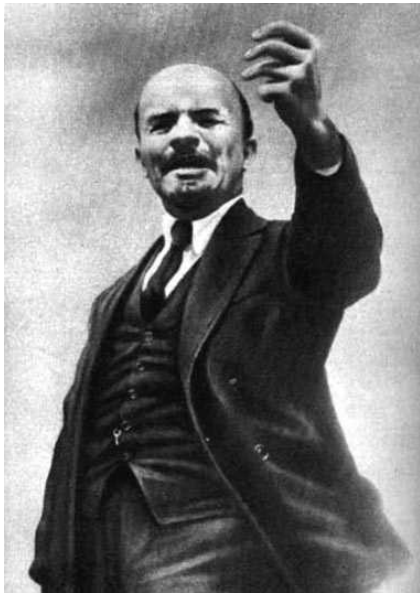


Lenin's What is to be Done? - a defence

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V.I. Lenin

Lenin's 1901 pamphlet *What is to be Done?* is still controversial. The book is used to provide illustration, by conservatives and liberals alike, for the argument that Lenin was an 'elitist'. He supposedly wanted a dictatorship of intellectuals over the working class and that his conception of a professional revolutionary party 'elite' laid the basis for Stalinism. Thinkers like Chomsky present Lenin as wanting to create this new elite - 'the Leninist intelligentsia have a different agenda. They fit Marx's description of the 'conspirators' who 'pre-empt the developing revolutionary process' and distort it to their ends of domination'.¹

Lenin the elitist?

The standard story of *What is to be Done?* is that it demonstrates Lenin's condescending attitude to working class people and puts forward a method of organisation that is modelled on the secretive and conspiratorial methods of Russian 'Narodnik' terrorists. This Russian revolutionary tradition arose from the middle class intellectuals who saw the peasants as the agents of change.

Although some of the Narodnik thinkers had read Marx they hoped that Russia could skip capitalism and develop socialism based on the peasant village commune.

Lenin is supposed to have adopted their conspiratorial methods and grafted them onto Marxism creating a Russian 'hybrid'.² There certainly was some continuity of personnel between the Narodnik movement and Russian Marxism. For example, Plekhanov, known as 'the father of Russian Marxism', began as a member of a Narodnik group called 'Black Repartition'. The reason some Narodniks moved over to a focus on the working class as the agent of change was, not only that capitalism had continued to develop and strengthen its hold in Russia, but also, that the terrorist methods just hadn't worked. In Lenin's early writings he conducted an argument with the terrorists. He wanted to show '*the reactionary, middle class character* of the way in which the direct producers' interests have been and are being represented by the Russian Narodniks'.³ His book *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* was an argument that the desire to 'skip capitalism' and save the village commune was nothing but a 'utopian' dream. Capitalism was developing in Russia and the process of class differentiation had proceeded to a much greater extent than the Narodniks were willing to admit.

It is important to remember that the necessity for conspiratorial methods amongst Narodniks and Marxists didn't arise from any theoretical argument about forms of organisation but from the stark reality of the Tsarist police state. Sloppy organisation got people arrested, exiled and killed by the police. 'Conspiracy' or the ability to avoid arrest was vital. Lenin wasn't unusual in wanting activists to avoid capture. The Tsarist state 'very soon adapted itself to the new conditions of the struggle and managed to deploy well its perfectly equipped detach-

¹<http://www.chomsky.info/articles/1986----.htm>

²See Robert Service *Lenin* Harvard Press 2000

³<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1894/narodniks/ch01.htm>

ments of *agent provocateurs*, spies, and gendarmes. Raids became so frequent, affected such a vast number of people, and cleared out the local study circles so thoroughly that the masses of the workers lost literally all their leaders.⁴

Socialism from Without

Certain passages in Lenin's book have been a godsend to those who want to paint Lenin as wanting to impose an intellectual led 'elite' organisation on the working class. Lenin makes the argument that:

We have said that *there could not have been* Social Democratic⁵ consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. By their social status the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the capitalist intelligentsia. In the very same way, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Marxism arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working-class movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of

thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia. In the period under discussion, the middle nineties, this doctrine not only represented the completely formulated programme of the Emancipation of Labour group, but had already won over to its side the majority of the revolutionary youth in Russia. Hence, we had the spontaneous awakening of the working masses, their awakening to conscious life and conscious struggle, and a revolutionary youth, armed with Marxist theory and straining towards the workers.⁶

Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers.⁷

We are told in most interpretations of Lenin that he is claiming that the working class makes no contribution to the development of Marxist theory, that Marxism is something to be 'imposed' on the working class. Engels made a similar argument to Lenin's when he described the evolution of the working class movement in Britain; he stated that:

[T]he working class movement is divided into two sections, the Chartists and the Socialists. The Chartists are the more backward, the less developed, but they are genuine proletarians... The Socialists proceeding originally from the capitalists, are for this reason unable to amalgamate completely with the working class. The merger of Socialism with Chartism... will be the next step.⁸

⁴<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/index.htm>

⁵It is important to note that 'Social Democrat' meant 'Marxist' in Lenin's time - whereas today to be a 'Social Democrat' would mean adherence to reformist politics.

⁶*ibid*

⁷*ibid*

⁸Quoted in Lars Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered. What is to be Done? In Context*. Haymarket 2008.

This argument that socialist activists needed to *merge* with the working class movement was common in the Marxist movement. That the socialist activists mentioned proceeded from the capitalist intellectuals was for Engels not a suggestion of a *preferred* situation, nor a profession of a lack of faith in the working class, but a description of events. Lenin was also writing in a very particular context and his description of the rise of Marxist ideas in the Russian revolutionary intelligentsia was a description of the recent history of that movement. He understood the necessity of a ‘merger’ between the revolutionary activists, some of whom were working class in origin, and the broader working class movement. There was a huge strike wave of workers growing throughout the late 1890’s. In 1895 there were 350 strike actions and by 1901, when Lenin was writing, there were 911 involving 176,000 workers. In the spring of 1901 mass protests by students saw workers spontaneously join the students on the streets. Lenin wrote the following words in the wake of a mass demonstration by workers in the town of Kharkov:

May Day in Kharkov showed what a great political demonstration a working-class festival can become and what we lack to make these celebrations a really great all-Russian manifestation of the class-conscious working class. What made the May Day celebrations in Kharkov an event of outstanding importance? The large-scale participation of the workers in the strike, the huge mass meetings in the streets, the unfurling of red flags, the presentation of demands put forth in proclamations and the revolutionary character of these demands: the eight-hour day and political liberty. The legend that the Russian workers have not yet matured for the political struggle, that their principal concern should be the purely economic struggle... that legend has been

totally refuted by the Kharkov May Day celebrations.⁹

Lenin was praising the ability of the workers, the revolutionary character of their demands, and using it to take on his rivals who thought that the ‘workers have not yet matured for the political struggle’. Lenin’s argument here hinges on the revolutionary potential of the workers. Lenin continues:

The Kharkov comrades say because the ‘general staff’ of the class-conscious socialist workers did not distribute its forces evenly, and, further, because the workers’ plan ‘was known to the authorities,’ who, of course, took all steps to split the workers. The conclusion to be drawn is obvious: we lack *organisation*. The masses of the workers were roused and ready to follow the socialist leaders; but the ‘general staff’ failed to organise a strong nucleus able to distribute properly all the available forces of class-conscious workers. ...It must combine within itself the socialist knowledge and revolutionary experience acquired from many decades of activity by the Russian revolutionary intelligentsia with the knowledge of working-class life and conditions and the ability to agitate among the masses and lead them *which is characteristic of the advanced workers*. (Emphasis mine)¹⁰

Notice that Lenin argues that the revolutionary intellectuals had to learn about the conditions of working class life from the advanced workers, while the working class needed to absorb the socialist knowledge and experience of the revolutionary intelligentsia. A revolutionary party could combine both. Lenin’s argument that socialism needed to be brought to the working class was a practical argument based on the necessity of merging the two trends- the socialists and the advanced workers. The lack of this

⁹<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1900/nov/maydays.htm>

¹⁰*ibid*

‘general staff’ was acting as a bottleneck preventing the movement from reaching its full potential. They didn’t lack active workers—they lacked people with political knowledge and experience to lead this mass struggle.

Not a single class in history has achieved a position of dominance if it did not push forward its own political leaders, and its own advanced representatives who were capable of organising the movement and guiding it. The Russian working class has already shown that it is capable of pushing forward such people: the overflowing struggle of the last five or six years has shown what a mass of revolutionary forces are hidden in the working class¹¹

For Lenin no class could win without leaders from *within its own ranks* and the Russian workers *were forging such leaders* in the course of the strike wave *but*, Lenin continues, the amateur methods of the activists were falling behind the needs of the movement. Lenin was certain that a ‘worker intelligentsia already exists, and we must make every effort to ensure that their ranks are continually broadened, that their high intellectual needs are fully met, that out of their ranks come the leaders of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party.’ We can contrast Lenin’s urgent appeal to the theories of another trend in the Russian movement -the ‘Economists’. Economism was a right wing trend in the Russian socialist movement which argued that workers should focus on the strikes alone and who played down conscious organisation, they argued that the strike movement alone would *automatically* lead to the growth of socialism.

Just as human beings will reproduce in the old-fashioned way despite all the discoveries of natural science, so the birth of a new social order will come about, in

the future too, mainly as a result of elemental outbursts, despite all the discoveries of social science and the increase in the number of conscious fighters¹²

There were a number of trends Lenin was attacking in this booklet. There was the ‘Credo’ - a document that argued for the outright reformism of Eduard Bernstein. Bernstein, a leading member of the German SPD, infamously declared that the ‘movement is everything, the final goal nothing’. There were also a number of other trends that Lenin regarded as sympathetic to Economism. The Economist and reformist trends, by arguing that the workers should focus on strikes alone, led to the rule of the intelligentsia over the working class because, firstly, workers were not trained to replace the intellectuals and, secondly, because ‘politics’ was then left to the liberals. The actual positions of the two sides in this debate are usually reversed in standard accounts of *What is to be Done?*

The actuality of revolution

Every aspect of Lenin’s thought was alive to the prospect of working class revolution. The question Lenin asked himself was what kind of organisation was necessary to lead such a revolt and win? As the Marxist philosopher Lukács says:

*Lenin re-established the purity of Marxist theory on this issue. But it was also precisely here that he conceived it more clearly and more concretely. Not that he in any way tried to improve on Marx. He merely incorporated into the theory the further development of the historical process since Marx’s death. This means that the actuality of the working class revolution is no longer only a world historical horizon arching above the self-liberating working class, but that revolution is already on its agenda.*¹³

¹¹<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/index.htm>

¹²*ibid*

¹³<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/1924/lenin/>

For Lenin revolution wasn't some far distant future 'horizon' - a final goal - that for the reformists never came. Neither was it a terrorist or ultra-left focus on the ability to spark revolution at any given moment. The revolution required the maximum concentration of working class organisation combined with a strategic and tactical awareness capable of making it through the complicated maze of the class struggle. The working class party had to be a *revolutionary* party with a truly revolutionary theory driving it. The building of a revolutionary party meant taking on those who wanted to import non-revolutionary ideas into Marxism. Under the banner of 'freedom of criticism' there were those in the movement who wanted to jettison the revolutionary core of Marxism. The problem for a party split into revolutionary and reformist wings was that at key turning points in the revolution it would pull in two opposing directions leading to confusion, demoralisation and defeat.

In fact, it is no secret for anyone that two trends have taken form in present-day international Social Democracy. The conflict between these trends now flares up in a bright flame and now dies down and smoulders under the ashes of imposing 'truce resolutions'. The essence of the 'new' trend, which adopts a 'critical' attitude towards 'obsolete dogmatic' Marxism, has been clearly enough presented by Bernstein and demonstrated by Millerand.¹⁴

Millerand was a French socialist who joined a capitalist Government which included General Gafflet. Gafflet had shot down workers after the defeat of the Paris Commune. The political *theories* of Bernstein and the political *practice* of Millerand betrayed the interests of the working class. These reformist trends were calling for 'freedom of criticism' as a means by which they could overturn the revolutionary aspects of Marxism. Lenin was furious. In Russia they

had a situation where Marxist ideas were only beginning to take hold, therefore, reformism would have been fatal for the movement.

We are marching in a compact group along a precipitous and difficult path, firmly holding each other by the hand. We are surrounded on all sides by enemies, and we have to advance almost constantly under their fire. We have combined, by a freely adopted decision, for the purpose of fighting the enemy, and not of retreating into the neighbouring marsh, the inhabitants of which, from the very outset, have reproached us with having separated ourselves into an exclusive group and with having chosen the path of struggle instead of the path of conciliation. And now some among us begin to cry out: Let us go into the marsh! And when we begin to shame them, they retort: What backward people you are! Are you not ashamed to deny us the liberty to invite you to take a better road! Oh, yes, gentlemen! You are free not only to invite us, but to go yourselves wherever you will, even into the marsh. In fact, we think that the marsh is your proper place, and we are prepared to render you every assistance to get there. Only let go of our hands, don't clutch at us and don't besmirch the grand word freedom, for we too are 'free' to go where we please, free to fight not only against the marsh, but also against those who are turning towards the marsh!¹⁵

Organisation matters

Lenin understood that politics was the most vital foundation of a revolutionary party.

¹⁴<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/index.htm>

¹⁵*ibid*

There needed to be a politically aware and motivated core of leaders from the working class and radical intelligentsia who could inspire other workers to take the revolutionary path. Lenin also understood the connection between Economist politics and *disorganisation*:

Can a connection be established between primitiveness as growing pains that affect the *whole* movement, and Economism?... Lack of practical training, of ability to carry on organisational work is certainly common *to us all*... it became clear that primitiveness is connected with Economism and that we shall never rid ourselves of this narrowness of our organisational activity until we rid ourselves of Economism generally¹⁶

Here Lenin was making the point that it was the politics of 'spontaneity', which by *divorcing organisation and politics*, was blocking the overcoming of 'primitiveness'. The Economists were raising the 'amateur' approach of the party to the level of a theory- Economism justified disorganisation. The reformist intellectuals were unconsciously sabotaging the working class. The building of the revolutionary party and the actual training of new revolutionary worker leaders was neglected and consigned to a magical future moment - a 'horizon' that never came. Here we glimpse Lenin's arguments with the Mensheviks in later years. The Mensheviks were the reformist trend in the Russian socialist movement. In 1903 at the Second Party Conference the Russian socialists broke into Bolsheviks (meaning 'majority') and the Mensheviks (meaning 'minority').

The standard account, taken mostly from Menshevik writers, is that Lenin split the conference in order to make a power grab. In fact there were a couple of key arguments. The first was on what made you a party member? For Lenin a party member had to be an activist who was working under the direction of a party body- for

the Mensheviks this definition was too restrictive as it rejected intellectuals who were just paper members. 'The more widespread the title of Party member, the better,' said leading Menshevik Martov. During a revolution which party would hold together? Lenin's party of revolutionaries, organised and committed to revolutionary politics or a loose party of intellectuals- who were worried about throwing sympathetic intellectuals 'overboard'? The intellectuals were uncomfortable with Lenin's demand for 'specialisation' and a 'division of labour' in the party. This division of tasks was vital if the party was to grow and expand beyond the amateur circles. The Menshevik intellectuals complained that Lenin wanted to bring in 'barracks discipline' and that he wanted to make them into 'cogs in a machine' but Lenin replied that being a cog in a great revolutionary party pursuing world historical goals was something a worker would be proud of. Lenin's internal focus, on building the structures of a revolutionary party, division of labour, a paper network and a serious approach to money, was intimately connected to his external focus, that is, on the actuality of revolution.

Can you 'plan' a revolution?

One of the key arguments the Economists made was that Lenin overstated the role of 'tactics-as-plan' and 'organisation-as-plan' whereas, they argued, tactics derived from 'social conditions' or 'objective circumstances'. Instead of 'tactics-as-plan' they argued for 'tactics-as-process' instead of fighting to establish a revolutionary organisation they proposed 'organisation-as-process'. Of course Lenin understood that revolutions occur because of the conflict between our growing forces of production and the constraints of the old relations of production and state but he also understood, as Marx did, that:

History does nothing, it 'possesses *no* immense wealth', it 'wages *no* battles'. It is *man*, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights;

¹⁶ *ibid*

‘history’ is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve *its own aims*; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims.¹⁷

We make our own history but not in circumstances we choose. Lenin wrote against their fatalism:

‘Tactics-as-plan contradicts the essence of Marxism!’ But this is a slander of Marxism; it means turning Marxism into the caricature held up by the Narodniks in their struggle against us. It means belittling the initiative and energy of class-conscious fighters, whereas Marxism, on the contrary, gives a gigantic impetus to the initiative and energy of the Marxist, opens up for him the widest perspectives, and (if one may so express it) places at his disposal the mighty force of many millions of workers ‘spontaneously’ rising for the struggle. The entire history of international Social-Democracy teems with plans advanced now by one, now by another political leader, some confirming the far-sightedness and the correct political and organisational views of their authors and others revealing their short-sightedness and their political errors.¹⁸

Lenin’s argument was that when the uprising came the party needed build towards it and also to be as prepared as possible to direct the working class movement to a successful conclusion.

...picture to yourselves a popular uprising. Probably everyone will now agree that we must think of this and prepare for it. But how? Surely the Central Committee cannot appoint agents to

all localities for the purpose of preparing the uprising. Even if we had a Central Committee, it could achieve absolutely nothing by such appointments under present-day Russian conditions. But a network of agents that would form in the course of establishing and distributing the common newspaper would not have to ‘sit about and wait’ for the call for an uprising, but could carry on the regular activity that would guarantee the highest probability of success in the event of an uprising. Such activity would strengthen our contacts with the broadest strata of the working masses and with all social strata that are discontented with the autocracy, which is of such importance for an uprising. Precisely such activity would serve to cultivate the ability to estimate correctly the general political situation and, consequently, the ability to select the proper moment for an uprising...for without such contacts it will be impossible collectively to discuss’ the plan for the uprising and to take the necessary preparatory measures on the eve.¹⁹

The movement is not enough

Political consciousness was completely overwhelmed by spontaneity —the spontaneity of those workers who were carried away by the arguments that a kopek added to a ruble was worth more than any socialism or politics, and that they must ‘fight, knowing that they are fighting, not for the sake of some future generation, but for themselves and their children.’²⁰

¹⁷https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/holy-family/ch06_2.htm

¹⁸<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/index.htm>

¹⁹*ibid*

²⁰*ibid*

The Economists tried to paint Lenin as an intellectual with no interest in the ‘real’ working class. For them the working class were only capable of expressing themselves in strikes and had no interest in ‘politics’. Lenin wanted to make clear that if the ‘embryo’ of class consciousness that arose in struggle wasn’t *organised* the result would be subordination of the movement to the ideas of the ruling class.

the worship of the spontaneity of the working class movement, all belittling of the role of ‘the conscious element’, of the role of Social Democracy, *means, quite independently of whether he who belittles that role desires it or not, a strengthening of the influence of capitalist ideology upon the workers.*²¹

This is the same idea Marx expressed when he said that:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.²²

This is why Marx said a mass revolution was vital, not only to overthrow the old system, but also because it is only in a process of revolution that we begin to throw off the ‘muck of ages’.

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is, necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.²³

Lenin added to this that ‘Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.’²⁴ Revolutions break out all the time because people are sick to death of an aspect of the system and feel they have no other way out. People usually start fighting with one set of ideas and become more radicalised as the movement progresses. But there can be no *socialist* revolution without revolutionary theory. The process of throwing off the ‘muck of ages’ is not *automatic*. People have widely varying levels of consciousness and confidence and a party is necessary to raise both. Revolution creates the potential - ‘fertilises the soil’ - but socialist ideas have to be present in the movement, and embodied in a mass organisation, in order to grow.

There is no middle course (for mankind has not created a ‘third’ ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or an above-class ideology). Hence, to belittle the socialist ideology *in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree* means to strengthen bourgeois ideology. There is much talk of spontaneity. But the

²¹ *ibid*

²² <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm>

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/index.htm>

spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to capitalist ideology, for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade-unionism, and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the capitalists. Hence, our task, the task of Marxism, is *to combat spontaneity, to divert* the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the capitalists, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Marxism.²⁵

Lenin argues that to belittle the task of winning people to socialism is to leave them subordinate to ruling class ideas. There is a problem with this quote; He uses the term ‘divert’ the working class from a ‘natural’ course that leads to ‘trade unionist’ politics. This formulation, like the ‘from without’ formulation, is wrong. There is no ‘natural’ course of development. If Lenin means that without the intervention of a socialist organisation the movement will end up ‘diverted’ by reformist forces if we don’t ‘divert’ it the other way then he’s correct- but the implication that Marxists have to ‘divert’ the movement implies we are somehow *outside* the movement. If by ‘natural’ he meant that workers generally see capitalism as a ‘natural’ unquestioned background for action, as the union leaders insist, then ‘diverting’ workers from *that* path to a socialist path is correct.

Lenin clarifies his comments by making the point that ‘that striving (to end up under the wing of the capitalists) indeed is common to the English trade-unionists, who are hostile to socialism.’ The English trade unions, despite engaging in struggle, were limiting worker’s class consciousness.

It is often said that the working class *spontaneously* gravitates towards socialism. **This is perfectly true** in the sense that so-

cialist theory reveals the causes of the misery of the working class more profoundly and more correctly than any other theory, and for that reason the workers are able to assimilate it so easily, *provided*, however, this theory does not itself yield to spontaneity, *provided* it subordinates spontaneity to itself. The working class spontaneously gravitates towards socialism; nevertheless, most widespread (and continuously and diversely revived) capitalist ideology spontaneously imposes itself upon the working class to a still greater degree.²⁶

Lukács pointed out that the idea that through action alone the working class would develop a correct class consciousness was the counterpart of the fatalistic reformist idea that the economy was ‘inevitably’ evolving towards socialism. Lenin’s strength was that he understood that advances in class consciousness would be lost if they were not given an organisational form.

The objective basis of the leading role of the working class is its position within the capitalist process of production. However it would be a mechanistic application of Marxism, and therefore a totally unhistorical illusion, to conclude that a correct proletarian class-consciousness - adequate to the working class’s leading role - can gradually develop on its own, without both frictions and setbacks, *as though the working class could gradually evolve ideologically into the revolutionary vocation appropriate to its class*. The impossibility of the economic evolution of capitalism into socialism was clearly proved by the Bernstein debates. Nevertheless, its

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ *ibid*

ideological counterpart lived on un-contradicted in the minds of many honest European revolutionaries and was, moreover, not even recognized as either a problem or a danger.²⁷

Organisations of Workers and Organisation of Revolutionaries

(O)n questions both of organisation and of politics the Economists are forever lapsing from Marxism into trade-unionism. The political struggle of Social Democracy is far more extensive and complex than the economic struggle of the workers against the employers and the government. Similarly (indeed for that reason), the organisation of the revolutionary Social Democratic Party must inevitably be of a *kind different* from the organisation of the workers designed for this struggle. The workers' organisation must in the first place be a trade union organisation; secondly, it must be as broad as possible; and thirdly, it must be as public as conditions will allow (here, and further on, of course, I refer only to absolutist Russia). On the other hand, the organisation of the revolutionaries must consist first and foremost of people who make revolutionary activity their profession (for which reason I speak of the organisation of *revolutionaries*, meaning revolutionary Social Democrats).²⁸

The standard argument goes something like this- other Marxists wanted a broad party, of the whole class, whereas Lenin wanted a small conspiratorial organisation of 'professional' revolutionaries. A party of the whole working class, like the Labour Party,

would end up reflecting the capitalist ideas the majority of the working class hold in a non-revolutionary situation. Such a party would be dominated by conservatives, torn by factionalism and end up pulling itself apart in the course of any social upheaval. Lenin understood that they would never challenge the Tsar with such a party. Instead the party would restrict itself to those workers and intellectuals who were revolutionaries. A party where '*all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals*, not to speak of distinctions of trade and profession, in both categories, *must be effaced*.'²⁹

This revolutionary party would be a minority of the working class until a revolution presented the opportunity to win over the majority of workers. This minority needed to be a significant minority *before* the revolution to benefit from the explosion of working class self-activity that would come with revolution. This revolutionary activist network would act to direct all other working class movements and strikes rendering them more cohesive and winning more and more workers over to socialism. There wasn't an opposition between revolutionary *leadership* and class *empowerment*- it was a question of *taking the lead to empower*.

If we begin with the solid foundation of a strong organisation of revolutionaries, we can ensure the stability of the movement as a whole and carry out the aims both of Marxism and of trade unions proper. If, however, we begin with a broad workers' organisation, which is supposedly most 'accessible' to the masses (but which is actually most accessible to the gendarmes and makes revolutionaries most accessible to the police), we shall achieve neither the one aim nor the other.³⁰

Lenin summarized his views as follows:

²⁷<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/1924/lenin/>

²⁸<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/iv.htm>

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ *ibid*

I assert: (1) that no revolutionary movement can endure without a stable organisation of leaders maintaining continuity; (2) that the broader the popular mass drawn spontaneously into the struggle, the more urgent the need for such an organisation, and the more solid this organisation must be (for it is much easier for all sorts of demagogues to side-track the more backward sections of the masses); (3) that such an organisation must consist chiefly of people professionally engaged in revolutionary activity; (4) that in an autocratic state, the more we *confine* the membership of such an organisation to people who are professionally engaged in revolutionary activity and who have been professionally trained in the art of combating the political police, the more difficult will it be to unearth the organisation; and (5) the *greater* will be the number of people from the working class and from the other social classes who will be able to join the movement and perform active work in it.³¹

A revolutionary paper

The Russian Marxist Plekhanov described ‘propaganda’ as giving many ideas to small groups of people. He contrasted this to ‘agitation’ which was about giving one or a few ideas to large groups of people. A socialist theoretical journal would be propaganda whereas a speech on a protest was agitation. ‘...[T]he propagandist operates chiefly by means of the *printed* word; the agitator by means of the *spoken* word. The propagandist requires qualities different from those of the agitator.’

For Lenin the revolutionary paper was a key means by which socialist ideas

were seeded throughout the working class. Lenin’s paper at the time of writing *What is to be Done?* was called *Iskra*, which meant the ‘Spark’. There were those who claimed Lenin’s call for a national paper was an ‘imposition’ on the local committees and a distraction from ‘practical’ work but Lenin understood that a revolutionary paper could unite all the local committees, generalise the best of their experiences and bring all the committee into common revolutionary work.

Unless we train strong political organisations in the localities, even an excellently organised all-Russia newspaper will be of no avail. This is incontrovertible. But the whole point is that *there is no other way of training* strong political organisations except through the medium of an all-Russia newspaper.³²

The distribution of a paper to hundreds of circles required committed agents and revolutionary organisers travelling the country, delivering the paper, collecting reports, forming a sense of unity, penetrating into the working class areas and workplaces.

A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organiser. In this respect *it may be compared to the scaffolding* erected round a building under construction; it marks the contours of the structure and facilitates communication between the builders, permitting them to distribute the work and to view the common results achieved by their organised labour.³³

Even a town with a few individuals who were separated from the main body of socialist activity would find themselves linked by the paper. Far from the paper interfering with the task of building the local groups it would give their work the significance of being part of an all-Russian enterprise also connected to the world socialist movement.

³¹<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/index.htm>

³²*ibid*

³³*ibid*

Organisational work would immediately acquire much greater scope, and the success of one locality would serve as a standing encouragement to further perfection; it would arouse the desire to utilise the experience gained by comrades working in other parts of the country. Local work would become far richer and more varied than it is at present. Political and economic exposures gathered from all over Russia would provide mental food for workers of all trades and *all stages of development*.³⁴

The continuity of work provided by the paper was a means by which they could to some extent overcome the constant arrests and the loss of work that accompanied such arrests. 'Indeed, picture to yourselves a very ordinary occurrence in Russia-the total round-up of our comrades in one or several localities.'³⁵ Such round ups meant months of disruption to work. But with Lenin's plan for a revolutionary newspaper a few 'energetic people' could go out with copies and re-establish contact with the circles. The paper featured as part of Lenin's vision from the present necessity of overcoming Tsarist police repression all the way up to the point of an uprising:

On the other hand, picture to yourselves a popular uprising. Probably everyone will now agree that we must think of this and prepare for it. But how?a network of agents that would form in the course of establishing and distributing the common newspaper would not have to 'sit about and wait' for the call for an uprising, but could carry on the regular activity that would guarantee the highest probability of success in the event of an uprising. Such activity would strengthen our

contacts with the broadest strata of the working masses and with all social strata that are discontented with the autocracy, which is of such importance for an uprising. Precisely such activity would serve to cultivate the ability to estimate correctly the general political situation and, consequently, the ability to select the proper moment for an uprising. Precisely such activity would train all local organisations to respond simultaneously to the same political questions, incidents, and events that agitate the whole of Russia and to react to such 'incidents' in the most vigorous, uniform, and expedient manner possible; for an uprising is in essence the most vigorous, most uniform, and most expedient 'answer' of the entire people to the government. Lastly, it is precisely such activity that would train all revolutionary organisations throughout Russia to maintain the most continuous, and at the same time the most secret, contacts with one another, thus creating *real* Party unity; for without such contacts it will be impossible collectively to discuss' the plan for the uprising and to take the necessary preparatory measures on the eve. ³⁶

Fighting oppression

Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter *what class* is affected - unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a Marxist point of view

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ *ibid*

and no other. The consciousness of the working masses cannot be genuine class-consciousness, unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical, political facts and events to observe *every* other social class in *all* the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical, and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis and the materialist estimate of *all* aspects of the life and activity of *all* classes, strata, and groups of the population.³⁷

The working class had to mobilise and respond to all cases of ‘tyranny, oppression, violence and abuse, no matter what class is affected.’ For Lenin a worker was not a Marxist unless they objected to violence against *all* women, pogroms and racism against *all* minorities and stood against *all* oppression. The revolutionary party had to be able to say to all those oppressed by the Tsarist state; ‘We are fighting against all oppression- join the working class in a revolution that will remove the causes of your oppression- the working class is the vanguard battalion in the coalition of all the exploited and oppressed’. The working class needed unity within its own ranks and also to act as a vanguard in the wider battle for democracy and against the Tsar.

Lenin was also making another argument. He had faith that workers could run society and so there was the necessity of workers understanding ‘*all* the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical, and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis.’ The fight against oppression mattered, not only in order to destroy oppression, but also, because the working class would understand the relation of every class in society and its own special role as the class that can achieve real human freedom.

Those who concentrate the attention, observation, and consciousness of the working class

exclusively, or even mainly, upon itself alone are not Marxists; for the self-knowledge of the working class is indissolubly bound up, not solely with a fully clear theoretical understanding — or rather, not so much with the theoretical, as with the practical, understanding — of the relationships between *all* the various classes of modern society, acquired through the experience of political life. For this reason the conception of the economic struggle as the most widely applicable means of drawing the masses into the political movement, which our Economists preach, is so extremely harmful and reactionary in its practical significance.³⁸

Those who focused the working class on its own navel were ignoring the political tasks of the working class in a future Russian Revolution. The Economists, by suggesting that the strike movement alone would ‘automatically’ produce socialist ideas, were downplaying the fight that must take place within the working class against reactionary ideas.

In order to become a Marxist, the worker must have a clear picture in his mind of the economic nature and the social and political features of the landlord and the priest, the high state official and the peasant, the student and the vagabond; he must know their strong and weak points; he must grasp the meaning of all the catchwords and sophisms by which each class and each stratum *camouflages* its selfish strivings and its real ‘inner workings’; he must understand what interests are reflected by certain institutions and certain laws and how they are reflected. But this ‘clear picture’ cannot be obtained from

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ *ibid*

any book. It can be obtained only from living examples and from exposures that follow close upon what is going on about us at a given moment; upon what is being discussed, in whispers perhaps, by each one in his own way; upon what finds expression in such and such events, in such and such statistics, in such and such court sentences, etc., etc. These comprehensive political exposures are an essential and *fundamental* condition for training the masses in revolutionary activity.'

The Social Democrats's ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but *the tribune of the people*, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth *before all* his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for *all* and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the working class.³⁹

What is to be Done?

In 1907 Lenin wrote that:

What Is To Be Done? is a criticism of the Right wing, which was no longer a literary trend but existed within the Marxist organisation... The central Party bodies, however, were suppressed by the police and could not be re-established. There

was, in fact, no united party: unity was still only an idea, a directive. The infatuation with the strike movement and economic struggles gave rise to a peculiar form of Marxist opportunism, known as 'Economism'.⁴⁰

Lenin was reminding new readers of the pamphlet in 1907 of the context of those older debates. He then said that those who ignored this context and criticised the booklet were mistaken as it had served a purpose at a time of disorganisation.

The basic mistake made by those who now criticise *What Is To Be Done?* is to treat the pamphlet apart from its connection with the concrete historical situation of a definite, and now long past, period in the development of our Party... Today these statements look ridiculous, as if their authors want to dismiss a whole period in the development of our Party, to dismiss gains which, in their time, had to be fought for. To maintain today that *Iskra* exaggerated (in 1901 and 1902) the idea of an organisation of professional revolutionaries, is like reproaching the Japanese, *after* the Russo-Japanese War, for having exaggerated the strength of Russia's armed forces, for having prior to the war exaggerated the need to prepare for fighting these forces. To win victory the Japanese had to marshal all their forces against the probable maximum of Russian forces. Unfortunately, many of those who judge our Party are outsiders, who do not know the subject, who do not realise that *today* the idea of an organisation of professional revolutionaries has *already* scored a complete victory. That victory would have been impossible if this idea had not been

³⁹ *ibid*

⁴⁰ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1907/sep/pref1907.htm>

pushed to the *forefront* at the time, if we had not 'exaggerated' so as to drive it home to people who were trying to prevent it from being realised.⁴¹

Giving people a vision

Revolutionaries were attracted to Lenin's *What is to be Done?* because it argued that their actions mattered, that they could change the world if only they could get themselves organised. It was the duty of revolutionary activists and the advanced workers to lead other workers and the oppressed in an assault on the Tsarist state that would act as a signal for a world-wide working class revolution. Instead of alienation and isolation you could join in a project to reshape the world. It was this vision that inspired an entire generation to become Bolsheviks. Lenin was capable of dreaming of a better world.

'There are rifts and rifts,' wrote Pisarev of the rift between dreams and reality. 'My dream may run ahead of the natural march of events or may fly off at a tangent in a direction in which no natural march of events will ever proceed. In the first case my dream will not cause any harm; it may even support and augment the energy of the working men.... There is noth-

ing in such dreams that would distort or paralyse labour-power. On the contrary, if man were completely deprived of the ability to dream in this way, if he could not from time to time run ahead and mentally conceive, in an entire and completed picture, the product to which his hands are only just beginning to lend shape, then I cannot at all imagine what stimulus there would be to induce man to undertake and complete extensive and strenuous work in the sphere of art, science, and practical endeavour.... The rift between dreams and reality causes no harm if only the person dreaming believes seriously in his dream, if he attentively observes life, compares his observations with his castles in the air, and if, generally speaking, he works conscientiously for the achievement of his fantasies. If there is some connection between dreams and life then all is well.' Of this kind of dreaming there is unfortunately too little in our movement. And the people most responsible for this are those who boast of their sober views, their 'closeness' to the 'concrete', the representatives of legal criticism and of illegal 'tailism'.⁴²

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/index.htm>