorsing* the destruction of the Stalinist régime, giving this revolutionary demand political form and meaning, and offering a clear perspective of struggle. Trotsky was unambiguous about this. Those who refused to sign Rakovsky's Declaration (discussed above), Trotsky insisted, had prematurely concluded that the Party was unreformable, a "corpse, and the road to the

37. Cliff 1991, p. 264.

dictatorship of the proletariat lies through a new revolution. *Although this opinion has been attributed to us dozens of times, we have nothing in common with it*''.³⁸ The Stalinists had certainly attributed this false opinion to the Trotskyist leadership many times. But did some of the rank-and-file Trotskyists think it was, or should be, the true opinion of their leadership? Cliff cites this paragraph from Reiman:

In the face of the campaign of the party leadership against the Left Opposition whom [the Stalinists] accused of wanting to form a parallel organisation, some even said: 'Let it organise – then we will see which party is really on the side of the working class for the existing party is starting to have a policy which is not ours'. In Krasnaia Presnia [a heavily industrialised workers' district in Moscow with a long and militant history of class struggle dating back to before the 1905 Revolution – J.M.] many remarked that the Left Opposition was right in its criticism.³⁹

Cliff says nothing about the profound political significance of the threat to organise a separate party. It is easy to see why. Those who advocated the independent political organisation of the working class were either not part of the Left Opposition, whose leadership rejected the call for a second party, or, if part of it, could not have been supported by the leadership.

The archive-based work of Alexei Gusev⁴⁰ fully confirms the Trotskyist leadership's adamant opposition to all working-class political struggles against Stalinism that might result in or require the formation of a second party. Thus, in September 1928, Radek sent a circular to fellow Trotskyists complaining that a 'considerable segment of workers and youth' in the Trotskyist rank and file simply could not bring themselves to understand why the leadership refused to work toward the foundation of a new, competing political party to represent and defend the interests of the working class. Indeed, some among them were now demanding outright organisational and political independence from the Communist Party, thereby demonstrating, in Radek's view, the danger among Trotskyist rank-and-filers of a 'sharp leftist deviation' toward another oppositional grouping, the Democratic Centralists ('Decists').⁴¹

Led by V. Smirnov and T. Saprionov, the Democratic Centralists had already concluded that the Communist Party was not reformable because it represented the interests of a new ruling class, and called on workers to engage

38. Cliff 1993, p. 94 (emphasis added).

39. Cliff 1993, p. 70.

40. See Gusev 1996, pp. 85–103.

41. Gusev 1996, p. 97.

in independent political action against it.⁴² These ideas found favour among quite a few lower-level Trotskyists. Indeed, one Trotskyist rued the outbreak of a 'Decist epidemic' in their midst.⁴³ The Trotskyist leadership denounced the Decists as ultra-left, sectarian and adventurist.⁴⁴ It urged the Left Opposition explicitly to reject working-class political strikes against the putatively workers' government: 'The duty of the opposition is to channel the demands of the working class into trade union and party legality', Rakovsky and other Trotskyist leaders insisted, and 'to oppose methods of struggle, such as strikes, that are harmful to industry and the state and to the workers themselves'.⁴⁵ Gusev concludes that the Trotskyists' 'conscious refusal to seek support in the growing workers' movement' significantly 'weakened the effectiveness of the "bolshevik-leninists" and disoriented potential adherents'.⁴⁶

Despite sharp ideological differences with the Stalinists, the Trotskyist *leadership* allied itself *in practice* with the Stalinist leadership by jointly opposing the formation of a separate party to defend the interests of working people. This 'popular front' with Stalinism meant that the working masses could not readily see how the leadership of the Trotskyist opposition was siding politically with the working class. As far as many workers were concerned, the difference between the Trotskyist and Stalinist leaderships was vanishingly small.

Having to choose between defending workers and exploiting them, the Left Opposition in the end fell over itself to join Stalin's team. "I can't stand inactivity. I want to build!" one of them is reported to have said. "In its own barbaric and sometimes stupid way, the Central Committee is building for the future. Our ideological differences are of small importance before the construction of great new industries".⁴⁷ Their thoughts turning somersaults, the truth of the industrialisation-drive upending the expectation that Trotskyists would be driving it, the overwhelming majority of Trotskyists signed on to build socialism 'for the future'.

Cliff does not adequately register the enormity of this appalling, stomach-churning fact. He notes workers and peasants initially responded to the economic and political crises of the late 1920s by developing their combativity and their consciousness; a development that had in turn provided a practical basis for a growth in the influence of political ideas that were oppositional to Stalin. Cliff chronicles, through Reiman, this objective development with-

42. Gusev 1996, p. 98.

43. Gusev 1996, p. 99.

44. Gusev 1996, pp. 98–9.

45. Gusev 1996, p. 95.

46. Gusev 1996, p. 95.

47. Cliff 1993, p. 98.

out however realising that this made the Trotskyists responsible for providing leadership to the spontaneously rising combativity of the working class. But the Trotskyist leadership was not at the rendezvous. It could not help the non-party masses develop their incipient struggle against Stalinist policies because it supported these policies. The Left Opposition opposed the emerging anti-Stalinist political orientation of the working-class rank and file because worker-opposition foreshadowed the formation of a second party that would inevitably threaten the unity of the Communist Party, undermine socialist construction, and jeopardise the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Cliff refuses to look reality in the face: the masses did not stand aside and passively watch Stalin bury the Trotskyists politically. Even after 1929, workers continued to resist. Kevin Murphy has demonstrated, as has no historian before him, and Cliff's assertions to the contrary notwithstanding, that broad, active, working-class resistance to Stalinism existed at the point of production during the Five-Year Plan.⁴⁸ Working-class passivity is a myth. The Trotskyists freely buried their opposition to Stalinism and metamorphosed into born again, 'conscious' builders of socialism. Why should the working class have actively supported the Trotskyists in this course? The Trotskyist opposition failed to defend the masses. In this volume, as with the preceding one, Cliff falsely counter-posed the politics of the Trotskyist opposition to the 'objective' correlation of class-forces that favoured Stalin's victory, instead of seeing the Trotskyists' politics, which flowed from their analysis, as contributing to the formation of that objective correlation, and to Stalin's triumph. The Trotskyists may claim no credit for organising working-class resistance to Stalinism. This unsettling conclusion is not in conformity with a reverential defence of the Trotskyist opposition mounted by Cliff and most Trotskyists, but it is in conformity with the facts. For the purposes of the argument I have developed here, it may be said that the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union did not lend consistent political support to working-class (and peasant-) resistance to Stalinism. The leadership handed a majority of its rank and filers over to Stalin on a silver-platter.

The Trotskyist Opposition abroad, 1928–33

Cliff's discussion of the international Left Opposition between 1928 and 1933 is exceedingly weak because he never makes clear what *national* bases Trotskyist factions inside the Communist Parties abroad proposed to organise upon. Could German Trotskyists be expected to address specifically German

48. Murphy 2005.

questions that were not meaningfully linked to Russian questions? Or was everything inextricably tied in one bundle? Let me cite one exemplary instance.

The German Communist Party was the most powerful party to come out of the post-World-War-One revolutionary upsurge. Oppositional currents had developed within it over the direction of its political leadership, particularly after the failure of the October 1923 (putschist) attempt to make revolution. The German factions aligned themselves to one or another faction of the Russian Communist Party, though Cliff does not report what German factional attitudes were at the time toward issues affecting German politics. In any event, in 1928, the leadership of the German Communist Party expelled Heinrich Brandler, leader of the German ‘supporters’ of the Russian Bukharin (whatever this meant in the German context). Brandler and his followers then set up the Communist Party Opposition (KPO) with a membership of 6,000. Cliff writes that there was a ‘political abyss between the Bukharinist [sic.] KPO and the Trotskyists. In international affairs Brandler was far from Trotsky and close to Stalin. However, in *German affairs*, Brandler *attacked* the KPD’s suicidal, ultra-left course that would ultimately help smooth the way for the triumph of Nazism.⁴⁹ Was there not a basis for joint activity between the Trotskyists and the Brandlerites on this critical *domestic* issue of German politics? Apparently not. According to Cliff, Trotsky pilloried Brandler for siding with Stalin in internal Russian conflicts. Again, did this have to stand in the way of reaching out to the Brandlerites on other issues, on *German questions*? Apparently so. On Cliff’s account, Trotsky assailed Brandler’s (momentary) exoneration of Stalin’s régime.⁵⁰ Was Trotsky right to lend greater weight to Brandler’s (ostensibly) incorrect positions on international affairs than to his organisation’s indubitably correct call for a united front of the KPD and the SPD against the Nazis? ‘Of course’ replies Cliff, the abyss was there, and could not be bridged. Doubtless the abyss was there. But who put it there? Who refused to bridge it?

Alongside the KPO stood the Leninbund and the Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei (SAP). The latter also advocated positions similar to those of the Trotskyists and the KPO, because they advocated a united front of the KPD and the SPD against Hitler. The similarity of their standpoints may have made it more difficult to draw workers to German Trotskyists specifically, especially when the 6,000 strong KPO was ten times larger than the Trotskyists; the SAP was larger still, with 35,000 members at least. But what Cliff needed to explore was

49. Cliff 1993, p. 140.

50. Cliff 1993, p. 141.

what repulsed the Trotskyists from these other political formations. We must conclude that an agreement on *the* burning political issue facing the German workers' movement – establishing a united front before the Nazi menace – was not enough to push the Trotskyists to co-operate fruitfully with the KPD, the Leninbund, or the SAP. Something else stood in the way. The Trotskyists' own sectarian politics? The accursed Russian Question?

Trotsky's attempts to use his organisation in Germany as a lever to move the KPD in the right political direction proved unsuccessful, as would his efforts to similarly influence Communist Parties elsewhere. After Hitler's epochal victory in 1933, Trotsky finally concluded that only a 'political revolution' overthrowing the Stalinist régime could set the working class on the road toward socialism in the Soviet Union, and – by organising new Bolshevik parties to compete against the Communist Parties outside the Soviet Union – set the working class on the road to socialist revolution in those lands. To that end, Trotsky, undeterred and indefatigable, forged ahead and founded the Fourth International in 1938, predicting that, within ten years, by 1948, it would become the 'decisive revolutionary force on our planet'.⁵¹ What falsified Trotsky's prognosis?

Trotsky's miscalculation

According to Cliff, the stability of the Stalinist régime, wholly unforeseen by Trotsky, negated Trotsky's predictions of victory. The Communist Parties grew during the War, 'basking in the reflected glory from the mighty Soviet Union and still claiming the mantle of the October Revolution'. However, Stalin acted as 'gravedigger of the revolution during World War Two and its aftermath'.⁵² At the Russian dictator's behest, the Communist Parties diverted the post-World-War-Two revolutionary upsurge of masses, in France and Italy especially, into reformist channels, postponing socialist revolution for an entire and not yet concluded epoch. Cliff starkly contrasts Trotsky's inability to affect the disastrous course of events leading up to World-War Two with Trotsky's brilliant analyses forecasting this very course and no other: the darker the night, the brighter the star.

Unquestionably, Trotsky possessed a masterful grasp of the social and political forces wracking the capitalist world in the 1930s. His writings on the rise of Nazism in Germany and how to combat it stand out, as do his penetrating criticisms of the popular-front strategy in France and Spain. These

51. Cliff 1993, p. 293.

52. Cliff 1993, p. 298.

writings can be unreservedly recommended for the political education of socialists today because, in them, Trotsky unfailingly brought his analytical skills to bear on the burning issue of the modern labour-movement, the alpha and omega of revolutionary, Marxist politics: the world-historical emancipation of the working class can be realised only through the revolutionary self-activity of the working class internationally. To make this point accessible to all militants, Trotsky wrote his magisterial *History of the Russian Revolution* chronicling the exemplary experience of the Russian Revolution and the class-struggle politics of Bolshevism that made 25 October 1917 a pivotal date in the twentieth century.

The supreme paradox Cliff fails to note is that Trotsky chose *not* to bring *Bolshevik* politics to bear, in good time, against Stalinism because Trotsky failed to see, in good time, how the Communist Party of Russia had come to represent a class that was unremittingly hostile to the working class and to the democratic-socialist project. In lieu of class-struggle against Stalinism, Trotsky advocated, all-too successfully and for much too long, class-reconciliation with Stalinism. He argued for a reformist, 'social-democratic' course, not for a revolutionary, Bolshevik one. Trotsky gained little and lost much by appealing to this Communist Party, whose thoroughly servile, career-seeking and timeserving rank and file had fully absorbed the fateful ethos of its Stalinist leadership. Trotsky committed a political error of the first magnitude in throwing himself and his followers at the mercy of this rank and file's all-too-real Stalinist prejudices, not their illusory-revolutionary, Marxist judgement. When Trotsky at last changed his mind, in 1933, and called for a political revolution against the Stalinist bureaucracy, it was too late: Stalinism had fully consolidated itself, at home and abroad.

Trotsky's erroneous world-historical political perspectives for the post-1938 period reflected his epochal miscalculation of the durability of the Stalinist régime internationally, as Cliff emphasises. Yet Cliff does not bring out enough the point that the destinies of international-Trotskyist political tendencies between 1933 and 1938, that is, in the period immediately preceding the formation of the Fourth International, were largely predetermined in Russia. Most directly to this point, Trotsky reaped the bitter fruits of defeat in Europe and America in the 1930s because he had sown the seeds of working-class defeat in Russia in the 1920s. Owing to his fundamentally incorrect analysis of the Stalinist bureaucracy, Trotsky ended up handing over more or less free of charge the accumulated political capital of the Russian Revolution to Stalin, who then used it to reap fabulous political rewards internationally by building 'socialism' in one country on the ruins of wrecked socialist revolutions abroad. Trotsky paid for this defeat with his life. So would millions more.

Conclusion: Cliff's faulty historical methodology

Behind the destruction of the Left Opposition in the USSR and its stillbirth abroad, then, lay a spectacular failure of political analysis on Trotsky's part. Trotsky would subsequently laud himself and the Left Opposition for accurately forecasting their own defeat. But such praise is misplaced, because it confuses political leadership with self-fulfilling prophecy. Above all, it is to underhandedly abdicate political responsibility for the rise of Stalinism by not fully acknowledging the part played by the failure of one's own actions to thwart this sombre outcome. For the cumulative political impact of Trotsky's mis-leadership was disastrous, and Cliff recognises this:

The zigzags in the fight against Stalin could not but weaken Trotsky's own supporters. Cadres cannot be kept if they have to abstain from action... Rank and file oppositions cannot survive politically without a fight in the here and now.⁵³

But Cliff considerably weakens his case against Trotsky's overall political strategy and direction because he tends to counter-pose Trotsky's political failure to the 'objective' correlation of class-forces that favoured the rise of the bureaucracy in Russia; instead of seeing Trotsky's faulty politics, flowing from his incorrect analysis, as contributing to the formation of that objective correlation. In other words, Cliff accepts Trotsky's political self-evaluation as valid, and repeats Trotsky's reasons for Stalin's victory:

The bureaucratic degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalin were rooted in Russia's economic and social backwardness and its isolation. The civil war brought about the disintegration of the Russian proletariat as a class. Its regroupment was further weakened by the defeat of the international proletariat...⁵⁴

Yet, as Cliff acknowledges, Trotsky's mistaken course of action itself surely tended to lower the political consciousness of workers and mislead them as to the dangers that were in store for them. Nevertheless, Cliff very often undermines this acknowledgement, when he does not vitiate it outright, by his simultaneous belief that the defeat of the Trotskyist opposition was inscribed in objective conditions, not in its politics. If so, then Trotsky's politics, along with the analysis that justified them, was irrelevant to the outcome.

On Cliff's account, Trotsky's real dilemma was the 'problem of how to keep the cadres together without involving them in a struggle going beyond

53. Cliff 1991, p. 19.

54. Cliff 1991, p. 12.

the party-ranks, which meant appealing to the workers *en masse*'.⁵⁵ However much a dilemma this posed in theory to Trotsky, in practice, Trotsky resolved it in a very definite way. Right down to 1933, Trotsky chose to turn his back on struggling workers and to turn his face to the bureaucracy. In doing so, he exercised his *judgement*. But Cliff wants to go deeper, back to the aforementioned objective conditions, the balance of class-forces, which, in Cliff's view, *determined* Trotsky's judgement. Here, Cliff falls into a determinist reductionism that excuses Trotsky's errors and, in the end, exonerates Trotsky politically. For, if no course other than Trotsky's was possible, then the rise of Stalinism was foreordained. However, this contradicts Cliff's other view that it was *not* inevitable, that Trotsky's politics *did* matter.

Had Trotsky seen that the bureaucracy was an independent social force that had, by the mid-twenties, pretty much secured control of the party-state, he would have seen that it was fruitless to attempt to induce this party-state to adopt revolutionary policies at home and abroad, and that there was no choice but to appeal to another social force, the working class, to do battle against it. Had Trotsky understood that behind the politics of the bureaucracy lay the defence of bureaucratic interests, he would have led a faction prepared, if necessary, to split and to form a new party to defend the interests of the working class.

Cliff knows this perfectly well. Yet he repeatedly calls upon 'objective conditions' to assume responsibility for Trotsky's false political judgement and for the false policies he adopted based on that judgement. Above all, the low '*level of consciousness of the working class*' Cliff writes, defensively, '*gravely circumscribed* [Trotsky's] *ability to resist Stalinist reaction*'.⁵⁶ It must immediately be said that Trotsky derided the argument that the political maturity of workers dictated the kind of leadership they got. In an empirically different but analytically identical context, Trotsky rounded on those who ignored the question of political leadership:

A 'false policy of the masses' is explained by the 'immaturity of the masses'. But what is 'immaturity' of the masses? Obviously their predisposition to false policies. Of just what this policy consisted in and who were its initiators: the masses or their leaders – that is passed over in silence by our author. By means of this tautology he unloads the responsibility on the masses.... The workers' line of march at all times cut a certain angle

55. Cliff 1991, p. 19.

56. Cliff 1993, p. 13. Emphasis added.

to the line of the leadership. And at the most critical moments this angle became 180 degrees.⁵⁷

Unfortunately, Trotsky seems not to have applied this line of reasoning to his own political leadership vis-à-vis the rising Stalinist bureaucracy. Cliff also tends to 'pass over in silence' the asymmetrical role of leaders and led and the unequal weight of political responsibility shouldered by each: 'It was the objective conditions that determined how successful the opposition could be'.⁵⁸ Wrongly thinking that Trotsky's 'conciliationism' was merely tactical, and merely reflective of the (putatively) low level of activity of the working class, Cliff does not fully appreciate just how much, in fact, it expressed a principled *strategy* of political action that corresponded to Trotsky's strategic (mis)understanding of the (non-class) nature of bureaucracy, and not to some imagined uniform, and uniformly low level of political maturity of the 'masses'. Again, had Trotsky recognised sufficiently early, by 1923 or 1924 say, that the material interests of the bureaucracy were at odds with those of the producers, whether peasants or workers, he would have predicted the reactionary domestic and foreign policy of the period; he would have fought against it by supporting, and fully developing, the class-struggle politics implicit in the extant struggles against the emergent bureaucratic state led by the revolutionary elements that remained in the Russian working class and in the Communist Party. Moreover, thanks to his international stature, Trotsky would have been strategically placed to complement and co-ordinate the struggles of workers in the West and the East with those in Russia, and so mutually reinforce all three. Could this strategy, based on the international interests of the working class, have reversed the course of events in Russia and abroad? No doubt, the objective conditions were unfavourable. But, however unfavourable they may have been, there was no alternative but to appeal to the class-interests of workers. To oppose such a strategy was incorrect, for any other course of action was doomed to failure.

Unfortunately, for far too long Trotsky believed that if he held a mirror to the bureaucracy it would recoil in horror at its own image, reform itself politically, and change course toward internationalism, revolution and democracy. Trotsky tried to convince the leaders of the Russian Communist Party and of the Comintern that they were vehicles of revolution, not counter-revolutionary roadblocks. He wrote sociological dissertations and researched history to teach 'lessons' to Stalin, Zinoviev, and Bukharin. But all this blackboard-socialism

57. Cliff et al. n.d., p. 69.

58. Cliff 1991, p. 277.

was meaningless to those whose social position and material interests blinded them to the profound lessons Trotsky sought to teach. By so squandering the accumulated political capital of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky reduced his opposition to a politically impotent sociology. By arguing with the real enemies of the working class, Trotsky alienated his real friends among the workers. It would be academic to debate the extent to which Trotsky prepared his final defeat. The point is that he prepared it.

Chapter Three

Class-Conflict, Political Competition and Social Transformation: Critical Perspectives on the Social History of the Russian Revolution

Introduction

What determined the victory of the Bolsheviks in 1917? In the past two decades, social historians of the labour-movement in late-Imperial Russia have given a novel answer, and have transformed the field. Speaking in the broadest of terms, the practitioners of the latest trend in scholarship have shown in rich, descriptive detail how workers participated in the Revolution to satisfy pressing material needs and interests rooted in their practical everyday-lives. According to these historians, the 'logic' of this multifaceted economic struggle, which took place in the context of acute economic crisis, detonated a variegated process of political organisation and developing political consciousness among workers that culminated in a majority of the latter arriving at Bolshevik positions and supporting the Bolshevik-led seizure of power.¹ This explanatory motif has now emerged as the standard approach to the great social transformation of 1917. Indeed, by exhaustively recording how workers were able to develop their politics and build their organisations 'from within', through their self-movement around wages, hours and working conditions, social historians have self-consciously challenged and overturned the

1. Suny 1983, pp. 31–52.

previously dominant 'political' view that unorganised and politically undeveloped workers achieved organisation and revolutionary ideas chiefly through the activity of radical intellectuals autonomously organised in a party, and acting 'from the outside'.² Nevertheless, while the previous party-political-centred interpretation has been deservedly dethroned, the new orthodoxy does not offer an analytically superior alternative to it.

Fundamentally at issue is the failure of social historians to properly pose the problem of a specific political *outcome* to the workers' struggles to secure their material well-being. In their view, the self-developing dynamic of the labour-movement in 1917 automatically generated the appropriate political response to the emerging opportunity, within the context of deep economic crisis, for revolutionary social transformation. In contrast, I shall argue that, while it is true the working class developed its consciousness and its organisation in struggle, there was always, as an integral part of that struggle, a competitive party-political moment that was *autonomous*. Party-political competition functioned as the selection-mechanism by means of which workers chose from among rival political solutions, advanced by competing political parties, to economic crisis, and responded to the associated potential for the transition from one type of society to another, i.e. from capitalism to socialism. Indeed, the actual evolution and outcome of the workers' movement in 1917 is incomprehensible without the autonomous political conflicts that were an *irreducible* aspect of the Revolution. But social historians *reduce* the logic of political struggle to the logic of the economic struggle determined by economic crisis and social dislocation. Owing to this reduction, the social interpretation of the Russian Revolution suffers from certain disabling weaknesses. Above all, social historians conjure away the political alternatives available to workers, along with the difficult political choices they had to make. In consequence, the issue of outcome arises in two respects.

First, the outcome of the workers' continental-wide drive in 1917–21 to secure their material well-being in times of economic calamity differed in different countries. In Russia, a revolutionary transformation took place and a workers' state was founded. But, in the West, no comparable revolutionary transition to socialism and Soviet power occurred during the German Revolution of 1918–19 and the Italian *Biennio Rosso* of 1919–20: contexts in which war-induced political-economic crisis drove workers (particularly those in the metallurgical industries) to organise mass-strikes and to participate in huge street-demonstrations; to occupy factories and set up factory-committees, and

2. Haimson 1955, Ulam 1960; Pipes 1963; Keep 1963; Wildman 1967; Daniels 1967.

to join revolutionary parties in the tens and hundreds of thousands.³ Despite the pronounced similarities of the actions taken to develop organisational structures in the working-class struggles of Berlin, Petrograd and Turin – and despite the similarities of their emerging revolutionary currents, which arose from similarly severe economic dislocations, engendered by four years of world-war – a deep-rooted crisis could not in itself shape working-class political response and determine outcome.

Second, the method of social historians to forcibly extrude organised political competition from the workers' movement has the ironic result of effecting a rapprochement with the old political tradition they wish to surpass. This is because they think that political parties and programmes – 'high politics' – is a sphere foreign to the workers' immediate bread-and-butter concerns.⁴ But every struggle of the working class for economic improvement is a political struggle, and, at every point of its economic movement, there is autonomous political competition between diverse parties and trends which social historians miss. In their approach, social historians have run together a correct rejection of the old 'political' historiography, where the autonomous political moment was incorrectly located *outside* the workers' movement, in the 'intelligentsia', with an incorrect rejection of the *autonomy* of the political moment, now correctly located *inside* the workers' movement.

It is the purpose of this essay to lend force and substance to these very general and abstract criticisms of the school of social history by examining, as thoroughly and systematically as possible, the clear and coherent perspective contained in *Strikes and Revolution in Russia, 1917* (Princeton, 1989), by Diane P. Koenker and William G. Rosenberg. This latter is an ambitious and meticulously researched work, and a major contribution to scholarship on the Russian Revolution. It stands out as a model of social history in that Rosenberg and Koenker, without ever formally discussing parties and politics, try to understand and theorise 'the forces that propel revolutionary processes toward one outcome or another'.⁵ In Part One of this essay, and whilst using *Strikes and Revolution in Russia, 1917* as a template, I trace the empirical and analytical weaknesses created for the field of social history by Koenker and Rosenberg's exemplary decision not to investigate directly the various party-political organisations and programmes through which class-conflict was mediated. I shall challenge their far-reaching assumption that factory-centred strike-activism within the context of grave economic crisis led workers to a political consensus, to support for the Bolsheviks, and to fundamental

3. Haimson and Tilly (eds.) 1989.

4. For an explicit example, see Keep 1976.

5. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 299.

social transformation. I shall emphasise instead how the political competition between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks inside and beyond the factory shaped the course of class-conflict at the point of production, and in the polity as a whole. And I shall argue how Bolshevik success in this competitive political contest – and it *alone* – propelled the transition of urban Russia from ‘capitalism’ to socialism.⁶

In Part Two, I bring the labour-movement in Russia and in the West under comparative analysis, and furnish additional evidence and related arguments in favour of the irreducibility of political outcome to economic substrate. The work under consideration is apposite for this comparative purpose. Unlike much of the scholarship on the Russian Revolution, which suffers badly from national insularity, Koenker and Rosenberg unhesitatingly adopt an internationalist perspective and place the workers’ struggles in Russia squarely within the broader context of the ‘explosion’ of working-class militancy in 1917–23 in Europe and America.⁷ They do so for the purpose of arguing, rightly, against an exceptionalist, providential account of the Bolshevik triumph. Nevertheless, the logic of labour-militancy at the workplace to meet basic material needs did not have uniform political consequences because it could not determine a Bolshevik-type victory elsewhere in the industrialised world. This variability of outcome once again points *prima facie* to party-political competition as the independent, determining variable. A full understanding of the Bolshevik achievement would apparently require a systematic and probing historical analysis of the political conflicts and party-politics that drove the 1917 Revolution toward its unique and epochal outcome.

In Part Three, and with the foregoing injunction in mind, I return to the Russian Revolution and straightforwardly narrate the main political conflicts between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks with a view towards highlighting their significance in determining the end result of the 1917 Revolution. In the process, I sketch the outlines of an alternate paradigm.

6. The following works represent a fairly unified conceptualisation of their subject: Wildman 1981, 1987; Koenker 1981; Mandel 1983, 1984; Smith 1983; Suny 1972; Raleigh 1986; Galili 1989; Wade 1984. As with any homogeneous trend in historical scholarship, each work has a character of its own: angles of approach to the subject matter differ, primary sources vary, foci contrast. *Strikes and Revolution in Russia, 1917*, however, is the only work where I will lay out as fully as possible the authors’ line of reasoning by means of which the school of social history reached certain analytically crucial conclusions. I shall have occasion to refer directly to a few of the above-listed works to substantiate the representative character of *Strikes and Revolution* with respect to interpretation and conclusion.

7. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, pp. 11–3. Extensive comparative references may also be found in Smith’s *Red Petrograd* (Smith 1983), the cousin-work to *Strikes and Revolution in Russia, 1917*.

I The social-historical dialectic of the Russian Revolution

The enduring social-scientific achievement of Koenker and Rosenberg and of the social historians generally has been to annihilate the conventional view of the masses as invariably acting impulsively, anarchically and short-sightedly, particularly in times of revolution. It is this school's greatest merit. Delving closely into the chosen focus of their work, the 'dialectic' of the revolutionary process at the level of the factory, Koenker and Rosenberg unfailingly emphasise how the militant strikes of 1917 radically enhanced the power and self-confidence of the working class, and how they also provided the indispensable practical basis upon which workers swiftly constructed the varied superstructural institutions they required to regulate the different aspects of their self-movement, trade-unions, soviets and, most especially, the factory-committees.

In 1917 factory-centred strikes were the 'flashpoint of labour-management relations' and these class-relations, in turn, 'constituted the core of the process for struggle for power in the revolutionary arena'.⁸ Accordingly, Rosenberg and Koenker observe closely how each strike-victory over and against management bolstered the workers' resolve to go further. They follow with painstaking precision the rapid consolidation of *ad hoc* strike-committees into permanent, elected factory-committees with growing powers of supervision and control over management in the most diverse areas, especially over hiring and firing. But each advance of workers' power at the point of production, achieved through militant strike-activity, was fraught with peril so long as hierarchical, 'bourgeois-democratic' relations of property were retained.

As workers developed a sense of their strength, expanded shop-floor democracy, and made despotic inroads into property-rights and managerial prerogatives, property-owners and managers became increasingly resistant. Koenker and Rosenberg show how they organised in self-defence and struck back, in late summer and autumn, with closures, lockouts and outright sabotage. Not content to use economic coercion alone, census-society began to mobilise politically as well, through the officer-corps, to reassert control. The cumulative economic result of this intense and all-sided political offensive was skyrocketing inflation, mass-unemployment and collapsing wages. For workers, then, a virtually unbroken string of strike-victories at the point of production, from February on, far from safeguarding jobs, wages and working conditions had, in the end, failed to preserve even minimally adequate standards of living.

8. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 329.

Confronted by an implacable political-economic employer offensive (a direct consequence of entrepreneurs losing interest in maintaining, let alone in expanding production so as to pay for the economic and political gains achieved by workers through shopfloor struggles) workers became increasingly contentious, intransigent even, precisely over issues of control and power on the shopfloor. Indeed, the workers' loss of faith in the viability of collective bargaining-agreements in conditions of galloping inflation and mass-unemployment largely determined them, Koenker and Rosenberg argue, to take a quantum-leap forward. Initially held back by the ill-defined immensity of the task, yet impelled by dire need, the workers set out in late summer and early autumn to seize the means of production from the owners, to replace all organs of managerial authority with elected bodies of the working class, and to begin to run production themselves.

Thus, the process of conflict between labour and management in the factories of Russia, Rosenberg and Koenker agree, had finally 'encouraged both sides to coalesce' along 'class positions'. 'The very patterns of mobilisation... contributed to the formation of a cohesive working-class in Russia, conscious of its collective position in the social order. Each strike, whether directly experienced or only shared through the press, contributed to this sense of cohesion'. 'In the economic conditions of 1917, with a massive decline in productivity and utter uncertainty about Russia's economic future', workers 'began to see themselves as common partners in the struggle against this collapse'.⁹

Finally, beyond achieving a sense of class-identity through militant shopfloor-centred actions, the steady accumulation of workers' daily strike-experience, coupled with growing economic crisis, was also fostering a molecular transformation of property-relations towards socialism. For the workers' innumerable workplace-centred and strike-bound actions, taken in the aggregate, were bringing them, almost insensibly, towards the collective organisation of production through the mechanism of a democratically-structured, worker-run Soviet state. Complementarily, the politically cohering effect that took place 'above', and which was caused by the transition to socialism implicit in the mass strike-process 'below', became manifest in the workers' explicit acceptance of the crowning political measure required to complete this transition: the Soviet seizure of state-power. This acceptance was expressed in workers drawing close to and, ultimately, rallying around the Bolsheviks, who, it so happened, had made 'All Power to the Soviets' the centrepiece of their political platform. The workers saw it in their interest – indeed, they had

9. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 328.

no choice – but to support the Bolshevik-led seizure of power if they were to successfully negotiate the difficult passage to the new society.

The foregoing overriding ‘dialectic’ of the process of revolutionary social transformation is characteristic of social-historical scholarship on the Russian Revolution.

Setting up the problem

Rosenberg and Koenker rightly hold that most workers went into motion on the factory-floor around issues of vital concern to them independently of party-prompting, and that workers sought, at first, to achieve gains within the established system of property. The problem is that they interpret the observed evolution of workers beyond it, toward a democratic socialism, in terms of an explanatory model that grants political parties in this transition passive and determined roles, not determining and active ones.

Koenker and Rosenberg are undoubtedly correct to argue that workers became aware of their immediate interests and coalesced around class-positions, in the narrowest sense of the term, largely in a myriad of spontaneously erupting workplace-struggles. And it is also true that it was plainly beyond the power of any organised group or party to determine class-conflict, or the Revolution, conceived as the sum-total of these work-centred antagonisms exploding in a relatively compressed period within the context of a profound economic crisis. In this abstract or general sense, revolution and economic crisis were less the willed product of the activity of politically organised individuals than the given background-condition against which all classes and parties acted, and in which the working class became ‘largely conscious of its identity, a class formed in the process of these struggles at the workplace’.¹⁰ Conflict over wages, hours and working conditions was built into the relationship between management and labour and Rosenberg and Koenker are right to say that what ‘gave many workers (and others) a sense of who they were, or at least a sense of who they were *not*’ was this conflicted relationship, not ‘slogans or more elaborate forms of ideology’ generated by political parties).¹¹ Nevertheless, the politics of the Russian Revolution were decidedly much more than the partyless politics of class-‘identity’. The significance of fuller and more complex political ideas, advanced by the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks notably, cannot be grasped at this level of abstraction.

But the larger significance of party-political conflict escapes Rosenberg and Koenker because they believe that the failure of ‘routine’ and even

10. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 327.

11. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 15.

'revolutionary' factory-level patterns of strike-activism to maintain production and meet the needs of workers *by itself* indicated to all workers, regardless of party-affiliation or political outlook, the appropriate, politically credible alternative. By constantly stressing that workers quickly achieved a hegemonic 'identity' on the factory-floor through their factory-committees – an identity that expressed their willingness and ability to strike virtually at will¹² – and by explaining how this occurred, Rosenberg and Koenker unfortunately end up missing the key point: acute political conflict did eventually arise between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, precisely because these working-class leaderships explicitly disagreed about the political implications of the workers' seemingly untrammelled power at the point of production.

I shall argue that workers forged a dynamic and richer sense of separate 'identity' through manifold actions to satisfy pressing material interests, and it is in relation to the complex problem of securing a living wage, acceptable working conditions and reasonable hours that the relationship between party-politics and the strike-process must be assessed. In the section below, I shall try to show the weakness of Koenker and Rosenberg's depoliticised approach to the strike-process. I will show that the workers' transformation of the relations of property at the point of production and their seizure of power, accomplished to preserve jobs and maintain living standards, cannot be understood apart from the outcome of successive party-political conflicts inside and beyond the factory; conflicts that determined the transition to socialism by providing workers with both the opportunity and the need to select this revolutionary course of action and, correlatively, to reject all alternatives to it.

Political conflict and the strike-process

Koenker and Rosenberg ably chronicle the failure of a multitude of discrete, factory-centred strike-processes to overcome economic crisis and meet workers' needs. But the aggregate political significance of these multiple failures was not self-evident to workers. In fact, it was subject to varied interpretation by the major working-class political formations in play. Specifically, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks understood the failure of strikes to achieve their purpose in contrasting ways. This caused these two working-class political vanguards to issue workers competing 'slogans', or formulated political

12. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 326. Rosenberg and Koenker calculate that 2.7 per cent of all strike-participants in 1917 lost strikes outright, an astonishingly low percentage. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 79.

objectives, along with a summons to choose between conflicting strategies of action to achieve (or defend) specific goals connected to these objectives.¹³

Bolshevik and Menshevik workers sharply divided over the broader, supra-firm significance of workers' institutionalised power at the point of production. They fought over which broad political objectives the working class should set for itself, and they debated how it should use its collective power to achieve them. As a result, these politically committed and party-organised workers engaged in systematic and principled political conflict and argument. But, before one can assess the relevance of this political struggle to the outcome of the Revolution one must first establish what the conflicting assessments and views were; something which Koenker and Rosenberg do not adequately do for reasons which will shortly become more apparent.

Both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks fundamentally agreed that striking alone was yielding ever-diminishing political and economic returns, particularly in the period leading up to, and from, the Kornilov rising. But, significantly, militants in both parties drew, and continued to draw, diametrically opposed political lessons from this growing experience.

The Mensheviks responded to the disturbing failure of strikes to realise their purpose by appealing ever-more strongly to workers to refrain from taking further strike-action to press what they judged to be the workers' increasingly irresponsible and unrealistic demands. In the Menshevik view, the workers were unintentionally destroying the economy and raising the spectre of civil war as a result of wilful strike action: the latter, they held, had triggered a crisis of business-confidence among property-owners. Consequently, to establish a political climate favourable to both business and investment required, minimally, that working-class organs of authority at the level of the firm be deprived of control over important areas, particularly over hiring and firing, so that management could make profit-maximising investment-decisions freely and confidently. Certainly, the workers should not seize power, expel management and expropriate the owners. Menshevik Minister of Labour Skobelev's oft-cited circular of 22 August, 'Concerning Worker Interference in Hiring and Firing', spelled out the directly pro-management political conclusions to be drawn from the foregoing analysis.

13. Political competition requires a minimum of two parties. Examining the activity of additional parties is not necessary for the purposes of my argument. I have restricted my choice of parties to the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks because, of all working-class formations, only these trends possessed an independent political significance. Other working-class currents lacked either political significance, for example, the anarchists, or political independence, for example, the Socialist Revolutionaries.

The Bolsheviks countered by arguing, pertinently and systematically, that the demands of the workers around the most diverse of workplace-issues were fully responsible and realistic because they had been raised in response to a war-induced economic crisis that had long preceded the strikes, and which had not arisen from them. The failure of management to meet the workers' claims on matters of vital concern to them was sufficient reason to have workers themselves realise their interests by supporting the Soviet seizure of power as an alternate and legitimate method to ward off economic collapse. The Bolsheviks organised explicitly to advance, defend and popularise their minority-viewpoint by participating in workers' struggles on the shopfloor, and elsewhere, and by everywhere insistently calling workers' attention to the larger political requirement – 'All Power to the Soviets' – for realising a 'constitutional' factory-order and overcoming the economic crisis. Since most workers did not, at first, link the Bolshevik demand for Soviet power to their interests and needs at the point of production, the task of the Bolsheviks was complex but straightforward: 'To patiently explain'¹⁴ the nature of the connection and its political necessity and, more generally, to provide workers with an understanding of what the Bolsheviks thought was required politically in order to win.

Throughout 1917, then, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks advanced competing, internally coherent arguments in favour of their respective political solutions. Both leaderships agreed that workers could not solve their problems through shopfloor-struggles exclusively, as shown by the developing failure of narrow, factory-based, 'syndicalist' tactics to maintain production and meet the needs of workers. But, for their part, the Mensheviks proposed to restore production under management-control. On the other hand, the Bolsheviks wanted workers to think about the potential success of another strategy; one that was designed to have workers themselves organise production collectively, and in their interests. The triumph of this plan was accordingly geared towards – because it was premised upon – the associated seizure of power at all levels, especially the seizure of state-power. This strategic Bolshevik political purpose led to systematic, principled and long-term conflict with Mensheviks because the latter, mindful of the limitations set by their chosen policy of 'dual power', were always advancing a fundamentally different political solution to workers' problems.

Clearly, most workers very quickly endorsed the political objectives the Mensheviks set for the working class by voting Mensheviks (and SRs) into office, from factory-committee to Congress of Soviets. The Mensheviks, in

14. Lenin 1964a, p. 25.

their view, had embarked on the politically correct course to critically support the policies of the Provisional Government. The broad masses 'supported the strategy of dual power as well as the leadership that proposed to implement it' because they believed that this was the only way to realise the 'eight-hour work day, confiscation of the gentry's land, and a democratic republic'.¹⁵

Conversely, a clear majority rejected the Bolsheviks' idea of transforming extant property-relations and establishing a socialist economy and a revolutionary government, both based on and run by soviets, because the Bolshevik outlook did not appear to be promising, realistic, and indeed able to realise this 'three-tail' programme. In fact, dual power would not have worked for any considerable length of time without the support of workers and soldiers, and of all working-class parties; including, initially, the Bolshevik Party, which offered no clear alternative to the Mensheviks in the first critical days and weeks of the Revolution, when the situation was extremely fluid and a majority of workers had not yet firmly committed themselves to the Mensheviks.

In sum, the response of workers to the developing economic crisis was, initially and for some time, Menshevik, for both negative and positive reasons. Negatively, the Bolsheviks presented no alternative to the Mensheviks. No principled differences on the immediate course of action taken existed in the leadership of the RSDLP. Positively, the Mensheviks were able to make – and would continue to make – a convincing case for their proposed political solutions to workers' grievances, and successfully conveyed to workers the great and inevitable dangers that would be courted should they choose to ignore Menshevik political counsel and select an alternate course of action. Still other workers listened, reserved judgement, and awaited further developments.

If it has been necessary to dwell on how two organised working-class political vanguards sought to come to grips with – by making political sense of – the 'demonstration-effect' exerted by wilful striking on managers, it is only because Koenker and Rosenberg simply do not attribute much significance to these competing assessments of workers' power in the development of the latter. And understandably so, from their standpoint. For the causal mechanism through which the eventual shift of worker-support towards the Bolsheviks was finally effected, and the transition to socialism ultimately secured, lies largely outside the sphere of political competition proper. On their account, the transition is chiefly to be sought in the very process of striking, within the 'specific historical conjuncture'.¹⁶ As Russian 'capitalism progressively weakened'¹⁷ and brought further hardships to workers, and in

15. Galili 1989, pp. 64–5.

16. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 318.

17. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 323.

light of the evident failure of wilful striking to avert the impending catastrophe, workers were increasingly pressured to use their accumulated power to expropriate outright the factory-owners and run the apparatus of production by and for themselves. Since the Mensheviks had never stopped denouncing this, in their eyes, foolhardy and dangerous course, workers gradually became disenchanted with them. Workers withdrew their support for 'dual power' and prepared to turn to any party willing to call for the seizure of undivided power by workers. As it turned out, only the Bolsheviks had been advocating precisely this uncompromisingly revolutionary course of action. Koenker and Rosenberg conclude that workers, spontaneously impelled by growing, circumstantially determined economic difficulties, moved, hesitantly perhaps, but in any case naturally and rationally, to support Lenin's partisans.

The probative value of the foregoing developed explanation of the sources of Bolshevik support needs to be very carefully established.

The political economy of crisis

Deteriorating working conditions, longer hours, declines in real wages, hunger, the senseless slaughter of millions at the front: such were the devastating background-conditions to the Russian Revolution, as well as its cause. But it is arguable that these supremely difficult socio-economic circumstances, which grew no less difficult with the passage of time, in any meaningful sense 'caused' workers to endorse the Bolshevik programme and support their politics, as Koenker and Rosenberg characteristically maintain. In fact, the spiralling economy actually produced, between February and October, divergent political responses that were in self-conscious conflict. To seek the wellspring of Bolshevik support in the progressive debilitation of the economy alone, outside the sphere of political competition altogether, is to get more than Rosenberg and Koenker have analytically bargained for, because economic crisis motivated workers to select not just one, but multiple, and competing, political solutions to their problems. All reductionist explanations suffer from a redundant causality. Koenker and Rosenberg's is no exception.

From the standpoint of logical argument, the analytical result of Koenker and Rosenberg's reductionism is self-contradictory: the constantly worsening economic situation 'caused' workers at the beginning of the Russian Revolution, in February–March, to support the *Menshevik* policy of dual power, just as it subsequently 'caused' them, towards the end of the Revolution, in September–October, to endorse the contrary *Bolshevik* call for 'All Power to the Soviets'. From the standpoint of the facts, their reductionism causes them to draw no sharp distinction between determined circumstances – the historically given, unwilling condition of progressive economic crisis, war and revolution – and

determining ones, i.e. the consciously willed actions and ideas of political parties. The blurring of the two issues in practice was not in an eclectic amalgam of willed and unwilled determinants, but in a clear foregrounding of the latter. In insisting *de facto*, if not *de jure*, on an economic determinism, Koenker and Rosenberg in practice deprive workers of a selection-mechanism – political competition – by means of which they could choose from among different party-political responses to ‘crisis’. And so, the increasingly uniform background-condition of growing economic breakdown is foregrounded, to appear in the structure of their explanation as the determining determination. The workers’ strength in the factories, and the consciousness of that strength, acquired through the experience of striking, in good time and in the given circumstances, self-selected a revolutionary-socialist, Bolshevik outcome, not a liberal-reformist, Menshevik one.

To be very specific: on Rosenberg and Koenker’s empiricist account of the Russian Revolution, the political solution to workers’ factory-centred and strike-bound problems needed no autonomous conceptual specification and political definition. On the contrary, this solution naturally suggested itself to workers because, in Koenker and Rosenberg’s view, strikes and the strike-process ‘did not just reflect the way workers, managers, and political figures thought about social and economic relationships. Much more powerfully, they changed the way these participants perceived the *political* process’.¹⁸ The socialist political solution – state-ownership of the means of production – ‘understandably’ became attractive to workers. In promoting it, the Bolsheviks were merely telling workers what the workers were already telling themselves, thanks to the workers’ special insight: their direct, ‘experiential’ access to their own experience. Consequently, Koenker and Rosenberg affirm the self-evidently attractive character of this solution to workers, as it was ‘extremely likely’ that the ‘issues revealed in management-labour struggles...propelled workers toward the Bolshevik camp and *would have done so* at this point in the revolutionary process [late spring] *even* had the party’s own agitation efforts been less intense’.¹⁹ Indeed, the socialist solution ‘became more attractive *even* to those mobilised workers who were not otherwise persuaded by the Bolsheviks’.²⁰

Through these ever-so-rare and ever-so-subtle aforementioned oppositions, then, Koenker and Rosenberg discreetly affirm that the immediate experience of strikes and their outcomes was not just *a* source of insight and learning for workers at any one point – an unexceptional proposition – but the very

18. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 326 (emphasis in the original).

19. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 205 (emphasis added).

20. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 323 (emphasis added).

different and, I think, highly controversial proposition that the strike-process alone ultimately proved to be the recurrent source of *singular* insight and learning; such as to render any party-political interpretation of, and intervention, in the experience of conflict between labour and management largely redundant or superfluous.

Pace Rosenberg and Koenker, no altered perception of the political process could arise directly from, or be immediately shaped by, factory-centred strike-experience. The reverse was true: strike-experience itself was (pre-)conceptualised in distinctly political ways, especially in times of revolution. In itself, or outside the political process, the experience of striking could never select its own political interpretation, as Menshevik-Bolshevik political conflict over the significance of strikes indubitably proves. For the workers' political comprehension of the act of striking was modified only through the autonomous political competition of the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks; by their competing arguments about the wider, political significance of the strike-process. And as the act of striking was inserted in society, so was the workers' political understanding of social relationships modified by these two parties in equally, and equally different, political ways. This political differentiation took time to evolve. It became manifest and sharply defined only in the period immediately leading up to, and subsequently from, the Kornilov revolt of 25 August.

In August and especially in September, after Kornilov's defeat, when many workers began overtly preparing to realise the transition to socialism by readying themselves to rapidly dismantle all organs of authority not accountable to them, at the level of the firm and in the polity, Koenker and Rosenberg remark parenthetically and matter-of-factly how these workers largely abandoned the strike-tactic itself, forsook the Mensheviks, and sought 'relief through revolutionary politics' by supporting 'with various degrees of commitment and enthusiasm' the Bolshevik seizure of power.²¹ But Rosenberg and Koenker do not adequately explain this astonishing reversal of political strategy effected by ever greater numbers of workers. Their just-so account of change in the basic orientation of workers towards the Bolshevik Party is a revelation. On the other hand, given the politically restrictive premises of their approach, Koenker and Rosenberg's *ad hoc* introduction of the Bolsheviks on to the scene should not really come as a surprise. They really cannot explain the workers' strategic shift away from wilful striking and toward the willing seizure of state-power as the *specific* result of the Bolshevik conquest of the workers to their politics. For, in all the intense, months' long, political debates between

21. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, pp. 324–5.

Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in factory-assembly, trade-union and Soviet, Rosenberg and Koenker basically stressed what united, not divided, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks (and the SRs) with respect to striking workers; they thus never gave themselves the opportunity to properly relate the determining political significance of the division between the two factions to the outcome of the Revolution. As they say, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks 'served largely as workers and as socialists *rather* than as party agitators'. 'Party labels were significantly absent from strike activity as it was considered a symbol of class solidarity *rather* than partisan policy'.²² Nevertheless, these exclusory oppositions seem unreasonable because the specific political aim each trend consistently sought to advance in various ways among periodically striking workers is unjustifiably eliminated from consideration.

Thus, Koenker and Rosenberg's key notion that the Bolsheviks were merely telling the workers what the workers already intuitively knew, through direct experience of the strike-process, is an empirically dubious proposition: it works only by arbitrarily highlighting the politically uncontroversial aspects of Bolshevik and Menshevik attitudes toward striking workers; by off-handedly devaluing evidence of political struggle about strike-experience, and by brushing aside the importance of argument among politically organised workers assessing the larger significance of strike-outcome. Against this ever-present flesh-and-blood political 'persuasion', when Bolsheviks and Mensheviks called on workers to exercise judgement, to choose a course of action, and to define themselves politically, Koenker and Rosenberg subtly and invariably invoke and mobilise an incorporeal 'logic' of movement toward socialism that 'followed *directly* from the cumulative economic and political experience of the preceding months', and which caused workers to adopt increasingly uniform 'maximalist' (Bolshevik) positions.²³ Is it any wonder, then, that they give so little critical reflection to the fact that the Bolsheviks had to argue for weeks and months on end to convince most mobilised workers that their alternative, summed up in the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets', was indeed 'attractive'; that it was the only way out, and not designed to bring utter catastrophe, as the Mensheviks untiringly warned?

The point is that Bolshevik-Menshevik conflict remains tangential throughout their account: no more than a distant rumble. This is because ostensibly operating independently of political parties was an apolitical, non-party economic 'logic' that was progressively annealing all political divisions among workers and showing them the way forward, towards workers' power and

22. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 328 (emphasis added).

23. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 13.

socialism. Koenker and Rosenberg strip political competition of any determining power of its own since they ultimately affirm a direct, unmediated connection between the impossibility of meaningful material improvement in conditions of economic crisis on the one hand, and the struggle for Soviet power on the other: they conceptualise the Bolshevik political response apart from the political competition that mediated determined and determining components of the revolutionary process in a specific – because specifically determining – way.

Koenker and Rosenberg thus apparently *assume* the transition to socialism in order to explain how all evolving (off-stage) political differences within the workers' movement in 1917 were bound to be transitory, destined to meet, merge and vanish into the Bolshevik Party. This major assumption can again be tracked from one more angle in the relationship that Rosenberg and Koenker see between the political response of workers, arising directly from the 'crisis' itself, and the movement from one set of property-relations to another, towards socialism:

For Russian workers in particular, revolution meant that the 'ground rules' of strikes...began in 1917 to dissolve...the range of workers' assumptions about the rules rapidly expanded as events unfolded...In other words the strike process itself helped shape a new range of beliefs, attitudes, and values in 1917, for workers as well as their employers, affecting the limits of political and economic possibility.²⁴

Even more forcefully, the strike-process itself 'mobilised workers, articulated their goals, and structured socially cohering perceptions and identities' and, above all, 'changed the frontiers of political struggle' by pushing back political and economic limits, beyond those set by tsarist class and property-relations.²⁵ Again, Koenker and Rosenberg clearly predicate or subordinate all other aspects of the revolution, political competition included, to the strike-process which, on their interpretation, is the final subject, the all-inclusive driving force of social transformation.

In accordance with the foregoing conceptual schema, the overarching political response of workers, through the strike-process, to the combined weakening of capitalism and the unravelling of 'routine' labour-management relations, was realised in the workers' 'need for state intervention' and the need for the even more radical alternative of 'state ownership of the means of production': socialism.²⁶ Thus, further confirmation is hereby obtained that it

24. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 13.

25. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 299.

26. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 323.

was the on-going critical transition 'below' from capitalism to socialism that constituted a fundamental constraint under which needy workers chose their political goals 'above', and, in turn, decided just how they would respond to the Bolsheviks, and to all other political formations. Koenker and Rosenberg are therefore analytically poorly placed to see workers authentically exercising their judgement and making decisions in the domain of politics: these deliberative actions are presented as being overridden by an epochal transition to socialism spontaneously emerging from workers' politically uncoordinated, factory-centred, disparate and elementary strike-action. Indeed, this particularised form of social action constituted the 'key element in the "particle physics" of Russia's broad revolutionary process', to use Koenker and Rosenberg's memorably revelatory metaphysical expression.²⁷

In sum, Rosenberg and Koenker must, and do interpret the transition from capitalism to socialism as a *direct* consequence of the failure of a myriad of individualised actions by workers to secure their narrowly defined economic interests. Since out of the failure of the strike-process appropriate political lessons and political objectives self-synthesised – emanated – Koenker and Rosenberg can neither logically nor empirically look upon the autonomous political debates between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks over alternative strategies of action between February and October as anything more than deceptive semblances, illusive shows; mere epiphenomena. Koenker and Rosenberg deprive these ideological struggles of their intrinsic character and significance, of their point, because they could not alter the progressive weakening of capitalism that was dissolving the capitalist 'ground-rules' of strikes. All the participants could do in diverse political struggles was either to verbally ratify or verbally condemn the ineluctability of this process, but not alter its course in any materially meaningful way. Therefore, and to avoid all analytically and empirically self-defeating consequences for their social interpretation of (off-stage) successive political conflicts from February to October 1917, Koenker and Rosenberg must and do confiscate any independently determining significance to the variegated and mobile political divisions within the workers' movement during that year. More plainly, these divisions can be safely ignored for the purposes of social-historical research, analysis and understanding.

27. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 299. 'For social historians, the dissection of what has been called the "elemental" social forces or Trotsky's "molecular mass" into smaller, identifiable aggregates, has permitted new and deeper understanding of the revolutionary process'. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 299.

Koenker and Rosenberg's work as representative of the trend of social history

The external relationship posited by Koenker and Rosenberg between political competition and the unilinear self-developing political dynamic of the workers' movement is a defining feature of social-historical scholarship. For what distinguishes social-historical analysis is not the general and correct notion that experiencing unendurable material conditions impelled working people to struggle in 1917, but, rather, the more specific and dubious idea that the masses' unwillingness to live as before moved them *independently* of party-political activity in a *particular* political direction. For example, in *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories*, one of the more illuminating and probing accounts of the Russian Revolution, S.A. Smith defends the ultimate reduction of politics to the spontaneous drive of workers to meet material interests. He vigorously criticises traditional historians for not seeing 'the extent to which the struggle to secure basic material needs provided the motive force behind the radicalisation of the workers and peasants'. But, it is one thing for Smith and the social historians to say, correctly, that the jagged crisis movements of a war-wracked economy between February and October 1917 underpinned the 'astonishing political developments of this *annus mirabilis*'.²⁸ It is quite another to reductively hold that the zigzag-course of the economy below merely expressed radical social transformation, and thus complementarily dictated the radical course of politics above in that year. Yet, it is the economic reductionism that symptomatically comes through in their accounts. Most social historians explain shifts in the political support of workers from one party to another by adverting to developments external to the sphere of political competition proper, among the determined circumstances of war and economic crisis. Since the elemental, politically inchoate pressures of hunger and war-weariness provide the masses with both motive-force and directional guidance, they alone are determinative of outcome.

For example, Smith writes that the 'debates on workers' control in the autumn of 1917 arose from the fact that the movement for worker's control had a relentless forward-moving dynamic'.²⁹ What, however, propelled this imperious forward movement? Where can its origins be pinpointed? If, on Smith's view, the political debates around the movement for workers' control arose from the movement *towards* workers' control in the autumn, then what are we to make of the debates of the spring and summer, when Smith could find no such unremittingly forward-moving dynamic in connection to this issue? Given that hard-and-fast evidence of a relentless drive for genuine

28. Smith 1983, p. 145.

29. Smith 1983, pp. 184–5.

workers' control in the spring and summer is absent, should we not conclude that the debates were, as a matter of fact, about moving forward, backward or standing still on the issue of the *larger* political requirement that Soviet power make workers' control real and effective? When, in the autumn, there did begin to appear a 'relentlessly forward-moving dynamic' to fend off disaster through the seizure of state-power is there not a reasonable basis to conclude that we are registering the effects of worker-repudiation of the Mensheviks, effected by the Bolsheviks? For once the workers rejected the lead of the Mensheviks, and once the Bolsheviks won them – through argument about the political significance of workers' evolving experience – to Bolshevik positions on workers' control, political controversy on this issue dissipated as growing numbers of workers drew the necessary political conclusions. After all, only the Bolsheviks had argued that workers could not stand still; only they had insisted throughout, as Smith quite rightly says, that 'workers' control implied a kind of "dual power" in the factory which, like dual power at state-level, was intrinsically unstable and necessitated resolution at the expense of one class or another'.³⁰ But, to repeat, a majority of workers disagreed for quite some time with the Bolshevik implication, or did not even understand it, and as long as this was the case there would be no progressive dynamic towards effective workers' control.

Smith's formulation of the causal mechanism underlying the dynamic of forward-movement on the shopfloor (and beyond) is emblematic of the tendency of social historians to undermine the notion that the outcome of political conflict in 1917 was choice determining.³¹ His formulation is characteristically topsy-turvy, and should be turned right-side up to read, roughly: it was because the Bolsheviks, in the debates on workers' control, moved steadfastly (but flexibly) forward with the politics of workers' control tied to the seizure of state-power that workers, in light of the growing, empirically given failure of the Mensheviks to avert the impending catastrophe, and in order to resolve it at the expense of capitalists and landlords, were won to Bolshevik positions on workers' control; once won, they began resolutely and consciously to move forward towards deliberate control and the pre-meditated Soviet seizure of power in the autumn of 1917. This formulation of the interrelationships between competitive politics, class-formation

30. Smith 1983, p. 185.

31. In his review of Mandel and Smith, Raleigh 1985 accurately reported that Smith offered a 'picture of workers' efforts to curb economic disaster and how struggles in the factories promoted revolutionary consciousness more than *anything* the Bolsheviks *said* and *did*', a depiction which Raleigh finds on the whole 'convincing' and largely correct (emphasis added). What Raleigh says of Smith in particular is true of social historians generally. Raleigh 1985.

and social transformation corresponds to all the incontrovertible facts, taken singly, unearthed by Smith, Rosenberg, Koenker and so many other social historians. Above all, by establishing their correct, causal interconnection, the formulation advances an understanding of the revolutionary process in 1917 that brings into sharp relief the element of critical awareness and advance planning that uniquely characterised the October Revolution.³²

But social historians are prepared to deny the uniqueness of the October Revolution precisely by way of formally and archetypally counterposing the allegedly 'spontaneous' outcome of the revolutionary process between February and October to the sphere of political competition: 'The end results of "Bolshevism" and "Soviet power"' Allan Wildman concludes, 'were *far more* a reflection of the spontaneous forces of the revolution, *as opposed* to the rational constructs of ideologues and political leaders, than either Soviet or Western historiography have characteristically acknowledged'.³³ Wildman's unambiguous subordination of non-Bolshevik consciousness to Bolshevik spontaneity is supremely paradoxical, but it neatly sums up his own work, as well as that of most social historians; of Mandel, Smith and Koenker, of Suny, Rosenberg, Galili and Raleigh, to mention but the better known.

With most social historians, then, the unconscious, unwilling, determined component of the revolutionary process systematically prevails over the conscious, willed, determining one making a 'naturalisation' of it 'spontaneously' acceptable to many. As Smith says, the 'attempts of workers to defend their living standards and to preserve jobs led them, to a large extent

32. Smith's position merits further analysis. Social historians rightly see the rational pursuit of material interests as the animating force of workers' conscious activity. However, in a review essay of Koenker's *Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution* Smith dissented from what he took to be her 'rather unilateral emphasis on "rationality"' because it wrongly suggested that workers were exclusively 'governed by hard-headed calculation of ends and means'. The workers' rationality, Smith cautioned, 'was deeply imbued with idealism and even utopianism. Revolutionary consciousness had moral and emotional as well as rational bases, but very little of this is conveyed in Koenker's narrative'. Smith 1984. Nevertheless, Smith is ambiguous on the relationship between the workers' putative utopianism and idealism on the one hand (for which, curiously, little evidence is to be found in his own book), and the workers' undoubted calculating rationality on the other. I believe the ambiguity stems from Smith's reluctance fully to recognise and analyse the determining substance of political competition. Indeed, that Koenker never reached the dimension of political competition in her study of the workers' drive to secure their material well-being was apparently not crucial to Smith, for, in his critical remarks, Smith leaped over that dimension altogether by attributing extra-rational, emotional bases to workers' consciousness and activity, and extra-material, ideal, even utopian, interests. In his commendable desire to make the worker more than a *homo economicus*, Smith still made him less than a *zoon politikon*.

33. Wildman 1987, p. 402 (emphasis added).

“spontaneously”, to see in the revolutionary options offered by the Bolsheviks the “natural” solution to their immediate problems’.³⁴ But, again, the link made by the Bolsheviks between the workers’ efforts to defend their material interests, which were indeed largely spontaneous, and the yet-to-be-created political conditions under which they could do so successfully, appears ‘natural’ only in retrospect. At the time, the Bolshevik connection seemed to most workers (and not they alone) unrealistic, artificial and contrived, whereas the equally ramified Menshevik connection was the ‘naturally’ convincing, self-evident one. Too many social historians are blind to the significance of this stark fact for a proper understanding of the 1917 Revolution. By speaking of a conscious, historically specific, manifold and internally contradictory political process as if it were a spontaneous natural development, social historians simply impose *their own* ideas of what was natural and intuitive, and what was by design and ‘artifice’; of what was practical and realistic, and what was not.

The autonomous significance of politics

In a demanding and probing essay, Leopold Haimson has subtly but effectively criticised the social historians for their generalised failure to recognise that the revolutionary process in 1917 was always perceived from within one of a multiplicity of autonomously formed political standpoints.³⁵ ‘Fundamentally at issue’, wrote Haimson, was the full recognition that ‘collective representations’ of various social classes and groups did not ‘magically spring out of the patterns of their own collective existence’ but were consciously developed, by autonomous intellectuals most especially. These autonomous representations, once formed, played a *crucial* role in shaping ‘political attitudes’ and guiding political behaviour, especially during periods of revolution, ‘when individuals and groups had to establish – indeed decide – who they were in order to determine how they should feel, think, and ultimately act’.³⁶

It is not necessary, though, to endorse Haimson’s larger argument (of which the foregoing view is a part) that just because the very ‘patterns of collective action, the attitudes, indeed the very sense of identity’ required interpretation, these patterns, attitudes and identities were therefore uniquely and completely constituted in the interpretation, and thus irreducible to any

34. Smith 1983, pp. 2–3. By placing quotation-marks around the indicated words, Smith lets the reader know he does not intend their strict meaning though what he leaves in abeyance he does intend. In effect, Smith perhaps senses that, in this instance, the terms may not be *quite* right.

35. Haimson 1988, pp. 1–20.

36. Haimson, pp. 1–4.

empirically identifiable 'set of "objective" social characteristics, however subtly defined'.³⁷ By conceptualising the generalising and synthesising political moment of the workers' movement as a phenomenon existing outside it (in a Kantian-demarcationist sense), in the 'intelligentsia', Haimson reaffirms the idealism that fundamentally characterises the political tradition. In this regard, in his exchange with Haimson, Rosenberg quite properly noted that Haimson 'allies himself firmly if implicitly against' the social historians who minimally tend to 'infer attitudes or mentalities' of social classes from a given, objectively constituted 'socio-economic system in which all members of Russian society found themselves', and not from ascriptive categories attributable to intellectuals.³⁸

It is not the purpose of this essay to critically assess the presuppositions that lie behind Haimson's notion – a notion that is central to the historiographical school of which he is the most sophisticated and powerful exponent – that the radical political ideology of the workers' movement in Russia was reducible to the discursive construct of radical intellectuals, that the attitudes and mentalities of workers ultimately constituted vehicles for the expression of the collective experience and political conduct of 'those members of the educated elite who had themselves assumed the collective representation of an "intelligentsia"'.³⁹ It is sufficient to agree with Haimson on his all-important but under-appreciated insight: that the specific political outcome of workers' struggles to satisfy needs in 1917 was not the direct and immediate result of that struggle, because the significance of the workers' drive to secure their material existence was always open to diverse and, at times, conflicting political assessments, which led to diverse and, at times, conflicting political actions. The outcomes of the latter, though not pre-determined, were determinative nevertheless. In short, *the experience of revolutionary activity in 1917 did not contain its own political interpretation.*

This is confirmed by the subsequent historical experience of the workers' movement in Italy and Germany in the 1920s, and in France and Spain in the 1930s (the list of countries and periods could easily be lengthened), which has shown that class-conflict in the midst of profound social crisis and economic dislocation has never provided (and never will provide) workers with a direct and indubitable basis upon which to anchor a course of action irrevocably committing them to a democratic-socialist transformation of extant class- and property-relations. For the best way to respond to the material interests of the working class (and of other classes) is always worked up and

37. Haimson, p. 3.

38. Rosenberg 1988, pp. 21, 23.

39. Haimson 1988, p. 4.

transformed – mediated – in competing ways, by competing political parties, competing programmes of social change, and competing strategies of political action.

Social historians, then, must deepen their broadly materialist approach by discovering, extracting, and valorising analytically the materialist kernel embedded in the peculiarly ‘intelligent idealism’ (Lenin) espoused by Haimson. For it was the autonomous movement of politics that opened the possibility for the transition to socialism: the direct intervention of the masses over matters of great concern to them, their massive break from the infernal monotony of exploitation, and their difficult and open-minded search for political solutions to problems of social existence. In 1917, workers were free to choose which party and programme to follow, and which to reject. As a rule, they changed their minds and their course of action mainly because one of the competing political formations would, through action and rational argument, convince them of the objective political significance of workers’ revolutionary practice and experience, and thereby attract their support. In times of revolution, free political activity – the action of parties – is the determining determination.⁴⁰

Initial assessment and balance-sheet

The discussion may be summed up at this point by way of a provisional and relatively complete conclusion. Koenker and Rosenberg illuminate flawlessly the manner in which organised and mobilised workers collectively created the necessary political *conditions* to make *possible* a pro-working-class solution to the manifold crises that threatened to overwhelm them. But they (and social historians) move too quickly from the plausible proposition that workers possessed a capacity to act politically in these difficult conditions to the very different proposition – which they tacitly defend – that these conditions *determined* workers to act politically in *one* way; that they motivated workers to use their capacity for free political action in a *single* direction, towards the organisation of production in their own interests and under the aegis of a workers’ state and, correlatively, away from the resumption of production under the control of management and the protection of a liberal-democratic state. Thus, and in conformity with the second proposition, which is the operating one and is the Achilles heel of the entire trend of social history, Koenker

40. ‘I now know how it is possible in the course of half an hour to leave not the slightest trace of the most hollow defencism’ among workers. So wrote Lunacharsky of a factory-meeting at which he and other Bolsheviks had spoken. Cited in Mandel, p. 124.

and Rosenberg see the political significance of a developing crisis evolving of itself and gradually becoming manifest to workers. No complex and concerted interpretation of it by representatives of competing political organisations was necessary. Since the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks only make cameo-appearances in the transition from capitalism to socialism, we are naturally given to understand that they were not really needed; that workers were not really required to choose among truly conflicting alternatives, to make difficult, sometimes wrenching, political decisions. In other words, the success of the Bolsheviks in winning workers to their programme for workers' power did not determine the motion of workers toward socialism. Rather, because the experience of economic upheaval carried its own (Bolshevik) response, the workers' success in independently moving toward socialism – independently, that is, of the appeal of Bolsheviks and their programme – endeared workers to the Bolsheviks' political platform. The Bolsheviks have a purely formal, ratificatory, 'cheerleading' function to perform from the side-lines, as workers parade by, straight towards socialism. Lenin's partisans are empirically associated in time and place with this historic movement, but no causal, determinative connection exists between the ideas and activity of the Bolshevik Party and fundamental social transformation. On the contrary, according to the logic of the argument of the social historians, the non-partisan 'radicalisation' of workers in pursuit of material salvation was fated to assume the shape of Bolshevism, while the Bolsheviks, their programme and activity, became mere means by which the abstraction of workers' needs and wants vested itself with political reality. The Bolsheviks did not determine the transition to socialism; they were determined by it.

Finally, having given the distinct impression that effectively satisfying workers' needs, wants and aspirations in a revolutionary situation was, at best, only marginally connected to the problem of offering workers effective political leadership in the most varied of forums and around the most diverse of issues, Rosenberg and Koenker implicitly pose the problem of what political leadership is effectively about. In this connection, they limit themselves to blandly stating that 'what might be described as an advance guard of politically conscious, experienced, and militant worker activists clearly existed in 1917 quite apart from strike-activity, working in trade unions, factory-committees, or local soviets, and expressing their militancy in party work and political demonstrations'.⁴¹ But if, as I have argued, they hardly see the political purpose of the Bolsheviks (and Mensheviks) in strike-activity specifically, if they close their eyes to the different roles the Bolsheviks (and Mensheviks) played

41. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 302.

in the various workers' struggles generally; if, in sum, the Bolsheviks are not particularly relevant and necessary to meeting the felt needs and wants of workers, then whose wants and needs are the Bolsheviks specifically expressing in militant party-political demonstrations? Koenker and Rosenberg, and most social historians, having uttered 'A' to 'Y', are reluctant to say 'Z', to say what other historians are prepared to say. Masquerading as political leaders of the working class, the Bolsheviks camouflaged interests and goals of *their own* and, as the subsequent rise of Stalinism would allegedly show, in deadly conflict with those of their popular constituency.⁴² The ostensible ideological differences that inhere in a 'political' versus 'social' approach to the Russian Revolution, highlighted by Suny notably, cannot conceal the fact that both approaches understand the workers' movement and the sphere of political competition to be external to one another. Social and political history, as they have been traditionally practised in the field of late-Imperial Russian history, are not mutually exclusive but condition and supplement each other 'from below' and 'from above' respectively.⁴³

42. For a shrill restatement of this view, see Pipes 1990. Keep shares Pipes's general outlook. In his review (Keep 1991) of *Strikes and Revolution in Russia, 1917*, Keep criticised Koenker and Rosenberg for believing that the Bolsheviks 'merely reflect[ed] the masses' own elemental aspirations'. Keep is correct on this crucial point. However, Keep went on to predictably but falsely deduce that, in giving political form and meaning to these aspirations, the Bolsheviks must therefore have falsified them and (super-) imposed the 'ulterior goal' of socialism, thereby depriving the masses of that liberal democracy and free enterprise to which they, presumably, ideally aspired. Keep's presumption, if acted upon politically, would take away the right of the people to take matters into their own hands and vote for a political party of their own choosing, because the masses might not know what is best for them. Many have used the line of reasoning espoused by Keep to justify dictatorship over the people, for the good of the people.

43. In his review-essay 'Toward a Social History of the October Revolution', (Suny 1983) Suny declined to characterise J.L.H. Keep's study of the Russian Revolution as genuine 'social history' owing to Keep's key notion that the Bolsheviks exploited their putative estrangement from the workers, to the detriment of workers. Suny countered Keep's central idea by seeing in the workers' 'autonomy' and self-enclosed 'rationality' defensive barriers that, fortunately, autarchically shielded workers (at least in 1917) from undue directing influence by parties of calculating radical intellectuals. However, Suny's counterposition is a mirror-image of Keep's basic position, with Suny merely attaching different political values to it. Keep and most political historians accompany the image of exteriority with imprecations against the Bolsheviks specifically. Suny and most social historians accompany their image of exteriority with studied moral-ideological praise of workers generally, especially when they are free or can be made to appear free of what most historians, social and political alike, tend to regard as *la politique politicienne* practised by party-revolutionaries. (This image of party-politics is so widespread and pervasive that, in my view, it is less a summary conceptualisation of revolutionary politics, in Russia or elsewhere, than a commentary by proxy on the manipulative techniques and false advertising of contemporary mass-electoral politics.) Cutting across and standing independently of

The social histories of the Russian Revolution, then, are not histories with the politics 'left out'; a widespread, partially correct but ultimately superficial view. They are, in fact, histories with the politics of Bolshevism 'left in', or insinuated into the revolutionary process, to cover developments that the social-historical model of social transformation cannot otherwise adequately explain.⁴⁴ On these accounts, at every critical juncture in the workers' self-movement in 1917, when the flux and reflux of events compelled workers to take a course of action, the workers always seem to respond in a quasi-Pavlovian manner, almost reflexively, so that the inner logic of the workers' participation in the revolutionary struggle appears to be devoid of much conscious political decision-making. Embedded in social-historical analysis, concealed in the very structure of its paradigm, is a denial of all real value and significance to political choices facing workers: the masses would only heed what 'logic' and 'circumstances' told them, regardless of what leading political parties said and did, and were bound to get the political leadership to tell them what they wanted to hear and do. In light of the current preoccupation with 'historical alternatives' inside and outside the former Soviet Union, how paradoxical it is that the social historians should generally hold fast to the notion that the outcome of the Russian Revolution was inevitable. Indeed, never has serendipity worked so determinedly on behalf of the masses, nor fortune smiled so good-naturedly on the Bolsheviks: the social-historical interpretation of the Bolshevik triumph is suffused with an underlying teleological determinism.⁴⁵

Suny and Keep's divergent moral-ideological evaluations of workers and (Bolshevik) politics, then, is the external relationship they both posit between the domain of party-political competition, on the one hand, and the workers' movement on the other. Unfortunately, Suny missed this distinction and, in line with his notion that separating political beliefs from an impartial treatment of the Russian Revolution was not truly feasible, he dragged in political values (in this case, his own) to deprive Keep's work of the title 'social history'.

44. *Mutatis mutandis*, some social historians of Stalinism may throw politics and the Stalinist state out through the front door from their accounts; only to have both covertly reappear through the back door, disguised as collectivisation and industrialisation, 'social' processes centrally commanded into existence by a coercive state. See Brovkin 1989 and Eley 1986.

45. In an empirically distinct though analytically analogous context, Reginald Zelnik advised historians to avoid all one-sidedness by 'working through a complex dialectic of ideology and circumstance, consciousness and experience, reality and will, a dialectic that can never be reduced to a catchy formula, and certainly not a formula that awards a golden certificate of causal primacy'. Zelnik 1989, p. 379. Nevertheless, while Zelnik does point to the real weaknesses of the social historians, he does so from a general position that risks an equally serious misconceptualisation of the historic process. As an alternative to the objectivist, Pavlovian determinism of the social historians, Zelnik advocates, in practice, a subjectivist, ideologically-driven determinism, by attributing causal primacy *de facto* to Bolshevik political will as the effective agent of twentieth-

In sum, social historians do not sufficiently take into account the intervention of different working-class parties, through concerted agitation and propaganda, in differentially shaping the political understanding and actions of workers. Either they neglect outright the mediation of specific political ideas, programmes and organisations through which workers interpreted and responded to their changing experience, or they reduce politics to economics altogether, or they view politics as a partyless, non-competitive, 'cultural' phenomenon alone.⁴⁶ In every case, their self-consciously revisionist

century Russian history, a notion re-valorised and popularised (notably, under Stalin) by the work of Sheila Fitzpatrick, in which the civil-war mentality of Bolshevism is identified as a (the?) transcendent ideological mainspring of social transformation. See for example Fitzpatrick 1985.

46. David Mandel 1983 devotes an entire introductory chapter to 'types of political culture' that coincided with three types of workers: the skilled, the unskilled and the 'labour aristocracy' (printers and small property owning workers mainly). According to him, the 'cultural traits and dispositions' of each group of workers 'filtered perceptions and shaped responses' to events so that it formed a 'necessary point of departure to understand political consciousness'. Mandel 1983, p. 9. However, in his conclusion, he rejects the notion that 'cultural factors' were determining in themselves. In fact, he says, they only 'acted as intervening variables between the actors and the objective situation'. 'The main practical import of political culture in 1917 itself was to accelerate or retard the radicalisation process'. As conclusive proof, he emphasises that the 'marked differences in political culture among the workers' proved no obstacle to the February Revolution and dual power mustering 'broad support' among workers, just as the victory of the October Revolution and Soviet power was only made possible thanks to the 'virtual unanimity' of workers in favour of it. Mandel 1984, p. 416. The analytical implication here is that political position, and shift in political position, was not reducible to fixed cultural type. But Mandel does not fully realise the implication as he rejects the empirical premises of his own conclusion and, in practice, at every point in the body of his work, tries to 'explain' the shifting political practices and outlooks of each group largely by reference to that group's relatively stable cultural peculiarities, traits and dispositions. What he actually engages in is reductionist-historical descriptivism, not causal analysis.

On an analytically related point, I should note in passing that Koenker and Rosenberg reject, rightly, sociologically-reductionist explanations of the propensity of workers to strike in 1917. 'The specific economic position of each industry... fails to explain differences in strike propensity' (p. 303); 'It would seem the attributes of skill alone... did not necessarily predispose workers to strike in 1917 (p. 309); '...it is still not certain that the size of an enterprise alone was more significant in fostering strikes than other factors...' (p. 312); 'In sum, we cannot speak of a strike vanguard at all in terms of social indices, since there are no really consistent patterns' (p. 318). Koenker and Rosenberg's summation calls attention to another implied and broader analytical problem, that of disaggregating the political moment of the workers' movement so as to speak of it exclusively in terms of social indices, that is, wage-level, industry, gender, skill-level, literacy, locality, factory-size, or any combination thereof. In other words, while the political moment doubtless contains these and other indices, it cannot be indexed under any of them: politics forms a category apart. Competition between political vanguards functions to determine the workers' movement own path, a function that cannot be carried out by, substituted for, exchanged with, reduced to or indexed under any other part of the workers' movement.

efforts to understand the evolution of the labour-movement in 1917 directly, apart from its relationship to diverse political parties, flows from their bed-rock-assumption that pressing and profound social problems select their own political resolution. Ironically, in attempting to write politics out of the revolutionary process, they have ended up surreptitiously reintroducing the politics of Bolshevism that determined the particular outcome of the class-struggle in Russia between February and October 1917. Specifically, toward the end of their work, when Koenker and Rosenberg drew Bolshevik political conclusions from their analysis of strikes in 1917, they did so only because at the beginning of their scholarly enterprise they unwittingly adopted the Bolshevik political standpoint in divining the strikes' ultimate, collective, political significance: Rosenberg and Koenker unconsciously stand as historians upon the same viewpoint as that which the Bolsheviks consciously stood as politicians.

II Organisation, bureaucracy and political leadership: the Russian labour-movement in comparative perspective

The socio-historical account of the workers' political response in Russia to endemic economic crisis falls apart if only because the economic impasse that is imputed to be the cause of the Bolshevik victory can be shown to produce very dissimilar political effects in other countries where very similar conditions obtained. For, everywhere else in the industrial world, the workers failed concretely to realise, through the seizure of state-power by means of their own, class-based institutions, the abstract 'logic' of the mass strike-process for higher wages, better working conditions and job-security outright. In light of this diversity of outcome, the triumph of the Bolsheviks 'up above' cannot actually be explained just by appealing to an abstract, unilinearly developing political dynamic that was ostensibly inherent in economic struggles 'down below'.

Rosenberg and Koenker rightly adopt an internationalist perspective to better understand the 'special nature of strikes in revolutionary situations throughout the industrial world'.⁴⁷ But they wrongly understand the nature of revolutionary, massively strikebound situations, specifically because they neglect the role played by political competition, which was responsible for the very different political course taken by the workers' economic movement outside Russia. To explain, therefore, the different political outcomes

47. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 22.

to similar revolutionary processes operating in Russia and the West in this period minimally requires coming to terms with the contrary political results of autonomous political conflicts in the two regions. To put it as sharply and meaningfully as possible: why is the autonomous moment of political competition in the West bereft of a Bolshevik-type party carrying out Bolshevik-type politics? An answer to this question preliminarily requires solving a host of intermediate problems and issues, and the answer I ultimately venture in turn raises the issue of Russian 'exceptionalism', which would apparently exempt analytically the Russian labour-movement altogether from a comparative perspective owing precisely to the singularity of the October Revolution: it is, after all, an unduplicated original. Nevertheless, I believe analysis can resolve these complexities.

Organisation and political leadership: general observations

Organisation-building by workers was the necessary complement to resource-mobilisation and, later, to successful struggle for practical rights and powers. This view, basic to Rosenberg and Koenker's account, fits the Russian situation splendidly. There, workers built an array of institutions, from factory-committee to Soviet, to run their own affairs, destroying, for good measure, Robert Michels's 'iron law of oligarchy'. Mass organisation tended to empower and mobilise workers. However, because Koenker and Rosenberg develop the view that workers' empowerment and mobilisation depended exclusively on workers' organisation, without paying due attention to the autonomous, goal-shaping political conflicts inside that organisation, they unwittingly establish the symmetrical contrary of Michels's law: organisation as such empowers and mobilises, regardless of political objectives set by leadership in the political arena. But the political success of the workers' movement, while doubtless dependent on successful institution-building on the shopfloor and beyond, is not assured merely by such innovatory organisational achievements. Above all, it is a question of the final outcome of class-conflict, the seizure of state-power, which Rosenberg and Koenker run together with the successful establishment of working-class organisations, from factory-committee to Soviets. The two must be adequately distinguished. Their failure to make that distinction sharp enough leads Koenker and Rosenberg to imply that workers' organisations in general promoted workers' struggles; an implication that seems to hold true in Russia, but only because, as I have argued, the political agency of Bolshevism was underhandedly structured into or simply assimilated with the organisation *qua* organisation of workers, factory-committee, trade-union, Soviet. But Rosenberg and

Koenker's lightning survey of the Western European and American labour-movements clearly reveals that the traditional organisations of the working class there did everything to disempower the working class, a fact for which Rosenberg and Koenker offer no adequate explanation.

Thus, Koenker and Rosenberg write revealingly, if perfunctorily, about how major strikes took place in the US 'often in sharp opposition to national trade-union policy' as the 'national unions participated in a state sponsored mediation effort to quell labour militancy'. In Britain, national labour-organisations entered into partnership with the state and used their power to oppose 'growing labour militancy and autonomous movement toward direct action', leaving 'rank-and-file militants without effective national organisations' to lead them. In Germany, as well, the trade-unions made a pact with the state 'but at the local level workers engaged in direct action and militant politics' that threatened this pact. In Italy, too, labour-militancy culminated in the *Biennio Rosso* of 1919–20, when the workers of Milan and Turin defied their leaderships and occupied the factories to press their demands while, in France, 'labour militancy reached unprecedented levels, largely outside the leadership of traditional labour organisations'.⁴⁸ Haimson acutely summarised the two key features of the workers' movement in this period as 'that of initiatives from below bringing to the surface, through new forms of collective action, the hitherto unrecognised grievances of large masses of unorganised workers, and of organised workers *rebellng against their leaderships*'.⁴⁹

It is true that, in Russia and in the West, militant mass-strikes, street-demonstrations and other extra-electoral and extra-parliamentary activities led to explosive confrontations with the state and the employers, involving hundreds of thousands of organised and unorganised workers. And Koenker and Rosenberg are surely right to bring to the fore these broad similarities to compensate for the failure of most historians to note them in the first place, let alone remark upon their significance in a comparative perspective. Still, Rosenberg and Koenker overlook the startling contrasts which were, I shall argue, the direct consequence of the contrasting outcomes of competing reformist and revolutionary politics and parties, in Russia and the West.

The contrasts may be summarised as follows: in Russia, the Bolshevik Party imparted to the workers' economic struggles a revolutionary direction which abolished 'bourgeois' relations of production and established, however fleetingly, a workers' state. In the West, the reformist parties directed workers' activity into parliamentary-electoral channels which bypassed, and thus left

48. Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, pp. 12–13.

49. Haimson and Tilly (eds.) 1989, p. 43 (emphasis added.)

intact, private property in the means of production, along with the political integument of this form of property, the capitalist state. In Russia, the leadership of all workers' institutions, from Soviet down to factory-committee, gave free and public access to the Bolshevik Party, a minority-revolutionary organisation. In the West, the leaderships of workers' organisations everywhere attempted to undermine, even physically repress, minority revolutionary currents rapidly emerging from among their mobilising rank and file. In Russia, the revolutionary (Bolshevik) rank-and-file minority became the majority in the workers' institutions democratically, through the ballot-box, in a series of open electoral contests that removed the reformist (Menshevik) leaderships from office, from factory-committee on up to Soviet. In the West, the reformist leaderships everywhere ultimately maintained their grip on the traditional organisations of the working class. The question is posed: why did reformist politics and reformist organisations emerge triumphant in the workers' movement in the West?

The reformist politics of party and trade-union bureaucracies in the Western labour-movement

Generally speaking, the creation of working-class political parties and trade-unions, or their qualitative transformation, has come about in spurts, at high points in the class-struggle, through explosive and militant direct action by hitherto unorganised or badly organised workers. It is in the course of actually constituting themselves as a class through struggle that workers form class-organisations able to force concessions from the state and the employers. Indeed, 'as a rule, it is only when workers have in fact broken through their own passivity, created new forms of solidarity, and, on that basis, amassed the power needed to confront capital, that the goals of reform and revolution *promised* upon collective, class-based action can appear at all relevant and practical'.⁵⁰ The source of workers' strength has lain not in their organisation as such, but in their ability to mobilise through increasingly powerful direct actions on the streets, in the neighbourhoods, in the offices and on the shop-floor. In this central respect, there is little to distinguish the Russian workers' movement from that in the West. In both, trade-unions and political parties were initially established through the onset of mass-struggles. However, in the West, workers' organisations continued systematically to develop even in the absence of sharp class-conflict. But the relatively prolonged periodic declines in working-class militancy in the West, conditioned by relative

50. Brenner 1985b, p. 40.

economic prosperity, changed the character of working-class organisation there by generating a phenomenon unknown in Russia: massive and solidly entrenched labour-bureaucracies.

Robert Michels, on the basis of the study of a relatively limited historical period and geographical area – principally Western Europe and the USA between 1880–1914 – and using the German Social-Democratic Party (of which he was a member) as a template, characterised the trade-union and party-bureaucracies in the workers' movement as a distinct social layer with a distinct social position, forms of activity, and political outlook that were potentially at odds with those of the rank and file. 'The party is endowed with a bureaucracy...the treasuries are full, a complex ramification of financial and moral interests extends all over the country'.⁵¹ Above all, the leadership no longer worked alongside the rank and file, and had consequently developed a new way of life and different social interests. Critically, the leadership had come to identify these interests and that way of life with the organisation they worked for, and not with the membership that they represented. Organisational self-preservation became the all-encompassing aim and last word of the bureaucratised party and trade-union leadership. The organisation had become an end in itself.

Given the priority of the labour-bureaucracy in protecting their corporate organisation as the material basis of their livelihoods and their distinctive modes of life, Michels continued, the leadership would systematically oppose all such revolutionary practices engaged in by workers during periods of acute class-struggle, as such practices would endanger and compromise the reformist organisational 'work of many decades, the social existence of thousands of leaders and sub-leaders, the entire party'. It will suppress 'bold and enterprising' tactics such as mass-strikes, street-demonstrations and other forms of activity the rank and file periodically develop, particularly in times of economic crisis, to defend their conditions of life against increasingly well-organised employers. It will react 'with all the authority at its disposal against the revolutionary currents which exist within its own organisation', because the advocacy by radicalised rank and filers of extra-parliamentary and extra-legal revolutionary methods of struggle would invite, if acted upon, state repression; this would jeopardise the very existence of the organisations from which the leadership draws its lifeblood. '[I]n the name of the grave responsibilities attaching to its position', the leadership 'now disavows anti-

51. Michels 1962, p. 338.

militarism, repudiates the general strike, and denies all the logical audacities of its past'.⁵²

Only heightened class-conflict activates the latent differences of political outlook and social interest between the rank and file and the leadership. In Germany, these differences first became evident in 1905, when masses of workers, organised and unorganised, moved ahead of the leadership and developed their militancy, self-organisation and political consciousness. This created the potential for the transformation of workers' consciousness in a radical direction. But the labour-bureaucracies in Party and trade-union moved swiftly to contain the struggle and to channel it into the classic forms of reformist activity. It was then that the cleavage between the reformist and revolutionary wings of the German Social-Democratic Party acquired practical and not just theoretical importance.⁵³

In broadly reformist periods, however, the conflict of interest between the bureaucracy and the rank and file is hidden, for an identity of interests apparently exists between the two; an identity that stems from their common recognition that the unfavourable balance of class-forces places reform rather than revolution on the agenda. Moreover, localised and partial struggles of workers in times of relative economic prosperity and stability can yield limited but positive gains, strengthening the reformist outlook among both workers and the leadership.⁵⁴ This said, the following generalisation may be ventured about the relative strength of revolutionary and reformist currents in the labour-movement in the West.

In the West, the revolutionary minorities operated within what in practice were mass-reformist organisations. Left-wing militants were therefore generally straitjacketed by the reformist leadership of the organisation, since that leadership could very often depend on a purely electoral mobilisation of the passive, reformist-minded, dues-paying majority to curb the advocacy of revolutionary politics, especially in non-revolutionary periods. But the failure of Western revolutionaries to become organisationally independent of the reformist parties meant that they could not free themselves politically from the reformist majority belonging to these parties. In other words, had these militants followed the example of the Bolsheviks and organised their own

52. Michels, p. 337. cf. Brenner 1985b, pp. 43–51. Elisabeth Domansky has amply documented the conservatism of trade-union leaderships in a case-study. Domansky 1989. The bureaucratic suffocation of the labour-movement has perhaps found its consummate expression in the United States. For a probing contemporary analysis, see Moody 1988.

53. Schorske 1955. Rosa Luxemburg presented the views of the revolutionary wing, in 1906, in *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*. Luxemburg 1971.

54. Brenner 1985b, pp. 41–2.

party, they would have been able to deliberately use their freedom of action to compete for influence through their distinctly minoritarian-revolutionary politics, and potentially win the rank-and-file majority away from the reformist leadership of the organisation; a conquest feasible only in broadly revolutionary situations.

But the Western revolutionaries did not create their own party. Under these chosen, organisationally and politically self-limiting circumstances, radicals were not really able sharply and integrally to develop and publicise revolutionary practices and understanding among themselves and in relation to the working class at large, and thus, in this objective way, prepare for the next revolutionary upturn. As a result, when revolution did break out in Germany and elsewhere, millions of workers and thousands of radicals were suddenly thrust into a revolutionary situation; they began to engage in revolutionary practice, but without having thought matters through very much or very clearly. Revolutionaries did campaign for their views among the working class, but only with the greatest of difficulty, diffusedly and haphazardly, and always in relationship to the bureaucratised leaderships of working-class parties and the trade-unions who were past masters in organising reformist politics. The latter jointly and speedily mobilised for their political viewpoint, and fought fiercely for their reformist ideas and practices, especially in this ominously revolutionary situation. But no authoritative revolutionary party had developed, or could be improvised on the spot, to provide the working class a relatively well-thought-out and credible political alternative to the traditional leaderships. Never having achieved organisational independence, the revolutionaries were very poorly prepared to compete politically. As a consequence, the existing reformist leaderships were able to channel the radicalisation of the rank and file in a reformist direction and the opportunity – which was not an inevitability – for the revolutionary seizure of power by the working class, in Germany and Italy especially, was momentarily lost.⁵⁵

If the distinctive features of the Western labour-movement help explain the absence of a well-formed revolutionary party and the failure of revolution in the immediate post-First-World-War period, then the presence of a sharply defined revolutionary party and the success of revolution in Russia reveal something distinctive about the labour-movement there. The following con-

55. Broué, 1971. In Italy, the workers of Turin and Milan experienced the especially bitter lessons of trying to move the revolution forward in 1919–20 merely by occupying the factories. See Williams 1975; Spriano 1975. In light of the Italian failure, Rosenberg and Koenker's view that 'the extension of workers' power *within* the workplace... was clearly a means of moving the revolution forward' and of ultimately forcing the 'transformation of the state' in Russia (Koenker and Rosenberg 1989, p. 236) requires further specification, that is, specifically Russian (Bolshevik) politics.

siderations may be briefly advanced with respect to the peculiar conditions of political struggle in Russia.

Despite the Herculean efforts of the Mensheviks to establish them, mass-reformist workers' organisations never took root in Russia because, to operate regularly, they normally require an environment generally characterised by the lack of sharp class-conflict; a situation which never stably existed under tsardom. Tumultuous workers' struggles were always clearly and closely associated with the workers' drive to organise. This is because the systematic maintenance of working-class association in late-Imperial Russia was virtually impossible apart from comparatively high, indeed, revolutionary or quasi-revolutionary levels of rank-and-file militancy. Therefore the political consciousness of such associations tended to be entwined with a powerful development of the Bolshevik trend. The formation and development of trade-unions and the rapid growth of the RSDLP into a small mass-party were immediate by-products of revolutionary struggle in 1905–7. Whenever the tsarist state periodically suppressed rank-and-file militancy, as in 1907–12, so too, for all practical intents and purposes, was the organisation itself, whether party or trade-union, along with any would-be labour-bureaucracy. As the revival of the workers' movement from 1912 to the outbreak of the First World-War once again confirmed, sustaining workers' organisations and achieving reforms required, once more, the organisation of increasingly militant, increasingly illegal, increasingly class-wide, and increasingly politically defined confrontations with the employers and the state. In this period of resurgence, the Bolsheviks ousted the Mensheviks from their leadership positions in the open and legal labour-movement.⁵⁶

It is beyond the scope of this essay to explain fully why a material basis to reformism in the Russian working class was lacking; a basis which capitalism periodically provides, by virtue of its unique power to periodically develop the forces of production on a colossal scale and make possible a rise in the working class' standard of living, thereby obtaining the workers' generally free and willing acceptance of this mode of production. Suffice to say here that a central component of a possible explanation, in my view, would have to come to terms with extant characterisations – (ex-)Soviet and Western alike – of Russia's developing industrial economy as capitalist, and its political order as feudal; a growing 'contradiction' that blew up in 1917, tearing the tsarist order asunder. An alternative conceptualisation of Russia's 'modernisation' would flatly deny the contradiction by denying that capitalism, with which modernisation is equated, was in fact developing in Russia. In this view,

56. Haimson 1964, 1965.

Russia's industrialisation was proceeding quite apace, along alternative, *ancien régime* lines, and consequently in fundamental harmony with the needs and interests of the feudal-tsarist state, not with the growth-requirements of a modern capitalist economy nor, *ceteris paribus*, with the needs and interests of a capitalist political order. Subordinating Russia's industrialisation to political requirements of self-preservation, the tsarist state adopted economic policies which, taken together, were inimical to the systematic productive investment of surpluses, thorough specialisation of productive techniques and regular technical-innovation characteristic of a capitalist economy. The consequence, most evident in agriculture, was a general inability to powerfully raise the productivity of labour, and so provide the material basis – a rising standard of living of the direct producers – for reformism. More familiarly, this interpretation would centrally target for criticism the standard argument that a true 'civil society' in the 'Western' (and only meaningful) sense of the term was ostensibly emerging in Russia but that it could not mature owing to the constraints imposed on its free and full development by the existing, non-Western political order. Perry Anderson has written a limpid summary of this conventional view; McDaniel has independently developed it, and Engelstein has recently restated it, in novel form.⁵⁷

Russian exceptionalism?

The Bolsheviks, then, unlike their partyless, politically disorganised counterparts in the West, never had to face a conjuncturely limited but viable and potent reformism among broad layers of workers, let alone have to master and overcome the organised reformist politics of powerful, materially privileged labour-bureaucracies. But the mere recognition of this fact should not be construed as a manifestation of Russian 'exceptionalism' that renders any comparative descriptive analysis nugatory for want of common reference-points. For more general and pertinent considerations – commonalties – emerge through the very distinct experiences of the labour-movement in both regions. They may be summed up as follows.

First, the political judgement of any working class, taken as a whole and no matter what its national, cultural, ethnic, etc., peculiarities maybe, is always inwardly riven and heterogeneous, and so can never determine, under any given circumstance, *this* leadership, *that* political outlook, *one* modality of political action. The Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks, the Socialist Revolutionaries and sundry other political trends and formations in Russia, as well as the many parties and currents in the West, are sufficient proof of this. These had

57. See Anderson 1975, esp. pp. 353–60; McDaniel 1988; Engelstein 1993.

at all times to exercise judgement and choose a course of action because the interests of the working class – what they are and how they can best be met – is always a matter of competing analyses and politics, neither of which would be possible or meaningful were objective conditions truly able to select their own political assessment and impart to all workers the corresponding course of political action, as we are led to believe by social historians.

Second, if, in Russia, the revolutionary wing of the organised workers' movement tended to prevail over and against the reformist one – the Bolsheviks over the Mensheviks – the capital-fact remains that, whether in the East or the West, and all wings confounded, the workers' movement always developed its politics in relationship to nonworking classes, whose parties often appealed to broader, supra-class interests, on the basis of other, non-class ties; national ones above all, as with the Kadets in Russia, for instance. Their potential for success is never to be excluded out of hand. These parties, then, will also compete in the political arena to determine an outcome favourable to their interests: an outcome which may well be opposed to the interests of the working class, or at least opposed to parties claiming to represent its interests. This is broadly true of most periods, whether peacefully parliamentary and reformist, or militantly revolutionary, and of different regions, whether in Russia or the West.

Third, the discontinuity of the labour-movement, the very volatility of working-class struggles, adds to political competition the most important dimension, common to both the West and Russia. Revolutions suddenly awaken to public life hundreds of thousands and millions of workers who normally, in non-revolutionary periods, are not politically active, however much a political order may (apparently) facilitate such activity, as in a democratic republic, or (really) restrain it, as in an autocracy. Workers' political instruction only begins in earnest when workers sense it makes, or can make, a real difference in their lives; when their material and moral well-being appears to depend on active participation in public affairs. In revolutionary situations, the generality of the working class must now confront new issues and solve new problems raised by its now qualitatively heightened, collective self-movement. And, because this is a learning process, hitherto politically inexperienced working men and women may well be open, at first, to ideas and modes of political action that a majority of politically experienced workers have already tested, found wanting, and rejected. But such politically seasoned workers will, at first, inevitably constitute only a small, agitating vanguard, in relation to the general working-class public. In other words, the Bolsheviks could not exempt the broad masses from having to learn politics anew, in 1917. They could not substitute themselves for the class and act on its behalf. Nor could the predominantly revolutionary past of the organised

vanguard of the Russian working class alone determine the future Bolshevik success of 1917, simply because mere tradition could not automatically solve the new problems which the Bolsheviks had to solve for themselves in the unprecedented conditions of that year. And, so it was that the Bolsheviks, finding themselves in the minority in all the institutions of the working class at large in the spring of 1917, once again faced, at that moment, the daunting task of achieving what they had achieved in the summer of 1914, under entirely different circumstances and only among a minority of workers, that is, among the systematically politically active workers: a *majority*-position. Now, in 1917, the Bolsheviks needed to win a majority of the working class *as a whole* to realise their new programme: 'All Power to the Soviets'.

Out of the failure of revolution in the West in 1917–23 and its success in Russia came a further development (and, perhaps, completion) of revolutionary theory. One aspect of this was the 'Leninist' view of the party, which held that the mass-reform party and the advanced-revolutionary party could not be permanently combined. It was thus necessary to build a 'vanguard'-organisation whose members would accept the fact that for a part of its existence, the party would be recruiting and organising only those workers who had, or were developing, a revolutionary worldview, which, of course, would be a minority. Premised on – but not determined by – the ideological and political heterogeneity of the working class, the party would enable revolutionised workers collectively to develop their own understanding, to analyse past experience, and to prepare for the future with non-revolutionary workers by systematically engaging in joint activity with them – 'united fronts' – in order to develop their consciousness, to struggle with them and, in the very process of struggle, to win them over to a revolutionary perspective. The Bolsheviks masterfully executed this united-front policy in Russia, between February and October, validating the united-front strategy. In times of revolution, then, the activity of a minority-revolutionary party could quickly transform it into a majority-revolutionary party, and determine political outcome.⁵⁸

Informed by the social-scientific accomplishments of the social historians, and with a view to outlining a new and, I think, more powerful paradigm, I return to the Russian Revolution and survey its overarching political conflicts by specifically examining, successively, the political motivation of Bolshevik and Menshevik policies, the conditions that made their consolidation possible and, lastly, the foundations for the success of the Bolsheviks and the failure of the Mensheviks.

58. Lenin 1966.

III Class-conflict, political competition, and social transformation: the course of the Russian Revolution, February–October 1917⁵⁹

In 1917, workers, as well as peasants and soldiers, sought to improve their lot in accordance with their past experience and with what presently made sense to them. The demands of the peasants, workers and soldiers for land, bread and peace determined no politically unequivocal answer to the question of the best political programme which would permit the realisation of these urgent and universally admitted needs. The Bolsheviki soon raised this question in a distinctive manner: indefinitely defer their satisfaction by supporting the Provisional Government, or immediately create the political conditions permitting their realisation through the Soviet seizure of power. Their programme, summed up in the demand 'All Power to the Soviets', gave the abstraction of workers' needs and wants concrete political definition and institutionally specific means of realisation. In the Bolshevik view, 'All Power to the Soviets' had to become the demand of the working class in order to establish the political conditions under which its needs and wants could be met. Worker-political opinion quickly divided in response, shaped, as it was, by workers' divided understanding of the new circumstances. And these multiple understandings in turn had been moulded by previous political experience (or lack thereof), so that bearing in the given conjuncture was a complex of historically-formed political assessments that, though not reducible to the conjuncture, nonetheless quickly developed further only in 1917, thanks to the powerful consciousness-raising dynamic of serrated political competition.

All major political formations organising to achieve political objectives in 1917 drew principally on the experience of the 1905 Revolution, when the various methods of action and various aspirations of the different classes were displayed and subsequently subjected to intense scrutiny and analysis by all political activists, revolutionaries and non-revolutionaries alike. The

59. Alexander Rabinowitch has exhaustively chronicled the activity of the Bolshevik Party specifically, between February and October, in Rabinowitch 1968 and 1976. It is categorically not my intent, in the concluding pages of this essay, to add empirically to this work, whose signal achievement was successfully to counter the traditional image of the Bolshevik Party as undemocratic and conspiratorial. Thanks largely to Rabinowitch's scrupulous scholarship, the open and deliberative character of the Bolshevik Party in 1917, so controversial when Rabinowitch first broadcast it, is now widely accepted; conventional, perhaps. We can now move on to examine the nature and function of party-politics in general. My purpose here is stringent: to corroborate empirically my thesis about the autonomous significance of politics, as against any reductive notion of social determination, by so conceptualising the meaning of party-political activity in the period from February to October.

Bolsheviks judged that the workers' independent political action in 1905, the October General Strike above all, had pulled the rest of the otherwise powerless opposition behind the struggle to overthrow tsarism and establish a republic. They concluded that, short of the victory of the 'bourgeois-democratic' revolution, any reform under tsarism benefiting workers had been and would be the by-product of the workers' revolutionary struggle, not the direct result of reformist bargaining with tsarist authorities, or of electoral pressures on them, let alone of agile parliamentary manoeuvring in the newly created Duma. The Bolsheviks, therefore, chose to resist any encroachment on the political independence of the working class by other political formations, the Kadets above all. The leading liberal party of Russia would seek to waylay the workers' struggles for reforms and revolution into reformist, quasi-parliamentary channels, in the Bolshevik view. Accordingly, solid unrelieved 'Kadet-eating' polemics featured prominently in the arsenal of Bolshevik political practice.

When the mobilised working class alone overthrew tsarism in February and set up Soviets to guide their subsequent movement, Lenin developed his 'April Theses' to interpret the significance of the workers' actions, and to develop the appropriate politics. He argued that the workers had revealed not only their immense power, they had also laid bare the inactivity and impotence of liberalism and reformism, and had vindicated the long-standing Bolshevik analysis of the balance of forces between revolution and reformism. Further, whereas, in 1905, nearly a year had separated the mass-strikes of January 1905 and the formation of the St Petersburg Soviet, in 1917 barely a week had elapsed before Soviets were created in virtually all the cities of Russia. In independently moving ahead and establishing Soviets everywhere, workers, Lenin announced, were setting up – had set up – a workers' state. Lenin interpreted the Soviet as having become in the eyes of workers a matter-of-fact institutional basis for further historic action; hence Lenin's call for 'All Power to the Soviets'. Above all, Lenin continued, workers, through their soviets, were implicitly challenging the existence of the Provisional Government, along with the propertied classes on whose political support it counted. This democratic revolution, Lenin now declared, was proletarian, socialist and international, not 'bourgeois-democratic' and national. Thus, the 'April Theses' centrally reflected the workers' heightened appreciation of the power of the soviet-form of organisation.

Lenin's theses also took into specific and close consideration the fact that the Bolshevik rank and file, of the Vyborg district notably, had from the very start expressed opposition to dual power and to compromise with census-society. In this the Vyborg-workers were merely expressing standard anti-Kadet, anti-liberal, anti-reformist Bolshevik politics. In the 'April Theses',

Lenin synthesised the element specific to the Bolsheviks – anti-Kadetism – with the element generally recognised by workers: the power of the Soviet. This specific, superior synthesis determined the popularity of Lenin’s programme among a significant, organised minority of workers, among worker-Bolsheviks. Within a matter of weeks, Lenin swept aside a purely doctrinal defence of the ‘bourgeois-democratic’ revolution theory mounted by Bolshevik Party VIPs and, strongly supported by the rank and file of Vyborg, who backed Lenin’s strategic outlook because it accorded so well with theirs, rearmed the Bolshevik Party. Party-members derived from their new analysis of the current situation a new politics, developed most clearly and trenchantly by Lenin, designed to reveal the anti-working class nature of the Kadet-led Provisional Government, and to offer a positive alternative to it.

Against the efforts of the Provisional Government to appear responsive to the needs of workers, peasants and soldiers, the Bolsheviks developed a strategy of action to actually be responsive, by explicitly calling for ‘All Power to the Soviets’. In the process, they politically challenged the Mensheviks, who denied any fundamental conflict of interest between defending the interests of workers, peasants and soldiers on the one hand, and critically supporting the policies of the Provisional Government on the other; a denial that was initially accepted by the masses. In this regard, Menshevik policy, too, was neither a purely pragmatic, conjunctural adaptation to circumstances, nor a doctrinaire, inflexible response to them, but was, like that of the Bolsheviks, the independent working-out of a long-held and diametrically opposite understanding of the dynamics of class-conflict; of the relationship between reform and revolution, of the moving forces of the Revolution.

The Mensheviks had long regarded the liberal opposition as leading the ‘bourgeois-democratic’ revolution and, in the interests of securing its cooperation, the Mensheviks had historically been prepared to channel or otherwise attempt to direct the activity of the working class as a whole within bounds acceptable to their prospective political partners, the Kadets. This meant working for reforms through reformist, non-revolutionary, ‘Western’ methods and institutions, especially after the defeat of the 1905 Revolution. Because Lenin’s partisans believed otherwise, and held that reforms could be achieved only through the revolutionary self-activity of the working class, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks had to compete for political influence among workers.⁶⁰

60. Conventional scholarship regularly fails to grasp the distinction between the struggle for particular reforms, and the struggle against the political strategy of reformism. Following the lead taken by the Bolsheviks’ contemporaneous Menshevik opponents, modern scholars often portray the Bolsheviks as being against reforms and

The Mensheviks pursued and developed their reformist policy in 1917. Of course, their views were in accord with a quarter-century of Social-Democratic orthodoxy regarding the 'bourgeois-democratic' nature of the revolution, but this did not determine their politics, since the Bolsheviks, who were equally orthodox on this point for an equally long time, developed a very different politics, while the Socialist Revolutionaries, who were hostile to Marxist sociology altogether, allied politically with the Mensheviks. Historically, then, politics was not reducible to sociology.

To safeguard the gains of the February Revolution, the Mensheviks argued that the needs and wants of workers, peasants and soldiers could be satisfied only on condition that the newly and democratically established Soviets support the Provisional Government's attempt to consolidate a liberal-democratic state, and to that end they progressively realised their long-standing commitment to ally with the Kadets. 'Dual power', they reasoned, was the necessary institutional framework that could reconcile the conflict of interests between industrialists and workers over issues that determined the very survival of workers, such as the length of the working day, the speed and pace of work, payment for work, and the hiring and firing of workers. As they enjoyed majority-support in the Soviets, universally recognised by workers as their own democratically elected institutions, the Mensheviks were in a position to set Soviet policy.

Meanwhile, having adopted the 'April Theses' to guide their political activity, the Bolsheviks anticipated the political result by subordinating their will to the practical requirements of achieving their purpose. This inverted causality, or finalism, set into motion a process of political self-definition that thrust the Bolsheviks into the minority, where they remained so long as most workers continued to identify their interests with the Menshevik policy of continued support, however critical, of the Provisional Government and its policies. Bolshevik willingness to abandon the apparent safety of numbers

for some sort of millenarianism simply on the basis of the Bolsheviks' hostility to the Mensheviks and reformism. Had the Bolsheviks truly acted on this understanding they would never have obtained, between 1912 and 1914, the support of the majority of politically active and organised workers who were struggling for *reforms*, for the eight-hour day, for employer-funded health-care, for social insurance, *and* for a Republic, for revolution and democracy. In the same period, the Mensheviks did act on that understanding, polemicised against the Bolsheviks, who did not share it, and counter-posed the struggle for reforms to the struggle for revolution; and lost worker-support because the Mensheviks could get no significant reforms by observing tsarist legality, by relying on the Duma to act as an effective reformist counterweight to the reactionary-tsarist bureaucracy, by looking to the Kadets for innovative political leadership, and so on. For a detailed and illuminating account of Menshevik-Bolshevik political conflict in connection to the struggle for one reform, see Ewing 1991.

and court unpopularity undercuts the key notion of the social historians that Bolshevik political success was merely predicated upon a responsiveness to workers' perceived needs, aspirations and wants; upon 'their boldness in adopting the programme of the masses without qualification'.⁶¹ This simple relationship is plainly incorrect because its converse is demonstrably false: these same masses, far from willingly adopting the programme of the Bolsheviks, rejected it outright for the better part of the period between February and October. Bolshevik motions on the broader political questions of the day – on the War, on the coalition-government, on state-power – were systematically voted down by workers because the Bolshevik platform as a whole did not appear to correspond to their interests and aspirations.

But the Bolsheviks did not jettison their autonomously arrived-at political agenda just to be responsive. They did not indiscriminately mould their politics to conform to whatever transitory, majority-political stands workers adopted; otherwise, they could hardly have adopted the 'April Theses' to guide their political activity. (The same held true for the Menshevik leadership, which would stick to the politics of 'dual power' to the end, even when popular support for them declined, indeed, especially then.) The task confronting Lenin's partisans was to change what most workers understood to be politically sufficient to meet their interests and wants, while responding to those very interests and needs to impel them to make the required change of their own free will. Towards this principled goal the Bolsheviks acted. However, the Bolsheviks could not realise the Soviet seizure of power by simple appeal to principle, but by political means, by removing the Mensheviks from leadership of the Soviets via the mechanism of political competition. Three oft-described episodes of Bolshevik-Menshevik competition stand out: the cancelled demonstration of 10 June and the permitted demonstration of 18 June; the July Days; and the Kornilov rising.

On 20–1 April, unorganised anti-war demonstrations by large numbers of indignant workers and soldiers erupted spontaneously to protest against Miliukov's publicly declared support for the war-aims of the defunct monarchy. An armed regiment made ready to storm the Marinsky Palace, the seat of the Provisional Government. As the protests subsided, a political crisis developed, and Miliukov resigned from his post as foreign minister. In response, the Mensheviks, not bound by rigid adherence to a fixed doctrine, unceremoniously tossed aside their cherished and long-held policy of non-participation in bourgeois governments, and entered a coalition-ministry. With the approval of the Soviet majority, on 6 May, six socialists took cabinet

61. Wildman 1987, p. 404.

seats alongside ten other 'capitalist' ministers in the Provisional Government. The Mensheviks had acted quickly to establish closer ties with the Provisional Government in the firm belief that defending the Revolution and advancing the interests of workers, soldiers and peasants required closer collaboration with census-society, and a more intense search for common ground.

Although the personnel of the Provisional Government had changed, its policies had not, the Bolsheviks explained. After due discussion, the Bolsheviks sought to lend political definition to the recently expressed anti-war sentiment by means of a peaceful mass-demonstration, to be held on 10 June, demanding the transfer of power to the Soviets. Through their first major initiative to popularise this key demand, and to compete for working-class support, the Bolsheviks compelled the Menshevik-SR dominated Central Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet to respond and to declare itself politically in relation to this demand and, through this relation, to the working class at large. The Soviet leadership did so by prohibiting the planned march on the grounds that the Bolsheviks were raising the spectre of martial strife. The Bolsheviks agreed to cancel because not they, but rather the Mensheviks were threatening civil war.

The Mensheviks could not ban mass-dissatisfaction with the policies of the Provisional Government, especially in relation to the War, which workers correctly sensed stood in the way of a better life. And the Bolsheviks could not be ignored. The Bolshevik initiative had compelled the Mensheviks to respond, and the response had opened a gap between Menshevik *words* in favour of peace and democracy, on the one hand, and their *action* against Bolshevik *action* in favour of peace and, above all, the democratic *right* to publicly organise such action. The Mensheviks tried to close this discrepancy between word and deed through action on their own terms, by organising a demonstration in support of the 18 June offensive against the German armies; a military operation that would, the Mensheviks vaguely hoped, win the peace by winning the War. It would also, collaterally, keep the Bolsheviks at bay. The Bolsheviks, undeterred by their recent setback, decided to participate in the planned march.

On 18 June, nearly half a million demonstrators marched peacefully. The Bolsheviks had expected their politics to be well represented in the march. Even so, they could scarcely conceal their astonishment when the great majority came out to carry aloft Bolshevik banners demanding 'All Power to the Soviets', 'Down with the 10 Capitalist Ministers', 'Down with the Politics of the Offensive', and other placards calling for the eight-hour day, higher wages, and workers' control over the factories. Only a minority held up the largely more abstract, less pointed, less immediately current and therefore

less quickly politically committing Menshevik demands for 'Universal Peace', a 'Democratic Republic' and 'Immediate Convocation of a Constituent Assembly'. Tellingly, the Mensheviks did not demand support for the Provisional Government, that is, for the Mensheviks' own policy.

The undeniable success of the 18 June demonstration, from the standpoint of the Bolsheviks, was the result of past action, in word and deed, in its favour. Having been held, the march secured a potential for future action in four interrelated respects.

First, having gauged the scope and depth of support for their views, Bolshevik workers in and out of uniform developed the necessary self-confidence to ardently promote them on the shopfloor, in the offices, in the neighbourhoods, and at the front. Second, the Bolshevik slogans combined respect for the Soviet as the authorised supreme political decision-making body of the working class, on the one hand, with criticism of the decisions made there by the Mensheviks and SRs on the other. Bolshevik agitation and propaganda to separate support for the institution of the Soviet from support for the policies of its Menshevik leadership brought more workers to distinguish between the two, to think in a new way about the relationship between a political party and the institutions it operated in, to think more deeply and thoroughly about the connection between their desire for peace on the one hand, and the policies of a leadership to actually realise peace on the other. The Bolsheviks showed how these distinctions could be made in practice by participating in what was, after all, a Soviet-sanctioned, Menshevik-SR-sponsored march. Third, the political result of the 18 June demonstration was to begin to make clear to many more workers the practical differences between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, to press them to compare words with deeds and, on this basis, to decide which political formation could in practice advance their interests, and which could not. Fourth, the march itself, an impressive public and concerted display of a broadly held political outlook, was bound selectively to impress the least committed or most indifferent of worker by eliciting from the 'man in the street' an interest in the interrelationships between the 'high-political' solutions proposed by the marchers, and the problems of everyday-life. The Bolsheviks combined the four aspects to advance a particular lesson in political science among workers.

The Russian offensive, launched the very next day, 19 June, postponed the political crisis that would have immediately resulted from the demonstrated lack of popular support for the War, and allied Menshevik policy. Yet, even as the military operations turned into a rout, the empirically given and growing failure of the Mensheviks to satisfy the deep-seated and long-standing desire of the masses for peace and for an improvement in their material conditions

of life did not of itself drive workers to forge a unified political response. No commonly accepted political alternative to support for the Mensheviks and the Provisional Government spontaneously emerged. Thanks only to Bolshevik agitation, a minority of workers did opt for the response proposed by Lenin's partisans, and, from the end of April to the end of June, party-membership doubled to 32,000, while support for its positions grew as well, perhaps to be embraced by a bare majority of workers in the capital. But, remarkably, the Bolsheviks had yet to win to their viewpoint the majority of workers in the country at large, let alone of the peasant-soldiers at the front, where defencist sentiment still ran high. In the trenches, the extant Menshevik-SR-leaderships remained especially wedded to the fullest implementation of the policy of critical support for the Provisional Government, upon ever-closer collaboration with it, so convinced were they that their ability to satisfy the material interests of their grey-coated constituency, above all, their desire for peace, was predicated upon this very policy, and no other. Finally, at the opposite end of the political spectrum, in the capital, an impatient minority of workers and soldiers struck out on its own to end the War and save the revolution by attempting on 3–4 July to directly impose the Soviet seizure of power on the Menshevik leadership. This action, arising from news of fresh disasters at the front, created another political crisis, the 'July Days'.

The spontaneous, unorganised and agonisingly long exertion of 3–4 July was destined to fail in its ultimate purpose for it had been undertaken without an integral understanding of the Bolshevik programme, whose realisation required the approval of the majority of the working class; an approval that had not yet come. Even so, the Bolsheviks attempted, in vain, to give this armed expression of minoritarian impatience an organised, peaceful and disciplined character. This impatient minority mistook Bolshevik action as a betrayal of the Bolsheviks' declared goal of the seizure of power by the Soviets, and resisted it. The Mensheviks interpreted the Bolshevik move politically to guide this armed minority as just another devious manoeuvre to seize power directly, forcefully, undemocratically, and that justified the repressive measures subsequently taken against Lenin's partisans. In the aftermath of the July Days, Bolshevik leaders were jailed, the Bolshevik press was shut down, and Bolshevik workers were physically assaulted in the streets for daring to voice their political opinions.

The movements of 20–1 April and of 3–4 July were similar. Both were spontaneous outbursts of popular discontent. But the acuity of the conflict between the demand for peace, land and bread on the one hand and the political requirements to satisfy it, on the other, had grown sharply from April to

July, the Bolsheviks argued.⁶² For, in the interim, the Mensheviks had committed themselves more deeply to the war-effort. By joining the Provisional Government in early May, they had now, by their actions, translated their support in words to support in deed. Moreover, they had taken the necessary ancillary measures to make this political support practically effective. Whereas, in June, the Mensheviks had merely threatened to resist Bolshevik efforts to organise anti-war resistance, by July the threat had materialised in the Menshevik-sanctioned use of force against the Bolsheviks. Whereas, in June, the Bolsheviks had successfully avoided a showdown, while still winning many workers over to their viewpoint, by July they had won over so many workers that a restless minority among them independently decided to move ahead and immediately realise the Bolshevik programme. Coming at the end of a string of Bolshevik successes, the July Days triggered a precipitous decline in Bolshevik fortunes that, at one point, threatened to plunge the revolutionary movement as a whole into headlong retreat and ultimate destruction.

General Kornilov calculated that the time to strike a decisive blow against the Revolution and the Provisional Government had arrived in late August, and would not soon return. Having reconnoitred the general political situation and obtained political-reconnaissance reports sent by interested quarters, the General made ready to march on the capital, and workers decided to resist him. Faced with imminent overthrow, the Provisional Government ordered the Bolshevik leaders released from prison. The Bolsheviks then played a leading role in organising the defence of the Revolution. The immediate, *cross-party* mobilisation of workers against Kornilov swiftly won immense numbers over to the Bolsheviks and their political programme, and for good reason.

Of all the parties in play, only the Bolsheviks had clearly said the Provisional Government could not be trusted to maintain a democratic order. They alone had consistently attacked the Menshevik policy of growing support for the Provisional Government, with or without reservations. Only Lenin's partisans had systematically argued that this policy could not respond to the material interests of workers, or defend their democratic rights. Only they had unceasingly urged workers to be vigilant, to organise against the Provisional Government and its supporters on the basis of the demand 'All Power to the Soviets'. And, when Kornilov challenged the workers to defend the Revolution, the Bolsheviks unhesitatingly rose to the occasion, demonstrating

62. Lenin 1964a developed and summarised the basic Bolshevik argument in 'Constitutional Illusions'. My paragraph is a synopsis of pp. 205–10 especially.

thereby their willingness and ability to back up their political programme with decisive and consequent political action, and inspiring confidence of victory among ever broader layers of workers. In sum, the Bolsheviks had politically predicted and prepared for a Kornilov-type coup all along. When the prediction came true, workers recognised Bolshevik prescience by rallying to them. Kornilov's desperate gamble confirmed for a clear majority of workers, dramatically and with condign finality, that the Bolshevik analysis of the policies of the Provisional Government and of the Mensheviks had been politically correct all along.

Had the Bolsheviks not provided an (initially) unpopular alternative to the policies of the Mensheviks, the majority of workers would have been strung along by the Mensheviks to the bitter end, politically disarmed before the covert support given to the Kornilov rising by the Provisional Government, which was in turn supported by the Mensheviks. Had the Bolsheviks rejected the 'April Theses', the October Revolution would not have taken place, for in the absence of the Bolshevik alternative the failure of the Mensheviks to meet the needs and wants of workers, soldiers and peasants would have brought ultimate demoralisation and defeat to the revolutionary movement. Indeed, without the Bolsheviks, the Menshevik objective of establishing a liberal-democratic state would still not have been realised either, for the February Revolution itself would have been reversed by Kornilov's victory.

By October, the Bolshevik programme of the seizure of power by the Soviets had at long last gained the clear-cut support of a majority of workers, as expressed in the election of solid Bolshevik majorities to virtually all the institutions of workers' power, the factory-committees, the trade-unions, the soldiers' committees, and the Soviets. This happened not only or even primarily because of the organisational superiority of the Bolshevik Party, although its democratic cohesiveness was indispensable for it to fulfil its tasks, as Alexander Rabinowitch has shown. It happened because of Bolshevik *politics*. Seeking first and foremost to meet the needs and interests of the working class in the context of acute class-conflict and sharp economic crisis, the Bolsheviks were able to persuade workers to adopt political demands to accord with those needs and interests. The Bolsheviks were better able to comprehend and predict the course of the class-struggle, to politically provide for it and, in so far as provided for, to shape its evolution and guide it to a victorious denouement. Through political competition, workers developed their politics and reached a political consensus on the need to seize power.

Social historians have emphasised how a majority of workers needed to connect their material self-interest to the vision of a democratic socialism to assure the political success of the Bolshevik-led Soviet seizure of power.

This is undoubtedly true. But it is also crucial to recognise the other side of the medal: that most workers initially opposed the Bolshevik programme of 'All Power to the Soviets' because they did not, at first, understand what the Bolsheviks *alone* eventually led them to understand, namely, that workers' needs and interests could not be met so long as there was a *conflict* between the demand for Soviet power, and the perceived interests and aspirations of the workers. The Bolsheviks *alone* determined a favourable resolution to this conflict, steered the revolutionary process to a successful conclusion, and made history.

Chapter Four

Political Leadership and Working-Class Agency in the Russian Revolution: Reply to William G. Rosenberg and S.A. Smith

Introduction: reframing the discussion

In my previous essay, I presented an alternative to the social-historical conception of the Russian Revolution developed over the last two decades, as well as to the now-resurgent political conception, associated with Richard Pipes's interpretation.¹ I did not, I should stress, place the challenging social-history interpretation on the same plane as the political conception. On the contrary, I took as my point of departure the work of the social historians, accepted it, and tried to build on it. I emphasised that they had fully restored the self-acting working class of 1917 to its proper, central position in the process of social transformation in Russia. Moreover, they had persuasively shown how the working class had become increasingly politicised, how it had decided to take matters into its own hands, and how it made a revolution to secure a better life. In advancing this understanding of the working class in the Russian Revolution, the social historians provided a clear alternative to the Nietzschean-influenced political orthodoxy, which still dismisses the working class as a dumb, undifferentiated Sorelian mass, prey to periodically unbridled inner passions, yet manipulable at will 'from the outside' by impulsive (Bolshevik) demagogues.

1. Marot 1994; Smith 1995; Rosenberg 1996.

Nevertheless, I held that the social historians had not followed through on their deepened appreciation of working-class self-activity and self-movement by commensurately rethinking and revalorising parties and politics. In their desire to show the self-activity of the working class and to criticise the political historians, they came close to throwing the baby out with the bathwater by leaving aside the autonomous political process of party-political competition through which workers not only moved to challenge the old order at the level of the factory, but to develop and embrace a full-fledged alternative. The social historians basically turned their backs on party-politics, by relegating the political interests of the competing parties to the realm of 'high politics', far from the daily interests of the working class, or by breaking down the integrity of this sphere into 'political culture' – 'us vs. *burzhui*' – a lowest common denominator, politically primitive culture of naked class-conflict, irrelevant to understanding the uniquely complex political issues facing workers in 1917.² Or, when critics pressed the social historians to justify how they could leave politics proper out of their accounts some retorted, as Rosenberg does in his rejoinder, that social-historical accounts 'were not written to displace the formally political or undermine its relative importance but to understand it and its victories more thoroughly'.³ Nevertheless, no matter how much Rosenberg may wish to 'deepen' Pipes's account, any operation 'from below' that allows the demonological view will not yield a better explanation of the Russian Revolution, it will only raise doubts about the achievements of the social historians.⁴

It was the burden of my argument therefore to show that, because the social historians had not developed analytically the key role played by political parties – that of the Bolsheviks especially, in competitively determining a revolutionary transition – they, like the political historians before them, still could not satisfactorily explain how the working class had come to see it in its political interest to overthrow the Provisional Government, consolidate a workers' state, found a fully socialist democracy and so realise in practice the Bolshevik programme summed up in 'All Power to the Soviets'.

In this rejoinder, I develop various, interconnected aspects of my original argument concerning the democratic transition to full working-class power in 1917. I deepen my analysis so that the difference between my critics and

2. Boris Kolonitskii 1994 provides a useful summary.

3. Rosenberg 1996, p. 104.

4. Extending an olive-branch to the social historians, R.V. Daniels also interprets 'the lack of incompatibility between political and social history' to mean that 'each area of emphasis can serve as a corrective to the other', indicating that Daniels sees complementary analytical matrices below the obvious differences of empirical focus. Daniels 1995, pp. 344–5.

myself will become clearer. This is necessary because Rosenberg, in particular, has done everything possible to dissolve the difference. 'I don't know any historian of 1917 who does not accept Marot's political competition,' he says, as 'one of the important influences' in the revolutionary process.⁵ Indeed, having read Rosenberg it is not easy to see, now, where he and I differ, and I shall leave it up to the scholarly public to decide whether these differences are real and central to understanding.

Determining the outcome of the Revolution

Rosenberg repeats in his rejoinder what he originally argued in his book. He sees the logic of the strike-movement as leading to workers' control, to workers' power, both to get a decent life and to overcome the economic crisis. The failure of strikes to guarantee the livelihoods of workers not only propelled workers to embrace the Bolsheviks, assuring the success of their politics: it apparently implicated those politics alone, in Rosenberg's view. Thus, the drive for workers' control came to tie up with the Bolshevik programme, which included workers' control, a 'constitutional' factory-order, within a broader politics. Rosenberg sees here a back and forth learning process between party and class, insisting that 'Bolshevik (and Menshevik) representations of what was politically possible within the soviets and elsewhere was of great importance in shaping workers' outlooks, *just as workers' outlooks and behaviours were of great importance in shaping the positions of the parties*' (Rosenberg's emphasis).⁶ Smith, as well, emphasises that 'political parties had an interactive relationship with workers, one which involved learning from, as well as teaching, them'.⁷

I fully agree that a 'reciprocal relationship' between party and class existed and it was never my intention to call it into question. Nevertheless, this dialectical relationship is entirely insufficient to explain the Russian Revolution. To reduce the relationship between the Bolshevik Party and the working class to an exchange-relation – 'mutual shaping' – is to overlook what cannot be exchanged: the specific locations and roles of party and class. The relationship is asymmetrical because there is no reciprocity of function. Party and class are not equivalents; they are not interchangeable.

What my critics can do with the help of their mutual-shaping notion is explain why more and more workers came to Bolshevism. It is also helpful

5. Rosenberg 1996, p. 101.

6. Rosenberg 1996, p. 100.

7. Smith 1995, p. 107.

for explaining how the Bolsheviks could come to the working class as worker leaders-educators. But it does not explain the construction of the Bolshevik alternative, its availability to the working class, the winning over of the working class to Bolshevism itself, and the political success of the Bolshevik alternative over all the others, from left (anarchist) to right (Kornilovite dictatorship) in three senses: securing a working-class majority; seizing power; holding power. Below, I detail these points.

(i) The crucial fact, which my critics leave out from their analysis, was that there was a Bolshevik, i.e., social-revolutionary, alternative from April 1917 onward. This alternative is incomprehensible without reference to the long-standing debates within Russian and European Marxism concerning the moving forces of the Russian Revolution, its nature. This is not, in any way, to place the Bolshevik programme as coming out of theory, in isolation from social and political realities of the times. On the contrary, the theory itself, in Russia and in Europe, was created in close relationship to Russian social and political realities, by Lenin, Luxemburg, Kautsky and Trotsky, to mention but the most prominent. The theory was critical to the construction of the Bolshevik alternative and the Bolsheviks adopted it because it did correspond, they believed, to Russian realities in 1917. But N.B.: a theory, a total conception.

The total conception was essential to putting forward the specific programme incarnated in the 'April Theses' and summed up in the slogans 'All Power to the Soviets' and 'Land, Peace, and Bread'. This political alternative could not have been put forward by any other party, and without that unified conception – all power to the Soviets, peace, bread, and land – no revolution. This is because critical to the whole Bolshevik project was the idea that a stable, bourgeois alternative was impossible and no one but the Bolsheviks could have advanced this idea.

The contrasting view among social historians that the Bolshevik conception was merely derivative, and simply shaped by workers' perceived needs, aspirations and wants, is grossly inadequate. How could the Bolsheviks come up with, and why did they hang on to 'All Power to the Soviets' when this slogan enjoyed precious little popularity in the working class for the better part of the period between February and October 1917?

My critics do not accord the Bolshevik conception of the Russian Revolution a genuine autonomy, as expressed in their empiricist downgrading of political theory. They are little interested in the arguments and debates that lay behind the formation and adoption of the Bolshevik viewpoint. As they both reiterate, 'Bolshevik programmes and politics have been largely absent from this discussion', adding, incongruously, 'but this is certainly not to minimise

that party's role' in 1917.⁸ They cannot properly assess the Bolshevik role if they make little room for it. At the same time, they are making ample room for importunate political historians to hurry in with their brittle Nietzschean substitutes for rational analysis of that role, namely, Bolshevik theory and politics did not correspond to anything very realistic, practical, or rational but corresponded very much to ideologically driven delusions of grandeur, to Lenin's demonic drive for power, to the desperado-mentality of the Bolsheviks, and similar beer-hall simplicities. Indeed, Smith is not afraid to call on social historians to beat a hasty retreat from previously held and firmly defended core-positions: 'Political discourses do not operate entirely, or even mainly, on the terrain of rationality' he now 'provocatively' declares.⁹ Disconcertingly, under cover of postmodernism, Smith retreats toward Richard Pipes's understanding of the Bolshevik role in the October Revolution, and draws conspicuously nearer to Allan Wildman's unreasonable master-notions as well.¹⁰

(ii) The fact that the Bolsheviks won workers to Bolshevik positions is incomprehensible as workers coming to Bolshevism independently of the Bolsheviks, with the Bolsheviks passive and on the outside. On the contrary, the key mediation was Bolshevik workers, who did the job of organising and leading at all levels, on the shopfloor, in the barracks, at the front, by fully participating in workers' struggles, in street-demonstrations and strikes. It was indispensable that an important section of worker-leaders become Bolshevised. Without the Bolshevik conception, these worker-leaders could not have fought for it. That they fought for it, interpreting the world from its standpoint, was essential.

My critics may well be prepared to agree that the Bolsheviks, in competition with other parties, enjoined workers to make political decisions. Still, they are not prepared to take the ultimate step and grant a uniquely determining effectivity to Bolshevik party-action in this domain. Instead, they accord the Bolsheviks the largely passive role of making workers subjectively

8. Both cite this remark from *Strikes and Revolution in Russia, 1917*, p. 328.

9. Smith 1995, p. 115.

10. According to Wildman, the 'real basis of the Bolsheviks' power under the umbrella of 'Soviet Power' largely amounted to the Bolsheviks' ability – Lenin's 'genius' in particular – to 'catch the motifs of popular folk-mythology and transform them into fighting slogans to generate mass action or belief in the validity of actions on their behalf. The potency of political myths in the twentieth century has been amply demonstrated; such myths tend to give the advantage to the party willing to exploit them over parties more rationally disposed and intellectually inhibited.' Wildman 1987, pp. 263–4. Are these views really that far from the political tradition, to which social history is at times offered as a superior alternative, as E. Acton does in *Rethinking the Russian Revolution?* Acton 1995.

aware of what is objectively already developing in their reality: full power to the working class. At the most, the Bolsheviks expedite the pre-determined outcome by declaring it so, through exhortatory effort on behalf of the working class, 'cheer-leading' as I put it in my original essay. The Bolshevik slogan 'All Power to the Soviets' simply sums up politically partyless strike-experience progressively *given* to the worker, but in no sense do my critics have the Bolsheviks themselves *give* to strike-experience *this* party-political implication.

(iii) From April onward, only the Bolsheviks were able to pose the key question of power. They did not begin to pose it as it corresponded more and more to experience. The Mensheviks and the SRs had a different position to begin with, nor did they change their position in October 1917. They opposed the Bolsheviks throughout the Russian Revolution, and beyond. This crucial fact demolishes my critics' appeal to the logic of experience. Experience has no logic.

Adopting Lenin's 'April Theses', the Bolsheviks anticipated the correspondence between their political programme and experience so that making the two correspond became a political project for the Bolsheviks, and therefore a goal posited by and realised through their own activity. Men and women may not always make history as they please, but when, in revolutionary situations, they do make it, this is the way they do it.

The Bolsheviks argued, from April on, that dual power had failed, was failing, and would continue to fail to meet the needs and interests of workers, to end the War, and to give land to the peasants. From this political conclusion, reached through a prior political analysis, the Bolsheviks acted to win workers to the idea of all power to the Soviets. The Mensheviks countered that they could not meet the needs and interests of workers so long as workers did not give bourgeois democracy a proper chance to work (and they could make it work properly if the Bolsheviks stopped their reckless and irresponsible attacks on it). Working people had to test the validity of one argument over another. They had to listen to these competing analyses, bring their own recent and not-so-recent experience into these debates, draw their own inferences and conclusions, and make their political choice. Rightly or wrongly, they exercised their judgement. Workers' political judgements are doubtless rooted in experience, and draw their raw material from experience, but it is misleading to think, as Rosenberg does, that experience *qua* experience immediately determines – *is* – this or that political judgement. To render judgement is possible only if one stands in an objective relationship to experience, in order to be able to reflect upon it. Only reflective judgement secures a conceptual basis for the autonomy of working-class politics.

Of course, I agree that workers became disenchanted with the Mensheviks because they failed to satisfy their needs and interests. But should Menshevik failure be equated with the rise of Bolshevism? Like most historians, my critics think the Mensheviks going bankrupt politically and the Bolsheviks going into business politically are reciprocal phenomena. No doubt, these were intimately related processes. Still, one was not the converse of the other because a general sentiment of discontent and defeat among workers does not always translate into Bolshevism. Without the Bolshevik alternative, these defeatist sentiments would have generated greater disappointment, deeper demoralisation.

Menshevik political defeat in the context of economic crisis, then, cannot adequately explain how the Bolsheviks could demand 'All Power to the Soviets' long *before* October, long before the negative results of Menshevik policies became evident to most workers. Most directly to this point, the Mensheviks did not just disconsolately 'find themselves losing out in this competition because their positions bore increasingly little relation to the perceptions of growing numbers of workers concerning the utility and practicality of strikes' as Rosenberg typically formulates the social-historical position.¹¹ The Mensheviks were losing *to* the Bolsheviks because the Bolsheviks were vanquishing them. The Bolsheviks were already there, active long before the Mensheviks started 'losing' and not as a function of the Mensheviks 'losing', nor determined by their 'losing'. Bolshevik self-activity within the field of political competition generated popular support for the Bolsheviks, not Menshevik self-destruction outside this field.

Mislocating the state

(iv) The distribution of power throughout society that Rosenberg and Smith speak of was nothing less than the withering away of the state, into society. Though not a social historian, Lenin had theoretically analysed this process, in *State and Revolution*, even before workers had fully realised it in practice. Though not Leninists, the social historians have shown that, by October 1917, the state-society nexus in urban Russia was nothing more than the organised, mobilised working class. They have rendered a huge service by showing how all working-class political formations, in democratically conducting their political struggles at every level of working-class association, were simultaneously struggling for power throughout society. The overthrow of the Provisional Government on 25 October formally completed this process in

11. Rosenberg 1996, p. 100.

favour of the working class. At this point, closure was achieved. The Bolshevik victory was 'assured', Rosenberg so rightly says, because it 'linked power at the point of production with politics at the level of the state'.¹² Or, as Lenin forthrightly put it: 'Democracy from below, democracy without officialdom, without a police, without a standing army; voluntary social duty by a militia formed from a universally armed people – this is the guarantee of freedom which no tsars, no swashbuckling generals and no capitalists can take away.'¹³ Nevertheless, though I agree with my critics that the 'locations of power' were distributed across the length and breadth of society, they overlook the special importance of wielding state-power *per se*, and consequently the special importance of the Bolshevik-initiated and Bolshevik-led seizure of power by the Soviets during the night of 25 October 1917.

Chiding me about the multiple places of power, in the streets, on the shop-floor and elsewhere, my critics miss a fundamental point. What the Bolsheviks were able to show – as no one else – was that the issue of state-power, that is, power to the Soviets, was the crucial issue for all the others. Unless the issue of state-power was favourably resolved in favour of the Soviets, all other sources of power would eventually evaporate. Without this favourable decision, the Bolsheviks foresaw two complementary alternatives for workers: striking continuously, they would become demoralised and, sooner or later, leave workers vulnerable to a military coup.

Given Menshevik failure, *and* for workers not simply to give up in despair, or to engage in despairing *bunty*, or both, Bolshevik political leadership was indispensable to provide a positive, organised and coherent alternative. That positive alternative, I must once again emphasise, could not arise from the abstract negation of the Menshevik failure: it arose from the positive Bolshevik conception of the Russian Revolution.

The implication here is that the drive for workers' control, however radical, does not lead to revolution. The history of the labour-movement is replete with examples of this, most recently in Poland, under *Solidarność*, in 1980–1. A further implication is that only worker-Bolsheviks armed with a revolutionary political programme could show a way forward from the radicalisation of workers toward workers' control. Had the Bolsheviks met with defeat on this road, the revolutionary process would have yielded, sooner rather than later, an alternative outcome: the counter-revolutionary victory of military dictatorship, followed by the headlong destruction of democracy, the immediate reassertion of managerial rights in the factory and of lordly rights over the

12. Rosenberg 1996, p. 105.

13. Lenin 1962m, p. 170.

land. Such successes would not have been unprecedented. After all, the forces of law and order had defeated the first, 1905 Revolution. Why not the second? The workers prevented this defeat by rallying in good season to the Bolshevik programme of 'All Power to the Soviets', prepared to defend their democratic choice by force of arms if necessary. Bolshevik self-movement, through the workers' own class-based institutions, was directly responsible for moving workers to the Bolsheviks.

(v) *What is further crucial is that only the Bolsheviks could have put forward this particular resolution of the issue of dual power.* All other options were for a type of bourgeois state, from Kadets to Mensheviks. Rosenberg disagrees. He says that everyone realised that a unitary outcome was inevitable. 'On both the shopfloor and in the corridors of high politics, experience increasingly revealed that the laws and order of bourgeois democracy no longer controlled the ways social groups interacted with each other.' It soon became obvious that dual power 'would have to give way to some unitary system of rule'.¹⁴ Rosenberg concludes that the economic crisis had closed off all options and enjoined nearly all politicians to call for state-control as the only way to overcome the chaos in the economy. 'In this perspective, if not in the way they chose to use the state, Lenin and his comrades were hardly unique.'¹⁵ I cannot agree.

Rosenberg's perspective apparently means stripping away the political differences that distinguished the Bolsheviks from other parties so that the Bolsheviks appear little different from the others. Is this very sensible? My point, of course, is that these differences did matter and cannot be ignored lest the empirical realities of the period be distorted beyond recognition. Not everyone recognised Rosenberg's unitarian solution to the problem of dual power. The Bolsheviks *were* unique in the way they wanted to exercise state-power and this was the relevant point for workers 'below' and politicians 'above' in 1917, if not for Rosenberg an epoch later. The Bolsheviks wanted to change the behaviour of the state by getting rid of the bourgeois-democratic state altogether, eliminating dual power and establishing a workers' state. The Mensheviks did not agree to this, nor did the Kadets, nor did any other political formation. Nor did the politicians agree to set aside their differences. The workers, therefore, had to choose, to vote on the basis of the issue that practically divided the parties.

Like most social historians, Rosenberg again bypasses the 'discursive' mediation of the Bolshevik Party and appeals to the logic of experience.

14. Rosenberg 1996, p. 102.

15. Rosenberg 1996, p. 103.

Pace Rosenberg, 'experience' spoke in different voices. The Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks interpreted this experience in politically antithetical ways because they brought to experience their political judgement. Since Rosenberg does not call on their judgement, he is perforce committed to judging in their absence. And Rosenberg makes Bolshevik judgements his own all along, without realising it, 'obvious', as if it were a matter of simple common sense. 'It was not strikes that were "destroying the economy"', Rosenberg declares, 'as much as the failures of state dominated exchange process to sustain production... They were failures attributable to the policies of the Provisional Government...'.¹⁶ But who, besides the Bolsheviks, was the judge that this was the case in 1917? Who, other than the Bolsheviks, was making this attribution? Only the Bolsheviks were absolving striking workers and blaming the Provisional Government, and all of its supporters, including the most 'critical' ones, the Mensheviks, for the impending catastrophe.¹⁷

In the end, Rosenberg gives the game away: 'How fundamentally different *were* the Bolshevik and Menshevik political solutions to workers' problems',¹⁸ he asks in his rejoinder, buttressing my view that Rosenberg had dissolved the political significance of these differences. Rosenberg hangs on to the social-historical paradigm but lets go of the essential reality that only the Bolsheviks

16. Rosenberg 1996, p. 102.

17. Alarming, what passes for objective, detached analysis of the 'experience' of the labour-movement in late-Imperial Russia and in 1917 is all too often the surreptitious defence of a political standpoint, and an attack on another because many historians, thinking they are detaching their analyses from any political discourse through which working-class experience was sifted, assessed, and judged, according to party-political criteria, unwittingly adopt one of these discourses as their exclusive field of vision and evaluation. The partisans are scattered across the political firmament, from Octobrist (Richard Pipes), to Menshevik (Ziva Galili) to anarcho-syndicalist (Maurice Brinton), with a massive cluster in the Kadet-constellation (Laura Engelstein). Even seemingly apolitical accounts have a sharp anti-Russian-Social-Democratic political edge to them. In two recent culturalist interpretations of the Russian labour-movement, morality and crime are the focus of investigation. In *Moral Communities: The Culture of Class Relations in the Russian Printing Industry, 1867-1907*, Mark Steinberg is partial toward the 'moralizers' in the labour-movement while incessantly voicing all manner of reservations about the 'politicals' (Steinberg 1992). In *Hooliganism: Crime, Culture and Power in St. Petersburg, 1900-1914*, Joan Neuberger imbues common criminal activity with revolutionary political significance (Neuberger 1993). Situating crime at one end of the spectrum of working-class political protest, Neuberger *de facto* polemicises against the view of Russian Social Democrats, Menshevik and Bolshevik alike, that crime and politics were mutually exclusive modes of social action, a view the ex-convict Malcolm X, a prominent American political activist with a unique insight into crime, also came to share. X understood first-hand the politically self-defeating nature of crime. In any event, to survey objectively the politically contested terrain of the Russian workers' movement, historians must retain critical self-awareness and detachment, something a fashionable postmodernism may tend to inhibit.

18. Rosenberg 1996, p. 107.

were for social revolution and only they could conceive of an alternative that had the potential to speak to working-class interests because it had the potential to get beyond the logic of capital. For what Rosenberg fails to emphasise is that all other unitary logics were capitalist-type logics, meaning management-control and repression of workers as part of a private property and profit-first strategy. Indeed, he arbitrarily rules out that this logic of exploitation was in fact the most likely alternative to workers' rule. He telescopes a whole epoch when he implies, especially in other work, a continuity between tsarist 'state capitalism' and Stalinist bureaucratic property and rule and thinks the 'subsequent role of the Bolshevik state in Soviet society represented essentially a radical extension, rather than a revolutionary break with the past'.¹⁹

My point is quite simple: only the Bolsheviks advocated an alternative to capitalism. And only the Bolsheviks could have put this forward, for only they were willing to consider a revolutionary alternative to bourgeois class-rule. And since they were, their programme could capture the working class.

Parenthetically, I leave it to Rosenberg and Smith to make what seems to me to be the entirely unsupportable point that the Bolsheviks somehow had a Stalinist alternative in mind, vaguely or otherwise, when they pushed for power to the Soviets. They think, however implausibly, that the Bolsheviks were for creating workers' power to destroy the old order and, having done so, for then turning right around and destroying that workers' power. They erect a Chinese wall between the workers' democratic choice and the political success of the Bolshevik Party in 1917 by anachronistically casting a retrospective Stalinist shadow on the Russian Revolution. Were 'industrial labour and the Bolshevik leadership sufficiently connected in 1917 to produce something that can usefully be called a Bolshevik victory?' Rosenberg asks,²⁰ throwing suspicion on the nature of the connection. For his part, Smith invokes the work of J.L.H. Keep and Marc Ferro and notes how the Bolshevik Party's 'superior organisation and articulateness'²¹ would nonetheless eventually prevail, under Stalinism, over and against autonomous-popular power and organisation.

19. Rosenberg 1994b, p. 188. A companion article is Rosenberg 1994a. I should perhaps point out that Moshe Lewin has offered a strikingly different assessment of the relationship between the Bolshevik Party and the Stalinist state, in *Russia, USSR, Russia* (Lewin 1994). Whereas Rosenberg and the quasi-totality of scholars working in the field take the Bolshevik Party to be the *homunculus* of the Stalinist state, Lewin argues, in some contrast, that this state destroyed all parties *qua* parties, all forms of free association, not excluding the Bolshevik form, because it was a totalitarian state.

20. Rosenberg 1996, p. 103.

21. Smith 1995, p. 114.

This is teleology of the first water.²² Anticipating the rise of Stalinism, Rosenberg and Smith project backward, to the October Revolution and perhaps beyond, a profound, albeit subterranean antagonism of social interests between a democratically inclined working class and a Bolshevick Party bent on realising its ostensibly dictatorial ambitions. This sinister view of the Bolshevick Party in 1917 drags them perilously close to that of the political historians before them. They, too, imagined – only from the Bolshevick side – the estrangement of the Bolshevick Party from the working class. With Pipes aggressively leading the charge, they once again still seek to understand the political success of the Bolshevick Party independently of the workers' interests, needs, and aspirations, which they conveniently airbrush out of the picture. Only five years ago [in 1990] Rosenberg and Smith would have protested at, I think, my suggestion that among social and political historians a concordance of views might exist on the 'essential' or 'ultimate' nature of the Bolshevick Party. Would they still protest today?

The Bolshevicks were European Social Democrats with no thoughts of Stalinism. There is no evidence in their writings or practice for this sort of outcome, as Rabinowitch has compellingly shown, with customary sobriety.²³ But, whatever their hidden motivations – and they would have to be hidden from everyone, since there is no evidence anywhere that the Bolshevicks were anything but European socialists in their goals – the key point was that only the Bolshevicks could have put forward all power to the Soviets.

(vi) Only the Bolshevicks could have seized state-power. State-power *per se*, control over armed bodies of men, was indispensable to *defend* workers' power at the point of production, and at all other 'locations of power', from attack by armed 'swashbucklers' not prepared to abide by the democratically expressed will of the working class. My critics have little meaningful to say about how to parry such threats because they do not think great danger lurks in irredentist quarters. There, among the swashbucklers, as everywhere else, only relatively harmless postmodernist notions of state-power would seem to prevail, if my critics are to be believed. But Kornilov had powerfully, menacingly reminded workers otherwise. The Bolshevicks had always held that this and any other would-be dictator and his supporters would have to be forcefully disarmed. Only the Petrograd Garrison could do this. Nevertheless, would the regiments obey the Provisional Government or the Petrograd Soviet? This matter could not be left up in the air. The battle for

22. Michael Confino has sharply criticised teleology, and other ills, that afflict the writings of many historians. Confino 1994.

23. Rabinowitch 1989, pp. 133–57.

control of the Petrograd Garrison was therefore critical. Whose army was it? In the two weeks leading up to 25 October, the Bolsheviks had led and to all appearances won, for the Soviet, the battle for political mastery of the army in Petrograd. The litmus-test of Soviet control over the Garrison only came when selected units obeyed orders to forcefully defend Soviet power.

The chief of the general staff for the insurrectionary seizure of power and a weighty authority on its significance wrote:

The overwhelming majority of the garrison was, it is true, on the side of the workers. But a minority was against the workers, against the revolution, against the Bolsheviks. This small minority consisted of the best trained elements in the army: the officers, the junkers, the shock battalions, and perhaps the Cossacks. *It was impossible to win these elements politically; they had to be vanquished.* The last part of the task of the revolution, that which has gone into history under the name of the October insurrection, was therefore purely military in character. At this final stage rifles, bayonets, machine guns and perhaps cannon, were to decide. The party of the Bolsheviks led the way on this road [emphasis added].²⁴

(vii) Once state-power had been seized, only the Bolsheviks could have held on to it. Rosenberg wonders why they succeeded. He says that the Bolsheviks had a programme that was good enough to dissuade Menshevik workers from attempting a counter-revolution. This is a concession to me. Equally to the point, Rosenberg misses the obvious point. The workers, who were democratic, saw the Bolshevik alternative win politically in the process of political competition within the Soviets. The Soviets had legitimacy in the eyes of Russian workers because they functioned democratically and expressed their will. Consequently, the soviet majority's politics also had legitimacy. This is crucial. *Democratic struggle, via party-political competition in the Soviets, and bringing this struggle to all struggles of the working class, was key to the Bolsheviks holding state-power.*

Europe and Russia: a comparative note

In my original article, I developed my analysis in comparative perspective and surveyed, from afar, the workers' movement in Europe during the great upheaval of 1917–21. Particularly in crisis-ridden Germany and Italy, revolutionary minorities of workers attempted a transition to socialism and yet nowhere were they able to realise it, despite the strong similarities of

24. Trotsky 1980b, p. 182.

socio-economic breakdown, similarities Rosenberg and Koenker were keen to point out. I argued that no Bolshevik-type party with Bolshevik-type politics had arisen directly from the economic crisis to win, in the struggle and through the struggle, a majority of workers to a revolutionary programme and to the subsequent establishment of a democratic workers' state. I offered a compressed explanation for the failure of a well-formed revolutionary party to appear, despite the objective conditions that seemed to promise its appearance, that did not rest solely on duly noted peculiarities of the Russian workers' movement but that incorporated the historical specificities of the latter as part of a fuller (if still limited) account of the distinct experiences of the labour-movement, in Russia and the West.

Smith is undoubtedly right to point to the peculiarities of the Russian situation, beyond just Bolshevism, that allowed for the overthrow of the bourgeois order. Nevertheless, only the Bolsheviks could have and did overthrow that order precisely because their outlook, from the start, integrated these particularities – the lack of a powerful bourgeoisie, the centrality of the land-question, the war-issue – in a way that their adversaries did not and could not. The Bolshevik programme of achieving peace, land, and bread, and all power to Soviets, catered to Russian specificities like no other programme.

In light, then, of the sharply contrasting political results in Russia and Europe issuing from a deep socio-economic crisis common to both, I conclude that class-conflict alone could not assure a univocal passage from one set of social relations to another. In order rationally to account for the singular success of revolutionary social transformation in Russia, class-conflict itself required mediation, or what I called an autonomous moment of party-political competition explicitly linking the outcome to the success of the Bolshevik political strategy, and the corresponding defeat of competing alternatives.

Conclusion: a hypothesis

Let us agree for the moment with the social historians that the Bolshevik programme incarnated the working class' fundamental, indeed, *perennial* need for adequate wages, job-security, reasonable hours – in sum, dignified conditions of social existence – and that workers came to support the Bolsheviks and make a revolution simply because they thought the Bolsheviks could bring a better life. If this is so, if 'Bolshevik discourse was effective only because it formulated deeply felt popular notions',²⁵ then should not much of the working class in the industrialised world have already become

25. Wildman to Marot, correspondence of 7 July 1994.

ideologically Bolshevised and revolutionised merely from workers having periodically acted massively on basic needs effectively formulated by Bolshevik discourse? Tellingly, despite the global crises and catastrophes of the twentieth century, the workers of the world have not embraced Bolshevism and overthrown capitalism; far from it! And this points to a conclusion that my critics, I think, did not draw. In Russia and abroad, the working class was politically inwardly riven. In Russia and abroad, only a small revolutionised part was pushing for full working-class power. The other parts were pushing for something else. These conflicts could only be posed on the terrain of political competition, and settled there. On this cardinal point, if not in the utterly aberrant way they argue this point, I have to agree with Pipes and Co., along with their key conclusion: no Bolsheviks, no October Revolution, or any facsimile of it.

Chapter Five

A 'Postmodern' Approach to the Russian Revolution? Comment on Ronald Suny

In 'Revision and Retreat in the Historiography of 1917: Social History and Its Critics' (*Russian Review*, April 1994), Ronald G. Suny adamantly defends the still-dominant 'social' interpretation of the Russian Revolution against a resurgent 'political' interpretation of it, advanced by Richard Pipes most notably. At the same time, and in a spirit of reconciliation, Suny invites both political and social historians to acknowledge and overcome their respective weaknesses and to work together toward a superior 'postmodern' synthesis of the rival historiographic trends. Only on this basis, Suny avers, can scholars move forward to a truer understanding of the Russian Revolution.

Richard Pipes and the political historians argue now, as they did over a generation ago, that political action and decision-making by parties decided the outcome of the Russian Revolution. Above all, they contend that the Bolsheviks alone were responsible for the October Revolution. The socio-historical response, developed over the last quarter-century and summarised here by Suny, amounts to saying that the reason the Bolshevik Party was able to lead the Soviet seizure of power was that the masses supported this historic action. The social historians have been able to show, beyond all reasonable doubt, how the free and democratic election of Bolshevik majorities to the Soviets of urban Russia in the fall of 1917 reflected the convergence of working-class

interests with the Bolshevik programme of 'All Power to the Soviets'. Because most political historians either blithely ignored this convergence or tortuously interpreted it out of existence, the social historians were able to score impressive victories for their approach and, in this way, to progressively lay bare the fundamental weakness of their historiographical rivals. But these were highly qualified successes, in a central respect, because the social historians achieved them at the cost of their failure to really come to grips with and really examine closely the activist-role of the Bolshevik Party.

The problem is fairly and squarely posed: how do you move from the militancy and interests of the working class, well delineated by the social historians, to political action, well emphasised by the political historians, when no connection between the two spheres is made by either historiographical trend, as Suny apparently recognises? How does Suny propose to bridge the two?

Suny agrees that there is simply no way to move directly from the militancy and support of the masses to the October Revolution. There is a mediation between the two: the realm of politics, which the social historians need to explore. To downplay this sphere would be reductionist. Crucially, the social historians must acknowledge the validity of the political historians' basic insight that the self-representation of workers as socialists and revolutionaries cannot be immediately 'deduced from their material conditions: it must be referred to the larger competitive discursive universes in which these workers found themselves'.¹ "Objective" economic and social realities' cannot determine, by themselves, 'the course of politics'² and, therefore, the outcome of the Russian Revolution. Having pointed out, then, against the social historians, that 'deepening economic crisis' or 'social polarization' alone cannot explain the Bolshevik seizure of power, Suny turns to Pipes and the political historians, where this point is made.

Unfortunately, Suny's discussion of Pipes and of the historiographical trend he represents is deficient because it does not adequately treat this very point. While Suny recognises that politics must be brought back in to fill in the blank-spots of social history, he never investigates closely whether Pipes and the political historians are right or wrong to argue that the Bolsheviks bore sole responsibility for the October Revolution. A definite yes or no must be given to this question because the answer unequivocally divides the two historiographical trends. But Suny skirts this divide and muddies the waters. Certainly, Suny cannot accept Pipes's as well as the liberals' assessment of Bolshevik activity in 1917. Indeed, Suny devotes much of his essay to attacking

1. Suny 1994, p. 181.

2. Suny 1994, p. 171.

Pipes's 'personal political vision'³ of the Russian Revolution, that is, Pipes's unrestrained tirades against Bolsheviks, his breathless abuse of workers and (revolutionary) intellectuals, his unrelieved, quasi-pathological hatred of Lenin, etc., etc., etc. While my moral and intellectual sympathies are entirely and unreservedly on Suny's side, Suny's numerous broadsides against Pipes's incontinent *vekhism* repeatedly miss the point because, again, they never target the truth or falsity of Pipes's and the political historians' major claim that the Bolsheviks were the sole architects of the October Revolution. Suny has trouble defining his position in relation to this claim because he has systematically run together a correct rejection of Pipes's absurdly false characterisation of the Bolsheviks' outcome-determining role in the Russian Revolution specifically, with an incorrect rejection of outcome-determining roles played by party-political 'vanguards' in revolutionary situations generally.

Suny's rough handling of Pipes stands in some contrast to his generally favourable treatment of the social historians. Surprisingly, Suny reassures us that 'instances of social reductionism or inadequate attention to the political' in their works, while not difficult to find, are in any event analytically harmless, mere deviations from a sound investigative norm. In fact, 'what is most striking is how social historians of Russia have included in their repertoire of explanations both "material" and "discursive"'.⁴ 'Most social historians, certainly those working on 1917', Suny maintains, 'have been negotiating the difficult relationship between ideas and circumstances, social and political determinants'.⁵

His praise notwithstanding, Suny nevertheless does discreetly note that, for example, Diane Koenker and William G. Rosenberg, two outstanding practitioners of social-historical scholarship, subtly negotiate in their work an incorrect because reductionist relationship between material and discursive elements in the workers' movement. Koenker and Rosenberg, Suny writes, locate the sources of workers' consciousness 'in the social location and experience of the workers' and explain how 'the generation of worker and class solidarity largely arises from within the sphere of the workers'. But Suny objects that the authors do not 'treat systematically the ways in which a sense of class was shaped by discourses outside the workers' milieu';⁶ the very objection made by other critics of social history, such as Longley and Sakwa.

In his conclusion, Suny follows up on this objection. He writes that the 'discursive construction of the world of workers, as well as that of peasants,

3. Suny 1994, p. 176.

4. Suny 1994, p. 177.

5. Suny 1994, p. 170.

6. Suny 1994, p. 180, n. 55.

soldiers or the 'bourgeoisie', has often been implied, sometimes more explicitly elaborated, but still needs to be foregrounded in our histories'.⁷ To that end, he invites social and political historians to transcend their differences and to ponder jointly a superior 'postmodernist' mode of inquiry into the Russian Revolution. Here, at last, 'deep investigation of the construction of meanings and identities' will take precedence over 'psychoanalysis of great figures in history or the search for objective social or political interests'.⁸

Suny's open-minded conclusion raises a number of questions. I will raise just one: who is discursively constructing the world of the workers, their experience, their social position, their interests? Who, precisely, is the bearer of 'discourse'? Regrettably, Suny rounds up those all-too-familiar suspects: radical intellectuals, 'from beyond the working class'.⁹ If deep investigation of the practice and theory of this cast of characters is central to a 'postmodernist' approach (the term is trendy these days), then I would submit that versions of that approach (minus the trendy term) have been around for quite some time. In a nutshell, the exponents of this approach, whatever it is called, have conceived the autonomous political moment of the workers' movement as lying *outside* that movement, in a party-organised 'intelligentsia' whose revolutionary discourse constructs revolutionary social 'identities' and correspondingly revolutionary social interests. The historian Leopold Haimson masterfully expounded this view, in *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism* (1955); the sociologist Victoria Bonnell deftly deployed it, in *The Roots of Rebellion: Workers' Politics and Organizations in St. Petersburg, 1900–1914* (1983); the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács intelligently theorised it, in *History and Class Consciousness* (1919); and the revolutionary politician Lenin insistently advocated it in *What Is to Be Done?* (1902). These disparate works, in some fashion or another, all expressed the view that the working class was capable by its own efforts of generating a reformist, trade-union consciousness exclusively, and that its struggle against the employer at the point of production was sharply separate from the struggle for broader political objectives, for socialism. Fortunately, the intervention of an outside-agency armed with revolutionary discourse and special organisational powers would destroy the barrier between the development of workers' activity and their ideas, between their narrow struggle around bread-and-butter concerns and their wider political development.¹⁰ To take the bull by the horns and at the

7. Suny 1994, p. 180.

8. Suny 1994, p. 182.

9. Suny 1994, p. 179.

10. Many scholars have taken Lenin's early, pre-1905 Kautskyan understanding of the relationship between the 'vanguard'-party and the working class to be the

risk of raising eyebrows, is not Pipes's exploration of the 'rhetoric and cultural codes of the revolutionary actors', as Suny puts it, a phantasmagorical, Kafkaesque variant of this approach?¹¹ Indeed, did not the social historians turn their backs on the political historians of the fifties and sixties and write in self-conscious opposition to them precisely because this earlier generation of scholars theorised a radical intelligentsia walling itself off from reality, producing a realm of political discourse and action that was self-contained, and riding to power on the backs of the workers? This is the very criticism that Suny levels, rightly, against Pipes, whom Suny regards as a 'throwback' to that earlier orthodoxy. Can the characteristic feature of that orthodoxy really be appropriated, in any significant way, into a superior synthesis? It is puzzling that Suny should think so in his conclusion but not, it seems, in the body of his essay, where Suny rejects Pipes and the trend he represents.

By way of a conclusion, it may tersely be said that the social historians of the seventies and eighties correctly located the autonomous political moment of the workers' movement *inside* the workers' movement, but they wrongly denied that moment its *autonomy*; that traditional political historians rightly granted that political moment its autonomy, but they wrongly located that autonomous moment *outside* the workers' movement, in the 'intelligentsia'. As I have argued in the preceding chapters, neither historiographical trend (nor Suny) has posed the outcome of the Russian Revolution fully in terms of competitive party-political decision-making processes. These processes, though grounded in and revolving around workers' material interests, were nonetheless neither reducible to those vital interests, as the social historians think, nor operating independently of those interests, in 'discourse', as the political historians contend. For party-political competition functioned as a selection-mechanism by means of which workers chose from among rival political solutions, advanced by competing parties, to economic crisis, and responded, as well, to the associated potential for the transition from one type of society to another, from capitalism to socialism, for example. Most directly to this point, in 1917 workers engaged in the immensely difficult and intricate task of establishing dignified material conditions of social existence and in pursuit of this goal the workers had to make a pivotal, political decision:

gospel-truth, fully reflective of the empirical realities of that relationship when, in fact, it was deeply flawed. Indeed, Lenin ultimately dropped this understanding of the relationship between the party and the working class. I develop this controversial point in Chapters Seven and Eight. For an analysis of the nature of the difficulties met by one Social Democrat, Alexander Bogdanov, when he tried to build an effective political movement based on an 'early Leninist', strictly tutelary conception of the relationship between party and class, see Chapter Nine.

11. Suny 1994, p. 171.

support the Provisional Government, as the Mensheviks and their allies were advocating, or overthrow it, as the Bolsheviks were demanding. But, according to the social historians (and, it seems, Suny), the workers did not have to evaluate and decide which competing political programme, the Menshevik or the Bolshevik, could secure their interests and needs because the workers' drive for job-security, adequate wages and decent working conditions automatically self-selected the Bolshevik political programme, summed up in the demand 'All Power to the Soviets'. Never properly addressed by this reductionist and teleological determinism that obliterates all historical alternatives is: what determined to the Bolsheviks' political programme itself? And what processes brought workers to see that programme as according with their interests? Meanwhile, according to the political historians, the Bolshevik Party was not driven to meet the interests of workers, it was driven to meet interests of its own, as a party. Never properly addressed by this solipsistic conception of the Bolshevik Party is why the workers supported the Bolshevik-led seizure of power by the Soviets.

Should the social and political historians one day give some definite content to that mystifying, *passé-partout* category, the 'intelligentsia';¹² should they, above all, revise their empirically and conceptually inadequate notions of revolutionary politics and revolutionary leadership, then it may become possible to move forward and truthfully assert, with Suny, that the October Revolution was profoundly popular and democratic and that, in clearing the way for the democratic expression of the will of the people, the Bolsheviks, as Pipes has maintained (however hateful and maddening it is to him), played a determining, 'vanguard'-role. For the political historians have shown, though misinterpreted, the decisive role of the Bolsheviks; and the social historians have shown, though without adequate explanation, the authentic popularity of the Bolsheviks.

12. A good place to start the process of demystification is Confino's 1991 essay.

Chapter Six

Alexander Bogdanov, *Vpered*, and the Role of the Intellectual in the Workers' Movement

The defeat of the Revolution of 1905 and the ensuing reflux of the revolutionary workers' movement set the stage for a crisis in the Bolshevik leadership of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour-Party about what to do politically in order to move forward again. In 1909, Alexander Bogdanov emerged as the chief spokesperson of a dissident-group of Bolsheviks. He and his partisans launched a campaign to shift the axis of the RSDLP's political activity.

For Bogdanov, the old tasks of building the Party, of agitation and propaganda in the mass-movement, seemed more and more irrelevant with the decline and eventual disappearance of that movement. The new conditions moved Bogdanov to attempt to deploy a strategy to prepare workers to seize power by creating 'an all-embracing proletarian culture, *hic et nunc*, within the framework of the existing society' by means of educating the working class in 'proletarian universities' run by socialist intellectuals.¹ Bogdanov recognised no national limitations to his strategy. In his view, the politics of creating 'proletarian culture' were valid not only for Russia but for all countries where the modern working-class movement had come into existence, in Europe and America.

In June 1909, a majority of Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, opposed Bogdanov's general cultural-paedagogical

1. Bogdanov 1910, pp. 4-5.

orientation, and disclaimed all responsibility for any future political action that Bogdanov and his associates might undertake. Bogdanov left the Bolsheviks and launched a new organisation, *Vpered* (Forward), in December 1909, to push his political views. Along with a number of Bolsheviks, notably A.V. Lunacharsky, M.N. Pokrovsky, G.A. Alexinsky, Stanislav Volsky and M.N. Liadov, Bogdanov used *Vpered* to try to win the rest of the Bolsheviks and the RSDLP to the politics of 'proletarian culture'.

I shall argue that the failure of the 1905 Revolution led Bogdanov to reaffirm his established view that the working class, exclusively by its own efforts, would not be able to develop an integral Social-Democratic worldview and would need the assistance of revolutionary intellectuals.² Bogdanov designed the political programme of the *Vperedists* to mobilise party-intellectuals to render such assistance to the workers. *Vperedism*, then, was premised on a strict interpretation of *What Is to Be Done?* regarding the tutelary role of the party-intelligentsia vis-à-vis the working class.

Lenin, however, interpreted the experience of the 1905 Revolution in a different way. He sharply revised his understanding of the relationship between the spontaneous workers' movement and the party. As Lenin now saw it, the working class could formulate an independent ideology, as well as engage in revolutionary practice, in the process of its self-movement.

The split revealed that Bogdanov could not remain Lenin's political ally if he wished actually to try to implement the *Vperedist* programme of 'proletarian culture'. The two men could no longer collaborate politically because Lenin and Bogdanov now conceptualised in politically exclusive ways the manner in which the working class would achieve revolutionary, Social-Democratic consciousness.

Contemporary historiography on Bogdanov and *Vpered*: a critique

Broadly speaking, the validity of an interpretation rests at a very minimum on an accurate rendering of the facts. Despite the growth of an enormous literature on 'non-Leninist' Bolsheviks – Alexander Bogdanov most prominently – there continues to exist widely different interpretations of the reasons for

2. According to Robert Williams, Bogdanov 'recognised the need to impose consciousness upon the workers from the outside'. Williams 1986, p. 45. Robert V. Daniels agrees. Bogdanov was a prophet 'in his own right' of Social-Democratic doctrine on this issue. Daniels 1960, p. 14.

the split between Lenin and Bogdanov.³ None of the reasons advanced is fully convincing.

All extant versions allege that *one* reason for the split was the putative disagreement between Bogdanov and Lenin on what should be the attitude of the RSDLP toward the Duma and toward legal arenas of work more broadly. Some interpretations say it was *the* reason for the parting of ways. But, whether the Duma issue was the reason or a reason for the split, all accounts stress the opposing views of Lenin and Bogdanov around this issue. Bogdanov was an 'otzovist' (*otzvat'*: to recall) who 'opposed all Duma participation',⁴ identifying with 'left-wing Bolshevism, which favoured boycotting the Duma'.⁵ The Vperedists 'disavowed the basic tactical line of the Party' in relation to the Duma by advocating the recall of the RSDLP's Duma-delegates.⁶ 'The disagreement between Lenin and Bogdanov over the Duma reflected fundamentally different analyses of the changes taking place in Russia' and how to respond to these changes.⁷ The political bloc between Lenin and Bogdanov broke up over 'tactical' issues around the Duma.⁸ According to these and other scholars, the Vperedists advocated a politics toward the Duma other than the one the RSDLP was currently pursuing. Since Lenin favoured participation and attacked the Vperedist position on this question, historians have *inferred* that the Vperedists were opposed to such participation.

However, no historian has documented the demand for withdrawal from the Duma in the political platform of the Vperedists because it is simply not there.⁹ Indeed, a direct reading of Vperedist political literature for 1909 and 1910 reveals no demand to change the decisions of the Fifth Congress regarding RSDLP-participation in the Duma. Though most interpreters have had an excellent reason for inadvertently giving a misleading account of the actual character of the political dispute opposing the Vperedists and Lenin – that is, Lenin's attacks on the Vperedists – the Vperedists never actually officially called on the RSDLP to change its line on the Duma. This fact, in turn, calls into question the validity of all interpretations resting on the contrary assumption. The *raison d'être* of this chapter, therefore, is to contribute to a fuller and deeper understanding of Bogdanov and of the Vperedist current. Below, I

3. Zenovia Sochor lists an array of interpretations without seeking to ascertain which interpretation is best. See Sochor 1988, p. 7, n. 10.

4. Elwood 1966, p. 372.

5. Sochor, 1988, p. 7.

6. Harding 1977, pp. 274, 279.

7. Biggart 1981, p. 141.

8. Wolfe 1964, p. 502.

9. *Sovremennoe polozhenie i zadachi partii: platforma vyrabotannaia gruppoi bolshevikov* 1909, pp. 1–32.

situate my view with respect to the contemporary historiography on the subject, offering an extensive critique and attempting to provide an alternative.

Most interpretations fail to distinguish clearly between Vperedism on one hand and 'boycottism', 'ultimatism', and 'otzovism' on the other.¹⁰ Boycottism, ultimatism, and otzovism were powerful *tactical* currents in the Bolshevik wing of the RSDLP. They developed in 1907, waxed strong in 1908, and began sharply to decline in 1909. All militants who belonged to or sympathised with these currents expressed strong reservations about the political utility of RSDLP-participation in the legal labour-movement in general and in the Duma in particular. Many among them campaigned actively to alter the RSDLP's line by submitting resolutions at local, regional, and national party-conferences calling on party-members to refrain from entering legal areas of work or, if already there, to withdraw from them. However, by 1910, these trends were virtually extinct. According to Victoria Bonnell, in the winter of 1909–10 the Bolsheviks 'returned to the legal labour-movement' even though many were still 'ambivalent and unenthusiastic about legal forms of activity'.¹¹ Here is a quick history of 'left Bolshevism' in the RSDLP to set the record straight and to establish the correct relationship between it and Vperedism.

In May 1907, the Fifth Congress of the RSDLP, after much debate, resolved to participate in elections to the Duma and to send representatives. The majority at the Congress consisted of the Bolsheviks and their allies. Bogdanov, the Bolshevik representative on the Central Committee of the RSDLP, voted for Lenin's resolutions. Consequently, the line of the RSDLP on the Duma was the Bolshevik line elaborated by Lenin. Round one ended in victory for Lenin. His line was to remain the line of the RSDLP in the period under study.

Stolypin's unexpected *coup d'état* of June 1907 sowed confusion in the Party's ranks. The party-leadership convened an emergency-conference in July 1907 in Kotka, Finland, to clarify matters. All tendencies were represented, the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks, the Bund, the Poles, the Latvians. Bogdanov's resolution called for boycott. *All Bolsheviks except Lenin* voted for it. In other words, Lenin voted with the Mensheviks, the Bund, the Poles, and the Latvians to defeat Bogdanov's resolution. Then, the Mensheviks put their resolution calling for participation to a vote. *All Bolsheviks* voted with Lenin to defeat it. Finally, Lenin put to a vote his resolution, which, like the Menshevik, called for full participation in the elections to the Third Duma, but for politically different motivations. *All Bolsheviks* voted *with* Lenin to pass it. The resolution simply reaffirmed the decisions of the Fifth Congress.

10. For example, Daniels speaks of the 'Otzovist-Vperedist' tendency. Daniels 1960, p. 24.

11. Bonnell 1983, p. 349.

Round two ended in victory for Lenin. His line remained the majority-line. The 'left Bolsheviks', including Bogdanov, rallied to him.¹²

Round three. When the Third Duma finally convened in November 1907, the number of Social-Democratic deputies elected to it fell sharply owing to the restriction of suffrage, and unexpectedly fell below thirty, the minimum-number required to submit bills. Moreover, most of those elected identified with the Menshevik wing of the Party. There was confusion among the Bolsheviks about what to do despite the resolutions of the recently held Kotka conference reaffirming the decisions of the Fifth Congress. Again, the sentiment was widespread among the Bolsheviks to recall the delegates or to issue an ultimatum (hence the 'ultimativist' tendency) threatening the Menshevik-inclined Social-Democratic parliamentarians to agree to act inside the Duma as little more than ventriloquists for the majority, Bolshevik, faction of the Party outside the Duma, or else be recalled. *Proletarii*, factional organ of the Bolsheviks, opened its columns to discuss differences. Bogdanov, it must be stressed, intervened to *disavow* otzovism and ultimatism and Lenin declared his 'complete solidarity' with Bogdanov'.¹³

The Fifth All-Russian Conference convened in December 1908 to settle the year-long debate. All tendencies were represented: Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Bundists, Poles, and Latvians. Two otzovists were present but placed no proposals of their own to a vote. In fact, the otzovists abandoned their otzovism

12. *KPSS v rezoliutsiakh i reshenniakh s' ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK* 1979, Volume 1, pp. 230–1. It has been necessary to recall in such detail the Kotka Conference because the Conference is used by many scholars to prove that the 'left Bolsheviks' took control of the Bolshevik faction, isolating Lenin: Lenin is the 'lone dissident' at Kotka. Wolfe 1964, p. 362. However, analysts rarely explicitly tell the reader that the left Bolsheviks do, in the end, vote *unanimously* for *Lenin's* motion. For example: 'With comparative ease [Lenin] persuaded the cautious wing of his faction in rejecting the idea of boycott, while the Left stubbornly held out'. Daniels 1960, p. 19. The 'cautious wing' is a product of Daniels's imagination whereas the left wing proved to be not stubborn at all. John Biggart also fails to see the flexibility of the Left so that he, too, has Bogdanov entering into 'conflict' with Lenin once Bogdanov allegedly began to insist that Lenin adhere to the Duma-policy 'advocated by the Bolshevik delegates' at Kotka. Biggart 1981, p. 140. There was no 'conflict' here. As I have shown, Lenin always adhered to the Duma-policy advocated by the Bolshevik delegates at Kotka because the Bolshevik delegates at Kotka advocated Lenin's policy toward the Duma, by unanimously voting for it. Lenin's line in the Party is the majority-line. *All* the 'non-Leninist' Bolsheviks had voted for Lenin's line, not just Bogdanov, as Service implies. Service 1985, p. 169.

13. Bogdanov 1908a. Yassour details Bogdanov's intervention. Yassour correctly notes that Western and Soviet historiography have 'ignored' this article because it directly contradicts the commonly held view that Bogdanov favoured recalling the delegates. Yassour 1981, p. 7. Kendall Bailes also refers to Bogdanov's intervention but unfortunately obscures its significance by relegating it to a footnote. See Bailes 1966, p. 35.

and, along with the rest of the Bolsheviks, voted for Lenin's motions. Thus, for a second time, a duly constituted party-body reaffirmed the decisions of the Fifth Congress. Lenin had won round three.

To sum up: otzovism, ultimatism, boycottism never became the line of the majority within the RSDLP. True, a majority of Bolsheviks in July 1907 – but only then – favoured boycott. But they were unable to get their way and, in the end, supported Lenin in the vote that determined party-policy. By 1909, only otzovist sentiments remained among rank-and-file Bolsheviks but no sharply defined tendency aggressively striving to alter the RSDLP's course.

While all historians, without exception, portray Bogdanov as an inveterate otzovist, some say that the dispute over the Duma was merely symptomatic of a much broader and deeper antagonism between Lenin and Bogdanov in the sphere of philosophy.

Lenin and Bogdanov did indeed occupy fundamentally different philosophical positions. Nevertheless, the philosophical debate must be clearly distinguished from the political debate adjoining it and examined separately from the latter, so that the relationship between these parallel debates may be properly established. Unfortunately, historians and philosophers alike tend not to proceed this way and collapse one into the other. The result has been to mix up and mis-characterise both philosophical and political debates. Thus, Aileen Kelly makes a serious effort to validate and improve on several contemporaneous Menshevik accounts attempting to establish an organic connection between Bolshevism and assorted voluntarist philosophies of the act, including empiriocriticism, and between Menshevism and assorted scientific and determinist philosophies, including materialism. The Russian empiriocritics, Bogdanov and Co., so Kelly argues, were pitting their 'free will' against the determinism of their opponents, the 'mechanical' materialists Plekhanov and Lenin.¹⁴

It is not possible here to do full justice to Kelly's very complex interpretation. Suffice it to say that to identify *Vpered's* advocacy of proletarian culture as 'free will' in action and in particular to characterise all opposition to such a programme as an expression of 'determinism' seems rather arbitrary, in the absence of a reasoned argument favouring such an identification. More to the point, Kelly says disagreements in philosophy were in any case latent and needed an external stimulus to become active in the domain of politics. The indirect stimulus for the fight in philosophy, in her view, came from politics specifically, from Bogdanov's opposition to Lenin 'on the issue of

14. Kelly 1981. This is a subsidiary theme as well in Jutta Scherrer's contribution. See Scherrer 1979, pp. 67–90.

social-democrat participation in the Duma'. But, since Bogdanov did not call for an end to the RSDLP's parliamentary activity, it could not possibly have served as such a stimulus.¹⁵

In David Joravsky's account, Lenin, unlike the Mensheviks, never made a serious effort to demonstrate an organic connection between 'Machism' and a specific political deviation because there was none for Lenin – or the Mensheviks – to make. According to Joravsky, at stake in the dispute was Lenin's defence of the 'standard Marxist sociology of knowledge' that correlates social theories with the 'interests of various classes' not with political tendencies within various parties. In addition, materialism, not empiriocriticism, was the philosophy of the working class.¹⁶

Joravsky is on the mark when he says that the philosophical debate was about epistemology, even if Joravsky mistakenly attributes a class-reductionist and class-instrumentalist understanding of epistemology to Lenin. Bogdanov actually held this position, not Lenin. In any case, Joravsky is right to add that neither Bogdanov nor Lenin looked upon their different epistemological positions as the reason to refuse to continue their political collaboration in 1909. Joravsky, however, adduces no cogent argument explaining the split because his primary purpose is to refute long-standing arguments seeking to link in a one-to-one manner political trends to schools of philosophy.

Broadly speaking, the unorthodox philosophical-views of *Vpered's* chief spokespersons, Lunacharsky and Bogdanov especially, could not have led, by themselves, to the political split that in fact occurred. Bogdanov and Lenin had basic disagreements in philosophy, which both acknowledged and which went back to 1904. Nevertheless, these differences in themselves had been no obstacle to Bogdanov pursuing, beginning in 1904, a common political strategy and political partnership with Lenin, nor did these differences in themselves have to become such an obstacle in 1909.

Nor did political divisions, in fact, coincide with philosophical divisions. The *Vperedists* were a heterogeneous lot. They disagreed among themselves on philosophy. Some were orthodox materialists, some 'God-builders', some neo-Kantian 'Machists'. Many *Vperedists* who parted from Lenin politically in 1909 did not care for Bogdanov's empiriomonistic philosophy or for Lunacharsky's 'religious atheism'.¹⁷ The historian and *Vperedist* M.N. Pokrovsky

15. Kelly 1981, p. 110.

16. Joravsky 1961, p. 25. Kelly does not discuss Joravsky's dissenting interpretation.

17. Bogdanov's major philosophical work was *Empiriomnizm* (St. Petersburg, 1904–6) in three volumes. In the introduction to Volume 3, written in 1906, Bogdanov attacked Plekhanov's materialist philosophy. Lunacharsky wrote *Religiia i sotsializm*. Volume 1 appeared in 1907 and Volume 2 in 1911. Lunacharsky considered Marxism to be a secular religion.

was orthodox in philosophy and a thoroughly secular Marxist, as was M.N. Liadov, also a Vperedist and erstwhile close associate of Lenin's. Owing to this diversity of philosophical standpoints, the Vperedists did not make philosophy a political issue.

Lenin did not write *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* (1909) in order to bring to heel political opponents by enforcing philosophical orthodoxy in the RSDLP, as is traditionally argued. As Joravsky correctly states, in opposition to Kelly, in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* Lenin took up philosophical issues that 'transcended the factional politics of Russian Social Democracy'.¹⁸ Philosophical differences were no cover for factional difference, nor did political conflict necessarily lead to philosophical discord: Plekhanov and Lenin were political opponents, yet philosophical allies.

The Vperedists, then, did not launch their organisation in 1909 to change the RSDLP's line on the Duma or for enforcing, in their own organisation or in the RSDLP as a whole, a particular line in philosophy.

Nevertheless, the actual importance of the Duma in the 1909 political split still raises a problem. Lenin recognised that the Vperedists had not explicitly come out against the decision of the Fifth Congress to participate in the Duma. 'Bogdanov and Co.', Lenin fulminated, are 'forever beating their breasts and protesting: we are not otzovists, we do not share the opinions of the otzovists at all!'¹⁹ Yet he relentlessly attacked Bogdanov because his strategy was, in his view, otzovist tactics theorised into a principled and complete 'system of politics'.²⁰ According to Lenin, what otzovism and Vperedism had in common was an abstentionist politics. Still, if, as I have argued, the Vperedists really thought participation in the Duma a secondary matter, why not defer completely to Lenin on what was after all – to the Vperedists – merely a tactical question? Why did the Vperedists not willingly and wholeheartedly agree to Lenin's demand not to 'shield' otzovists so as to compel Lenin to shift the focus of the intra-Bolshevik debate to what was really near and dear to the Vperedists: the strategy and politics of 'proletarian culture'?

The Vperedists did not do so because their leader, Bogdanov, was trying to build on an already existing – though rapidly vanishing – current of dissent, otzovism, in the Bolshevik rank-and-file. He and his partisans were looking somehow to sustain the otzovists not because they agreed with their tactic *per se*, but because their tactic was only an improper application of Vperedist strategy. As the otzovists could still be won to a tactically correct application of the Vperedist line, Bogdanov refrained from directly attacking them.

18. Joravsky 1961, p. 39.

19. Lenin 1962k, p. 39.

20. Lenin 1962i, p. 357.

The Vperedists used Lenin's refusal to tolerate otzovism as a legitimate, if tactically mistaken, shade of opinion in the Party to portray Lenin as undemocratic and wilful. In this way, the Vperedists sought indirectly to foster 'anti-Leninist' currents *tout court* – hence their own – by appealing to the democratic sensibilities of the Bolshevik rank and file against Lenin's 'authoritarian' leadership of the RSDLP.

Bogdanov's manoeuvre to undermine Lenin's political authority and standing by first undermining his moral authority and standing among the Bolsheviks largely failed for political, not moral, reasons. Owing to the nature of their political agenda – 'proletarian culture' – the Vperedists could not logically make the issue of the Duma a strategic one. However, the few remaining otzovists, ultimatists, and boycottists in Russia were looking for people in the leadership abroad who would actively fight for their standpoint, not for leaders who would utilise that standpoint to fight for something else. Consequently, the rank and file found lukewarm sympathisers for their cause among the Vperedists, not politicians championing it. Inevitably, the Vperedists disappointed the Russian underground, and the Russian underground disappointed the Vperedists.

An alternative to the contemporary historiography on Bogdanov and *Vpered*: the argument of this essay

In Russia, Vperedism offered a *strategic* alternative to both Bolshevism and Menshevism. Its purpose was to inculcate the socialist worldview in the working class 'from the outside' via 'proletarian universities' run by party-intellectuals. Vperedism eventually crystallised into a full-fledged faction, complete with an authoritative journal of its own, in December 1909. On secondary issues, such as the RSDLP's tactic toward the Duma, individual Vperedists held different political views. However, the political line advocated by *Vpered* toward the Duma did not differ from that pursued by the RSDLP. Vperedism waxed strongest when its members organised experimental precursors of the 'proletarian university' on the Isle of Capri from August to December 1909, and in Bologna from November 1910 to March 1911.²¹ Nevertheless, Vperedism remained at all times a minority-current among the Bolsheviks and within the RSDLP as a whole.

Bogdanov first clearly stated what Bolsheviks should do to move forward at the Conference of the Extended Editorial Board of *Proletarii* called by Lenin

21. For a detailed account of the pedagogical activities of the Vperedists, see Scherrer 1978.

in June 1909 in Paris to settle political accounts with Bogdanov once and for all.²² Bogdanov sowed the seeds of the future Vperedist political programme at this Conference. His overall political perspective was markedly pedagogical in character, ascribing to Social-Democratic intellectuals a tutelary role in bringing socialist consciousness to the working class.

At the Conference, Bogdanov circulated (or read) a 'Statement to the Editorial Board of *Proletarii*'. He noted that no 'principled differences' existed between him and Lenin on what position to adopt toward the Duma. 'Personal misunderstandings' alone were responsible for the minor 'practical' differences that did exist. *Proletarii*, official organ of the Bolshevik faction within the RSDLP, was mistaken to raise issues of principle around the Duma when there was none.²³

The issue was not the Duma for Bogdanov, but rather the '*practical work*' of '*widening and deepening of fully socialist propaganda*' (emphasis in the original) in the working class. The editors of *Proletarii* had ignored this question. They had paid virtually no attention to the intellectual formation of workers. They had not engaged in a thorough 'theoretical and historical' working over of the people's armed struggle against the autocracy. The absence of such propaganda meant the absence of 'conscious leaders' in workers' organisations. Only intellectuals could train workers to be conscious leaders. But the intelligentsia was leaving the Party. It was therefore especially critical for the RSDLP to make full use now of the few intellectuals remaining in its ranks. Once trained, these workers would take over from the intellectuals currently leading the RSDLP.²⁴

In this context, Bogdanov brought to the fore the party-school on the Isle of Capri being organised by him and other Bolsheviks. The school, Bogdanov stressed, was not a 'trivial matter'. Socialist propaganda was always necessary but during the revolution of 1905 the Bolsheviks had not engaged in it. Now, in the period of counterrevolution, it was the 'task of the moment', a task far more important than participation in the Duma. There, in party-universities, intellectuals would help workers 'systematise' their knowledge and so 'allow' workers to play the leadership-role in the Party that 'they ought to play', but which they were not now playing. 'The question of a party-university is the question of the day'.²⁵ The school would give intellectuals in the Party a critical role to play in the socialist education of workers.

22. *Protokoly soveshchaniia rasshirennoi redaktsii 'Proletariia', Iun' 1909*, Swain (ed.) 1982.

23. Swain (ed.) 1982, p. 144.

24. Swain (ed.) 1982, pp. 145–6.

25. Swain (ed.) 1982, p. 151.

The Paris Conference resolved that Bogdanov's political programme had nothing in common with Bolshevism and disclaimed all responsibility for Bogdanov's future political actions. Bogdanov refused to accept this decision because only a conference or congress of Bolsheviks could settle this question.²⁶ On that note, Bogdanov walked out.

At the Paris Conference, Lenin had demanded of Bogdanov an 'open statement' of his views 'for the sake of an ideological struggle' which would 'teach the Party a great deal'.²⁷ Bogdanov quickly met this demand. In July, one month after the Conference, Bogdanov and L.B. Krasin published a *Report* to fellow Bolsheviks.²⁸ It was the draft-platform of the yet-to-be-established *Vpered* group.

Bogdanov revealed in his *Report* the actual character of the now-consummated political split. Confirming Lenin's contention that issues of principle were at stake, not personal misunderstandings, Bogdanov charged Lenin and his partisans with having fundamentally deviated from the 'entire political line of Bolshevism', namely, from '*revolutionary Marxism*' and the idea of the hegemonic role of the proletariat in the coming democratic revolution. The shift of hegemony to 'bourgeois liberalism' after the defeat of the 1905 Revolution cleared the way for the triumph of reaction all along the line, and to the opening of the 'Duma-period' in the popular movement.²⁹ Lenin and his followers were needlessly prolonging the Duma-period by giving an 'overriding significance' to participation in the Duma.³⁰ Lenin's parliamentarism 'at any price', said Bogdanov, naturally led to the reassertion of revolutionary Marxism expressed in the rise of otzovist sentiment in the Party.

Bogdanov valued the revolutionary drive of the otzovists. The otzovists understood that participation in the Duma could never be 'paramount and fundamental' for the RSDLP. Nevertheless, Bogdanov disagreed with the political tactic of the otzovists. Recalling the RSDLP's Duma-representatives, Bogdanov warned, was not feasible, would not bring favourable results and, above all, threatened the unity of the Party by driving Lenin and his partisans out should the otzovist line gain the upper hand and become the line of the Party.³¹

26. Swain (ed.) 1982, p. 77.

27. Swain (ed.) 1982, p. 66.

28. A. Bogdanov and L.B. Krasin, *Otchet tovarishcham bolshevikam ustrannennikh chlenov rasshirennoi redaktsii Proletarii*, in *Protokoly rasshirennoi...*, pp. 240–50.

29. A. Bogdanov and L.B. Krasin, *Otchet tovarishcham...* p. 240.

30. Swain (ed.) 1982, p. 247.

31. Swain (ed.) 1982, p. 246.

Though Bogdanov found Lenin's position on the Duma 'dubious' and 'questionable'³² he did not call on the Bolshevik rank and file to organise a political struggle against Lenin around the Duma. For Bogdanov, the key was not withdrawal from the Duma but a proper assessment of the RSDLP's necessary participation in it. Bogdanov only thought Lenin's assessment of that participation was improper. Tactically, Bogdanov stood by Lenin on the Duma-question.

Central to the Vperedist critique of the official leadership of the Bolsheviks was the urgent need to develop and give wide scope to the cultural-paedagogical activity of the RSDLP. It was Bogdanov's entire political line on this matter, rather than the Duma, which, in Bogdanov's view, defined Bolshevism and from which Lenin and his partisans had fundamentally deviated. Since he devoted 80 per cent of the document to developing this idea, Bogdanov thus underscored his belief that the role of the Duma in the revolutionary movement was peripheral and should not occupy undue attention in party-tactics.

Once again, Bogdanov charged that *Proletarii* had ignored the question of socialist propaganda and those who conducted it. For the past sixteen months 'not one book or brochure' disseminating such propaganda had been sponsored by *Proletarii*.³³ What had been produced was purely 'revolutionary-democratic', not socialist. Sadly, even in 1905 the Bolsheviks had put out only 'revolutionary-democratic' propaganda. As a result,

the socialist principles of class consciousness were not deeply and durably assimilated and the socialist *world view* was relatively little propagated. . . . In the proletariat itself not enough was done to create a strong and influential nucleus of workers possessing a full and complete socialist education. . . . Whether one likes it or not, systematic [socialist] propaganda, was neglected. . . . The pamphlets distributed among the masses gave them no complete, class-based, world view merely scraps and pieces of it.³⁴

One of the most important tasks of the Party was, accordingly, the '*broadening and deepening of socialist propaganda*' (emphasis in the original). A small beginning had been made in the pre-revolutionary period, in the 1890s, when 'small circles' of Social-Democratic activists conducting 'elementary' propaganda had partially met the educational needs of a relatively narrow layer of workers. The Party had to renew the propagandistic traditions of early, pre-1905 Russian Social Democracy, only on a larger scale and in a more

32. Swain (ed.) 1982, p. 245.

33. Swain (ed.) 1982, p. 248.

34. Swain (ed.) 1982, p. 243.

sophisticated way. Propaganda of a 'much higher type', 'more complete and encyclopaedic', designed to convey to an 'influential nucleus of workers' an integral class-based worldview was now needed. To that end, 'party-schools of a new type have to be created to complete the party-education of the worker, to fill the inevitable gaps in his knowledge...and to prepare him to be a conscious leader in all forms of proletarian struggle'.³⁵

It was vital to undertake at once this daunting task as the intelligentsia was fleeing the ranks of the Party in the current period of reaction, transferring responsible work onto the workers themselves. But the workers were not yet fully prepared to take over. They still lacked the education and 'formal intellectual discipline [*formal' noi distsiplina uma*]' to shoulder successfully their weighty leadership responsibilities.³⁶

'Intellectuals' in high schools and universities acquired such discipline of the intellect. If 'one or another comrade-worker' acquired it, then all would be well for the worker would not be 'inferior to many intellectuals'; if the worker did not acquire it, then the worker had a much more difficult time coping with knowledge painstakingly acquired through reading and study. Without such discipline of the intellect, the worker *was* inferior to the intellectual because the worker's knowledge, unlike that of the intellectual's, would not be 'systematised' or 'encased in an organised system'.³⁷

Workers in the Party understood they lacked the 'formal' discipline of the intellect possessed by intellectuals to 'systematise' and 'encase' their knowledge in an 'organised system'. And they were doing something about it, according to Bogdanov. Workers were 'straining every nerve' on the 'unaccustomed but necessary work' of systematisation. Workers also knew whom to turn to for help in this necessary intellectual endeavour:

Party-workers are energetically demanding of the *intellectuals remaining in the Party* serious literary and propaganda support, paying the keenest attention to, and interest in every attempt to create this support, such as founding party-schools.³⁸

The role of the Social-Democratic intellectual was, in Bogdanov's view, as clear as it was pivotal. He had to 'complete the party-education of the worker' by filling 'the inevitable gaps' in the worker's 'knowledge'. In imparting to the worker a 'full and complete socialist education', the Social-Democratic intellectual prepared the worker to be a 'conscious leader in all forms of

35. Swain (ed.) 1982, p. 244.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

proletarian struggle'. These were the 'vital and immediate' tasks for the intellectuals still left in the Party.³⁹ In 1909, Bogdanov regarded the school of Capri as the experimental precursor of the 'proletarian universities' whose paedagogues would disseminate the 'socialist principles of class-consciousness' and inculcate the 'socialist worldview' in the working class.⁴⁰

For Bogdanov, the paedagogical tasks of the RSDLP now, in 1909, had to come to the forefront, if only to retain the Social-Democratic intellectual in the Party's ranks, the actual bearer of a 'complete, class-based worldview' in the working class. Founding party-schools would give these intellectuals a role to play in the Party, indeed, a leadership-role.

By 1909, it had become quite clear to Bogdanov that founding proletarian universities would not become the focus of the Bolsheviks' political activity nor of the RSDLP's: the Mensheviks, on the whole, were not interested in Bogdanov's political project, despite its 'anti-Leninist' character. In response, intellectuals like Bogdanov fought to set Social Democrats on the politically correct course. However, Lenin's leadership of the Party remained unbroken. As a result, many intellectuals left. This unleashed a vicious dynamic: the fewer intellectuals in the Party, the lower the odds of turning the Party around; the lower the odds of turning the Party around, the harder for such intellectuals to remain in the Party. Bogdanov witnessed this dynamic, sought to reverse it, only to be swept up by it. By 1912, he belonged to no organised political group.⁴¹

Underlying the Vperedists' political programme as a whole was an *intellectualist* and *paedagogical* conception of politics and of political activity generally. Specifically, Bogdanov, the group's chief-theoretician and inspirer, regarded the achievement of revolutionary-socialist consciousness by the working class as, ultimately, the product of the paedagogical activity of Social-Democratic intellectuals exercised on the working class 'from the outside'. The Vperedists' political programme was about developing that activity inside 'proletarian universities'.

Bogdanov's focus on the central role of paedagogy and of the paedagogue to impart to workers a total worldview distinguished his approach to politics and marked him off from other Social-Democratic thinkers. In this respect, he was the Peter Lavrov of Russian Marxism. Nevertheless, speaking more

39. *Ibid.*

40. Swain (ed.) 1982, p. 248.

41. Lenin wrote to Gorky in February 1908, 'The significance of the intellectuals in our Party is declining; news comes from all sides that the intelligentsia is *fleeing* the Party'. Lenin 1965d, p. 379. Lenin wrote about the flight of the intelligentsia in a spirit of *Schadenfreude*. Bogdanov wrote about it in an entirely different spirit.

broadly, Bogdanov's views converged with all pre-1905 Social-Democratic theorists in a critical respect: the notion that the spontaneous working-class movement was too limited to foster socialist consciousness and that these limitations could be overcome by organising a party 'from the outside' to bring this consciousness to workers. However much Bogdanov may have differed from other Social Democrats on *other* issues – issues about which he did *not* wage a fight within the Party – Bogdanov's views on *this* issue displayed an elective affinity to *all* pre-1905 'orthodox' Social Democrats. Bogdanov's initial adhesion to the Social-Democratic movement, then, was conditioned – though by no means determined – by a meeting of minds on the only issue that counted politically.

Broadly speaking, Social-Democratic theorists throughout Europe, led by Karl Kautsky, held that the working class could never, on its own, break out of an essentially reformist, trade-unionist practice and a corresponding reformist, trade-unionist consciousness. Socialist consciousness, Kautsky wrote, was not a 'necessary and direct result of the proletarian class struggle'. On the contrary, it had arisen only 'on the basis of profound scientific knowledge' whose 'vehicle' was the '*bourgeois intelligentsia*'.⁴² Thus, since the working class could not attain revolutionary consciousness by itself, intellectuals had to bring this in from outside the working class. Social-Democratic theorists adhered, then, to the notion that socialist consciousness could be brought to the working class from without despite the non-socialist, reformist character of its day-to-day practice. Specifically, the working class would have a reformist destiny if not for the intervention of revolutionary intellectuals. Lenin expressed this view fully in *What Is to Be Done?* published in 1902. However, Lenin's ideas were not *sui generis* in Russian Social Democracy or in European Social Democracy more generally. Leading Russian Social Democrats, Plekhanov, Martov, Axelrod, and Bogdanov as well as, again, most European Social Democrats shared them with Lenin.⁴³

42. Lenin 1962a, p. 383.

43. For a statement and defence of this position, see Harding 1983, Chapter 1. While Social Democrats in Russia debated how to bring revolutionary consciousness to the mass of workers, in Germany the left-wing of SPD struggled to prevent reformism from taking root in the *leadership* of the Social-Democratic Party. In both cases, though from opposite angles, similar theories were elaborated. In particular, Rosa Luxemburg, spokesperson of the left-wing in German Social Democracy, argued in the words of historian Carl E. Schorske, that 'the infusion of the *sozialistischer Geist* into the proletariat' via purely 'propagandistic and educational methods' could stem, from below, reformist tendencies within the SPD leadership. Schorske concludes that the problem of maintaining a revolutionary perspective in non-revolutionary times was largely sustained by an 'idealistic attitude' which clashed with Social Democracy's 'materialistic philosophy'. Schorske 1955, p. 23.

Most Social-Democratic leaders, then, agreed that there could be ‘no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement’.⁴⁴ Intellectuals would consequently play an indispensable role in preparing the working class ideologically for socialism, which was the party’s mission. Lenin and Bogdanov saw eye-to-eye on this question. Despite differences of emphasis – notably Bogdanov’s focus on paedagogy – both men could therefore find a critical basis for unity in political struggles to build the Party. Indeed, they worked closely in the Bolshevik leadership through 1905 and beyond. Nevertheless, Lenin and Bogdanov responded differently to the Revolution of 1905. It did not lead them to part but it did show the basis for parting.

The Revolution of 1905 deepened and fixed Bogdanov’s established views on the need to bring the socialist worldview to workers from without. In *The Cultural Tasks of Our Times*, written in 1911, Bogdanov spelled out *post festum* the theoretical premises of the Vperedist political programme by reaffirming a framework-notion of *What Is to Be Done?*, viz., the pivotal, tutelary role intellectuals had to play in the formation of socialist consciousness in the working class.

To make a socialist revolution, Bogdanov explained, the working class needed all-round ‘social-scientific knowledge’. The workers also required deep ‘natural-scientific knowledge’ to organise production after the revolution. However, the ‘political and economic struggle’ of the working class, by itself, created neither. It only fostered ‘specialised knowledge’. Such knowledge was one-sided, restricted to ‘one sphere of society’, and to one class, the working class. But the struggle for socialism was ‘extraordinarily complex’, ‘many-sided’, and its course did not depend on the ‘conditions of life’ of the working class alone. The natural course of the workers’ movement would not create a material, practical basis for workers to acquire a ‘unified scientific outlook’, that is, an integral Social-Democratic worldview.⁴⁵ The role of Social-Democratic activists would supplement the limited and limiting conditions of working-class existence and movements. Through education, they would create an intellectual-ideal basis for workers to accept Social-Democratic ideas. The paedagogical tasks of Social Democrats were therefore critical. These were the ‘cultural tasks of our times’.

Bogdanov affirmed that he had come to this conclusion almost from the very beginning of his political activity. Specifically, the experience of running propaganda-circles for workers in the late 1890s in Tula, his hometown,

44. Lenin 1962a, p. 384.

45. Bogdanov 1911, pp. 54–5.

'largely determined the nature of all my subsequent scientific and philosophic work'.⁴⁶ In 1919, he reaffirmed the determining character of his Tula experience and cited lengthy extracts from *The Cultural Tasks of Our Times*, written eight years earlier, describing that experience.⁴⁷ Bogdanov thereby established an unbroken continuity, stretching over a period of twenty years, in the direction and course of his scientific, philosophical, and political activity. Neither the Revolution of 1905 nor even the Revolution of 1917 would change Bogdanov's basic thinking about the tutelary role of the Social-Democratic intelligentsia in the workers' movement.

The impact of the 1905 Revolution led Lenin, unlike Bogdanov, to reassess the potential of the working class to develop socialist consciousness. In *What Is to Be Done?* Lenin had emphasised the duty of Social Democrats, organised in a party, to bring 'political knowledge' to workers, to teach workers what they did 'not yet know' and could 'never learn' from their 'factory and "economic" experience'.⁴⁸ But, now, Lenin saw, 'revolution' had expanded workers' experience beyond what Social-Democratic theorists had believed possible. Lenin transformed his political theory: revolution, and it alone, he now concluded, would 'teach Social Democratism' to the masses of workers in Russia, and would teach it with such 'rapidity and thoroughness' as to appear 'incredible' in non-revolutionary periods.⁴⁹ Indeed, 1905 'proved' that workers could 'fight in a purely Social Democratic spirit'. Astonishingly, at the height of the Revolution, Lenin actually declared workers to be 'instinctively, spontaneously, Social Democratic'.⁵⁰ Specifically, Lenin vigorously opposed the hostile attitude and abstentionist approach of the Bolshevik-majority, led by Bogdanov, toward the St. Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies.⁵¹ Lenin instead urged the Bolsheviks to participate fully in it, as well as in trade-unions and factory-committees, and in all other institutions created by workers to guide the course of their movement. Lenin also called on all Social Democrats

46. Bogdanov 1911, p. 72.

47. Bogdanov 1919.

48. Lenin 1962a pp. 416–17.

49. Lenin 1962c. p. 17.

50. Lenin 1962e, p. 32. See also Harding 1981, pp. 242–3.

51. For this pivotal episode showing Bogdanov's and other Bolsheviks' antipathy to the spontaneous workers' movement and to institutions created by it, see Schwarz 1967, pp. 178–95. Lenin's positive attitude toward the Soviet was not fully theorised by him at the time, and he attributed to that institution no historical significance beyond the immediate circumstances of its birth. It was not until the summer of 1916, in preparatory notes, that Lenin made the Soviet the institutional cornerstone of his theory of the workers' state. The Russian workers' movement realised his theory a few months later. Lenin had thus correctly *anticipated* the formation of the Soviet as the central institution of the workers' state and workers' power – the mark of genius.

to open wide the gates of the Party and let in as many workers as possible, on the assumption that they had been revolutionised, their consciousness transformed, through the experience of the revolution itself.⁵²

Although he never explicitly theorised this, Lenin had thus come to an understanding of working-class radicalisation as the result, ultimately, of its own revolutionary activity in its own interests and not as the product of the influence of revolutionary intellectuals 'from the outside' upon the working class. In his mind, the reality of revolution had shown that workers could transcend narrow trade-union consciousness and achieve revolutionary, Social-Democratic ideas because their own revolutionary activity provided a practical-material, and not merely an intellectual-ideal, basis for those ideas. This was the lesson of the mass-strikes and the Soviets. Because Lenin had significantly distanced himself from the formulations of *What Is to Be Done?* he opposed, on principle, the political programme of *Vpered*.

In Lenin's view, the experience of the Revolution of 1905 had decisively undermined the paedagogical and intellectualist foundations of the *Vpered* program. The Revolution had shown in practice that workers could achieve revolutionary, Social-Democratic ideas on their own. For Bogdanov and his co-thinkers to seek to implement the *Vperedist* programme meant, in Lenin's view, to assess improperly the experience of 1905 and to fail to develop a fuller, more comprehensive, revolutionary theory.

Lenin did not arrive at these conclusions in the course of direct and immediate polemic with Bogdanov or with the *Vperedists* generally for these conclusions long antedated the 1909 political dispute: they had become an ideological premise for Lenin and, as such, needed no explicit reaffirmation or development by him. Thus, in his reply to Bogdanov in September 1909, Lenin focussed on the *Vperedists'* stance on the Duma, virtually ignoring Bogdanov's propagandistic-paedagogical views even though these were central to the *Vperedist* critique of Lenin's politics. Lenin did address Bogdanov's paedagogical politics, but only very briefly and elliptically, stating that a political appraisal of the 'experience of the revolution' meant the 'conversion of the experience already gained by the masses into ideological stock-in-trade for new historic action' and not so much a 'theoretical summing up of experience in books and researches',⁵³ which is what, broadly speaking, Bogdanov had in mind. In Lenin's view, then, the political education of workers would still 'not be obtained by books alone', nor even 'so much from books' in a classroom-setting 'as from the very progress of the revolution' on the factory-floor and in

52. Schwarz 1967, pp. 216–20; cf. Liebman 1975, Chapter 3.

53. Lenin 1962k, p. 36.

the streets.⁵⁴ Lenin's conclusion was unequivocal: 'Experience in the struggle enlightens more rapidly and more profoundly than years of propaganda'.⁵⁵

In 'The Attitude of the Workers' Party toward Religion', written in May 1909, Lenin linked the foregoing understanding of the relationship between activity and consciousness to Marxism's materialist-philosophical principles. Lenin argued against those comrades who believed that education or 'ideological preaching' primarily was the way to inculcate the Social-Democratic worldview and to undermine religious beliefs among workers and peasants. Such comrades explained the roots of religion in terms of the 'ignorance of the people' so that the dissemination of 'atheist views' and of the Social-Democratic outlook generally became the 'chief task'.⁵⁶ This was a superficial view, in Lenin's judgement, because it explained the roots of religion 'idealistically', in terms of ignorance, not 'materialistically', in terms of its social roots, specifically, the 'fear of the blind force of capital', which threatened to inflict and did inflict "'sudden", "unexpected" accidental ruin and destruction' in the life of the proletariat and of the small-peasant proprietor. 'Fear made the Gods'.⁵⁷

For Lenin, religious faith, that is, non-Social-Democratic worldviews, ultimately would be undermined practically, not paedagogically, because the roots of such worldviews were ultimately material and practical, not merely intellectual and cognitive. He wanted to link the struggle against religion with the 'concrete practice of the class movement which aims at eliminating the social roots of religion'. Only the 'progress of the class struggle could convert Christian workers to Social Democracy and atheism'⁵⁸ for only the class-struggle actually changed social relationships and, consequently, changed ideas about those relationships and one's role in changing them. Only the experience of class-conflict had a sufficiently powerful material and practical impact on the consciousness of its participants actually to change consciousness. Only in the course of that struggle would workers be won to Social Democracy because the Marxist, Social-Democratic worldview made better sense of their struggle than any other worldview.

Whereas Bogdanov, then, gave a primacy to education in the transformation of working-class consciousness, Lenin looked to the experience of

54. Lenin 1962b, p. 287.

55. Lenin 1962d pp. 351–2. The impact of the 1905 Russian Revolution on the left wing of German Social Democracy also pushed Rosa Luxemburg to develop her political theory in a more fully 'materialistic' direction. See Luxemburg's seminal 1906 essay, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions* (New York, 1971).

56. Lenin 1962j, p. 406.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*

class-struggle. Bogdanov did not think that this struggle, by itself, would create the basis for workers to adopt a socialist outlook. He wanted to supplement it by socialist schooling in proletarian universities. Lenin and Bogdanov likewise assessed the 1905 Revolution very differently though, again, neither drew the difference sharply in direct and immediate polemic.

Bogdanov's strong emphasis on propaganda was a hallmark of his activity from the beginning of his political career. It is doubtful that Lenin ever shared Bogdanov's enthusiasm for the paedagogical element in politics. What was decisive in bringing them together was their common belief in the RSDLP's tutelary role in relation to the working class, summed up in the view that workers through their own activity could not reach revolutionary consciousness, which had to be brought from the outside by revolutionary intellectuals. This laid the basis for their political collaboration beginning in 1904.

The failure of the 1905 Revolution had imposed great responsibilities on the Social-Democratic intellectuals. Bogdanov was convinced that they now needed to raise workers to be not just politically educated revolutionaries, but fully rounded socialist men and women fit to run the new society before the overthrow of the old one. He gave pride of place to this lofty task in the *Vpered* platform:

The socialist consciousness of the working class must embrace its entire existence and not just the working class' direct economic and political struggle.... Against bourgeois culture, a new proletarian culture must be disseminated among the masses, a proletarian science developed... a proletarian philosophy worked out. Art must be oriented toward proletarian aspirations and experiences.⁵⁹

The function of the Social-Democratic intellectual was essentially to free the worker's consciousness from the shackles of 'bourgeois culture' and bourgeois ideology 'within the framework of the existing society'. In Bogdanov's view, then, the achievement of socialist consciousness by the worker took place *despite* those practical/material conditions of everyday life which daily produced and reproduced 'bourgeois culture', bourgeois science, bourgeois philosophy, and bourgeois art. 'The defining feature of Bolshevism', he concluded, 'is the creation of an all-embracing proletarian culture, *hic et nunc*, within the framework of the existing society.'⁶⁰

With hindsight, Bogdanov's views on the relationship between politics and culture, in the broad sense of the term, were already somewhat at odds with

59. *Sovremennoe polozhenie i zadachi partii: platforma*, pp. 16–17.

60. Bogdanov 1910a, pp. 4–5.

Lenin's own conceptions expressed in *What Is to Be Done?* There, Lenin agreed with the viewpoint expressed by Bogdanov that it was certainly no disadvantage to bring workers up to the level of the Social-Democratic intellectual in science, art, and philosophy. However, this task was not 'easy' nor 'pressingly necessary', for it belonged in the domain of 'paedagogics' not 'politics and organisation'. 'Leave paedagogics to paedagogues and not to politicians and organisers!' Lenin cried.⁶¹

Nevertheless, what drew Bogdanov decisively to Bolshevism and to Lenin in 1904 was the pivotal notion of *What Is to Be Done?* that the mass of the working class could not reach revolutionary, socialist consciousness in the course of struggle because that struggle would never, on its own, challenge existing social relationships nor *a fortiori* challenge the consciousness corresponding to those relationships. On this critical point, Bogdanov agreed with Lenin. Bogdanov's belief in the missionary-role of Social-Democratic intellectuals to bring socialist consciousness to the workers via education dovetailed with Lenin's view that such consciousness would also arise as a result of the propaganda by Social Democrats acting 'from outside' the workers' movement. The political alliance between Lenin and Bogdanov, then, was rooted in two complementary conceptions of how workers would become Social Democrats.

But, by 1909, Bogdanov's long-term political perspective clashed with Lenin's. Bogdanov still adhered to the intellectualist presuppositions of *What Is to Be Done?* regarding the formation of socialist consciousness in the working class. He reaffirmed them in *The Cultural Tasks of Our Times*. Lenin had meanwhile reconsidered and sharply revised those presuppositions because the workers had, in 1905, challenged existing social relationships and had therefore acted in a necessarily revolutionary, Social-Democratic spirit, whether they had actually joined the RSDLP or not. It was that challenge that had made the year 1905 a year of Revolution.

The experience of the Revolution of 1905 not only failed to bring Bogdanov to the same sort of rethinking as it did Lenin; it confirmed him in his established view. By 1909, they no longer shared a common paradigm. The result was fundamental conflict between the two men. The political split showed that the conflict was irreconcilable.

Bogdanov and the *Vperedists* were unable to win over a majority of Bolsheviks or of Russian Social Democrats generally to their programme of creating a proletarian culture via socialist schooling in party-universities. *Vpered* never secured a lasting political influence in the workers' movement

61. Lenin 1962a, pp. 470-1.

in Russia. Throughout its short-lived existence, *Vpered* had a proportionately higher contingent of intellectuals in its ranks than any other tendency of the RSDLP, as well as a proportionately higher number of adherents abroad.

Vpered did not long survive the departure of its chief inspirer and theoretician in 1911, and *de facto* collapsed in 1912. After leaving *Vpered*, Bogdanov continued his scientific and philosophical investigations and began to write *Tectology: Universal Science of Organisation* (Moscow, 1913–22). Bogdanov's membership in the Russian Social-Democratic Labour-Party and in *Vpered* had been only one dimension of his broader conception of politics.

Meanwhile, the working-class movement again went on the offensive. The Bolsheviks, applying the lessons of 1905, bolstered that offensive by actively participating in the cooperative, trade-union, and political movement of the workers. On the eve of World-War One, the Bolsheviks had won the political allegiance of the majority of the organised working class.⁶² In March of 1917, the Bolsheviks were to regain that allegiance and eventually lead the workers to seize power through their own class-based institutions, the Soviets.⁶³

Afterword

The view of Bogdanov presented here is so much at odds with the one given by most scholars of this 'non-Leninist' Bolshevik that it requires a concluding, justificatory, comment.

Many scholars praise Bogdanov's attitude toward the workers for being the 'complete anti-thesis of the ideas put forward by Lenin in *What Is to Be Done?*' because Bogdanov did not presume to 'lead the workers in any direction' or 'dictate' how they ought to think and act.⁶⁴ In *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*, Zenovia Sochor highlights repeatedly her view that Bogdanov 'glorified the workers and their innate aptitude for attaining knowledge, political consciousness and self-transformation' whereas Lenin did not, that Bogdanov 'challenged' authority 'in all guises' whereas Lenin was the authoritarian *par excellence*.⁶⁵

62. See Leopold Haimson's classic 'The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia, 1905–1917', *Slavic Review* (December 1964 and March 1965) and Bonnell 1983 Chapter 10.

63. For the role of the Bolshevik Party in the 1917 Revolution, see Rabinowitch 1968, and 1976; for the role of the Bolsheviks in the Soviets, see Mandel 1983, and 1984; for the role of the Bolsheviks in the factory-committees, see Smith, 1983. These works support my construction of Lenin's revised Bolshevism after 1905.

64. White 1981, pp. 44, 48.

65. Sochor 1988, p. 175.

Pace Sochor and others, this view of Bogdanov renders his initial adhesion to Lenin a veritable mystery. True, Bogdanov had nothing but the loftiest praise for workers who met, or strove to meet, his rigorous theoretical specifications. But how many such workers were there? To this all-important question, Sochor occasionally concedes that few workers and even fewer of their organisations met Bogdanov's ideal. Indeed, according to Sochor, Bogdanov did not think 'workers' organisations in general' could 'serve as adequate transitional forms for the construction of socialism' because all 'trade unions, cooperatives, and Party organisations' functioned 'according to the economic and cultural laws of capitalism'. They ended up 'reflecting' existing capitalist culture rather than 'fostering' socialist 'attitudes and values'.⁶⁶ These and other isolated but telling passages in Sochor's book point to the imperative need to distinguish between Bogdanov's praise of imagined workers functioning in imagined institutions and Bogdanov's scepticism toward real workers functioning in real organisations.

Sochor does not give this distinction the emphasis it deserves in her book. She should have accorded it more attention and study because, for Bogdanov, the distinction confirmed that actual workers, without the mediation of revolutionary intellectuals, would not transform their consciousness. Indeed, Bogdanov premised his entire political sociology on the opposition between the workers' actual 'false' consciousness and his ideal 'authentic' proletarian being. The *Vperedists* wanted to overcome the bourgeois consciousness of the working class by *ideologically* overcoming bourgeois society from the outside, by engineering a socialist consciousness among workers outside bourgeois society, in isolation from it, behind its back, privately, via proletarian universities. However, the Revolution of 1917 showed *Vperedist* strategy – 'Bogdanovism' – to be, in Sochor's harsh but just words, a set of 'ideas' lacking 'genuine political clout'.⁶⁷

In 1917, workers once again engaged in mass strikes and built factory-committees and Soviets to guide their movement. They did so on their own and without the tutelage of intellectuals, confirming Lenin's views regarding the working class' capacity to develop revolutionary consciousness and institutions, and allowing the Bolsheviks to intervene in every sphere of working-class activity. On the other hand, the actual development of the revolution rendered Bogdanov's political strategy irrelevant because inapplicable. As the intelligentsia showed no sign of playing a tutelary role in the workers' movement, Bogdanov apprehended that movement and opposed the Soviet

66. Sochor 1988, p. 34.

67. Sochor 1988, p. 13.

seizure of power in October 1917. In 1917, revolution passed Bogdanov by and Bogdanov passed by the Revolution.

Bogdanov's estrangement from the organised working-class movement in 1917 and beyond was exemplified in his attitude toward *Proletkul't*, a non-Party organisation sponsored and led by the Bolsheviks. As *Proletkul't* grew to become a mass-movement, actively connected to the social, political, and cultural realities of the immediate post-1917 period, it progressively ceased to meet Bogdanov's theoretical specifications because it developed independently of intelligentsia-tutelage. Insofar as *Proletkul't* did meet those theoretical specifications, it only encompassed a sect of doctrinaire intellectuals working in the editorial offices of *Proletarskaia Kul'tura*, a journal to which Bogdanov and his handful of followers contributed. Surveying the evolution of the *Proletkul't* movement from very different vantage points, two Soviet historians, V.V. Gorbunov, *V.I. Lenin i Proletkul't* (Moscow, 1974) and L.A. Pinegina, *Sovietskii rabochii klass i khudozhestvennaia kul'tura* (Moscow, 1984), as well as an American scholar, Lynn Mally, *Blueprint for a New Culture: A Social History of the Proletkul't* (UC Berkeley doctoral dissertation, 1985), have shown that the theory of 'proletarian culture' originally developed by Bogdanov and his associates in 1909 was largely irrelevant to the revolutionary practice *des real existierenden* worker (and peasant), in 1917 and beyond.

Chapter Seven

The Bogdanov Issue: Reply to Andrzej Walicki, Aileen Kelly and Zenovia Sochor

In the previous chapter, I attempted to explain the Vperedist split, led by Bogdanov, from the Bolshevik faction of the RSDLP. In contrast to earlier interpretations, I tried to show that Bogdanov did not part from Lenin over their differences of philosophy (orthodox-Plekhanovist materialism versus Mach's empiriocriticism). Nor did they separate because Bogdanov dissented from the Bolsheviks' decision to participate in the Duma, although it is true that Bogdanov and Lenin did assess that participation differently. I argued, instead, that what they split over was their general political approach or outlook: specifically, over Bogdanov's desire to have the Bolsheviks place their emphasis on paedagogical/propagandistic tasks. That did cause them to differ not only on how to assess participation in the Duma, but much more generally on the value of the Bolsheviks' day-to-day work in connection with the workers' mundane practical activities, 'where they were at'.

My concern with the Bolshevik-Vperedist split is part of a broader effort to understand Bogdanov's ideas in relation to those of Lenin. My methodological point of departure is that the ideas of these men, and the several generations of intellectuals of which they are a part, are best grasped in relationship to their political practice. This is because they were not concerned to solve intellectual problems *qua* intellectual problems. They were, above all, concerned with the Russian workers' movement and with helping

that movement to develop fruitfully, and their ideas, however theoretical and complex, were shaped for this end. Specifically, their ideas were aimed at party-political organisations through which their connection with the workers' movement was mediated. I do not deny that one can ask other questions about the ideas of these men. But I do assert that an absolutely indispensable way to understand them – to be able to say in what ways they are similar, in what ways they differ, what distinctions are important – is through a detailed account of the interrelationships of their ideas to their political interventions; political interventions which led up to, brought about, and resulted from the Vperedist-Bolshevik split. I believe some of my central differences with my critics can be traced to the primacy I give to these men's practices as an indispensable, if not the only, key to understanding their ideas.

My point of departure was that the political unity of Bogdanov and Lenin in the Bolshevik leadership from 1904 to 1909, despite their clear philosophical differences, was predicated on an overriding agreement on the tutelary role of intellectuals in the Party in helping the proletariat come to revolutionary Social-Democratic consciousness, a conception they shared with most of the leading thinkers of West-European Social Democracy, as Aileen Kelly rightly recognises.¹

Andrzej Walicki² devotes much space to spelling out *differences* among Lenin and Bogdanov and Western European Social-Democratic leaders on the role of the intellectual. I agree, for the most part, with his account of these differences, but do not agree with his assessment of its relevance. For I was in no way attempting to argue that Bogdanov shared with Lenin, let alone with all the other European Social-Democratic thinkers, an identical view on the *nature* of and the *reasons* for the tutelary role of the intellectuals vis-à-vis the working class. My point was that, *despite their differences*, what was of overriding importance was their agreement on the need for this tutelary role: most important, Lenin and Bogdanov agreed, as did the rest of European Social Democracy, that the workers could not, out of their own activity, come to revolutionary consciousness. It was this point of agreement that was central, and not their differences, for it *overrode* their differences and *in practice* brought Bogdanov and Lenin together on the need for a party like the Bolshevik Party and in their common participation in that party.

Walicki asserts that Bogdanov and Lenin were so sharply opposed in their understanding on the role of the intellectuals vis-à-vis the working class that it drove them apart. Zenovia A. Sochor³ even claims that Bogdanov opposed

1. Kelly 1990.

2. Walicki 1990.

3. Sochor 1990.

Lenin fundamentally from the very beginning on the vanguard-party. Walicki specifically argues that, for Bogdanov, all knowledge and truth is 'derived from praxis', from productive labour and from the 'different forms of class struggle', so that knowledge is 'always relative, class-bound, sociologically determined and praxis-oriented'.⁴ Walicki then goes on to say that, given Bogdanov's praxis-based epistemology, Bogdanov simply could not have held the view I attribute to him of the tutelary role of the intellectuals through the party because 'it could not be justified by [Bogdanov's] theories'. He says the '*very possibility*' (my emphasis) of this tutelary role 'involves two assumptions: first, that it makes sense to talk about 'objective truth'; second, that such truth is accessible only to those people who have a proper professional training'. Since Bogdanov's philosophy was a 'radical rejection of both of these assumptions',⁵ he simply could not have held the view I attribute to him. How then could they have worked together from 1904 to 1909 if they differed so radically, as Sochor and Walicki assert, on the party and its tutelary role? Walicki finds this no problem. 'In fact, this might be true about Bogdanov's practice but could not be justified by his theories'.⁶ In other words, Bogdanov simply did not understand the implications of his own viewpoint, or was so insufficiently committed to them that he acted against them in practice. I believe this sort of reasoning is also implicit throughout Sochor, who is prepared to find in Bogdanov's theories a clear departure from the premises of *What Is to Be Done?* regarding the tutelary role of intellectuals.⁷

I find this sort of reasoning extremely perilous and difficult to justify. One discovers what one believes to be a crucial disagreement between individuals based on *one's own* analysis of their texts; then, when their practice tends to belie this disagreement, rather than seek some further explanation as to how to reconcile the disparity, one simply asserts inconsistency between theory and practice. This sort of procedure is, in general, difficult to justify, for, as we all know, the relationship between theory and practice – especially epistemology and practice! – is exceedingly elusive, and certainly practice cannot be understood to follow from theory as a logical deduction. What practices do and do not follow from a given theory is always a question of complex reasoning and argument. More specifically, given the rather extreme sensitivity to the interrelationships between theory and practice in the Russian Social-Democratic movement, to say that a revolutionary intellectual like

4. Walicki 1990, p. 300.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Sochor 1990, p. 287.

Bogdanov or Lenin is simply acting in a way that is entirely inconsistent with his theory should raise doubts.

I believe that Walicki, by speaking of the relationship between practice and theory, indeed epistemology and political outlook, as if it were one of logic and deduction, has simply imposed *his own* idea of which practices must be inconsistent with Bogdanov's theory. I agree with him entirely that Bogdanov's epistemology was opposed to Lenin's, and that he viewed Marxism, like other theories, as expressing the experience and standpoint of a specific class, in this case, the proletariat, and not of scientific-bourgeois intellectuals. Nevertheless, I believe Walicki has no basis for concluding that therefore Bogdanov *must*, somehow, have opposed the tutelary role of intellectuals in the workers' movement. This fails to note what seemed to Bogdanov the obvious fact that, despite its origins and significance in the proletariat's position and experience, intellectuals could grasp Marxism more systematically than could most workers, and therefore had a crucial paedagogical role to play. It fails also to note, as Aileen Kelly rightly points out, that the particular ideology which supposedly sums-up the workers' experience ends up, *de facto*, being defined by the intellectuals and imputed to the workers. For this reason, as Kelly rightly emphasises, despite appearances, the Bogdanovist perspective could bring about a highly paternalistic relationship between intelligentsia and the working class. As Kelly says, Bogdanov and Lenin 'were united on one common belief: in the indispensability of the intelligentsia... The intelligentsia are precluded by their class origins from creating a collectivist ethic of the future, but they alone can define and expose deviations from it, because it is they who invented the rules of the game.'⁸

Indeed, what are we to conclude from Walicki's own evidence with respect to his view that Bogdanov simply could not have believed in the intelligentsia imposing consciousness from outside. 'Bogdanov was not horrified and scandalised by the hypothesis that the Soviet state might be ruled, in the transitional period by scientific engineers rather than workers', says Walicki.⁹ But who, then, besides intellectuals like Bogdanov, were judging the appropriateness of this substitution of the rule of the technical intelligentsia for the workers and how long the supposed transition-period was to last? More directly to the point, Walicki tells us of Bogdanov's 'sensitivity to the dangers of a premature seizure of power', which he believed, 'was better than popular anarchy', and that 'the workers rule should be *a result* of their maturity' (Walicki's emphasis).¹⁰ Is this really such a long way, in practice, from the scientific

8. Kelly 1990, p. 307.

9. Walicki, p. 301.

10. *Ibid.*

position of classical Social Democracy, supposedly abhorred by Bogdanov, whose 'main aim', as Walicki tells us, was 'to avoid the danger of a revolutionary voluntarism'.¹¹ Is it not obvious that in both cases, it is the intellectuals who are warranted to judge just what represents mature workers' consciousness and whether the workers, in any given case, have achieved it?

It should perhaps be pointed out in passing that Kelly muddies the water when, in commenting on my argument on the centrality of the tutelary role of the party, she says that all Social Democrats, including Lenin, were, from the start, materialists and thus believed that consciousness could be changed by experience. No doubt this is true. But Lenin, Bogdanov, and the RSDLP more generally nevertheless concluded that the experience of the proletariat would not be enough in itself to lead them to adopt Social-Democratic consciousness. Thus, in the turn-of-the-century dispute opposing the Iskristis and the economists, all Social Democrats, 'orthodox' and 'revisionist' alike, agreed that class-consciousness developed actively, through the experience of class-struggle, but they disagreed about how far that struggle, left to itself, would actually go. The Iskristis – Lenin, Martov, Axelrod, and Plekhanov – argued that workers' struggle, on its own, would never transcend a reformist stage and progress to a revolutionary, Social-Democratic one. The Party would make up for the lack of revolutionary activity among workers by *substituting* for it the Party's scientifically-based worldview and programme. Bogdanov shared the Iskrist perspective, and he continued to see the revolutionary process in this light after the 1905 Revolution: 'The proletariat's ideological revolution – the achievement of class self-consciousness – precedes the all-round social revolution'.¹² Quintessentially, this was the argument of the Vperedists, as well as the programmatic basis of their political unity. It was also one argument, *among others*, the Iskristis had deployed in favour of organising a vanguard-party according to their specifications.

In the 1905 Revolution, masses of workers engaged in activity that was revolutionary, not simply reformist or narrowly trade-unionist, so that there was now, at last, a practical basis for revolutionary consciousness. The experience of 1905 prompted Lenin to extend a materialist interpretation to this new and unprecedented activity, not to invent that interpretation out of whole cloth. Lenin's new position from 1905 that revolutionary experience could itself revolutionise workers' consciousness was therefore a major break, although I never implied that its implication was to deny the need for a party.

11. Walicki 1990, p. 296.

12. Bogdanov 1910, p. 114.

What then caused the split? Kelly reaffirms her view that Bogdanov developed a voluntarist philosophy opposed to the orthodox-Marxist materialism professed by Lenin and Plekhanov. She agrees with me that Bogdanov's adherence to Bolshevism in the summer of 1904 expressed his strongly held belief that the RSDLP needed, as Kelly says, to 'assume conscious control over the spontaneous workers' movement'.¹³ By 1909, Bogdanov, Kelly says, was challenging Lenin's leadership of the Bolsheviks. Unfortunately, Kelly never spells out the nature of this challenge. Throughout her commentary, she refers to 'political tactics' and 'tactical considerations' that divided Lenin and Bogdanov in 1909 without detailing what these tactics were, let alone what was different about them.

I did not dispute Kelly's view that the philosophical beliefs of the two men were connected to their political split in 1909; I only disputed the connection Kelly made. The Menshevik critique of empiriocriticism, she says, restating her 1981 position',¹⁴ offered a 'useful insight into the unarticulated premises'¹⁵ of Bolshevik practice. Nevertheless, along with David Joravsky, I argued against the view that empiriocriticism was, somehow, a Bolshevik philosophy. Kelly questions my agreement with Joravsky, claiming that Joravsky only disagreed with those who claimed that *Lenin* identified 'Machism' with a specific political tendency. But Joravsky also examined at length the identification of 'Machism' with Bolshevism made by the Mensheviks (and by Kelly), and concluded that it, too, was 'erroneous'.¹⁶

But if empiriocriticism articulated the philosophical premises of Bolshevik practice, why did Lenin attack the philosophical premises of his own practice in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*? In Kelly's view, only Lenin's ruthless determination to undermine Bogdanov politically – by irrationally characterising Bogdanov's philosophical conceptions as non-Bolshevik – can explain why Lenin would actually defend philosophical positions at odds with his activist political practice.

I have already expressed strong reservations regarding a similar claim of inconsistency between theory and practice made by Walicki with respect to Bogdanov. Like Walicki – only in reverse – Kelly deduces an appropriate epistemological standpoint, empiriocriticism, from Lenin's political practice.

13. Kelly 1990, p. 307. Indeed, Bogdanov attacked the Mensheviks for denying precisely this role to the RSDLP and for resurrecting the old economist heresy that workers needed no party to lead them. See Bogdanov 1904a, 1904b. For Kelly to assert elsewhere that Bogdanov denounced Lenin's view of the party's role as 'contrary to orthodox Marxism' is puzzling in the extreme. Bogdanov, in any case, never said this.

14. Kelly 1981, pp. 89–118.

15. Kelly 1990, p. 309.

16. Joravsky 1961, pp. 33–6.

But, unlike Walicki, Kelly thinks she can avoid positing a contradiction between Lenin's theory and practice by saying that Lenin's practice includes a 'utilitarian attitude to philosophical truth' which is itself an 'epistemological position'.¹⁷

In fact, Kelly does not give an accurate account of Lenin's practice at all because Lenin explicitly attacked, in practice, by publishing *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, the very epistemological utilitarianism that Kelly attributes to Lenin. To suggest, as Kelly does, that Lenin wrote a philosophical treatise merely to rationalise a political break with Bogdanov is to acknowledge that the actual grounds for breaking with him lie elsewhere.

I argued that the split between Bogdanov and Lenin was directly derived neither from differences over philosophy nor from mere tactical differences, but from differences of political outlook, made sharp by their differing conclusions from 1905. Bogdanov drew from 1905 further reaffirmation of his view of the need for paedagogy and propaganda, whereas Lenin *developed* his Marxist view on the connection between change in experience and change in consciousness by dropping the idea that workers could not, out of their own experience, come to revolutionary consciousness.

I did not perhaps bring out enough that though Bogdanov and the Vperedists supported the Bolshevik majority on participation in the Duma and opposed the otzovists on this question, nevertheless they assessed participation in the Duma and the otzovist current differently. Thus Lenin saw it as 'being where the workers were', as participating in their struggles and developing their consciousness in the course of struggle. Bogdanov and the otzovists, in contrast, tended toward abstention, though in different ways and for different reasons. Bogdanov thought that participation in the Duma as part of a wrong orientation detracted from the crucial task of offering to workers a well-rounded worldview. He thought he might get the support of the otzovists because both shared a desire to counter bourgeois ideology, the otzovists by avoiding participation in bourgeois institutions, Bogdanov by providing a worldview that could not be attained merely through such participation. This set Lenin against both. Convinced that the Party had to engage in the day-to-day struggles with workers, even if not revolutionary, Lenin opposed the different forms of abstention of the Vperedists and the otzovists.

Kelly denies the significance, and perhaps even the fact, of this difference in approach. Lenin, she says, was as tutelary as Bogdanov, if not more. Indeed, his whole politics, she argues, was based on controlling spontaneity, as exemplified in *What Is to Be Done?* She grants that, in 1905, Lenin declared

17. Kelly 1990, p. 309.

the working class spontaneously Social-Democratic and decided to open the Party to workers. But she dismisses the significance of all this, saying that by 1907 he had relapsed into his old authoritarian concern to control spontaneity and 'reverted to his former concept of professional revolutionaries'.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Kelly's view essentially ignores the trajectory of the workers' movement.

In 1905, workers were revolutionary and Lenin urged Social Democrats to participate fully and unreservedly in factory-committees, in trade-unions, and in the Soviets. Party-membership grew from a few hundred to seventy thousand by mid-1907. It then abruptly declined as a result of the onset of counterrevolution, signalled by Stolypin's *coup d'état*. Lenin closed the gates of the Party in response to the departure of workers and the ebbing of revolutionary consciousness flowing from the ebbing of revolutionary activity. Kelly says that, at this point, Lenin reverted to his old views. I deny this, and there is a test: 1917.

In 1917, the Bolsheviks did not suppress spontaneity, they participated in it. Revisionist historians of 1917 have established beyond a reasonable doubt that the Bolsheviks were an integral though distinctive part of the social forces pressing for fundamental change.¹⁹ Lenin's partisans participated in all the workers' institutions, including the Soviets, as a matter of course. The Bolsheviks showed an acute sensitivity to shifting popular moods and desires. At the same time, the Bolsheviks predicated their political and organisational success upon their capacity to provide a political and organisational lead for the popular masses in general and for workers in particular.

The Bolsheviks played a vanguard-role in 1917 in part because of the way Lenin and the majority of Bolsheviks had worked over and critically accepted the experience of 1905. In 'The Assessment of the Russian Revolution', written in April 1908, a few weeks before the split with Bogdanov, Lenin declared that 1905 had 'provided a model of *what has to be done*. . . . For the proletariat, the working over and critical acceptance of the experience of the revolution must consist in learning how to apply the *then* methods of struggle *more successfully*'.²⁰

But Bogdanov and a minority of Bolsheviks evaluated the 1905 Revolution very differently because it provided a model of what the Bolsheviks had failed to do, and of what yet needed to be done: apply *other* methods of struggle by adopting the Vperedist programme of proletarian culture. The role of Bogdanov in 1917 was therefore quite different.

18. Kelly 1990, p. 308.

19. See Suny 1983, pp. 31–52.

20. Lenin 1962h, p. 53.

As Sochor has shown,²¹ despite Bogdanov's overt concern to prepare the workers to rule, Bogdanov grew increasingly apprehensive about the radicalisation of the workers' movement in Russia between February and October because it pointed to the seizure of power by a working class not yet endowed with a well-formed proletarian culture; a clear sign that Russian Social Democrats had failed to work for the proletariat's complete ideological transformation as an indispensable precondition for socialism. And Russian Social Democrats were still, in 1917, not working for the working class' ideological demystification. Instead, they were engaged in 'some kind of strange scholasticism' which excluded 'all breadth and independence of thought', Bogdanov complained. Indeed, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks were not 'conscious socialists' at all because they were ignorant of the 'economic and historical foundations of Social-Democratic teachings'.²²

As a result of the failure of the socialist intelligentsia to exercise a tutelary role in the workers' movement, Bogdanov logically denied the legitimacy of a number of important workers' demands, or objected to their practical realisation. Specifically, he opposed the implementation of the eight-hour day; he had a very low opinion of the factory-committees because so many ordinary workers and so few 'experts' ran them; he denied that the working class possessed 'clear socialist consciousness'; and once again, as in 1905, counterposed a Social-Democratic party of the 'European type' to the Soviet.²³ In sum, the workers were not yet ready for socialism in Russia – or anywhere else, for that matter – until they had been ideologically prepared by the 'scientific and technical intelligentsia'.²⁴

21. Sochor 1988, pp. 93–4 and 97.

22. Bogdanov 1917a.

23. Bogdanov 1917b, p. 14.

24. Bogdanov 1917c.

Chapter Eight

Marxism, Science, Materialism: Toward A Deeper Appreciation of the 1908–9 Philosophical Debate in Russian Social Democracy

A voluminous literature of uneven quality exists in the West on the philosophical controversy that erupted in 1909 between Lenin and the ‘Machists’, much of it naturally centred on Lenin’s written intervention, *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*.¹ Unfortunately, the substantive issues over which Russian Social Democrats disagreed, and the reasons for this disagreement, are still not easily grasped. Most historians and philosophers have been less concerned to present both sides of the debate convincingly as they have been to take up sides within it and to ‘do combat with a point of view’;² Lenin’s point of view above all. My purpose therefore is to present the

1. See Sochor 1988; Wolfe 1964; Service 1985; Williams 1986; Kolakowski 1978; DeGeorge 1966; Kelly 1981; Jordan 1967; Wetter 1958; Ballestrem 1969; Read 1979; Joravsky 1961; Copleston 1986; Harding 1977; Bakhurst 1991.

2. Graham 1966, p. 418. Joravsky, Bakhurst, and Copleston do not belong to the ‘Lenin-bashing’ tradition, though their accounts are not exempt from problems of a different kind. Soviet interpreters, for their part, were too busy trying to prove the existence of a ‘Leninist stage’ in the development of ‘Marxist philosophy’ that they completely overlooked Lenin’s own, infinitely more modest claims, regarding his philosophical intervention. As part of the ‘new thinking’ in the Soviet Union, this hagiography has come under attack; in the theoretical and political journal of the Central Committee of the CPSU no less. See Volodin 1990. However, Gorbachev’s July 1991 declaration that Marxism itself was no longer relevant to the contemporary world may have overridden Volodin’s critique of the Stalinist, Khrushchevite and Brezhnevite schools of falsification and excess, and his plea to maintain a sense of proportion in assessing Lenin’s contribution to Marxism. [Events have since confirmed this forecast. The ersatz religion of ‘Marxism-Leninism,’ along with all ‘stages’ of its ‘development,’ has been officially and unceremoniously swept aside to make room for the real thing, the old-time religion of Russian Orthodoxy].

philosophical dispute between the 'Machists' and Lenin in a new light simply by reconstructing the arguments on each side – especially Lenin's side – as clearly and as persuasively as possible. Along the way, and in concluding remarks, I assess some common misconceptions regarding certain important aspects of Lenin's position.

Conventional scholarship treats Lenin's philosophical text as strictly symptomatic of the political context; an epiphenomenon of extant factional politics within the Bolshevik wing of the RSDLP. On this view, Lenin used and abused philosophy for adventitious political purposes by intruding upon his philosophical discourse the political struggle he was conducting against Alexander Bogdanov, leader of the 'left Bolsheviks'. More broadly, interpreters generally agree that Lenin's politically motivated interest in philosophy clashed with genuine philosophical reflection. Lenin was 'too absorbed with immediate polemical objectives to treat theoretical constructs with anything but manipulative intent'³ so that his sortie into philosophy was ill fated, a 'catastrophe'.⁴ Unfortunately, this general characterisation of Lenin's intervention fails to grasp its essential contours.

To begin with, Lenin could not have written *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* to defend the Bolsheviks against 'Machist' attack because the 'Machists' were attacking G.V. Plekhanov, not the Bolsheviks or their leader. Plekhanov was the quasi-official philosopher of European Social Democracy who had broken politically with Lenin and the Bolsheviks long before 1909. Moreover, since most interpreters think that Lenin wrote his book primarily to destroy Bogdanov politically, using philosophy as a cover, they overlook the fact that Lenin achieved this aim elsewhere, at party-conferences, in party-resolutions, and in the party-press where several lengthy articles openly hostile to Bogdanov and the 'left Bolsheviks' were published free of philosophical camouflage or subterfuge. Most directly to the point, with respect to the view that Lenin wrote *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* against Bogdanov, what are we to conclude from the 'quite astonishing' evidence highlighted by one scholar, Ballestrem, that Lenin wrote 'only three relatively short sections' – 'altogether

3. Harding 1977, p. 2. Harding criticises historians for treating Lenin's theoretical works in this manner. Yet, curiously, with respect to Lenin's philosophical intervention, Harding adopts the very approach he criticises: 'Lenin's objective in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* was essentially practical rather than philosophical' Harding writes, because Lenin was less concerned to show the falsity of his opponents' views, as he was to associate these views with incorrect politics. This work therefore 'bears the imprint of the context in which it was written' from 'first to last' and has a mostly instrumental or functional significance. pp. 278–9.

4. Ballestrem 1969, p. 283.

23 pages of a total of almost 400 pages' – 'explicitly' against Bogdanov.⁵ This 'astonishing' evidence alone should raise doubts that considerations of narrow factional advantage were paramount in Lenin's decision to write his study. Finally, Lenin's book does not bear the imprint 'RSDLP'. The book was not an official party-publication, and neither were the published interventions of the other participants in the debate.

I do not intend to polemicise at length against Lenin's ambition to unite philosophical and political concerns but will simply show how he tried to draw out the broadest possible implications of an 'unorthodox' philosophical outlook for the practice of science and politics. For Lenin was above all concerned with the workers' movement and with helping that movement to develop fruitfully, and this concern stimulated Lenin to respond to the arguments of the 'Machists' by advancing some of his own. Revolutionaries in those days valued intellectual integrity, especially in Russia, where most intellectuals who made a revolutionary-political commitment did so for strictly ideological, non-careerist motives: in a country lacking basic democratic rights and freedoms, such commitments all too-easily led to prison and exile, and worse.

The debate, though contemporaneous with massive repression of the workers' movement in Russia and consequent loss of influence by the RSDLP over it, was relatively autonomous from political disputes concurrently taking place among Russian Social Democrats, and the participants – except Bogdanov – made little serious effort to correlate factional political affiliation to philosophical outlook. The positions defended in the sphere of epistemology could not be directly read into – or from – positions defended in the domain of political practice, although Plekhanov and his understudies, A.M. Deborin and L. Axelrod (Ortodoks), did hint darkly at a link between 'Machist' philosophy and Bolshevik politics. I examine the philosophical discussion apart from its relationship to factional politics in the RSDLP.⁶

The debate in philosophy: an overview

The discussion had originated within the natural-scientific community around the epistemological significance of fresh discoveries made in physics, a sphere normally well beyond the political horizons of the Social-Democratic movement, in Russia or elsewhere. Speaking very broadly, some scientists

5. Ballestrem 1969, pp. 292–3.

6. I examine the complex interrelationships between philosophical theory and political practice in Chapter Nine.

and philosophers held that the revolution in physics at the beginning of the new century demanded a revolutionary rethinking of the epistemological presuppositions of science. Until the turn of the century, all scientists held a strictly Newtonian view of nature's workings. However, great discoveries had called into question the framework principles of the Newtonian view. The discovery of radium had undermined the principle of the conservation of energy; the detection of electrons had called into question the principle of the conservation of mass. The result was 'a general debacle of principles'⁷ forcing a fundamental revision of the conceptual basis on which the scientific description of nature had until now rested. The participants in the debate agreed that the rise and demise of scientific theories or paradigms characterised the development of science, but they had yet to come to a meeting of minds over what new basic ideas were to replace the old ones. This unsettled and unsettling state of affairs led some scientists and philosophers to call for a philosophical reappraisal of scientific theory and its relationship to the world it sought to explain.

One school of philosophers and philosophically minded scientists theorised from the recent revolution in physics that nature had no nature of its own. Nature's periodically transformed *modus operandi*, they argued, reflected only scientists' periodic re-conceptualisation of it because they alone generated those theoretical constructs by and through which knowledge was achieved. Beyond these mind-dependent constructs, nothing could be known about the world; some even expressed philosophical doubts as to its very existence. Scientific theories about the world were heuristic devices, theoretical 'conventions' created by man's subjective quest for order and 'harmony' in nature. The world in itself or outside the cognising subject had forever to remain beyond the grasp of knowledge. It was not 'nature that imposes on us the concepts of space and time', as was once thought, 'but we who impose them on nature'.⁸ The physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach attacked the materialist doctrine theorising the existence of an objective material world independent of consciousness and knowable by consciousness, because this view could not provide a philosophically satisfactory account of science, of its procedures and purposes. The 'Machists' in Russian Social Democracy thus belonged to what most historians of philosophy designate the neo-Kantian tradition. Lenin dubbed this the idealist tradition.⁹

7. Poincaré 1927, p. 200.

8. Poincaré 1927, pp. 7, 10, 6.

9. The works of Mach's Russian followers include Bogdanov 1908; Lunacharsky, Gelfond, Bazarov, Yushkevich, Suvorov, Berman and Bogdanov 1908; Berman 1908; Valentinov 1908; Yushkevich, 1908; Bogdanov, Bazarov, Lunacharsky and Gorky 1909.

According to Lenin and other adherents of a competing school of philosophy, scientific theories were validated by the assessment of whether they truly reflected the world. Such assessment was possible only if the world was external to and independent of scientific theory. For this school, succeeding theories achieved ever more profound, comprehensive and precise knowledge of an objectively existing material world, superseding theories that experiment and observation, and the interpretation thereof, had shown to be less profound, less comprehensive and less precise. Progress in knowledge of the world distinguished the development of science. Speaking very broadly, most historians of philosophy call this epistemological appraisal of science 'realism'. Lenin belonged to the realist school, although he preferred to call it the materialist school.¹⁰

The 'Machist' critique of materialism

Marx had criticised the materialists of his day, Feuerbach notably, for conceiving 'reality, sensuousness... only in the form of the object or of contemplation but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively'.¹¹ Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach' served as the avowed¹² or implied point of departure for the philosophical reflections of the Marxist 'Machists'.

According to Bazarov, nature was not given to us as a 'single connected whole. The unity of the world was not a precondition of creative cognition, but its task'.¹³ 'Objects are "created" for our consciousness only in the creative act of cognition. All that is given is, simultaneously, created'. 'Sense-perception

10. The riposte to the adherents of Mach in Russian Social Democracy came principally from Lenin 1964. Joining Lenin were Plekhanov 1976, Deborin 1908, and Axelrod 1909. For the purposes of this argument, I take materialism to mean *realism*, which describes the epistemological position Lenin defended. According to one authority, realism only asserts the independence of reality from consciousness and that the nature of reality is knowable. Materialism goes further by adding an ontological claim regarding the object of thought, 'all reality is ultimately material in nature', whereas realism makes no particular claim regarding the nature of the world beyond the general or abstract claim that it is knowable and self-subsistent. Sayers 1985, pp. xiv–xv. DeGeorge confirms that 'All the arguments which Lenin uses to defend materialism are *in fact* arguments for realism'. If 'conclusive they would at best prove epistemological realism'. DeGeorge 1966, pp. 149, 151 (emphasis added). Regrettably, DeGeorge declined to examine the substance of Lenin's defence of realism and appraise how 'conclusive' it was, preferring instead repeatedly to rake Lenin over the coals for mislabelling his (Lenin's) defence of realism a defence of materialism. I believe Lenin did not use the precise epistemological term for his position largely because the Marxist tradition is not an epistemological one.

11. Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, London, 1975, Volume 5, p. 6.

12. Bogdanov 1909b, pp. 125–6.

13. Bazarov 1909, p. 38.

is the reality existing outside us'.¹⁴ For Bazarov, every idea was a 'cognitive construction', a 'method for solving a whole series of cognitive problems'.¹⁵ When sense-perception was worked up into theory, every theory became 'equally true within its parameters' and, thus, incommensurable with any other theory.¹⁶

Gelfond reiterated Bazarov's conclusion that hypotheses in the rationalist sense founded all science. Scientific knowledge was symbolic, he stated, and the truths of the sciences were only 'symbols with whose help we strive to give a simplified and generalised description of observed relations between things. But symbols, obviously, have little in common with the world of concrete things, or with the concrete relations between things. They are only means, working hypotheses'.¹⁷

For Bogdanov, too, the world itself or outside the subject's 'experience' was unstructured, a 'chaos of elements' that existed for us only when it had been 'cognitively organised' or ordered in a meaningful way.¹⁸ The 'social coordination' or, more plainly, general acceptance of ideas generated in the experience of each individual conferred truth to theories about experience.¹⁹ Such theories possessed no validity beyond the socially organised experience of humanity. The laws of nature did not inhere in nature but were only ways of intellectually organising the world, methods of cognitively orienting human beings in the chaotic 'flow of experience'.²⁰ Truth was an 'organising form of experience',²¹ and Bogdanov specifically understood 'reality, the objective world' in terms of the labour of humanity that fashioned it.²² The experience of human labour outside society was unorganised and 'what is not organised cannot be experienced'.²³ However, the 'collective labour of humanity' had 'immeasurably enriched' the world of experience by ordering it. Thanks to social labour, 'the world of experience has been and continues to crystallise out of chaos'.²⁴ The world was what we made it to be.

14. Bazarov 1909, p. 65.

15. Bazarov 1909, p. 47.

16. Bazarov 1909, p. 38.

17. Gelfond 1908, p. 287.

18. Bogdanov 1906, pp. xxxviii, xxxii.

19. 'For a wide circle of backward Russian peasants, sprites and hobgoblins represent a living reality which is understood as a phenomenon of the physical world'. Therefore, sprites and hobgoblins possess 'objectivity'. Bogdanov 1913, p. 26.

20. Bogdanov 1909b, pp. 46, 93.

21. Bogdanov 1906, p. ix.

22. Bogdanov 1909b, p. 125.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Bogdanov 1906, pp. xxxiii–xxxiv.

The 'Machists' generally concluded that the traditional-materialist view – defended *inter alia* by Plekhanov, who had studied the philosophical aspects of Marxism closely – that nature could exist as an object alone, apart from and independently of the subject, whether thought, sensation, practice, perception, experience or any other term used to describe the activity of the subject, was neither right nor wrong but meaningless. All dismissed the cardinal notion of the materialists that 'matter' or the totality of things existed 'in itself' or outside the cognising subject. To treat this notion as representing something existing was flagrantly 'non-dialectical',²⁵ for one could not know anything of something that was not an object of the cognising subject, including whether that something existed or not. Being little more than another word for Kant's noumenon or the unknowable thing-in-itself, matter was a metaphysical notion because it was not tied to the experience of the cognising subject. In an epistemological sense, matter independent from experience did not exist.²⁶ The 'empiricists', Bogdanov admonished, 'correctly taught that 'only the perceptible exists'.²⁷ What the relationship of the world was *to* our representation of it in thought could not meaningfully be thought since that relationship, by definition, lay outside any representation. This line of reasoning, in part self-consciously inspired by Marx, summarily expressed the Russian 'Machists' criticism of the materialist doctrine.

From their interpretation of Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach' and the revolution in physics, then, the Marxist 'Machists' drew the general epistemological conclusion that all understanding of the world was nothing but the product of human practice, indeed – and speaking very strictly – that the world was itself an aspect of human practice, entirely reducible to it.

Lenin's critique of 'Machism': introduction

The panoply of arguments giving unity, direction and purpose to *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* revolved around developing and defending the fundamental thesis that materialism alone provided an adequate philosophical foundation to science, to the exclusion of any other foundation, *tertium non datur*. Lenin set out to show that, by collectively forsaking the true philosophical premise of science, the 'Machists' had involuntarily provided a philosophical basis for non-scientific worldviews. In rejecting the uniquely materialist foundations of scientific modes of thought, the 'Machists' could

25. Bogdanov 1906, p. xi.

26. Bogdanov 1906, p. xxxvi.

27. Bogdanov 1910b, p. 170.

not philosophically regard science as *the* paradigm of knowledge, only as *a* paradigm of knowledge, one among many. Lenin drew out the anti-scientific implications of the multiple-paradigms-of-knowledge theory underpinning ‘Machist’ philosophical reasoning. He tried to show that the regulating principle of ‘Machist’ epistemology was so devised as to smudge over the distinction between the real knowledge yielded by science, and the false or illusory knowledge of metaphysics, of religion. For, if theories of the world were validated by criteria *other* than by assessment of whether they correctly reflected the nature of the world, if truth was merely an organising form of experience, then the ‘Machists’ could not logically close the door to the ‘organising forms’ of religious experience and *their* ‘truths’ – ‘itself an admission of the fundamental premise of clericalism’.²⁸ The ‘Machists’ were philosophically casual regarding the epistemological difference between scientific ideas and theological ideas. Indeed, this lack of philosophical discrimination was disturbingly evident in the charitable equanimity of the Russian ‘Machists’ toward the overt ‘God-building’ ideology of Anatoly Lunacharsky and Maxim Gorky.²⁹

I should stress that Lenin systematically refused on philosophical grounds to assess and evaluate any particular scientific theory, Marxism included, in order to bring out a feature common to all of them that had important epistemological implications for the thesis he was defending. Interested ‘exclusively’ in the relationship between thought and being, subject and object,³⁰ Lenin *directly* defended realism or epistemological materialism, not ‘Marxist’³¹ materialism let alone ‘orthodox Marxism’,³² as is traditionally asserted. Accordingly, Lenin distinguished his work from the Marxist tradition by noting that Marx and Engels had developed a materialist conception of history, a ‘*historical* materialism’, whereas he, Lenin, was about to expound a ‘materialist epistemology’, a ‘*historical materialism*’.³³

Lenin’s argument

Lenin opened his argument against the ‘Machists’ by agreeing with them that recent revolutionary advances in scientific knowledge had profoundly shaken the traditional Newtonian view of the world. But they were wrong

28. Lenin 1964, p. 112.

29. For one perspective on Lunacharsky and Gorky, see Read 1979, Chapter 3, ‘Religious Revolutionaries’.

30. Lenin 1964, p. 240.

31. Copleston 1986, p. 292.

32. Williams 1986, p. 138.

33. Lenin 1964, p. 319.

to base a theory of knowledge exclusively on the relativity and historicity of knowledge brought to light by these undoubted achievements. To express scepticism about the 'existence of things outside our sensations, perceptions, ideas' simply because new discoveries in physics had reopened the 'question of the criterion of correctness of our ideas of "these things themselves"' was to make no distinction between the criterion of truth on the one hand, and the objectivity of truth on the other.³⁴ Lenin freely admitted that criteria of truth were doubtless historically relative, conditional. The recent revolution in physics had shown absolutely and unconditionally that 'all boundaries in nature are conditional, relative, movable'. Scientists had pushed the frontier of knowledge far beyond what they had previously thought possible, and it expressed a much further 'approximation of our mind toward knowledge of matter'.³⁵ Yet it did not follow from this scientific revolution that the objectivity of truth, its independence from the subject, was also historically conditioned, relative, indeed, revolutionised and overturned. To alter the epistemological relation between subject and object just because the subject had discovered new properties about the object was to commit a category-mistake, to confound epistemology with ontology.³⁶ Lenin insisted throughout that there could be approximate knowledge of the properties of objects existing independently of thinking subjectivity without the existence of these objects being dependent on their being known, and this truth defined what a materialist epistemology was. Lenin rejected as misconceived all attempts to historicise materialist epistemology, emphasising that all theories aspiring to be scientific had a materialist epistemic logic, and that materialists affirmed the externality of being in relation to thought, of object in relation to subject. The 'sole "property" of matter with whose recognition philosophical materialism is bound up with is the property of *being an objective reality*, of existing outside the mind'.³⁷ Man's cognitive faculties copied, photographed

34. Lenin 1964, p. 99.

35. Lenin 1964, p. 269.

36. Lenin 1964, pp. 122–3. Ballestrem conceded that 'some' empiriocritics 'ontologised their theory of knowledge'. This caused 'confusion' because in arguing that the world 'could only exist as complexes of *sense data*' the 'Machists' 'had to admit to the difficulty as to how the world could have existed at a time when no mind and no human experience existed, because there were no men'. Ballestrem 1969, p. 296. In trying to save Bogdanov in particular from solipsism, Ballestrem missed the point, for the empirio critics did not admit the 'difficulty' Ballestrem alluded to because they did not distinguish between 'sense-data' and the 'world'. Denying this point or the feasibility of this distinction was what their philosophy was all about, as both Lenin and the empirio critics recognised.

37. Lenin 1964, p. 248.

and reflected this objective reality.³⁸ But a materialist epistemology said nothing specific about the structure of the world, the way it developed, or what it was made of. These ontological questions were properly asked of the scientist, not of the philosopher, for scientists alone studied the world to discover its manifold properties and features by means of observation and experiment.

Pursuing his argument, Lenin also agreed with the ‘Machists’ that the formation of knowledge was undoubtedly a product of observation, experiment and interpretation carried out by the subject and, in this sense, the ‘Machists’ were quite correct to stipulate that the world could be known only through human activity. The revolution in physics had not fallen from the skies. Nevertheless, the known world was not reducible to the product of that activity. For what made human activity *itself* subject to testing, to independent observational and experimental controls, was precisely the world’s irreducibility to practice or to the comprehension of that practice. The ‘correspondence between our ideas and the objective nature of the things we perceive’ could be progressively established in and through practice only when reality was external to practice.³⁹ If the world was reduced to human practice and the comprehension of that practice alone, then religious and scientific practices, and the comprehension thereof, both yielded equivalent knowledge of the world and there was no reason to prefer one form of knowledge over another. Lenin predicated the epistemological distinction between science and religion on human activity not being the sole reality.

Marx had correctly criticised Feuerbach and other materialists for their exclusive focus on nature as the sole legitimate object of social-scientific inquiry, Lenin noted, but the ‘Machists’ were committing Feuerbach’s mistake in reverse by recognising the activity of man *alone* as worthy of investigation. By characterising human activity as absolute and self-sufficient, a totality that excluded nothing, the ‘Machists’ necessarily abolished all genuine objectivity, Lenin reasoned. As objectivity itself became an internal moment of an all-inclusive human activity, the ‘Machists’ rendered all distinctions between objects – including that between subject and object – purely subjective. They regarded the objects of scientific investigation as fixed instantiations of particular cognitive operations by the subject. The actual existence of objects apart from these cognitive operations was not determinable. By extension, Lenin continued, the ‘Machists’ regarded nature as the instantiation of human activity in the aggregate. The actual existence of nature apart from that activity was

38. Lenin 1964, p. 116.

39. Lenin 1964, p. 126.

not determinable. Nature, then, was ‘not taken as the *immediately* given, as the starting point of epistemology’. Not being given a ‘genuine primacy’, nature therefore could only be ‘deduced’ from something operating, necessarily, ‘*outside* nature’. While the ‘Machists’ did eventually reach nature, they only did so in a roundabout way, indirectly, via cognitive ‘*abstractions*’ produced by the subject. ‘[P]lain language’ called this productive subject God, philosophical language called it ‘practice’, ‘experience’, ‘Universal Spirit’, ‘Absolute Idea’, ‘Universal Self’, ‘World Will’.⁴⁰ Lenin dismissed these ‘monistic’ categories, for behind the variegated nomenclature was the recurring idealist notion that the mind introduced discontinuities or distinctions in experience to produce not only the determinate object in thought, but the real object as well since, within this ‘Machist’-created totality of reason, ‘objects of knowledge’ could not be meaningfully distinguished from ‘real objects’.⁴¹

Given the ‘Machist’ premise of an indistinct unity or identity of subject and object within human activity conceived as the only reality – because it was a totality – the ‘Machists’ judged the rationale for adopting or discarding theories about how ‘objects’ within that totality behaved in a variety of ways: one theory might possess greater coherence of thought, another greater ‘economy’ of thought, or still another greater ‘unity’ of thought.⁴² But Lenin insisted that the ‘Machists’ could not remain true to their philosophy if they assessed any theory in terms of the characteristics and properties that belonged to the object and were really imaged by the subject, and those that were only imagined by the subject and belonged to it alone. The logic of the ‘Machist’ position was quite clear: it regarded truly objective characteristics and properties as lying outside the experience of the subject, and as therefore inaccessible to it. And so, the ‘Machists’ philosophically precluded a materialist verification of theories, i.e., by assessment of whether they truly reflected these characteristics and properties.

Philosophically to deny the conceptual meaningfulness of a reality outside the mind, Lenin believed, meant that the ‘Machists’ could draw no philosophically justified distinction between scientific thought and religious thought: both were modes of thought, ways of making sense of the world. While the ‘Machists’ did make such a distinction – Bogdanov, for instance, ‘*emphatically*’ repudiated religion⁴³ – the distinction could nevertheless not be *justified* in terms of the ‘Machists’, philosophy, by appeal to its epistemological

40. Lenin 1964, p. 214.

41. Here I borrow the terms ‘real object’ and ‘objects of knowledge’ from Althusser.

42. Lenin 1964, pp. 156–60.

43. Lenin 1964, p. 216.

principles. This was a critical point for Lenin, and he made it repeatedly because, although the 'Machists' overtly embraced science, their philosophical standpoint covertly undermined it by conferring the legitimacy of science to theology.⁴⁴

In Lenin's view, the history of science implicitly proved the truth of materialism. Scientists compared their theories of the world to the world and chose which most fully – not absolutely and for eternity – reflected the objective characteristics of that world. The overwhelming majority of scientists compared and chose without giving a full philosophical account of their scientific practice. In substituting one theory for another, they sought to make them more dependent on the world by achieving a better fit or truer reflection of nature. Nature possessed a nature of its own, and since natural scientists presupposed this independent nature their materialism was natural, a matter of course.⁴⁵ At the same time, Lenin periodically remarked that, in practice, scientists could never reach the goal of completely according the concept of the object to the object. Bringing the concept *into* correspondence with its object was a never-ending task owing to the 'inexhaustibility and infinity of the object'.⁴⁶ However, the achievement of 'objective truth' through successive approximations, asymptotically, was '*nothing else than the existence of objects truly reflected by thinking*'.⁴⁷

The philosophical account of science and of scientific activity given by 'Machism' did not harmonise with what scientists did in practice, in Lenin's view. The 'Machists' obliterated the incompatibility of science and religion because they had no principled, philosophical grounds to distinguish the two. 'Machist' accounts of science therefore potentially harmonised with accounts of activities incompatible with science. The implicitly anti-scientific thrust of 'Machist' philosophy resulting from its faulty epistemological principles had already been made explicit, and realised in practice by one of their own, Lunacharsky. Had any Russian 'Machist' publicly disowned the 'downright fideism' and 'God-building' of their fellow Social Democrat and 'Machist', who saw in Marxism the contemporary realisation of religion? Had any one of them ever openly and clearly rebuked Lunacharsky's outrageous characterisation of Marx's work as a 'religious atheism' that 'deified the higher human potentialities'?⁴⁸ As none had forthrightly distanced themselves from such fideist notions, Lenin accused the 'Machists' of playing an 'objective,

44. Lenin 1964, p. 112.

45. Lenin 1964, p. 336.

46. Lenin 1964, p. 250.

47. Lenin 1964, p. 90.

48. Lenin 1964, pp. 329, 325; Cf. Lunacharsky 1908b, pp. 156, 159.

class role in rendering faithful service to' Lunacharsky and other fideists 'in their struggle against materialism in general and historical materialism' in particular.⁴⁹ That the 'Machists' should remain piously silent about Lunacharsky's open descent into rank religiosity was '*in itself* servility to fideism', Lenin protested.⁵⁰ They were not silent by chance because the 'Machists' denied, on principle, the existence of an objective measure or model against which to evaluate such notions materialistically, i.e., scientifically. The empiriocritics intended to keep abreast of developments in science and philosophy of science. Yet, independently of this laudable intention, they were encouraging a philosophical climate hostile to science, Lenin concluded.

Marxism and materialism

Lenin spelled out the implications of his critique in the sphere of the social sciences – and therefore of politics – in the last chapter of his work, 'Empiriocriticism and Historical Materialism'. Lenin pursued the same line of reasoning. Society, like nature, possessed a nature of its own. Historical materialism, Marxism, was an objective science like any other, distinguished only by the specific character of its object, society, this science had knowledgeably to reflect. Lenin insisted that Marx had established the '*objective* logic' of modern economic development 'in its general and fundamental features'⁵¹ and that the development of 'all capitalist countries in the last few decades' had confirmed the 'objective truth' of Marx's theory of capitalism, making Marx's theory the most satisfactory account, superior to any other contemporaneous account.⁵² Thanks to Marx, Social Democrats could politically 'adapt to' the objective logic of development of the capitalist mode of production their 'social consciousness and the consciousness of the advanced classes of all capitalist countries in as definite, clear and critical a fashion as

49. Lenin 1964, p. 347. Lunacharsky characterised Marx's oeuvre as the 'fifth great religion formulated by Judaism'. Lunacharsky 1908a, p. 145. The future Commissar of Enlightenment thought Bogdanov's philosophy provided a 'splendid soil' for the growth of 'socialist religious consciousness' among workers. Lunacharsky 1911, p. 372. Lenin said very little about Lunacharsky and nothing directly about Gorky in his philosophical treatise. In Lenin's view, though, the ideological attraction of the two men for each other and for 'Machism' was clear: what united them was their denial of materialism. According to Lenin, Gorky and Lunacharsky denied materialism principally from an 'aesthetic standpoint', while Bogdanov and his associates denied it from an epistemological standpoint. Lenin 1964, p. 325.

50. Lenin 1964, p. 333.

51. Lenin 1964, p. 314.

52. Lenin 1964, p. 129.

possible'.⁵³ Were Social Democrats to proceed subjectively, by imposing aims of their own on the life-processes of modern capitalist society, they would not be able to realise their goals and incur the charge of utopianism. But, since Marx's socialism was scientific, the political success of Social Democrats was everywhere and always predicated upon a clear and critical understanding of capitalist society's own logic of development because it suggested to Social-Democratic activists what their aims must be, and what means must be chosen to attain them. The conformity of Marx's theory to reality, Lenin wrote, materialistically established not only the conditions that determined the success or failure of Social-Democratic activity, it also made possible a scientific appraisal of that activity by putting it to the test of the workers' movement. As such, Marxist science acted as a regulator of the Social Democrats' political activity because it gave Social Democrats the freedom to do what was necessary. That is why the philosophical foundation of science, materialism, was always 'connected by an organic real bond' with the Marxist, Social-Democratic movement.⁵⁴

Summing up, Lenin declared the implications of 'Machist' philosophical views in public affairs reactionary. In directly rejecting materialism, the 'Machists' had indirectly rejected science, including Marxist science. Having lapsed into scepticism and agnosticism, they had lost every weapon against fideism and were now easy prey for the proponents of idealist, unscientific, worldviews. Indeed, Lenin concluded, 'god-builders', such as Lunacharsky (and Gorky), were only the first and the most obvious victims. In their *fuite en avant*, they had become outright metaphysicians, freely diffusing overtly mystical and obscurantist framework-notions in politics, philosophy, literature, ethics, and aesthetics.

A standard objection

Lenin minimised the subject's contribution – via theory and interpretation – to the formation of objective knowledge, on occasion writing as if appearances, directly given to the senses to be passively 'photographed' by the subject, exhausted reality. This is an empiricist or naïvely realist position and some have characterised Lenin as a Lockean *sic et simpliciter*, resurrecting, for good measure, Berkeley's criticism of Locke. But Locke was a 'dualist whose realism takes a dualist form...vulnerable to Berkeley's attack', writes a leading authority, while Lenin clearly and decisively rejected any 'dualistic, absolute,

53. Lenin 1964, p. 314.

54. Lenin 1962l, p. 75.

distinction between appearance and reality'. In this 'central respect', Lenin was opposed to Locke.⁵⁵ Lenin did not ultimately reduce and confine reality to appearances, beyond which there was nothing, or about which nothing could be known. Lenin called this reduction a 'mystification of materialism',⁵⁶ for the resulting philosophical depthlessness of reality rendered science superfluous. But science went beyond appearances in order to explain their...appearance.⁵⁷

Still, Lenin was bound to stress the passive, 'photographic' element in cognition given the one-sidedly activist-role assigned by his 'Machist' opponents to thought and reason in rendering form and meaning to experience. Bearing this circumstance in mind explains why Lenin had occasionally a tendency, especially evident in his discussion of Kant, to defend a direct or naïve realism, as opposed to a representational one. In Lenin's view, the 'Machists' were outflanking Kant 'on the right', from an idealist position, by retracting Kant's sole 'concession' to materialism, the existence of things-in-themselves. When Lenin criticised the 'Machists' *through* Kant, he did so from the 'left', from a naïvely realist position so that Lenin inevitably emphasised *in* Kant the existence of things-in-themselves which, of course, was not *Kant's* emphasis.⁵⁸ Because the 'Machists' privileged the subject's role in the formation of knowledge Lenin saw no need to similarly stress the active faculty of reason to create knowledge, and Ballestrem is quite right to state that, in this regard only, an 'implicit and never articulated theory of abstraction' is present in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*.⁵⁹ Clarifying epistemological issues for himself in *Philosophical Notebooks*, written in 1916, Lenin recognised fully the value of an 'intelligent idealism' broadly speaking for the development of an integral materialist epistemology. He did not, however, disown *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, and had the book reprinted in 1920.

Concluding remarks

Developing arguments for or against any particular scientific theory, whether in the social or natural sciences, was not a central objective for Lenin in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. The truth of any theory, including Marxist theory, could be properly argued only in a scientific treatise, not in a

55. Sayers 1985, pp. 9–11. Nevertheless, Jordan sought to render Lenin's position 'untenable' by 'confronting' Lenin-Locke with Berkeley. Jordan 1967, p. 213.

56. Lenin 1964, p. 59.

57. See, generally, pp. 54–61, 112–17 of Lenin's text.

58. On this point, see Lenin 1964, pp. 178–88.

59. Ballestrem 1969, p. 295.

philosophical treatise limited to establishing a general theory of truth. Lenin's broad generalisation with respect to all scientific theories was philosophical. In Marxist science, for example, Marx had not conceptually introduced, or constructed, or organised the developmental pattern of the capitalist mode of production, only conceptually discovered and laid it bare. Some might legitimately question whether Marx's work had correctly reflected the nature of modern capitalist society, its long-term developmental trends. This was an ontological question to which scientists alone, not philosophers could provide an answer, however tentative and provisional. Of itself, philosophical materialism could not secure the truth of Marxist theory because materialism *qua* materialism could not generate scientific argument. However, the arguments that did establish the truth of Marxism were scientific, and therefore materialist. To assess the validity of Marxism this way meant that there was an unstated materialist-epistemological basis for scientific discussion. But, in Lenin's view – and this was crucial to him – no such basis existed for a scientific interchange with the 'Machists'. While he recognised that no 'Machist' in Russian Social-Democracy had ever doubted the scientific character of Marxism, anti-Marxists had done so indirectly, on philosophical grounds. Unfortunately, the 'Machists' could not convincingly rebuff the philosophical detractors of Marxism because they refused to anchor their defence of science generally and Marxism particularly in materialist philosophy. Lenin wrote *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* to establish that the relationship between science and Marxism was their common materialist epistemology. This was the epistemological lesson Lenin wanted the 'Machists' to assimilate. That is why he wrote the book.⁶⁰

For Lenin, 'matter' was a philosophical category, a label, denoting objective reality. Epistemologically, it implied '*nothing but* objective reality existing independently of the human mind and reflected by it'.⁶¹ Philosophical

60. Few interpreters grasp the interrelationships Lenin posited between Marxism, materialism, and science. 'Even if one were to accept Lenin's theory of truth, it would not follow that historical materialism' as a particular science 'is true in general'. DeGeorge 1966, p. 157. This is correct and Lenin was not saying anything different.

61. Lenin 1964, p. 249. Again, Carlsnaes raises a common objection to Lenin's reflection-theory, first made by Berkeley against Locke. Lenin's 'copy theory' is 'unverifiable' because we can 'perceive only the copies or reflections of things but never the things themselves; therefore it is impossible to compare our images of things with the things themselves, in which case we can never know if our copies are "true" or "false" or even if they are copies at all of objects existing independently of perception'. Carlsnaes 1981, p. 138. But, elsewhere in the same work, Carlsnaes highlighted the anti-scientific implications of this line of argument, noting that 'if one is persuaded by the arguments offered by T.S. Kuhn and especially P.K. Feyerabend' that the material of perception and observation worked up into 'paradigms' or 'theories' are 'incommensurable and therefore neither compatible nor comparable – then little can

materialism was not a discrete category of science or a discrete object of science; it was the epistemological condition for there *being* science, including Marxist science.

Lenin's partisanship

Beginning with Georg Lukács, and continuing with Louis Althusser, Leszek Kolakowski and others, a long line of Marxists, non-Marxists, and anti-Marxists has attributed to Lenin one or a combination of the following beliefs: a class-divided society can only be understood by the working class (or its 'representative', the party); the standpoint of the working class must be adopted before gaining access to the truth; materialism is the philosophy of the working class.⁶² While some of Lenin's polemical remarks are open to a class-reductionist understanding of basic trends in philosophy, his general position belied it. Lenin compared basic philosophical trends, materialism and idealism, to basic social classes, proletariat and bourgeoisie, to bring out a common relational aspect: the mutually antagonistic character of the related entities; social interests in one, and epistemological points of departure in the other. Lenin, however, never identified conflicting epistemological principles with conflicting class-interests. It was Bogdanov, not Lenin, who rooted scientific knowledge in class and thought that in class-divided societies science would be divided along class-lines. Only Bogdanov singled out class for special analysis because only he thought class had specially conditioning properties in the formation of knowledge, and he may well have been the original theorist of the putative existence of a 'proletarian' science of nature and society, antedating Lukács by a few years.⁶³

Lenin rejected an *a priori* partisanship in favour of the working class in the search for the truth. In Lenin's view, science operated according to 'class-independent standards of evidence and evaluation', making the truths of science valid for all, regardless of class.⁶⁴ The Marxists premised their political

be done since someone else's different conception of reality cannot be understood or explained except as a consequence of a process of conversion'. Carlsnaes concluded that one must then 'question the very existence of scientific development and science itself'. Carlsnaes p. 52. Lenin developed the same anti-scientific implications against the 'Machists'.

62. Lukács 1971; Althusser 1971; Kolakowski 1978.

63. Lukács acknowledged the positive intent of the 'Machist' project in 'What is Orthodox Marxism?' Lukács 1971, pp. 3-4.

64. Parekh 1982, p. 171. Here, Parekh is discussing why Marx never examined, or even claimed to have examined, capitalist society from the point of view of the working class. Parekh notes, *inter alia*, that 'if the thesis that society must be viewed from a class point of view is not an arbitrary assertion, it must be supported by reasons

partisanship on an impartial and objective understanding of capitalism, Lenin argued. Specifically, and to take the simplest example, the division of capitalist society into classes with opposed social interests was not a partisan war cry but Marx's (and not his alone) scientific insight into the actual nature of this society, and from which Social Democrats undoubtedly drew partisan political conclusions. Disproving those partisan conclusions required marshalling objective data to undermine or refute the objective analysis upon which these conclusions rested. Thus, in Lenin's view, Marxists had no need to extend their partisanship *to* science, *to* objective truth to pursue their political goals, as Alexander Bogdanov especially, believed. On the contrary, they could best champion the interests of the working class by being partisans *of* science, *of* objective truth. Being partisans of science, Marxists were consequently partisans of the philosophical foundation of science: materialism.

Lenin wrote *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* to convince and accordingly deployed arguments whose persuasiveness required no prior political commitment to Marxism or to the working class. Lenin distinguished philosophical materialism from Marxism, acknowledged and respected their distinctive discourses, and linked the two only in the last chapter of his work. Had he bound them from the very start, there would have been nothing for Lenin to unite and no book for him to write. In arguing the unitary character of materialism and Marxism, Lenin had recourse to a complex of arguments that was not peculiarly Marxist lest he beg the central question and take for granted what needed to be proved.

The reader can now assess the persuasiveness of Lenin's arguments. But, persuasive or not, these arguments were Lenin's.

which cannot themselves be grounded in a class point of view. One cannot say that the class is the basic social reality, or the only coherent epistemological subject, or that a particular class point of view is higher, without stepping outside the classes altogether and appealing to the class-independent standards of evidence and evaluation.' Parekh p. 171. Unfortunately, Parekh mistakenly included Lenin among those who held that only those adopting the cognitively superior standpoint of the working class could access the higher truths of working-class science on society.

Chapter Nine

Politics and Philosophy in Russian Social Democracy: Alexander Bogdanov and the Socio-Theoretical Foundations of *Vpered*

Introduction

In the aftermath of the defeat of the 1905 Revolution, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks struggled to determine the political direction of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour-Party. In 1909, a third tendency emerged, *Vpered*, led by its chief theoretician, Alexander Bogdanov. Bogdanov and the *Vperedists* opposed both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks on fundamental questions of the revolutionary movement. Bogdanov was also known as a prominent exponent of neo-Kantianism or 'Machism' in Russian Social Democracy and, along with other Social Democrats, had developed the epistemological implications of recent discoveries in the natural sciences for the social sciences and, thus, for Marxism. Lenin wrote *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* challenging his fellow Social Democrats' neo-Kantian philosophical standpoint.¹ Nevertheless, despite philosophical disagreement with Lenin, Bogdanov had collaborated closely with the philosophically 'orthodox'-Bolshevik leader between 1904 and 1908 because both men had agreed on the necessity of building the Party to bring 'from the outside' revolutionary consciousness to workers. However, the

1. I examine this debate in Chapter Eight.

experience of the 1905 Revolution convinced Lenin to revise sharply the theses of *What Is to Be Done?* on this point. That same experience, on the other hand, led Bogdanov energetically to reaffirm in 1909 his tutelary conception of the Party in the workers' movement.² In this chapter, I attempt to establish the nature and reasons for the tutelary role of the Party.

My methodological point of departure seeks to grasp Bogdanov's views in philosophy and political economy in relationship to his political practice, as exemplified by the formation of the *Vpered* group, because Bogdanov wanted to help workers contest the coming domination of capitalist society in Russia, specifically, the impersonal rule of the market and the attendant ideological mystification engendered by its operation: bourgeois ideology. Freeing workers' consciousness from the shackles of bourgeois ideology, if successfully accomplished by *Vpered*, would shorten the era of bourgeois ideological hegemony and hasten the transition to socialism. I shall argue that Bogdanov's variant of Mach's empiriocriticism – his 'empiriomonism' – furnished a philosophical basis for *Vpered's* strategy of educating workers politically by means of 'proletarian universities' run by RSDLP-intellectuals.³ In particular, Bogdanov's uniquely empiriomonistic interpretation of Marx's theory of commodity-fetishism provided the necessary social-theoretical link between his 'Machist' epistemological views, on the one hand, and the politics of 'proletarian culture' advocated by *Vpered*, on the other. Thanks to his special study of the political economy of bourgeois and proletarian ideology under capitalism, Bogdanov theorised an organic connection between his philosophical views and his affiliation to *Vpered*.

The political conjuncture

To show the nature of the connection between Bogdanov's philosophical ideas and his political project, a survey of the workers' movement is essential. For the *Vperedist* tendency did not merely provide a vehicle for Bogdanov's intellectual outlook; more generally, it also expressed, and magnified, certain aspects of working-class activity that came to the fore in the aftermath of the defeat of the 1905 Revolution.

Mass-strikes, the formation of Soviets and factory-committees – in short, collective forms of protest and organisation – had characterised the workers' movement at the zenith of its social power in 1905. The brutal suppression of the Moscow insurrection of December 1905 triggered a downward spiral in the

2. See Chapters Seven and Eight.

3. Bogdanov 1910, pp. 4–5.

combativity and morale of the working class. Workers adopted increasingly sectoralist strategies for survival as the focus of the labour-movement shifted from the complete destruction of tsarism to the formation of trade-unions. Stolypin's *coup d'état* of June 1907, outlawing trade-unions and implementing other repressive measures, dealt a further blow to workers. The bulk of the working class sank into apathy and indifference. Terrorised into abandoning revolutionary-political activity, workers left the RSDLP in droves.

The ever-diminishing number of workers who still felt the pulse of the 1905 Revolution progressively resorted to forms of organisation that would minimise conflict with the employers and the state or that would avoid such clashes altogether. Accordingly, the number of producer- and consumer-cooperatives grew sharply and became important in this period.⁴ Because workers made demands not on the employer or on the state but on fellow-workers, they were less susceptible to police-repression. Above all, cultural and educational clubs, particularly in St. Petersburg and Moscow, flourished as never before. This form of working-class activity, dating back to the 1880s, became prominent in this period of retreat because, like the cooperative movement, the clubs did not make political demands on the established order. Though the clubs stood on the periphery of politics, nonetheless many workers cherished them as 'the centre of their entire intellectual' lives, havens where they could systematically develop their 'world-view', as the St. Petersburg metalworkers' union newspaper, *Nadezhda*, put it.⁵ Sympathetic intellectuals, many in or close to Social Democracy, gave lectures and organised cultural activities. Tolerated by the authorities, the clubs multiplied and their nominal combined membership peaked in 1909 at 7,000. Meanwhile, and most expressive of the manifold directions various trends in the working class were taking at this juncture, organised membership in the RSDLP fell below 1,000, with no sign of a turnabout.

Amid this general and frightening rout, Bogdanov saw signs of forward movement precisely in the efflorescence of the workers' cultural clubs, where, Bogdanov thought, the most enlightened workers were already implementing the programme of 'proletarian culture', albeit haphazardly and inconsistently owing largely to the RSDLP's failure to capitalise fully on workers' desire for cultural advancement. Bogdanov set out to correct the RSDLP's strategic error of political perspective by founding *Vpered* in 1909. As Bogdanov now saw it, the Party had to make every effort to speed the formation of a

4. Pushkareva 1989, pp. 97–8.

5. Cited in Bonnell 1983, p. 332. I have drawn on Chapter Seven, 'Workers' Organizations in the Years of Repression, 1907–1911' for material on the workers' cultural movement.

complete Social-Democratic worldview by making workers conscious of the nature of the connection between their cultural/educational ventures on the one hand, and their social/economic undertakings on the other. Specifically, Bogdanov wanted workers to generalise intellectually the practical experience they were accumulating in the cooperative movement because the latter anticipated – although only on a local level and in an isolated way – the social cooperation of the working class in organising production and distribution as a whole: socialism. Bogdanov believed workers active in producer- and consumer-cooperatives would respond favourably to his political project because it would be relevant to their lives. Still, the significance of that activity was not self-evident and required complex interpretation by Bogdanov.

The political economy of bourgeois ideology

Bogdanov accorded enormous importance to the study of political economy, allotting the greatest number of course-hours to the subject in the curriculum of the 'Highest Party-School' organised by the Vperedists, first on the Isle of Capri and then in Bologna. The two schools were experimental precursors to the proletarian university and Bogdanov alone taught political economy in both. He was the expert in this domain, having recently supervised a Russian translation of Marx's *Capital* (published in 1909) and written numerous introductory works in the field.⁶

Bogdanov believed the proletarian and bourgeois ideologies were competing for hegemony in the capitalist society that was then emerging in Russia, and already dominant in Western Europe and America. These ideologies were the direct product and outcome of two different social conditions corresponding to the lived experience of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. In other words, the proletarian and bourgeois worldviews had a material-practical basis in the dual reality of modern capitalist society. The destruction of bourgeois society, within which both ideologies struggled for supremacy, required, as a first step, emancipating the working class from bourgeois ideology.

Bourgeois intellectuals, Bogdanov asserted, exclusively characterised society by anarchy of production and competition in the marketplace, where each individual looked after his own interest in competition with others. This reciprocal isolation and atomisation of the producers led to a Hobbesian state of war. Yet the result was not an annulment of particular individual interests and the negation of the general, social interest because mediating the mutual relations of individuals was the relationship each individual had

6. See Scherrer 1978 for a detailed account of Vperedist pedagogical activity.

to that relationship, that is, *to* the social network (the market), created by the totality of individuals atomistically pursuing their private interests. From the vantage-point of each individual taken singly, the social network appeared as something that posited itself for itself, independently of the sum-total of individuals that it linked together. This was the 'fetishised' outlook of bourgeois ideology popularised in Adam Smith's notion of a 'hidden hand' that systematically realised the interests of individuals, competing and exchanging in the marketplace. In an 'anarchical system of production,' Bogdanov noted, 'in the midst of the terrible struggle of interests, in the chaos of competition, the spontaneous forces of social existence, incarnated in the market, assert themselves above and beyond the individual. Powerless to master these forces in practice, the individual is equally powerless to understand them.'⁷

A 'distorted' understanding of society characterised a fetishistic outlook, Bogdanov wrote.⁸ It was the distorted view that the essential and defining property of social relationships, overriding or assimilating every other single attribute or quality they possessed, was their independence from and externality to any individual, what Bogdanov called their *objectivity*. For bourgeois ideologues – and they alone – commodity-production typified all societies (past and present), whereby individual actions to maximise self-interest (concretely, by maximising price/cost ratios in the market) were not coordinated with the actions of other individuals acting in an identically self-interested manner. Bogdanov averred that competition in the marketplace had historically generated a spontaneous pattern of development leading to unintended consequences for the sum-total of individuals caught up in the web of exchange: stock-market crashes, economic collapse, war, and famine.

Bogdanov's theme was familiar one to Marxists in key respects. Today, Marxists commonly call it alienation, the inability of the individual members of society to bring their own social processes of production under conscious control. When the products of labour assume the form of commodities, Marx wrote, 'the relationships between the producers, within which the social characteristics of their labours are manifested, take on the form of a social relation between the products of labour... a *relation* which exists *apart from* and *outside* the producers'. 'The mysterious character of the commodity form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence, it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a

7. Bogdanov 1909b, p. 60.

8. Bogdanov 1910b, p. 33.

social relation between objects'.⁹ As a result, commodity-production normally took place anarchically, without the knowledge, foresight, and action of the producers.

Extending Marx's concept of alienation to precapitalist social formations, Bogdanov saw an 'uninterrupted continuity' between the 'life-like idolatry' of natural economies and the 'abstract fetishism' of capitalist society, between the 'crudely material heavens' of medieval religious thought and the 'unknowable noumenal world' of modern bourgeois philosophy.¹⁰ According to Bogdanov, the medieval-religious thinker and the modern-bourgeois philosopher both grasped the objectivity of relationships, whether worldly or otherworldly, in such a way as to *exclude* the subject, man. The pre-bourgeois scholastic looked upon God's world in the same manner as the bourgeois philosopher grasped the noumenal world, or as the bourgeois economist perceived the world of the market, namely, as self-subsisting realities, positing themselves for themselves, independently of man. All conceptualised man as a predicate of the Spirit or Matter, a plaything of 'impersonal and incomprehensible' spiritual or material forces. Bogdanov developed this idea at great length in virtually all his writings.

Bogdanov denied and rejected, as did the empiriocritics generally, all 'dualistic' world-views, secular or religious, that posited the existence of worlds outside and beyond human activity. It mattered little to Bogdanov whether idealists and materialists conceived the philosophical hypostatisation of objectivity as Spirit and Matter respectively. To the ideologists of the bourgeoisie (and to Marxists influenced by them, such as Lenin and Plekhanov), the market appeared to enjoy an existence independent of man because the forces of social existence that acted there escaped conscious practical mastery. Bourgeois intellectuals represented these as objective forces. 'The mysteries and contradictions, the impersonal and incomprehensible forces that, in their totality, determine the fate of the individual at this stage of development', Bogdanov wrote, 'are condensed by the ideologists of the commodity world into impersonal and abstract divinities, into the Absolute of the metaphysicians'.¹¹

Marx, like Bogdanov after him, also drew an analogy between the 'misty realm' of religion and the 'world of commodities'. In religion, Marx commented, the products of men's minds appeared as autonomous figures 'endowed with a life of their own' which entered into relation with each other and with human beings. Likewise in the commodity-world. Here, the

9. Marx 1976, pp. 164–5. Emphasis added.

10. Bogdanov 1908c, p. 218.

11. *Ibid.*

products of 'men's hands' were endowed with a life of their own and entered into relations with one another and with other men because men's capacities to labour had themselves become commodities whose movements in the market were dictated by the operation of the market.¹²

Crucially, Marx at once pointed out the peculiar limitation of this analogy. After all, the gods could never enter on their own into relations with one another and with men because they owed their existence to men. Commodities, on the other hand, could and did enter into such relations on their own because workers owed their existence to them. Commodities were products of their labours, not of their brains; they had a material, not an ideal, existence. Furthermore, their movement on the market could and did dictate the movement of workers because labour had itself become a commodity: wage-labour. Marx commented on the epistemological peculiarity of this distinction:

The belated scientific *discovery* that the products of labour, in so far as they are values, are merely the material expressions of the human labour expended to produce them, marks an epoch in the history of mankind's development, but *by no means banishes the semblance of objectivity* possessed by the social characteristics of labour...[just] as the fact that the scientific dissection of the air into its component parts left the atmosphere itself unaltered in its physical configuration.¹³

Because the discovery that the 'characteristics of labour' were 'social' and 'objective' rather than cognitive and subjective, the discovery did nothing to alter or abolish the 'semblance of objectivity' that these characteristics possessed. It is precisely on this point that Bogdanov distinguished himself from Marx.

Bogdanov surpassed Marx's view and that of 'orthodox' Marxists by developing what he believed to be a more fully Marxist approach, a class-approach. Bogdanov removed the epistemological and historical limitations Marx placed on the analogy by *equating* fetishism/alienation with objectivity. To conceive society and nature, the object, as existing independently of the subject, man, was fetishistic. To think fetishistically meant to think the world was external to us. Objectivity was fetishism. Bogdanov further distinguished himself from Marx by asserting that in a class-divided society the reality of fetishism/objectivity differed according to class-position, whereas, in Marx, class-position had no bearing on the reality of alienation. For Bogdanov, objectivity

12. Marx 1976, p. 165.

13. Marx 1976, p. 167. Emphasis added.

possessed a 'semblance of reality' *only* among the 'ideologists of the commodity-world' because the sphere of the market and exchange circumscribed and limited the outlook of bourgeois intellectuals. Therefore, they founded the notion of objectivity separate from and independent of subjectivity. The class-position of bourgeois ideologues caused them to attribute a genuine reality to the gulf that separated subjective and objective spheres because the social relation of men could only appear to them as a relation between the products of men's labours endowed with self-movement. They could not help granting true objectivity to the object because, again, the commodity-world hemmed in and confined their mental horizons. It was otherwise with the outlook of workers.

The political economy of proletarian ideology

The workers' view of the world in the broadest possible sense of the term, i.e., the relationship between subject and object, was different because their world was different. Workers inhabited the world of production, a world founded on the fusion, through labour, of the object and subject in an undifferentiated 'monistic' whole. Situated at the heart of the productive processes of modern society, the working class alone recognised that society was nothing but the creation of the workers' collective labour, of the workers' physical and intellectual powers taken in their totality. Most directly to the point, behind the appearance of isolated competitive production and the reification of social relationships engendered by the operation of the market was the inner, cooperative essence of modern relations of production: the interdependence of workers arising from the *de facto* cooperation of workers through a social division of labour spanning the whole globe. Such interdependence was immediate and direct within each individual unit of production in the factory. In 1909, in the growing cooperative movement of Russia, the interdependence was also free and voluntary. In producer- and consumer-cooperatives the relation of workers to one another and to the products of their labour was as clear as day. It was 'conscious', 'comradely', and 'cooperative' Bogdanov repeated indefatigably. The labour of each worker represented the conscious individual application of the combined labour of the collective. The workers achieved their cooperation in a direct and 'comradely' way, via a plan of production and distribution. The network of cooperation did not exist outside the workers who were cooperating. And, so, hidden 'behind the outer shell of competition' on the market – which bourgeois intellectuals never ventured to penetrate – was 'cooperation' in the factory; behind the 'independent and unconscious linking of people to one another' that

so fascinated exponents of the bourgeois worldview, the workers' factory-'collective'.¹⁴ Thanks to their central position in the factory, workers were strategically placed to conceive the planned cooperation of a 'great collectivity' directly, i.e., before this cooperation took the fetishised form of the unplanned exchange of the products of their labour under capitalism.¹⁵ They possessed a natural aptitude for going beyond fetishised modes of thought, for transcending the objectified appearances of modern capitalist society that so mesmerised bourgeois thinkers because workers could see the relations between their labours for what they really were: direct relations between persons in their work. The organisation of production within the factory was socialism writ small.

A division of labour based on a definite plan daily generated superior productive powers. Through universal competition, artisanal modes of production were breaking up and giving way to industrial ones; mom-and-pop operations were yielding to giant factories. This concentration and centralisation of production was inexorably ousting the old social division of labour based on the producers' possession of the means of production and the unplanned exchange of their products of labour by a new planned division of labour embodied in the factory. The workers were therefore increasingly open to a superior, proletarian worldview based on this ever-expanding experience. The factory prepared them to execute their social-historical mission because it trained them to cooperate. It also created a 'general intelligence' among workers, enabling them to carry out their diverse productive functions thanks to modern machinery, and the systematic application of science and technology to production.¹⁶

I should note in passing that Bogdanov's fellow 'Machists' raised no objection to granting class a role in the social and historical conditioning of knowledge. As Marxists, they all agreed that class was an indubitable social and historical phenomenon. On the other hand, only Bogdanov singled out class for special analysis because only he thought class had specially conditioning properties in the formation of ideas. This class-determination of reason and perception distinguished Bogdanov's empiriomonism as a sociology of knowledge, and he may well have been the original theorist of class-science and class-philosophy, antedating Georg Lukács by a few years.¹⁷ Of course, Bogdanov agreed with the larger outlook of the empiriocritics, centred

14. Bogdanov 1910b, p. 114.

15. Bogdanov 1924, pp. 97–8.

16. Bogdanov 1911, p. 53.

17. Lukács acknowledged the positive intent of the 'Machist' project in *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács 1971, pp. 3–4.

as it was on the historicity and the social relativity of knowledge. But only Bogdanov looked upon class as forming a category apart. Although this did not transcend the broader framework of neo-Kantianism (of which empiri-omnism was a subset), it did supply Bogdanov's philosophical views with socially-determinate and therefore politically-actionable focus.

As noted, the growing factory-experience of workers formed the developing material-practical basis for them to achieve socialist consciousness and to elaborate a proletarian worldview. It also formed the basis for workers to assimilate and understand the philosophical premises of that world-view: empiri-omnism. The regulating idea of empiri-omnism – 'social being and social consciousness are, in the exact sense of the terms, identical'¹⁸ – expressed the relationship of the worker's activity to material production and to the production of social relationships. The working class was unconditionally responsible for continually producing and reproducing the conditions of its own existence directly, through the production of use-values in the labour-process, and indirectly, via the establishment of the cooperative interdependence of workers, i.e., society. Further, given that, in Bogdanov's view, nature itself was nothing but 'socially-organised experience',¹⁹ an internal moment of society, the cybernetics of the natural world were best understood in terms of the social organisation and movement of the working class' intellectual and physical powers taken in their totality. Consequently, the epistemological principles of empiri-omnism were 'Social-Democratic'.²⁰ Empiri-omnism was the appropriate 'collectivist philosophy' of the proletariat because the world of science, industry, and technology could not be meaningfully understood apart from the collective labour of the working class. The scientific-minded Bogdanov clothed his metaphysics of labour in epistemology. Bogdanov's thinkers-in-arms, Lunacharsky and Gorky, cut to the chase, did not bother much with the paraphernalia of science and epistemology, and gave it to their public straight: they deified labour.²¹

The worker's authentic reality, then, was comradely cooperation in the immediate process of production. On the other hand, the authentic reality of the bourgeois was the atomised competition of individuals in the market. Neither reality existed independently of one's class-position in society. Each class produced a world-view determined, immediately and directly, by its differentially lived experience. The lived experiences of the working class and of

18. Bogdanov 1904c, pp. 50–1.

19. Bogdanov 1906, p. 36.

20. Bogdanov 1906, p. xix.

21. For one perspective on these 'god-builders' as Lenin christened them, see Read 1979.

the bourgeoisie were incompatible and excluded one another. Life itself had shown them to be mutually exclusive: bourgeois ideology reigned supreme, exercising its undivided sway over the working class as a whole. But the proletarian ideology must dispute bourgeois ideology for supremacy. Hence the historical necessity of combating bourgeois ideology; hence the necessary existence of *Vpered*.

The supremacy of bourgeois ideology in the minds of the workers had dangerous epistemological ramifications, in Bogdanov's view, because it deluded workers into thinking that reality and its representation in thought were distinct, that thinking and doing, theory and practice, subject and object were separate. To Bogdanov, such fetishistic modes of thought, whether religious or secular, were inappropriate for workers because they were irrelevant to the workers' experience. So long as bourgeois ideology transfixed workers, no action could be commanded because this ideology hindered the workers' will to act by *objectifying* bourgeois-social relationships, placing them, so to speak, beyond the reach of workers. This 'Great Fetish', i.e., the objectivity of bourgeois society, had to be destroyed by transforming the minds of workers through education in proletarian universities run by RSDLP-intellectuals.²² Through such intellectual transformation, the Party would annihilate the cognitive bases of objectivity. Moreover, by re-establishing the general connection between workers' ideas and workers' activity into a 'monistic whole', workers would resume their movement toward socialism.

All things duly and calmly considered, Bogdanov recognised that, in practice, as a matter of common sense and simple fact, the working class had yet to elaborate an integral and well thought-out ideology of its own. As long as this unfortunate state of affairs obtained, workers were necessarily in the toils of bourgeois ideology, victims of bourgeois ideologists who imposed their own, market-based interpretation of society and thereby obscured and mystified the real organisation of the economy under capitalism. In sum, they elevated their partial, one-sided, class-based world-view of society and nature to universality. Bourgeois ideology, despite its scientific pretensions, was little more than 'religion in disguise'²³ because it did not correspond to the workers' experience. Above all, bourgeois-ideological deception was the basis for the creation of 'idols' and 'fetishes' and, ultimately, for misguided political action by workers. Bogdanov wanted to unmask, demystify this fetishism, and show workers, by education, that they already ran production and needed only to destroy the capitalist property-form, which existed

22. Hence the title of Bogdanov's seminal work: *Padenie velikogo fetishizma: krizis sovremennoi ideologii* (*The Downfall of a Great Fetish: The Crisis of Contemporary Ideology*).

23. Bogdanov 1910, p. 133.

only because the ideological expression of that form subjugated and enslaved workers' reasoning. Workers needed to cast off this ideological form and create their own through the systematic study of 'economic science' in proletarian universities:

Economic science studies real relations between people... [But] the doctrine of fetishism, for example, has nothing to do with it. It belongs to the science of ideology, of spiritual culture but not to economic science... [This doctrine] may play a role in the critique of economic doctrines, but then we are not talking about economic relations but about economic views, which are an ideological product.²⁴

The 'doctrine of fetishism' had nothing to do with 'real relations between people' because fetishism pertained to the spiritual culture of the bourgeoisie, not the economic science of the proletariat. Workers would bring their own social processes of production under their conscious control by first demystifying their consciousness, by understanding that the fetish of objectivity arose not out of the workers' material experience but out of the bourgeoisie's (super-)imposition of its objectivistic ideological discourse onto that experience.

Bogdanov expected that *Vpered* would meet with success in the working class (and therefore among Social Democrats) because he was convinced that workers would ultimately destroy the 'Great Fetish' thanks to their special insight on the true nature of bourgeois society; insight that merely needed to be awakened and valorised politically. It was in light of these general perspectives that Bogdanov attacked Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1909 for not publishing a single book or brochure to that end. The 'Highest Party-School on the Isle of Capri' had to remedy this unconscionable state of affairs by forming a 'strong and influential nucleus of workers possessing a full and complete socialist education' and able to lead the RSDLP in the politically correct direction.²⁵

Bogdanov's solution to the problem of the workers' false consciousness was ultimately paedagogical because, in his view, workers' ignorance explained the domination of bourgeois ideology. Critical 'gaps' in the workers' 'knowledge'²⁶ prevented them from perceiving their actual position and role in society, from grasping their situation as it really was. Workers did not know that bourgeois ideology dominated their thinking whenever they ventured beyond the gates of the factory. Without such knowledge, ideological delusions prevailed. Bogdanov's key idea was that the worker could not achieve

24. Bogdanov 1901, p. 187.

25. Bogdanov and Krasin 1909c, pp. 243-4.

26. Bogdanov 1908c, p. 215.

ideological self-clarification and annihilate objectivity because the bourgeoisie exercised a monopoly on the production of ideology in schools, universities, and in the media generally. True, workers were fashioning the ideal forms appropriate to all spheres of production, but they were doing this only partially, incompletely, only within the factory, as it were, because, under capitalism, the planned character of production was evident only there. The Party had to win them over to a proletarian worldview through systematic education in proletarian universities. The axis of Vperedist politics revolved around educating workers to abandon fetishised modes of thought, to free them from bourgeois ideology in order to speed the transition to socialism. Since socialist intellectuals could grasp the Social-Democratic, Marxist worldview more systematically than could most workers, they had a critical paedagogical role to play in the destruction of bourgeois ideology.

The character of Bogdanov's political response to the problems confronting the workers' movement, the centrality accorded to socialist schooling in the *Vpered* programme for proletarian culture, and in his general political strategy, was not only connected to his socioeconomic analysis and to his appraisal of the limits of the workers' movement. It was also closely linked to the epistemological framework of Bogdanov's general intellectual outlook. We need to examine the conceptual interrelationships of this framework carefully, and from different angles, to assess fully its relevance to Bogdanov's Vperedist politics.

The end of epistemology

Bogdanov 'intellectualised' both the domination of bourgeois ideology among workers and the process, essentially paedagogical, by which workers cast off this domination. According to him, workers were imposing – through cooperative labour in the immediate, technical processes of production at the level of the factory – practical and cognitive order on the 'chaotic' and 'elemental' world of nature. Unfortunately, workers had yet to extend this kind of order beyond factories, that is, to the social processes of production in their entirety. Here, the chaotic, elemental world of the market – or more precisely, its ideological expression, bourgeois ideology – dominated workers' thinking. But, for Bogdanov, the worker's authentic reality was the factory, while the reality of the market existed only outside factories, and thus at the interstices of the workers' factory-experience. The market formed the boundary of the workers' experience but was not part of it. Yet, the ideology of this inauthentic market-reality swayed workers' minds. There was an intolerable tension between the worker's actual 'false' consciousness and

his ideal 'authentic' proletarian being. Bogdanov's epistemological concepts resolved this tension, though not without cost, as we shall see.

In reconstructing Bogdanov's intricate reasoning we must always bear in mind that Bogdanov presumed in the worker's general outlook a 'monistic' identity between object and subject, between being and consciousness, between experience and its representation in thought; pairs that formed an undifferentiated unity, a self-contained totality bounded by a 'totalising' class-experience. Bogdanov expressed this epistemological presumption in his belief that worker-knowledge was *unmediated*, the product of pure, direct, and immediate sensory contact with the world through labour. But bourgeois knowledge was abstract, a purely intellectual and mental creation tied exclusively to the experience of the market and therefore founded on the notion of objectivity separate from and independent of subjectivity. Schools and universities taught the worker to view the world through the mediation of bourgeois cognitive forms that transformed and distorted his sensory faculties by *mediating* the immediacy of his experience. That is, mediation arbitrarily demarcated experience into objective and subjective elements. However, it was not the bourgeois character of the mediation that destroyed the 'wholeness' of the workers' thought because mediation *was* the separating out of the sensory/practical component of knowledge from its intellectual/ideal component. Bogdanov believed that such distinctions were irremediably bourgeois and anti-proletarian. The worker had to be re-educated in proletarian universities to view society in its entirety through monistic proletarian cognitive forms that had no use for mediation.

Let us look at this matter from another angle. Bogdanov denied that a genuine relationship stood between the worker's being and the worker's consciousness because only heterogeneous entities (thought *and* being, subject *and* object) could be related; a point N.A. Berdiaev highlighted in his negative review of Bogdanov's *Osnovny elementy istoricheskogo vzgliada na prirodu* (St. Petersburg, 1899).²⁷ Bogdanov thus hypothesised no real or *objective* distinction between the worker's representation of his reality and reality itself lest the conceptual monism of the workers' experience be disrupted and the anti-epistemological thrust of empiriomonism blunted. Epistemology was

27. 'Epistemology studies the problem of the composition and validity of thought' wrote Berdiaev, and 'epistemological controversies are conducted over the question of the relation of thought to reality. An evolutionary or, in Bogdanov's terminology, historical epistemology is not so much false as impossible, since it does not give an answer to the epistemological question concerning the validity of thought and its relation to reality'. 'From an epistemological point of view it is impossible to conceive of thought without assuming a subject and an object and necessary logical presuppositions'. Berdiaev 1902, p. 842.

withering away, in Bogdanov's view, and relational assertions were mistaken because they were relational, i.e., epistemological, not because they asserted particular relations. Any distinction within the workers' experience had therefore to arise and remain within the worker's representation of his experience, *in* his thinking about it. A (faulty) relationship within the worker's representation of his authentic reality, caused by a lack of knowledge, could be corrected by adding knowledge wherever there were 'gaps'.

Although Bogdanov incorporated the consciousness of the worker's class-experience as an undifferentiated moment of that class-experience, that consciousness turns out to be – as a straight-forward matter of empirical fact – a bourgeois consciousness. Bogdanov found it analytically unacceptable to account for this discrepancy by seeking its causal origins outside the totality of worker's class-experience because it meant differentiating that totality by externalising part of it. In other words, to explain the difference between the workers' actual bourgeois consciousness and his ideal proletarian being by adverting to causes originating outside the workers' experience was to specify the difference *objectively*, according to Bogdanov's conceptual schema. But to adopt this mode of inquiry meant to succumb conceptually to the fetishistic notion that, for workers, experience and its representation in thought *were* distinct, that being and consciousness were *not* identical. Bogdanov did not fall for the fetish of objectivity in either its materialist or idealist guise. He held on to empiriomonism. Bogdanov thought he could avoid choosing between the world as it actually was and how it appeared to workers by realising the anti-epistemological premisses of empiriomonism and contracting any discordance *between* the worker's thought and reality *into* his thought or representation of reality. The worker needed first to change his mind, and then his world. And this movement, within thought, from ignorance to enlightenment, from false or illusory knowledge to real knowledge, was an eminently paedagogical movement, not an epistemological movement taking place between thought and objective reality. Here was the anti-epistemological nub and hub of Bogdanov's paedagogical perspectives.

Correlatively, Bogdanov downgraded the reality of market-competition, as well as the reality of bourgeois ideology corresponding to it, to the level of an ideological illusion, a mirage, an illusive show put on by the bourgeoisie's command of the instruments of ideological production. Bogdanov thus attached a purely subjective meaning to the appearance of bourgeois ideology among workers because he detached it from any working-class reality. In a sense, this ideology came out of the blue, its true origins unknown to workers.

For Bogdanov, the problem of reorganising society meant reorganising the contents of the workers' consciousness through education in proletarian universities. Socialist paedagogues would drill into the worker's mind the

cardinal idea that society was a product of the collective labour of humanity; that the only class open to this knowledge was the working class; that the acquisition and mastery of such knowledge would, in turn, guide workers to transform the world in their own interests. 'The proletariat's *ideological* revolution – the achievement of class self-consciousness – precedes the all-round *social* revolution', Bogdanov peremptorily declared. There could be no doubt that the working class 'can and must establish the wholeness of thought before it can establish the wholeness of society'.²⁸

The wholeness of society – socialism – expressed the collectively planned organisation of production and was prefigured by the equally planned acquisition of class self-consciousness in proletarian universities. For Bogdanov, the social revolution had first to take place in the head. Later, the hand, with complete foreknowledge, would execute the transformation practically. The transformation itself, practice, would add nothing that was not already known.

Bogdanov thus derived from his class-analysis of ideology under capitalism a battery of anti-epistemological concepts that harmonised with the paedagogical politics of Vperedism.

Two conceptions of politics: Vperedist and 'orthodox'-Marxist

For Bogdanov, the workers' bourgeois conception of society did not correspond to the objective structure of bourgeois society as a whole, no matter what one's location in it, but only to a conception of society held by bourgeois intellectuals. Bogdanov therefore assigned the proletarian university a key-role in freeing workers from bourgeois society simply by showing that the reality of bourgeois ideology was but a product of the worker's bourgeois mis-education. In 'The Attitude of the Worker's Party to Religion', written in May 1909, Lenin indirectly attacked this idealist view by directly attacking the paedagogical and intellectualist conception of politics sustained by this idealist standpoint.

In his essay, Lenin adverted to the materialist epistemology he had defended in his just published *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* to explain how the 'political line of Marxism' in the struggle against the domination of non-Social-Democratic world views among workers was determined by and 'inseparably bound up with its philosophical principles'.²⁹ Without naming names, Lenin argued against those party-comrades who believed that education primarily

28. Bogdanov 1910b, p. 114. Emphasis added.

29. Lenin 1962j, p. 405.

was the way to undermine workers' religious beliefs. He wrote this essay implicitly against Bogdanov since the latter considered bourgeois ideology to be a kind of religion. While Lenin's philosophical views are not the focus of this paper – I treat them in Chapter Eight – nonetheless, I examine them briefly, in strict conjunction with Lenin's attack on a general conception of politics with which Bogdanov and the Vperedists identified.

To combat religion successfully, and false ideas generally, the source of faith and religion had to be explained in a materialist way by examining its 'social roots', began Lenin. 'No educational book can eradicate religion' for it was not principally a matter of ignorance. There was a genuinely objective basis, one lying outside the subject, for reflecting the world in this way. The material basis of this reflection was modern capitalism, regardless of one's class-position in it. Forthrightly and directly, Lenin described the social roots of religious beliefs, of non-scientific, non-Social-Democratic ideas in the following way:

The deepest root of religion today is the socially downtrodden condition of the working masses and their apparently complete helplessness in the face of the blind forces of capitalism which, every day and every hour, inflict upon ordinary working people the most horrible suffering and the most savage torment, a thousand times more severe than those inflicted by extraordinary events such as wars, earthquakes, etc. 'Fear made the gods'. Fear of the blind force of capital (blind because it cannot be foreseen by the masses of people) – a force which at every step in the life of the proletarian and small proprietor threatens to inflict, and does inflict, 'sudden', 'unexpected', 'accidental' ruin, destruction, pauperism, prostitution, death from starvation. Such is the *root* of modern religion, which the materialist must bear in mind first and foremost.³⁰

Bogdanov gave a similar description:

The spontaneous domination of the market over the producers is virtually as sovereign as was that of external nature in the past: But in its manifestation, the domination of the former is stripped of the concreteness, simplicity, and definiteness characteristic of the latter. The peasant can see how sun or hail can destroy his crops; but the commodity producer... does not see how prices arise, how supply and demand are established... [When] abrupt price changes drive the small producer to ruin and destitution, the process

30. Lenin 1962j, pp. 405–6.

is incomprehensible to him. Here, fetishism does not take a lucidly concrete form but an obscurely abstract one.³¹

Though both men's sociological descriptions of 'false consciousness' were virtually identical, their political prescriptions diverged widely owing to their divergent philosophical points of departure.

In Lenin's view, only the development of the class-struggle against the 'rule of capital', and the insecurity of life that it brought, could uproot religious beliefs.³² The task of diffusing 'atheist propaganda' was 'subordinated' to the requirements of developing this struggle which alone would convert 'Christian workers to Social Democracy and to atheism a hundred times better than bald atheist propaganda'. Since only the concrete practice of the class-movement could eliminate the social basis of religion, it followed that the struggle against religion had to be linked to that movement.³³ The heavenly community would fall *pari passu* with the rise of the earthly one.

But, for those who (like Bogdanov) saw the 'ignorance' of workers as the chief cause of their religious, non-Social-Democratic ideas, the dissemination of atheist Social-Democratic views was naturally seen as the 'chief task' to which the task of developing the class-struggle was subordinated. Lenin derided the inconsequent politics derived from this 'superficial view':

The combating of religion cannot be confined to abstract ideological preaching, and it must not be reduced to such preaching. It must be linked to the concrete practice of the class movement, which aims to eliminate the social roots of religion. Why does religion retain its hold on the backward sections of the town proletariat, on broad sections of the semi-proletariat, and on the masses of the peasantry? Because of the *ignorance* of the people, replies the bourgeois progressist, the radical, or the bourgeois materialist. And so: 'Down with religion and long live atheism: the dissemination of atheist views is our chief task!' The Marxist says that this is not true, that this is a superficial view, the view of narrow bourgeois uplifters. It does not explain the roots of religion profoundly enough; it explains them not in a materialist but in an idealist way.³⁴

Reason alone could not undermine faith, in Lenin's view. Marxist science could confront religion only indirectly, by explaining the source of religious faith 'in a materialist way', by recognising that the explanation itself would not directly undermine religious consciousness because this consciousness,

31. Bogdanov 1908c, p. 218.

32. Lenin 1962j, p. 406.

33. Lenin 1962j, p. 407.

34. Lenin 1962j, p. 405. Emphasis added.

by definition, was not immediately open to science and its methods. Though religious representations of the world were false, nonetheless, they had a practical, material basis, and were not the product of sheer ignorance, of mere subjective error, as Bogdanov tended to believe in accounting for the absence of a scientific Social-Democratic worldview among most workers. Lenin thought philosophical materialism *better suited* to a political outlook that gave pride of place to changing the nature of society practically, through participation in the class-struggle. He rejected changing the workers' conception of society chiefly via paedagogy in proletarian universities. Such a changed conception would follow – not precede – a changed relationship to society; the latter, in turn, could only be achieved through revolutionary activity.³⁵

But Bogdanov had come to explain the appearance of 'fetishism' among workers largely, if not exclusively, in terms of their ignorance, their 'knowledge-gap'. By 1909, his solution had come to be identified with, and largely confined to, education and the dissemination of the Social-Democratic worldview in proletarian universities. Having placed instruction at the centre of their political activity, the Vperedists maintained a paedagogical conception of politics stemming from what they perceived to be the ultimately cognitive foundation of workers' false consciousness. Bogdanov's philosophical standpoint was *better suited* as a conception of politics that gave pride of place to paedagogy as the *chief* means to transform the social consciousness of workers.

In sharp contrast, philosophically-'orthodox' Social Democrats – European and Russian, Bolshevik and Menshevik – affirmed that a scientific understanding of the nature of society, including recognition of the socially and historically conditioned character of that understanding, did not *eo ipso* alter society's nature precisely because society's nature was an objective one, existing outside our cognition. In this instance, although Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had different politics, nevertheless they had a political not paedagogical conception of politics stemming from their common materialist recognition that workers' ideas were not primarily the result of (mis-)education but of oppressive social conditions that limited their activity and, consequently, narrowed the scope and restricted the validity of their ideas about society. Neither Bolsheviks nor Mensheviks (or 'orthodox' Marxists generally) denied the paedagogical element in politics. Indeed, Lenin himself took the initiative to set up a school in Longjumeau to compete with the Vperedists.³⁶ Still, Lenin and 'orthodox' Marxists all understood formal political instruction obtained

35. See also Sayers 1985, p. 208.

36. Nelidov and Barchugov 1967.

in study-circles and schools to be no more than a subordinate element of politics, always tied to a broader conception. For them, the establishment of schools and universities did not, by itself, constitute that conception; no matter what was taught in these establishments. As far as they were concerned, the Vperedists looked at the world upside down and this was reflected in Vperedist political practice by their *inversion* of the relationship between politics and paedagogics: Bogdanov and his collaborators turned paedagogy into an entity existing in its own right, a final subject, while transforming politics into a mere predicate of that subject. Thus, when Lenin appealed to materialist-philosophical principles to explain the subordinate role played by paedagogy in politics, he did not link these principles to this faction exclusively since the Mensheviks *de facto* agreed with him on this question. Because Lenin's hostility to the Vperedists had a general or abstract *aspect*, lying *outside* either Menshevik and Bolshevik factional affiliation, that aspect was best grasped in factionally neutral terms, i.e., philosophically.

Epilogue: Bogdanov and Vpered in historical perspective

A great many questions could be asked of Bogdanov's ideas but methodological considerations require that it be this one: what was the relevance of this Social Democrat's theories to the practice of the workers' movement?

Bogdanov's political project met with scant success among workers for Vperedism soon became a casualty of the gigantic revolutionary upsurge of the working class against the employers and the state detonated by the shootings at the Lena gold-fields in April 1912. The material basis of Vperedist politics narrowed. In response, Bogdanov left *Vpered* and the group dissolved *de facto* in 1912. The outbreak of World-War One postponed the revolutionary dénouement for three years, until 1917. Then, the October Revolution opened a new but brief epoch of 'proletarian culture'.

Proletarian culture was the grand term used by a handful of intellectuals and worker-intellectuals influenced by Bogdanov to describe the poignant aspiration of thousands upon thousands of newly emancipated but culturally destitute workers to advance their knowledge of the arts and of the sciences, in part through the *Proletkul't*, a mass-, Bolshevik-sponsored and supported organisation. However, neither Bogdanov nor the political tendency of which he had once been the animating spirit was truly vindicated by the practice of the working-class movement in this period.

The October Revolution doubtless showed that workers possessed a capacity for cultural advancement, as Bogdanov, speaking for all Marxists, had believed. Nevertheless, Bogdanov utterly misjudged the *character* of the

motivation to use this capacity on a mass-scale. Bogdanov had thought that workers would be driven to revolutionise society practically through a prior process of intellectual transformation. The October Revolution decisively refuted this thesis and turned it upside down: workers rose first to revolutionary action, established class-based Soviets and factory-committees – not universities – and, by creating new forms of solidarity in practice, created the material basis for new, collectivist forms of consciousness. The institutional mechanisms and strategies of action through which workers realised their potential for cultural development bore little affinity to Bogdanov's precepts. In this central respect, the politics and philosophy of 'Bogdanovism' proved thoroughly impractical and idealist, as Lenin and other Marxists had emphatically maintained.

However, in another, equally central respect, Bogdanov and the orthodox Marxists, Lenin included, were vindicated. Besides utopian politics and an idealist philosophy, there was in Bogdanov's worldview the soundly scientific component of his sociology.

It was axiomatic for all Marxists, including Bogdanov, that the non-socialist aspirations and interests of the peasant-majority constituted an insuperable barrier to combining democracy with socialism and workers' rule. Peasants were small property-owners and as such had no interest in collective ownership of the means of production and a planned economy. Their archaic, individualised form of production could not be freely transformed into a modern socialised one. Such socialisation, the Marxists had theorised, could only come about forcibly, through the contradictory action and full development of a capitalist mode of production. That is why Bogdanov opposed the Soviet seizure of power.

The October Revolution rendered active and practical the latent and theoretical antagonism of interests between peasant and worker. Peasants appropriated the feudal lords' estates through the mechanism of the *mir*, while workers established a Soviet state and moved to organise production collectively. But the social and economic conditions for the establishment of socialism still lay in the West, with its culturally developing proletariat, not in Russia, with its culturally underdeveloped workers surrounded by a sea of smallholding peasants.

Though all Marxists recognised that not all the objective conditions for building a democratic socialism in Russia were present in 1917, they did not agree politically about what was to be done that year. Bogdanov concurred with the Mensheviks that Russia had just begun the transition to a modern-capitalist economy and had developed to a point where only a 'democratic republic'

was feasible in 1917.³⁷ Bogdanov consequently viewed the Bolshevik-led seizure of power by the Soviets in October as a calamity. That the proletariat had rallied in its overwhelming majority to Bolshevism merely testified to its cultural immaturity. Bogdanov greeted the extant proletarian culture made possible by the fleeting political victory of 'Leninism' with deep reservations and precious little enthusiasm. Since Russia lacked the rudiments of modern science and industry to underpin proletarian culture, the latter was destined to be the sickly offspring of a *prematurely* executed political revolution.³⁸

The Bolsheviks, of course, agreed with Bogdanov and the Mensheviks that socialist construction in an isolated Russia would meet with quasi-insuperable obstacles. However, Lenin's partisans held out the materially well-founded hope that workers' rule in Russia would generate socialist revolutions abroad in the very near future. If successful, they would break Russia's isolation by reconnecting the country to an advanced Europe and America within a single shell of international socialism. Bogdanov turned the Bolshevik argument inside out.

Like the Mensheviks, Bogdanov excluded the very possibility of extending the October Revolution abroad. Unlike the Mensheviks, Bogdanov did not think it possible to reverse the Bolshevik-led seizure of power at home. He concluded that workers had no choice but to catch up culturally to Russia's now advanced political forms. The success of this daunting enterprise demanded that the pioneers of proletarian culture be isolated from their hostile and threatening peasant-environment. In short, they needed to incubate, hothouse-fashion, a proletarian culture.

Politically, the attempt to create a proletarian culture in an artificial environment, *despite* the October Revolution, which had prematurely exposed workers to material circumstances inimical to the natural development of such a culture, proved ill-fated, a *fuite en avant*. Yet the subsequent history of the workers' movement in Russia confirmed Bogdanov's manifold doubts and misgivings about the future of socialism there. Indeed, later developments corroborated in the most devastating way the materialist kernel in Bogdanov's fantastic project: his and the classical Marxist's abiding conviction that the absence of the material premises of socialism in Russia would work progressively to undermine the country's socialist future. For the failure

37. Bogdanov 1917b. Bogdanov's Menshevism undercuts the view that empiriocriticism was a 'voluntarist' revolt against determinism and materialism, as some have affirmed, for example, Kelly 1981.

38. Bogdanov 1918.

of proletarian revolution in the West sequestered the material achievements of modern capitalism from Russia, removing for an entire epoch the material basis for the free development of the working class. In the rubble of the October Revolution grew the 'culture' of Stalinism.

Afterword

Historians have not properly established the historic interrelationships between the Soviet state, the Bolshevik Party, *Vpered* and *Proletkul't*. Regardless of methodology and 'ideological' outlooks, most historians trace the lineage of *Proletkul't* to *Vpered* and, based on the antagonism between the Bolsheviks and the *Vperedists* in 1909, posit a similar antagonism between Bolshevism and *Proletkul't* ten years later, in 1917–21.³⁹ This is misleading.

While it is true that Lenin attacked the theory of a uniquely proletarian culture, pushed by Bogdanov and a handful of others, it is incorrect to conclude from this that *Proletkul't* and the Bolshevik Party were hostile. In fact, the overwhelming majority of the rank-and-file delegates attending *Proletkul't* congresses were members of the Bolshevik Party; the elected leaderships of *Proletkul't* were almost without exception members of the Bolshevik Party; *Proletkul't*, as an organised expression of the workers' movement, was funded exclusively by the Commissariat of Enlightenment, headed by the Bolshevik and ex-'god-builder' Lunacharsky; the policies of the Soviet state (of which Lunacharsky was a member) were determined by the Bolshevik Party; finally and emblematically, the delegates to the First Congress of *Proletkul't* in June 1918 elected Lenin as their Honorary President. For all practical intents and purposes, *Proletkul't*ists and Bolsheviks were the same.

Further, to regard *Proletkul't* as the lineal descendent of the ideas and activities of Bogdanov and his associates in *Vpered* is profoundly misleading. As Trotsky once remarked, the 'different aspects of a revolutionary movement as a homogeneous historical process and generally as a development possessing survival-value are neither uniform nor harmonious in content or movement'.⁴⁰ Between 1909 and 1917, the relationship of *Vperedism* to the working-class movement as a whole had undergone an asymmetrical inversion.

In 1909, the cultural politics of *Vpered* had articulated a dominant aspect of the organised activity of a subordinate and repressed working class. A decade later, the 'proletarian-culture' movement had grown vertiginously but it

39. See, for example, Read 1990 and Mally 1990.

40. Trotsky 1946, p. 88.

articulated only a subordinate aspect of working-class activity because the working class was now dominant and emancipated, a position it had been brought to by Bolshevism, not Vperedism. Put linearly, worker-cultural activity expanded immensely thanks to the success of the October Revolution but Vperedism could not legitimately claim credit for this cultural breakthrough because Vperedism had nothing to do with securing the victory of the October Revolution.

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