

# Symposium on Lars Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered*

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## *Historical Materialism* Volume 18, 2010

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## Editorial Introduction

### Symposium on Lars Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered*

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#### **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

Lars Lih's study of Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* demolishes the shared liberal and Stalinist myth of Leninism as an ice-cold ideology of professional and opportunistic revolutionary organisation. He conclusively shows, not only that Lenin's thought had deep roots in the democratic culture of contemporary Marxism, but also that it was predicated upon a strong belief in the revolutionary potential of the working class. Lih's research thus moves the debate about Lenin's contribution to Marxism on from the tired caricatures of the textbooks to focus instead upon his complex relationship to the Marxism of the Second International. By showing that Lenin's Marxism was much more sophisticated and textured than is normally allowed, this debate opens his rich legacy to contemporary re-evaluation.

#### **Keywords**

Lenin, Kautsky, Marxism, Second International, socialism, What Is to Be Done?

Superficially, there appears to be no very good reason why Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* (*WITBD?*) should be numbered amongst the most (in)famous and influential texts of the classical-Marxist tradition. Not only did it address specifically Russian concerns at the turn of the last century, but also, within half a decade of its publication, Lenin stressed that these concerns were of mainly historical interest. Moreover, beyond its local polemics, the main argument of the booklet – that Russia's weak and fragmented Left could be transformed into a strong unified party through the creation of a network of buyers and sellers of a national socialist newspaper – was not particularly novel within the international socialist movement. And, in light of the problems

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1. This essay draws on Blackledge 2006.

associated with untangling the general insights of its arguments from the distinctly Russian colouration of their presentation, in 1921 Lenin questioned the desirability of translating it for non-Russian Communist Parties.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this unassuming provenance, *WITBD?* has come to define 'Leninism', and Lenin's name has perhaps become the primary political connotation of the phrase 'what is to be done?'. Whatever the merits of the book itself, this somewhat bizarre development was a product, first and foremost, of the power-struggle within Russia after Lenin's death. To justify their claims to power in the early to mid-1920s, the triumvirate of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin orchestrated a 'cult of Lenin' in which they, the 'old Bolsheviks', were to be the high priests. As part of this campaign, *WITBD?* was deployed, for instance, by Stalin in *The Foundations of Leninism* (1924) and by Zinoviev in *Bolshevism or Trotskyism?* (1925), as the textual bearer of a definitive and essential 'Leninism'. In the context of Trotsky's criticisms of the lack of democracy within the Communist Party, the triumvirate found it convenient to point out that, amongst other heresies, Trotsky had clashed with Lenin over formally similar criticisms of *WITBD?* two decades earlier. Consequently, for their own short-term political reasons, first the triumvirate and then Stalin alone promoted *WITBD?* as the definitive manual for their own authoritarian model of political leadership. Unappealing as it was, this image of 'Leninism' was quickly embraced by Western liberals as an authentic rendering of Lenin's politics.

If the demise of this 'Leninist' model of political organisation was widely portrayed as a footnote to Fukuyama's 'End of History', the re-emergence of a global anticapitalist movement from the late 1990s onwards reopened Lenin's question, if not his answer. For, even within the anticapitalist milieu, the Stalinist connotations of 'Leninism' have tended to inform a widely accepted assumption that Lenin's proposed cure to the contradictions of capitalism was at least as bad as the disease itself.

By effectively endorsing Stalin's cynical claim to be Lenin's true heir, this common-sense opposition to 'Leninism' not only obscures the process through which the Russian Revolution degenerated, but also that by which the Bolsheviks had previously won hegemony on the Russian Left. As Lars Lih argues in his magnificent study of Lenin's early political thought, a key failing of the standard interpretation of 'Leninism' is that it is almost impossible to conceive of how such a moribund, undemocratic, and dogmatic organisation might have escaped the sectarian wilderness to seriously challenge tsarism. Not only did the Bolsheviks succeed in leading this challenge, they also

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2. Le Blanc 1990, p. 63.

influenced the construction of other mass-parties which posed a credible challenge to capitalism in its European heartlands in the half decade after the First World-War.

These facts alone suggest that we need an account of Lenin's politics that escapes the cardboard-abstractions of 'Leninism'. Such a project is all the more important given the limitations of alternative modes of political theorisation. Commenting upon the social and political irrelevance of much of contemporary political theory, Raymond Geuss recently suggested that if

political philosophy wishes to be at all connected with a serious understanding of politics, and thus to become an effective source of orientation or a guide to action, it needs to return from the present reactionary forms of neo-Kantianism to something like the 'realist' view, or, to put it slightly differently, to neo-Leninism.<sup>3</sup>

The limitations of mainstream (liberal) political philosophy reflect deeper problems liberalism has with the question 'what is to be done?'. If an answer to this question necessarily involves an assessment of where one is, a vision of where one wants to be, and an outline of the agency to bridge the gap between these two states, the positivism of political science lends itself to an impressionistic reconciliation with existing power-relations while the abstract content of political philosophy's normative alternatives leaves its various pseudo-universal oughts safely quarantined from the machinations of real-world politics. These two sides to liberalism are, of course, rooted in its naturalisation of modern capitalist social relations: because liberals assume these to be universal, they tend to conceive *radical* alternatives as mere utopias with no immanent mechanisms through which they might be realised. Consequently, political philosophy tends to a farcical repetition of what Fourier recognised as the moralistic 'impotence in action' of those sections of the Left influenced by classical-German idealism.<sup>4</sup> If, as Geuss suggests, Lenin's question 'who whom?' – which Geuss expands as 'who does what to whom for whose benefit'<sup>5</sup> – points beyond the limitations of contemporary political philosophy, Lih, in his demolition of the myth of 'Leninism', makes a fundamental contribution to an honest historical reassessment of the political consequences of that theoretical breakthrough.

Whatever else it does, by demonising Lenin, the liberal variant of the myth of 'Leninism' tends to obscure his world-historic importance. The Bolsheviks

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3. Geuss 2008, p. 99.

4. Fourier quoted in Marx and Engels 1975, p. 201.

5. Geuss 2008, pp. 23–30.

led a revolution which ended the First World-War on the Eastern Front and acted as a beacon to those who, a year later, did the same in the West. Moreover, Lenin's actions were premised on a theoretical 'renewal' of Marxism that re-emphasised the democratic-revolutionary core of Marx's ideas in the wake of their debasement at the hands of the official leadership of the international socialist movement in 1914.<sup>6</sup> Wartime-antagonists responded to this new situation by throwing aside their old differences in a joint effort to crush the new workers' régime. If this act is evidence of just how much they feared the spirit of revolution spreading from Petrograd, the consequent civil war ensured that the new régime was born in the worst possible circumstances.

The importance of this context to an adequate explanation of the emergence of Stalinism implies that it would be a mistake, as Victor Serge famously argued, to judge Bolshevism by its eventual rotten corpse.<sup>7</sup> Stalin's rule was built not only on the decimation of the Russian proletariat and the defeat of the German Revolution,<sup>8</sup> but also through the destruction of the Bolshevik Party itself.<sup>9</sup> These processes have been downplayed and sometimes entirely dismissed in an approach in which the horrors of Stalinism are easily identifiable on the pages of *WITBD?*: a method Lih labels 'Soviet history made easy'.<sup>10</sup> Although it is unsurprising that right-wing critics of socialism skirt over the social basis of Stalinism, it is less understandable that Serge's plea for understanding has tended to fall on deaf ears even on the radical Left – where tired clichés about the corrupting influence of power and revolutions devouring their children regularly act as substitutes for concrete analyses of Lenin's legacy.

Perhaps 'democratic centralism' is the pivotal concept deployed in criticisms of Lenin's politics. Associated with Stalin's authoritarianism, this concept is typically coupled with *WITBD?* to portray the essence of Leninism, and deployed to bear the weight of explanation for all that went wrong in Russia after 1917. A key problem with this claim, as Lih points out, is that the idea of democratic centralism is neither mentioned in *WITBD?* nor particularly 'Leninist' in its provenance. Moreover, as Paul Le Blanc affirms in his contribution to this symposium, this concept is not even a fundamental tenet of Lenin's politics. Typically, these mere facts have not been allowed to interfere with the ideological medium through which the myth of 'Leninism' has been reproduced in the West: what Lih calls the 'textbook interpretation'. According

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6. Bloch quoted in Anderson 2007, p. 123.

7. Serge 1939.

8. Cohen 1980, p. 123; Harman 1982; Broué 2005.

9. Harris 1978, p. 272.

10. Lih 2006, p. 433.

to Lih, within this interpretation of Lenin's legacy, the concept of textbook operates at two complementary levels. Textbook-histories of the Russian Revolution tend to rip *WITBD?* from its social context to represent it as a textbook on Bolshevik organisation and practice. Thus represented within the textbooks as itself a textbook, *WITBD?* tends to be interpreted as a Rosetta Stone with which Soviet history is easily deciphered.

According to Lih, the substance of the textbook-interpretation of 'Leninism' includes, primarily, the assumption that Lenin had contempt for the intellectual capacities of workers who, allegedly, were incapable of escaping the parameters of bourgeois ideology. This intellectual élitism informed his project of, first, building a party of professional revolutionaries whose job it was to bring socialist ideas to the working class from the bourgeois intelligentsia, after which, in a second moment, these revolutionaries would lead the working class in a top-down manner. Bad enough before the Revolution, the textbooks insist that this perspective led to Stalinism after 1917. Widespread amongst reactionary histories of the Soviet state, this interpretation has also become something of a commonplace across much of the contemporary Left.<sup>11</sup>

Left-wing criticisms of Lenin tend to be framed through reference to a supposed contradiction between Lenin's conception of socialist leadership and Marx's democratic dictum that 'the emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working class itself'. While obviously true of Stalin's 'Marxism-Leninism', Lih points out that, irrespective of Lenin's thoughts on the subject, the claim that leadership is inimical to self-emancipation is not as obvious as a superficial rendering of the question might suggest. On the contrary, because Marx's vision of socialism is rooted in a model of the democratic workers' movement from below, he conceives it as emerging from sectional and fragmented struggles that constantly tend to create and recreate differences between more and less advanced sections of the working-class movement. This process gives rise to an organic conception of socialist leadership. At its heart, Lenin's contribution to Marxism is perhaps best understood as the most systematic attempt to deal with this practical problem. As Lih argues,

Sometimes the dictum [socialism is the self-emancipation of the working class] is viewed as the opposite of the vanguard outlook, but, in actuality, it makes vanguardism almost inevitable. If the proletariat is the only agent capable of introducing socialism, then it must go through some process that will prepare it to carry out that great deed.<sup>12</sup>

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11. See, for instance, the essays collected together in Bonefeld and Tischler (eds.) 2002.

12. Lih 2006, p. 556.

The great strength of Lih's book is that, by crushing the textbook-interpretation of 'Leninism' beneath an avalanche of scholarship, he opens the door to a serious engagement with Lenin's contribution to such a democratic model of socialist leadership.

Lih argues that, once adequately contextualised, Lenin's argument in *WITBD?* is best understood as the diametric opposite of that presented in Russian-history textbooks. It was Lenin's opponents rather than Lenin who dismissed the socialist potential of the Russian workers – accusing him of 'being over-optimistic about the possibility of proletarian awareness and organisation'. Lenin replied, as Lih paraphrases him, with the claim that

worker militancy is not the problem because it is increasing in leaps and bounds all on its own. The problem, the weak link, is effective party leadership of all this militancy. *Iskra* very properly focuses attention precisely on this problem – on Social-Democratic deficiencies, not worker deficiencies.<sup>13</sup>

If the great and powerful contribution of Lih's book is its demolition of the underlying assumptions of the textbook-interpretation of Leninism, the debate on the pages that follow tends to focus on his claim that the interpretations of Lenin written by what Lih calls 'activists' – he focuses on the work of Tony Cliff, John Molyneux, and Paul Le Blanc, but also mentions important contributions by Ernest Mandel and Marcel Liebman – have been marred, at least partially, by their more or less tacit acceptance of large chunks of the myth of *WITBD?*

There are two key aspects to this debate. First, there is the matter of fact about the extent to which various activists, more or less influenced by the writings of Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, and Georg Lukács, actually embraced something like the textbook-interpretation. Second, there is the more nuanced issue of Lenin's relationship to Kautsky generally, and the idea that he formulated a model of a party of a 'new type' more specifically. Here, both sides agree that Lenin thought himself an orthodox Kauskyist right up to 1914. However, as Chris Harman argues in his contribution to the symposium, there is a divergence between the activists and Lih about the extent to which there was a growing *practical* separation between what Lenin and Kautsky did in the two decades leading up to the First World-War – a separation that was only adequately theorised after the political split between the two at the outbreak of war.

As to Lenin's relationship to Kautskyism, it is perhaps illuminating to point to an ambiguity in the oft-repeated claim that Lenin built a 'party of a new

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13. Lih 2006, pp. 316–17.

type'. This seemingly innocuous phrase was never deployed by Lenin himself, but was coined by Stalin in his *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1939). According to Stalin, the 'ideological foundations' of this new type of party were first formulated in *WITBD?* and finally realised in 1912 when the Bolsheviks 'purged the proletarian party of the filth of opportunism and succeeded in creating a party of a new type, a Leninist Party'.<sup>14</sup> Lih paraphrases this account of the model of a party of a new type as being 'hyper-centralised, confined to a few "professional revolutionaries" recruited amongst the intelligentsia, and dedicated to conspiracy'.<sup>15</sup> If authors such as Alexander Rabinowitch<sup>16</sup> have debunked the myth that the Bolshevik Party was actually organised along these lines in 1917, Lih shows in exhaustive detail that, far from having a clearly thought-out alternative to Kautskyism, Lenin conceived his own role in the decades up to 1914 as one of applying to Russian conditions the party-building philosophy outlined by Kautsky in the Erfurt Programme (1891).

While Lih's general point is undoubtedly true, and despite the Stalinist provenance of the phrase 'party of a new type', a number of the contributors to this symposium point to a tacit break with orthodoxy. On the one hand, Robert Mayer suggests that Lenin's formulations opened his ideas to authoritarian misrepresentation, while, on the other hand, the (Trotsky-inspired) 'activists' tend to agree that Lenin did in effect build a new kind of party before 1914, but that this organisation had precious little in common with Zinoviev's and Stalin's ideology of 'Leninism'. Consequently, as opposed both to Mayer's claim that Lenin's formations opened the door to Stalinist distortion and Lih's suggestion of a strong continuity between Kautsky and Lenin, the activists tend to follow Lukács in positing deep theoretical and political roots to the 1914 split between Kautsky and Lenin which pointed to a new and profoundly *democratic* form of political organisation. Concretely, as Alan Shandro points out in his contribution to the symposium, this division emerged out of the struggle for hegemony against reformism – economism as its Russian variant. According to Lukács, whereas 'the Second International... was able to commit itself to many things in theory without feeling the least compelled to bind itself to any particular line in practice', because Lenin orientated to the revolution as a real living 'actuality' rather than a far-distant myth, 'the development which Marxism thus underwent through [him] consist[ed] merely – merely! – in its increasing grasp of the intimate, visible,

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14. Stalin 1939, Chapter 4.

15. Lih 2006, p. 17.

16. Rabinowitch 2004.

and momentous connexion between individual actions and general... revolutionary destiny of the whole working class'.<sup>17</sup>

Whatever the strengths of the various contributions to this debate, one thing is beyond doubt: Lih's formidable book opens the door to a serious re-engagement with Lenin's politics that escapes the boring clichés of the textbooks. This is important because the issues Lenin engaged with are not of mere academic interest. On the contrary, because activists are constantly confronted with the problem of what to do, if we are to avoid the errors of the past, we must learn from it: and, for the Left, this project includes rescuing the real Lenin from the myth of 'Leninism' so that we can make an honest assessment of what is living and what is dead in his contribution to Marxism.

### **Addendum: Chris Harman**

Chris Harman's contribution to this symposium was written before his untimely death on the eve of his sixty-seventh birthday in November 2009. The arguments of this piece have roots going back at least as far as 1968 when Harman put his PhD to one side while he engaged in a few months' full-time revolutionary activity for the International Socialists (IS). These few months turned into more than four decades of full-time political activity, during which time he played a leading role within, first the IS, and then its successor-organisation the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP). One of Chris's earliest and most important contributions to the IS/SWP was his essay 'Party and Class' published in *International Socialism* in 1968. This essay not only informed the IS/SWP's subsequent political orientation, it also combined Harman's typically deep understanding of the subject-matter with eminently clear and jargon-free presentation. The essay below marks Harman's return to the themes of this article forty years after he first made that fundamental contribution. We are proud to publish it on these pages, most importantly because of Harman's importance as a Marxist, but also because he has been a long-standing friend of *Historical Materialism*. He was a regular contributor both to the journal itself and to our annual conference. Chris was 'above all else a revolutionary'. *Historical Materialism* mourns his loss and dedicates this symposium to his memory.

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17. Lukács 1971, p. 301; Lukács 1970, p. 13.

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## Reconsidering Lenin: What Can Be Said about *What Is to Be Done?*

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### Abstract

Lars Lih's explication of the intended meaning of Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* is not only the most sophisticated to date, it is also unlikely to be surpassed in the foreseeable future. Lih's portrayal of Lenin as a democratic 'Erfurtian' Marxist undoubtedly poses a powerful challenge to those would suggest that Stalinism can be deduced from the arguments of the book. Nonetheless, there exists contemporary evidence to suggest that not only Mensheviks but also some Bolsheviks interpreted Lenin in a way not too dissimilar from what Lih calls the 'textbook-interpretation'.

### Keywords

consciousness, hegemony, intelligentsia, party, spontaneity, workers

Lars Lih has written a big book about a little book, and, in doing so, has re-opened and clarified the debates that have centred on an important text now over one hundred years old. *What Is to Be Done?* has been given pride of place as the founding document of Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet system, and international communism. Characterised by one of the most influential opponents of the Left (a former Communist) as containing 'all the essentials of what was later to be known as Leninism' and the doctrinal source of Leninist authoritarianism, the foundation of the Soviet dictatorship,<sup>1</sup> the book's critics from Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky on the Left through to the Cold-War analysts like Philip Selznik and Bertram Wolfe have credited its ideas as the source of intellectual élitism overtaking worker-initiative, a fatal evolution from democracy to dictatorship of the party, and the degeneration of revolutionary promise and hope into Stalinism and totalitarianism.

The origins of the little book lie in the esoteric debates of Russian Social Democrats, who, at the turn of the last century, were faced by a growing but

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1. Conquest 1972, p. 32.

disorganised workers' movement. By May 1901, Lenin was working on a synthetic statement of the position of the Social Democrats around the newspaper *Iskra* [*Spark*] on the rôle of a revolutionary Social-Democratic party. Published in the spring of 1902, *What Is to Be Done?* set out to defend the positions of *Iskra* against the economists and their allies, who argued that workers were primarily interested in the daily struggles for wages and working conditions, that, out of these struggles, they would gravitate spontaneously toward socialism, and accused the *Iskra*-ites of being dogmatic propagandists who were forcing workers into political confrontations. Lenin pleaded for an effective Social-Democratic party, uniting the disparate activities of the dozens of circles and organisations then functioning in an 'amateurish' way inside Russia. Hostile to the terrorism of the populists and the pusillanimous moderation of 'bourgeois' liberals, Lenin called on Russia's workers to participate in the broad social opposition to tsarism and not isolate themselves within their own class-ghettos.<sup>2</sup> Castigating the economists for limiting their attention to the working class alone, Lenin argued that Social Democracy must lead an all-nation, all-class struggle for political emancipation. The task of the party was to expand the outlook of workers from a narrow understanding of their own class-interests to an inclusive vision of the interests of the whole society. Such an expansion could only be achieved by a struggle on the level of theory, a struggle against the tendency of some workers to be concerned solely with their own problems – in other words, a struggle against 'spontaneity [*stiikhinost'*]' and for political consciousness [*soznatel'nost'*].

Lenin broke with those Marxists who believed that the consciousness generated by actually living and working under capitalism was sufficient for workers. 'The history of all countries bears witness,' he wrote in one of his most dramatic but elusive phrases, 'that exclusively by its own forces the working class is in a condition to work out only a *trade-unionist* awareness'.<sup>3</sup> This trade-unionism was not simply economic but also involved a kind of 'bourgeois' politics, expressing workers' interests within the framework of the existing economic and political order. The task of Social Democrats was to assist in the development of political consciousness – the awareness of the need for the political overthrow of autocracy – in the workers, something that would not emerge simply from the economic struggle, but rather from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers, from 'the area of the relations of *all* classes and [social] strata to the state and to the government – the area of the interrelations between *all* classes'.<sup>4</sup> Here, the Social Democrats had a most important rôle to play.

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2. This point is at the centre of the analysis in Tucker 1987.

3. Lih 2006, p. 703.

4. Lih 2006, p. 745.

Lenin did not argue that the working class could not spontaneously gravitate toward socialism, as many of his critics would later claim, nor did he argue that only intellectuals could lead workers. Rather, workers easily assimilate socialist ideas, for they are perfectly aware of their own misery, but, under the conditions of bourgeois cultural hegemony, socialist consciousness faces powerful obstacles. ‘The working class is drawn in *stiikhinyi* fashion to socialism, but nevertheless bourgeois ideology, more broadly disseminated (and constantly resurrected in the most various forms), all the more thrusts itself on the worker in *stikhiinyi* fashion’.<sup>5</sup> Social Democrats must struggle against this kind of spontaneity in order to lead the working-class movement away from a gravitation toward trade-unionism and bourgeois politics. ‘Modern socialism’ – that is, Marx and Engels’s understandings of the dynamics of capitalism and the development of the working class – was the product of intellectuals, and Social Democrats, both intellectuals and advanced workers, would bring that theoretical expression to the working class, which, because of its experience, could easily assimilate it.

Lenin’s stark formulation – that full socialist consciousness under bourgeois hegemony required Social-Democratic intervention – seemed to many of his critics to move beyond the orthodox Plekhanovian synthesis that workers would gravitate naturally to socialism while Social Democrats would merely accelerate that movement. For Lenin, the party of revolutionary Social Democrats was to act neither as a ‘trade-union secretary’ advocating the immediate material interests of workers alone, nor as disconnected leaders independent of the workers, but as tribunes of the whole people, expounding the need for political freedom.<sup>6</sup> Under Russian conditions, the party was to be made up ‘first and foremost of people who make revolutionary activity their profession’, full-time revolutionaries. But Lenin was ‘not proposing any monopoly of decision-making by the revolutionaries by trade’.<sup>7</sup> All distinctions between workers and intellectuals were to be effaced.

The organisation was to be small, as secret as possible, made up of people who understood how to work in the difficult conditions of a police-state. They had to practice *konspiratsiia*, ‘the fine art of not getting arrested’.<sup>8</sup> Lenin concluded his essay with a call for the foundation of a central party-newspaper that would become a collective organiser, linking up local struggles and engaging in political and economic exposures all over Russia. Around the

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5. Lih 2006, p. 712. *Stiikhinyi* is usually translated as spontaneous, but Lih carefully dissects the various meanings of ‘spontaneity’ and prefers to leave this word in the original Russian.

6. Lih 2006, p. 746.

7. Lih 2006, p. 464.

8. Lih 2006, p. 447. Lih shows conclusively that the Russian term *konspiratsiia* should not be confused with the English word *conspiracy*, which is equivalent to the Russian *zagovor*.

newspaper, an ‘army of tried fighters’ would gather, ‘Social Democratic Zheliabovs’, made up not only of intellectuals but of ‘Russian Bebel from among our workers.’<sup>9</sup>

Lenin’s pamphlet was, at one and the same time, a relentless polemic against the critics of *Iskra*, a plea for workers to reflect the aspirations of the whole of society, and an inspirational call for a new relationship between Social Democrats and workers. Unwilling to concede that the current stage of the average worker’s consciousness required socialists to moderate their tactics, he insisted on an active intervention by politically conscious revolutionaries. Lenin refused to confuse the present with the future or to consider the labour-movement one-dimensionally determined by objective-economic forces or fated to fall under the sway of the currently hegemonic ideology of the bourgeoisie. Conscious political activity by leaders, along with changing circumstances, offered broad perspectives for a revolutionary working class. Blame for the failure to develop such a movement was to be placed, not on the workers, but on Social Democrats who were unable to raise socialist consciousness among the rank and file.

The issues laid out in *What Is to Be Done?* had been widely discussed in Social-Democratic circles, but no-one before Lenin had exposed them so starkly. Lenin’s personal political style, which was to have a decisive influence on the Bolshevik wing of Russian Social Democracy, was expressively demonstrated in this book. Here, sharp ideological distinctions, principled divisions, and purity of position were made virtues. Accommodation, compromise, and moderation were thrown aside in favour of an impatient commitment to action. Conciliation [*soglashatel'stvo*] was, in Lenin’s view, a negative quality for a militant revolutionary. Although Bolshevism or Leninism was not yet a fully-formed political tendency, Lenin’s language and proposed practice had an immediate appeal for certain Social-Democratic activists and bred anxiety in others. For the *praktiki* inside Russia, those working with workers or underground presses, like Iosip Jughashvili (the future Stalin), Lenin’s message was inspirational: ‘You brag about your practicality and you do not see (a fact known to any Russian *praktik*) what miracles for the revolutionary cause can be brought about not only by a circle but by a lone individual’.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, as a secret-police report noted, Lenin’s pamphlet

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9. Andrei Ivanovich Zheliabov (1851–81) was a leading populist revolutionary, an adherent of the terrorist People’s Will, executed for participation in the assassination of Alexander II. August Bebel (1840–1913), a founder of the German Social-Democratic Party, began his career as an artisan and ended as a leading politician and theorist of Social Democracy. The reference to ‘Russian Bebel’s’ was to turning workers into Social-Democratic activists.

10. Lenin 1958–65b, p. 107. Lars T. Lih argues convincingly that *What Is to Be Done?* was ‘a pep talk to the *praktiki*’, a challenge to them to carry the socialist word to the masses, which in

soon made ‘a great sensation’ among revolutionary activists in Russia.<sup>11</sup> The young Georgian Social Democrat Avel Enukidze remembers how he convinced a policeman to let him keep a confiscated copy of the book, which he then smuggled into Metekhi Prison in Tiflis after his arrest in September 1902.<sup>12</sup> His comrade Jughashvili read *What Is to Be Done?* sometime later, and his subsequent writings show the profound effect it had on his thinking. The man who would become Stalin was one of those ‘daring and determined’ young men who found in this pamphlet a clear call to the exalted rôle they were to play. ‘[I]t applied to *all of us* in those years’, writes N. Valentinov (Vol’skii).

‘Daring and determination’ were common to us all. For this reason *What Is to Be Done?* struck just the right chord with us and we were only too eager to put its message into practice. In this sense, one may say, we were one hundred per cent Leninists at that time.<sup>13</sup>

At the time it was written, *What Is to Be Done?* was – and remains even more so today – a dense and difficult text that requires deep knowledge of the specific context in which it was written. Its sharp criticisms are directed precisely against opponents within the Marxist movement in Russia at the turn of the century, when differences between various groups, newspapers, and ‘tendencies’ were often subtle and nuanced and more often exaggerated by competing adherents. Lenin was willing to blur distinctions that future historians would be more careful to delineate when he felt essential characteristics revealed underlying affinities between groups. As analytical and programmatic as the pamphlet was, it was also a polemic, written with passion and fierce commitment to a particular vision of what Russian emancipation required. *What Is to Be Done?* was a political intervention at a key-moment in the formation of a Marxist opposition to tsarism autocracy, and it proved to be both foundational in the creation of a Russian Social-Democratic Party and ultimately fatally divisive for those who credentialed themselves as the leaders of the working class.

For the last half century at least, *What Is to Be Done?* has come down to us in what Lars Lih characterises as the ‘textbook-version’. While details and emphases may differ among writers, the general argument centres on Lenin’s pessimism about the potential of workers to become conscious, revolutionary

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1902 were receptive to Social Democracy and already moving toward revolution. See Lih 2003, p. 47.

11. Quoted in Mayer 1996, p. 311. For thoughts about why workers were receptive to Lenin’s ideas, see Reichman 1996, and Zelnik 1976.

12. Enukidze 1923, pp. 133–4.

13. Valentinov 1968, p. 27.

socialists. This ‘worry about the workers’ led Lenin to emphasise consciousness over spontaneity, leadership by the Social-Democratic intelligentsia over the self-activation of the workers, and the development of a ‘party of a new type’, the tight, centralised, conspiratorial party of professional revolutionaries. Lenin’s pessimism and its need for a narrow élitist party is contrasted with Martov and the Mensheviks’ optimism about workers coming to socialist consciousness through their own efforts, guided and assisted by Social Democrats, which led the more moderate wing of Russian Social Democracy to advocate the formation of a broad, inclusive, more democratic political organisation. The textbook-version, then, sees Lenin and Leninism as a break with orthodox Marxism, a populist-tinged deviation, and this deviation as fundamental to the split in the RSDRP, the international socialist movement, and twentieth-century Marxism more broadly. Even more damning, Lih writes:

There has been a persistent effort in Western scholarship to tie Lenin as closely as possible to the Russian revolutionary tradition and, by so doing, to distance him as far as possible from European socialism. The aim, one speculates, is to ‘Orientalise’ Lenin and to make him the voice of a so-called Eastern Marxism: Marx, for all his sins, was a solid European, while Lenin the non-European Russian misunderstood Marx so completely because he was a Russian.<sup>14</sup>

Lih shows that Lenin’s alleged sympathy for the views of Petr Tkachev, the most fitting candidate for the title ‘Russian Jacobin’ or ‘Russian Blanquist’, is based on misreadings and has no basis in the extant evidence.<sup>15</sup> Rather, Lih argues, Lenin was quintessentially ‘European’, in the sense that he was a fervent follower of Karl Kautsky and German Social Democracy.

Perhaps the most impressive and influential presentation of the ‘textbook-version’ is the now-classic work by Leopold H. Haimson, *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism*. The mentor of a generation of American historians of Russia and the Soviet Union – many of whom studied the history of the Marxist and labour-movements, among them Allan K. Wildman, Alex Rabinowitch, Ziva Galili, William G. Rosenberg and (in the interest of full disclosure) myself – Haimson deployed a psychological framing to illuminate how personality and politics combined to form opposing political tendencies, Bolshevism and Menshevism. His own sympathies lay with the Mensheviks, whose history he would continue to explore throughout his career and whose basic contours of analysis he deftly employed in his own interpretation of the

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14. Lih 2006, p. 377.

15. Lih 2006, pp. 377–84.

pre-revolutionary crisis of the tsarist régime. Haimson introduced as a central conceptualisation the distinction embedded in the discourse of Russian *intelligentsia* of ‘consciousness [*soznatel’nost’*]’ versus ‘spontaneity [*stikhiinost’*]’.

It is in this process of dissociation in the psychic life of the members of the *intelligentsia*, just as much as in their alienation as a ‘conscious’ minority from the ‘unconscious’ masses, it is in the contrast between the elevated sentiments that they could incorporate in their world view and the more undisciplined feelings that they attempted to suppress or ignore, that we should look in part for the origin of the duality of *soznatel’nost* and *stikhiinost*, consciousness and elemental spontaneity, the two basic conceptual categories under which so many of the *intelligentsia* were subsequently to subsume the conflicts in their own existence and the evolution of the world around them.<sup>16</sup>

Haimson linked consciousness to a ‘left’ position within the radical *intelligentsia*, expressed in an ‘insistence on the ability of a small elite to remake the world in the image of its consciousness’ and a ‘spontaneity’ to the ‘more adaptive position of the right’ that sought to fuse with the ‘potent’, elemental ‘spontaneous’ forces either of the peasants or the workers. The ‘father of Russian Marxism, Georgii Plekhanov, moved from the sentiments he felt for the peasants to a rational commitment to the proletariat ‘as an instrument of reason, of history, of his will’, in contrast to his comrade Pavl Aksel’rod, who emphasised the ‘free development . . . free maturation’ of the working class as they moved toward consciousness.<sup>17</sup> ‘Lenin, like Plekhanov, attempted to reconcile the imperious demand of his will to mould the world in his own image with an insistence that the revolutionary adapt to the requirements of an objective reality external to the will, external to the self’.<sup>18</sup> But Lenin did not share Plekhanov’s confidence that objective laws of history would inexorably move that external reality toward the desired rational order. Instead, the younger Marxist worried (unlike Martov) that

‘spontaneity’ would be a persistent element in the development of the working class for a long and perhaps indefinite period. . . . Lenin’s new organisational model was designed to secure the overthrow of absolutism by harnessing the persistent ‘spontaneous’ forces in the working class movement, by insuring that these forces would be guided – and economically utilised – by a ‘conscious’ Social Democratic elite.<sup>19</sup>

16. Lih 2006, p. 8.

17. Lih 2006, p. 45.

18. Lih 2006, p. 46.

19. Lih 2006, p. 138.

Haimson's Lenin was a man of great passion, often undone by his strong emotions, who fought with himself to restrain his affective side with his reason and will. The conscious historical actor, Lenin himself and right-thinking Social Democrats, were essential for the success of the revolution. Haimson makes a strong claim about Lenin's élite leadership-rôle of the Social Democrats.

Not only was the working class incapable of developing independently a socialist ideology but, unless the Social Democrats proved successful in their efforts to indoctrinate it into the socialist faith, it would inevitably fall under the spell of its enemies – it would inevitably be converted to the ideology of the bourgeoisie.<sup>20</sup> Haimson sees Lenin's critics, like the 'economist' Boris Krichevskii or the left Social Democrat Rosa Luxemburg, as 'prophetic':

... implicit in the conception of 'spontaneity' that Lenin had broadly sketched in *Chto delat'?* was not merely a lack of faith in the capacity of the labor movement to grow to consciousness by its own resources, but also a basic distrust in the ability of any man to outgrow his 'spontaneous' elemental impulses, and to act in accord with the dictates of his 'consciousness' without the guidance, and the restraint, of the party and its organisations.<sup>21</sup>

Lih argues that every one of the contentions of the textbook-version does violence to Lenin's own intentions and ideas in *What Is to Be Done?*. Rather than gloomy about the prospects for socialism and the potential of the workers to become revolutionary, Lenin was buoyant about the possibility, and revelled in their day-by-day, year-by-year mobilisation.<sup>22</sup> Where the textbook-version sees workers as lagging behind, benighted and unable to rise to socialist consciousness, Lih demonstrates through his extensive citations that Lenin enthusiastically applauded the *stikhiinyi pod'em* [elemental upsurge] of the workers, and faulted the Social Democrats for not being prepared to offer them the needed guidance and leadership. Rather than Lenin being a pessimist, Lih shows that it was his adversaries, the economists like Elena Kuskova and Sergei Prokopovich, who believed that workers were only interested in

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20. Haimson 1955, p. 134.

21. Haimson 1955, pp. 138–9.

22. Scholars disagree over whether Lenin was fundamentally pessimistic about the workers' capability to achieve socialist consciousness on their own or optimistic about their potential but emphasising a rôle for the Social Democrats in facilitating and accelerating the development of consciousness. For the pessimistic view, see Zelnik 2003. For the challenge to this view, see Lih 2006, pp. 15, 20–8. Robert Mayer argues that Lenin's pessimism in *What Is to Be Done?* was a momentary departure from his usual optimism about workers spontaneously generating a socialist consciousness, a position he held before and shortly after the years 1899 to 1903 (Mayer 2006).

their material interests and had little enthusiasm for the political struggle against autocracy or for socialism. Lih argues that, rather than deviating from orthodox Marxism, the young Lenin enthusiastically aligned himself with the leading German theorist, and heir to Marx and Engels, Karl Kautsky, and his version of Second-International Marxism. This synthesis, which Lih labels ‘Erfurtianism’, takes its name from Kautsky’s *Das Erfurter Programm* of 1892 and included eight principal premises: acknowledgment that the party, its programme, and Kautsky’s writings were the sources of authority; commitment to the idea that Social Democracy meant the merger of socialism and the workers’ movement; dedication to the notion that Social Democracy’s mission was to bring the ‘good news’ to the workers of their world-historical task; the aspiration to establish an independent class-based political party; insistence on the priority of political freedom and democracy; the expectation that the Social-Democratic party would become the party of the whole people; the assertion that the workers were the natural leaders of the movement to socialism; and advocacy of internationalism. Lenin was, Lih claims, a ‘Russian Erfurtian’.

Like other Russian Social Democrats, Lenin saw the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) as the model that a Marxist party ought to emulate. Social Democracy’s task was to combat certain forms of ‘spontaneity’, e.g., undisciplined outbursts of anger or rage, but to work with and encourage the ‘spontaneous upsurge’ of the workers’ movement. Spontaneity, Lih believes, is not an accurate translation of the Russian *stiikhinost’* and collapses many different meanings of what might be called ‘spontaneous [*stiikhinyi*]’ into a single word. Under *stiikhinyi*, diverse meanings – disorganised, unplanned, chaotic, sudden, haphazard, surprising, unstoppable, explosive, elemental, natural, occurring in various places without co-ordination – can be discerned. The meanings are sometimes contradictory in the same text. Not only workers suffered from *stiikhinost’*, but intellectuals as well, those who turned to individual terrorism as a tactic, giving in to emotion and attempting to carry on the struggle exclusively with their own forces.

Rather than favouring intellectuals over workers, Lenin was particularly critical of the *intelligenty*, who often were more indecisive and wavered more than real proletarians. The message of *What Is to Be Done?*, Lih argues, is that Social Democrats have lagged behind; they must be energised to organise and act, to take up their historical rôle in fostering the already-effervescent labour-movement. Workers’ experiences do not occur in a vacuum; they must be interpreted and explained by agitators and propagandists, by *intelligentnyye rabochie* [*intelligentnyye* workers]. Social Democrats are to mediate and interpret that experience. Lenin wrote:

The central point is this: it's not true that the masses will not understand the idea of political struggle. The most backward [*samyi seryi*] worker will understand this idea, on the following condition: if an agitator or propagandist knows how to translate it into understandable language while relying on facts well-known to him from everyday life.<sup>23</sup>

Many Social Democrats imagined three different kinds of workers: the gray masses, which knew their economic interests but were not very clear about their political interests; the middle strata, which was already interested in politics more than merely economic interests; and advanced, conscious workers, worker-*intelligently* already dedicated to the political struggle. For the *Iskra*-ites, the 'economists' reflected the views of the least advanced part of the working class, while the Social Democrats were to represent those of the most advanced and struggle to bring the other strata into conscious political life. Rather than pessimism about workers, the Social Democrats believed in the bright future of the movement, only the more attainable through the joint efforts of the party and the workers.

For all his emotional attachment to the cause to which he dedicated his life and energies, Lenin was a supremely rational politician. He believed that people act in line with their interests and are even capable of heroic and self-sacrificing action. 'Indeed', writes Lih, 'the more people realise their true interests, the more heroically they will act'.<sup>24</sup> Workers do not act out of instinct, but in line with interests that they come to understand from experience, reflection, and through the explanations of the Social Democrats, which can overcome the hegemonic power of bourgeois ideology. Less-developed workers may be mistaken or led astray, which only makes the task of the Social Democrats even more important – to guide them toward an understanding of their true interests.

Lih has thoroughly detailed the various arguments that Lenin proposed at the turn of the century. His *explication de texte* is unlikely to be repeated or surpassed for many decades. But unravelling the layers of Lenin's meanings is only the beginning of the task. All Social Democrats understood that *intelligently* had a rôle in the labour-movement. For some, it was explanation; for others, it was guidance or leadership. The former easily slipped into the latter, the latter into substitution of the party for the workers themselves. Whatever Lenin intended in *What Is to Be Done?*, his readers took from it different emphases. And, later, the Communist Party in power would make its own

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23. Lih 2006, p. 345.

24. Lih 2006, p. 397.

interpretation of the foundational text, much more in line with the textbook-version than with Lih's more careful and nuanced reading of Lenin in context. As soon as the text left the printing press, the struggle over its meaning began in earnest, and Lenin was forced to defend himself against what he considered misreadings. Some of his most loyal followers, however, understood Lenin's views in ways not much different from the Menshevik interpretation, though unlike the Mensheviks they supported ideas of a highly-centralised party of professional revolutionaries, who, by default, would largely come from the intelligentsia and through their greater knowledge and political commitment lead the workers' movement. Lenin would be compelled to 'de-Bolshevise' some of the more militant Bolsheviks, most emphatically in the revolutionary fervour of 1905.

While researching and writing the biography of the young Stalin, I have revisited the period 1902–6 and come to appreciate the ongoing confusions about what Lenin might have meant and how both opponents and supporters interpreted his text. It is very clear that powerful and persuasive Menshevik voices in the pivotal years 1903–5 have shaped the Western academic and popular reception of *What Is to Be Done?* At the very moment when Bolshevism and Menshevism were taking shape, key interventions by Pavl Aksel'rod, Iulii Martov, and – in the case of the South Caucasus, where Menshevism became the dominant wing of Social Democracy – Noe Zhordania defined the differences between the factions as more than personal or intramural differences. Aksel'rod, for example, wrote to his friend Kautsky, a figure revered both in the German Social-Democratic Party and among Russian Social Democrats, accusing Lenin of 'Bonapartist methods together with a healthy dose of Nechaevan ruthlessness', and being a man determined to create his own 'administrative dictatorship' in the Party, no matter what.<sup>25</sup>

Particularly telling is a letter from Zhordania in June 1904 announcing his decisive adherence to the party-'minority' and laying out his critique of Lenin's approach.<sup>26</sup> He lashed out against the dominance of the Party by the intelligentsia, rejecting Lenin's formulations in *What Is to Be Done?*

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25. Letter of Aksel'rod to Kautsky, 22 May 1904, Kautsky Archive, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam; quoted in Ascher, 1973, p. 208. For Marxists, Bonapartism referred to deceptive dictatorial tendencies akin to the practices of Louis Bonaparte (Napoleon III, 1851–70); Sergei Nechaev (1847–82) was a revolutionary populist, whose slogan 'the end justifies the means' was manifested in the murder of an associate who disagreed with Nechaev's methods.

26. RGASPI (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History), f. 17, op. 1, d. 168, my translation from the Georgian; GARF (State Archive of the Russian Federation), f. DP, OO, 1905 g, m d, 118, ch. 3, l. 21a, b; perillustration. My translation is from the handwritten-Russian version in the RGASPI.

In Lenin's opinion, not only socialist but political class-consciousness of the workers is brought from outside, by other classes. . . . Thus, the proletariat must receive everything from another, from the non-proletarian. In this way, having degraded the proletariat and elevated the intelligentsia, the author de-valued the economic struggle. He even denied such an indisputable fact that the economic struggle is the best means to lead the workers into the political arena. 'Political class consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from outside* (the emphasis is Lenin's), i.e., from outside the economic struggle . . .' Lenin completely distorts Marxism in order to raise the political element above socialism, i.e., in order to give the party over to the intelligentsia.<sup>27</sup>

For Zhordania, accepting Lenin's vision of the party-organisation would lead to the driving of many proletarians out of the Party and 'a complete dictatorship of the intelligentsia'. Fortunately, he says, the Party rejected Lenin's formula.

If this plan had been adopted, then our party would have been Social-Democratic only in name, and in fact would have turned into a closed little circle, a sect, the master of which would have been Lenin and Company. That would have been a Blanquist organisation (that is, an organisation for a *tight* circle of conspirators who each minute must listen to the orders of their chief) that would have forever eliminated from our party its proletarian spirit.<sup>28</sup>

Zhordania read Lenin in the spirit of Aksel'rod. While Lenin emphasised the key rôle of Social Democrats in the development of political consciousness and was not particularly enamoured of intellectuals playing the rôle of leaders, nor of neglecting the vital contribution of 'advanced workers', Aksel'rod and Zhordania, in contrast, depicted Lenin as substituting a party of intellectuals for the workers' movement. Such readings gave content to the factional split. This struggle was not about the editorship of *Iskra* or the sovereignty of the party-congress; the schism was presented as an epic battle between democracy and dictatorship within the Party (and, by implication, in the future socialist state).

Lars Lih's reconsideration and new translation of *What Is to Be Done?* forces serious rethinking of what he calls the 'textbook-version'. He opens up what looked to many as a closed argument. Instead of deducing the Soviet future from this 1902 pamphlet, and by doing so, avoiding the intervening history, Lih proposes that the causes of Soviet dictatorship remain a major question. The arguments about democracy presented in *What Is to Be Done?*, Lih writes,

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27. RGASPI (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History), f. 17, op. 1, d. 168, ll. 10–10ob.

28. RGASPI ll. 17–17ob.

‘do not make Stalinist tyranny easier to explain – they make it harder to explain’.<sup>29</sup>

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29. Lih 2006, p. 476.

## One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: On Lars Lih's Lenin

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### Abstract

Lars Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered* seeks to replace the textbook-myth of Leninism with a painstaking reconstruction of 'Lenin's Erfurtian drama'. That reconstruction is more accurate than the Lenin-myth, but Lih's step forward is marred by two steps back. One is his account of Lenin's 'work about workers'. The other is Lih's new translation of *What Is to Be Done?*.

### Keywords

Lenin, class-consciousness, proletariat

For decades, the widely held view in the scholarly literature was that 'the basic principles of Lenin's system were set out in his pamphlet *What Is to Be Done?*'.<sup>1</sup> This was said to be Lenin's 'decisive work', 'the most important single work of Leninist theory'.<sup>2</sup> In it, he 'hammered his revolutionary philosophy into shape' and 'sketched out the revolutionary principles which he employed sixteen years later'. 'For the rest of his life he was to remain the prisoner of the ideas expounded in *What is to be Done?*. They possessed for him a fatal finality'.<sup>3</sup>

More specifically, the famous thesis about bringing consciousness from without in the second chapter of Lenin's book has been called 'one of the most essential elements of his developed theory'; 'to this fundamental theme he returned again and again'.<sup>4</sup> It is 'the most distinctively Leninist argument', 'the doctrinal core of Leninism', from which his authoritarianism is said to have 'flowed logically'.<sup>5</sup>

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1. Schapiro 1970, p. 39.

2. Childs 1973, p. 68; Utechin 1963, p. 217.

3. Payne 1964, pp. 147, 154.

4. Mirsky 1931, p. 202; Schub 1966, p. 73.

5. Van den Berg 1988, pp. 125–6, 128.

That is the textbook-interpretation of *What Is to Be Done?* (*WITBD?*). But, in *Lenin Rediscovered*, Lars Lih sets out to prove that the conventional account is deeply flawed.<sup>6</sup> Even in 1902, Lenin was not pessimistic about proletarian abilities, as many have claimed. ‘The keynote of Lenin’s outlook was not worry about workers but exhilaration about workers’.<sup>7</sup> The Russian proletariat was on the march in 1902, and Lenin had great faith that wage-labourers would acquire class-consciousness and also become the vanguard-fighter in the struggle for democracy. Despite his reputation, Lenin was in fact a passionate advocate of political freedom, and the party he wanted to build in order to win that freedom was well within the mainstream of European Social Democracy. According to Lih, the future-leader of the Bolshevik faction was at this time an orthodox Kautskyist, not a Jacobin or a nascent Stalinist, and he ‘retained the same Erfurtian outlook... at least up to 1917’.<sup>8</sup>

This is not the textbook-Lenin. According to Lih, that caricature was the product of a Cold-War scholarship that ripped *WITBD?* from its context and elevated a few ‘scandalous passages’ into a pessimistic theory that seemed to anticipate the despotism of later decades. Lenin, however, did not subscribe to this textbook-theory, for his words have been misunderstood. Key terms in the Russian text have been mistranslated, and the ideological and historical contexts within which Lenin wrote have been forgotten. Lih’s aim in this big book is to reconstruct those contexts and to translate more faithfully Lenin’s words so that we can rediscover what the author really meant. This book is so big because it contains both a new translation of *WITBD?* and a detailed reconstruction of Lenin’s thinking and polemics during the decade before the outbreak of the 1905 Revolution. A behemoth, Lih’s work will likely be seen as an exhaustive account of the topic; certainly it will exhaust those who read the book from cover to cover.

Lih’s refutation of the textbook-interpretation of *WITBD?* constitutes one step forward. His is not the first such refutation, but it is, by far, the most detailed. Lih is right that *WITBD?* is not the founding text of Bolshevism and that the arguments in its second chapter are not the theoretical heart of Leninism. Lenin was indeed the most Erfurtian of the Russian Social-Democratic leaders, and his main aim at this time was to facilitate the birth of an inclusive-democratic state in Russia. Throughout the decade covered by this book and beyond, Lenin expressed great faith in the proletariat as an agent of political and economic change. He did not think that the party could substitute for the class in the revolutionary process, or that the intelligentsia

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6. Lih 2006.

7. Lih 2006, p. 20.

8. Lih 2006, p. 114.

should seek to dominate the workers within the party. Lih is also right that Lenin's writings are filled with harsh polemics that distort his opponents' views and that Lenin was sometimes sloppy in expressing his ideas. The 'scandalous passages' in the second chapter of *WITBD?* are a case in point, and do not reflect Lenin's considered position. Lenin did not believe that workers would fixate at the stage of trade-union consciousness if left to themselves, or that the party had to combat the spontaneous development of the class. He was an optimist about the maturation of the proletariat, not a pessimist.

All of these claims are correct, and together they constitute one step forward in our understanding of Lenin. Lih's proof for some of these claims could be tighter, sharper, and supported with better evidence, but the claims themselves are valid. However, as Lenin says in another book that got him into trouble, 'One step forward, two steps back. . . . It happens in the lives of individuals, and it happens in the history of nations and in the development of parties'.<sup>9</sup> It happens in scholarship too. Lih does refute the textbook-account of *WITBD?*, but he then leaves the reader with the false impression that there is nothing worrisome or unusual in Lenin's view of the proletariat before 1905 (or even 1917). He exonerates *WITBD?* and directs all of our attention to it, but then misses a different 'worry about workers' that emerges in Lenin's texts at this time, and that will grow and remain with him after the seizure of power. Like the textbook-dogma he refutes, Lih makes a fetish of *WITBD?*, and exaggerates its importance in understanding the Lenin who will take power in 1917. But it is not in this 'classic text' that Lenin's more important 'worry about workers' is expressed. That worry is to be found, instead, sprinkled through the minor writings and forgotten polemics that fill the 55 volumes of Lenin's *Collected Works*. But we cannot see it if we allow *WITBD?* and its scandalous passages to dazzle our vision. This failure to take notice of other ideas that emerge in Lenin's writings during this time-period, and that will endure and shape his choices when he comes to power, constitutes one step back in our understanding of Lenin's thought.

The other step back is Lih's translation of *WITBD?*. I admire the effort, and agree that Russian terms should be translated consistently and faithfully into English. But Lih's translation often transforms Lenin's vigorous prose into a clumsy mess of ambiguity. In a misguided effort to render Lenin's scandalous passages less scandalous, Lih substitutes constructions that are vague and ungainly. *WITBD?* would never have enhanced Lenin's reputation in the underground-movement and attracted followers, as in fact it did, if the original conveyed the impression which Lih's translation does. One of Lenin's comrades

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9. Lenin 1961, p. 412.

on the *Iskra* editorial board, A.N. Potresov, praised this text for the poetry of some of its passages.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, Lih has purged the poetry in order to protect Lenin from criticism. That is a second step back.

In the following sections, I will describe each of these steps and missteps in greater detail. At the end, I will briefly speculate about the future of Lenin-studies.

### Lenin-slips

The really important thing to know about *WITBD?* is that the ‘scandalous passages’ in the second chapter are a mistake. They do not accurately express Lenin’s considered view on the subject of working-class consciousness. The great irony of this text is that its most famous passages – the ones thought to be the very core of Leninism – are, in fact, the sloppiest and most deceptive in *WITBD?*. This is why Lih proposes to bracket them in his analysis of the book. ‘The scandalous passages are just about the last place to look for something genuinely revealing about Lenin’s outlook’.<sup>11</sup>

Lih is right that ‘the formulations about spontaneity are not the heart of *WITBD?* but a tacked-on polemical sally’; they are ‘confusing’ and ‘unedifying’.<sup>12</sup> Lenin ‘obscures’ his own view by making it sound ‘as if he were somehow suspicious and fearful of *stikhiinosť*’.<sup>13</sup> His insistence on diverting the workers away from their spontaneous path ‘must be adjudged a very bad move’.<sup>14</sup> Lenin was actually ‘trying to affirm something that was utterly non-controversial’. But, ‘unfortunately, he did not do it very well’, due to ‘hasty polemical improvisation, use of borrowed vocabulary, and an insistence on equating *Rabochee delo* with people holding quite different views’. The outcome was a ‘sorry result’.<sup>15</sup> In the end, ‘the scandalous overtones of his words arise solely from his insistence – for strictly polemical motivations – on using a confusing and ambiguous vocabulary to express his accusations’.<sup>16</sup> ‘Such was his polemical overkill that he ended up giving the impression that he himself held scandalous opinions. One is tempted to say “serves him right”’.<sup>17</sup>

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10. Lih 2006, p. 387.

11. Lih 2006, p. 396.

12. Lih 2006, p. 20.

13. Lih 2006, p. 352.

14. Lih 2006, p. 353.

15. Lih 2006, p. 395.

16. Lih 2006, p. 615.

17. Lih 2006, p. 667.

All of these assertions are correct. In fact, I said something like this more than a decade ago in a set of articles on Lenin's theory of working-class consciousness. Against the textbook-interpretation, I argued that Lenin's pessimism in *WITBD?* was 'in fact irrelevant for an understanding of Lenin's mature theory and practice. A systematic review of the evidence indicates that Lenin's critique of spontaneity there was an aberration – indeed, an error – from which he soon retreated'.<sup>18</sup> The text 'was not composed in a leisurely and reflective manner' but 'was a polemic dashed off in the heat of battle and should not be mistaken for a polished work of theory'. The thesis of consciousness from without was 'a mistaken formulation that did not define the essence of Bolshevism'. It was, rather, 'a famous failure' and 'should not be viewed as the doctrinal core of Leninism'.<sup>19</sup>

The evidence for this interpretation of the scandalous passages consists of Lenin's own statements between 1903 and 1907; the testimony of other Social Democrats, both friends and foes; and Lenin's failure to employ this argument in any of his writings after 1905. I reviewed this evidence in several articles, and it is gratifying to see that Lih has discovered no additional evidence of any consequence bearing on the question, despite his exhaustive search.<sup>20</sup> I agree completely with his judgement that in the second chapter of *WITBD?*, 'Lenin made a number of "mistakes" – that is, he said or implied things that he clearly did not believe'.<sup>21</sup> I also agree with him that 'what seems to the textbook interpretation as the very heart of *WITBD?* could be erased from the book without trace by snipping a couple of paragraphs'.<sup>22</sup>

Despite challenging the centrality of *WITBD?* as a statement of Lenin's considered view on proletarian capacities, Lih says in the article that preceded his book that my work 'leaves the textbook interpretation of *WITBD?* itself untouched'.<sup>23</sup> While I get credit for putting 'new source material... into scholarly circulation', my mistake consists in trying to square this new material with 'the standard reading of *WITBD?*'. I do this by setting forth the 'double flip-flop hypothesis: Lenin had a crisis of faith immediately before *WITBD?* and then had a radical change of mind very soon thereafter, thus leaving *WITBD?* disconnected both to Lenin's past and his future'.<sup>24</sup>

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18. Mayer 1996, p. 308.

19. Mayer 1996, pp. 309, 315, 318.

20. Mayer 1994, 1996, 1997a, and 1997b. Several of my early articles on Lenin do adhere to the textbook-view. It took me some time to figure out that there was a problem with this interpretation. See Mayer 1992, 1993a, 1993b, and 1993c.

21. Lih 2006, p. 650.

22. Lih 2006, p. 646.

23. Lih 2003, p. 41.

24. Lih 2006, p. 24.

Lih has such enthusiasm for this material that he tends to imitate the polemical methods of his subject. The advantage of this method is that it makes a long journey less weary. The disadvantage is that it tends to ‘bend the stick’. Politicians are in the business of bending sticks, but scholars are not. To say that Lenin flip-flopped twice implies that he lacked convictions, or just said what his audience wanted to hear, or was thoughtless and confused. Whatever else we might say about Lenin, none of those criticisms apply. Since it is hard to think of a politician in the past century who flip-flopped less than Lenin, my double-flip-flop hypothesis must seem quite ridiculous.

But I do not think that Lenin flip-flopped on the topic of working-class consciousness. Neither do I think that he had a crisis of faith in 1899 and a radical change of mind in 1903. The real difference between Lih’s interpretation and mine is that I think Lenin meant what he said in the second chapter of *WITBD?* and Lih does not. According to Lih,

While I emphasise polemical context, I am *not* making the argument often heard in the activist tradition that polemical overkill led Lenin to ‘bend the stick’ and overstate a valid point. My argument is, rather, that when we grasp Lenin’s polemical aims, we discover that he is affirming something rather banal and non-controversial for Social Democrats.<sup>25</sup>

It was ‘hasty carelessness’<sup>26</sup> that accounts for the scandalous passages. Lenin was like an undergraduate who bashes out an answer in an essay-exam and does not realise that his sloppy formulations convey the wrong impression. He only made the mistake here and nowhere else. Yet the textbook-interpretation focuses only on the mistake, and treats it not as the mistake it was but as the very essence of Leninism.

Both Lih and I think that Lenin made a mistake in *WITBD?*, but we disagree about the nature of this mistake. If Comrade Martynov was still alive, he could write a pamphlet on the controversy entitled *Two Mistakes*. Lih says that Lenin was careless in his choice of words. I say that Lenin chose his words carefully, but did not appreciate at the time how his strategy of argumentation in responding to the ‘economists’ was vulnerable to the charge of authoritarianism and unorthodoxy.

As I have shown in detail elsewhere, beginning in 1899 Lenin formulated a response to the ‘economist’ challenge that was different from Plekhanov’s.<sup>27</sup> In a nutshell, Plekhanov said that to help workers attain consciousness sooner

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25. Lih 2006, p. 615.

26. Lih 2006, p. 573.

27. Mayer 1997b.

rather than later, Social Democrats must accelerate the pace of their maturation. That maturation was occurring spontaneously even now, but would reach its goal more quickly through timely intervention by conscious Social Democrats. Lenin, by contrast, responded to the ‘economists’ by arguing that the maturation could not happen without external intervention by those who possessed the science of socialism. The two ideologists were fighting a common enemy, but adopted different rhetorical strategies to defeat those who (in Plekhanov’s memorable phrase) gazed in awe on the posterior of the Russian proletariat. Lenin’s strategy, however, was vulnerable to counterattack, because it seemed to express doubt about one of the holiest propositions in Marxism, the capacity of the proletariat to emancipate itself. It took the controversy over *WITBD?* for Lenin to recognise the weakness of his formula, and he then quietly revised it. He had always believed in the holy proposition, but inadvertently gave the impression in *WITBD?* that he might not. That was Lenin’s mistake.

I doubt that it matters very much which interpretation of Lenin’s mistake is correct. As I see it, Lih and I belong to the same camp, and that is why I view this aspect of his work as a step forward in relation to the textbook-account. But, like his subject, Lih is opposed to ‘vagueness and the blunting of sharply drawn boundaries’.<sup>28</sup> So I am consigned to the textbook-camp, but deemed at least an honest representative who does ‘make a good faith effort to incorporate a wider range of evidence’ into his interpretation.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps we can form alliances for tactical purposes, even if we do not belong to the same party.

Lih thinks the mistake I identify in Lenin is a mistake because the source from which Lenin drew his inspiration in responding to the ‘economists’ was Karl Kautsky, the premier theorist of the Second International. Kautsky’s orthodoxy was beyond dispute, so, if Lenin was guided by Kautsky, the ideas Lenin was trying to express in *WITBD?* must be thoroughly orthodox.

That is not a bad argument, but we should bear in mind three facts. First, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, Lenin garbled Kautsky’s ideas.<sup>30</sup> Lih agrees with this, but we might quibble about the exact details of Lenin’s confusion.<sup>31</sup>

Second, as I argue in another article, the Russian orthodoxy on working-class consciousness formulated by Plekhanov was not exactly the same as Kautsky’s, and was more optimistic about proletarian capacities.<sup>32</sup> Lih assumes that orthodox Social Democrats had to be Kautskyists at the turn of the

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28. Lih 2006, p. 675.

29. Lih 2006, p. 555.

30. Mayer 1994.

31. Lih 2006, p. 576.

32. Mayer 1997b.

century, but European Marxism was, in fact, diverse, and the orthodoxy in the Russian branch was a purer version of the ‘sooner-or-later’ theory than Kautsky’s Erfurtism. In turning to Kautsky, then, Lenin was turning away from or ignoring the Russian Marxism of his own movement.

Third, doubts were sometimes expressed, even by Kautsky’s comrades, about the consistency of his formulation with the views of Marx and Engels. At the Austrian party-congress in November 1901, no less a figure than Victor Adler criticised Kautsky’s ‘merger formula’.<sup>33</sup> Adler thought Marx would have rejected Kautsky’s formula because it distinguished too sharply between science and knowledge born of practice. I agree with Adler, but Lih, curiously, chooses to interpret the thought of Marx and Engels through the lens of Kautsky.<sup>34</sup> As I see it, Kautsky got Marx wrong and Lenin, in turn, got Kautsky wrong. Lenin would have stayed out of trouble if he had simply followed the lead of Plekhanov.

Speaking of Plekhanov, he offers evidence neglected by Lih that casts doubt on the ‘hasty-carelessness’ version of Lenin’s mistake. If Lenin’s error was due only to sloppiness, and not conviction, the mistake could have been corrected by a collaborator who read the first draft. In fact, Lenin had such a reader, but he refused to correct the mistake when it was pointed out to him. That reader was Plekhanov, and I discuss the evidence elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> Lenin showed the first few chapters of *WITBD?* to Plekhanov in late December 1901. The latter pointed out Lenin’s hasty carelessness to him, but Lenin failed to revise his draft. Plekhanov complained when he saw the proofs of the pamphlet, and P.B. Akselrod agreed with him that Lenin’s ‘work in certain respects seems to me to have important defects and to be too extreme [*v svoem rode vabank*]’.<sup>36</sup>

In short, Plekhanov tried to save Lenin from the controversy over his scandalous passages that would soon explode, but Lenin refused to acknowledge the mistake. The explanation for Lenin’s refusal could have been pride, arrogance, confusion, or conviction – or all of these at once. But the important point is that the second chapter of *WITBD?* was a mistake which Lenin would not repeat. You will not find Lenin employing the arguments from that chapter after the seizure of power, and it is therefore a serious error to interpret it as the

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33. For Adler’s criticism, see Mayer 1994, p. 679. In a 22 October 1901 letter to Kautsky, Adler criticised his friend’s *Neue Zeit* article and the assertion that ‘socialism must be brought “from without” into the masses’. He told Kautsky that ‘this is a point about which I am a heretic, but a heretic *with* Marx and not against him insofar as I understand him’. See Adler 1954, p. 373.

34. Lih 2006, pp. 42–53.

35. Mayer 1997b, pp. 176–80.

36. Berlin 1925, p. 165.

central text in Leninism. Lih makes this case forcefully in his tome, and that is indeed one step forward from the textbook-view.

### **Worry about workers**

Lih's suggestion that we bracket the scandalous passages and interpret the rest of *WITBD?* without them is fruitful. If we do, we see that Lenin was optimistic about the workers' movement, eager to imitate the success of Kautsky's party, and a passionate advocate of political freedom. As Lih observes, '*WITBD?*'s arguments about democracy do not make Stalinist tyranny easier to explain – they make it harder to explain'.<sup>37</sup>

This view is correct. Aside from two perfunctory references to the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', there is no trace in this book of Lenin's later ideas about the state and revolution or proletarian democracy.<sup>38</sup> The kind of democracy for which Lenin was fighting at the turn of the century is bourgeois democracy – liberal, inclusive, and competitive. A reader of this pamphlet in 1902 would have had no reason to suspect that its author would one day press for an immediate transition to socialism in Russia on the morrow of the bourgeois revolution; suppress a democratically chosen constituent assembly; construct a one-party dictatorship; or establish a political police-force more ruthless than the one he was combating at that time.

There is scarcely any hint of that Lenin in *WITBD?*. Indeed, as Lih depicts him, the Lenin of 1894–1904 is progressive and democratic and wise. He is usually on the right side in his polemics with opponents, and his polemical methods are no worse than theirs. To be sure, Lenin could be 'inexcusably misleading'<sup>39</sup> in his counterattacks, and he did sometimes indulge in 'unscrupulous and obfuscating polemics'.<sup>40</sup> But even Rosa Luxemburg was guilty of 'an unscrupulous hatchet job' from time to time.<sup>41</sup> That was how Marxists argued amongst themselves. Lenin had a sharp pen and was sometimes sloppy in wielding it. That seems to be the worst one could say about him, based on Lih's reading of this decade in Lenin's revolutionary career.

But there is more going on in Lenin's writings during this period than Lih recognises. There is a worry about workers expressed in his articles and manuscripts after 1898 that grows and persists during the remainder of Lenin's

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37. Lih 2006, p. 476.

38. On the evolution of Lenin's view of proletarian dictatorship, see Mayer 1993a.

39. Lih 2006, p. 359.

40. Lih 2006, p. 384.

41. Lih 2006, p. 526.

career. This worry is not emphasised in *WTTBD?*, and that is another reason not to exaggerate the importance of this book. In directing our attention there, Lih fails to ‘rediscover’ another Lenin who will matter a lot later on.

I have developed this argument at greater length elsewhere, and will only sketch the outlines here.<sup>42</sup> In the last months of his Siberian exile, Lenin began to express the anxiety that certain fractions of the Russian proletariat were corruptible, and could be bought off by reforms or deceived by reformist ideas. The result of this corruption would be to divert these workers away from the revolutionary path being blazed by the vanguard and to divide the class against itself. This fear of corruption explains why it was so important to Lenin to wage a vigorous campaign against the ‘Russian Bernsteins’, who had become unwitting agents of this corruption. As he explained in ‘A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social Democracy’,

the lower strata of the proletariat may become downright corrupted if they hear such calumnies as that the founders of Russian Social Democracy view the workers only as a means for overthrowing the autocracy; if they hear invitations to limit themselves to the restoration of holidays and to craft unions, with no concern for the final aims of socialism and the immediate tasks of the political struggle.<sup>43</sup>

The uneducated workers did not know any better, Lenin warned, and, if their leaders encouraged them to pursue material gain at the expense of the long-term interest of their class, they were all too ready to listen. ‘The most undeveloped workers, we repeat, can be corrupted’. ‘Such workers can always be ensnared (and will be ensnared) by the bait of any dole offered by the government or the bourgeoisie.’ They were too foolish and could not control themselves. These proletarians jumped at the smallest morsels, and did not think about the future. As organs of the lowest stratum of workers, ‘economist’ publications like *Rabochaia mysl* could therefore do tremendous harm, for ‘to reduce the entire movement to the interests of the moment means to speculate on the undeveloped character of the workers, to play into the hands of their worst passions’.<sup>44</sup> The ‘economists’ were pouring ladles of tar into a barrel full

42. Mayer 1993c, 1996, and 1997a.

43. Lenin 1960, p. 283. To avoid misunderstanding, I do not think that Lenin had a ‘crisis of faith’ in 1899, or underwent a change in personality. He was the same old Lenin, but, in 1899, he confronted, for the first time, serious deviations within the workers’ movement. Until then, his opponents had always been outsiders, like the legal populists. Bernsteinism was a much more threatening phenomenon because it came from within the Marxian camp and could therefore more easily pervert.

44. Lenin 1960, pp. 280–5. In places, I have revised the English translation in Lenin’s *Collected Works*.

of honey, Lenin claimed, and the time had come for the orthodox to fight this corruption of the undeveloped workers.

The English word ‘corruption’ is the standard translation of the Russian term *razvrashchenie*, which recurs again and again in Lenin’s texts, from this time forward to the end of his political career. As he often does, Lih tries to dull Lenin’s vocabulary by rendering the word as ‘leading astray’,<sup>45</sup> but, in Russian, *razvrashchenie* and its cognates has a sexualised flavour of debauchery. As a verb, the term is probably best translated as ‘to pervert’. Lenin was fearful that external forces and opportunists within the Party would pervert sections of the working class and render them unfit for revolutionary action. They enticed these workers from the difficult path of struggle and encouraged them to indulge or relax. When successful, this corruption deformed its victims and perverted their minds so that they cooperated in their own oppression.

I submit that texts like ‘A Retrograde Trend’ betray a worry about workers. The worry is not about the class as a whole, but certain fractions within it. In that manuscript, Lenin worries about the corruptibility of the lowest stratum of the class, but, in later writings, he will also warn of perversion in the ‘labour aristocracy’. Both the top and the bottom of the class are unreliable, and can yield to temptation. As the revolution approaches, Lenin will also speak about the ‘petty-bourgeois instincts’ of these strata, which are powerful in a peasant country like Russia. Scratch a Russian worker, Lenin seems to say, and you may well find a flip-flopping petty bourgeois. As he explained in *Left-Wing Communism* (1920), small proprietors ‘surround the proletariat on every side with a petty-bourgeois atmosphere, which permeates and corrupts the proletariat, and constantly causes among the proletariat relapses into petty-bourgeois spinelessness, disunity, individualism, and alternating moods of exaltation and dejection’.<sup>46</sup> While much water will have flowed under the bridge by the time we reach the late civil-war period, I believe that the first traces of this rather obvious worry about workers manifest themselves in Lenin’s pre-*WITBD?* writings.

This worry is important, because it is the justification Lenin will offer for discounting the views of workers who do not follow the lead of his faction, both before the Revolution and after. Proletarians who align themselves with a different party or faction, or who fail to do what Lenin wants them to do, will be written off as corrupted – either by external forces or by the petty bourgeois within. They had betrayed the class or never really belonged to it in the first place. They were not the steadfast, rock-hard proletarians, who, of

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45. Lih 2006, p. 401, n. 23.

46. Lenin 1966, p. 44.

course, always supported Lenin's policies. As Lenin explained in *Steps*, discipline is the essential trait of the proletariat.<sup>47</sup> Thus, any workers who deviate from his preferred position prove that they have lost their proletarian soul or never possessed it to begin with.

Lenin could afford to drop the scandalous argument about consciousness from without made famous in *WITBD?*, because it was unnecessary and in fact counterproductive. That argument appeared to clash with the holy proposition of proletarian self-emancipation, but the 'perverted and/or petty-bourgeois' formula did not. The keynote of Lenin's outlook could be exhilaration about workers, as Lih says, because real workers always played the role assigned to them in Lenin's script. People who did not play that role were not real workers, even if they performed wage-labour. They lacked the requisite proletarian mentality [*psikhiiia*]. Their views (and votes) could therefore be discounted, because they were in fact outsiders, not insiders. Salvation did not come from outside the proletariat, Lenin believed; that was in fact the source of corruption, betrayal, and opportunism.

Anxiety about the corruptibility of the proletariat runs like a red thread through Lenin's mature writings. Although much of what he said about workers and their inclinations was perfectly orthodox, a deep-seated fear of working-class corruption was distinctive to him. It is true that one can find occasional expressions of this anxiety in the works of other Marxist thinkers. Marx and Engels were the first to make use of the concept of corruption in order to explain the reformism of the English workers, and their argument was certainly familiar to turn-of-the-century Social Democrats. Dissidents within the German Social-Democratic Workers' Party, for instance, employed this rhetoric against the leadership in an 1890-campaign to wrest control from party-moderates.<sup>48</sup> Among Russian Marxists, Iulii Martov in particular wrote often of the danger of 'Zubatov corruption' in the early issues of *Iskra*. But the depth of Lenin's fear, and the frequency with which he spoke of it, were unprecedented in Russian Social-Democratic circles. There is simply no trace of this anxiety in the writings of Plekhanov, Akselrod or Zaslulich, either before 1899 or after. They did not fear that many workers were corruptible or worry that some were insufficiently proletarian to withstand temptation. Lenin alone expressed such pessimistic sentiments and – what is more – drew organisational and tactical conclusions from them.

Lih, however, misses the emergence of this worry about workers in the phase of Lenin's career which he examines. This worry is registered in a few

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47. Lenin 1961, pp. 387–9, 392.

48. Lidtke 1966, pp. 305–19.

passages in the first chapter of *WITBD?*, but does not surface in the more famous second chapter. By directing our attention there, Lih fails to detect other scandalous passages in Lenin's writings that do point toward the future. That counts as one step back in our effort to understand Lenin.

### Ballhorning Lenin

In Chapter Three of *WITBD?*, Lenin explains that *Verballhornung*, or ballhorning, is a German expression that means an effort to improve that actually makes things worse.<sup>49</sup> That is, unfortunately, an accurate description of Lih's translation of *WITBD?*. While much of it is fine, where it really matters, Lih's version makes Lenin muddled or incomprehensible. This is another step back.

Part of the problem is that Lih lacks faith in his readers. In the text, he explains what Lenin meant by the terms *konspiratsiia* and *tred-iunionizm*, but Lih seems to think that we will forget those explanations when we read Lenin's text, and so he retains the Russian terms in his English translation. But English-speakers are still going to think 'conspiracy' or 'trade-unionism' when they run across those foreign terms – and there is no reason why they should not, as long as they bear in mind the explanation. The untranslated words only make Lenin's text more ungainly than it actually is.

That is a minor problem. More serious is the refusal to translate the infamous *stikhiinost*, a decisive word in *WITBD?*. That Russian word will not suggest anything to English-speakers when they encounter it, and this may be why Lih refuses to translate it. He wants us to draw a blank, because he thinks the word is polymorphous, ambiguous, and confusing. Above all, we must not think 'spontaneous', which is how the word is usually translated in *WITBD?*. Lih devotes a dozen pages<sup>50</sup> to the history of the word and its various meanings in Lenin's texts, and the story is so confusing that he just 'throws up [his] hands' and refuses to translate the term at all.<sup>51</sup> The result is that the scandalous passages in his translation are no longer scandalous, but incomprehensible. Thus we are sure to ignore them as we set about rediscovering Lenin.

One way to determine what the word means is to ask how Lenin's Russian readers in 1902 understood what he was saying. But Lih does not want to do this, because many who read Lenin's pamphlet thought he meant something like 'spontaneity'. That word may not be precise, but it is close enough – especially

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49. Lih 2006, p. 735.

50. Lih 2006, pp. 616–28.

51. Lih 2006, pp. 35–6.

because Lenin slips in these passages. By the time we get to the translation, we know that we must be cautious about the second chapter. No harm will be done if the translator does his job and finds an English equivalent for us, and, thus far, no-one has found a better equivalent than the dreaded ‘spontaneity’.

But, even worse than not translating at all is translating in ways that soften or confuse, or render ungainly Lenin’s incisive style. From a purely literary point of view, *WITBD?* is Lenin’s best book. In no other work was he so playful with language, inventing new concepts and words that quickly entered the Russian Social-Democratic vocabulary and set the terms of debate. The book made ‘a great sensation’ in underground-circles in 1902, in part because it was lively and well written.<sup>52</sup> But Lih dulls Lenin’s edge by substituting ‘awareness’ and ‘purposiveness’ for ‘consciousness’; ‘to cause to stray’ for ‘to divert’; ‘leader/guide’ for ‘leader’; ‘writerism’ for ‘bookishness’; ‘activeness’ for ‘activity’; ‘led astray’ for ‘corrupted’; and ‘worker-class’ for ‘working class’. The translated title of chapter two is an excellent example of ballhorning: ‘The *Stikhiinost* of the Masses and the Purposiveness of Social Democracy’. That title conveys no meaning at all.

This objection is partly stylistic, which is a matter of taste, but, in places, I think the new terminology positively obfuscates. One example is Lih’s translation of *kustarnichestvo* as ‘artisanal limitations’. The phrase is not only awkward, but severs the connection we are meant to draw between Lenin’s organisational views and the topic that engaged much of his energy during the 1890s, the development of capitalism in Russia. A *kustar* is a handicraft-worker, and, all through the 1890s, Lenin engaged in a debate with the legal populists about the fate of these labourers. The legal populists imagined that handicraft-industry remained outside the bounds of the capitalist system because it was conducted on a small scale. But, in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* and other writings, Lenin demonstrated that handicraft-production in Russia was already a constituent-part of the capitalist system, and that the supposed independence of the handicraftsmen was a sham. Most handicraft-workers, were, in fact, wage-labourers in the kind of putting-out system described by Marx in the fifteenth chapter of *Capital*. They were already proletarians of a sort, but the conditions in which they worked prevented the *kustari* from recognising this or organising to improve their situation. Encouraged by the legal populists, they dreamed of regaining the independence and the property they had lost during the course of capitalist development and therefore remained divided and supremely exploitable.

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52. On the reception of Lenin’s text, see Mayer 1996, pp. 310–16.

When he turned from his economic studies to organisational questions in the late 1890s, Lenin was able to frame the problem in a way that would make Russian Marxists sympathetic to his call for the construction of a nationwide organisation. Lenin invented the term *kustarnichestvo* to describe the fragmented and amateurish state of the movement in the absence of an integrated party-apparatus. The local circles were like isolated *kustari*, too disorganised to fight effectively against the enemy who oppressed them. Just as capitalism was moving forward from the handicraft to the industrial phase of development, so too must the Party leave behind its *kustarnichestvo* or handicraftism. The implication of the term was that advocates of local autonomy and circle-democracy were akin to the legal populists, a retrograde and non-Marxian trend.

Handicraftism, then, is a better translation for this term than ‘artisanal limitations’, and helps tie *WITBD?* more closely to Lenin’s earlier economic studies. Neil Harding makes this argument in the first volume of his great study of Lenin’s thought.<sup>53</sup> In any case, ‘artisan’ is likely to create the wrong impression for English-speakers, because *kustari* tended to be unskilled, part-time labourers and not highly skilled masters of an art.

I also think that ‘professional revolutionary’ is better than ‘revolutionary by trade’ as a translation, because it suggests the source of Lenin’s memorable image in the Webbs’ book *Industrial Democracy*. But I have made that argument elsewhere, and will not repeat it here.<sup>54</sup>

Translation is a difficult art, and Lars Lih is well-qualified to undertake this task. He is right that the older translations are not entirely satisfactory, and that a solid knowledge of the context is necessary to do justice to a complicated work like *WITBD?* But Lih has nonetheless ‘ballhorned’ Lenin, although not in the fashion of Martynov. Martynov tried to render Plekhanov more profound, but Lih has succeeded in making Lenin more awkward and confusing than he was.

### **What is to be done?**

Despite the two steps back which the Party suffered after the Second Congress, Lenin remained optimistic about the long-term prospects of the workers’ movement. At a low point in his career, with most of his former comrades arrayed against him, a lesser man might have quit in despair. But Lenin steeled

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53. Harding 1977, pp. 136–8.

54. Mayer 1993b.

himself and took solace in the dialectic. History proceeds by way of contradictions, he said.

But does scholarship? I have my doubts. The textbook-view of Lenin persists, despite efforts to correct it. The mistakes have been passed down from one generation to the next until they seem like an obvious truth. The legend of *WITBD?* endures, perhaps because it fills a need. It tells a simple story and identifies a moment when the future is foreshadowed. In this text, Lenin seems to lift his mask and reveal to us who he will become. The future dictator shows himself in the scandalous passages. Unfortunately, this myth makes for a more compelling story than ‘Lenin’s Erfurtian drama’, even though the latter is closer to the truth. The myth also has the advantage of legitimating the status quo and discrediting alternatives to it.

For these reasons, I am not optimistic that better scholarship will succeed in rewriting the textbook-interpretation of Lenin. It does not help that the market for Lenin-studies has collapsed. Hardly any journals or publishers are interested in this story, because Lenin now seems truly to be dead. Some have spoken of the ‘Leninist extinction’. As long as his creation endured, the story was important, but once the creature died, Lenin lost his fascination. We know how this story ends, apparently, so who cares how it begins?

Lars Lih makes a valiant effort to get this story right. His effort is not entirely successful, but he is certainly a talented scholar.<sup>55</sup> Scholarship, however, is not always enough. Myths frequently have more power than the truth.

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## Lenin Rediscovered?

Chris Harman

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### Abstract

By framing Lenin's thought squarely within the mainstream of classical Marxism, Lars Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered* acts as a powerful contribution to rescuing Lenin's Marxism from the condescension of the 'textbook-interpretation' of Leninism. However, the power of Lih's book is weakened by a failure to grasp the slippage between what Kautsky wrote and the various ways in which his writings were interpreted within the Second International. While Lenin attempted to apply lessons from the German Social-Democratic Party to Russian conditions, so too did his opponents within the Russian socialist movement. The actual degree of difference between what Lenin did and what Kautsky wrote became fully apparent only after the events of 1914 and 1917.

### Keywords

Lenin, Kautsky, Marxism, Second International, socialism, What Is to Be Done?

Lenin's short book *What Is to Be Done?* is one of the most maligned texts in modern history. For liberal, social-democratic, anarchist, and conservative historians, academic and popular alike, it has long been portrayed as the source of the full horrors of Stalinism. It is generally claimed that Lenin laid down his scheme for a totalitarian party which would cajole workers into acting as cannon-fodder in his drive to establish a totalitarian state. And, should anyone doubt these claims, they are often supported by statements from Rosa Luxemburg and the young Trotsky.

The essence of the hegemonic interpretation of Lenin is that he distrusted the mass of workers, despised their 'spontaneity', held that they could only be won to socialism by forces coming from outside the working class, and believed they could only be induced to take part in revolutionary action if brought under the control of a top-down centralised organisation of professional revolutionaries made up of bourgeois intellectuals. This argument is typically supported with selected quotations from *What Is to Be Done?* and the later text, *One Step Forwards, Two Steps Back*.

Some on the revolutionary Left have criticised this interpretation. Tony Cliff did so in the first volume of his biography of Lenin, *Building the Party*,

as did John Molyneux in his *Marxism and the Party*, I did so in my little pamphlet of 1968, *Party and Class*, so too did Paul Le Blanc, Ernest Mandel and Marcel Liebman. Yet the contrary message has been so pervasive as to have been incorporated without question into numerous works on the history of the twentieth century, even when written by people whose sympathies are with the far Left. It should not need adding that resisting the message has not been made easier by the support it receives among those Stalinists who welcomed its presumed authoritarianism.

Lars T. Lih has done historical truth a favour with this monumental exploration of *What Is to Be Done?*. In 840 pages, he expounds the historical background against which it was written, the purpose Lenin had in mind, and what it actually said – providing a new translation of the text so as to eliminate mistaken understandings based on mistranslations of certain key concepts. His central argument is that Lenin, far from wanting to impose some sort of dictatorial rule on the workers' movement, was in fact concerned with how, in conditions of extreme illegality in which any activist could expect to face arrest, imprisonment or exile within a few months, it was possible to build the enduring elements of a workers' movement capable of being at the centre of an uprising against tsarism. He provides copious quotations showing Lenin's faith in the possibility of workers achieving this goal. So Lenin writes in 1899:

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 worker 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 worker class.<sup>1</sup>

After a May-Day demonstration in 1900, Lenin similarly argued:

In the history of the Russian worker movement, an epoch of excitement and outbursts has commenced, occasioned by a very wide variety of causes. . . . There exists a fairy tale that says that the Russian workers have not yet grown up enough for political struggle, that their main cause is a pure economic struggle that will imperceptibly and bit by bit be supplemented by partial political agitation for individual political reforms and not by a struggle against the entire political system of Russia. This fairy tale is decisively refuted by the May First events in Kharkov.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Lih 2006, p. 421.

2. Lih 2006, p. 425.

How do Lenin's much commented-on 'professional revolutionaries' fit with this picture? Lih describes how, time and again, the tsarist secret police, the Okhrana, would discover and destroy workers' organisations by arresting their members. What made this task easier was the amateurism of many revolutionaries: those new to the struggle found it difficult to hide their activities from the authorities. This could only be avoided by 'conspiratorial methods' – meaning not the organisation of terrorist acts or military actions, but the use of secrecy to hide from the authorities the organisation's propaganda and agitational activities among workers.

To achieve these goals, the principal enemy was amateurism (or, as Lih translates Lenin, 'artisanal limitations') – acting in a haphazard and disorganised manner and so playing into the hands of the Okhrana. There needed to be an organisation with a core of 'professional revolutionaries' – Lih prefers the translation 'revolutionaries by trade' – who knew the 'conspiratorial techniques' needed to avoid arrest while organising workers' meetings, intervening in strikes, and circulating the paper. Lih shows how widely the need for such an approach was recognised by quoting not Lenin, but an article written for a German socialist newspaper in 1902 by Vera Zasulich: one of the people who turned against Lenin in 1903. According to Zasulich:

The pressing necessity of the creation of a 'Central Committee', a central organisation that would stand over and above the local organisations, is felt by everybody, although not everybody has a clear idea of its character. We think, however, that to some extent this central organisation will be formed and already gradually is being formed according to the only model possible under a regime of unlimited despotism. This is an organisation of carefully selected 'illegal' revolutionaries – an organisation consisting of people for whom revolution is, so to speak, their only trade, who devote themselves exclusively to revolutionary activity and who are ready at any moment to change their name or change their mode of life in order to escape from persecution and constantly serve the cause. Only under these conditions is intensive revolutionary activity that is measured in years thinkable in Russia. Only such people will be able to hold out for several years, as opposed to the present time when a single revolutionary can barely be active for a few months. Only under these conditions will they acquire the knack for *konspiratsiia*, the skill in revolutionary matters, that is unattainable in other conditions even given outstanding revolutionary abilities.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Lih 2006, p. 485.

This was the message Lenin attempted to hammer home in *What Is to Be Done?*. As Lih points out, the equation of ‘professional revolutionaries’ with the intellectuals involves a distortion of Lenin’s argument:

There is no textual justification for taking the alleged arguments about ‘intellectuals’ and applying them to the ‘revolutionary by trade’. Of course, Lenin recognises that at the time of writing, most full-time revolutionaries are not originally from the worker class. But neither then nor later is there any logical or factual reason for us to equate ‘revolutionaries by trade’ with intellectuals. According to the study of worker membership...48 percent of pre-Second Congress [i.e. 1903] ‘revolutionaries by trade’ were of worker origin. The same study indicates that the total number of revolutionaries by trade during this period is quite small – no more than two hundred.<sup>4</sup>

If these figures challenge the dominant proto-totalitarian interpretation of Leninism, a central-democratic theme of *What Is to Be Done?* is the need for a revolutionary-socialist paper, printed abroad and circulated as widely as possible inside Russia. This, Lenin argued, could provide the necessary linkage between activists and workers across Russia. It could express a sense of common purpose across the workers’ movement, generalise their experiences, and orient to the goal of the uprising in each concrete situation. Lih quotes Lenin from 1901:

If we unite our forces in producing a newspaper common to all, then this work will prepare and push forward not only the most able propagandists, but the most expert organisers, the most talented political leaders of the party, capable at the right time to give the watchword for the decisive battle and to guide it.<sup>5</sup>

### **Spontaneity, economism and leadership**

In pulling such material together, Lih dispels the myth that Lenin’s practice was in opposition to the self-emancipation of the working class. The libel rests on taking two paragraphs – from a work of over 160 pages – out of context. These refer to socialism coming from outside the working class and on spontaneity leading to subordination of bourgeois ideology. Lih gives the two quotations in the form they appear in the usual translation:

We have said that *there could not have been* Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It could only have been brought to them from without. The

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4. Lih 2006, p. 465.

5. Lih 2006, p. 421.

story 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 teachings of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by the intelligentsia. By their social status, the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, belonged themselves to the bourgeois intelligentsia.<sup>6</sup>

There is much talk of spontaneity. But the *spontaneous* development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology *to its development along the lines of the Credo programme*; for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade-unionism, and trade-unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie. Hence, our task, the task of Social Democracy, is *to combat spontaneity, to divert* the working-class movement from this spontaneous trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy.<sup>7</sup>

Lih argues that the usual interpretation of these passages confuses the translation of the Russian into English. The Russian word translated as ‘spontaneity’ in the second passage, *stikhiiny*, does not refer to the positive sense in which ‘spontaneity’ is usually used in English. Rather, he claims, it has the negative sense of meaning ‘disorganised, lacking purpose’.<sup>8</sup> He also argues that the word translated as ‘divert [*sovlech*], would be better translated as ‘attract away from’.<sup>9</sup> So, the message of the second passage becomes that disorganised, undirected action by workers can easily fall into a very narrow form of trade-unionism that rejects political action. Or, if I can paraphrase Lih’s translation of Lenin: hitting out angrily is not good enough, you have to direct your anger. And the job of socialists is to provide some direction for that anger.

I do have a quibble with Lih’s arguments here. I think he underestimates the importance of Lenin’s struggle against ‘economism’ – the tendency to reduce workers’ struggles to those of narrow trade-union issues. Lih argues that, by the time *What Is to Be Done?* was written, ‘economism’ was finished as a tendency within Russian Social Democracy, and therefore the function of the chapters against economism in Lenin’s book was not to defeat ‘economism’ but to label a non-economistic tendency, *Rabochee delo*, as economistic. Lenin himself recognised in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* that the ‘the division of Russian social democrats into Economists and

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6. Lih 2006, p. 641.

7. Lih 2006, p. 614.

8. Lih 2006, p. 625.

9. Lih 2006, p. 629.

politicians has long been obsolete. . . . the fight against “economism” subsided and came to an end altogether as far back as 1902’.<sup>10</sup> But that did not mean that economism did not continue to emerge (and does not continue to arise today) within the wider workers’ movements. The ‘independents’ opposed to the Social Democrats were, for instance, very influential among Odessa’s workers in 1903,<sup>11</sup> and again in St Petersburg in 1904.<sup>12</sup>

More importantly, ‘economism’ has regularly raised its head within the international workers’ movement. As Gramsci pointed out, labour-power has two faces in capitalist society: on the one hand, its exploitation is the whole basis of that society, while, on the other, it appears on the market as a commodity like any other commodity. This aspect encourages the idea among workers that all that is needed is to negotiate harder over the terms on which their labour-power is sold. One face leads workers in the direction of class-struggle and consciousness, the other in the direction of subordination to a conservative trade-union bureaucracy. Or, as Gramsci put it elsewhere (in a passage virtually ignored by would-be Gramscian Eurocommunists and neo-Gramscian academics), workers under capitalism have a contradictory consciousness.<sup>13</sup> From this perspective, the point of revolutionary organisation is to develop one element in this contradictory experience at the expense of the other. Lenin, the translator of the Webbs’ history of trade-unionism into Russian, may not have theorised this very well in *What Is to Be Done?*, but he was absolutely aware of its consequences.

### The question of Kautsky

There is a more important weakness in Lih’s book which confuses his otherwise powerful reinterpretation of Lenin’s project. He claims Lenin was simply following the path of pre-World-War-One German Social Democracy and its principal theoretician, Karl Kautsky, and that it has been a mistake of revolutionaries to argue otherwise.

Certainly, it was Kautsky who repeatedly referred to bringing socialism to the working class from outside. So he wrote in 1901:

The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the *bourgeois intelligentsia*: modern socialism arises among individual members of this stratum and then is

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10. Lih 2006, p. 384.

11. Schneiderman 1976, pp. 298–9.

12. Surh 1989, pp. 113–14.

13. Gramsci 1971, p. 641.

communicated by them to proletarians who stand out due to their intellectual development, and these then bring it into the class struggle of the proletariat where conditions allow.<sup>14</sup>

According to Lih, Lenin was simply a follower of Kautsky at this time. This leads him repeatedly to refer to Lenin's positions as 'Erfurtian', after the Erfurt Programme of German Social Democracy written by Kautsky. So strongly does Lih adhere to this view that he criticises mercilessly those who have drawn a strong divide between Lenin's approach to politics and Kautsky's:

On the Left, a number of writers with no or very shallow roots in the Second International – Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Karl Korsch – created a theory (*not* shared by Lenin) that Leninism was the principled rejection of the fatalistic Marxism of the Second International and of Kautsky in particular. In my view, the insistence on seeing a great gulf between Kautsky on the one hand and Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky on the other has condemned those in the post-war Trotskyist tradition to a deep misunderstanding of their own heroes.<sup>15</sup>

That Lenin *believed* he was a conventional follower of Kautsky in 1902–3 is not in doubt. It is a point I made in *Party and Class* and John Molyneux made in *Marxism and the Party*. In fact, in his bitter criticism of Lenin in *Our Political Tasks*, Trotsky wrote that 'Lenin took up Kautsky's absurd idea of the relationship between the "spontaneous" and the "conscious" elements of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat.'<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, Trotsky did not develop this claim to challenge the fundamental approach of Kautskyism. Indeed, much of the rest of *Our Political Tasks* (the text in which this claim was made) consists in a criticism of Lenin for breaking with the West-European approach to party-building.

Lih argues that Lenin's reliance on Kautskyite arguments in *What Is to Be Done?* means that it is wrong to claim that his overall conception of the relationship between party and class was different to Kautsky's. He therefore criticises John Molyneux for writing that Lenin in 1904 'diverged' in a 'fundamental way' from 'social democratic orthodoxy', but was not aware that he did so. Lih writes, 'I am not sure whether we are supposed to explain this by Kautsky's deceitfulness, Lenin's inability to understand what he read, or Lenin's unawareness of his own beliefs'.<sup>17</sup>

14. Lih 2006, p. 636. See also Kautsky 1910, p. 198.

15. Lih 2006, p. 32.

16. Trotsky 1904.

17. Lih 2006, p. 25.

This argument fails to understand how people read texts. We do so in terms of the context in which we find ourselves and interpret them accordingly. This frequently means both that readers ascribe different meanings to texts from those intended by the author and that different readers interpret the same text in different ways – without necessarily becoming aware of these differences. In the case of Kautsky, this was not just a problem for Lenin. Virtually the whole of the Second International accepted Kautsky's version of orthodoxy until August 1914, with only a small group around Bernstein publicly dissenting on one side, and an even smaller group around Rosa Luxemburg on the other.

The Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks, and those that wavered between them, all believed themselves to be 'Kautskyists' until 1914.<sup>18</sup> This did not stop their various practices from being very different. Does Lih really believe the 'activists' can only explain this 'by Kautsky's deceitfulness', their 'inability to understand' what they 'read', or their 'unawareness' of their 'own beliefs'? In fact, we all know of cases in which people who claim to agree on a series of texts interpret them differently.

The reason why so many people looked to Kautsky was that he was very good at explaining Marxist ideas in an easily intelligible way, and using those ideas to analyse certain long-term historical developments. His *Foundations of Christianity* and two-volume work, *The Agrarian Question*, are still well worth reading a century after their publication. It is unsurprising that not only Lenin, but also Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg were impressed by Kautsky so long as it was a question of asserting Marxist ideas against those of liberalism and tsarist conservatism. The problem with Kautsky became apparent when it came to moving from the picture of general historical trends to the role of human action in relating to and shifting the direction of such trends – from a 'war of position' to a 'war of manoeuvre' to use Gramsci's terminology.

Kautsky's approach to politics was always paedagogic and schoolmasterish. In his texts, theory attempts to guide practice, but practice never causes a radical transformation of theory. Consequently, the party was always teacher to the class; the class never the teacher of the party.

But, once the routine tempo of political life is shaken by enormous political, social or economic crises, the paedagogical approach blurs important issues relating to the application of abstract principles to reality. Such blurring explains how various people in Russia who saw themselves as 'Kautkyites' could adopt diametrically opposed practical-political approaches

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18. With the exception of a few small groups, such as the one surrounding Rosa Luxemburg from around 1908.

in 1904–6 and 1912–14 – and why the revolutionaries who had accepted the Kautskyite theoretical approach found themselves compelled to break from it explicitly after August 1914.

Lenin's life – before as well as after 1914 – displayed an approach to politics very different to that of Kautsky. He saw the party not merely as a teacher, but above all as an instrument for engaging in revolutionary-socialist action. That was why his supporters were known as the 'hard side' in the first split with the Mensheviks in 1903. This was why it was the Bolsheviks, not the Mensheviks, who organised the Moscow insurrection of December 1905. This was why, as Israel Getzler pointed out in his biography of Martov forty years ago,<sup>19</sup> the Bolsheviks were enthusiastic about the spontaneous irruptions of workers' anger in 1912–14, while the Mensheviks were afraid of their disorderly aspect. This also explains why Lenin was so insistent on berating party-members in 1905 to open up the Party to the newly revolutionary layer of workers – something Lih's work recognises as having happened, but whose significance he feels compelled to minimise because of his 'Erfurtianism'-thesis.

It took the outbreak of the First World-War to reveal to Lenin that his interpretations of Kautsky's argument had been very different to those of Kautsky himself. This was because it was only then that the practical implications of the Kautskyite approach became clear internationally. Until that point, people could read what they wanted into Kautsky's writings, within certain limits.

This should not surprise us. You do not only judge someone by what they say they are. You have to work out what they really are. Or, as Marx once put it: 'We do not set out from what men say, imagine or conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real active men...' <sup>20</sup> And real, active people, who say the same things, often behave very different to each other.

Lenin came to the conclusion, after reading Hegel in the first months of the War, that the Kautskyite orthodoxy's basic form of understanding of the world was a mechanical, rather than dialectical, version of materialism. He wrote in his notebook, 'Marxists criticised (at the beginning of the 20th century) the Kantians more in the manner of Feuerbach (and Büchner) than of Hegel'.<sup>21</sup> Feuerbach and Büchner were mechanical materialists – and so, by implication, was the 'pope' of pre-1914 Marxism, Kautsky. Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci and Karl Korsch had a point which Lih fails to grasp. The

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19. Getzler 1967.

20. Marx 1970, p. 47.

21. Lenin 1961b, p. 179.

proof of the pudding, as Engels would have put it, was in the eating. Lenin behaved very differently in the Russian Revolution of 1917 from Kautsky and the Kautskyites did in the German Revolution of 1918–23. And the theses and resolutions of the Communist International in Lenin's time were very different to Kautsky's Erfurt Programme.

It was not only those 'with no or very shallow roots in the Second International', as Lih claims, who commented on the mechanical character of its Marxism, as represented by Kautsky. Trotsky, writing in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the First World-War, noted that 'Marxism became for the German proletariat not the algebraic formula of the revolution...but theoretic method for adaptation to a national-capitalist state crowned with the Prussian helmet.'<sup>22</sup> He later noted that:

Kautsky the propagandist and vulgariser of Marxism saw his principal theoretical mission in reconciling reform and revolution. But he himself took shape ideologically in an epoch of reform. For him reform was the reality. Revolution was a theoretical generalization and a historical perspective... Kautsky did not have this indispensable living experience of revolution. He received Marxism as a finished system and popularized it like the schoolmaster of scientific socialism... Kautsky tirelessly defended the revolutionary character of the doctrine of Marx and Engels... But politically Kautsky had totally reconciled himself with social-democracy as it had developed...<sup>23</sup>

The same point is made in the obituary Trotsky wrote of Kautsky in 1938, which contrasts him sharply with Lenin:

Almost up to the time of the world war, Lenin considered Kautsky as the genuine continuator of the cause of Marx and Engels... This anomaly was explained by the character of the epoch, which was an era of capitalist ascension, of democracy, of adaptation of the proletariat... It was taken for granted that with the change of the objective conditions, Kautsky would know how to arm the party with other methods. That was not the case... His character, like his thought, lacked audacity and sweep, without which revolutionary politics is impossible.<sup>24</sup>

Neither Lenin's thought nor his character lacked 'audacity and sweep'. This is why it is fundamentally misleading to portray him, as Lih does, as an 'Erfurtian'. He might have made use of the 'vulgarised' and 'pedantic' texts of

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22. Trotsky 1971, p. 57.

23. Trotsky 1919.

24. Trotsky 1938.

Second-International Marxism. But he did so for purposes of his own, and put back into them the revolutionary zest so missing from Kautsky.

Lih has written a very useful book, but come close to ruining it as various points by trying to make Lenin into the something he certainly was not.

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*Historical Materialism* 18 (2010) 75–89

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## Text and Context in the Argument of Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?*

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### Abstract

Lars Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered* aims to overthrow what he labels the textbook-myth of Leninism through a comprehensive reconstruction of Lenin's relationship, both to the Kautskyite orthodoxy that dominated the international socialist movement, and more local polemics. While the resulting rereading of Lenin's early Marxism is a powerful counter to the 'textbook-interpretation' of Leninism, Lih has perhaps 'bent the stick' too far in an attempt to prove Lenin's orthodoxy. Importantly, he misconstrues Lenin's critique of 'economism' through a too-narrow reading of 'economism'. Lih would have been better served to recognise the importance of Lenin's polemic as an attempt, not simply to paint his opponents on the Russian Left as 'economists', but, more importantly, to grasp the organic nature of reformism and thus the true scale of the difficulties involved in challenging its hegemony within the workers' movement.

### Keywords

hegemony, economism, consciousness, spontaneity, self-emancipation

For those interested in the revaluation and reworking of the theory and practice of the classical-Marxist tradition, Lars Lih's 'rediscovery' of the political context of Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* (*WITBD?*) is a work of considerable importance. Lenin's text has been a key-point of reference, perhaps *the* key-point of reference, in debates around the political function of a Marxist vanguard and the logic of political action, and hence around the relation of theory and practice. According to 'the textbook-interpretation', as Lih terms it, a reading that has passed into a broader conventional wisdom to the extent that it has gained the status of common sense, Lenin's scepticism as to the capacity of the working class to spontaneously generate socialist consciousness led him to assign revolutionary agency to a vanguard-party of professional revolutionaries, rather than to the working-class movement. The subordination of the workers to the Leninist vanguard-party prescribed by Lenin thus prefigures, and thereby serves to provide the veneer of an

explanation for, the authoritarian upshot of the revolutionary process. The plausibility of attributing such a blatant departure from the canons of historical materialism to a professed Marxist depends upon situating Lenin's thought in the context of the political élitism and messianic voluntarism of the pre-Marxist tradition of Russian populism. This depends, in turn, upon reading Marxism (or at least the Marxism with which Lenin was familiar), not as a guide to action, but, as the populist adversaries of Russian Marxism did, as a conceptual straightjacket that precluded the theorisation of effective revolutionary-political action. And, if this reading is to have any plausibility, it must rely upon contemporary criticism of Lenin from a few minor figures on the margins of the Russian Social-Democratic movement, from the retrospective criticism of Lenin's Menshevik adversaries, and from the later-Leninist characterisation of Kautsky and the Mensheviks as mechanical Marxists. The textbook-interpretation not only serves to sustain the legend of Lenin's populism, but also to constrain debate over the logic of revolutionary-political action within the narrow confines of an abstract opposition between agency and structure.

The textbook-interpretation has been subjected to serious scholarly criticism before, notably in the first volume of Neil Harding's *Lenin's Political Thought*,<sup>1</sup> but Lih here lays out a much more relentlessly detailed – I am tempted to say exhaustive – refutation. The theoretical and evidentiary issues Lih addresses are complex, and he combines evidence drawn from historical, literary and linguistic sources into a powerful multi-faceted argument that resists brief summary. His interpretation turns upon the meticulously argued claim that the historical narrative of the fusion of socialism and the workers' movement epitomised in Kautsky's commentary upon the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD)'s Erfurt Programme, and the attempt by Russian Marxists to situate their political aims and practice in the terms of this narrative, constitute the context without which Lenin's text cannot be understood. The 'Erfurtian' narrative is shot through with biblical overtones – it is the 'mission' of the Social Democrats to bring to the workers the 'good news' of the world-historical 'mission' of the working-class movement to seize power and establish socialism – and so the political project of Social Democracy is not premised simply upon a dryly mechanical theory of history, but resonates with activist-evangelism. 'Socialist consciousness' is thus to be understood essentially in terms of the task of spreading this 'good news', and an evangelical and democratic confidence in the capacity of the workers to receive it and act upon it was essential to the Social-Democratic project. This

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1. Harding 1977, Chapters 6 and 7.

portrait of the political orientation of Kautsky's orthodox Marxism, in which confidence in the inevitable unfolding of the historical laws of capitalism, rather than excusing a political posture of passive expectation, sustains a durable will to revolutionary activism, is a crucial building-block in Lih's argumentative strategy, for it is only by contrast with a fatalistic caricature of orthodox Marxism that Lenin's advocacy of the organisation of a revolutionary vanguard could appear heterodox. Once the caricature is exposed as such – and it is one of the signal contributions of this work to have done so – it is possible and necessary to measure *WITBD?* against the standard set by Kautsky's Marxism and the political project of the SPD.

How, then, does *WITBD?* measure up? The strategic perspective fashioned by Plekhanov, Lenin and their *Iskra*-colleagues, the hegemony of the proletariat in the Russian bourgeois-democratic revolution, is construed by Lih in terms of the Erfurtian narrative, and he accumulates a mass of evidence to demonstrate the fidelity, not only of Lenin and *Iskra*, but also of the most prominent of their polemical adversaries, to its narrative structure. Indeed, he suggests that the Russians added little besides the term 'hegemony', and perhaps not even that, to the political orientation of the SPD. If anything distinguished Lenin in Russian-Marxist circles, in the company both of his *Iskra*-colleagues and of his polemical adversaries, it was his more unyielding attachment to the theme and the logic of the Erfurtian narrative and his correspondingly greater confidence in the political capacity of the workers to meet the demands of revolutionary-political struggle: if Kautsky's rectitude in matters of Marxist theory made him, according to a witticism of the time, 'the pope of Social-Democratic ideology', then Lenin, according to Lih, 'comes off as more Social-Democratic than the pope'.<sup>2</sup>

Following Lenin's commentary on the 1907 re-edition of *WITBD?*, Lih insists that the pamphlet be read in 'connection with the concrete historical situation of a definite, and now long past, period in the development of our Party'.<sup>3</sup> It was widely expected, around the turn of the century, in revolutionary circles that the struggles of the nascent working-class movement would serve to galvanise the opposition to tsarist rule that was welling up throughout Russian society. But early attempts to provide the movement with organised Social-Democratic leadership proved abortive when police-raids decimated its central organisations and reduced the fledgling party to a mere aspiration. In the resulting atmosphere of disorientation and demoralisation, a tendency emerged to shrink back from the revolutionary

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2. Lih 2006, p. 114.

3. Lenin 1962d, p. 101.

mission of Social Democracy, to narrow its practical ambition for the working class to a kind of Gompers-style trade-unionism pure and simple, and to cede the political struggle against the government, and consequently hegemony in the democratic revolution, to the representatives of bourgeois liberalism. Lih notes, however, that by the time *WITBD?* was written, although the Social-Democratic movement remained a congeries of circles, principally those around *Iskra* and those around the journal *Rabochee delo* [*Workers' Cause*], loosely co-operating and, at the same time, contending for influence in the process of drawing together into an organised party, Lenin was able to assume opposition on the part of his readership to this 'economist' tendency. Lih fails to note, however, that, at least according to Lenin, disagreement over how this protean tendency to economism was to be understood – and consequently, how it was to be dealt with – played an important part in the contention among the Russian Social Democrats. As we shall see, this disagreement serves as a kind of index of tensions and ambiguities that beset the Social-Democratic project of proletarian hegemony and the Marxist orthodoxy upon which it rested; and it is thus an index of pervasive, if latent, differences in approach to understanding and acting within and upon the 'concrete historical situation'.

On Lih's reading, the argument of *WITBD?* was structured in two main ways by this situation. First, it was shaped by Lenin's concern to map out a plan for the construction of a party-organisation through the production and distribution of a newspaper devoted largely to political agitation and thus to sustain in practical terms *Iskra's* bid for leadership. The requisite organisation would have, under then prevailing conditions, to be narrow rather than broad, a vanguard as distinct from a mass-organisation, capable of resisting police-repression and hence of growing roots in the working-class movement and of focusing worker-struggles on a political assault upon the tsarist régime. Thus understood, the newspaper-proposal would not displace working-class activity and consciousness, but rather serve to develop them and so enable Social-Democratic activists to act out the Erfurtian narrative under the trying conditions of tsarist autocracy. '[T]he vanguard outlook' not only does not contradict the Marxist assumption that 'the emancipation of the working classes must be the work of the working classes themselves', but is effectively derived from it.<sup>4</sup> The significance of the newspaper lies in the need for a vanguard-organisation of revolutionaries, this need from the exigencies of political agitation under autocratic conditions and the need for political agitation from the struggle for hegemony of the working class in the

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4. See Lih 2006, p. 556.

democratic revolution. This logic governs the last three chapters of *WITBD?*, which Lih terms its ‘business part’.<sup>5</sup>

Second, however, the argument of *WITBD?* was subject to the political logic of the factional struggle. Lenin was obliged by this logic to respond to a virtual challenge from *Rabochee delo* to defend *Iskra* against charges of having dogmatically subordinated the spontaneous struggles of the workers to an arid theoretical purism, that is, of having abandoned the ‘class point of view’ which led him to introduce the ‘business part’ of the book with two chapters devoted, respectively, to discussions of dogmatism and freedom of criticism and of spontaneity and consciousness. But, carried away by polemical zeal, he was led to assimilate the stance of his opponents, who, like *Iskra*, situated themselves inside the Erfurtian narrative, to that of acknowledged economists. In so doing, a penchant for trying to bend the rhetorical tropes of his opponents to his own purposes pushed him into a series of hasty and sometimes ill-considered and cryptic formulations, notably in his discussion of spontaneity and consciousness, that has become the focal point of subsequent political and exegetical controversy. Once Lenin’s argument is read in context and its practical essence distinguished from the distortions introduced by factional polemics, Lih argues, *WITBD?* can be seen, not as the site of dramatic political departures or theoretical innovations, but as nothing more nor less in substance than a reassertion and detailed application to the practical problems of Russian Social Democracy of the Erfurtian perspective of orthodox Second-International Marxism. If Lih is right, the political and theoretical controversy that has swirled around *WITBD?* is simply ‘much ado about nothing’.

Any reading of a text must draw some kind of distinction between what is essential to its meaning and what is merely incidental, between what is of theoretical relevance and what is merely circumstantial. This distinction corresponds, in Lih’s work, to his distinction between the practical or ‘business’-sections and aspects of Lenin’s argument, those devoted to his proposal for the appropriate tactical, organisational and practical arrangements to give effect to the Erfurtian perspective, itself uncontested among the Russian Marxists, and the polemical aspects of the work, dominated by the struggle as to who, which circle, would take upon itself the leadership of Russian Social Democracy within the parameters of the shared Erfurtian perspective. This distinction rests, in turn, upon a narrow construal of the term Lenin uses to designate the object of his criticism, ‘economism’, as entailing a rejection of working-class participation in the bourgeois-democratic revolution. Thus understood,

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5. Lih 2006, pp. 11, 353.

Lenin's attribution to *Rabochee delo* of an economist perspective is a polemical distortion of little or no theoretical interest, but one that has had the unfortunate effect of fostering the impression, among those unfamiliar with the context of the debate, that the critique of economism signified a departure from the canons of Marxist orthodoxy and hence of lending unwarranted plausibility to the textbook-interpretation.

If we take Lenin at his word, however, economism is not to be understood in such narrow terms. The term 'economism', although entrenched by usage, did not, he acknowledged, adequately convey the character of the political trend he designated by it.<sup>6</sup> Understood 'in the broad sense of the word', the 'principal feature' of economism was 'its incomprehension, even defence, of... the lagging of the conscious leaders behind the spontaneous awakening of the masses'.<sup>7</sup> Thus understood, the meaning of economism is subordinate to Lenin's distinction between consciousness and spontaneity, and its significance is to be sought in the relation between leadership and the masses. Not only was economism not inconsistent with political activity, it was not inconsistent with political revolution. Thus understood, the category of economism did indeed allow Lenin to associate *Rabochee delo* with economism in the narrow sense, but this does not imply that he attributed the reformist views of the latter to the former – he did not. If we turn Lih's interpretive procedure around and assume that Lenin intended his category of economism to designate some coherent referent, the question necessarily arises as to just what the coherence of its referent consists in. The coherence of economism certainly does not consist in an agreement of ideas, but the political significance of an idea is not necessarily what its proponent professes it to be. It depends upon the context in which it is professed: different ideas may play the same or an analogous rôle in different contexts, and even in the same context may display a convergent significance. The connection Lenin asserts between *Rabochee delo* and economism in the narrow sense is to be understood in some such sense, not as that between different adherents of the same set of ideas, but as that between variant forms of a political tendency. Judgements in matters of this kind suppose, of course, a claim to understand, at least in its broad outline, the strategic logic of political struggles, but that Lenin was prepared to make such a claim is not, I think, a matter of debate.

Making sense of Lenin's notion of economism thus requires us to grapple, not only with his distinction between spontaneity and consciousness, but also with the logic of political strategy in the democratic revolution. The matter is

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6. Lenin 1962c, pp. 386–7.

7. Lenin 1962b, p. 317.

best approached by considering the latter issue first. One of the merits of Lih's book is to have shown that working-class participation in the struggle for political freedom flows naturally from the Erfurtian perspective: according to the Erfurtian narrative, it is only in the course of the struggle for political democracy that the workers learn to wield political freedoms in their own interests and hence develop the understanding and political capacity necessary to assume political power and organise society along Social-Democratic lines and, since the growing political strength of the working class tempers bourgeois enthusiasm for democracy, leadership in the struggle for political democracy is increasingly incumbent upon the proletariat. This conception refers, on one hand, to the theme of proletarian self-emancipation, the idea that the working class is – in the course of its struggle becomes – capable of taking charge of its own emancipation and, on the other, to the idea that the need of the working class for democracy in its struggle for a classless society renders it the appropriate leader for the democratic aspirations and struggles of other, non-proletarian classes and strata of society. It is thus characterised by some internal complexity – it assumes that the two tasks, self-emancipation and democratic leadership, and two corresponding interests, class-interest and popular-democratic interest, coincide. In Germany, where capitalism was incomparably more highly developed than in Russia and where the bourgeoisie had, accordingly, already been able to establish its preponderant weight in state-affairs, the established rôle of the SPD as the pre-eminent party of opposition may have seemed, in Erfurtian eyes, to cement the conjunction of these two terms into self-evidence.

But, in Russia, where this Erfurtian conception was translated into the strategic orientation of proletarian hegemony in the bourgeois-democratic revolution, the conjunction of class-interest and popular-democratic interest was as yet only a strategic aspiration. Its translation into Russian political reality was conditional upon successfully coping with the challenge of rival, bourgeois, projects for hegemony in the revolutionary process. And if he is to be taken at his word, Lenin took the threat of such projects seriously. It is not that he feared the spectre of some latter-day revival of the Jacobin Clubs – that prospect was, indeed, historically *dépassé*. But bourgeois hegemony could take quite different forms than this. And, in the important essay, 'The Persecutors of the Zemstvo and the Hannibals of Liberalism', written just a few months before *WITBD?* and reissued along with the latter in 1907, Lenin discerned the lineaments of such a bourgeois-hegemonic project in an attempt by Peter Struve, former Social Democrat (in fact, the author of the manifesto that emerged from the abortive first congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour-Party [RSDLP]) and future luminary of Russian liberalism, to use the threat of a revolutionary workers' movement to urge

reforms upon tsarism: this attempt presaged a scenario in which the revolutionary force of the masses played a necessary rôle, albeit only as a kind of stage-army with which to frighten the tsar, but which would then, when the time came for the serious business of renegotiating the redistribution of power, yield the political stage, willingly or unwillingly, to liberal specialists in constitutional politics.<sup>8</sup> Such a scenario did not assume workers smitten with liberal ideology; rather, it envisaged a workers' movement of militant, even revolutionary, even socialist temperament, but for which revolution was a means to enforce its economic class-interests, narrowly construed, rather than to transcend its interest-group limitations. Any tendency to construe the political project of the working class in restrictive terms, even one decked out, as in the case of *Rabochee delo*, in the language of revolution and claims to vanguard-status, would play into such a scenario: at stake in Lenin's critique of economism was not only the relation of politics and economics, revolution and reform, but also, and perhaps more basically, the relation between class-interests and popular-democratic interests in the project of proletarian hegemony. If, as Lih claims, there was consensus among the Russian Social Democrats over the Erfurtian narrative and the project of proletarian hegemony in the bourgeois-democratic revolution, then Lenin's critique of economism indicates that this project was beset by internal political, and therefore perhaps also theoretical, tensions; hegemony could not be taken as given, it would have to be constructed. And this suggests, in turn, that the relation between the business- and the polemical aspects of Lenin's argument is more fluid (and perhaps more productive) than Lih would have it: if we once again take Lenin at his word and assume that a tendency exists corresponding to his definition of economism, it could reveal itself only in the course of polemics over what proletarian hegemony is, that is, how it was to be constructed. The polemical aspect plays not only a rhetorical or even political rôle in Lenin's argument, but also an epistemological rôle.

If the economist tendency as identified by Lenin does exist, the question must arise as to how it is to be understood and, in this connection, recourse to the distinction between spontaneity and consciousness is necessary. If we retain the possibility that Lenin's polemic does play a theoretical rôle in his argument, then it may, conversely, help in clarifying the distinction between spontaneity and consciousness. It is a crucial weakness of Lih's reading of *WITBD?* as an exemplification of the Erfurtian narrative that it is unable to account for some of Lenin's most noteworthy (or, at least, most noted) formulations on the relation between spontaneity and consciousness,

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8. See Lenin 1962a.

particularly his repeated claim that ‘the task of Social-Democracy is to *combat spontaneity*, to *divert* the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social-Democracy’.<sup>9</sup> The logic of the Erfurtian narrative can be stretched to accommodate a good deal of Lenin’s polemic against the economist practice of subordinating consciousness to spontaneity, but it cannot contain this crucial claim; it is a tribute to Lih’s intellectual honesty that he acknowledges this difficulty. And, while Lih can attribute the formulations in question to a combination of polemical distortion and editorial haste, it should be noted that his procedure of determining the meaning of key-terms in Lenin’s text, including spontaneity and consciousness, by reference to common Russian usage of the time, while necessary and sometimes illuminating, is ill-adapted to the task of discerning their place, and hence their meaning, in the logic of Lenin’s argument and therefore for determining whether or not they indicate an innovative movement of thought.

The rôle played by ‘consciousness’ in Lenin’s text is not to be understood, Lih cautions, in abstraction from political practice, and since the political practice advocated by Lenin is to be understood in terms of the Erfurtian narrative, consciousness is construed as an awareness of the task of spreading the good news of the fusion of socialism and the working-class movement. Inasmuch as historical materialism supplies the theory of the historical movement of this fusion, consciousness is to be grasped by reference to Marxist theory. The introduction of consciousness into the spontaneous working-class movement from without signifies, in terms of the Erfurtian narrative, a practice of making workers aware of a goal and a direction of their movement that is already implicit in their practice. Since the spontaneous movement and the conscious awareness of it, practice and theory, are congruent and harmonious, there is no need, and no theoretical room, for a struggle between them. This is, indeed, the implication of the passage by Kautsky famously cited by Lenin in his own discussion of consciousness and spontaneity in *WITBD?*<sup>10</sup> However, while some of Lenin’s formulations can be assimilated to this logic, others, in particular those enjoining a struggle against spontaneity, are suggestive of a different logic at work in Lenin’s argument. The evidence assembled by Lih renders the ‘textbook-interpretation’ unsustainable, yet the conceptual tensions upon

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9. Lenin 1962c, p. 384.

10. See Shandro 1997/8.

which that reading feeds cannot be resolved absent an explanation of these passages.

Socialist consciousness, as it figured in Lenin's argument, certainly carried an injunction to working-class solidarity in the struggle for a socialist aim that transcended capitalism and class-society, but it also assumed an awareness of 'the irreconcilable antagonism of [the workers'] interests to the whole of the modern political and social system'<sup>11</sup> and, thus, it implied attentiveness to the twists and turns in the path to the socialist end, that is, to the politico-strategic logic of the class-struggle. The irreconcilability of class-antagonism implied that it is built into the very foundation of the bourgeois social edifice and it enjoins systematic distrust of the class-enemy; the pervasive character of class-antagonism implied that it cannot be escaped and argued that exclusion of any aspect of the socio-political totality from the purview of the socialist project might concede the strategic initiative to the adversary. Socialist consciousness could not but draw upon Marxist theory (the theorisation of the irreconcilability of class-antagonism) and could not be brought to bear upon the class-struggle in the absence of an organised leadership informed by that theory and able to apply it ambitiously and with confidence.

Lenin's argument distinguishes two contradictory tendencies in the spontaneous working-class movement, that is, in the working-class movement insofar as the consciousness of 'the irreconcilable antagonism of [the workers'] interests to the whole of the modern political and social system' has not been brought to bear upon it: the movement, grounded in the exploitative social relations of capitalist production that structure the workers' lives and experience, tends spontaneously through the experience of solidarity and struggle to engender a socialist consciousness (that is, the spontaneous movement is the 'embryo of consciousness') but bourgeois ideology imposes itself spontaneously as the frame within which working-class experience and struggles are grasped in terms that could not shake the hegemony of the adversary (that is, the spontaneous movement leads to a merely corporate or 'trade-union consciousness'). Lenin's claim is that the latter tendency 'spontaneously' predominates over the former and that it is therefore incumbent upon 'Social-Democratic consciousness' or rather, those who have achieved this consciousness, to struggle against 'spontaneity'.

To appreciate the force of this claim, we need to look at the logic of the interplay between these tendencies.<sup>12</sup> The workers struggle spontaneously,

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11. Lenin 1962c, p. 375.

12. The point is more thoroughly argued in Shandro 1995.

and, in the course of their struggles, a combination of changed circumstances and innovative methods of struggle may result in a challenge and even, on occasion, a breach of the parameters of bourgeois hegemony. Spontaneous working-class struggles may elicit not only a re-assertion of the tried and true themes of class-rule, but also sometimes innovative attempts to reformulate the parameters of bourgeois hegemony, that is, the reorganisation of bourgeois strategy and the spontaneous imposition of bourgeois ideology onto the struggle of the workers. To be effective, this kind of response must appear in forms that have some purchase upon the spontaneous proletarian experience of the class-struggle; indeed, bourgeois hegemony need not depend upon denial of the class-struggle and might be most effectively expressed in and through the political shape, organisation and direction of the resistance of its socialist adversary. Accommodation to bourgeois hegemony thus proceeds spontaneously, not through a failure of proletarian commitment to the struggle for socialism, which Lenin never questioned, but through failure effectively to mount a political project of proletarian hegemony, that is, to contend for, establish and maintain the strategic initiative in the struggle for hegemony in the democratic revolution. An effective project of proletarian hegemony could not arise simply from the workers' spontaneous experience, because that experience is structured both by the reality of class-antagonism and by the bourgeois-ideological construction of such antagonism as somehow reconcilable. Since each aspect of this spontaneous movement may take on novel forms beyond the current experience of the participants, the irreconcilability of their antagonism can only be grasped theoretically. Since attempts at class-conciliation can draw upon ideological and political materials from anywhere in the social totality and may do so innovatively, Marxist theory must be open to the whole of the social order, including the open-ended logic of the struggle for hegemony, that is to say, it must itself develop; indeed, theory and the political project grounded in it can only be vindicated, however, through engagement with periodically renewed attempts to reconcile class-antagonisms, including attempts that would instrumentalise elements of socialist theory and practice to this end.

Why could the workers themselves not grasp Marxist theory? Lenin's explicit answer was that they could do it, better in fact than the intellectuals. They would do so, however, not in the mass, but as individuals, and having become conscious, they would find themselves in a position analogous to that occupied by the initial, intellectual, carriers of Marxist theory, confronting the challenge of bringing consciousness to bear upon the contradictory logic of the spontaneous movement. Meeting it spontaneously,

they might observe the objective logic of the class-struggle and, accommodating themselves to flow of events, no doubt participate along with their fellow-workers in whatever struggles should arise, but forego any pretensions to provide leadership in the class-struggle. Meeting it consciously, they would employ Marxist theory reflexively to grasp their own situation within the spontaneously-given conjunctures of the class-struggle and, acting from where they are, assume the burdens of leadership in the struggle for hegemony. To assume this responsibility was to take up a sophisticated political stance, sustaining the spontaneous struggles of the workers and fostering the embryonic forms of socialist consciousness thrown up in the course of them by diagnosing and combating the forms in which bourgeois ideology spontaneously imposes itself within the working-class movement. At stake in Lenin's discussion of spontaneity and consciousness was, not an issue in the sociology of knowledge concerning the bearer of socialist consciousness, but the strategic, or better, meta-strategic, issue of the terms in which Marxist political actors – intellectuals or workers – can come to grips with their own situation within the class-struggle and position themselves to act effectively upon it. Indeed, that the 'profound theoretical error' of *Rabochee delo* and other Economists had to do with just this issue, their inability 'to connect spontaneous evolution with conscious revolutionary activity',<sup>13</sup> is asserted by Lenin in a brief article he described as a 'synopsis' of *WITBD?*<sup>14</sup>

Lenin's distinction between spontaneity and consciousness is not a transposition into political terms of an ontological distinction between matter and mind or of a social-scientific distinction between base and superstructure, or even of a sociological distinction between workers and intellectuals. It invokes, rather, the contradictory combination of a complex set of forces and tendencies in a concrete conjuncture of political struggle and implicitly, through this, the operation of a politico-strategic logic of struggle for hegemony in relation to which the Marxist political actors are invited/required to situate themselves. Refracted through this logic, the class-struggle and, with it, working-class consciousness cannot but develop unevenly. The thesis of consciousness from without is an attempt to think through the implication of this unevenness for political action and political leadership of the working-class movement. It provides the conceptual underpinnings for the distinctive Leninist injunction to concrete analysis of the concrete situation, and it mandates, accordingly, the reflexive adjustment of

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13. Lenin 1962b, p. 316.

14. Lenin 1962c, p. 350.

consciousness to the shifting lines and logic of the struggle for hegemony. Thus, paradoxically, it generates the possibility of opening up Marxist theory to unexpected innovation and diversity in the spontaneous movement of the class-struggle.<sup>15</sup> Lenin's *WITBD?* emerges from and cannot be understood without the context of orthodox Erfurtian Marxism, but it points beyond it.

If some such logic is at work in *WITBD?*, then it becomes plausible to regard *Rabochee delo* and Kuskova's *Credo* as, not necessarily different expressions of the same set of political ideas, but distinct phenomenal forms of the same underlying political tendency. For, on this logic, political tendencies are to be identified not only by reference to the ideas expressed by political actors but essentially by reference to the rôle ideas and actions play in the class-political struggle for hegemony. The economism that was the target of Lenin's critique need not imply the reduction of political to economic struggle; indeed, it could be and often was articulated in quite revolutionary terms. Thus, it could assume an indefinite number of forms, leftist as well as rightist, as it did during the revolution of 1905, and again, during the First World-War, when Lenin would revive the terminology of the earlier polemic to tax Bukharin and his co-thinkers with the charge of 'imperialist economism' for their refusal to recognise a right of nations to self-determination as an essential part of a revolutionary-socialist programme.<sup>16</sup> Thus understood, the economist-trend consisted in the effective concession to bourgeois interests of areas of political debate and activity and thereby and to that extent the restriction of working-class politics to narrowly corporate concerns and the accommodation of socialist politics to the spontaneous movement of the class-struggle, that is, to lines, forms and trajectories of conflict prescribed by, or at least recoverable by, bourgeois hegemony. The struggle between political tendencies in the working-class movement is no longer reduced to a struggle between ideas proper to the working class itself and those proper to historically outmoded social strata intermingled with it, but is to be understood as well in terms of the logic of contemporary political struggles.

If some such logic underpins Lenin's argument, then his critique of *Rabochee delo*'s theoretical indifference in the first chapter of *WITBD?* is not, as Lih maintains, of merely polemical significance but integral to his political position, that is, to the way in which he was beginning to conceive the hegemony of the proletariat. For knowledge of Marxist theory figures there, not as a rigid standard of orthodox rectitude with which to chastise his

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15. See Shandro 2007.

16. See Lenin 1964.

adversaries for their departures, but, more importantly, as a necessary condition for grappling consciously with the new and in some cases unprecedented issues posed by the struggle against the tsarist autocracy and, consequently, for situating oneself in concrete political terrain. The importance of theory is enhanced for the Russian Marxists, Lenin writes, not only by the need to settle accounts with non-Marxist trends of revolutionary thought and the consequent necessity of a ‘strict differentiation of shades of opinion’, but by the need to develop ‘the ability to treat [the] experiences [of other countries] critically and test them independently’ and by the fact that ‘the national tasks of Russian Social-Democracy are such as have never confronted any other socialist party in the world’.<sup>17</sup> And this suggests, if it does not imply, that the defence of theory requires it to be further developed by applying it to new and as-yet unresolved questions. *Rabochee delo*’s theoretical gaffes and practical blunders are to be gauged, accordingly, not only by already-established Erfurtian standards, but also by the task of grappling with challenges on the frontiers of Marxist theory and practice.

Lars Lih’s comprehensive demonstration that *WITBD?* cannot be understood apart from the political and discursive context of Erfurtian Marxism, and its attempted translation into Russia Social Democracy provides an indispensable service to the historiography of Marxist theory and practice. But, if I may borrow a Leninist metaphor, it seems that Lih has bent this particular stick too far. This is most evident in Lih’s narrow construal of the pivotal concept of ‘economism’, in terms of the professed positions of only *some* of the targets of Lenin’s polemic, although Lenin explicitly cautions his readers against this kind of misreading. But the same sort of difficulty appears in Lih’s assumptions about the status of Marxist theory in Lenin’s argument. Where Lenin derived his recourse to theory from the very logic of the debate over practical proposals – ‘the perplexity of the Economists over the practical application of our views in *Iskra* clearly revealed that we often speak literally in different tongues and therefore *cannot* arrive at an understanding without beginning *ab ovo*’<sup>18</sup> – Lih subordinates the text of *WITBD?* to his distinction between its ‘business’ – and its polemical parts, thus making it impossible to see what of theoretical significance could possibly be at stake in the controversy and reading as mere rhetoric, superfluous except for polemical purposes, the necessity Lenin asserts for recourse to Marxist theory in order to understand what is at issue in the debate over the practical project of proletarian hegemony. In these ways, the necessary and proper concern with restoring the context of

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17. Lenin 1962c, p. 370.

18. Lenin 1962c, p. 350.

*WITBD?*, pushed too far, actually leads to distortions of the text itself. In effect, Lih reduces the argument of Lenin's text to its Erfurtian context and thereby misses its innovative aspect and, paradoxically, this kind of procedure can occlude such a crucial contextual feature as the connection, designated by Lenin, between economism as a political current and an emergent liberal-bourgeois bid for hegemony in the democratic revolution. Where a text challenges the terms of debate, it may illuminate unsuspected distinctions and connections in the reality it seeks to grasp, and where that reality is the political context within which it is written, it may change the terms in which its context is understood; in this – materialist – sense, a text such as Lenin's *WITBD?* may re-invent its own context.

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## Rediscovering Lenin

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### Abstract

*Lenin Rediscovered* is an important and powerful contribution to our understanding of Lenin's Marxism. However, it is also flawed by an attempt to push too far the claim that Lenin was a consistent 'Erfurtian' or Second-International Marxist. The dynamics of a mass political party and social movement are very different from even the most representative theoretician. The reality of German Social Democracy was certainly more problematic than what Lenin was able to glean from the very best of Kautsky's writings. This became apparent to Lenin in 1914, when he recognised that he had been building a very different kind of party from the actual SPD. It may be possible that the SPD and the RSDLP (Bolsheviks) were both 'parties of a new type,' but it is also clear that they were not parties of the same type. There was much that Lenin had in common with Kautsky and Bebel – but he was doing something that was, in important ways, quite different.

### Keywords

Bolshevism, communism, Lenin, Marxism, party, revolution, socialism, working class

The first thing one must say about Lars T. Lih's massive study, *Lenin Rediscovered: 'What Is to Be Done?' in Context*, is that it is a magnificent contribution to our understanding of V.I. Lenin, Bolshevism, Marxism, the history of the Russian-revolutionary movement and of Communism. It stands as an incredibly effective challenge to anti-communist and anti-Lenin dogmas and distortions that have dominated scholarship and popular expositions since the 1950s in the advanced-capitalist countries – and, since 1990, throughout most of the world.

Clearly written, well-reasoned, effectively documented, it is a work that no scholar seriously examining the life and thought of Lenin will be able to ignore. More than this, it is a gift to serious political activists seeking to draw on traditions and lessons of the past in order to get present-day and future possibilities into sharper focus. Although the sheer bulk of the volume (more than 860 pages) will be daunting for many, those who seek to bridge the gap

between serious scholarship and serious activism by helping deepen their comrades' understanding through the development of more-widely accessible educational materials will certainly want to draw on this outstanding resource.

Lih's primary target for criticism is 'a strong consensus of informed experts' who, 'at least from the mid-1950s', have put forward a reading of *What Is to Be Done?* that 'has found its way into textbooks of political science and of Russian history, and, from there, into almost any secondary account that has reason to touch on Lenin. The two or three famous passages that form the textual basis of this reading are endlessly recycled from textbook to popular history to specialised monograph and back again'. He sums up: 'Putting all the assertions of the textbook interpretation together, we realise that *WITBD?* is a profound theoretical and organisational innovation, the charter document of Bolshevism, and the ultimate source of Stalinism'<sup>1</sup> – a set of contentions unable to withstand this scholarly onslaught.

Lih presents a Lenin who is absolutely committed to the establishment of political democracy as essential to the struggle for and the realisation of socialism, a Lenin who has immense confidence that the working class has a natural capacity for absorbing revolutionary-socialist ideas and committing itself to the struggle for a radically better world, a Lenin who is determined to help build a broad working-class party with a principled socialist programme flowing from a Marxist understanding of the world. He demolishes the notions that Lenin diverged qualitatively from Marx, that he distrusted the workers and their 'spontaneity', that he was an élitist and an authoritarian. In doing this, Lih draws together a variety of facts and opens up certain lines of thought that greatly add to our knowledge and understanding. It is a splendid achievement.

There is, however, a problematic feature of *Lenin Rediscovered* that merits critical scrutiny. A somewhat exaggerated claim and unfortunate literary strategy are part of the structure of his argument. I would contend that this does no harm whatsoever to the primary thrust of his work – an examination of what Lenin actually thought and said and did. But it does introduce a distortion into secondary matters having to do with Lenin-historiography and how Lenin has been understood by a significant layer of pro-Lenin activists of the twentieth century.

Lih presents his book as a boldly innovative challenge to what he calls 'the textbook interpretation' of *What Is to Be Done?*, Lenin's major 1902 work on 'the organisation question'. This so-called 'textbook interpretation', he tells us,

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1. Lih 2006, pp. 13–14, 18.

is offered not only by ‘academic specialists’ (Alfred G. Meyer, Adam Ulam, Leonard Schapiro, John Keep, Samuel Baron, Allan Wildman, Israel Getzler, Abraham Ascher, Richard Pipes, Jonathan Frankel, Herbert Marcuse, Barrington Moore, Bertram D. Wolfe, Reginald Zelnick, and others) – but also by ‘activists in the Trotskyist tradition’ (specifically ‘writers such as Tony Cliff, John Molyneux and more recently Paul Le Blanc’). The activists, he claims, have been inclined to give too much ground to the academics’ positing an élitist and authoritarian content in Lenin’s 1902 classic. The problem, he suggests, is that the activists are swayed by the unfair and inaccurate anti-Lenin polemics of 1904 advanced by Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky (which are also employed by many of the academics).

I would insist that the argument is far too neat. The reality is messier, more interesting. Related to this, it is odd that Lih does not include at least brief consideration of important discussions of Lenin and the Bolsheviks by Isaac Deutscher, E.H. Carr, Moshe Lewin, C.L.R. James, Victor Serge, Ernest Mandel, Marcel Liebman, and Neil Harding (only the last three are even cited in the bibliography). To do so, however, would disrupt the neatly schematic generalisations he makes about the interpretations of academics and activists – and would also demonstrate (in the case of most of these authors) that Lih’s interpretation is hardly the innovation that he implies it is.<sup>2</sup> Consider, for example, the 1963 comment by C.L.R. James, which seems a succinct summary of Lih’s argument:

The theory and practice of the vanguard party, of the one-party state, is not (repeat not) the central doctrine of Leninism. It is not the central doctrine, it is not even a special doctrine. It is not and it never was. . . . Bolshevism, Leninism, did have central doctrines. One was theoretical, the inevitable collapse of capitalism into barbarism. Another was social, that on account of its place in society, its training and its numbers, only the working class could prevent the degradation and reconstruct society. Political action consisted in organizing a party to carry out these aims. These were the central principles of Bolshevism. The rigidity of its political organization came not from the dictatorial brain of Lenin but from a less distinguished source – the Tsarist police state. Until the

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2. To Lih’s credit, he does acknowledge ‘that there exists a solid counter-tradition on *WITBD* – so much so that I can safely say I am rediscovering Lenin rather than presenting an original new picture’ (Lih 2006, p. 22). But the counter-tradition not only excludes the three textbook-tainted Trotskyists but also the other just-mentioned prominent scholars and activists. It involves what early Bolsheviks (including the young Stalin) and Mensheviks, plus Kautsky, said and did not say about *What Is to Be Done?*, as well as the comments of ‘informed outside observers’ such as journalist William Chamberlin, insights from two of his own teachers (John Plamenatz and Robert C. Tucker), and good points made by a scattering of others (such as Stephen Cohen, Moira Donald, Henry Reichman).

revolution actually began in March 1917, the future that Lenin foresaw and worked for was the establishment of parliamentary democracy in Russia on the British and German models... Bolshevism looked forward to a regime of parliamentary democracy because this was the doctrine of classical Marxism that it was through parliamentary democracy that the working class and the whole population... was educated and trained for the transition to socialism.<sup>3</sup>

It is not the case that Lenin has been ‘rediscovered’ only with the appearance of this excellent new study. It takes its place as a valuable contribution to an important body of literature defending the ‘Leninism of Lenin’ from slander and distortion.

This quibble with *Lenin Rediscovered* seems worth further elaboration, it seems to me (perhaps not surprisingly, since I am one of its ‘activist’ targets). Lih’s argument is also ‘far too neat’, I will suggest in the concluding section of this essay, in relation to the development of Bolshevism in later years. First, however, we should look more closely at the solid merits of this important work.

## I

What, according to Lih, was the Leninist vision of the revolutionary party as put forward in his 1902 classic? His view of Lenin’s orientation could be summarised this way: the creation of a revolutionary workers’ party, guided by a serious-minded utilisation of socialist theory and scientific analysis, drawing increasing numbers of working people into a highly conscious struggle against all forms of oppression – this could not be expected to arise easily or spontaneously. It had to be created through the most persistent, serious, consistent efforts of revolutionary socialists. The working class would not automatically become a force for socialist revolution, but it could develop into such a force with the assistance of a serious revolutionary workers’ party. Such a party – making past lessons, the most advanced social theory, and a broad social vision accessible to increasing numbers of workers – would be a vital component in the self-education and self-organisation of the working class, helping to develop spontaneous working-class impulses toward democracy and socialism into a cohesive, well-organised, and powerful social force.<sup>4</sup>

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3. James 1992, pp. 327–8.

4. This is a summary of Le Blanc 1990, p. 67. Lih cites it when acknowledging that ‘the activists have a more accurate sense than the academics of Lenin’s vision of the party’ (Lih 2006, p. 20).

Lih is able to demonstrate, with an almost overwhelming scholarly thoroughness, that this vision is at the core of Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* and other writings from the mid-1890s up to the revolutionary upsurge of 1905. Thanks to his knowledge of Russian, he is able to comb through existing English translations to identify problematic formulations not existing in the Russian original. In fact, about one-third of the text consists of a retranslation of *What Is to Be Done?*, with two sections of detailed annotations – an incredible contribution by itself. He also trawls through an immense quantity of other Russian-language materials that he utilises to help bring the context of Lenin's writings into clearer focus than ever before. For those of us labouring without Russian-language skills, this in itself is a precious offering.

More than this, noting that Lenin unambiguously projected a Russian version of the German Social-Democratic Party as the kind of organisation to bring about socialism in Russia, Lih focuses sustained attention on the German Party and its powerful influence on the Russian Marxists. In doing this, he gives a well-merited respectful attention to the early contributions of Karl Kautsky and to his importance for the revolutionary Left, Lenin most of all. One might argue that he 'bends the stick' too far – being rather dismissive of the powerful critique of 'so-called fatalistic Marxism' of the Second International advanced in the 1920s by the likes of Lukács, Korsch and Gramsci, and not being alert to the critical insights that Rosa Luxemburg and other revolutionary Marxists (Pannekoek, Riazanov, Parvus, Trotsky, Radek, Rakovsky, etc.) were developing at the time. These critical insights that found confirmation in the debacle of 1914, a ghastly tragedy causing Lenin himself to revise his earlier positive judgements and to recast and sharpen his own Marxism. But a serious understanding of Lenin and the other Russian Marxists of the early 1900s can be advanced by setting these matters aside in order to fully comprehend *the understanding they had at the time* of the Marxism of the Second International and of German Social Democracy. And as he does this, Lih helps us to see the strengths and grandeur of these truly impressive entities.

He thereby helps us see that *What Is to Be Done?* – far from representing some single-minded determination to create a 'party of a new type' (as Soviet dogmatists and Western Cold-War scholars insisted) – expressed the common orientation of the great majority of Russian Social Democrats (those who would become Mensheviks as well as future Bolsheviks) to create on Russian soil, and under Russian conditions, a socialist workers' party coming as close to the German model as possible. This included that party's core-commitment to advancing the most-thoroughgoing democracy as the essential basis for the workers' struggle to take power and initiate the socialist reconstruction of society.

In making this case, Lih treats us to the delicious demolition of one anti-Lenin myth after another. Consider, for example, his comments on Richard Pipes:

Advocates of the textbook interpretation will sometimes admit that Lenin did not explicitly advance the views attributed to him, although this fact does not seem to worry them much. For example, Richard Pipes summarises a Lenin article of 1899 by telling us that Lenin's '*unspoken* assumption is that the majority of the population is actually or potentially reactionary; his '*unspoken* conclusion, that democracy leads to reaction.' Pipes is absolutely right: these particular assumptions and conclusions are definitely unspoken. Lenin's spoken assumptions and conclusions – a subject in which Pipes shows less interest – are all about the majority of the population charging the citadel of the autocracy in order to achieve democratic political freedom as the necessary next step toward socialism.<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes, what Lih is able to do along these lines has the quality of shooting fish in a barrel.<sup>6</sup> He takes, for example, a sentence from *What Is to Be Done?* whose meaning is consistently garbled by 'textbook'-academics: 'We said that there could not have been a Social-Democratic awareness among the workers.' Presumably translating from the original Russian, Adam Ulam has Lenin proclaiming: 'Socialist consciousness cannot exist among the workers'. This is used to buttress the notion that Lenin believed only revolutionary intellectuals such as himself were fit to lead ignorant workers (incapable of thinking socialist thoughts) in a socialist revolution... somehow. The incoherence of such a notion is cleared away by Lih's explanatory restatement of Lenin's point: 'The Russian workers who carried out the heroic strikes of the mid-1890s did not yet have socialist awareness nor could we have expected them to'. Yet Ulam's rendition turns Lenin's historical statement into a general proposition about workers as such, everywhere, at all times. Some such misreading must be behind some extraordinary assertions by scholars. In 1956, Alfred Meyer wrote that Lenin's 'generally prevailing opinion was that the proletariat *was* not and *could* not be conscious'. More recently, James D. White makes the same point, with the assertion that in Lenin's view 'socialist consciousness *always* remained outside the working class because it could *never* see beyond its narrow material class interests'. It is impossible not to concur with Lih's scornful comment: 'Amazing'.

It is not difficult for him to direct our attention to an avalanche of words and analyses from Lenin himself, and other original source-material as well

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5. Lih 2006, pp. 23–4.

6. Lih 2006, pp. 647–8.

(including from Lenin's political opponents), to demonstrate that Lenin's central mission was to bring about a merger of socialism with the workers, and that he did not waver from

very confident assumptions about workers' receptivity to the Social-Democratic message and about the ability of underground activists [under Russian conditions of tsarist despotism] to build and sustain a nation-wide political organisation, one that could both put down roots in the worker milieu and escape destruction at the hands of the police... He is always on the side making the most confident assumptions about the empirical possibility of a mass underground Social-Democratic movement... Lenin generally argued that the 'advanced workers' were already committed Social Democrats and that these advanced workers were in an ideal position to spread the message further, since they would be accepted by other workers as their natural leaders.<sup>7</sup>

In 1895, Lenin – discussing his own draft political programme for the Russian Social-Democratic Labour-Party – explained that a particular paragraph of the programme

is the most important and central one because it shows what should be the activity of a party that defends the interests of the worker class and what should be the activity of all purposive workers. It shows the way by which the aspiration of socialism – the aspiration of ending the eternal exploitation of man by man – must be merged with movement of the people that arose out of the conditions of life created by large-scale factories and workshops'.<sup>8</sup>

Lih has little patience for even prestigious revolutionaries who indulged in distortions of Lenin's views. '[Rosa] Luxemburg's prestige as an icon of the Left has given her anti-Lenin broadside an uncriticised authority among academics and activists', he says,<sup>9</sup> but 'I feel it is my duty as a historian to point out that it is not a perceptive or prophetic critique but an unscrupulous hatchet job'. This is a harsh judgement that my own research corroborates (although I believe that, independently of her anti-Lenin invective, there are magnificent insights in her 1904 polemic that are more generally applicable for revolutionary socialists). Lih also offers a scathing judgement of Trotsky's anti-Lenin polemic of 1904, *Our Political Tasks* – although it is hardly more scathing than the judgment of Isaac Deutscher many years ago that 'it required a volatile and

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7. Lih 2006, pp. 7–8.

8. Lih 2006, pp. 124–5.

9. Lih 2006, p. 526.

irresponsible imagination in the pamphleteer to show his adversary in so distorting a mirror'.<sup>10</sup>

He also offers new information, rich insights, and challenging interpretations. Again, some of what Lih offers has a delicious irony. For example, Rosa Luxemburg, in arguing 'that Lenin was so intent on total central control that he overlooked the creative role of the worker movement itself', made reference to a series of unsigned articles from *Iskra* demonstrating spontaneous mass actions of the workers in Rostov-on-the-Don – and Lih shows us that, unbeknown to Luxemburg, these articles had been written by Lenin himself.<sup>11</sup> His formulations on the matter of a 'party of a new type' and 'vanguard party'<sup>12</sup> are provocative and illuminating:

As we set about the task of rediscovering Lenin's actual outlook, the terms 'party of a new type' and 'vanguard party' are actually helpful – but only if they are applied to the SPD [Social-Democratic Party of Germany] as well as the Bolsheviks. The SPD was a vanguard party, first because it defined its own mission as 'filling up' the proletariat with the awareness and skills needed to fulfill its own world-historical mission, and second because the SPD developed an innovative panoply of methods for spreading enlightenment and 'combination.' The term 'vanguard party' was not used during this period (I do not believe the term can be found in Lenin's writings), but 'vanguard' was, and this is what people meant by it. Any other definition is historically misleading and confusing.<sup>13</sup>

'Let us build a party as much like the SPD as possible under underground conditions so that we can overthrow the tsar and become even more like the SPD', was Lenin's perspective, Lih tells us. 'He gave advice on how to build an effective party in the underground, but the reason he wanted an effective party was to be able to leave behind forever the stifling atmosphere of the underground'.<sup>14</sup>

This was the orientation of the Mensheviks as well. So what explains the devastating 1903 Bolshevik/Menshevik split in the RSDLP? The problem, Lih accurately notes, was the development and implementation, at the 1903 Second Congress of the RSDLP, of democratic rules and structures that stepped on the toes of old and respected comrades. As he puts it,

old habits die hard, especially for individualistic intellectuals. The old *Iskra* editors felt that [they] had a personal right to the editorial chairs of the party newspaper.

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10. Deutscher 1954, p. 95.

11. Lih 2006, pp. 206–7.

12. Lih 2006, p. 556.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Lih 2006, p. 557.

They felt they had a right to advocate whatever policies they felt best, even if those run directly against the policies of the Congress. They were eager for the authority conferred by the Party, but had no time for the discipline that went with it.<sup>15</sup>

What happened next flowed from this élitist impulse. The indignant ‘aristocrats’ rebelled against the democratic decisions of the Congress. ‘Since the old *Iskra* board had split five against one, the five were able to accuse the one [Lenin] of dictatorial ambitions – all the while acting as a compact oligarchy and taking one high-handed action after another’. Between the worthy ideals of ‘a national democratic organisation’ and ‘the continuity and prestige of the top leaders’, they felt the second must not be trumped by the first in the manner that Lenin had insisted on. Lih goes on to stress that it was not Lenin but the Mensheviks themselves who chose the label ‘the minority’ (which is what Menshevik means) – because of their ‘feeling that “minority” signified a progressive vanguard leading the way’, that ‘going along with the majority’ meant ‘being conservative and in the tail of the movement, instead of acting as a minority that advanced new and broader tasks’. Related to the ‘new and broader tasks’ was the campaign blueprinted by Menshevik-elder Pavel Akselrod to lobby liberal political figures for a ‘zemstvo campaign’ to broaden democracy, introducing a worker-bourgeois class-collaborationism, a new political note that Lih – unlike Lenin, who favoured a worker-peasant alliance – does not seem to catch.<sup>16</sup>

What Lih does emphasise, most interestingly, is that Lenin – often accused of reverting from Marxism to nineteenth-century conspiratorial traditions of People’s Will [*Narodnaia volia*] – was actually the defender of Social-Democratic orthodoxy. This becomes clear in his proposal that a member of the RSDLP be someone who agrees with the party-programme, pays dues, and is an active member of the organisation. In contrast, Martov proposed a loose definition of membership as someone who agreed with the programme and gave the RSDLP ‘regular assistance’. It was Martov’s formulation ‘that represented the spirit of *Narodnaia volia*’, Lih tells us, and ‘Akslerod explicitly brought up *Narodnaia volia* as a positive model that exemplified Martov’s logic’. Commenting from afar, Kautsky ‘also sided with Martov – because of the special circumstances of the Russian underground. In the case of a party operating under political freedom, Lenin’s formulation would be preferable’. Lenin’s formulation, more in line with the statutes of the SPD, was voted down at the 1903 Congress, and most ‘textbook’-historians have made much

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15. Lih 2006, p. 500.

16. Lih 2006, pp. 501–9.

of it (contrasting the ‘authoritarian’ Lenin with the ‘democratic’ Martov), falsely identifying it as a reason for the Bolshevik/Menshevik split – although the Mensheviks themselves adopted Lenin’s formulation within a couple of years.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most interesting points highlighted in Lih’s account of the 1903 split and its aftermath is the place of the practical workers [*praktiki*] of the RSDLP’s underground-committees in the swirl of polemics. I find it so interesting that I will give-in to the temptation of simply quoting it at length:

The bitterness and contempt toward the party *praktiki* is another striking feature of the Menshevik polemics in 1904. While officially the abuse is directed at Lenin’s supporters, it is not counterbalanced by any praise or encouraging words for Menshevik *praktiki*. One discerns a feeling of exasperation on the part of the educated and cosmopolitan émigrés toward the young, semi-educated and provincial *praktiki* in Russia. The most thorough-going expression of this attitude is a series of articles published in 1905 by Potresov. These articles portray the history of the Russian revolutionary underground as a series of misadventures by the utterly provincial and comically self-absorbed *praktiki*. Lenin acquired influence among the *praktiki* because he shared and faithfully reflected these delusions.

There is nothing similar to this in Bolshevik polemics, which are directed solely against the *Iskra* editors and allies such as Trotsky. Olminskii and Bogdanov [leading Bolshevik activists] quickly picked up on this feature of Menshevik writings. Olminskii even took his pseudonym from a remark in this vein by Martov, who attributed Lenin’s success to his pandering to the ‘cheap seats [*galerka*]’. Thus Olminskii signed his pamphlets Cheap Seats, while Bogdanov adopted the pseudonym Rank-and-File [*Riadovoi*]. They portrayed the party split as a clash of the party aristocracy and of prestigious émigré writers on the one side and the party plebians and the rank and file on the other.<sup>18</sup>

What has been summarised here consists of only a modest sampling of the riches offered in Lih’s fine volume. Some of us will certainly be going through it again and again to find valuable nuggets and to ponder challenging conceptualisations. It is unfortunate, however, that amid the myth-busting and stimulating new interpretations, Lih employs his critical-minded and creative intelligence to create his own little myth of ‘activists in the Trotskyist tradition’ (Cliff, Molyneux, Le Blanc) who choose to link themselves with ‘the textbook interpretation’ of anti-Lenin academics.

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17. Lih 2006, p. 519.

18. Lih 2006, pp. 506–7.

## II

One way of puncturing the mythic conceptualisation of ‘the activists’ which Lih presents is to provide some autobiographical information on how I came to engage with *What Is to Be Done?* and to develop the understanding of Lenin that culminated in my study *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*. I would imagine that the story of Cliff and Molyneux would have to be different, particularly since, despite much common ground, there are differences between their interpretations and mine.

When I was very young, I discovered that the admirably idealistic views of my parents and favourite relatives were under sustained assault from the dominant culture in the United States, including from such publications as the *Weekly Reader*, which we got every week in my junior high-school social-studies class (displaying portraits of a noble George Washington and a sinister V.I. Lenin under the heading ‘Democracy Means Freedom and Communism Means Tyranny’). There were also the somewhat-more sophisticated and richly-illustrated *Life*-magazine expositions on Communism, not to mention the crude assaults by J. Edgar Hoover of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the reasonably-priced paperback-edition of his book *Masters of Deceit*.

My father was a dedicated trade-union organiser who had been in and around the Communist Party from the early 1930s to the early 1950s. He saw unions as a coming-together of the workers to struggle for a better life for themselves and their families in the face of the tyranny of selfish and powerful profiteers who own and control the capitalist workplaces and economy. Unions meant workers sticking up for each other and struggling for a better future. I knew, by the time I was 13 years old, that he believed in *socialism* or *communism* (these were synonyms for him) which he viewed as people sharing the abundant resources of society so that each and every person could have all their basic material needs met, with possibilities opened up for free and creative lives – not just for a lucky few, but for each and every person.

I asked him one day: ‘What about Lenin?’ And he explained to me that Lenin was for the workers, that things like oppression and exploitation made him very angry, and that he was a very tough man, tough in a good way – tough-minded about how to organise to change the world. From that time onward, I saw Lenin as representing something very positive.

In 1962, in the small Pennsylvania-town where I lived, I found and immediately bought a small, densely-packed, and (again) reasonably-priced paperback-book by the radical sociologist C. Wright Mills entitled *The Marxists*. Mills, not at all hostile to Lenin, presented me with what Lih calls ‘the textbook interpretation’, writing that one distinctive feature of Lenin’s outlook was favouring ‘a disciplined, tightly organised party of professional

revolutionaries [that] “represents” (or replaces) the proletariat as the spontaneous historical agency of this [socialist] revolution’. I accepted this for good coin, until I immersed myself in the writings of Isaac Deutscher a couple of years later – first the biography of Stalin, then the Trotsky-trilogy, which gave a vibrant sense of the Russian-revolutionary movement and early Bolshevism. The understanding of Lenin conveyed there was quite inconsistent with ‘the textbook interpretation’. This – along with a reading of *The State and Revolution* and a few other, short writings by Lenin, and Hal Draper’s seminal ‘Two Souls of Socialism’ (placing Lenin firmly and unambiguously in the tradition of uncompromisingly *democratic* revolutionaries) – prepared me for my first reading of the notorious *What Is to Be Done?*, but there was one more crucial influence.

While still in high school, I had been drawn to the rising ‘New Left’ and, in my senior year, joined Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In 1965, I went on to help organise an SDS-chapter at the University of Pittsburgh, and, in the summer of the following year, I worked in the SDS national office in Chicago. These were exciting times, and SDS was beginning to experience a very dramatic growth. While working in the national office, however, I was in a position to see, up close and personal, the utter inadequacy of the national-organisational structure – fragmented and all-too-amateur – which would contribute, given the tidal-wave of new members, to a small but promising organisation turning into an utterly chaotic national disorganisation incapable of doing much more than spinning out of control while being swept along by turbulent events.

At the end of the year, I picked up Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?* and devoured it. By then, I was also encountering versions of ‘the textbook interpretation’ offered by the likes of the bitter ex-Leninist Bertram D. Wolfe, and I rejected that with utter contempt. For me, *What Is to Be Done?* was an illuminating and inspiring revolutionary text that fitted together with *State and Revolution* to form a dynamic and vibrant whole. Over the next couple of years, I supplemented this with *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, plus such splendid shorter works of Lenin’s as ‘The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement’ and ‘Karl Marx’. Helpful in contextualising these writings was the account by his companion Nadezhda Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*. By the early 1970s, I was engaging with the intensive and instructive discussions of Leninism of Leon Trotsky (post-1917), Ernest Mandel (especially his ‘Leninist Theory of Organization’), and – blended with the rich traditions of American radicalism – James P. Cannon. It all made sense to me, and it had nothing to do with ‘the textbook interpretation’. The Trotskyist movement, into which I was drawn, followed Trotsky in dismissing his 1904 anti-Leninist polemic *Our*

*Political Tasks*, and, while we greatly respected Rosa Luxemburg, we rejected her early attacks on Lenin as well.

Before the 1970s were over, I came across other interpretations of Lenin that seemed a cross between the one I had embraced and the ‘textbook’-hostility of Bertram Wolfe. In particular, there was Marcel Liebman, who, in *Leninism Under Lenin* and other writings, saw two souls of Leninism: one tending toward sectarianism, dogmatism, and authoritarianism, the other wonderfully creative, revolutionary, democratic. According to Liebman’s influential exposition, elements of the bad Lenin were reflected in *What Is to Be Done?*, but the revolutionary events of 1905 brought the good Lenin to the fore. The hard times of 1907–12 caused Lenin to revert to the negative qualities of earlier times, but 1917 once again brought forth the positive qualities. The isolation and agony of the early Soviet Republic predictably caused a swing back toward the dark side, and the crystallisation of Stalinism, after Lenin’s death, resulted in the murderous elimination of Leninism’s brighter side within the Communist mainstream.

Far more satisfying to me was Tony Cliff’s extensive and overwhelmingly positive assessment of Lenin. But I did not accept his less-than-positive assessment of my beloved *What Is to Be Done?*, and more to my liking was the stress by Neil Harding, in *The Political Thought of Lenin* and other works, on the consistency of Lenin’s orientation (including that of 1902) with Marxism pure and simple.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1980s, under the influence and at the urging of George Breitman (best known for editing and explicating the works of Malcolm X and Leon Trotsky), I wrote *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*. Our particular corner of the Trotskyist movement was being severely damaged by a presumed ‘Leninism’ gone terribly wrong. One of the primary purposes of the book was to recover genuine Leninism in a way that would be helpful for present-day and future revolutionaries. Concepts and quotations from *What Is to Be Done?* and Lenin’s other early writings are peppered through the early chapters, with texts related to contexts, in a positive exposition of what Lenin thought and said.

Given all of this, it should not be surprising that my conclusions on *What Is to Be Done?* do not quite match what Lih describes as the position of the ‘activists.’ These conclusions approximate to Lih’s own:

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19. The earlier Harding seemed to like both Lenin and Marxism, but, in later years, he stressed the same point (Leninism is fully grounded in Marxism) with a negative twist brought on by apparent disillusionment.

The general arguments it contains – despite polemical exaggerations – remain reasonable and valuable for later periods, including our own. . . . In recent years some left-wing writers have felt a need to distance themselves from what Tony Cliff, for example, has called ‘Lenin’s . . . mechanical over-emphasis on organisation in *What Is to Be Done?*,’ but the powerful stress in that work on the practical implementation of revolutionary perspectives continues to have an impact after eight decades. . . . It is worth repeating that Lenin shared this orientation with all those gathered around *Iskra*. . . . As it turned out, however, Lenin was one of the few leaders of the *Iskra* current who was prepared to follow the implications of the orientation through to the end.<sup>20</sup>

This view has been carried over by me into later studies, *From Marx to Gramsci* and *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience*, although as part of an increasingly critical exploration, which seems to me to be consistent with the Leninist spirit.

### III

What is of primary importance, however, is not the minor matter of a mischaracterisation of ‘the activists’, but the understanding of ‘the Leninism of Lenin’ to which Lih makes such an outstanding contribution.

‘The present study is neither pro-Lenin nor anti-Lenin,’ he tells us. ‘Its aim is to give an accurate account of Lenin’s outlook and his empirical judgements.’<sup>21</sup> Except as a literary device to establish an image of ‘scholarly objectivity’, however, this seems an odd thing to say, given the overwhelmingly pro-Lenin tone of the entire work. In fact, a pro-Lenin orientation, in the hands of a capable scholar, can have the effect of providing a ‘sympathetic reading’ yielding a far more coherent and insightful account than the hostile sort of ‘scholarship’ predominant among anti-Communists both during the Cold War and since the collapse of the USSR.

Such a work as this, which goes against the stream of standard-interpretation and also refuses to conform to dominant fashions and moods, runs the risk of being dismissed, distorted, or treated as if it had never been written. But such works sometimes appear at a time when dominant ideologies and scholarly paradigms are challenged by political and social crises generating insurgent forces that are ready to connect with these challenging works. It is possible that Lih’s book comes to us on the eve of what may be a Lenin-revival – to which it will contribute and from which it will benefit.

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20. LeBlanc 1990, pp. 64–5, 67–8.

21. Lih 2006, p. 29.

If this is the case, then we may see new works inspired by, responding to, and taking issue with various aspects of Lih's interpretation of Lenin and early Bolshevism. In the hope that this will turn out to be so, I want to conclude by touching briefly on some areas of potentially fruitful exploration and engagement.

There may be a tendency in Lih's study to idealise the *praktiki* who lined up with Lenin. A lengthy extract from the reminiscences of Lenin's companion Krupskaya highlights some of the problems:

The organisations in Russia definitely existed already in the shape of illegal local committees, which were obliged to work under extremely difficult conditions of secrecy. As a result, these committees everywhere practically had no workers among their membership, although they had a great influence on the workers' movement. The committees' leaflets and instructions reflected the mood of the working-class masses, who felt that they now had a leadership. . . .

The 'committeeman' was usually a rather self-assured person. He saw what a tremendous influence the work of the committee had on the masses, and as a rule he recognised no inner-Party democracy. 'Inner-Party democracy only leads to trouble with the police. We are connected with the movement as it is,' the 'committeemen' would say. Inwardly they rather despised the Party workers abroad, who, in their opinion, had nothing better to do than squabble among themselves – 'they ought to be made to work under Russian conditions.' The 'committeemen' objected to the overruling influence of the Centre abroad. . . . The opposition to this Centre was headed by Bogdanov.<sup>22</sup>

Krupskaya adds that

they did not want innovations. They were neither desirous nor capable of adjusting themselves to the quickly changing conditions. The 'committeemen' had done a tremendous job during the period of 1904–5, but many of them found it extremely difficult to adjust themselves to the conditions of increasing legal facilities and methods of open struggle.<sup>23</sup>

This finds corroboration in memoirs from activists on both Bolshevik and Menshevik sides of the split.<sup>24</sup> Amid the turbulence, upsurge, and opportunities of 1905, Lenin felt it necessary to write to his *praktiki* comrades:

Be sure to put us in *direct* touch with new forces, with the youth, with newly formed circles. . . . So far *not one* of the St. Petersburgers (shame on them) has

22. Krupskaya 1970, pp. 124ff.

23. Krupskaya 1970, p. 125.

24. Trotsky 1967, pp. 61–8; Schwartz 1967; Broido 1967; Bobrovskaya 1976.

given us a single new organisation. . . . It's a scandal, our undoing, our ruin! Take a lesson from the Mensheviks, for Christ's sake!<sup>25</sup>

Nothing in Lih's study quite prepares us for any of this.

Aspects of the 'committeeman'-mentality contained seeds of a future factional struggle led by Bogdanov that unfolded in 1907–11 within the Bolshevik current that ultimately resulted in a split. Krupskaya commented:

A Bolshevik, they declared, should be hard and unyielding. Lenin considered this view fallacious. It would mean giving up all practical work, standing aside from the masses instead of organising them on real-life issues. Prior to the Revolution of 1905 the Bolsheviks showed themselves capable of making good use of every legal possibility, of forging ahead and rallying the masses behind them under the most adverse conditions. Step by step, beginning with the campaign for tea service and ventilation, they had led the masses up to the national armed insurrection. The ability to adjust oneself to the most adverse conditions and at the same time to stand out and maintain one's high-principled positions – such were the traditions of Leninism.<sup>26</sup>

This suggests a greater complexity, a greater messiness in the story of Lenin and early Bolshevism than is conveyed in Lih's account. In his defence, we should note that he stops the story before such complexities become clear. The same can be said for other matters that complicate the unfinished story that he presents. For example, his argument that the Social-Democratic Party of Germany is the Leninist 'party of a new type' *par excellence* seems to hold up relatively well if we stop the story in early 1905, and it allows Lih to have fun at the expense of one of the 'activist'-writers:

The activist writers also talk as if they knew Lenin's beliefs better than he did himself. John Molyneux writes, for example, that 'Lenin at this stage [1904] was not aware that he diverged in any fundamental way from social democratic orthodoxy' and therefore incorrectly identified himself with the mainstream of SPD luminaries such as Karl Kautsky and August Bebel. We are left with the following picture. There was probably no one in Russia who had read Kautsky's voluminous writings so attentively, extensively and admiringly as Lenin, yet he remained completely unaware that he diverged in fundamental ways from Kautsky. I am not sure whether we are supposed to explain this by Kautsky's deceitfulness, Lenin's inability to understand what he read, or Lenin's unawareness of his own beliefs.<sup>27</sup>

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25. Quoted in Le Blanc 1990, p. 117.

26. Krupskaya 1970, p. 167.

27. Lih 2006, p. 25.

This is certainly not a highpoint in *Lenin Rediscovered*. The writings of a capable theoretician such as Kautsky are not necessarily the same as the complex dynamics of a mass political party and social movement. The reality of German Social Democracy was certainly more problematic than what Lenin was able to glean from the very best writings of Karl Kautsky. This became clear to Lenin himself in 1914. At that point, it became obvious that Lenin had been building a very different party than the actual SPD. The point was made again – by actual historical developments – in the period 1917–20. It may be possible that the SPD and the RSDLP (Bolsheviks) were both ‘parties of a new type’, but it is also clear that they were not parties of the *same* type. Here, Molyneux is much more on target. Lenin did not understand in 1904 what he understood in 1914. People learn – even Lenin. And this all has interesting implications that Lih seems inclined to turn away from. There was much that Lenin had in common with Kautsky and Bebel – but it turns out that what he was doing was, in important ways, quite different. This obviously merits further exploration.

Similarly, while the Lenin of 1904 *seemed* to have far more in common with Kautsky and Bebel than with Luxemburg and Trotsky – Lih certainly makes that crystal-clear – the unfolding of reality suggests a different truth. By 1917, this had become clear to Lenin himself. It is worth giving greater attention to such commonalities and convergences with Luxemburg and Trotsky than Lih seems inclined to offer in this work. For that matter, his dismissive attitude toward Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci strikes this reviewer as off-base. They were not only prominent theorists but, in the 1920s, practical, party-building revolutionary activists working very much in the Leninist tradition. Much can be learned from them, as well as from Luxemburg and Trotsky, by those who would seek to explore the continuing relevance of Lenin’s revolutionary orientation.

While these and other pathways of exploration must be taken up by those (including Lih himself) who wish to further advance our understanding, *Lenin Rediscovered* makes a powerful, very substantial contribution to those who would comprehend the life and thought of this great revolutionary.

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## Lenin Disputed

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### Abstract

Critical discussion of Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* is hindered by a series of historical myths. Issues such as the following need to be studied more empirically and more critically: Did the attitudes of early readers of *WTTBD?* reflect Lenin's alleged 'worry about workers'? Did the events of 1905 cause Lenin to renounce his earlier views about the workers and about party-organisation, giving rise to disputes with Bolshevik activists? Did either Lenin or Trotsky ever rethink and reject the ideological positions that Karl Kautsky defended before World-War I? These and related issues are addressed with close attention to source-material.

### Keywords

Lenin, Bolshevism, Trotsky, Kautsky, Menshevism

The principal aim of *Lenin Rediscovered* was to allow and encourage people to shift their attention away from a relatively narrow set of passages from *What Is to Be Done?* towards a much broader range of historical data. People have been focusing so intently, and for so long, on what I term the 'scandalous passages' that my aim of shifting attention could not possibly succeed unless I provided a great deal of historical data. This necessity is the cause of the book's immoderate length. One central aim of my book is negative and polemical, namely, to challenge the textbook-interpretation of Lenin's 'worry about workers' in all its varieties. But, once the blinders imposed by the textbook-interpretation have been removed, what do we see? I would stress four themes that emerge from the material presented in the book.

The first is the vast influence of what I call 'Erfurtianism' on Russian Social Democracy and on Lenin personally. Erfurtianism was a complex but coherent outlook that combined the world-historical narrative set out in the writings of Marx and Engels, an idealised model of the German Social-Democratic Party, and an ideological self-definition set out to greatest effect in the writings of

Karl Kautsky. As often in such cases, outsiders such as the Russian Social Democrats were the most *purs et durs* Erfurtians of all.

The party-model inherent in Erfurtianism was summed up by Kautsky's merger-formula: 'Social Democracy is the merger of socialism and the worker-movement'. Behind this ideological formula lies the scenario of the inspired and inspiring leader. To use an image found in both Kautsky and Lenin, the Social Democrat preached the 'good news' of socialism in the confident expectation that the workers would respond. The spread of socialist awareness was seen as so powerful that the workers were assigned the rôle of leader (or 'hegemon') of the people as a whole.

For the Russians, acceptance of this party-model implied a whole political strategy: 'Let us build a party as much like the German SPD as possible under the autocracy so that we can overthrow the tsar and build a party even more like the SPD.' This Erfurtian strategy had an enormous impact on many levels. It led to the creation of an underground of a new type. It gave Russian Social Democracy its most urgent goal, right up to 1917: to overthrow the tsar and introduce the political freedom needed for the full SPD-model. Finally, it explains many developments even after the party emerged from the underground – among others, the vast propaganda and agitational campaigns undertaken by the new Soviet state.

The original Erfurtian party-model grew up in countries with relative-political freedom. The second main theme of my book is the way the Russian underground grew up as the result of an *empirical* search for ways to apply the Erfurtian model under repressive underground-conditions – a search undertaken by a whole generation of anonymous Russian Social-Democratic *praktiki*. The innovative set of institutions that was built up step-by-step starting in the early 1890s was an underground of a new type. The old Russian underground aimed at a successful conspiracy [*zagovor*] in lieu of a mass-movement that was deemed impossible. The new underground aimed at creating as much of a *mass-party* as was possible under tsarist absolutism. This kind of underground required a culture of *konspiratsiia*, which can be defined as 'the fine art of not getting arrested'. The two types of 'conspiracy' – *zagovor* and *konspiratsiia* – implied two vastly different types of underground.

This Erfurtian underground (no longer an oxymoron) also required a functional equivalent of the full-time party-workers that constituted the backbone of European Social Democracy. Lenin christened this type the 'revolutionary by trade [*revoliutsioner po professii* or *professionalnyi revoliutsioner*]'. The name and the type caught on with *all* factions of the

Russian underground. Neither *konspiratsiia* nor ‘revolutionary by trade’ was a distinctive feature of Bolshevism.

*WITBD?* did not set forth a new and innovative party-model, but, rather, presented an idealised version of the empirical creation of the *praktiki*. In 1905, when the fervent Bolshevik M.G. Tskhakaia described his reaction to reading *WITBD?*, he stressed that he had found nothing earth-shaking or requiring special attention. Nevertheless, he was highly pleased that ‘a decade of the practical experience [*praktika*] of Russian Social Democracy had not gone to waste. It had found a worthy expression of itself on organisational, tactical and overall party-issues – an expression that summed up all of Russian practical experience’.<sup>1</sup>

A third theme of my book is the insistence that the proper way to grasp Lenin’s individual outlook is *not* to become obsessed about abstract generalities concerning ‘spontaneity’ and ‘consciousness’, but, rather, to examine Lenin’s *concrete* views about the actions of the Russian working class during the years 1895 to 1905. When these views become the centre of attention, Lenin’s *romantic optimism* about the working class becomes glaringly obvious. Lenin wrote *WITBD?* at a time when the revolutionary temperature in Russia was rising rapidly and the upsurge in worker-militancy was noted by all observers. Furthermore, in the various disputes within Russian revolutionary circles, Lenin is always on the side with the most optimistic assumptions about the revolutionary fervour of the workers, the organisational potential of the Russian underground, the willingness of other classes to follow the lead of the workers, and so on. Why did Lenin strive for an organised, centralised, efficiently-structured party that was staffed with people who knew their business? Because he had given up on the masses and was looking for a substitute? Just the opposite: Lenin wanted all these things because he thought he saw the masses on the move.

Finally, I argue that Lenin understood his own basic outlook and remained loyal to it. Anyone who thinks this assertion is anodyne and uncontroversial will change their mind once they have read my critics. It is an article of faith for many on the Left and on the Right that Lenin was fundamentally *opposed* to basic features of what I call Erfurtianism – and, if Lenin himself insisted on the opposite, he was mistaken. Many people also believe that Lenin continually ‘bent the stick’ from one extreme to the other, leading to various breakthroughs to a fundamentally new vision of things – if not in 1902, when he published *WITBD?*, then during the revolution of 1905 or after the outbreak of war in 1914. And, if Lenin insisted that he was the one who remained loyal to the

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1. *Tretii s'ezd RSDRP: Protokoly* 1959, p. 340.

old orthodoxy and his opponents were the renegades – well, once again, he was mistaken.

The standard textbook-interpretation of *WITBD?* puts Lenin's alleged worry about workers at the centre of things. When I wrote *Lenin Rediscovered*, I thought of the textbook-interpretation as a global approach to *WITBD?*, Lenin and Bolshevism. *WITBD?* showed worry about workers, which meant that Lenin was worried about workers throughout his career, which meant Bolshevism as a whole was worried about workers. Although my study focused sharply on *WITBD?*, the ultimate target was the worry-about-workers approach to Lenin and Bolshevism generally.

One thing I learned from my critics was that the textbook-interpretation comes in an extensive range of partial applications. Robert Mayer, for example, accepts a worry-about-workers approach both regarding *WITBD?* and regarding Lenin generally. According to Mayer, Lenin thought that any worker who disagreed with him must have lost his proletarian soul or never had it to begin with. This attitude finds expression in *WITBD?*'s controversial formulations. Where Mayer differs from the mainstream is his insistence that *WITBD?* is *not* the most important or influential expression of Lenin's worries. A more revealing clue to Lenin's feelings is his use of the word *razvrashchenie* [corruption or perversion], which showed that he felt that the outlook of most workers had been corrupted, and that they were therefore useless as revolutionaries. Mayer does no more than tweak the standard textbook-interpretation.

Ron Suny accepts my argument that Lenin himself did not intend *WITBD?* to communicate worry about workers. Yet, for Suny, Lenin's own intentions are almost irrelevant, since *everybody else* read *WITBD?* along the lines of the textbook-interpretation: Mensheviks, Lenin's Bolshevik-followers and the Communist Party in power. Thus the standard-scholarly textbook-interpretation is a perfectly accurate description of the *historical impact* of *WITBD?*.

John Molyneux,<sup>2</sup> Chris Harman and, to a lesser extent, Paul Le Blanc reject the textbook-interpretation for Lenin generally, yet mainly accept it for *WITBD?* itself. As they see it, Lenin renounced the worry about workers found in *WITBD?* only under the impact of unexpected (to him) worker-militancy in 1905. In their version of events, *WITBD?*'s avid Bolshevik readers were so infected with worry about workers that even in 1905 they resisted allowing workers on local Social-Democratic committees! These writers also duplicate another feature of the textbook-interpretation: the desire to dig as deep a gulf as possible between Lenin and other Social Democrats, particular Karl Kautsky.

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2. See Molyneux 2006.

Paul Le Blanc and Alan Shandro are influenced by the textbook-interpretation in a more subtle way. Though they do not portray Lenin as hand-wringingly worried about workers, nor as pessimistic about their revolutionary inclinations, they do present Lenin as centrally concerned about protecting the worker-outlook from malign influences. Le Blanc emphasises Lenin's views about the need to educate the workers through long years of hard work, while Shandro emphasises Lenin's vigilance about combating attempts at bourgeois hegemony over the workers. In my view, their picture is both accurate and misleading: accurate, because Lenin really did hold these views; misleading, because it distorts what is *distinctive* about Lenin. Not only did Lenin share these views with other Social Democrats, but Lenin's opponents often insisted on them with even greater emphasis. Lenin's most characteristic arguments and policies stemmed, rather, from enthusiasm and exhilaration about the current state of the Russian and European workers' outlook.

With the partial exception of Ron Suny, none of my critics pay me the ultimate compliment of having changed their minds. I am praised when I confirm what the author in question has long believed on the subject. I am complimented on my industriousness and gently chided for overstating my originality. I am then put on notice that I have 'bent the stick too far' at precisely the point where I challenge each author's long-held beliefs. Like Lenin in this respect, I do not see myself as bending the stick too far, but rather as straightening-out a stick bent out of true alignment by others. My critics themselves rightly stress the importance of their remaining disagreements with me. These disagreements all stem from continued loyalty to some aspect of the textbook-interpretation, which I reject lock, stock and barrel.

I approach these questions as a *historian* whose only concern is to be true to the evidence. Reading over my critics, I have come to believe that the greatest stumbling block to profitable discussion is adamant loyalty to a number of historical myths. The best use of the space accorded me, therefore, is to summarise the evidence against these various myths and ask my critics as firmly as possible to engage with this evidence.<sup>3</sup> Each of the following nine topics is treated in *Lenin Rediscovered*, but, in all cases, I have added new evidence, with occasional retraction of some mistakes in my book.

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3. In the interests of making the evidence widely available, all Lenin-citations in this essay are to the English-language *Collected Works*. Actual quotations have been checked against the Russian-language texts, as found in Lenin 1958–65a, 1958–65b and 1958–65c.

## I. On translation

There are two ways of approaching the translation of a literary, philosophical or political classic that originates in a culture with outlooks and assumptions very different from our own. One is to ‘make familiar’: to make the translation as painless to read as possible. A translation adopting this strategy strives to replace strange idioms and turns of speech with local equivalents, even if only approximate. Such a translation would certainly not retain unfamiliar foreign words. The other strategy is to ‘make strange’: to embed the work in its own culture, and emphasise the gap between our automatic assumptions and those of the author. In such a translation, certain expressions or revealing key-terms will often be kept in the original language.

There already exist several translations of *WITBD?* that follow the ‘making-familiar’ strategy. For a variety of reasons, I chose the path of ‘making strange’ for my new translation. Robert Mayer is so hostile to the result that he thinks it cancels out any merits of my commentary, and contests some of my translation-choices for key-terms. In self-defence, I could cite the words of Tatyana Shestakov, a reviewer who is a native Russian speaker and who sympathises with my approach to translation:

Lih does not try to domesticate the source and the target texts, he courageously leaves foreign elements (in this case Russian words and exclusively Russian notions of that particular epoch) untouched, but he doesn’t leave his reader alone with them: he explains, contextualizes them and thus makes his reader familiar with the reality of the Russian historical, social, and political situation in the beginning of the twentieth century. This model is more characteristic of the Russian and German schools of translation. . . .

By introducing different options of translation of the same words and explaining his choices, Lih engages his reader in an active intellectual participation in the process of discovering the real intentions of Lenin, and the social and political situation in Russia and in Europe at the beginning of the last century. . . . Being born in Russia, I have a direct access to the source text and can attest that Lars T. Lih grasps even the slightest subtleties in the meaning of Russian words as Lenin uses them. . . .

Usually, in discussing a translated text, scholars argue about how much has been ‘lost in translation’. In case of Lars T. Lih and V. Lenin, we can certainly talk about how much Lenin’s work has *gained* after Lars T. Lih’s ‘interference’. As a native Russian speaker, who grew up in Moscow being forced to read and reread Lenin’s works in Russian, I can say that in this book Lih has managed not only to rediscover but also to liven up Lenin’s difficult-to-absorb oeuvre. He makes Lenin sound not only polemical but also surprisingly absorbing.<sup>4</sup>

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4. Shestakov 2005.

I should note that my translation-choices were made for the specific purpose of a scholarly translation of *WITBD?*. I think that ‘revolutionary by trade’ is a somewhat more accurate translation than ‘professional revolutionary’, but I often find myself speaking or writing in contexts where it is inconvenient to explain why, and so I use ‘professional revolutionary’. I think ‘spontaneous’ is a misleading translation of *stikbinnyi*. I prefer ‘elemental’, although there were reasons (distorted by Mayer), particular to *What Is to Be Done?*, why ‘elemental’ could not be used. For this and other reasons, therefore, I kept *stikhinost* in Russian. I am confident that anyone who reads all of *WITBD?* in my translation will get a good idea of what the word means, even without taking advantage of my commentary. But, in many other contexts, I cannot expect such devotion to the issue, and so I use the word ‘spontaneity’ in order to communicate with my audience.<sup>5</sup>

According to Mayer, my translation is ugly and grating, not only because I have a tin-ear, but because I have an ideological agenda:

Lih’s translation often transforms Lenin’s vigorous prose into a clumsy mess of ambiguity. In a misguided effort to render Lenin’s scandalous passages less scandalous, Lih substitutes constructions that are vague and ungainly. . . . Lih has purged the poetry in order to protect Lenin from criticism.

Here, I think, we see the reason why Mayer reacts so violently to my translation-strategy. He has his own definite interpretation of the book’s scandalous passages, and my translation evidently weakens its plausibility. Let us compare the standard translation and my translation of one such passage. I choose this particular passage because Alan Shandro strengthens his critique of my book by citing it in the older translation (without noting the fact or explaining why he rejects my rendering).

*Standard translation:*

Hence, our task, the task of Social Democracy, is *to combat spontaneity, to divert the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeois, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy.*

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5. Mayer also argues that ‘One way to determine what [*stikhinost*] means is to ask how Lenin’s Russian readers in 1902 understood what he was saying. But Lih does not want to do this because many who read Lenin’s pamphlet thought he meant something like “spontaneity”.’ In other words, I avoid looking at reader-reactions to *WITBD?* in order to suppress inconvenient evidence. A glance at my Index under ‘*What Is to Be Done?*, reactions by’, however, reveals entries for An (Zhordania), Gorev, Krupskaya, Lenin, Luxemburg, Martynov, Miliukov, Nadezhdin, Olminskii, Parvus, Plekhanov, Potresov, Radchenko, Stalin, Trotsky, Tskhakaia, Valentinov, and Vorovskii.

*My translation:*

Therefore our task – the task of Social Democracy – consists of a *struggle with stikhinost*, consists in *causing* the worker movement to *stray* away from this *stikhiinyi striving of tred-iunionizm* toward accepting the leadership of the bourgeoisie and in *causing* the worker movement to go toward accepting the leadership of revolutionary Social Democracy.<sup>6</sup>

My translation is undoubtedly more ungainly, and reads less smoothly. In my view, these defects are amply compensated by a greater accuracy that enables the serious student of Lenin to avoid common misreadings.

- The Russian word rendered by ‘to combat’ is *borba*, the word ordinarily used to render ‘struggle’, as in ‘class-struggle’.
- ‘Combat spontaneity’ is often read in the manner of Bertrand Wolfe, for whom Lenin was the self-proclaimed enemy of ‘spontaneity, the natural liberty of men and classes to be themselves’.<sup>7</sup> By retaining the idiosyncratic Russian word *stikhinost* – with its connotations of primitiveness, uncontrolled impulsiveness, lack of organisation and purposeless violence – I make it less paradoxical that *all* Russian Social Democrats wanted to overcome the initial *stikhinost* of the Russian worker-movement. Indeed, as noted in Section IV, the Mensheviks were probably *more* wary of *stikhinost* than were the Bolsheviks.
- I substituted ‘cause to stray’ for ‘divert’, because ‘cause to stray’ is closer to the Russian idiom here invoked (straying from the path of righteousness). Furthermore, this rendering allows me to bring out the significant parallelism Lenin establishes between getting the worker-movement to move *away* [*otvlech*] from *tred-iunionizm* and getting it to move *towards* [*privlech*] Social Democracy.
- ‘Spontaneous, trade-unionist striving’ is simply inaccurate, since it says that the *workers* are striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie. Lenin does not say ‘trade-unionist striving’, but ‘the striving of *tred-iunionizm*’. *Tred-iunionizm* is an *ideology*, whose alien nature was signalled to the Russian-reader by its ostentatiously English origin (which is one reason I have merely transcribed it back from Russian). Lenin is therefore saying that *tred-iunionizm*, a bourgeois ideology that rejects the need for a Social-Democratic party, has a *stikhiinyi* striving to seduce the worker-movement. Social Democracy must struggle against it.

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6. Lih 2006, p. 711 (see pp. 658–67 for discussion).

7. Wolfe 1984, p. 30.

- I translated the literal expression ‘under the wing’ according to the meaning of the idiom. I make no great claims for this decision, but I think it adds clarity.<sup>8</sup>

In order to really understand what is going on in this passage, the reader also has to know that Lenin has sarcastically borrowed the term ‘divert/cause to stray’ from the people he is attacking. In fact, the key-term *stikhinost* is so prominent in *WITBD?* only because it was used in a polemical attack on Lenin’s faction that was published a few days before Lenin sat down to write his book. Lenin’s cut-and-thrust polemical style creates problems for a translation. Lenin’s original reader may have enjoyed his polemical sarcasm, but, by the time the joke is explained to the modern reader, the humour is inevitably lost.

Mayer further castigates me for losing the ‘poetry’ of *WITBD?*, that is, the rousing eloquence that inspired many of its earliest readers. In my opinion, *WITBD?*’s poetry simply does not reside in Lenin’s crabbed polemical formulae, effective as they were in their way.<sup>9</sup> Typical of Lenin’s whole approach to politics is a combination of obsessive polemics and inspiring vision. The polemics are usually front and centre, while the inspiring parts of Lenin’s writings are harder to find. Lenin’s enthusiastic vision of the workers leading the anti-tsarist revolution is all over his writings, but it is almost never set out systematically – it just pops out here and there, often in the final paragraph or two of an article.

A scrupulously accurate translation can also convey the effect of these more inspirational passages. When Lenin really becomes eloquent, he does not need the specialised jargon, often borrowed from the very people he is attacking, that he uses when refuting detailed arguments. This following passage from *WITBD?* invites the local activist to see herself as part of a vast crusade against tsarism. Lenin speaks directly, without resorting to the polemical vocabulary over which Mayer and I clash:

If we genuinely succeed in getting all or a significant majority of local committees, local groups and circles actively to take up the common work, we would in short order be able to have a weekly newspaper, regularly distributed in tens of thousands of copies throughout Russia. This newspaper would be a small part of a huge bellows that blows up each flame of class struggle and popular indignation into a common fire. Around this task – in and of itself a very small and even

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8. For the reasoning behind my somewhat unidiomatic ‘worker movement’, see Lih 2006, pp. 68–70.

9. As shown in Section V, many Bolsheviks declared their admiration for Lenin’s book *despite* the clumsiness of some of these formulae.

innocent one but one that is a regular and in the full meaning of the word *common* task – an army of experienced fighters would systematically be recruited and trained. Among the ladders and scaffolding of this common organisational construction would soon rise up Social-Democratic Zheliabovs from among our revolutionaries, Russian Bebel from our workers, who would be pushed forward and then take their place at the head of a mobilised army and would raise up the whole people to settle accounts with the shame and curse of Russia.

That is what we must dream about!<sup>10</sup>

## II. Perverting the worker-outlook

According to Robert Mayer, the controversial formulation in *WITBD?* about ‘from without’ is indeed an expression of Lenin’s ‘worry about workers’, but Lenin quickly realised this formulation was impolitic and dropped it. No real flip-flop in Lenin’s outlook was involved, however, because his worry about workers is revealed in another series of texts starting in 1899.<sup>11</sup> The essential clue hidden in these texts is the word *razvrashchenie*, variously translated as ‘corruption’, ‘perversion’, or ‘leading astray’ (my translation). Thus, the textbook-interpretation is correct about Lenin’s outlook and mistaken only in seeing *WITBD?* as the classical formulation of it.

Mayer says that I have overlooked this evidence. I can assure him that I read his provocative article with great interest, weighed his arguments with care, and examined all the Lenin texts he cited to back up his case. In the first draft of *Lenin Rediscovered*, I included a ten-page section explaining why Mayer’s own evidence led me to reject his conclusions. This section hit the cutting-room floor in a last-minute drive to make my book less of a ‘behemoth’ (as Mayer describes it).

The excised section explained at length why I adopted the translation ‘leading astray’. The definition of *razvrashchenie* found in Dal’s nineteenth-century dictionary, plus the usage of the word in texts of the time, convinced me that the word did not have exclusively sexual connotations, but also referred to false doctrine.<sup>12</sup> I searched for a translation that, as I put it, ‘preserved the overtones of vice without overemphasising it’.

10. Lih 2006, p. 828. (Zheliabov was a leader of Narodnaya volya, the organisation that assassinated Tsar Aleksandr II. August Bebel was the worker who became the leader of the German Social-Democratic Party.)

11. I was therefore mistaken in labeling Mayer’s interpretation ‘double flip-flop’ (Lih 2006, p. 24).

12. In a book published in America in 1919, the following conversation between Lenin and Raymond Robins is recorded. Lenin says, ‘The American government is corrupt.’ Robins responds, ‘You cannot call the American government a bought government.’ Lenin explains: ‘I should not have used the word corrupt. I do not mean that your government is corrupt

My aim was not to ‘dull Lenin’s vocabulary’, as Mayer assumes. In fact, it seems to me that ‘leading astray’ is more overtly sexual than ‘corruption’. But there is no need to argue about how to translate *razvrashchenie*. After reading Mayer’s present critique, I decided that the term he often uses there, ‘perversion’, is the best translation. Furthermore, after consulting modern dictionaries and observing usage, I conclude that ‘perversion’ can refer both to sexual debauchery *and* false doctrine. The Russian and the English terms are also etymologically similar.

Now that we have a mutually acceptable English equivalent, let us turn to the substantive issues. Does Lenin’s use of ‘perversion’ betray a distinctive worry about workers that led him to ‘write off’ large sections of the working class as lacking a ‘proletarian soul’, as Mayer claimed?

The heart of Social Democracy’s self-appointed mission was to bring the socialist message to the working class, to ‘merge socialism and the worker-movement’. At any one time, there would be workers who had already accepted the message and those who had not. Social Democracy was pleased to call the former category ‘advanced’ and the latter ‘backward’.

Of course, Social Democracy was not the only force trying to inculcate a particular world-outlook in the workers. From the point of view of the forces of order, Social Democracy was trying to pervert the naturally healthy outlook of the otherwise-loyal worker, so they put a great deal of energy into propagating a less subversive world-outlook. Naturally, Social Democracy was well-aware of this threat and took it very seriously indeed. As Wilhelm Liebknecht said in 1875, ‘Our most dangerous enemy is not the standing army of soldiers, but the standing army of the enemy press.’<sup>13</sup>

The forces of order were not the only perceived threat to the correct worker-outlook. The most common mutual accusation among Social Democracy and its rivals on the Left, and among Social Democrats themselves, was that one’s opponents were corrupting the class-awareness of the workers. Naturally enough, all Social Democrats were ‘anxious’ about this situation. They saw attempts to inculcate hostile world-views as a serious threat, they were not complacent about the possible damage this could do to Social Democracy, and they were determined to fight back vigorously. On this meaning of ‘anxious’, it is misleading to say (in Mayer’s words) ‘there is simply no trace of this anxiety in the writings of Plekhanov, Akselrod or Zasulich, either before 1899 or after’.<sup>14</sup> Lenin is in no way unique when he talks about the backwardness of

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through money. I mean that it is corrupt in that it is decayed in thought... It is, therefore, lacking in intellectual integrity.’ (Williams 1919, pp. 140–1.)

13. Steenson 1981, p. 129.

14. See the discussion in Sections III and IV.

some Russian workers, and warns about the dangers of adjusting to their level instead of fighting against their *nerazvitost*, their ‘lack of development’.

What is the proper Social-Democratic reaction to the danger of the perversion of the worker-outlook by hostile or misguided opponents? Obviously, to roll up one’s sleeve and get down to the job of spreading what one believes is the correct socialist message to the undeveloped strata, and of subjecting to critique the perverted doctrine being foisted on them by others. In Lenin’s view, counteracting attempts at perverting worker-outlook required vigorous polemics, often against fellow Social Democrats or allied anti-tsarist revolutionaries. Other Social Democrats felt that the take-no-prisoners rhetorical style of Lenin and his fellow *Iskra*-colleagues was outrageously intolerant, dogmatic, and uncomradely. In response, Lenin polemicalised in favour of vigorous polemics – for example, in the first chapter of *WITBD?*. This is the context – justifying combative polemics – in which we most often find him writing about attempts at ideological ‘perversion’.

Lenin was typically confident that such polemics would lead to a successful and fairly speedy end-result. Mayer denies the presence of this optimism. On the contrary, he tells us, Lenin washed his hands of such workers and wrote them out of the proletarian family. Any worker who disagrees with Lenin can be ‘written off as corrupted’. For Lenin, ‘any workers who deviate from his preferred position prove that they have lost their proletarian soul or never possessed it to begin with. . . . Lenin alone expressed such pessimism and – what is more – drew organisational and tactical conclusions from them.’<sup>15</sup>

Mayer and I thus have very different readings of Lenin’s reaction to worker-‘backwardness’. Oddly enough, we use exactly the same texts to make our respective cases. A key-text for Mayer is the unpublished 1899 essay, ‘A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social Democracy’. I, too, have a high opinion of this essay. In *Lenin Rediscovered*, I commented that it ‘contains some of the most eloquent assertions of his basic beliefs and I particularly recommend it as the most revealing of Lenin’s early writings’.<sup>16</sup>

This essay makes clear Lenin’s extravagant admiration for the ‘advanced workers’: their hunger for knowledge, their devotion to socialism, their heroism in the fight for Russian freedom, and their ability to lead less advanced workers. ‘The advanced workers, as always and everywhere, determined the character of the movement, and they were followed by the working masses because they showed their readiness and their ability to serve the cause of

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15. ‘The “corruption” which Lenin confronted was therefore more disgusting and more dangerous [because associated with moral perversity], a disease which had to be purged from the body of the movement through renovation’ (Mayer 1993, p. 642).

16. Lih 2006, p. 140.

the worker class, because they proved able to win full confidence of the mass of workers.<sup>17</sup>

For Mayer, Lenin's views about the advanced workers are irrelevant. But does Lenin dismiss the backward worker as irredeemable? On the contrary, reaching the backward worker is a major theme of this text. Lenin felt that *Rabochaia mysl* (the only Russian-underground Social-Democratic newspaper in 1899) was pitching its message to the backward worker. Seeking to attract this audience was valuable and indeed 'absolutely essential' work, that is, *until* this newspaper put forth a programmatic philosophy about *limiting* the Social-Democratic message to what these lower-strata could grasp immediately. These programmatic claims spoiled the good work it was doing.

According to Lenin, an official Social-Democratic newspaper should aim instead at the advanced workers. When and if the intellectual demands of this stratum of advanced workers are met, it will 'take the cause of the Russian workers and, *consequently*, the cause of the Russian revolution, into its own hands'.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps backward workers will probably find such a newspaper well-nigh incomprehensible, but this is nothing to get upset about. Even in Europe, many loyal Social-Democratic voters do not read Social-Democratic newspapers. All it means is that *other ways of approach* should be used, such as oral agitation or leaflets on local problems. Lenin demonstrates by giving what he calls Kautsky's 'superb' description of the technique of oral agitation.

Lenin turns the necessity of reaching out to the lower strata into yet one more argument for moving to a nation-wide revolutionary party. Those who *restrict* themselves to local economic struggles deprive themselves of 'even an opportunity of successfully and steadily attracting the lower strata of the proletariat to the cause of the working class'.<sup>19</sup> If, on the other hand, the field is left exclusively to non-revolutionary socialists such as *Rabochaia mysl*, the backward workers 'might' very well fall under the influence of various baneful bourgeois prejudices.

Let us next turn to something that all Social Democrats regarded as a direct and conscious attempt to 'pervert' the outlook of the workers: the Zubatov police-unions. Zubatov was the police-official who, during the *Iskra*-period, tried to convince workers that they could have effective economic unions if they only renounced the project of overthrowing the tsar. In *WITBD?*, Lenin actually argues that Social Democrats should *welcome* Zubatov-type organisations as ultimately working to the advantage of the Social Democrats – of course, on

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17. Lenin 1960–8a, p. 260.

18. Lenin 1960–8a, p. 281.

19. Lenin 1960–8a, p. 283.

the assumption that the Social Democrats do their job of exposing Zubatov's attempts at perversion.<sup>20</sup>

In January 1905, Father Gapon's Zubatov-like organisation led the workers of St. Petersburg in a massive demonstration that turned into the massacre of Bloody Sunday. Lenin's immediate response was to claim that his argument in *WITBD?* had been *confirmed*.<sup>21</sup> Because Lenin uses the word 'perversion', Mayer actually cites the following passage as evidence for Lenin's pessimistic worry about workers:

A legally-permitted and Zubatov-type worker-society, sponsored by the government in order to pervert the proletariat by systematic monarchist propaganda, rendered no little service in organising the movement in its early stages and in expansion. What happened was something that the Social Democrats had long ago pointed out to the Zubatovists, namely, that the revolutionary instinct of the worker-class and the spirit of solidarity would prevail over all the petty ruses.

Even the most backward workers would be drawn into the movement by the Zubatovists, and then the tsarist government would itself take care to drive the workers further; capitalist exploitation itself would turn them away from the peace-preaching and utterly hypocritical Zubatovshchina toward revolutionary Social Democracy. The practice of proletarian life and proletarian struggle would prove superior to all the 'theories' and all the vain efforts of the Zubatov-crowd.<sup>22</sup>

After the 1905 Revolution, Lenin often used the imagery of ideological perversion to describe the attempts of bourgeois liberals to win hegemony over the peasants. What 'organisational and tactical conclusions' (Mayer's words) did Lenin draw from bourgeois attempts at perversion? Lenin concluded that the main task of Russian Social Democracy was to wrest hegemony over the peasants from the liberals. This strategy rested on a highly *optimistic* reading of the Social-Democratic solidarity of the workers, as well as the ultimate rationality of the peasant-outlook and its democratic nature. The Mensheviks simply threw up their hands at the romanticism of the whole strategy. This reaction is understandable when one reads a passage such as the following, which comes from the very same paragraph as a sentence referred to by Mayer because it contained the word 'perversion':

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20. Lih 2006, pp. 402–3, 595, 778–9.

21. As we shall see in Section VII, this is the sort of passage that is often used to show how far Lenin moved away from his *WITBD?*-outlook during 1905. Yet Lenin explicitly cited *WITBD?* in order to document the continuity in his views (Lenin 1960–8e, p. 115).

22. Lenin 1958–65b, pp. 220–1; Lenin 1960–8e, pp. 114–5 (January 1905); cf. Mayer 1993, p. 642, n. 30.

By the heroic struggle it waged during the course of three years (1905–07), the Russian proletariat won for itself and for the Russian *narod* gains that took other peoples decades to win. It won the *liberation* of the labouring masses *from the influence* of treacherous and contemptibly powerless *liberalism*. It won *for itself the role of hegemon* in the struggle for freedom, for democracy, as a precondition of the struggle for socialism. It won for all the oppressed and exploited classes of Russia the *ability* to wage a revolutionary mass struggle, without which nothing of importance in the progress of mankind has been achieved anywhere in the world.<sup>23</sup>

Lenin's political strategy in the 1914–18 period – ‘civil war instead of imperialist war’, and so forth – was similarly based on a cluster of very optimistic (from the revolutionary point of view) assumptions. By 1920, it is true, Lenin was worried about how to proceed in Russia, and for once Mayer's citation (from *Left-Wing Communism*) is apposite. Lenin found himself in a situation he never predicted, precisely because some of his earlier key-assumptions turned out to be over-optimistic. Nevertheless, *Left-Wing Communism* shows abundantly that Lenin could not envisage a successful revolution without the full support and participation of ‘the masses’, in the manner of 1917.

The standard version of the textbook-interpretation fetishises a single word: spontaneity/*stikhinost*. It insists that the key-question to ask is, ‘What is Lenin's relation to spontaneity?’, and focuses on drawing vast conclusions from his not-very-frequent use of the word. Mayer attempts to re-establish the textbook-interpretation by fetishising a different word: perversion/*razvrashchenie*. He draws vast conclusions from what he takes to be the exclusively sexual connotations of this word, and shows no interest in the actual arguments Lenin is making in the various texts in which this word is found. Anyone who actually examines the texts themselves will conclude that Mayer's ‘worry-about-workers-Mark-II’ is a non-starter.

### III. *WITBD?* and the Mensheviks

Ron Suny states a widespread belief with the following words: ‘It is very clear that powerful and persuasive Menshevik voices in the pivotal years 1903–5 have shaped... the Western academic and popular meaning of *What Is To Be Done?*’.

In *Lenin Rediscovered*, I put forth a very different thesis about the relation of Menshevik polemics in 1904 and the historiography. The textbook-

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23. Lenin 1960–8j, p. 387 (1910); cf. Mayer 1993, p. 643, n. 37.

interpretation of *WITBD?* did *not* arise out of Menshevik polemics – rather, scholars imposed the textbook-interpretation on Menshevik polemics and, as a consequence, thoroughly misread them. According to the textbook-interpretation, *WITBD?* was the basic cause of the party-split in 1903–4. Historians begin with the assumption that Mensheviks reacted in horror to the heresies of *What Is to Be Done?* And, since the textbook-interpretation also tells them what they needed to know about Lenin’s argument, they are able to *deduce* the views of the Mensheviks, almost without the need of textual evidence.

Clarity on this point is essential if we are to grasp the real nature of the split within Russian Social Democracy. In this section, I will review the factual difficulties with the standard version of events. In Section IV, I will examine some of the real differences between Menshevism and Bolshevism.

According to the textbook-interpretation, Lenin endorsed intelligentsia-domination of the party. Therefore, the Mensheviks *must* have been hostile to Bolshevik glorification of the intellectuals. But I presented evidence showing that the Bolsheviks attacked the leadership-role of intellectuals in 1904–5, while Menshevik spokesmen and defenders such as Akselrod, Trotsky and Luxemburg justified this role.<sup>24</sup>

According to the textbook-interpretation, Lenin was against democracy in the Party on principle. So the Mensheviks *must* have defended ‘democratism’. But I presented statements by Mensheviks that condemned democratism (invocation of democratic principles in inappropriate contexts) and by Bolsheviks defending party-democracy.<sup>25</sup>

According to the textbook-interpretation, Lenin was obsessed with ‘professional revolutionaries’. So the Mensheviks *must* have denounced professional revolutionaries. But I presented endorsements of the professional revolutionary by Mensheviks such as Pavel Akselrod, Vera Zasluch, and Georgii Plekhanov, among others. Of course, the Mensheviks did not want to *restrict* the party to professional revolutionaries. But then, neither did the Bolsheviks. The professional revolutionary was a type common to *all* the underground-parties of the era and played an equivalent role in each.<sup>26</sup>

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24. The evidence mentioned in the following paragraphs can be found in Lih 2006, Chapter Nine (‘After the Second Congress’), pp. 489–553. (Trotsky’s views are discussed in Section IX.)

25. For Bolshevik views on party-democracy before and during the 1905 Revolution, see Section IX.

26. Very instructive in this regard is the chapter ‘Professional Revolutionists’ in Moissaye J. Olgin, *The Soul of the Russian Revolution* (Olgin 1917, pp. 321–34). This chapter (written in 1917) relies completely on novelistic portraits of a well-known social type. This type was not restricted to any one party or faction (Olgin does not even mention Bolsheviks or Mensheviks). Neither the term nor the type is associated by Olgin with Lenin in any way.

According to the textbook-interpretation, *WITBD?* is a blueprint for Soviet tyranny. So Menshevik attacks on Lenin *must* have been a prophetic protest against Soviet tyranny. But I presented evidence showing that the Mensheviks such as Akselrod attacked the Bolsheviks for their exclusive focus on achieving political freedom as opposed to inculcating a specifically socialist class-consciousness.

According to the textbook-interpretation, *WITBD?* was a founding document of Bolshevism. Therefore the Mensheviks *must* have aimed their polemics at *WITBD?* and its heresies from the very beginning. But I presented material showing the limited and ambiguous role of *WITBD?* in Menshevik polemics.

At the Second Congress in August 1903, the ‘economists’ Aleksandr Martynov and Vladimir Akimov attacked the scandalous passages in *What Is to Be Done?* as part of their attack on the *Iskra*-group as a whole. The textbook-interpretation does owe a debt to this critique.<sup>27</sup> At that time, either because of conviction or as an act of *Iskra*-solidarity, the future Menshevik leaders all defended Lenin and his book. Although they were soon attacking Lenin personally, they were loath to backtrack on their defence of *WITBD?*. In Section IX, I give passages from Trotsky’s Menshevik manifesto *Our Political Tasks* (1904) in which he presents *WITBD?* as an acceptable, if crude, presentation of *Akselrod’s* outlook during the period 1900–3. According to the Menshevik leaders, Lenin’s problem in 1903–4 was his refusal to move on to the new tasks of the present stage of the movement.

Only a full year after in the Second Congress, in August 1904, did Plekhanov bite the bullet: he strongly condemned *WITBD?* for its ideological heresies and (feebly) explained away his own earlier defence. After Plekhanov’s intervention, *WITBD?* did become a standard talking-point for Menshevik polemicists. Yet the most prominent spokesman for Menshevism in 1904 – Pavel Akselrod – *never*, as far as I know, attacked *WITBD?* or traced the conflict with Bolshevism to ideological heresies of any kind. In fact, in his foundational *Iskra*-articles of early 1904, he explicitly endorses the orthodoxy of Lenin’s Marxism.<sup>28</sup>

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27. I base my reading of the Menshevik view on the writings of the *Iskra*-editors and other émigré pamphleteers. Suny quotes a letter of June 1904 from the Georgian Menshevik Noe Zhordania that suggests that Menshevik *praktiki* in Russia itself may have been more directly influenced by the earlier ‘economist’ critique. For example, Zhordania writes that Lenin ‘even denied such an indisputable fact that the economic struggle is the best means to lead the workers into the political arena’. Zhordania’s (shaky) critique is not ‘in the spirit of Akselrod’, but rather in the spirit of earlier opponents of *Iskra* such as Martynov and Krichevsky of *Rabochee delo*.

28. ‘To complete its malicious irony, history will perhaps place at the head of this bourgeois

The scholarly view of the party-split owes much to Abraham Ascher's description of what Ron Suny terms 'the spirit of Akselrod'. Ascher's *Pavel Axelrod and the Development of Menshevism* (1972) is the *one* scholarly account of Akselrod's writings in any language. Following Ascher, Suny tells us that Akselrod 'depicted Lenin as substituting a party of intellectuals for the worker-movement' and depicted the factional split as 'an epic battle between democracy and dictatorship within the Party (and, by implication, in the future socialist state)'. I agree about Akselrod's importance and disagree completely about his actual views.

Let us look at a document highly relevant to this dispute. Suny mentions a letter that Akselrod sent to Kautsky in summer 1904 describing the factional split. Kautsky wrote back saying that he still could not perceive any substantive differences and that the split seemed based on 'misunderstandings'. Akselrod therefore wrote a second letter to Kautsky in order to set him right about the dispute. He then published this letter in *Iskra* and republished it in 1906.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Akselrod's second letter to Kautsky is a carefully considered and authoritative statement of his view of the party-split.

Yes (Akselrod says to Kautsky), the split *is* based on misunderstandings – on the part of the majority of Russian *praktiki*, who support Lenin. Lenin himself knows exactly what he is doing. He challenges us Mensheviks on organisational grounds, simply because he knows he can get no mileage on anything more substantive. Not that Lenin does have any real 'organisational plan' or any talent as an organiser. No, Lenin is unique only in this: his complete demagogic unscrupulousness. 'He was the only one of us who was able to use for his advantage precisely the weak sides of our movement, in particular, the sense of helplessness felt by our *praktiki*. Indeed, perhaps even from the very beginning he systematically exploited it.'

Lenin, aided and abetted by his 'agents' and 'minions', uses 'banalities' about the 'centralism acknowledged [as a value] by all of us', in order to become the 'idol' of the majority of the party and to increase the 'chaos in their heads'. What these *praktiki* seem incapable of understanding is that our party is still *much too primitive* for genuine centralism. Russian Social Democracy is not yet 'a *political* party in the real sense of the word'. The mission of the minority [*menshinstvo*] is constantly to point this out to the local activists. But the disorganising methods of 'Lenin and Co.' and their

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revolutionary organization, not just a Social Democrat, but the very one who by origin is the most "orthodox". Lenin is not named, but the allusion was unambiguous (Lih 2006, p. 551).

29. *Iskra* No. 68 (25 June 1904); *Iskra' za dva goda* 1906, pp. 147–54. For further discussion, see Lih 2003, p. 14.

‘systematic casting of suspicion on our critical and positive explanation’ is threatening the Party with ruin.

You, my dear Kautsky, have trouble gasping our difficulties because party-conflicts in the West usually involve genuine programmatic and tactical differences. Not in our case. All we have is ‘organisational fetishism’, that is, the pathetic daydreams of powerless *praktiki*. The result in practice cannot be compared to Jacobins or to Blanquists, who were, despite everything, real revolutionaries. No, the dreams of the Russian *praktiki* are merely a limp parody of the tsarist bureaucracy.

So goes Akselrod’s explanation of party-differences. Akselrod tells Kautsky that the split in Russian Social Democracy reflects the primitive problems of a primitive party in a primitive country. Lenin is an unscrupulous nonentity and nothing else, his émigré admirers are ‘agents’ and ‘minions’, his Russian admirers are simple-minded *praktiki* afflicted by a psychological complex that prevents them from attending to the wisdom dispensed by the Menshevik spokesmen.<sup>30</sup> Akselrod does not in any way suggest that the split is based on principled differences of vast significance for the future socialist state that stem from Lenin’s ideological heresies in *WITBD?*

Ascher almost literally turns this crucial document on its head when he tells the reader that the letter stressed ideological differences, contained no personal attack on Lenin, compared Bolshevism to Jacobinism, and so on.<sup>31</sup> The same comment can be made about Ascher’s entire interpretation – perforce influential, since it had no rivals – of the ‘spirit of Akselrod’. Ascher was not able to take in what he was reading because he was in thrall to the textbook-interpretation of *WITBD?* as the ultimate source of Soviet tyranny. Therefore, Lenin’s foe Pavel Akselrod *had* to be opposing Soviet tyranny, as foreshadowed in *WITBD?*<sup>32</sup>

Another eloquent illustration of the gulf between the textbook-interpretation and the actual Menshevik interpretation of Bolshevism comes from Martov’s writings after 1917. In 1917–18, Martov wrote a history of Russian Social Democracy in which he talked about *WITBD?* in its time and place. Yet, in 1919, in his book *World Bolshevism*, *WITBD?* is not even mentioned. Indeed, Martov’s explanation of the origins of ‘world Bolshevism’ makes no reference

30. I discuss the content of the Menshevik message in Lih 2006, pp. 509–17.

31. Ascher 1972, p. 211.

32. ‘Bolshevism took shape as the bearer of predominantly *general-democratic* and *political* tendencies of the movement, and Menshevism as the bearer predominantly of its class and *socialist* tendencies.’ Thus wrote Fyodor Dan in 1945 in his *Origins of Bolshevism* (cited in Lih 2006, p. 553). Dan, one of the principal Menshevik leaders in 1904, is summarising Axelrod’s critique. The emerging postwar scholarly consensus took no notice of this central aspect of the actual ‘spirit of Axelrod’.

whatsoever to prewar Bolshevik ideology. World-Bolshevism is shown to be the product of impatient activists, cut off from the tradition of Social Democracy by the crisis of the War, brutalised by wartime-psychology, and resorting to *stikhiinyi* explosions of ‘anarcho-Jacobinism’. The only role assigned to the ideology of Bolshevik leaders is the existence of Marxist scruples *against* giving in completely to demagogic exploitation of these *stikhiinyi* passions.<sup>33</sup>

For the textbook-interpretation, *WITBD?* is the ultimate source of world-Bolshevism. In Martov’s interpretation of world-Bolshevism, even though he was as familiar with it as any man living, *WITBD?* is the book that did not bark – eloquent by its absence. For Martov, *WITBD?* is a footnote in the history of Russian Social Democracy, but plays no role in the explanation of the Bolshevik Revolution and its European aftermath.

#### IV. Distinctiveness of Bolshevism

In late 1901, a Russian Social Democrat accused a rival Social-Democratic faction of giving too much scope to the spontaneity [*stikhiinosi*] of the worker-movement. In his opinion, the worker-movement would go astray unless the Party ‘takes upon itself the immediate guidance of the economic struggle of the proletariat and by so doing turns it into a revolutionary class struggle’. Of course, the workers do not need Social Democracy in order to undertake an economic struggle. Nevertheless, without the influence of Social Democracy

this struggle has a *stikhiinyi* character. Often workers, aware of only their transitory and special interests, act in opposition to the interests of the working class as a whole. There have been and there continue to be cases where the workers themselves demand longer shifts and non-compliance with factory-laws. There have been and there continue to be times when their boiling rage unleashes itself against Jews . . . against foreigners, and so on. By taking into its hands the guidance of this struggle, Social Democracy significantly widens it and, most of all brings into it light and awareness.<sup>34</sup>

In 1902, this same Russian Social Democrat spelled out his vanguardist convictions even more explicitly. He told the workers that the enemy – the autocratic government and the exploiting élite – had the experience, knowledge and organisation that the workers did not have. Individual workers certainly

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33. *World Bolshevism* and other relevant writings have been recently reprinted in Martov 2000. Martov’s views are further discussed in Section IV.

34. Quoted in Lih 2006, pp. 394–5.

could not work out the necessary socialist science on their own. Fortunately, ‘the socialist intelligentsia, devoted to the proletariat and in part itself emerging from its ranks, flesh of its flesh, using the knowledge of the present century and the experience of proletarian struggle, succeeded in working out a socialist science’. Only the Social-Democratic Party embodied this socialist science, ‘only this party is capable of creating and of guiding the liberation struggle of the working class, only this party is capable of guiding the proletariat at the present moment of revolution’.<sup>35</sup>

Who expressed this worry about workers, this anxiety about the spontaneous development of the workers’ struggle? Aleksandr Martynov, Lenin’s principal polemical target in *WITBD?* and, later, a vociferous anti-Lenin Menshevik. Leopold Haimson describes Martynov’s views in 1901–2 as follows: ‘workers *by their own devices* would be able to set their own political objectives, rather than having them dictated to them by outside political actors’.<sup>36</sup> Why does this respected historian give such a distorted picture of Martynov’s views? For the same reason that Abraham Ascher distorted Akselrod, Haimson is in thrall to the textbook-interpretation of *WITBD?*. According to the textbook-interpretation, Lenin argued that the political objectives had to be dictated to workers by outside-political actors. Martynov was a foe of Lenin’s who mounted a critique of *WITBD?*. Therefore, he *must* have been in favour of leaving workers to their own ‘spontaneous’ devices.

The textbook-interpretation thus creates a very problematic contrast between Lenin and his ‘economist’ opponent Martynov. Two of my critics, Alan Shandro and Paul Le Blanc, present the heart of Lenin’s message in a way that does not fully escape the same framework.

Alan Shandro argues that

To assume [the burdens of leadership in the struggle for hegemony] was to take up a sophisticated political stance, sustaining the spontaneous struggles of the workers and fostering the embryonic forms of socialist consciousness thrown up in the course of them by diagnosing and combating the forms in which bourgeois ideology spontaneously imposes itself within the working-class movement.

Paul Le Blanc, for his part, argues that

The creation of a revolutionary workers’ party, guided by a serious-minded utilisation of socialist theory and scientific analysis, drawing increasing numbers of working people into a highly conscious struggle against all forms of oppression –

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35. Lih 2006, p. 556.

36. Haimson 2004, p. 60 (emphasis in original).

this could not be expected to arise easily or spontaneously. It had to be created through the most persistent, serious, consistent efforts of revolutionary socialists. The working class would not automatically become a force for socialist revolution, but it could develop into such a force with the assistance of a serious revolutionary workers' party.<sup>37</sup>

I accept these formulations as accurate statements of important aspects of Lenin's outlook. Now, let us ask the question: would Martynov, set up by Lenin as a model 'economist', have disagreed with them? Not at all. No doubt *Haimson's* Martynov would have disagreed, since he wanted to leave the workers to their own devices, and thus negated any need for leadership by a Social-Democratic party. The Martynov described by Haimson had no motive for worrying about bourgeois influence on the workers. But *Martynov's* Martynov would certainly have agreed with the formulations of Le Blanc and Shandro – in fact, he insisted upon them. Since Lenin and his most irreconcilable foe agree on these basic points, I conclude they are part of a broad Social-Democratic consensus. They do *not* tell us what is distinct about Lenin or Bolshevism.

Shandro disagrees and points particularly to Lenin's comment that 'the task of Social Democracy is to *combat* spontaneity'.<sup>38</sup> Shandro comments: 'The logic of the Erfurtian narrative can be stretched to accommodate a good deal of Lenin's polemic against the economist practice of subordinating consciousness to spontaneity, but it cannot contain this crucial claim; it is a tribute to Lih's intellectual honesty that he acknowledges this difficulty.'

My actual argument is somewhat different: 'the most important thing to keep in mind about the scandalous passages [is] that Lenin's aim is not to assert a bold new proposition, but to make his opponents look marginal by claiming that they reject a universally accepted commonplace'.<sup>39</sup>

Are Lenin's images of *combating* and *diverting* indeed incompatible with Erfurtianism? Lenin certainly did not think so. He immediately illustrates his point about combating spontaneity by evoking 'the example of Germany'. Lassalle carried out 'a desperate struggle with spontaneity' with excellent results. The SPD still today carries out 'unremitting struggle' with ideologies that emerged from the worker-movement, such as those propagated by Catholic

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37. Le Blanc 1990, p. 67 (also quoted in his essay *supra*).

38. For unexplained reasons, Shandro chooses to cite this crucial Lenin passage in an older translation. I discuss the relevant translation-problems in Section I. In this Section, I follow Shandro's choice of translation.

39. Lih 2006, p. 394. Where I found Lenin less than convincing is his claim that his opponents did reject these commonplaces.

and monarchical trade-unions.<sup>40</sup> Lenin's style of argument here – 'Remember the example of Germany' – is *extremely typical*. He knew the history of the European worker-movement and Social Democracy after 1848 backwards and forwards. For both Martynov and Lenin, a central aspect of the rôle of Russian *intelligenty* was to inform the *Russian* workers about the achievements of the *European* workers.

Kautsky's formulations were crucial for Lenin, because they showed him how the actual history of European Social Democracy could be viewed as a confirmation of the *Communist Manifesto*. According to Shandro, however, Kautsky himself felt no need for 'combating spontaneity':

The introduction of consciousness into the spontaneous working-class movement from without signifies, in terms of the Erfurtian narrative, a practice of making workers aware of a goal and a direction of their movement that is already implicit in their practice. Since the spontaneous movement and the conscious awareness of it, practice and theory, are congruent and harmonious, there is no need, and no theoretical room, for a struggle between them. This is indeed the implication of the passage by Kautsky famously cited by Lenin in his own discussion of consciousness and spontaneity in *WITBD?*.

At the highest level of abstraction, Marx and Engels certainly did claim that their mission was to make workers aware of the goal already implicit in their practice. Kautsky and Lenin undoubtedly believed this as well. But it does not follow that Kautsky, for instance, did not 'combat spontaneity' in the relevant sense, that is, vigorously warning against and subjecting to critique tendencies that emerged from the practice of the worker-movement. Kautsky systematically covers a whole range of such phenomena, from the continual influx of new workers from the countryside to the formation of labour-aristocracies, from *Nur-Gewerkschaftlerei* (the principled restriction of worker-activity to trade-unions) to violent anarchism.

In the first chapter of *WITBD?*, Lenin calls (not for the first time) for a creative application of Marxist theory to the unprecedented problems of the Russian movement. Russian Social Democracy needed to find answers to questions such as these: how can we merge socialism with the worker-movement, given the entire lack of political freedom? How can we achieve the necessary political freedom? How can we get other classes to see the workers as the leaders in the fight for democracy? In other words: how do we achieve basic Erfurtian goals in an extremely hostile environment?

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40. Lih 2006, pp. 711–2. For evidence that the German Party saw the issue in similar terms, see Bebel's comment in Lih 2006, p. 406.

Shandro points to the first chapter of *WITBD?* as a crucial breakthrough, since he sees creativity and Erfurtianism as incompatible. If Lenin is not content with ‘a rigid standard of orthodox rectitude’ or with ‘already-established Erfurtian standards’, if he is open to ‘unexpected innovation and diversity in the spontaneous movement of the class-struggle’, he is *ipso facto* moving beyond Erfurtianism. I think this is too narrow a definition of Erfurtianism. In any event, as we shall see in Section VIII, Lenin specifically praised Kautsky’s writings during the decade 1899–1909 precisely for his creative openness to new developments, and in particular, his appreciation of the innovations arising out of the workers’ struggle in Russia.

For Paul Le Blanc, the heart of Lenin’s message in *WITBD?* is that purposive-revolutionary struggle ‘could be expected to arise easily or spontaneously’, but only through long, hard effort. And, of course, Lenin believed this very deeply – but he was not alone. As Le Blanc puts it: ‘Lenin was one of the few leaders of the *Iskra*-current who was prepared to follow the implications of the orientation through to the end.’<sup>41</sup> As we have seen, Lenin shared this orientation not only with his fellow *Iskra*-editors, but with ‘economists’ like Martynov and indeed all of Social Democracy. But, according to Le Blanc, the Mensheviks did not follow-out the implications of this perspective, that is, they forgot that the working class was not automatically or spontaneously a force for socialist revolution and that only persistent and serious efforts by socialists made it such a force.

The Mensheviks did not forget these truths – indeed, they made them the centre of their critique of Bolshevism. A typical analysis of events by the Menshevik leader Iulii Martov runs something like this: yes, Bolshevik policies are more popular with the workers, but that is because so many workers are backward, subject to influence from other classes, demoralised by economic constraints, and so on. The Bolsheviks cannot resist the temptation to pander demagogically to the workers’ mistaken outlook. In response, we must put all our attention toward bringing correct class-awareness into the working class.

A very revealing sample of Menshevik reasoning is a short ‘tactical platform’ written by Martov and other leading Mensheviks (including Martynov) in 1907.<sup>42</sup> This platform is a critique of Bolshevik tactics (too much suspicion of urban-democratic classes and not enough suspicion of peasant-democratic classes), although the Bolsheviks are not mentioned. According to the platform,

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41. Le Blanc 1990, pp. 64–8, also quoted in his essay *supra*.

42. The platform was published as a separate pamphlet with the following title: ‘A Tactical Platform for the Upcoming Congress, worked out by Martov, Dan, Starover [Potresov], Martynov and others, with the participation of a group of Menshevik *praktiki*’. The text can be found in Trotskii 1993, pp. 174–7. See also Lenin’s dissection in Lenin 1960–8h, p. 249–64.

the workers themselves have these incorrect tactical views and they are therefore not yet ready to fulfill their historical mission of leading the Russian revolution. The implication is that the Bolsheviks merely reflect the mistaken outlook of the workers.

The platform sets up the issue just the way Alan Shandro would like:

The proletariat can fulfill the role [of leader of the Russian revolution] only to the extent that it steps forward as a political force that is conscious of its own position among the conflicting classes, of its urgent and final goals, and of the paths leading to them – only to the extent that it conducts an independent class-policy, free from subordination to the leadership of other classes.<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately (the platform continues), the proletariat is *not* free from ‘the influence of other classes’ that threatens to ‘divert the proletariat from the path dictated by its class-interests’ (this is exactly the same idiom that seemed so shocking when used by Lenin in *WITBD?*). Overreacting to lack of support during the 1905 Revolution from the urban-democratic classes, the Russian proletariat tends in its hostility to underestimate the progressive-historical rôle of these classes. And, because a significant portion of the Russian proletariat still retains ties with the village, the workers are infected with peasant-violence and utopian thinking. This problem is compounded by the worrisome inroads among the workers of propaganda emanating from the Socialist-Revolutionary Party.

According to the platform, the spontaneous/*stikhiinyi* influences emanating from the workers’ social environment are not meeting enough resistance from the advanced, vanguard-elements of the proletariat – the ones with sufficient socialist consciousness to grasp the historical mission of the proletariat.<sup>44</sup> The immediate task is, therefore, to gather these elements together, so that they can collectively fulfil their task of leading the mass-movement. Only in this way can they counteract the ‘spontaneous’ emergence of an economic struggle independent of Social Democracy.

The argument of the Mensheviks should sound very familiar. It shows that both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks were solid Erfurtians, but that Mensheviks were typically sceptical about actual developments and the Bolsheviks typically sanguine.<sup>45</sup> The Russian historian N.A. Kazarova has recently summed up Martov’s experience with these words: ‘Since he understood that Social

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43. Trotsky 1993, p. 175.

44. The platform uses the term *peredovye* or ‘advanced’ workers; this term is sometimes translated as ‘vanguard’ in the English-language *Collected Works* of Lenin.

45. For another sample of Martov’s analysis, see his provocative 1919 description of ‘world Bolshevism’ (Martov 2000, pp. 393–434).

Democracy in Russia did not possess a sufficiently powerful social base, he aimed at creating one, using all possible means for developing the self-activity of the proletariat and its class-consciousness.<sup>46</sup>

My dispute with Alan Shandro and Paul Le Blanc is on a different level than the other issues treated in this essay. Each of them has zeroed-in on something true and important about Lenin. Nevertheless, they distort historical perspective when they claim that they have identified what is distinctive about Lenin – either because he was moving beyond the Erfurtian consensus, or because he remembered what other Social Democrats forgot.

A foundational outlook such as Erfurtianism needs to be applied to an empirical reality, and legitimate differences can arise about how to view the facts of the case. Lenin and the Bolsheviks were typically *optimistic* about the implications of the facts. Drop the needle on a typical Bolshevik-Menshevik dispute, and you will hear the Bolsheviks berating the *nedoverie*, the lack of faith, of their opponents.<sup>47</sup> Conversely, their opponents were the ones who typically stressed the need for patient consciousness-raising and the dangers of ideological infection from other classes.

## V. Did Lenin ever renounce or distance himself from the arguments in *WITBD*?

Partial answers to this question are scattered throughout *Lenin Rediscovered*.<sup>48</sup> After reading my critics, I realise the issue requires more direct treatment. In particular, this issue determines our view of how Lenin reacted to the events of 1905 (as discussed in Section VII). To a varying extent, the interpretations of Robert Mayer, Ron Suny, Chris Harman and John Molyneux, and Paul Le Blanc all depend on a positive answer to this question.

In 1907, Lenin republished *WITBD?* in a collection of his writings entitled *During Twelve Years*. In his preface to this edition, he makes the following points about *WITBD?*, which I will paraphrase in the following words:

What I *meant* to say in the controversial formulations of *WITBD?* is clear enough if you take into account the argument and spirit of the book as a whole. And when understood properly, these formulations are only a restatement of universally-accepted axioms of Social Democracy. In fact, the same basic idea is

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46. Kazarova 2006, p. 363.

47. In particular, Lenin's use of the word 'hegemony' points not primarily to Lenin's anxiety about the distorting influence of *bourgeois* hegemony over the workers, but rather to his daring project of exercising *proletarian* hegemony over the peasantry.

48. Further material on this topic can be found in Lih 2003.

found in the party-programme of the RSDWP: ‘Social Democracy organises [the proletariat] into an independent political party... guides all manifestations of its class-struggle... and explains to it the historical significance and necessary conditions of the social revolution that stands before us.’

I must admit, however, that the actual formulations given in *WITBD?* are clumsy and not particularly successful in conveying what I meant to say. Nevertheless, it hardly elevates party-debate to nitpick about the exact wording, draw absurd conclusions, and dream up non-existent differences. Even those who grasp what I meant to say should remember that I was responding to a *particular* challenge to Social-Democratic orthodoxy, namely, ‘economism’. I was *not* doing what I have often done elsewhere, namely, putting forth comprehensive-programmatic statements of the Social-Democratic outlook *as a whole*. No, I stressed only those parts of the Social-Democratic outlook that were appropriate to the task at hand.<sup>49</sup>

Lenin also expressed this last point – about responding to a particular challenge – by using the image of ‘bending the stick’. The image comes at the beginning and end of a daisy-chain of polemical outbursts. A correct reading of several documents cited by my critics depends on inserting them into their proper place in this polemical chain. It is important to note the dates of the various pronouncements listed below, since there exists a myth that the events of 1905 refuted in some way the arguments of *WITBD?* and that Lenin recognised this.

- At the Second Congress in August 1903, the *Iskra* editorial board makes common cause in defending Lenin’s book against ‘economist’ critics. In particular, Plekhanov points out that the book was aimed at ‘economists’ who (allegedly) denied the need for Social-Democratic leadership. In response (continues Plekhanov), Lenin properly stressed the need for leadership. Lenin makes the same point using the ‘bend-the-stick’ metaphor: the economists bent the stick away from the centre, so we should bend it back, in order that ‘our stick will therefore always be straight as possible and as ready as possible for action’.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the ‘bend-the-stick’ imagery was *not* created in reaction to the events of 1905 or in reaction to Menshevik critics, but rather as part of a general *Iskra*-rebuttal of ‘economist’ critics.
- For a full year after the beginning of the party-split, *WITBD?* plays a very minor rôle in intra-party polemics.<sup>51</sup> Finally, in July/August 1904, Plekhanov

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49. This paraphrase is based on Lenin 1960–8i, pp. 106–8. Here, Lenin says only that his *WITBD?*-formulation is reflected in the party-programme. The actual quote from the programme, as well as the words ‘dreaming up imaginary differences’, come from the 1905 Lenin/Vorovsky article discussed below.

50. Lih 2006, p. 27; Lenin 1960–8c, p. 491.

51. This point is discussed further in Section III.

(who, by this time, sides with the Mensheviks) reverses direction and writes an extensive article attacking *WITBD?*, arguing that Lenin was no Marxist and that the *weakest* aspects of the book were precisely what made it popular among the *praktiki* (whom Plekhanov obviously despised). According to Plekhanov, Lenin's formulation implied that socialist ideas came about in complete isolation from social practice (a point later taken up by writers such as John Molyneux). Plekhanov sharply contrasts Lenin's heresy with Kautsky's orthodoxy. Without mentioning that he himself had made a similar point in Lenin's defence, he took up Lenin's 'bend-the-stick' metaphor as proof that Lenin had semi-recanted: 'Lenin himself... admitted that in the dispute with the economists he went *too far and 'bent the stick in the other direction'* (Plekhanov's emphasis). Crucial here is the contrast between *going too far* (Plekhanov's reading of what Lenin said) and Lenin's actual emphasis on making the stick *as straight as possible*.<sup>52</sup>

- In the autumn of 1904, the Bolshevik pamphleteer Mikhail Olminsky comments on the over-the-top nature of Plekhanov's rhetoric and mocks the idea that Lenin really believed that the intelligentsia developed in complete isolation from the worker-movement ('One has to wonder how it is that Lenin doesn't know what everybody else in the world knows'). Olminsky observes that, when Plekhanov defended *WITBD?* at the Second Congress, he described its formulations as a not very happy presentation of what were nonetheless correct ideas.<sup>53</sup> In another pamphlet around the same time, Olminsky explains why Lenin's *WITBD?* formulations did not give a full account of the rôle of *stikhinost*. He and other *Iskra*-authors were writing at a time when the worker-masses were ahead of many Social-Democratic intellectuals in acknowledging the need for anti-tsarist political action. Therefore one should not look upon *WITBD?* as 'a complete catechism for Social Democrats nor as a full expression of the opinions of its author'.<sup>54</sup>
- In early 1905, a local Menshevik committee issued an attack on Lenin that relied heavily on Plekhanov's article. Lenin and his lieutenant Vlatislav Vorovsky used this as an excuse to respond directly to Plekhanov, in an article drafted by Vorovsky, with corrections and additions by Lenin. This article dismissed Plekhanov's picture of Lenin as a demagogic caricature

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52. Plekhanov 1923–7, p. 138 (originally published in *Iskra* [now edited by the Mensheviks], 25 July and 1 August 1904). John Molyneux dismisses my attempt in *Lenin Rediscovered* to sort out what Lenin meant by 'bend the stick' as too complicated, so I have tried to make the contrast as clear as possible.

53. Olminskii and Bogdanov 1904, pp. 81–8.

54. Olminskii 1904b, p. 7.

carried out for purely factional motives. In response to Plekhanov's attempt to dig a gulf between Lenin and Kautsky, Vorovsky claimed that the alleged 'Leninist heresy' was nothing more than a *restatement* of the ideas of the 'principal theorists of socialism' (a formulation meant to include Kautsky) and especially Marx himself. To support this claim, Vorovsky brought forth passages from the *Communist Manifesto* and *Poverty of Philosophy*. The 'salt', the core, of Lenin's *WITBD?* argument was the merger-formula – 'Social Democracy is the merger of the worker-movement with socialism' – as explicitly stated in the first issue of *Iskra* by a joint statement of the entire editorial board.<sup>55</sup>

- Vorovsky responded to Plekhanov's charge that Lenin saw socialist thought as something isolated from worker-practice by arguing there was no need to state the obvious (material in brackets added directly by Lenin): 'It would be ridiculous – in a work discussing "the burning questions of our movement"<sup>56</sup> – if Lenin were to start demonstrating that the development of ideas, and in particular the development of scientific socialism, took place and takes place in close historical connection with the development of productive forces, [in close connection with the growth of the worker-movement in general].' Lenin added another sentence stating that his aim was a straightforward [*nekhitryi*] reminder to the 'economists' about 'the duty of a socialist to bring in awareness from without'.<sup>57</sup>
- In April 1905, at the Third Congress, Bolshevik M.G. Tskhakaia compliments *WITBD?*, but adds 'Of course, he makes mistakes, untrue or unsuccessful formulations, and he himself, no doubt, would now better formulate and support the very same ideas that he set out in *WITBD?*'. (These remarks were made in Lenin's presence.)<sup>58</sup>
- In early 1905, the Georgian Menshevik Noe Zhordania publishes an attack on *WITBD?*. Zhordania's critique is evidently influenced by Plekhanov, since he argues that 'the fight against "economism" gave rise to another extreme'.<sup>59</sup> In other words, he takes a 'going too far' reading of the 'bend the stick' metaphor.
- An extensive response to Zhordania's articles was written by a fellow-Georgian, the young Bolshevik *praktik* Iosif Dzugashvili (Stalin).<sup>60</sup> Stalin's

55. Vorovskii 1955.

56. 'Burning Questions of Our Movement' is the subtitle of *WITBD?*.

57. Vorovskii 1955.

58. *Tretii s'ezd RSDRP: Protokoly* 1959, p. 341.

59. Stalin 1946–52, p. 96 (Stalin's counterblast is my only source for Zhordania's article). For Zhordania's anti-*WITBD?* comments in a private letter written in Summer 1904, see Ron Suny's contribution to this symposium.

60. Stalin 1952, pp. 90–132, 162–74.

defence tied Lenin's formulation very closely to Kautsky and to the merger-formula from the *Erfurt Programme* (and not specifically to the Kautsky passage cited in *WITBD?*, although Stalin also cites this passage with approval). (It is pleasant to think of the diligent Soviet reader in the 1940s learning from Stalin what a great Marxist theoretician Kautsky was.) Stalin makes much use of an argument found in Kautsky but not in Lenin, namely, that workers 'sooner or later' would come to socialism without Social Democracy, but only after much avoidable travail and error. According to Stalin, Plekhanov's 1904 article was the result of a desperate search by the Mensheviks to find some substantive disagreement to justify their takeover of the *Iskra* editorial board. 'They searched and searched until they found a passage in Lenin's book which, if torn from the context and interpreted separately, could indeed be cavilled at.' But, (continues Stalin) if we look at Lenin's *actual* position, we see that, in fact, 'Plekhanov does not disagree with [the Bolsheviks] and with Lenin. And not only Plekhanov. Neither Martov, nor Zasulich, nor Akselrod disagree with them.'<sup>61</sup>

- Stalin listed a number of 'lies' about Lenin's position. The truth? Lenin did *not* say that only intellectuals can bring socialist awareness to the workers. 'Why do you think that the Social-Democratic Party consists exclusively of intellectuals? Do you not know that there are many more advanced workers than intellectuals in the ranks of Social Democracy? Cannot Social-Democratic workers introduce socialist awareness into the worker movement?'<sup>62</sup> Lenin did *not* want to limit party membership to professional revolutionaries or to committee-members. Lenin did *not* say that socialist thought arose in isolation from the worker-movement. Lenin did *not* deny the historical inevitability of socialism. Lenin's proposed definition of party-membership does *not* discourage worker-enrolment into the Party (with some glee, Stalin cites Plekhanov himself on this point).<sup>63</sup>
- We can debate whether Stalin has described Lenin's position accurately (I believe he is more-or-less accurate). Nevertheless, Stalin's article indicates that highly committed Bolsheviks such as Stalin did *not* read *WITBD?* in the way suggested by the textbook-interpretation.<sup>64</sup> In October 1905, Lenin's party-newspaper *Proletarii* had a discussion of the Georgian party-newspaper that had published Stalin's articles. Lenin himself wrote the page-long paragraph that discussed Stalin's second article. He praised the article for its 'excellent presentation of the notorious issue of "bringing in

61. Stalin 1946–52, pp. 127, 122.

62. Stalin 1946–52, pp. 166–7.

63. Stalin 1946–52, pp. 162–74.

64. For Ron Suny's claim to the opposite effect, see Section III.

awareness from without”’. He then summarised Stalin’s argument and concluded: ‘What does Social Democracy meet in the proletariat itself, when it goes to the proletariat with its preaching of socialism? An instinctive urge [*vlechenie*] toward socialism.’<sup>65</sup> In other words, in October 1905, in the midst of a grandiose general strike, Lenin *explicitly* endorsed *WITBD?*’s argument about bringing awareness from without.

- We finally arrive back at our starting point, namely, the 1907 introduction to the republication of *WITBD?*. Here, Lenin referred with some irritation to the way Mensheviks used his ‘bend-the-stick’ comment as an admission of error. On the contrary, ‘the sense of these words is clear: *WITBD?* was a polemical correction of “economism” and to consider its content outside this task of the book is incorrect’.<sup>66</sup>

A couple of comments on this polemical daisy-chain. To grant that *WITBD?* is one-sided and therefore incomplete is not the same as conceding that Lenin’s outlook during the *Iskra*-period as a whole is similarly one-sided. Lenin wrote on a variety of topics that brought out different aspects of the Social-Democratic outlook, and he also participated in the creation of the RSDWP party-programme. Indeed, what all contributors to this debate overlooked was that an evocation of the other side of the Social-Democratic synthesis can be found *in WITBD? itself*, in the small but significant section devoted to critique of the individual terrorist who despaired of the mass-movement.<sup>67</sup>

Also noteworthy is the way that Karl Kautsky served as ideological gold-standard for everyone in the debate: Lenin, Plekhanov, Olminsky, Vorovsky, Zhordania, Stalin, and even Trotsky (as shown in a later section). The Bolsheviks pushed Lenin and Kautsky closer together, the Mensheviks pulled them apart. (Perhaps the emphasis on Kautsky’s merger-formula in particular was a distinctive feature of Bolshevik polemics.)

Only recently, I have become aware of one source of confusion about this whole issue. The English-language edition of Lenin’s *Collected Works* does not provide a literal translation of Lenin’s use of ‘bend the stick’ in relation to *WITBD?*. Lenin’s comment at the 1903 Second Congress is translated as follows:

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65. Lenin 1960–8f, p. 388. A verb with the same root as *vlechenie* is used in *WITBD?* in a passage quoted by Stalin. In my translation, the relevant passage runs: ‘It is often said: the worker class is drawn to socialism in *stikhinnyi* fashion. This is completely true’ (Lih 2006, p. 712).

66. Lih 2006, p. 27; Lenin 1960–8i, pp. 106–8.

67. Lih 2006, pp. 583–5, 741–4.

We all know the ‘economists’ have gone to one extreme. To straighten matters out somebody had to pull in the other direction – and that is what I have done. I am convinced that Russian Social Democracy will always vigorously straighten out whatever has been twisted by opportunism of any kind, and that therefore our line of action will always be the straightest and the fittest for action.<sup>68</sup>

Given the notoriety of the ‘bend-the-stick’ metaphor, it is unfortunate that the standard translation hides its presence. On the other hand, this translation accurately presents the gist of Lenin’s remark. Lenin’s motto was *not* ‘bend the stick,’ but ‘straighten out whatever has been twisted’.

We can see, then, that there are two ways of interpreting the ‘bend-the-stick’ comment. According to the Mensheviks, Lenin admitted *going too far*, for which he was properly chastised by Plekhanov. Many years later, Trotsky set forth this Menshevik interpretation: according to Lenin,

revolutionary awareness was brought into the proletariat from without by the Marxist intelligentsia... The author of *WITBD?* himself subsequently acknowledged the one-sidedness and therefore the incorrectness of his theory... After his break with Lenin, Plekhanov came forward with a belated but all the more severe critique of *What Is to Be Done?*<sup>69</sup>

Writers in the Trotskyist tradition such as Liebman, Cliff, and Molyneux are still loyal to this Menshevik reading.

According to the Bolsheviks – including not only Lenin himself but, oddly enough, Plekhanov at the Second Congress – Lenin’s argument *straightened out* a stick that had been bent out of alignment by the ‘economists’. Thus Lenin did not acknowledge the *incorrectness*, but only the *incompleteness* of his argument: it was not a complete ‘catechism’ of the Social-Democratic outlook, nor was it meant to be. The *WITBD?*-formulations did not set forth a new ‘theory’, but, rather, a straightforward [*nekhitryi*] restatement of a basic Social-Democratic axiom. Plekhanov’s caricature was due solely to partisan nitpicking. If Lenin’s clumsy wording gave rise to ridiculous misapprehensions, this was cause for apology and regret and *not* the result of systematic exaggeration in order to get the point across.<sup>70</sup>

68. Lenin 1960–8c, p. 491; see also Lenin 1960–8i, p. 107, and compare with Lenin 1958–65a, p. 272 and 1958–65c, p. 107. (Brian Pearce’s edition of the Second-Congress minutes evidently keeps the literal ‘bend-the-stick’ image.)

69. Trotsky 1996, p. 91. The word ‘one-sidedness [*odnostoronnost*]’ has been misleadingly translated as ‘bias’. Although he gets factual details garbled, Martov’s history of the Party follows the same line (Martov 2000, p. 65).

70. The apologies started early, since even in the Foreword to *WITBD?*, Lenin apologises for

Taken in the main, my account supports the Bolshevik reading of the ‘bend-the-stick’ comment and the status of the scandalous passages. Of course, *WITBD?* had many other arguments besides the scandalous passages. (In fact, these passages were a last-minute addition.) Contrary to the myth that Lenin distanced himself from *WITBD?* in 1905, he actually endorsed other specific *WITBD?* arguments fairly often after Bloody Sunday (9 January 1905). These include:

- endorsement of the Zubatov-paradigm. Lenin referred to *What Is to Be Done?*’s discussion of this topic on a number of occasions;<sup>71</sup>
- pride that *WITBD?* had already broached the topic of armed insurrection;<sup>72</sup>
- self-quotation (without explicit citation) of the *WITBD?* formulation ‘many people, but no people [*massa liudei, a liudei net*]’;<sup>73</sup>
- affirmation of earlier arguments about the impossibility of applying the elective principle under underground-conditions;<sup>74</sup>
- affirmation of the call in *WITBD?* for a wide variety of organisations, from very broad to very secretive, in explicit connection with an affirmation of the famous definition of party-membership put forth by Lenin at the Second Party-Congress;<sup>75</sup>
- insistence that his call for workers to be enlisted into the local committees was a reflection of a long-held stand (see Section VII);
- finally, besides these comments from 1905, Lenin insisted in his 1907 introduction to these collected writings that *WITBD?* did *not* ‘exaggerate’ the rôle of the revolutionary by trade. Rather, *WITBD?* insisted on a necessary truth against those who just didn’t get it. This ‘correct way’ of accomplishing organisational tasks was now accepted by both Social-Democratic factions (and indeed, by all underground-parties).<sup>76</sup>

As Robert Mayer and I have both documented, *WITBD?* was then more-or-less forgotten until after Lenin’s death.<sup>77</sup> This fact is completely compatible

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‘the many inadequacies in its literary presentation. I was forced to work *at the highest possible speed* along with interruptions from all other sorts of work’ (Lih 2006, p. 678).

71. For Lenin’s 1905 endorsement of *WITBD?* on this topic, see Section II and Lih 2006, pp. 401–3.

72. Lenin 1960–8e, p. 142.

73. Lenin 1960–8e, p. 144.

74. Lenin 1960–8f, p. 167, Lenin 1960–8g, pp. 30–1 (see Section VII on ‘de-Bolshevisation’).

75. Lenin 1960–8e, p. 444.

76. Lenin 1960–8i, pp. 101–4.

77. Mayer 1996; Lih 2003.

with the Bolshevik defence that I have just described. From the Bolshevik point of view, why would anyone read *WITBD?* after 1905? It did not advance any new theories or make any points that could not be found in what remained the Bolshevik party-textbook, Kautsky's *Erfurt Programme*. Its restatement of these basic axioms was admittedly clumsy. Its practical arguments were very dated. Why bother to argue that a party-newspaper would be a good way to set up as-yet-nonexistent central party-organs? *WITBD?* was a good book for its time, but its time had past. It applied some basic Social-Democratic truths to a specific situation, but now the task was to apply these and other truths to more current problems.

Such was the Bolshevik view of *WITBD?*: neither embarrassment nor founding document.

## VI. Did Lenin have a 'bend-the-stick' theory of leadership?

Any polemicist will aim his remarks at the people against whom he is polemicising.

Similarly, any political leader who advocates a particular policy at a particular time will use only arguments that show the advantages of that policy. Anyone seeking to understand the world-view of the polemicist or political leader would be ill-advised to take advocacy of any one polemic or policy as a full expression of her practical views. A full range of her writings or leadership-activities should be considered.

These are very elementary rules of historical interpretation. An energetic protest should be lodged against the violation of such axiomatic rules. But this protest need not and should not be based on an alleged 'bend-the-stick'-approach unique to Lenin. There is nothing special about Lenin's polemics and policy-advocacy in this regard. As I have shown in Section V, Lenin himself used the 'bend-the-stick' metaphor to make this point about elementary fairness in interpretation. He was trying to say: When I wrote *WITBD?*, I was straightening the stick bent awry by one particular set of opponents, I was advocating one particular set of policies appropriate for that moment, as any responsible Social-Democratic leader would do, In any such case, it is inaccurate and unfair to deduce an entire worldview without a further range of evidence.

Writers such as Tony Cliff and John Molyneux agree with Plekhanov's reading of the 'bend-the-stick' metaphor: Lenin admitted *going too far*. He overstated his point, he took an extreme position, he was obsessed about one particular aspect to the exclusion of all else:

After the event, [Lenin] would say: ‘We overdid it. We bent the stick too far,’ by which he did not mean that he had been wrong to do so. To win the main battle of the day, the concentration of all energies on the task was necessary. . . . He always made the task of the day quite clear, repeating what was necessary *ad infinitum* in the plainest, heaviest, most single-minded hammer-blow pronouncements. Afterwards he would regain his balance, straighten the stick, then bend it again in another direction.<sup>78</sup>

We are furthermore told by Molyneux that this alleged procedure on Lenin’s part is a good thing – a necessary and effective tool for leaders of revolutionary parties. Unless you exaggerate and become obsessed, you will not overcome the inertia of the rank and file. Bending the stick, going too far, is like the proverbial whack on the head of the donkey: first, you have to get people’s attention. Of course, once the activists are pushed in one direction, they will inevitably end up going too far, and so they must be yanked back by exaggerating and obsessing in some other direction.

According to Tony Cliff, this is exactly how Lenin operated. In *Lenin Rediscovered*, I reviewed Cliff’s description of Lenin from 1895 and 1905, and remarked that Cliff’s portrait of Lenin as a leader is a rather unattractive one.<sup>79</sup> An audience at the Marxism 2008 conference was told by John Molyneux that I objected to Cliff’s portrait because it showed Lenin changing his mind, and I was duly reminded that there is nothing wrong in changing one’s mind where circumstances warrant.

Given this misunderstanding of my observation, I am compelled to explain at greater length the deficiencies of Cliff’s portrait. As we follow Cliff’s Lenin from year to year, we find that he continually veers back and forth on fundamental questions. Back in 1895, we find Lenin propagating the idea that ‘class consciousness, including political consciousness, develops automatically from the economic struggle’.<sup>80</sup> In 1899,

it was fear of the danger to the movement occasioned by the rise of Russian ‘economism’ and German revisionism in the second half of 1899 that motivated Lenin to bend the stick right over again, away from the spontaneous, day-to-day fragmented economic struggle and towards the organisation of a national political party.<sup>81</sup>

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78. Cliff 1975, p. 67.

79. Lih 2006, p. 25.

80. Cliff 1975, p. 52. Cliff also writes, ‘In November 1895, in an article called *What are our ministers thinking about?* Lenin urged the expediency of leaving the tsar out of the argument, and talking instead about the new laws that favoured employers and of cabinet ministers who were anti-working class.’ This assertion is entirely without factual basis.

81. Cliff 1975, p. 69.

Also in late 1899, however, Lenin ‘sharply contradicted his later statements in *What Is to Be Done?* on the relation between the spontaneous class struggle and socialist consciousness’.<sup>82</sup> In 1902, Lenin bent the stick ‘right over to mechanical over-emphasis on organization in *What Is to Be Done?*’. This operation, however, was ‘quite useful operationally... the step now necessary was to arouse, at least in the politically conscious section of the masses, a passion for political action’. Lenin had so far forgotten the views he held a year or two earlier that Cliff is forced to lecture him solemnly: ‘many economic struggles *do* spill over into political ones’.<sup>83</sup>

But *did* the stick need to be bent in this way at this particular time? Did the masses lack any passion for political action? Evidently not, since Cliff informs us that ‘the “economism” that Lenin attacked so sharply in *What Is to Be Done?* was already on the decline and practically finished by the time the pamphlet saw the light of day... During the years 1901–3, *workers* became the main active political opponents of Tsarism’.<sup>84</sup> In 1905, ‘Lenin was singing a different tune... The unfortunate Lenin had to persuade his supporters to oppose the line proposed in *What Is to Be Done?*... Lenin now formulated his conclusion in terms which were the exact opposite of those of *What Is to Be Done?*’.<sup>85</sup>

My main problem with this description of Lenin’s description is that it is incorrect: Lenin did not hold these extreme positions and certainly did not veer from one to the other. At all times, Lenin realised that economic struggles often lead to political struggles, especially in Russia. At all times, Lenin gave an essential rôle to Social Democracy in bringing organisation and insight. Cliff’s mistake arises from the same source as those of many academic historians: they focus exclusively on one sentence by Lenin and do not bother to look at the argument in the surrounding paragraph, much less the entire article. This procedure is especially problematic with Erfurtian Social Democrats such as Lenin, since they consciously fought a two-front polemic war against *both* those who pinned their hopes on the worker-movement in isolation, and those who pinned their hopes on the socialist movement in isolation.

Let us assume for purposes of argument that Cliff’s portrait is an accurate one. I find Cliff’s Lenin unattractive for the following reasons:

- Stick-benders seem to come in two types, manipulative (consciously exaggerating to get the attention of activists) and self-deceiving (sincerely

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82. Cliff 1975, pp. 80–8.

83. Cliff 1975, p. 82. If Cliff had looked at Lenin’s many *Iskra*-articles of 1900–2, he would not have been so condescending.

84. Cliff 1975, pp. 97–8.

85. Cliff 1975, pp. 171, 175–6 (these assertions are examined in Section VII).

veering from one ‘operationally useful’ extreme to the other). I am not sure which of these two types is the least attractive. In any event, Cliff’s Lenin deceives himself.

- The various positions taken by Lenin are incorrect, as even Cliff states. Class-consciousness does not develop ‘automatically’ from the economic struggle. Mechanical over-emphasis on organisation is not a defensible position. Excluding workers from local committees is not a defensible policy. Indeed, these various positions are not simply incorrect, they are extremist and rather stupid.
- As Cliff accurately points out, the rapid rise of worker-politicisation in the years 1900–3 was a crucial development in Russian politics. As shown in *Lenin Rediscovered*, all participants in the polemics of 1901 took this new phase of the worker-movement for granted. Yet Cliff’s justification for Lenin’s exaggerations in his book of 1902 is that the workers needed to be politicised. It would seem that Lenin was so ill-informed that he bent the stick precisely where it was *not* needed.
- Cliff asks us to forgive the inadequacy of Lenin’s stated positions because of the ‘operational’ advantages of ‘bending the stick right over’ from one extreme to the other. But he overlooks the many operational *disadvantages* of stick-bending. For a start, if Lenin’s position in *WITBD?* was as extreme as Cliff says, he gave his factional opponents a justifiable talking point: Lenin *had* gone too far and overreacted to economism. Plekhanov very properly pointed this out. Lenin’s stick-bending thus led to confusion and defensiveness on the part of his own supporters.<sup>86</sup>
- Another operational disadvantage of Lenin’s stick-bending, if Cliff’s account is to be believed, is that the Bolshevik *praktiki* considered it their duty to exclude workers from local committees. Indeed, they were so committed to this policy that even Lenin could not bend the stick back again in Spring 1905. Bolshevism in the period 1902–5 was therefore objectively anti-worker in organisational terms, thanks to Lenin.
- In the midst of revolution in 1905, Lenin had to lose precious time trying to undo the damage of his previous ideological extremism.
- Although Cliff pictures the Bolshevik activists as stodgy and not over-bright, surely even they would start, at some point, to discount Lenin’s exhortations as just the latest bending of the stick – nothing to get excited about. Stick-bending seems doomed to diminishing returns.

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86. As shown in Section V, Lenin was aware that his less-than-successful formulations had led to confusion in his own ranks and *regretted* the fact.

These are the reasons leading me to conclude that over-frequent recourse to the ‘bend-the-stick’-type of explanation ‘ends up making Lenin look like a rather incompetent and incoherent leader’.<sup>87</sup> Cliff’s Lenin stands for nothing definite, and his habit of jerking his followers around had many practical disadvantages, even if one overlooks the disrespect involved.

Lenin used the metaphor of bending the stick to defend the theoretical formulae of *WITBD?* as an incomplete but thoroughly mainstream statement of basic Social-Democratic truths. He believed he had a duty to straighten out what others had bent awry, but he did *not* think that ‘going too far’ was a necessary or attractive part of leadership.

## VII. ‘Lenin vs. the Bolsheviks’: *WITBD?* and the Revolution of 1905

A very dramatic story is often told about Lenin’s relation to the *praktiki* of his own faction during the Revolution of 1905 – a story that provides considerable support to the textbook-interpretation of *WITBD?* A good title for this story is ‘Lenin vs. the Bolsheviks’. It can be paraphrased as follows:

Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?*, published in 1902, propagated distrust of worker-spontaneity and suspicion of party-democracy. Lenin’s book successfully – too successfully – imbued local Bolsheviks with these attitudes. But the revolutionary militancy of the workers in 1905 showed the inadequacy of Lenin’s arguments. Lenin himself was open and flexible enough to admit this, and the tone of his writings changed completely. Now, for the first time, he argued for recruitment of workers to local party-committees and for the maximum practicable extension of party-democracy.

Unfortunately, no other Bolshevik shared this flexibility. The local Bolshevik *praktiki* remained loyal to *WITBD?*, and, therefore, fought Lenin tooth and nail in 1905, quoting *WITBD?* against its straying author. Lenin was compelled to fight a year-long battle against his own party. In April 1905, at the Bolshevik Third Party-Congress, Lenin fought unsuccessfully for recruitment of workers to party-committees. In November 1905, Lenin returned to the attack and called for opening the gates of the party.

A striking feature of this story is the way it foreshadows Trotsky’s relationship with the ‘epigones’ and ‘party-bureaucrats’ in the 1920s. In each case, the great

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87. Lih 2006, p. 25.

leader is frustrated by the unimaginative stodginess of the middle levels of the Party and longs for union with the masses against the conservative and routine-bound *praktiki*. We should therefore not be surprised that the writers who insist on ‘Lenin. vs. the Bolsheviks’ in 1905 tend to be admirers of Trotsky: Marcel Liebman, Tony Cliff, John Molyneux, Chris Harman and Paul Le Blanc. The commitment of writers in the activist-tradition to ‘Lenin vs. the Bolsheviks’ is a major reason why I count them as *supporters* of the textbook-interpretation of *WITBD?*, despite their pro-Lenin attitude in general. If Lenin was so worried about workers in 1902 that only the volcanic events of 1905 persuaded him to allow them on party-committees – if he had done such a thorough job of imbuing his followers with similar worries that even in 1905 they were determined to keep the workers out of party-committees – then Lenin must really have been one worried guy! Of course, the activist-account goes on to tell us how the great leader Lenin later rises above these limitations, and – in a satisfyingly ironic sort of way – loses his personal worries in 1905, even while his followers are displaying theirs.

The story of Lenin vs. the Bolsheviks shows its kinship with standard anti-Lenin academic stories in yet another respect. In both cases, Lenin is the sole creator of the Bolshevik faction, whose members are defined by the attitudes allegedly propagated by *WITBD?*. His followers (I had almost said, his minions) are thoroughly unable to think for themselves. Any change in their outlook has to come from above (in the ‘bend-the-stick’ manner discussed in Section VI).

Elements of this story can indeed be found in academic scholars as well.<sup>88</sup> For example, Leopold Haimson also remarks on ‘Lenin’s inebriation with the spontaneous labor movement’ which led to ‘dramatic changes’ in his view of the party. To which my response was and is: Lenin indeed may have been inebriated in 1905, but he was hardly sober before.<sup>89</sup> But the overlap between the activist-writers and academic historians such as Haimson is no coincidence, since the story told by the activist-writers is taken directly from academic historians – indeed, strongly anti-Leninist historians.

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88. In his contribution to this symposium, Ron Suny writes ‘Lenin would be compelled to ‘de-Bolshevisise’ some of the more militant Bolsheviks, most emphatically in the revolutionary fervour of 1905’. He does not elaborate, but I learn from later discussions with him that he means primarily Bolshevik attitudes toward the revolutionary soviets of 1905. This is a separate and rather complicated issue, so I will just say here that I do not see anything in *WITBD?* that contradicts enthusiasm about the soviets, so that, in my opinion, the term ‘de-Bolshevisation’ sows more confusion than light. (The term ‘de-Bolshevisise’ evidently goes back to Trotsky in 1917, explaining why he could now join with Lenin. Exactly what Trotsky meant is unclear from the reference in Deutscher 1965, p. 258. The term was taken up by Marcel Liebman to describe opening up the Party in 1917 [Liebman 1975, pp. 157–61].)

89. Haimson 2005, pp. 10; Lih 2006, p. 430.

This observation is a correction to my account in *Lenin Rediscovered*, since I thoroughly misunderstood the historiography of this issue. Misled by Tony Cliff's idiosyncratic footnote-practices, I was under the impression that he had consulted primary, Russian-language sources, and so I made him my principal interlocutor. I now realise his remarks have no independent value.

Here are the facts of the case. In 1963, John Keep published *The Rise of Social Democracy in Russia*. Keep is a respected academic historian who is intensely hostile to Lenin personally.<sup>90</sup> In 1967, Solomon Schwarz published *The Russian Revolution of 1905*. Schwarz was a Bolshevik in 1905 but moved to the Mensheviks soon thereafter. His account is more a monograph than a memoir.

In 1973, Marcel Liebman published *Le léninisme sous Lénine*. Liebman is the real creator of the 'Lenin vs. the Bolsheviks' story. Without access to Russian-language sources, Liebman relied heavily on Keep and Schwarz, particularly in his account of the dramatic episode of the Third Congress. Liebman wove their material into a story that was much more hostile to the Bolshevik *praktiki* than either of his two main sources. In his book, Lenin stands as an isolated figure of wisdom within the Bolshevik faction throughout 1905. Liebman's contemptuous attitude toward the Bolshevik *praktiki* contrasts with his treatment of the Menshevik activists, to whom he accords a good deal of praise. Liebman's list of supporting anecdotes and Lenin citations forms the basis of later accounts in the activist-tradition.

In 1975, Tony Cliff published *Lenin: Building the Party*. Cliff took over the Liebman-story, but he also went directly back to Keep and Schwarz – and I mean *directly*. Keep describes Bolshevik activists at the Third Congress (as it happens, without any factual basis) as follows: 'Buttressing themselves with quotations from *What Is to Be Done?*, they called for "extreme caution" in admitting workers into the committees and condemned "playing at democracy".' In Cliff, this becomes: 'Buttressing themselves with quotations from *What Is to Be Done?*, they called for "extreme caution" in admitting workers into the committees and condemned "playing at democracy".'<sup>91</sup> No footnotes, no attribution. Cliff takes several pages to describe the debate at the Third Congress, during which he gives substantial excerpts, all footnoted to the original Russian-language sources. The entire section is lifted almost word for word from Solomon Schwarz.<sup>92</sup>

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90. Sample: 'Uppermost in his mind [at the Third Congress], as always, was the question of power. He reasoned that the untutored workers suddenly brought into the Party could serve as an instrument for the leaders to crush the "opportunist" intellectuals' (Keep 1963, p. 211). Keep clearly had direct access to Lenin's mind, since the documents do not reveal this reasoning.

91. Compare Cliff 1975, p. 175 to Keep 1963, p. 210. If Cliff had actually consulted the original source, he might have realised that Keep's assertion is baseless.

92. Compare Cliff 1975, pp. 173–5, to Schwarz 1967, pp. 217–19.

Anyone who looks at the footnotes in the relevant chapters in Cliff's biography will get the impression that Cliff had consulted many arcane Russian-language sources from the 1920s and the like. I, personally, would be surprised if any of these attributions were not taken from secondary sources. I have no wish to impose what may be inappropriate academic standards on Cliff. Nevertheless, it must be realised that the activist-account, especially in regard to the Third Congress, originates in the (as it happens, deeply distorted) interpretations of John Keep and Solomon Schwartz.

As their contributions to this symposium and elsewhere show, John Molyneux, Chris Harman and Paul Le Blanc are also committed to 'Lenin vs. the Bolsheviks'.<sup>93</sup> I tacked Chapter Nine on to my already long book partly to address this issue. In this chapter, I document the actual Bolshevik reading of *WITBD?* and show the errors of Cliff and other activist-writers about the Third Congress. For reasons I can only guess at, *none* of my critics have even acknowledged the existence of these arguments, much less responded to them. I must therefore once again address this issue as forcefully as I can.

*Did 1905 cause a fundamental change in the tone of Lenin's writings?*

John Molyneux writes that in 1905, 'in the face of the enormous and spontaneous revolutionary achievements of the Russian working class, the tone of Lenin's writings changes completely'.<sup>94</sup> As we have seen, Leopold Haimson concurs, speaking of 'Lenin's inebriation with the spontaneous labor movement'. The question asked by Molyneux and Haimson is: are Lenin's pronouncements about the workers in 1905 consistent with what we ourselves feel are the implications of his *WITBD?* formulations? A better question to ask is: how do Lenin's pronouncements about the Russian workers in 1905 compare with what he was saying about the Russian workers earlier? The answer to this more concrete question is scattered throughout *Lenin Rediscovered*. Gathering this material together, we find the following picture.

In 1896, the Petersburg-workers carried out strike-actions that amazed Russian society. Lenin's reaction? These events show that the Russian workers are moving rapidly toward purposive anti-tsarist revolutionary action, thus

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93. In Paul Le Blanc's version of 'Lenin vs. the Bolsheviks', *WITBD?* is not explicitly mentioned. Nevertheless, we are told that 'Lenin quickly perceived the need for a shift away from an organisational model in which professional revolutionaries demanded absolute obedience. In 1905, 'Lenin himself "bent the stick" away from one of the formulations of 1902,' that is, from *What Is to Be Done?* (Le Blanc 1990, pp. 117, 121). Le Blanc's hostile attitude toward the Bolshevik *praktiki* in this period comes out not only in Le Blanc 1990 but in his contribution to this symposium.

94. Molyneux 1978, pp. 59–63.

confounding the sceptics. The weak link is us, the Social Democrats. We are falling short of what the workers ask of us. We need to redouble our efforts to bring enlightenment and organisation so that the revolutionary fervour of the workers will become more effective.<sup>95</sup>

In 1900, May-Day demonstrations by workers in Kharkov inaugurated a new stage of *political* protest in the Russian worker-movement. Lenin's reaction? These events show that the Russian workers are moving rapidly toward purposive anti-tsarist revolutionary action, thus confounding the sceptics. The weak link is us, the Social Democrats. We are falling short of what the workers ask of us. We need to redouble our efforts to bring enlightenment and organisation so that the revolutionary fervour of the workers will become more effective.<sup>96</sup>

In the so-called 'spring-events' of February/March 1901, workers went out on the street to support student-protests. Lenin's reaction? These events show that the Russian workers are moving rapidly toward purposive anti-tsarist revolutionary action, thus confounding the sceptics. The weak link is us, the Social Democrats. We are falling short of what the workers ask of us. We need to redouble our efforts to bring enlightenment and organisation so that the revolutionary fervour of the workers will become more effective.<sup>97</sup>

In May 1901, striking workers fought a pitched battle with police that became famous as 'the Obukhov-defence'. Lenin's reaction? These events show that the Russian workers are moving rapidly toward purposive anti-tsarist revolutionary action, thus confounding the sceptics. The weak link is us, the Social Democrats. We are falling short of what the workers ask of us. We need to redouble our efforts to bring enlightenment and organisation so that the revolutionary fervour of the workers will become more effective.<sup>98</sup>

In November 1902, worker-demonstrations in Rostov-on-Don turned into a massive general strike. Lenin's reaction? These events show that the Russian workers are moving rapidly toward purposive anti-tsarist revolutionary action, thus confounding the sceptics. The weak link is us, the Social Democrats. We are falling short of what the workers ask of us. We need to redouble our efforts to bring enlightenment and organisation so that the revolutionary fervour of the workers will become more effective.<sup>99</sup>

In the summer of 1903, massive strikes rolled across the cities of South Russia. Lenin's reaction? These events show that the Russian workers are

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95. Lih 2006, pp. 125–6, 641.

96. Lih 2006, pp. 424–6.

97. Lih 2006, pp. 426–7.

98. Lih 2006, pp. 202–3.

99. Lih 2006, pp. 203–6.

moving rapidly toward purposive anti-tsarist revolutionary action, thus confounding the sceptics. The weak link is us, the Social Democrats. We are falling short of what the workers ask of us. We need to redouble our efforts to bring enlightenment and organisation so that the revolutionary fervour of the workers will become more effective.<sup>100</sup>

In 1905, a wave of strikes and demonstrations culminates in the massive general strike of October and armed insurrection in December. Lenin's reaction? These events show that the Russian workers are moving rapidly toward purposive anti-tsarist revolutionary action, thus confounding the sceptics. The weak link is us, the Social Democrats. We are falling short of what the workers ask of us. We need to redouble our efforts to bring enlightenment and organisation so that the revolutionary fervour of the workers will become more effective.<sup>101</sup>

Do Lenin's comments in 1905 reveal a complete change of tone from years past? In no way. Lenin's exhilaration with worker-militancy in 1905 was preceded by his exhilaration with every indication of worker-militancy since 1895. Lenin's enthusiastic insistence on the revolutionary fervour of the workers does not contradict his insistence on the necessity of the party. The two are part and parcel of the same outlook.

*Did Bolsheviks learn 'worry about workers' from Lenin?*

We have examined the continuity between Lenin's pre-1905 views and his outlook during the Revolution. Let us now turn to the other protagonist in this story, the Bolshevik *praktik*. Did Bolsheviks in Russia pick up 'worry-about-workers' attitudes from Lenin or from *WITBD*? In my book, I discuss the views of Aleksandr Bogdanov, M. Liadov, Vlatislav Vorovsky, Iosif Dzugashvili (Stalin), I.I. Radchenko, M.G. Tskhakaia, among others – all Bolsheviks, all militant, all admirers of Lenin (although they did not like to think of themselves as Lenin's 'minions' in the style of Akselrod and later historians), all attentive readers of *WITBD*? Their views provide no support for 'Lenin vs. the Bolsheviks'.

Here is one more instructive example. In 1904, the Bolshevik pamphleteer Mikhail Olminsky sketched Lenin's 'political physiognomy'. What is crucial for the issue before us is not the adequacy of his portrait of Lenin, but the mere fact that one of his ardent followers pictured Lenin in this way in autumn

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100. Lenin 1960–8c, pp. 515–16 and 1960–8d, pp. 199–202. See also Lih 2006, p. 185, where an *Iskra*-article by Plekhanov from summer 1903 is quoted.

101. See, for example, 'Lessons of the Moscow Uprising', Lenin 1960–8i, pp. 171–8 [1906].

1904 – that is, prior to the events of 1905. Olminsky cited the following Lenin-pronouncements to back up his admiring portrait.<sup>102</sup>

In 1901, Lenin wrote ‘Before our eyes, the wide masses of urban workers and “simple folk” [*prostonarode*] are straining at the bit to join in struggle – and we revolutionaries appear to be without a staff of leaders and organizers’.<sup>103</sup>

In 1902, Lenin criticised ‘*inappropriate and immoderate* application of the electoral principle’. Olminsky emphasised the words ‘inappropriate and immoderate’ to show that Lenin was *not* opposed to the electoral principle *per se*. Olminsky further quotes Lenin to the effect that ‘the estrangement of workers from active revolutionary work’ was one of the principal defects of party-organisation at present.<sup>104</sup>

In 1903, Lenin asserted that ‘in order to become a party of the masses not only in words, we need to enlist ever wider masses in all party affairs’. Steps should be taken ‘so that the experience of the workers in struggle and their proletarian sense of things *teach us a thing or two*’. Lenin also insisted that ‘it is necessary to do everything possible, up to and including some deviations from beautifully centralized organizational charts, from unconditional subordination to discipline, to give to groups [within the Party] the freedom to speak out’.<sup>105</sup>

Olminsky’s Lenin-citations show us the kind of thing that really inspired the *praktiki* – *not* ‘worry about workers’, but, rather, faith in the revolutionary fervour of the workers and the historic mission of the Party.

Olminsky went on to predict that, if Lenin acted consistently with his printed statements, he could be counted on to advocate expansion of the electoral principle whenever circumstances warranted. He noted Lenin’s 1903 call for wide *glasnost* within the Party, to the extent consistent with *konspiratsiia* and tactical secrecy. Olminsky himself argued that the principle of freedom of press within the Party should be introduced *now*, to the extent practicable – otherwise the Party would be bankrupt when freedom of press was won for Russia as a whole.

Throughout this pamphlet, Olminsky made clear his own views about party-democracy. He insisted that, for any consistent Social Democrat, ‘*partiinnost* and democratic organization of the party are two inseparable concepts’. The party-ideal should be ‘centralized democracy’. True, the environment of the underground forced many painful compromises – all the more reason to insist on any democratic procedures that *were* possible.

102. Olminsky 1904a (I have provided references to Lenin’s *Collected Works*).

103. Lenin 1960–8b, pp. 13–24.

104. ‘Letter to a Comrade’, in Lenin 1960–8c, pp. 231–52.

105. Lenin 1960–8d, pp. 115–18.

Olminsky was confident that the Party would not reject the democratic principle ‘until the second coming of Christ’.

In looking back at party-history, Olminsky insisted that the workers had moved forward more quickly toward open political struggle than ‘economists’ from the intelligentsia. The workers themselves seized the first opportunity to demonstrate openly in the streets, despite the scepticism of their own leaders. According to Olminsky, the triumph of *Iskra*-ism owed much less to the talented editors of *Iskra* than to the reaction of the Russian workers themselves to changing circumstances.<sup>106</sup>

Would Mikhail Olminsky have been surprised or upset by Lenin’s outlook in 1905? Did Lenin need to wean Olminsky away from his ‘sectarian’ and ‘elitist’ views about party-democracy and worker-recruitment? Hardly. We may therefore conclude that neither the textbook-interpretation nor the story of ‘Lenin vs. the Bolsheviks’ gives us even a clue about the outlook of Lenin’s most committed followers.

*Lenin vs. the praktiki at the Third Congress (April 1905)*

According to ‘Lenin vs. the Bolsheviks’, this is what happened at the Bolshevik Third Congress: Lenin saw that the surprising worker-militancy of 1905 required a change of outlook, and so he, and only he, insisted that workers be allowed entry to the party-committees. Most other Bolsheviks were dead set against this, since they remained loyal to *WITBD?* and even quoted it against its baffled author. The anti-worker *praktiki* won hands down.<sup>107</sup>

Here is what the factual record shows. At the Congress, Lenin bragged that his published writings showed that he had been the one Russian Social-Democratic leader who had always openly called for more workers in the committees, and other speakers confirmed this claim. *WITBD?* was not mentioned in the debate. Everybody at the Congress agreed that the local committees needed to recruit more workers – the only question was how. The resolution submitted jointly by Lenin and Bogdanov was criticised by *praktiki* because it merely affirmed an axiomatic goal (worker-recruitment) without showing ways and means. The people most informed about the situation on the ground – activists who had recently visited a number of local committees in Russia – opposed Lenin’s resolution as impracticable at the present time. After Lenin’s resolution was defeated by a close vote (Lenin was not isolated on

106. Olminsky 1904a.

107. Liebman 1975, pp. 84–6; Cliff 1975, pp. 171–9; Molyneux 1978, pp. 59–63; Le Blanc 1990, pp. 116–19.

this issue), the Congress passed *another* resolution on the topic which tied worker-recruitment to concrete solutions.<sup>108</sup>

The activist-view of the Third Congress pictures Lenin battling stick-in-the-mud *komitetchiki* [members of local committees]. The opposite view of the dynamics of the congress was provided by a participant, M. Liadov (*not* a *komitetchik*), looking back in 1911: ‘Look at the proceedings of the Bolshevik Third Congress and you will immediately see the extent to which the lower ranks [*nizy*] had overtaken their leader at that time.’<sup>109</sup>

Rejecting the completely erroneous standard account of the Third Congress is *very important*. Anyone who maintains that one of Bolshevism’s most influential texts turned local Bolshevik activists into fanatic opponents of putting workers on party-committees does not understand Bolshevism.

*Lenin’s article on party-reorganisation (November 1905)*

In late 1905, Lenin, newly arrived in Russia, wrote an article on party-organisation that called for fundamental changes to party-institutions: more sweeping application of the electoral principle, greater efforts at mass-recruitment into the Party, and more open party-conferences, congresses, and so forth.<sup>110</sup> This important article has been misused in a number of ways to support the story of ‘Lenin vs. the Bolsheviks’.

First, Lenin’s slogans are often cited as evidence of a fundamental turnaround in his views on party-organisation, caused by his new enthusiasm for worker-militancy.<sup>111</sup> This interpretation is based on a fundamental misreading of the historical situation. In October 1905, the tsar issued a manifesto granting a certain measure of political freedom. This manifesto, plus widespread pressure from below, led to a very short-lived situation that became known as ‘the days of freedom’. In the opening words of Lenin’s article: ‘The conditions in which our party is functioning are *changing radically*. Freedom of assembly, of

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108. Lih 2006, pp. 540–4. Lenin certainly felt that *praktiki* were not doing enough to recruit workers to local committees. This attitude was partly motivated by factional competition with the Mensheviks. I see no reason to assume that the émigré Lenin had a more realistic view of actual conditions in Russia than Bolshevik *praktiki* such as Lev Kamenev and Rosalia Zemliachka. In her memoirs, Krupskaya loyally supports Lenin’s view of the matter. (Note that the English translation muddlies Krupskaya’s point [see Lih 2006, p. 541].) Krupskaya’s overall judgment on the *praktiki* does not lend much support to ‘Lenin vs. the Bolsheviks’.

109. Liadov 1911. In his memoir written in the 1920s, Liadov is, of course, less condescending to Lenin, but still stresses the active initiative shown by the *praktiki*-delegates. Liadov views the Third Congress as the real founding congress of Bolshevism (Liadov 1956, pp. 80–3).

110. Lenin 1960–8 g, pp. 29–39.

111. Examples include Cliff 1975; Haimson 2005; Le Blanc 1990.

association and of the press has been captured.<sup>112</sup> And since *de facto* political freedom had been acquired, vast changes in party-organisation should follow.

Was this a new position, a change of heart? Of course not! In my book, I sum up Lenin's pre-1905 political strategy in this way: 'Let us build an underground-organisation as much like the German SPD as possible so that we can overthrow autocracy in order to obtain the political freedom that we need to build a party even more like the German SPD.' For one brief shining moment, it looked as if political freedom *had* been won, and Lenin acted immediately to cash in his revolutionary chips and put the Party on the more efficient and more mass basis he had always dreamed about. As I put it in *Lenin Rediscovered*: Lenin 'gave advice on how to build an effective party in the underground, but the reason he wanted an effective party was to be able to leave behind forever the stifling atmosphere of the underground'.<sup>113</sup>

Lenin's article has also been tied to the story of the Third Congress in a way that suggests a year-long fight against the 'party machine'.<sup>114</sup> As Cliff describes it, 'it was not characteristic of Lenin to give up a fight, and a few months after the third Congress, in November 1905, he returned to the issue with increased vigour'.<sup>115</sup>

This is the reverse of the truth. Lenin says in the article of November 1905 that 'we Bolsheviks have always recognized that in new conditions, when political freedoms were acquired, it would be essential to adopt the elective principle. The minutes of the third Congress of the RSDWP prove this most conclusively, if, indeed, any proof is required'.<sup>116</sup> Compare Le Blanc, who quotes Lenin's November article and then says 'At the Third Congress, in April 1905, the Bolshevik committeemen had revolted against such ideas'.<sup>117</sup> Thus Lenin's affirmation of *continuity* with earlier Bolshevism and his specific *endorsement* of the Third Congress is turned into its opposite.

The issue over which Lenin found himself in conflict with many *praktiki* at the Third Congress in April 1905 was substantially different from the issue at stake in November 1905. In the spring, the problem was worker-recruitment to local party-committees under conditions of a *konspiratsiia*-underground. In the autumn, the problem was worker-entry as general party-members under conditions of rapidly expanding political freedom.

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112. Lenin 1960–8g, p. 29 (emphasis added).

113. Lih 2006, p. 557.

114. Molyneux 1978, pp. 59–63.

115. Cliff 1975, p. 177.

116. Lenin 1960–8g, p. 30. Lenin also continues to insist that full democracy within the Party is impossible *without* political freedom, that is, in the underground.

117. Le Blanc 1990, p. 118. Le Blanc also erroneously suggests that Lenin discussed the rôle of professional revolutionaries in this article.

Finally, one particular sentence in this article is taken to be a repudiation of Lenin's earlier outlook. Lenin writes: "The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social Democratic, and more than ten years of work put in by Social Democracy has done a great deal to transform this spontaneity into consciousness."<sup>118</sup> Does this statement really 'bend the stick' away from Lenin's earlier standpoint, as Cliff and Le Blanc assert?<sup>119</sup> Even on a purely verbal level, Lenin's 1905 formulation does not differ in essential ways from his *WITBD?*-formulations. He says, in *WITBD?*, that, while, it is completely true' that 'the working class is spontaneously drawn toward socialism', Social Democracy is not thereby excused from its leadership-role.<sup>120</sup> More substantively, Lenin's statement of November 1905 reflects his life-long assumptions about the receptivity of the workers to the socialist message.

In his text, Molyneux cites Lenin's statement in *WITBD?* that the working class exclusively by its own efforts is able to develop only *tred-iunionist* consciousness. He then comments: "This is not, and was not, true – witness the Paris Commune – and Lenin saw with his own eyes that it was not true in 1905, hence his statement then that "the working class is spontaneously social democratic".'

This is a curious observation. Does either the Paris Commune in 1871 or worker-militancy in 1905 show us workers achieving socialist insight without socialists? By 1871, socialists had been at work in Paris for at least a generation. As for Russia, Molyneux himself states Lenin's view of the matter: "The open-ended expansion envisaged by Lenin *in the revolutionary period* was possible *only* on the basis of the solid preparation of the party beforehand."<sup>121</sup>

Chris Harman sees Lenin's article of November 1905 as proof of his revolutionary and therefore (in Harman's view) non-Erfurtian political outlook: "This is also why Lenin was so insistent on berating established party-members in 1905 to open up the Party to the newly revolutionary layer of workers – something Lih recognised happened, but feels compelled by his "Erfurtianism"-thesis to minimise its significance.' This statement is triply misleading. First, I do not minimise the significance of this article but see it as

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118. Lenin 1960–8g, p. 32.

119. Cliff 1975, p. 176 ('Lenin now formulated his conclusion in terms which were the exact opposite of those of *What Is to Be Done?*'); Le Blanc 1990, p. 121.

120. Lih 2006, p. 712 (translation adjusted by using standard renderings).

121. Molyneux 1978, pp. 59–63. Mikhail Pokrovsky cites a comment of Lenin from 1908: 'In the summer of 1905, our party was a union of underground groups; in the autumn it became the party of *millions* of workers. Do you think, my dear sirs, this came all of a sudden, or was the result *prepared* and secured by years and years of slow, obstinate, inconspicuous, noiseless work?' (Pokrovsky 1933, pp. 193–4).

an important confirmation of my general view of Lenin.<sup>122</sup> Second, Lenin's call for party-democracy in conditions of political freedom *stems from* his Erfurtian outlook. Third, Lenin was not berating party-members in this article, in which he says that he was 'profoundly convinced' that these proposals would be accepted by local committee-members.<sup>123</sup>

*Lenin's endorsement of WITBD? arguments in 1905*

Contrary to the myth that Lenin distanced himself from *WITBD?* in 1905, he actually endorsed many specific *WITBD?* arguments fairly often after Bloody Sunday (9 January 1905). Besides the issues treated in Section V, we find the following.

- Endorsement of *WITBD?*'s 'bring-it-on' attitude toward police-socialists such as Zubatov. Lenin referred to his discussion of this topic in *WITBD?* on a number of occasions in 1905.<sup>124</sup>
- Pride that *WITBD?* had already broached the topic of armed insurrection.<sup>125</sup>
- Self-quotation (without explicit citation) of the *WITBD?* formulation 'many people, but no people [*massa liudei, a liudei net*]'.<sup>126</sup>
- Affirmation of earlier arguments about the impossibility of applying the elective principle under underground-conditions.<sup>127</sup>
- Affirmation of the call in *WITBD?* for a wide variety of organisations, from very broad to very secretive, in explicit connection with an affirmation of the famous definition of party-membership advocated by Lenin at the Second Party-Congress.<sup>128</sup>
- Insistence that his call for workers to be enlisted into the local committees was a reflection of a long-held stand (as noted in this section).
- Finally, besides these comments from 1905, Lenin insisted in his 1907 introduction to this collected writings that *WITBD?* did *not* 'exaggerate' the role of the revolutionary by trade. Rather, *WITBD?* insisted on a necessary truth against those who just did not get it. This 'correct way' of accomplishing organisational tasks was now accepted by both Social-Democratic factions (and, we might add, by all underground-parties).<sup>129</sup>

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122. Lih 2006, p. 473.

123. Lenin 1960–8g, p. 30.

124. See Section II and Lih 2006, pp. 401–3.

125. Lenin 1960–8e, p. 142.

126. Lenin 1960–8e, p. 144.

127. Lenin 1960–8f, p. 167; 1960–8g, pp. 30–1.

128. Lenin 1960–8e, p. 444.

129. Lenin 1960–8i, pp. 101–4.

*Lenin and the praktiki*

The story told by a number of activist-writers, ‘Lenin vs. the Bolsheviks’, needs to be replaced with a new story, ‘Lenin and the *praktiki*’, one that goes something like this.

By 1902, owing to the collective and anonymous work of Social-Democratic activists all over Russia, an underground of a new type had been created in Russia – one based on imaginative adaptation of Erfurtian principles to the alien environment of tsarist Russia. Lenin’s *WITBD?* painted an idealised portrait of these underground-institutions and inspired local activists with a vision of the ‘miracles’ of leadership they could perform, given the revolutionary fervour of the workers. The Bolshevik *praktiki* choose Lenin as their spokesman because he was the émigré leader who best understood their practical problems and who had the most optimistic vision of what they could accomplish.

Both Lenin and the *praktiki* saw the events of 1905 as a giant confirmation of their general outlook. They had wagered on the workers as leaders of the Russian revolution, and (so it seemed to them) the wager was paying off handsomely. The interaction between leader and party in 1905 was complicated, sometimes conflicted but on the whole productive. Neither side monopolised the initiative in this interaction. Sometimes, Lenin showed symptoms of émigré disconnection from Russian realities (as in his unrealistic demands for immediate and massive worker-recruitment to party-committees in April 1905). Sometimes, the enthusiasm of leader and locals were mutually reinforcing. There was nothing resembling a year-long battle of Lenin against the *praktiki*.

At no time did Lenin repudiate the arguments of *WITBD?* or substantially change the tone of his writings. On the contrary, he specifically endorsed *WITBD?*’s arguments throughout the year. In November 1905, he affirmed his Erfurtian credentials by calling for thorough-going party-democracy under the conditions of the short-lived ‘days of freedom’.

A centrally defining feature of Bolshevism in post-revolutionary years (1907–17) was the assertion that the 1905 Revolution had *confirmed* the political and organisational outlook of ‘old *Iskra*’, that is, *Iskra* prior to the Menshevik/Bolshevik split. Lenin regarded *WITBD?* as a succinct expression of many aspects of that outlook. He attacked all those who would liquidate the heritage of the prerevolutionary underground.

### VIII. Lenin and ‘Kautsky when he was a Marxist’

In a last-minute addition to *WITBD?*, Lenin cited a passage from an article that had just been published by Karl Kautsky. A huge amount of attention has been given to this passage and its relation to Lenin’s outlook (as illustrated by this symposium). A principal aim of my book is to shift the focus away from Lenin’s ad hoc use of Kautsky to bolster a passing polemic, and toward the rôle Kautsky played in Lenin’s outlook for the entire first decade of his revolutionary career, 1894–1904.

Three key-components of Lenin’s revolutionary activity have deep roots in Kautsky’s writings:

- the merger-formula (‘Social Democracy is the merger of socialism and the worker-movement’). As shown in Section V, Lenin saw his *WITBD?* formulations as a clumsily-worded restatement of the merger-formula. In fact, the merger-formula is central to *all* of Lenin’s programmatic writings during this decade. For Lenin, the merger-formula is ‘K. Kautsky’s expression that reproduces the basic ideas of the *Communist Manifesto*’.<sup>130</sup>
- The primordial importance of political freedom. As Kautsky wrote in the *Erfurt Programme*, basic political freedoms are ‘light and air for the proletariat; he who keeps the proletariat from the struggle to win these freedoms and to extend them – that person is one of the proletariat’s worst enemies’.<sup>131</sup> Kautsky explained *why* the proletariat needs political freedom, namely, in order to organise and educate itself on a national scale. The urgent priority of political freedom is what made Russian Social Democracy into a *revolutionary* party.
- The hegemony-scenario, in which the Russian workers lead the entire Russian *narod* to overthrow the tsar. The hegemony-scenario was part of Lenin’s outlook from the very beginning, but it only became central to his political activity in the decade 1904–14. Accordingly, Kautsky became a sort of honorary Bolshevik during and after the 1905 Revolution.<sup>132</sup>

Lenin’s debt to Kautsky on these three points – the heart of his political outlook – is manifest and explicit. Of course, this does *not* mean Lenin got his Marxist outlook from Kautsky. On the contrary, Lenin was exceptional in his

130. Lih 2006, p. 147.

131. Lih 2006, p. 89.

132. Lenin in 1909 writes: ‘Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky – Social Democrats who often write for Russians and to that extent are in our party – have been won over ideologically [*ideino*], despite the fact that at the beginning of the split (1903) all their sympathies were with the Mensheviks’ (Lenin 1960–8), pp. 58–9).

comprehensive knowledge of the writings of the Masters.<sup>133</sup> Lenin read Marx and Engels, he read Kautsky, and he concluded that Kautsky had got Marx and Engels right, particularly on points with the greatest practical implications for Russian Social Democracy.

My exploration of Kautsky's rôle runs right into the deeply-ingrained desire of much of the Left to dig as deep a gulf as possible between Lenin and Kautsky. In order to brush away the inconvenient fact that Lenin himself was unaware of any such gulf, many writers of the Left resort to the idea that Lenin had 'unconsciously' or 'semi-consciously' broken with Kautsky. In this, they join anti-Lenin scholars who have their own reasons for digging the gulf deep and wide.

John Molyneux states the case with admirable explicitness. Lenin rebelled 'at first instinctively and politically, and then philosophically' against Kautsky's ideological position.<sup>134</sup> True, 'the citations of Kautsky as *the* marxist authority are legion in Lenin's works at this time and remain so throughout the pre-war period'.<sup>135</sup> Lenin was still not 'aware that he diverged in any fundamental way from social democratic orthodoxy'.<sup>136</sup> The mechanistic, fatalistic and passive nature of Kautsky's Marxism escaped his attention. But 'in 1914 the scales fell from Lenin's eyes regarding Kautsky, Bebel and the rest and theory caught up with a vengeance (see *Imperialism – The Highest Stage of Capitalism, Imperialism and the Split in Socialism, the Philosophical Notebooks, Marxism on the State, The State and Revolution* and much else besides).'<sup>137</sup>

In my book, I pointed out the logical implications of this kind of formulation: either Lenin misunderstood Kautsky, or he misunderstood himself, or both. This observation evoked much criticism on the part of Harman, Le Blanc and Molyneux (who, despite the fact that he was the nominal target of my remark, responded in a comradely way).<sup>138</sup>

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133. This point is well documented in Nimtz 2009 (unfortunately Nimtz seems to be under the impression that I argue that Lenin's knowledge of Marx was mainly through Kautsky).

134. Molyneux 2006.

135. Molyneux 1978, pp. 56–7.

136. Molyneux 1978, pp. 52, 56.

137. Molyneux 2006.

138. Paul Le Blanc defends Molyneux against my criticism, and yet I rather doubt he actually agrees with Molyneux's view of the Kautsky-Lenin relationship. Instead, Le Blanc points out that the Russian Bolshevik Party and the German SPD were quite different from each other – an observation that is very true, very obvious, and very irrelevant to the dispute about Lenin's relation to Kautsky's theoretical framework. As Le Blanc himself has pointed out, Kautsky was unhappy with many developments in the German Party (Le Blanc 2006, pp. 65, 259). When Lenin later criticised the German Party for succumbing to 'opportunism', he was using a concept that he *shared* with Kautsky, as he himself stated more than once after 1914 (see the Kautsky-as-Marxist database discussed below).

My critics point to Lenin's later break with Kautsky and argue more-or-less the following: Lenin broke decisively with Kautsky in 1914 and this break led to a root-and-branch rejection of Kautskyism in general. So why is Lih making such heavy weather about the alleged logical difficulties of the earlier situation, when the paths of the two men began to diverge, even though Lenin was not yet fully aware of the fact? Perhaps Lih's presentation of Lenin as an Erfurtian has some merit, but his exclusive focus on this earlier period has caused him to 'bend the stick' too far. By overlooking the later break, he fundamentally distorts the Lenin-Kautsky relationship.

My critics are justified in challenging me on this point, since I said nothing in my book about the Lenin-Kautsky relationship after 1914. It remains to be seen whether I can meet this challenge. In 1914, Lenin's attitude toward Kautsky as a person and toward his *current* writings changed drastically. But this change still leaves open the most relevant question: did Lenin change his attitude toward Kautsky's *prewar*-writings and his prewar-outlook? According to Tony Cliff, Lenin 'had to admit that he had been wrong, terribly wrong, in his approbation of Karl Kautsky' – not only about Kautsky as a person, but also Kautsky's brand of Marxism.<sup>139</sup> Did Lenin in fact ever admit he was mistaken about Kautsky's theoretical framework? Or did he affirm the opposite in the strongest possible terms?

In a letter written to Aleksandr Shliapnikov in the first shock of what he took to be Kautsky's betrayal, Lenin wrote 'I hate and despise Kautsky now more than anyone, with his vile, dirty, self-satisfied hypocrisy'. This sentence has often been quoted (not least by Trotsky in 1932).<sup>140</sup> But, surely, for those interested in the *intellectual* connection between Lenin and Kautsky, more informative is this sentence from another letter to Shliapnikov written a few days later: 'Obtain without fail and reread (or ask to have it translated for you) *Road to Power* by Kautsky [and see] what he writes there about the revolution of our time! And now, how he acts the toady and disavows all that!'<sup>141</sup>

In order to answer the essential question on a firm documentary-basis, I compiled a database containing *all* comments on Kautsky's prewar-writings made by Lenin after the outbreak of war in 1914. I would like to thank my critics for provoking me into compiling this material, since I garnered enough research-leads to last me a long time.<sup>142</sup> Here, I will only touch upon the main points.

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139. Cliff 1976, p. 6.

140. Trotsky 1970, p. 607.

141. Lenin 1960–8n, pp. 167–72.

142. A talk based on this research (Lih 2008) has been published by *International Socialist*

The number of references by Lenin to ‘Kautsky when he was a Marxist’ is truly amazing. I have collected more than eighty comments. Examples come from every year from 1914 to 1920 (after that, Lenin’s obsession subsides and both positive and negative comments are infrequent). Most of these are passing comments on the fact that Kautsky was once an admirable Marxist, but there are also a number of substantive discussions.<sup>143</sup> Lenin cites Kautsky on a wide range of issues and refers to a long list of Kautsky’s works (most coming from the decade 1899–1909). In many cases, Lenin had recently re-read the work in question. We must therefore conclude that the opinions expressed by Lenin after 1914 about ‘Kautsky when he was a Marxist’ are the outcome of considerable thought, graced with the advantage of hindsight, and based on a recent examination of relevant texts.

What picture of the prewar-Kautsky emerges from this material? I composed the following portrait, based entirely on Lenin’s pronouncements *after* his break with Kautsky in 1914:

Karl Kautsky was an outstanding Marxist who was the most authoritative theoretician of the Second International and a teacher to a generation of Marxists. His popularisation of *Das Kapital* has canonical status. He was one of the first to refute opportunism in detail (although he hesitated somewhat before launching his attack) and continued to fight energetically against it, asserting that a split would be necessary if opportunism ever became the official tendency of the German Party. A whole generation of Marxists learned a dialectical approach to tactics from him. Only vis-à-vis the state do we observe in him a tendency to restrict himself to general truths and to evade a concrete discussion.

Kautsky was also a reliable guide to the revolutionary developments of the early twentieth century. His magisterial work on the agrarian question is still valid. He correctly diagnosed the national problem (as opposed to Rosa Luxemburg). He insisted that Western Europe was ripe for socialist revolution, and foretold the connection between war and revolution.

Kautsky had a special relation to Russia and to Bolshevism. On the one hand, he himself took great interest in Russian developments,

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*Review* and is available online; the full database is available on the *Historical Materialism* website: <[www.historicalmaterialism.org](http://www.historicalmaterialism.org)>.

143. The most important of these are contained in the 1914 article ‘Dead Chauvinism and Living Socialism’, the 1917 discussion in *State and Revolution*, and the 1920 discussion in *Left-Wing Communism*.

and endorsed the basic Bolshevik view of the 1905 Revolution. On the other hand, the Russian revolutionary workers read him eagerly and his writings had greater influence in Russia than anywhere else. This enthusiastic interest in the ‘latest word’ of European Marxism is one of the main reasons for Bolshevism’s later revolutionary prowess.

Such is Lenin’s portrait of ‘Kautsky when he was a Marxist’, a portrait from which he never diverged. Of course, this portrait needs to be extracted from the voluminous abuse hurled at Kautsky’s *current* writings by Lenin after 1914. The reader of the English-language *Collected Works* is also easily misled by Lenin’s polemic against ‘Kautskyism’. ‘Kautskyism’, however, translates *kautskianstvo*, a term that is *not* an ‘ism’ – that is, it does not mean ‘the system of ideas associated with Kautsky’ (Lenin could have used the term *kautskizm*, a perfectly possible neologism in Russian). Rather, *kautskianstvo* means ‘acting in a revolutionary crisis the way Kautsky is now acting’ – more precisely, using revolutionary verbiage to disguise a refusal to act in a revolutionary way. Accordingly, Lenin applies the term to people whose views at the time were not at all similar to those of Kautsky. The term is applied, for example, to Lev Trotsky and to Christian Rakovsky. Paradoxically, then, Trotsky in 1916 is a *kautskianets*, but Kautsky in 1906 is not.<sup>144</sup>

Chris Harman writes:

But, once the routine tempo of political life is shaken by enormous political, social or economic crises, the paedagogical approach blurs important issues relating to the application of abstract principles to reality. Such blurring explains how various people in Russia who saw themselves as ‘Kautskyites’ could adopt diametrically opposed practical-political approaches in 1904–6 and 1912–14 – and why the revolutionaries who had accepted the Kautskyite theoretical approach found themselves compelled to break from it explicitly after August 1914.<sup>145</sup>

This statement is triply misleading. If we use ‘Kautskyites’ the way Lenin used it after 1914, then no-one thought of themselves as a Kautskyite before 1914. Harman’s statement is equally misleading if we understand ‘Kautskyite’ in the way he evidently intends, namely, ‘someone who shares Kautsky’s theoretical approach’. From 1905 on, Kautsky was, in fact, much closer to the Bolsheviks

144. Lenin 1960–8k, pp. 311–12.

145. Harman also argues that Lenin and Kautsky applied the same general positions in very different ways (‘we all know of cases in which people who claim to agree on a series of texts interpret them differently’). I very much sympathise with this way of putting things and I use it, for example, when talking about Bolsheviks and Mensheviks (see Section IV). But this is a very different approach from claiming that Lenin *rejected* these general positions, which he never did.

and to Trotsky than to the Mensheviks. Both factions were aware of this. Finally, I doubt whether any Russian Social Democrat broke explicitly with ‘the Kautskyite theoretical approach’ after 1914, even when they did break with Kautsky himself. Certainly, Lenin did not.

Another factor easily overlooked is Kautsky’s continued status as a Marxist authority even after the Bolsheviks took power. Paradoxically, at the very same time Kautsky was penning savage polemics against Soviet Russia, his prewar-writings were held in greater esteem in that country than anywhere else in the world. If Lenin actually realised that he fundamentally disagreed with the prewar-Kautsky, then, clearly, it was his bounden duty to wean party-members away from this profoundly erroneous world-view. After all, Kautsky’s writings had been ideological mother’s milk to the pre war Bolsheviks, as stressed by Lenin himself.

Not only does Lenin fail to take up this task, but he actually continues to invoke Kautsky when making a case to Bolshevik and other sympathetic audiences. Lenin used Kautsky’s prewar-writings to bolster his argument in remarks before the following audiences: Swiss workers in January 1917, Bolshevik party-conference in April 1917, congress of peasants in November 1917, Executive Committee of Congress of Soviets in April 1918, Eighth Party-Congress in March 1919, Adult-Education Congress in May 1919, Lenin’s fiftieth birthday celebration in 1920, and Second Comintern-Congress in 1920.<sup>146</sup>

The extent of Kautsky’s continued authority in Bolshevik Russia is demonstrated by the invaluable appendix provided by Moira Donald listing Kautsky’s works *published in Soviet Russia*. Donald informs us that

when Lenin died in 1924 his library contained more works by Kautsky than by any other author, Russian or foreign, apart from his own work. Surprisingly, perhaps, of the eighty-nine titles listed, more were official Soviet publications dating from 1918 onwards than were published abroad or in Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>147</sup>

‘Renegade Kautsky’ – this epithet was not chosen lightly. A renegade is someone who renounces the *truths* he earlier supported. When Lenin called Kautsky a renegade, he was, at the same time, affirming his own continued *loyalty* to these truths. Lenin almost never changed his mind about Kautsky’s writings. What he likes the first time he read it, he continued to like. What he disliked the first time he read it, he continued to dislike.

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146. For references, see the Kautsky-as-Marxist database.

147. Donald 1993, p. 247.

There is therefore no escape-clause from the dilemma that presents itself to those who wish to dig a gulf between Lenin and Kautsky. If Lenin disagreed fundamentally with Kautsky's brand of Marxism as expressed in his voluminous prewar-writings, then either Lenin misunderstood Kautsky, or he misunderstood himself, or both, *throughout his revolutionary career*. Those who wish to dig a gulf between Lenin and Kautsky must claim, and must back up their claim, that *either* they understand Kautsky better than Lenin did, *or* they understand Lenin better than Lenin understood himself.

Another tactic used by the gulf-diggers is to paint Kautsky as a mediocre old duffer who had nothing in common with revolutionaries who had red blood in their veins. Chris Harman paints Kautsky as someone who wrote a few elementary textbooks back in the 1890s and lived off them for the rest of his career. Molyneux tells us that Kautsky saw ideas in total isolation from social practice, that he saw the job of a socialist as representing the present state of the working class, and so on and so forth.<sup>148</sup>

On the basis of the Kautsky passage in *WITBD?*, for example, Molyneux concludes that for Kautsky, science develops 'in complete isolation from social life'.<sup>149</sup> Harman's portrait of Kautsky as someone stuck in the 1890s is equally far from the truth. As my database brings out, the writings by Kautsky that Lenin found most impressive were those from 1899 to 1909, the reason being precisely because of what Lenin believed to be Kautsky's *revolutionary* response to the *new* developments of the early twentieth century. The effort to glorify Lenin by rubbishing Kautsky can easily backfire. At the Essen Conference on Lenin in 2001, Slavoj Žižek could hardly find words to express his contempt for Kautsky and especially for his 1902 book *Social Revolution*. However, Lenin himself had a well-documented and life-long admiration for *Social Revolution*.<sup>150</sup>

148. Molyneux 1978, pp. 46–9, 52, 54, 72, 75.

149. Molyneux 1978, pp. 46–9. As shown in Section V, this charge goes back to Plekhanov in 1904 and was immediately denied by Bolshevik writers.

150. Immediately after Kautsky's *Social Revolution* was published in 1902, Lenin arranged for a Russian translation. In 1907, he devoted an article to praising Kautsky's new introduction to a second edition of *Social Revolution*, in which Kautsky summed up the lessons of the 1905 Revolution. In early 1917, he reread it and immediately quoted it approvingly in a lecture on the Revolution of 1905: 'The case of the Russian revolution of 1905 confirmed what K. Kautsky wrote in 1902 in his book *Social Revolution* (by the way, he was then still a revolutionary Marxist, and not a defender of social-patriots and opportunists, as at present)' (Lenin 1960–81, pp. 249–50). In *State and Revolution*, he criticised it for not taking up the question of the state, but also stated that 'the author gives here a great deal that is extraordinarily valuable' (Lenin 1960–8m, p. 479). On several occasions in 1917, 1918 and 1919, Lenin cites *Social Revolution* approvingly in speeches (see Kautsky-as-Marxist database).

Fortunately, there is a heartening movement to re-examine Kautsky undertaken by writers such as Moira Donald, Paul Blackledge, Alan Shandro, Paul Le Blanc, Jean Ducange, Daniel Gaido and myself.<sup>151</sup> I predict that those who are compelled by their ideology to dig a deep and impassable gulf between Lenin and Kautsky will soon find themselves on the dust-heap of historiography.

## IX. Trotsky as witness

An important topic brought up by my critics that warrants further examination is Trotsky's relation to Kautsky, which naturally varied over the years.

What Kautsky wrote in the earlier – the better! – period of his scientific and literary activity... was and remains... a complete theoretical vindication of the subsequent political tactics of the Bolsheviks[.]<sup>152</sup>

In 1904, when Trotsky was a principal spokesman for the Mensheviks, he published a violently anti-Lenin pamphlet entitled *Our Political Tasks*. Although this pamphlet was published at about the same time as Plekhanov's anti-Lenin articles discussed in an earlier section, the influence of Plekhanov's polemics on Trotsky's argument, if any, is very slight. Toward the end of his life, Trotsky made a comment on *WITBD?* that reproduced Plekhanov's critique. We shall examine these two pieces of evidence in turn.

After taking a careful second look at the *WITBD?* references in Trotsky's *Our Political Tasks*, I find that I have to correct what I said in my book on the subject: 'Trotsky's pamphlet confines its critique of *WITBD?* to a few passing pot-shots at some of Lenin's *obiter dicta*.'<sup>153</sup> In reality, Trotsky gives some very conditional *praise* to *WITBD?* as a serviceable statement of what needed to be done – back in 1902. Lenin's problem, Trotsky tells us, is that he has refused to move on, as shown by his deeply reactionary 1904 pamphlet on the party-crisis, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*.

*Our Political Tasks* has a strangely split personality. The first half of the pamphlet is a relatively calm polemic about what was to be done in 1904. Trotsky consciously tried to build on the accomplishments of the earlier pre-congress period and not simply reject it as mistaken. The second half of Trotsky's pamphlet is a relatively unhinged polemic inspired by the recently published *One Step Forward* ('What indignation seizes you, when you read

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151. For an excellent introduction to the current discussion on Kautsky, see Blackledge 2006.

152. Trotsky writing in 1922, as cited in Gaido 2003, p. 80.

153. Lih 2006, p. 28.

these monstrous, degenerate and demagogic lines!... Truly, one could not approach the ideological heritage of the proletariat with more cynicism than does Lenin!).<sup>154</sup> The second half is also filled with venom toward a majority of his own party's *praktiki*. Comments concerning *WITBD?* are mostly in the relatively calm first half.

To a surprising extent, Trotsky's overall argument in this first half of *Our Political Tasks* can be summed up: what Pavel Akselrod says, goes. During the period of the old *Iskra* (1900–3), Akselrod best understood the tasks of the movement and set the tone that was followed by the other editors. In 1903, Akselrod realised it was time to move on and managed to convey this to the future Mensheviks (in face-to-face encounters, not published articles). Unfortunately, Lenin stopped being a pupil of Akselrod, stayed true to the outlook of the old *Iskra*, and carried along a majority of the Party in his reactionary stubbornness. Things will be set right once the minority is able to reorient the Party's outlook along Akselrodian lines. (Among other things, this narrative justifies control of the official party-newspaper by a self-proclaimed minority.)

Trotsky slots *WITBD?* into this narrative, as shown by the following passages from *Our Political Tasks*:

'Any kowtowing before the *stikbinost* of the worker movement', says the author of *What Is to Be Done?*, thereby popularising Akselrod and Plekhanov, 'signals just by itself the strengthening of the influence of *bourgeois ideology on the workers*'.<sup>155</sup>

Lenin's 'organisational plan' – if we keep in mind not the bureaucratic prose of his *Letter to a Comrade*, but the article 'Where to Begin?' or the pamphlet *What Is to Be Done?* – was not, of course, any big discovery, but it gave a successful answer to the question: *where to begin? what was to be done* in order to bring together the scattered elements of the future party organisation and therefore make possible the *setting* of broad political tasks? ... I repeat, the so-called 'organisational plan' embraced – and Lenin himself understood this, as long as he was carrying out progressive work – not the party building itself, but only the scaffolding.<sup>156</sup>

When Lenin palmed off on Kautsky [his own] absurd presentation of the relations between the '*stikbinyi*' and the 'purposive' elements in the revolutionary movement of the proletariat, he simply depicted the task of his period with crude strokes.<sup>157</sup>

In this last comment, Trotsky is saying that Kautsky is not to blame for Lenin's theoretical crudities. This remark perhaps shows the influence of Plekhanov's

154. Trotskii 1904, p. 75 (Trotsky is referring here to Lenin's criticism of intellectuals, for which, see below).

155. Trotskii 1904, p. 3; cf. Lih 2006, p. 708.

156. Trotskii 1904, p. 34.

157. Trotskii 1904, p. 20.

anti-*WITBD?* article that made a strong contrast between Kautsky's orthodoxy and Lenin's heresy. Misled by the highly inaccurate English translation available on the Marxists Internet Archive, Harman incorrectly states that Trotsky criticised Kautsky in *Our Political Tasks*.<sup>158</sup>

What Trotsky sees (inaccurately) as Lenin's exaltation of the intelligentsia in 1902 is, for him, a peccadillo compared to the 'degenerate demagoguery' of Lenin's 1904 attack on the intelligentsia. Because of the prominent rôle he assigns to the intellectuals, Trotsky is infuriated by Lenin's *intelligent*-baiting. Trotsky rejects with sarcastic wrath Lenin's 1904 suggestion that the proletariat can 'give lessons in discipline to its "intellectuals"'. On the contrary, says Trotsky, the Russian proletariat goes through the school of political life 'only under the leadership – good or bad – of the Social Democratic intelligentsia'.<sup>159</sup>

In 1939, when writing his biography of Stalin, Trotsky returned to the subject of *WITBD?*. Trotsky portrayed Stalin as a deeply provincial *praktik* who defended *WITBD?* in 1905 even though 'the author of *WITBD?* himself subsequently acknowledged the one-sidedness and therefore the incorrectness of his theory'.<sup>160</sup> Trotsky is here giving the standard Menshevik reading of Lenin's 1903 statement about 'bending the stick'. Trotsky's 1939 comment therefore adds nothing new to the discussion.

### *Kautsky and 'permanent revolution'*

While sitting in prison in 1906, Trotsky produced a translation-cum-commentary of Kautsky's seminal article 'Driving Forces and Prospects of the Russian Revolution'.<sup>161</sup> Trotsky not only announces complete solidarity between Kautsky's argument and his own theory of permanent revolution, but he even gives Kautsky priority:

If the reader will take the trouble to read through my article *Results and Prospects*, he will recognise that I have absolutely no reason to repudiate any of the positions contained in the [present] article by Kautsky that I have translated, since the train of thought in both articles is completely the same. . . .

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158. The MIA-translation says: 'Lenin took up Kautsky's absurd idea of the relationship between the "spontaneous" and the "conscious" elements of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat.'

159. Lih 2006, p. 535. See Section III for further discussion of Mensheviks vs. Bolsheviks on the rôle of the intellectuals.

160. Trotskii 1996, p. 96.

161. Trotsky's rendition was published in 1907. It was republished in the invaluable Russian-language collection Trotskii 1993 (*Permanentnaia revoliutsiia*), put out by the Iskra Research-Group based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A translation of this important and revealing document can be found in Day and Gaido (eds.) 2009.

Kautsky refuses to call this political domination of the proletariat a *dictatorship*. I usually avoid this word in the same way, but in any event, the social content of proletarian domination is completely the same with me as with Kautsky... Kautsky, who very rarely speaks of dialectical materialism, but does an excellent job of applying its method for the analysis of social relations...

Meanwhile, this is not the first time Kautsky has expressed these thoughts. Here [in this article] he only brings them together in one place.<sup>162</sup>

In his own *Results and Prospects* (1906), the link to Kautsky is hardly less clear, since Trotsky gives page-long quotations from Kautsky on a number of occasions. After citing Kautsky's statement in 1904 about the very real possibility of Russia taking the lead in international socialism, Trotsky notes that 'the theorist of German Social Democracy wrote these words at a time when for him it was still a question whether or not the revolution would break out earlier in Russia or in the West'.<sup>163</sup> In a personal letter to Kautsky in 1908, Trotsky told him that Kautsky's 'Driving Forces and Prospects' 'is the best theoretical statement of my own views, and gives me great political satisfaction'.<sup>164</sup> In 1922, looking back, Trotsky reaffirmed this solidarity in a comment that is close in spirit to Lenin's attitude toward 'Kautsky when he was a Marxist':

At the time, Kautsky himself fully identified himself with my views.<sup>165</sup> Like Mehring (now deceased), he adopted the viewpoint of 'permanent revolution'. Today, Kautsky has retrospectively joined the ranks of the Mensheviks. He wants to reduce his past to the level of his present. But this falsification, which satisfied the claims of an unclear theoretical conscience, is encountering obstacles in the form of printed documents. What Kautsky wrote in the earlier – the better! – period of his scientific and literary activity... was and remains a merciless rejection of Menshevism and a complete theoretical vindication of the subsequent political tactics of the Bolsheviks, whom thickheads and renegades, with Kautsky today at their head, accuse of adventurism, demagogy, and Bakuninism.<sup>166</sup>

Writers on the Left, such as Molyneux and Harman, also want to 'reduce Kautsky's present to the level of his [post-1914] present'. Not only that, they claim that Lenin and Trotsky agree with them on this issue. But they, too, are encountering obstacles in the form of printed documents.

162. Trotsky 1993, pp. 122–8, order of passages changed.

163. Trotsky 1993, p. 168. Actually, as Lenin was aware, Kautsky made similar comments in 1902 in the article 'Slavs and Revolution'. Lenin gave long citations from this article on more than one occasion in 1920.

164. Donald 1993, p. 91.

165. An interesting way of putting it. Many people, after reading Trotsky's words at the time, would say that Trotsky fully identified himself with Kautsky's views.

166. Gaido 2003, p. 80.

In 1906–7, the connection with Kautsky was an asset. After the Bolshevik Revolution, it became more and more of a liability. Accordingly, Trotsky's unambiguous statement of 1922 is an anomaly, and he more often pictures Kautsky's relation to the 1905 Revolution and to 'permanent revolution' in the most grudging way possible. In particular, Trotsky describes Kautsky as nothing but a 'talented commentator' who was briefly and superficially radicalised by the Russian Revolution of 1905 – a thesis that is widespread today on the Left. Trotsky clearly did not see things this way back in 1906–8, but perhaps he changed his mind for better reasons than polemical convenience.

Nevertheless, there is a stark contrast between Lenin's and Trotsky's retrospective assessment of Kautsky precisely on this point. There seems to be no trace in Lenin's writings of the 'radicalised-by-1905' scenario. On the contrary, Lenin pictures Kautsky as someone who responded with innovative revolutionary insight to the new developments of the early-twentieth century on the European and global level.

#### *Trotsky's personal relations with Kautsky before the War*

In the years after 1905, Trotsky was much closer personally to Kautsky than was Lenin. He corresponded regularly with Kautsky and, in fact, was one of his principal sources of information about Russian affairs (to Lenin's annoyance). He was a regular contributor to Kautsky's journal *Die Neue Zeit*, as described by Isaac Deutscher:

[Trotsky] turned these friendships and contacts [among German Social Democrats] to political advantage. In *Neue Zeit*, Kautsky's monthly, and in *Vorwärts*, the influential Socialist daily, he often presented the case of Russian socialism and explained, from his angle, its internal dissensions.... Trotsky's manner of writing was undogmatic, attractive, European; and he appealed to German readers as no other Russian Socialist did. His German friends, on the other hand, occasionally contributed to his Russian émigré paper, helping to boost it.<sup>167</sup>

In March 1914, Trotsky's journal *Bor'ba* published the following statement: 'On 16 October of this year Kautsky will celebrate his 60th birthday. Socialists of all countries will honor on that day the most brilliant personality in the International. The day will certainly not pass unnoticed by Russian workers, whose best friend Kautsky has been and remains.'<sup>168</sup>

167. Deutscher 1965, p. 182; see also Donald 1993, pp. 168–9, Gaido 2003, p. 88.

168. 2 March 1914, as quoted in Donald 1993, p. 183.

Trotsky does not give any sense of this closeness in his post-revolutionary comments. He pictures himself as quickly seeing through Kautsky's superficial good nature and observing him thereafter with contemptuous eyes and a sardonic smile.<sup>169</sup> Trotsky's retrospective comments seem less than candid.

*Trotsky on Kautsky's 'organic opportunism'*

As Trotsky points out, he was more intimately involved with the German Party before the War than was Lenin. Partly for this reason, his post-1914 dissection of Kautsky contains a more searching critique of Kautsky's function within the German Party than we find in Lenin's writings. According to Trotsky, Kautsky papered over the growing reformism of the German Party with revolutionary generalities. As the Party split wide open, this operation no longer worked. The 'organic opportunism' of Kautsky's personality and his situation meant that he was incapable of striking out on his own in a revolutionary way, and so he gradually collapsed into a dithering, hand-wringing mass of confusion. Thus he was only 'half a renegade' after 1914. While he did betray his 'principled revolutionary ideology', he remained true to his 'practical opportunism'.<sup>170</sup>

This is not the place to evaluate this explanation of Kautsky's actions, an explanation that strikes me as insightful but 'one-sided and therefore erroneous'. For our purposes, two points need to be made. First, Lenin had no theory of this kind. Trotsky's observations cannot tell us anything about how Lenin saw things.

Second, and more importantly, Trotsky's explanation of why Kautsky fell from grace gives no support whatsoever to the 'scales-fell-from-Lenin's-eyes' scenario. Indeed, in all of Trotsky's postrevolutionary polemics against Kautsky, I see no indication that Trotsky has any problem with Kautsky's revolutionary generalities as such. On the contrary, he stressed that 'there was a time when Kautsky was in the true sense of the word the teacher who instructed the international proletarian vanguard' and that Kautsky 'tirelessly defended the revolutionary character of Marx and Engels'.<sup>171</sup> Kautsky's pronouncements were indeed objectively hypocritical, since the German Party failed to live up to them, but certainly, in Trotsky's opinion, the Party *should* have lived up to them.

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169. Trotsky 1919; Trotsky 1938.

170. Trotsky 1919; Trotsky 1938.

171. These descriptions come from Trotsky 1919 and Trotsky 1938.

*Lenin's and Trotsky's postrevolutionary attitude to Kautsky compared*

On the most important point, Trotsky and Lenin agree: they both see Kautsky as a renegade from his prewar 'principled revolutionary ideology'. If told by their present-day admirers that they had earlier failed to understand Kautsky's prewar-writings, Lenin and Trotsky would have snorted angrily: 'We understood perfectly well what he was saying, and *he did not live up to his own pronouncements*. Why do you defend this man by claiming against the evidence that he was consistent?'

Lenin and Trotsky both affirmed their solidarity with Kautsky's prewar-writings, but with a different range of ideas and with a different intensity. Kautsky's 1906 article 'Driving Forces and Prospects' was seminal for both, although they drew different conclusions from it.<sup>172</sup> On my present knowledge of the evidence, Trotsky lacked Lenin's intense involvement with either the merger-formula or Kautsky's later views on colonialism, national self-determination and 'the oncoming age of wars and revolutions', as set forth in Kautsky's *Road to Power* (1909) and many other writings. Trotsky did not match the intensity of Lenin's involvement with Kautsky – indeed, this was hardly possible. Accordingly, Lenin gave much more of his post-1914 time and energy to the issue of 'Kautsky when he was a Marxist'.

Trotsky had a more fully worked-out theory of the personal and institutional reasons for Kautsky's fall from grace. He therefore added the proviso that Kautsky was only half a renegade, since he was true to his earlier 'practical opportunism'. Lenin advanced no such theory.

**Concluding remarks**

The aim of this essay has been to debunk a number of historical myths that stand in the way of a full rejection of the 'worry-about-workers' interpretation of Lenin's outlook. Lenin's alleged rejection of workers whose outlook had been 'perverted', inaccurate contrasts with alleged Menshevik optimism, the story of de-Bolshevisation in 1905, the desire to dig as deep a gulf as possible between Lenin and Kautsky – all of these issues are barriers to a more empirically-grounded appreciation of the historical Lenin.

My fight against the remnants of the textbook-interpretation, spread out over so many pages, may have left a misleading impression of my relation to the other participants in the present *HM*-symposium. With the exception, perhaps, of Robert Mayer, all of us are agreed in rejecting the textbook-interpretation

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172. Donald 1993, pp. 91–3.

in fundamental ways.<sup>173</sup> Many of my present critics have been fighting the good fight for years. Throughout this essay, I have quoted only those passages from my critics with which I disagree. Anyone who reads the other contributions to the symposium will realise that they also contain some very generous assessment of *Lenin Rediscovered*, for which I am very grateful. Indeed, this essay is an expression of my gratitude, since I believe that all my critics share with me a desire to get Lenin right.

Looking ahead, I stress that the textbook-interpretation of *WITBD?* has served as a distorting mirror for much wider topics – the nature of the split in Russian Social Democracy, the rôle of the *konspiratsiia*-underground as a factor in Russian history, the real impact of Bolshevik ideology on the revolution of 1917 and its outcome, to name but three. All of these issues offer a wide scope for rethinking and re-examination to me and my fellow historians.

I also believe that much of the dispute between myself and writers in the activist-tradition is unnecessary. For various accidental reasons, these writers have ended up committed to historical myths that stem originally from academic historians of a very different political outlook. These myths can be jettisoned without any damage to the political values of the activist-tradition. The irony is that these myths that are defended with such fervour by pro-Lenin writers end up by tarnishing Lenin's image. If Lenin shuttled back and forth between one ideological extreme and another, if he established a faction whose original hallmark was suspicion of workers in the Party, if he had a life-long admiration for the writings of a passive, mechanical fatalist – then Lenin is just that harder to admire. The activist-tradition has some great strengths in its approach to Lenin, and it will only become stronger by rethinking these superfluous positions.

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173. I should like to state more explicitly than I have in the past that Robert Mayer's articles from the 1990s are path-breaking explorations of Lenin in historical context that used a wider and more imaginative range of empirical evidence than previously. We have ended up with very different views of Lenin, but I greatly benefited from careful reading of his articles and from following up many of their empirical leads.

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