

# *A Farewell to the Vanguard Party or a Return to Leninism?*

*At the Third Congress, in 1921, we adopted a resolution on the organisational structure of the Communist Parties and on the methods and content of their activities. The resolution is an excellent one, but it is almost entirely Russian, that is to say, everything in it is based on Russian conditions. This is its good point, but it is also its failing. It is its failing because I am sure that no foreigner can read it. I have read it again before saying this. In the first place, it is too long, containing fifty or more points. Foreigners are not usually able to read such things. Secondly, even if they read it, they will not understand it because it is too Russian. Not because it is written in Russian – it has been excellently translated into all languages – but because it is thoroughly imbued with the Russian spirit. And thirdly, if by way of exception some foreigner does understand it, he cannot carry it out. This is its third defect. I have talked with a few of the foreign delegates and hope to discuss matters in detail with a large number of delegates from different countries during the Congress, although I shall not take part in its proceedings, for unfortunately it is impossible for me to do that. I have the impression that we made a big mistake with this resolution, namely, that we blocked our own road to further success. As I have said already, the resolution is excellently drafted; I am prepared to subscribe to every one of its fifty or more points. But we have not learnt how to present our Russian experience to foreigners. All that was said in the resolution has remained a dead letter. If we do not realise this, we shall be unable to move ahead.<sup>1</sup>*

## I

In the last issue of *Workers Action* Nick Davies dealt with the question of ‘what kind of organisation should Marxists be building’, and argued that Marxists ‘have to break from the traditional Leninist model and find a new and more relevant way of working.’<sup>2</sup>

To begin, it certainly *is* the case that the left needs a ‘fresh start’: given the record of the European and north American revolutionary left over the last thirty years, any revolutionary socialist who really did not believe that it was necessary to question the accepted orthodoxies of building revolutionary socialist organisations would appear to be signally out of touch with the real world. Nick must therefore be congratulated on raising the questions that he does, for it is increasingly clear that ‘business as usual’ is no longer a tenable option for us. Yet, as we all know, the road to hell is often paved with good intentions, and the well-meant spirit of a ‘ruthless criticism of everything existing’ runs the danger of the baby going off with the bathwater.

The standard critique of what is normally taken to be Leninist orthodoxy, which Nick goes some way in accepting on my reading of his article, is this. Lenin’s strictures as to the type and functioning of revolutionary organisation were if not exclusively then at least principally a product of the conditions of Russian absolutism in which the RSDLP had to operate. A tight organisation of conspiratorial revolutionaries, however, while

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For references to citations of Lenin the English version of the fourth Russian edition of the *Collected Works*, 47 volumes (Moscow: Progress, 1960-1970) is hereafter abbreviated to *LCW*.

<sup>1</sup> V. I. Lenin, ‘Five Years of the Russian Revolution and the Prospects of the World Revolution: Report to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International’, *LCW* vol. 33, pp. 430-1.

<sup>2</sup> *Workers Action* 22 (Summer 2003), 26.

appropriate to *these* conditions, can only result highly over-centralised and undemocratic organisations run by self-appointed leadership cliques unable to relate to the real class struggle and real processes of radicalisation when applied to conditions of bourgeois-democratic openness. We thus need to find new ways to organise as revolutionaries, and, in our search for new methods in the enlightened bourgeois democracies of the twenty-first century, Lenin's approach, developed in opposition to an absolutism that firmly belonged in nineteenth, can have little to say to us.

Of course, the argument does not usually stop here. Logically, the debate cannot remain focused for long on the *form* of the revolutionary organisation without taking some account of its *function*. For in the cross-hairs of the begrudgers of Leninist 'democratic centralism' is also the strategy of Leninist 'insurrectionism': Lenin's revolutionary party, the argument runs, had to exist in the form of a centralist instrument, for its enemy, the Russian absolutist state, also had the same form. And as absolutism could only be overthrown through crude insurrection in these conditions the party took the form that it did precisely *because* it was an instrument of such a political strategy. But this is not the case in the more developed and complex institutional and ideological system of capitalist rule in the 'west': the traditional Leninist 'insurrectionist' strategy, an instrument sufficient to blast through the outworks of early twentieth-century Tsarism, is a weapon too blunt and brutal to finish with the sophisticated and bedded-in bulwarks of bourgeois rule in the greatly more developed bourgeois-democratic sector. Thus Leninism has to be rejected, or at least very significantly modified, on more than one front: not only in terms of its prescriptions for party organisation but also with respect to its very strategy for overthrowing capitalism itself. Indeed, the critique of Leninism ultimately has to take this dual form, for in the relation between politics and organisation form does indeed follow function, even if in a dialectical way: the working class constructs the organisations it needs, according to what it must do. And the proof of this particular pudding too lies in the eating: Lenin's Bolshevism was the supremely effective instrument for the elimination of antediluvian Russian Tsarism (even if super-centralism harboured the germs of the Stalinist monster that was to come) in precisely the same way that it has been signally incapable of unseating bourgeois rule in the 'west', and the continuing and seemingly impenetrable resilience of capitalism, alongside the wreckage of the post-1968 revolutionary left, stand grim testament to this logic.

This argument is of course hardly new. Not only was it the *raison d'être* of what came to be called Eurocommunism, but long before the current debates on 'moving on' it had already penetrated the thinking of a good part of the revolutionary left: the 'strategy of dual power' advanced by the European leadership of the USec in the 1970s was precisely founded in this kind of reasoning, and the need to develop a more 'sophisticated' Marxism than simple Leninism in 'western' countries appeared axiomatic in the conceptions of the English-speaking New Left as it emerged in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

That these arguments have the currency that they do is indeed a reflection of the parlous state of the revolutionary left, for not only are they based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what Lenin's contribution to Marxist theory and practice really is, but they display a profound incapacity to grasp how it will be that capitalism must be overcome and the consequent exigencies for revolutionary organisation. As such, a 'moving-on' of this type represents not a fresh start but a retreat from the very fundamentals that make us Marxists in the first place. The rest of what follows here is an attempt at a justification of this judgement.

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<sup>3</sup> The 'strategy of dual power' is most cogently expressed in the writings of Ernest Mandel: see, for example, 'Ernest Mandel: A Political Interview', *New Left Review* 100 (November 1976-January 1977), especially pp. 98-9 and pp. 111-3. The most lucid spokesperson of the English-speaking New Left was of course Perry Anderson. His most developed exposition of the need for a revolutionary strategy in the 'west' that goes beyond 'insurrectionism' is to be found in his 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' in the same issue of *New Left Review* as that of Mandel's interview, but it was an idea already prefigured in his thinking as far back as the early 1960s – see his 'Problems of Socialist Strategy', in Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn (eds.), *Towards Socialism* (London, 1965), p. 240.

## II

To begin to deal with the flaws of the argument above adumbrated it is necessary to look at what ‘Leninism’ really is. Bolshevism, literally understood, itself appeared as a distinct political trend with the *de facto* political split at the second congress of the RSDLP in 1903,<sup>4</sup> ostensibly over the differing definitions of Lenin and Martov on the definition of party membership. In this respect, therefore, if we take Leninism as synonymous with Bolshevism, as we should, then its foundational text is Lenin’s own *What is to Be Done?*<sup>5</sup>, even if its writing predated the congress. Of course, the full ramifications of the Bolshevik-Menshevik split were not to become apparent until later – especially the case with regard to the outbreak of the First World War and the collapse of the Second International (considerations that lie outside the scope of this article). However, the post-1903 evolution of Bolshevism, I would argue, was precisely predicated on the ramifications of the theory of the revolutionary party that Lenin elaborated in *What is to be Done?* in 1902 and fought for in the Congress of 1903 and beyond.<sup>6</sup>

But where did Bolshevism itself come from? How did it relate to the broader development of revolutionary ideas in Russia? Now, Marxism itself as such had emerged in Russia – or, more accurately, it was first propagated in exile by Russian émigrés – in the form of a conscious and deliberate break with revolutionary populism, in the words of one commentator ‘Russia’s first indigenous socialist ideology.’<sup>7</sup> Populism – if it can be summed up in such a simple way – took the form of a rejection of the idea, common amongst the liberal intelligentsia, that Russia was an inherently and peculiarly backward society that needed to undergo a European-type process of capitalist development. Rather, it was projected – most clearly by Herzen – that Russia could bypass a capitalist stage of development altogether on the path to socialism. In good part it was the perceived peculiarities of Russian social development, in particular the nature of the peasant commune, that provided the historical basis for this view. As populism developed into a fully-fledged – if still relatively minuscule – political movement by the 1870s, this central conception of the significance of the peasantry in the revolution, founded on the view of the peasant commune as proof of the collectivist tradition of the great mass of the Russian people, and bolstered to a certain degree by the influence of anarchist conceptions of mass spontaneity, led to the celebrated 1874 ‘turn to the people’. The manifest and dispiriting failure of this attempt at mass propaganda, directed at a largely bewildered peasantry, prompted an advance in populist ideology along two lines: first, a move towards forcing a confrontation with the state (increasingly viewed in populist circles as the main Russian capitalist-inducing institution); and second, on the need to develop better and more effective forms of organisation. These conceptions led directly to the formation in 1876 of *Zemlya i Volya* (Land and Liberty) which embraced the necessity of insurrection, and, increasingly, the efficacy of the ‘propaganda of the deed’.<sup>8</sup>

In 1879 the movement split, bequeathing *Narodnaya Volya* (People’s Will), an increasingly centralised organisation focused on acts of terrorism against state officials (and which was ultimately successful in 1881 in its attempts to assassinate the Tsar himself); and the minority *Chernyi Peredel* (Black Repartition) group, which opposed the growing stress on armed action in favour of propaganda. This latter organisation is of significance for our purposes since in 1883, as a wave of state reaction threatened to crush the indigenous populist movement, an exiled group of its leaders, Plekhanov, Axelrod and Zasulich prominent among them, established themselves as the ‘Emancipation of Labour’ group and declared for Marxism.

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<sup>4</sup> For stylistic convenience, the words ‘party’, ‘faction’, ‘current’ and so forth will be used rather loosely to denominate ‘Bolshevism’ in what follows. For the sake of precision then, let us reiterate that technically Bolshevism over 1903-12 was not a party but a faction of a party — the RSDLP. For my part I find the distinction a little pedantic: 1903-12 Bolshevism, if not a party *de jure*, behaved very much like one *de facto*.

<sup>5</sup> ‘What is to be Done?’, *LCW*, vol. 5 (1961), pp. 347-529.

<sup>6</sup> I am therefore not in agreement with the view, most clearly expressed by Neil Harding in his *Leninism* (London, 1996), pp. 7-10, that the origins of ‘Leninism’ are to be located solely by reference to Lenin’s response to the outbreak of the First World War, significant though this was.

<sup>7</sup> Teodor Shanin, *Russia as a Developing Society* (London, 1985), p. 213.

<sup>8</sup> See the account in Teodor Shanin (ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (London, 1983), pp. 8-13.

Thus Marxism in Russia was at birth founded on the basis of a conscious and deliberate break with populist orthodoxies; what can be seen as its founding texts – Plekhanov’s *Socialism and Political Struggle* (1883) and *Our Political Controversies* (1885)<sup>9</sup> – attempted to develop a scientific account of the development of Russian capitalism *designed* to refute the perceived errors of populism. Central to the conceptions advanced by Plekhanov was the view that Russia was a backward and barbarous country: before any idea of an advance to socialism could be even considered, a long supervening process of capitalist industrialisation and westernisation was necessary. The precondition for this was to be a bourgeois-democratic – not socialist – revolution: the working class in Russia would be forced to play the role of supporting the liberal bourgeoisie in over-turning absolutism and establishing a constitutional, parliamentary state. The peasantry, communal or otherwise, was seen not as a revolutionary asset in the struggle against Tsardom but as a backward and reactionary force. Thus the Marxism advanced by Plekhanov and his co-thinkers contradicted populism on practically every vital point; and the prospect of the necessity of capitalist development, the consequent class character of the revolution and the leading forces within it, and this view of the nature and role of the peasantry were the founding orthodoxies of Marxism in Russia.

Thus it is intriguing to note that on these questions Plekhanov was something more of an ‘orthodox Marxist’ than Marx had been. In a polemic directed at the populist theorist Mikhailovsky in 1877, Marx had objected to the accusation that he wanted to transpose on Russia the process of ‘primitive accumulation’ described in *Capital*. Marx disagreed: ‘It is absolutely necessary for [...] [Mikhailovsky] to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed [...]’<sup>10</sup> Even more suggestively, in his 1881 letter to Vera Zasulich, Marx was to argue that:

In analysing the genesis of capitalist production [in *Capital*] I say:

‘At the core of the capitalist system, therefore, lies the complete separation of the producer from the means of production ... the basis of this whole development is the *expropriation of the agricultural producer*. To date this has not been accomplished in a radical fashion anywhere except in England... But *all the other countries of Western Europe* are undergoing the same process’ [...].

Hence the historical inevitability of this process is *expressly* limited to the *countries of Western Europe*. [...]

Hence the analysis provided in *Capital* does not adduce reasons either for or against the viability of the rural commune, but the special study I have made of it, and the material for which I drew from original sources, has convinced me that this commune is the fulcrum of social regeneration in Russia, but in order that it may function as such, it is necessary to eliminate deleterious influences which are assailing it from all sides, and then ensure for it the normal conditions of spontaneous development.<sup>11</sup>

Thus Marx expressed a far greater degree of flexibility with regard to the possibilities for Russian development in the light of its concrete and specific historical circumstances than did Plekhanov’s rather more abstract schemas. In fact, the rather mechanical ‘evolutionism’ being advanced by Plekhanov seemed to have more in common with the brand of Marxism that was beginning to emerge in the Second International, and which was to be associated with the ‘revisionism’ of Bernstein: a Marxism that was to develop the structural weaknesses that were to result in the practical disintegration of the International in 1914 and against which the more mature Lenin was to be in the forefront of opposing on the international plane. Nevertheless, Plekhanov’s conceptions predominated in the nascent Russian movement, and it was out of this movement that the historic split of 1903 produced both Bolshevik and Menshevik factions.

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<sup>9</sup> Georgi Plekhanov, ‘Socialism and the Political Struggle’, *Selected Philosophical Works*, 5 volumes (Moscow: Progress, 1974-1980), vol. 1 (1974), pp. 49-106; ‘Our Political Controversies’, *ibid.*, pp. 107-352.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Letter to *Otechestvenniye Zapiski*’, *Collected Works*, vol. 24, p. 200.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Marx to Vera Zasulich’, *Collected Works*, vol. 46 p. 71. Earlier drafts of this letter are to be found in Karl Marx, ‘Drafts of the Letter to Vera Zasulich’, *Collected Works*, vol. 24 pp. 346-371.

### III

As is well known, the split between the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions was precipitated by the debate over the two different conceptions of party membership advanced by Martov and Lenin. Respectively: ‘A member of the [...] Party is one who accepts its programme and supports it both materially and by regular co-operation under the leadership of one of its organisations’; and: ‘A member of the party is one who accepts its programme, and supports it both materially and by personal participation in one of its organisations.’<sup>12</sup>

The differences between these two formulations appear to be small. Yet behind them lay fundamentally different, if as yet incipient, conceptions of the nature of the coming revolution and the role to be played by the party within it. The content of Lenin’s views as a codification of party practice were both fundamental and new, and represented the beginnings of a decisive break with not only the organisational but the political conceptions of Russian social-democracy.<sup>13</sup>

Central to Lenin’s argument were his views on spontaneity and consciousness. Now, the ostensible target of *What is to be Done?* was the trend known as ‘economism’, which stressed the importance of the day-to-day, economic and trade union aspects of working class struggle, positing as a virtue the spontaneous development of working class consciousness. Against this conception, Lenin offered a number of critical arguments. Most importantly, he stressed that the working class, left to its own devices, was unable to develop social-democratic – meaning revolutionary socialist – consciousness, only what he termed ‘trade union consciousness’. That is, simply by virtue of its conditions of life under capitalism, there was no automatic mechanism which prompted the working class to revolutionary conclusions. Thus: ‘The working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness’, or, more strongly: ‘The spontaneous working-class movement is by itself able to create (and inevitably does create) only trade-unionism, and working-class trade-union politics is precisely working-class bourgeois politics.’<sup>14</sup> Socialist consciousness had to be introduced into the working class struggle from *without*. This is what was most fundamental and new about Lenin’s theory, and which lay at the core of his – soon to be literally Bolshevik – politics.

It is interesting that Lenin used two different arguments in *What is to be Done?* to justify his position.<sup>15</sup> First, he approvingly quoted Kautsky (as he was wont to do in this period) to this effect:

Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. [...] The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the *bourgeois intelligentsia*: it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated to the more intellectually developed proletarians who, in their turn, introduced it into the proletarian class struggle [...].

In this conception, ‘within’ and ‘without’ are conceived of in terms of social class, and it is the bourgeois intelligentsia – not the working class unaided – that is able to develop socialist consciousness. This argument is often used as evidence for the claim that Lenin’s model was elitist and exclusionary. But there is, of course, more than one way to read it. As a description of what had really happened historically, there is in fact a good deal of truth to it: Marxism, as a body of thought, had indeed been developed by bourgeois or petty bourgeois intellectuals, albeit in concrete conditions of developing capitalism and manifest class struggle. But it is also possible to read this argument in a *prescriptive* way, as a template for, quite literally, ‘what is to be done’. It was of course not the case that Lenin’s intention was to argue for a party of the bourgeois intelligentsia, the better to

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<sup>12</sup> Cited in E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> And, as Carr insists, the relationship between Lenin’s formulation and his theories on party organisation was both understood and acknowledged at the congress (Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, p. 41).

<sup>14</sup> ‘What is to be Done?’, p. 375, p. 437.

<sup>15</sup> For an excellent dissection of Lenin’s argumentation in *What is to be Done?*, see Norman Geras, *Literature of Revolution: Essays on Marxism* (London: Verso, 1986), pp. 177-93.

bring to the masses socialist consciousness: far from it, his prescription was for a party of ‘professional revolutionaries’. In fact, the whole history of both Bolshevism and Lenin’s own activity rules out such a prescriptive reading of this conception. And, of course, we should note that the argument was not in fact Lenin’s, but Kautsky’s; Lenin accepted it, and repeated it, but it did not originate with him: it was not his innovation.

But this is not the only argument that Lenin used. Later in the text he argued that:

The basic error that all the Economists commit [...] [is] their conviction that it is possible to develop the class political consciousness of the workers *from within*, [...] from their economic struggle [...].

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. The sphere from which it alone is possible to obtain this knowledge is the sphere of relationships of *all* classes and strata to the state and the government, the sphere of the interrelations between *all* classes.<sup>16</sup>

Here, ‘within’ and ‘without’, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ are defined not in terms of social class but as a function of the distinction between the partial, and the global. Sectional struggles, trade union struggles for example, ‘organically’ only lead to sectional, partial consciousness: what the working class needs, therefore, is a centralising, totalising instrument – a revolutionary party – to unify the experiences of its multifarious, partial struggles. For Lenin, the revolution will require at some point a confrontation with the centralised state; the working class, as a consequence, needs its own instrument of political centralisation. This was Lenin’s fundamental innovation, a re-assertion of the political element of socialist strategy, founded on the conception of the revolutionary party as a pro-active, subjective political instrument. It was this conception which marked such a sharp break with the evolutionist, objectivist conceptions developed by Russian social-democracy in its own break from populism; although it was not at this stage explicitly formulated as such – the fundamental content of the break was only to become apparent over the course of the next decade and a half.

But why should the working class need a centralising – understood politically – instrument? Why would the working class, without this weapon of organisation, only be capable of developing partial – ‘trade union’ – consciousness? The key is that capitalist social relations do not automatically reveal themselves as they really are: the laborious excavations undertaken by Marx in *Capital*, for example – a project to which he devoted the best part of his life – were precisely necessary because of the mystificatory nature of capitalist social relations. The nature of the exploitation and oppression suffered by a peasant is different from that experienced by a capitalist wage-earner: it is clear to the peasant that she is exploited, even if it may appear that such exploitation arises from the ‘natural order’ of things, but the nature of the exploitation of the oppressed in capitalist societies is not readily obvious at the level of surface appearances. In order to unmask the real nature of the workings of capitalist social relations a level of theoretical – scientific – understanding is necessary.

Intrinsic to capitalist social relations is that the ideas that ‘organically’ arise on the basis of the appearance of bourgeois society – and which are, in this sense ‘partially’ correct – are insufficient in themselves for the development of revolutionary socialist consciousness, and are, moreover, not organically amenable to self-correction: meaning that full socialist consciousness needs a theoretical – scientific – understanding of the global relations making up bourgeois society. Such a scientific understanding was for Lenin, predicated on organisation: the theoretical understanding that was necessary was impossible to achieve without a revolutionary party. Or to put it another way, what Lenin meant by ‘revolutionary party’ was the type of organisation that would bring this process about. It was, in turn, on this theoretical innovation – summarised in *What is to be Done?* – that the entire remaining course of his political evolution was predicated.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> ‘What is to be Done?’, pp. 421-22.

<sup>17</sup> It is not the case that this phenomenon is exclusive to mechanisms of social exploitation, but is something that appears at all levels of bourgeois society. To take one example. It is axiomatic for Marxists that the struggle for socialism is an international one. But this is not something miraculously revealed as true: the continuing attraction of the idea that the movement to socialism can take a national road – whether understood in its social-democratic or Stalinist form – is testament to this. But the idea that the construction of socialism can take a national form is something that naturally arises

There is a fundamental point that needs to be registered here. There is a qualitative difference between the type of organisation that Lenin suggests - a type of organisation that has to be consciously fought for - and that which 'organically' develops within capitalist society, and, as a consequence, which normally obtains within the working class movement. For the consequence of the modus operandi of the classic social-democratic type organisations (of which the Communist Parties form a sub-group) is not to engender the type of totalisation that Lenin envisages as essential for the development of revolutionary socialist consciousness but precisely to reinforce and institutionalise the sectoral divisions that organically arise within bourgeois society, be they functional ('parliamentarism'), national, or vertical and horizontal sectoralism. Indeed, the very structure of social democratic organisations mitigates against totalisation: if the phenomenon of bureaucracy broadly understood can be said to have a functional characteristic then it is precisely this: that it arises from degrees of 'partial' consciousness and acts as a block to their supersession. Moreover, such forms of organisation, arising as they do on the basis of partial, sectoral, consciousness, themselves are the organic and natural forms of political organisation that bourgeois society prompts: without conscious political struggle for the revolutionary party as a totalising instrument the working class movement will spontaneously throw up bureaucratic and conservatising social-democratic type political organisations. If the contour of the struggle to build a revolutionary party can be summed up in one sentence, then it is the struggle to break free from and overcome the limitations of this partial and sectoral consciousness that the working class movement develops organically within bourgeois society and which finds its reflection in the type of political organisations that it spontaneously produces. It is against this necessity that particular attempts to build revolutionary parties can be judged in terms of (relative) success or failure, against the degree to which they have been successful in overcoming the limitations of partial conceptions of the struggle for socialism.

#### IV

Thus it is not the case that Lenin's prescriptions regarding political organisation were developed solely with reference to conditions in Tsarist Russia. What we find in Lenin is a method, a theory of organisation: a theory based on an understanding not of the specificities of Russian society but on how capitalism works in general. Nevertheless, it is true that the specific features of Russian society at the beginning of the twentieth century impacted on how the party functioned, but it is not the case that as a consequence of this we can differentiate different types of Leninism: pre-1905, 1905-07, post-1917, etc. What we see is periods in which, for contingent reasons, it is more or less possible to apply the method of organisation to its fullest extent. It is necessary to differentiate between the particular, and the general, in Lenin's writings.

But what of the argument that Lenin's party, a political centralising instrument, is specifically suited to a frontal confrontation with the state, a strategy for socialism that is inapplicable to societies with a developed tradition of bourgeois democracy; that in such societies simple insurrectionism is an insufficiently sophisticated weapon for unseating the bourgeoisie? Is it not the case that we need to develop a 'differential' strategy of insurrectionism for societies where we are confronted with a centralist, undemocratic state structure, and a more 'Gramscian'

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from the very nature of bourgeois society: without an a priori theoretical commitment to the conception of the capitalist mode of production as a global phenomenon, the idea that the struggle for socialism is a national one is not such a strange one. The fundamental idea of revolutionary strategy is that the precondition for social advance is the prior capture of state power. Yet the states that we face are precisely national and not international. In this sense the struggle for socialism does have a national aspect, in that the proletariat must first deal with the national bourgeois state with which it is confronted. And, on the basis of *surface appearances*, are we not faced with a national bourgeoisie, a national capitalism, a national economy, and national classes? The idea that it is possible spontaneously to come to the judgement of a *world* stage of capitalist development a priori theoretical - 'scientific' - understanding of the global modus operandi of the capitalist mode of production would be 'spontaneism' on a grand scale. The conception of the struggle for socialism as essentially a national one is as much an example of partial consciousness - 'trade-union consciousness' - as the view of the supporters of 'economism' that the economic struggle within the factories alone was sufficient.

strategy for building some kind of working class counter-hegemony prior to the assault on the bulwarks of capitalist rule in societies where we confront a developed system of bourgeois democracy?

Again the argument is false, for it betrays a fundamentally national conception of revolutionary strategy. The record of the revolutionary struggles of the twentieth century indicate that the socialist revolution will not allow itself to be neatly compartmentalised in to 'western' and 'eastern' sectors.

It is certainly the case that a consideration of the parameters of revolutionary strategy that underestimates the role of ideology and culture in societies under the rule of the bourgeoisie – in a bourgeois democratic system or otherwise, and let us remember that Russian absolutism did not suffer a lack of ideological devices with which to dazzle the proletariat and, especially, the peasantry – will fall short of the necessities of the socialist revolution. But there is a wider problem in relation to the phenomenon of bourgeois-democratic hegemony, for it is not just the case that the efficacy of bourgeois democracy effects a hypnotic attraction on the masses of the countries in which it is operative, but also evidently true that its attractive power also operates on an *international* level: few have been the countries in which the masses have recently lived under dictatorship of one form or another in which they have not looked with expectant hope and envious eyes towards the bourgeois democracies of the 'west'. The experience of the collapse of the 'people's democracies' teaches us this, for example; as does the struggle against apartheid. Misleadership alone surely is not the problem here: while leaders willing to preach the efficacy of bourgeois democracy have not been wanting it is also clear that it has not been necessary to force feed the masses the idea. (Maybe this is the real lesson of the failure to transform the collapse of the southern European dictatorships in the mid-1970s into consummated socialist revolutions.) In this respect the very universal international ubiquity of the 'bourgeois democracy problem' in itself mitigates against a conceptual division of the socialist revolution into eastern and western sectors.

But, of course, the mechanisms of ideology and culture are not the only underpinnings of bourgeois democracy. In western Europe, for example, what is central to the workings of bourgeois democratic systems is the existence of entrenched labour bureaucracies and social democratic parties. Whatever deficiencies bourgeois democracy has in the eyes of the masses, the existence of labour movements offers hope of amelioration of their concerns through recourse to the mechanisms of parliament. Conversely, of course, against whatever fear of the modern labour movements that the bourgeoisies hold, the structural existence of labour bureaucracy offers them hope of containing the demands arising from the working class within the framework of bourgeois rule.

The absence of a treatment of the concrete problem of labour bureaucracy in the conceptions of the European sections of the Fourth International, of which Mandel was the chief and most public spokesman, is well known. Indeed, the 'strategy of dual power' advanced in the 1970s by the sections of the International played the role of a substitute for an adequate strategic conception of building revolutionary parties capable of providing a counter-weight to the labour bureaucracies and the social democratic parties. Equally, the phenomenon of labour bureaucracy forms a central if curious ellipse in the work of Anderson in this period, whatever other merits (and they are indeed substantial) it contains. Whatever insights Mandel and Anderson offer us as to the need to take seriously the specificities of bourgeois rule in the west, their blindness to the phenomenon of labour bureaucracy can only invalidate the utility of their claims.

But there is yet another aspect to this issue. For what is striking about the myriad revolutionary experiences of the twentieth century is that each occurs not singly, country by country, but as a part of an *international wave of capitalist breakdown and revolutionary crisis*. For the breakdown of capitalist rule, like the operation of capitalist economy, is nothing if not international. The core proof of the thesis that classical Leninist insurrectionism applies to the political structures of the west as much as to the east is the German Revolution of 1918-9. Yet the question as to whether the German Revolution would have occurred at all if the Russian Revolution had not preceded it is a moot one. The pattern is recurring in twentieth-century European history: 1914-23, the 1930s, the mid 1940s, 1968-9, the early to mid 1970s – each of these periods witnessed not single *national* revolutionary crises but a crisis of capitalist rule on an *international* scale. The categories of 'east' and 'west' can look a little artificial when set against this observation.

And this is at the heart of the matter. Once a revolutionary crisis does arise, it is clear the necessary task is that

of the old classical Leninist insurrection. But the key question is *not* the precise mechanism of revolution, but the precise mechanism of the *breakdown of bourgeois rule*; the real debate for or against insurrectionism is not centred on what is to be done once revolution breaks out but how the revolution will arrive: a question which has a significant import for what revolutionaries do in the interim.

Now the categories of ‘east’ and ‘west’ do indeed demonstrate a real utility in this area; but ‘east’ and ‘west’ need to be understood not as geographical zones within Europe, but as a metaphor for describing where bourgeois rule is at its weakest (maybe today we should be talking of ‘north’ and ‘south’). For there is another striking and recurring feature of the twentieth-century European socialist revolution: the moment of revolutionary crisis within the international revolutionary wave tends to move from ‘east’ to ‘west’ in this metaphorical sense; that is to say, from periphery to centre. Bourgeois rule breaks at its weakest link.

But where is this periphery – our ‘east’ – to be found? Bukharin once remarked that the socialist revolution broke out first in Russia because Russia was the poorest of the poor; Lenin rebuked him: the socialist revolution broke out in Russia because Russia was the poorest of the rich. Here we have our ‘east’ and ‘west’: the ‘east’, the periphery of bourgeois rule, is not the geographical or economic periphery of capitalism but that geographical area, social sector or political region where the contradictions of bourgeois rule are posed most sharply. Generalised capitalist crisis is a necessary precondition for the outbreak of revolutionary crisis: this cannot be willed into being by subjective revolutionary optimism – capitalism will not wilt before the orator. But when, under the whip of crisis, revolutionary crises do break out they tend to appear first at the weakest social, political or economic point of capitalist rule: in the revolutionary wave at the end of the First World War, from Russia, spreading west; in the mid 1930s, from backward Spain to metropolitan France; in May 1968, from the revolutionary students to the industrial working class; in 1974-5, impelled by the collapse of the remains of the Portuguese empire, from the junior officers of the MFA to the Portuguese peasants and workers. Here we have our east and west: not closed geographical (or national) areas but dialectically related sectors of the international socialist revolution.

How will our east and west in this sense play itself out in the next great revolutionary wave? The future is impossible to predict and difficult to forecast: when the next generalised crisis of bourgeois rule occurs will the spark, the first moment of a new international revolutionary wave, appear first in Latin America, or in the Pacific Rim, or will the dialectic of the permanent revolution play another of its tricks and take us all by surprise once again? We will have to wait and see. We can be reasonably confident, however, that the spark will not flare initially in the core of international capitalism, in western Europe or northern America. But the bush fire of revolution will indeed spread in this direction, as it has done in *each and every one* of the revolutionary waves of the past, bourgeois democracy notwithstanding. And what then proves decisive is the degree to which the working class has been able to build the organisations necessary to deal with the frontal confrontation with the bourgeois state, and this means organisations constructed along the lines of the method that Lenin outlined in *What is to be Done?*

## V

For Lenin, as we have seen, the guiding principle of the revolutionary party was to be Marxism; and for Lenin Marxism was a science: ‘Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.’ And: ‘The role of vanguard fighter can be fulfilled only by a party that is guided by the most advanced theory.’<sup>18</sup> But where does this revolutionary theory, so to speak, come from? Following the conception of the party as a centralising instrument of sectional struggles, the theoretical understanding of the party is itself a product of this political centralisation. After the revolution, summarising the experiences of Bolshevism in a text directed at socialists in the new Communist Parties outside Russia, Lenin asserted that ‘Correct revolutionary theory [...] assumes final

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<sup>18</sup> ‘What is to be Done?’, p. 369, p. 370.

shape only in close connection with the practical activity of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement'.<sup>19</sup> That the development of theory was an ongoing and a practical question is intimated by Lenin's assertion in his own account of the proceedings of the second congress: 'A struggle of *shades* is *inevitable and essential* as long as it does not lead to anarchy and splits, as long as it is confined *within bounds* approved by common consent of all party members.'<sup>20</sup> That the party had to be centralised flowed from the understanding that it needed to develop a global understanding of political struggle; in order to achieve this it also had to allow for open discussion and disagreement – indeed, inevitably and essentially so.

It is essential to recognise the fundamental nature of Lenin's innovation. In Perry Anderson's judgement, with which I agree, Lenin's outlook, 'often seen as simply 'practical' measures, in fact also represented decisive *intellectual* advances into hitherto uncharted terrain.' Lenin 'inaugurated a Marxist science of politics, henceforward capable of dealing with a vast range of problems, which had previously lain outside any rigorous theoretical jurisdiction.'<sup>21</sup> There is, I would argue, in this respect a direct and linear connection between the Lenin of 1902-3 and the Marx of 1844, when the latter, in the first of his Theses on Feuerbach, suggests that 'The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism[...] is that [...] reality[...] is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively.' Marx went on: 'The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth—i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.' 'All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice,' Marx continues, ending with the famous exhortation: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.'<sup>22</sup>

This conception is impossible to overestimate in its fundamental importance for historical materialism. Marxism, so claimed its founders, with whom I find myself in agreement, is a science. What does this mean? Marx and Engels were always at great pains to differentiate their theoretical viewpoint from what they, in the nineteenth century, called 'ideology'. For the founders of Marxism, 'ideology' was those sets of ideas intended to explain reality but which were unable to do so. For Marx and Engels, what was specific to their theory was that it could paint a sufficiently accurate picture of the inner workings of human society that it could be used by humanity to change, *consciously*, the course of human history. It was this very *accuracy* of Marxism that made it scientific, and it was its scientific nature that consequently made it *revolutionary*, for the transition from what Marx called the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom – impossible without international, social, socialist revolution – demands a degree of accurate theoretical *knowledge and consciousness* historically speaking hitherto uncalled for.

But the obvious question is: where does this theory come from, and how do we know that it *is* true? Marx is precisely addressing this matter in 1844: he argues that a 'correct' theoretical understanding comes not from abstract contemplation of society from without but from the active engagement with it from within; and that its correctness is to be measured in terms of its efficacy in changing the world, in the way that theory serves as an

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<sup>19</sup> "Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder', *LCW*, vol. 31, p. 25. Perry Anderson draws out the full significance of the formulation: 'Every clause [...] counts. Revolutionary theory can be undertaken in relative isolation — Marx in the British Museum, Lenin in war-bound Zurich: but it can only acquire a *correct* and *final* form when bound to the collective struggles of the working class itself. Mere formal membership of a party organisation [...] does not suffice to provide such a bond: a *close connection* with the *practical activity* of the proletariat is necessary. Nor is militancy in a small revolutionary group enough: there must be a linkage with the *actual masses*. Conversely, linkage with a mass movement is not enough either, for the latter may be reformist: it is only when the masses are *themselves revolutionary*, that theory can complete its eminent vocation.' (*Considerations on Western Marxism* (London, 1976), pp. 105-6.)

<sup>20</sup> 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back', *LCW* vol. 7, p. 347.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, *Considerations*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth, 1975), pp. 421-23.

effective weapon to this end.<sup>23</sup> When Marxists speak of the unity of theory and practice it is this that they should be referring to, yet it is a conception generally poorly understood.

Marx devoted the greater part of his efforts following his theoretical breakthroughs of the 1840s to a sustained analysis of existing social phenomena: trapped as he and Engels were within the given conditions of the time, they did not develop sustained reflection on the central ideas of the Theses on Feuerbach: they did not elaborate substantially on the relation between theory and practice: they did not, in short develop a theory of *politics*. For classical Marxism, that was to come later. And it came in the form of the revolutionary current within the socialist movement of the Russian Empire, of Bolshevism. Lenin's profile within the received wisdom of Marxism—itsself echoing bourgeois commentary—is very much that of the 'practical politician' rather than the theoretical innovator. Yet to deny the fundamental role of Lenin's work in the development of Marxist *theory* is to seriously debase the latter. If the Marxism of Marx and Engels lacks a theory of politics (understand in the terms that they would themselves understand it, within the parameters of the final Theses on Feuerbach), this was to be supplied by Bolshevism, and by Lenin.

León

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<sup>23</sup> As Marx wrote a year earlier: 'Clearly the weapon of criticism cannot replace criticism of weapons, and material force must be overthrown by material force. But theory also becomes a material force once it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses when it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp things by the root.' *Early Writings*, p. 251.