The great Lenin debate of 2012

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The complete debate

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Tony Cliff's *Building the Party* published in 1975 was the first book-length political biography of Lenin written by a Marxist. As a result, it shaped the approach of subsequent investigations by academics like Lars T. Lih as well as the thinking of thousands of socialists in groups like the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP, founded by Cliff), the US International Socialist Organization and Paul Le Blanc, author of *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* and former member of the US SWP (no relation to Cliff's group).

Cliff begins his biography by debunking the USSR’s official state religion of Lenin-worship that “endowed [Lenin] with superhuman attributes”. Yet throughout the book Cliff refers to these “superhuman attributes”:

> Lenin adapted himself perfectly to the needs of industrial agitation.
>
> [Lenin] combined theory and practice to perfection.

If these passing remarks were the main flaws of Cliff’s book it would still be useful to read, full of political and historical lessons. Sadly, this is not the case.

Cliff’s errors and distortions begin with Lenin’s political activity in mid-1890s. According to Cliff:

*Ob Agitatsii* [“On Agitation”, a pamphlet written by Arpadii Kremer and Martov] had a mechanical theory of the relation between the industrial struggle, the struggle against the employers and the political struggle against tsarism, based on the concept of “stages”. … [W]hatever the official biographers may say, the truth is that in the years 1894-96, [Lenin] did not denounce *Ob Agitatsii* as one-sided, mechanical and “economist”. His writings of the period coincide exactly with the line which it put forward.

To show that Lenin’s writings of this period “coincide exactly” with the arguments of *Ob Agitatsii*, Cliff quotes Lenin’s 1895 draft Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) program and cites his article “What Are Our Ministers Thinking About?” in which Cliff claims “Lenin urged the expediency of leaving the tsar out of the argument and talking instead about the new laws that favored employers and of cabinet ministers who were anti-working class”.

Cliff later states in *Building the Party* that “[n]ot to point out the direct connection between the partial reform and the revolutionary overthrow of Tsarism is to cheat the workers, to fall into liberalism”. Did Lenin fall into liberalism at this early stage of his career?

Anyone who reads either document will find that Lenin’s views do not “coincide exactly” with those of *Ob Agitatsii*. Neither the draft program nor the article Cliff cites are mechanical, one-sided, stageist, or “economist”. In “What Are Our Ministers Thinking About?” Lenin did not urge the expediency of leaving the tsar out of the argument. Lenin did not fall into liberalism.
These egregious misrepresentations of Lenin’s views occur throughout *Building the Party*.

‘Bending the stick’

Cliff closes chapter two by claiming that Lenin’s penchant for “bending the stick” was “a characteristic that he retained throughout his life”.

> [Lenin] 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.

Throughout the book Cliff makes reference to Lenin’s “stick bending”, by which Cliff means deliberately and one-sidedly over-emphasised something one day and then the opposite thing the next day in different circumstances.

If “stick bending” was Lenin’s political method, it would mean that none of his writings should be taken at face value. Each piece would suffer from one-sided overemphasis and distortion. Such a method would also call into question Lenin’s intellectual and political honesty. How could anyone be sure what Lenin really meant or thought if his arguments were always exaggerated in some way? Furthermore, why would anyone in the Russian socialist movement take what Lenin had to say seriously if the only thing that was consistent about his message was its exaggerated character? Such a method would create a culture of disbelief and cynicism among Lenin’s followers that would grow more toxic with each “bend”.

Lenin’s letter to Georgi Plekhanov on the economist trend that Cliff uses to illustrate “stick bending” tells us something very different from what Cliff claims:

> The economic trend, of course, was always a mistake, but then it is very young; while there has been overemphasis of “economic” agitation (and there still is here and there) even without the trend and it was the legitimate and inevitable companion of any step forward in the conditions of our movement which existed in Russia at the end of the 1880s or the beginning of the 1890s. The situation then was so murderous that you cannot probably even imagine it and one should not censure people who stumbled as they clambered up out of that situation. For the purposes of this clambering out, some narrowness was essential and legitimate: was, I say, for with this tendency to blow it up into a theory and tie it in with Bernsteinism, the whole thing of course changed radically ... The overemphasis of “economic” agitation and catering to the “mass” movement were natural.

Here, Lenin’s real method emerges. The one-sidedness Cliff lauds is not Lenin’s but a feature of a particular stage of the Russian socialist movement’s development, namely the transition from study circles and propaganda to the field of mass action and agitation. In this transition some mistakes were inevitable and “one should not censure people who stumbled as they clambered up out of that situation”. However, when people elevated inevitable mistakes, errors and stumbles into a full-blown theory and then connected it with Bernstein’s revisionism “the whole thing of course changed radically”. Once the whole thing changed radically, Lenin wrote, *A Protest by Russian Social Democrats* in 1899.

Cliff conflates features and stages of objective development with Lenin’s subjective responses to them:

> [F]ear of the danger to the movement occasioned by the rise of Russian “economism” and German revisionism in the second half of 1899 ... motivated Lenin to bend the stick right over again, away from the spontaneous, day-to-day, fragmented economic struggle and toward the organisation of a national political party.

Lenin did not transform from an armchair revolutionary in a study circle into an economist factory agitator, from economist factory agitator into top-down party-builder and from top-down party-builder into a proponent of building the party from the bottom up around the elective principle in the name of the spontaneously socialist working class in 1905, attacking his own former positions all along the way. He continually grappled with the development of Russia’s
worker-socialist movement through each of its distinct stages, each of which had unique challenges and opportunities (or “tasks”). Together, these stages were part of a single process that Lars T. Lih described as Lenin’s “heroic scenario” -- the RSDLP would lead the workers, who, in turn, would lead the peasants, oppressed nationalities and all of the downtrodden, exploited and oppressed people of tsarist Russia in a revolution that would destroy the autocracy, setting the stage for international socialist revolution.

In polemics Lenin typically reminded his readers about the importance of keeping the whole process of development in mind and instead of isolating its individual elements:

That which happened to such leaders of the Second International, such highly erudite Marxists devoted to socialism as Kautsky, Otto Bauer and others, could (and should) provide a useful lesson. They fully appreciated the need for flexible tactics; they themselves learned the Marxist dialectic and taught it to others (and much of what they have done in this field will always remain a valuable contribution to socialist literature); however, in the application of this dialectic they committed such an error, or proved to be so undialectical in practice, so incapable of taking into account the rapid change of forms and the rapid acquisition of new content by the old forms, that their fate is not much more enviable than that of Hyndman, Guesde and Plekhanov. The principal reason for their bankruptcy was that they were hypnotised by a definite form of growth of the working-class movement and socialism, forgot all about the one-sidedness of that form, were afraid to see the break-up which objective conditions made inevitable and continued to repeat simple and, at first glance, incontestable axioms that had been learned by rote, like: “three is more than two”. But politics is more like algebra than elementary arithmetic and still more like higher than elementary mathematics. In reality, all the old forms of the socialist movement have acquired a new content, and, consequently, a new symbol, the “minus” sign, has appeared in front of all the figures; our wiseacres, however, have stubbornly continued (and still continue) to persuade themselves and others that “minus three” is more than “minus two”.

It was Lenin’s appreciation for the totality of development, not “stick bending”, that led him to write polemics against economists, Mensheviks, followers of Bogdanov, liquidators, “left” communists and Karl Kautsky, all of whom did not make the transition from one stage of the “heroic scenario” to the next by adapting themselves to the new “tasks”.

In chapter three, Cliff continues his “bending the stick” narrative:

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 toward the organisation of a national political party.

This is totally false. The 1895 draft RSDLP program Lenin wrote and Cliff cited in chapter two proves that Lenin sought to build a national political party years before the economist trend emerged:

The Russian Social-Democratic Party declares that its aim is to assist this struggle of the Russian working class by developing the class-consciousness of the workers, by promoting their organisation and by indicating the aims and objects of the struggle. The struggle of the Russian working class for its emancipation is a political struggle and its first aim is to achieve political liberty.

Anyone who reads Lenin’s draft program will know where he stood on the party question in 1895. Fear had nothing to do with Lenin’s commitment to organising a national political party.

**Lenin and party rules**

Cliff’s chapter on Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* is unremarkable except for the section dealing with Lenin’s attitude towards party rules. Cliff quotes Lenin’s 1902 *Letter to a Comrade on Our Organisational Tasks* that was circulated as an RSDLP pamphlet in 1904 to show that Lenin had a “distaste for red-tape and rule-mongering”. Cliff goes on to say:
Lenin’s faction was for a long time very informal indeed. He started to build his organisation through *Iskra* agents. When, after the second Congress, as we shall see, he lost the support of his own Central Committee, he reorganised his supporters around a newly convened conference that elected a Russian Bureau.

There are a number of errors here.

The first is that the purpose of *Iskra* agents was to build the RSDLP, not an organisation loyal to Lenin (another falsehood that runs throughout *Building the Party* is the notion that Bolsheviks and/or the central committee were “his”).

The second and more serious error is to use Lenin’s actions in the aftermath of the RSDLP’s second congress that gave birth to the Menshevik-Bolshevik split as proof of Lenin’s preference for informal or loose rules. One of the central charges that Lenin and his Bolshevik co-thinkers levelled at the Mensheviks was that their resignations, boycotts of party institutions, refusal to call a third congress despite the expressed will of the majority of the 1903 congress delegates and declaration that the League of Social Democrats Abroad was autonomous from the RSDLP all violated the rules adopted at the 1903 congress.

Anyone who reads Lenin’s *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* will find that Lenin paid very close attention to rules, regulations, procedural minutiae and abided by them. One of the central reasons why Lenin spent years working to convene the 1903 congress in the first place was to eliminate the informal rules and procedures that prevailed in the socialist circles and replace them with the formal rules necessary to govern the workings of a professional political party. In contemporary terms Lenin sought to overcome what feminist Jo Freeman described as “the tyranny of structurelessness”.

Lenin’s *Letter to a Comrade on Our Organisational Tasks* proves the opposite of what Cliff claims. In that letter Lenin writes:

> It would be all the less useful to draw up such Rules at present [1902] since we have practically no general Party experience (and in many places none whatever) with regard to the activities of the various groups and subgroups of this sort and in order to acquire such experience what is needed is not Rules but the organisation of Party information, if I may put it in this way. Each of our local organisations now spends at least a few evenings on discussing Rules. If instead, each member would devote this time to making a detailed and well-prepared report to the entire Party on his particular function, the work would gain a hundredfold.

And it is not merely because revolutionary work does not always lend itself to definite organisational form that Rules are useless. No, definite organisational form is necessary and we must endeavour to give such form to all our work as far as possible. That is permissible to a much greater extent than is generally thought and achievable not through Rules but solely and exclusively (we must keep on reiterating this) through transmitting exact information to the Party centre; it is only then that we shall have real organisational form connected with real responsibility and (inner-Party) publicity. For who of us does not know that serious conflicts and differences of opinion among us are actually decided not by vote “in accordance with the Rules”, but by struggle and threats to “resign”? During the last three or four years of Party life the history of most of our committees has been replete with such internal strife. It is a great pity that this strife has not assumed definite form: it would then have been much more instructive for the Party and would have contributed much more to the experience of our successors. But no Rules can create such useful and essential definiteness of organisational form; this can be done solely through inner-Party publicity. Under the autocracy we can have no other means or weapon of inner-Party publicity than keeping the Party centre regularly informed of Party events.

Here Lenin stressed the importance of reporting and inner-party publicity as opposed to rules because he believed (correctly) that proper decisions about rules could only be made if the RSDLP’s leaders were fully aware of the work...
each of its members engaged in. (Lenin viewed the centralisation of information regarding members’ activity into the hands of the party leadership as a response to operating as an illegal organisation; presumably information would be decentralised among the membership as a whole through the medium of a newspaper if the party was legal.)

Lenin closed this letter with the following words:

And only after we have learned to apply this inner-Party publicity on a wide scale shall we actually be able to amass experience in the functioning of the various organisations; only on the basis of such extensive experience over a period of many years shall we be able to draw up Rules that will not be mere paper Rules.

So while it is true that Lenin detested rule mongering, it is equally true that Lenin spent the better part of 1904 and 1905 fighting in defence of the rules adopted by the 1903 congress and against the informal methods that the Mensheviks proved unwilling to part ways with.

Chapter five on the 1903 congress is again replete with errors. In discussing the famous debate between Lenin and Martov over what the definition of a party member should be, Cliff attacks Martov and Trotsky for supporting Lenin’s organisational plan as laid out in *What Is To Be Done?* and then opposing Lenin’s formulation on membership, writing:

> To combine a strong centralist leadership with loose membership was eclecticism taken to an extreme. …

> The revolutionary party cannot avoid making strong demands for sacrifice and discipline from its own members. Martov’s definition of party membership fitted the weakness of his conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Cliff fails to note that *Martov’s membership definition became the basis for recruitment into the Bolshevik wing of the RSDLP for three years* until the Mensheviks agreed (in conjunction with the Bolsheviks) at the 1906 party congress to a formulation in line with Lenin’s 1903 wording. According to Cliff’s logic then, the Bolsheviks during 1903-1906 were guilty of “eclecticism taken to an extreme” for combining “strong centralist leadership with loose membership” and “weakness” with regards to proletarian dictatorship, while the Mensheviks were innocent of these things after 1906 because they supported Lenin’s definition of party membership.

Eclecticism indeed!

In this regard, Cliff is like most other “Leninists” who invest the 1903 membership debate with an artificial and ahistorical significance. If Lenin did not mention the issue in his discussion on the “Principle Stages in the History of Bolshevism” in *Left-Wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder* written for foreign communist audiences unfamiliar with RSDLP history it could not have been a terribly important issue from his point of view.

Cliff’s next egregious error comes in his discussion of Lenin’s actions after the 1903 Congress that gave birth to the Menshevik and Bolshevik trends within the RSDLP:

> With the aid of Krupskaya in Geneva and a group of supporters operating inside Russia, [Lenin] built a completely new set of centralised committees, quite regardless of Rule 6 of the party statutes, which reserved to the Central Committee the right to organise and recognise committees.

He goes on to say that these “completely new” and “centralised committees” began to agitate for a new RSDLP congress in 1904 to resolve the disputes that arose between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks at the end of the previous congress.

If Cliff’s statement is true, then Lenin was a hypocritical and ruthless faction fighter who attacked his political opponents for not playing by party rules that he exempted himself from. If true, it would have fatally undermined the whole basis of post-1903 Bolshevik agitation for a new congress because it was based on the following rule adopted by the second congress: “The Party Council must call a congress if this is demanded by Party organisations which together would command half the votes at the congress”. If Lenin himself violated these rules by creating “completely
new centralised committees” it would have been impossible for him to attract support within the RSDLP for his claim in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* that it was the Mensheviks who were making a mockery of the RSDLP’s rules.

Cliff’s assertion has no footnote, so it is unclear what the source of his claim is. What is certain is that there is no mention of illegal (in the sense of being against the RSDLP’s rules) and “completely new set of centralised committees” in Krupskaya’s memoirs. Surely if Lenin had done what Cliff claims the Mensheviks would have pounced on this monstrous fact and included it in their bitter attacks on Lenin in the pages of the post-congress *Iskra*.

Another element that appears in this chapter and throughout *Building the Party* is Cliff’s “truisms” about a variety of topics that have no basis in things Lenin said or did. For example:

> [T]he leadership of a revolutionary party must provide the highest example of devotion and complete identification with the party in its daily life. This gives it the moral authority to demand the maximum sacrifice from the rank and file.

Lenin certainly appreciated the sacrifices people made for the revolutionary movement, but this was not limited to those who were party leaders or even party members (for example, his attitude towards earlier generations of Russian revolutionaries, the Narodiks and Decembrists). At no time did Lenin use his position as a party leader to demand “maximum sacrifice from the rank and file”. This sounds like something from the Stalin era or from Mao’s *Little Red Book* which is full of timeless, moralistic phrase mongering.

Cliff’s references to Lenin’s imaginary disregard for rules serves an important purpose in the *Building the Party* narrative: Lenin has to constantly circumvent rules and fight against his own followers who become “conservative” and “formalist” in their approach to politics by resisting Lenin’s continual “stick bending”. This narrative reaches its climax in chapter eight which celebrates Lenin’s fight at the third RSDLP congress held in April 1905 against the Bolshevik committee men over two issues: recruiting workers to party committees and democratising the party in the midst of the 1905 revolution. According to Cliff, “[b]uttressing themselves with quotations from What Is to Be Done? [the Bolshevik committee men] called for ‘extreme caution’ in admitting workers into the committees and condemned ‘playing at democracy.’”

The problem with Cliff’s account is that Lenin and the Bolsheviks *never* fought about either recruiting workers to party committees or democratising the party at the third congress. It simply did not happen. Lih discovered that this episode in *Building the Party* was “lifted wholesale from Solomon Schwarz”, a Bolshevik-turned-Menshevik who wrote *The Russian Revolution of 1905: the Workers’ Movement and the Formation of Bolshevism and Menshevism* (“wholesale” meaning copied word for word).

Cliff’s plagiarism is a relatively minor issue compared to the real scandal: he evidently never bothered to read Lenin’s *Report on the Third Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party* written in May 1905! Had Cliff read Lenin’s account of the third congress he would have discovered that Lenin makes no mention of any conflict, debate, or friction over whether to recruit workers and democratize the party in light of the new conditions created by the 1905 revolution. The report is positively glowing about the results of the third congress, which included more clearly defined party rules (so much for Lenin’s alleged informality) and a series of resolutions guiding the RSDLP’s conduct during the 1905 revolution.

The conclusion is inescapable: *either* Cliff did not read what Lenin said about the 1905 third congress *or* he knowingly repeated a falsehood taken from someone else’s work in order to support his narrative of “Lenin versus the party machine he built”. Neither is acceptable for a political biographer of Lenin.

It is in this chapter that the contradictions embedded in Cliff’s “Lenin must continually fight the party machine he built” narrative become most apparent. Suppose that Cliff was right that the committee men did indeed defeat Lenin on the issue of recruiting workers at the third congress and stubbornly resisted such recruitment efforts. The question then becomes: how did the Bolshevik wing of the RSDLP grow so rapidly? How could workers join the party against the
will of the people who were the party? Cliff does not explain this impossibility but exclaims, “nevertheless it moves” and quotes figures showing the rapid growth of the Bolsheviks in 1905 and after. Cliff’s Lenin was evidently a magician who could make the party take actions the people who constituted the party opposed.

‘Democratic centralism’ and party discipline

In chapter 15 Cliff’s litany of errors continues. The 1905 revolution created strong pressure from the RSDLP’s rapidly growing ranks to unite the Menshevik and Bolshevik factions. This unity was consummated at the RSDLP’s 1906 congress held in Stockholm. Cliff neglects to mention that this congress elected a central committee of three Bolsheviks and six Mensheviks. He recounts that an RSDLP conference in Tammerfors held in 1906 decided to create an electoral bloc with the Constitutional Democrats (Cadets), a liberal party backed by big business. Lenin insisted that the decisions of this conference were not binding on local party bodies. A surprised Cliff writes:

What had happened to the democratic centralism so dear to Lenin? For years he had argued for the subordination of the lower organs of the party to the higher and against the federal concept of the party. In One Step Forward, Two Steps Back, written February-May 1904, he had said that “the undoubted tendency to defend autonomism against centralism ... is a fundamental characteristic of opportunism in matters of organisation”.

What Cliff means by “democratic centralism” is “subordination of the lower organs of the party to the higher” and a non-federal party. What Lenin meant by “democratic centralism” was altogether different.

The quote Cliff cites from One Step Forward, Two Steps Back is misplaced because Lenin was arguing against those, like Trotsky, who held that the editorial board of the party’s newspaper should be autonomous and not subject to the democratic control of the party congress, a very different issue from the autonomy of local committees or local party branches to make decisions regarding local work. The notion that local autonomy was a new element in Lenin’s thought in 1907 is mistaken. Lenin noted that the third congress of the RSDLP in 1905 affirmed this principle:

The autonomy of the committees has been defined more precisely and their membership declared inviolable, which means that the C.C. no longer has the right to remove members from local committees or to appoint new members without the consent of the committees themselves. ... Every local committee has been accorded the right to confirm periphery organisations as Party organisations. The periphery organisations have been accorded the right to nominate candidates for committee membership.

The principle of autonomy was first affirmed at the RSDLP’s second congress in 1903:

All organisations belonging to the Party carry on autonomously all work relating specially and exclusively to the sphere of Party activity which they were set up to deal with.

Another element missing from Cliff’s account of “democratic centralism” is the following rule, also adopted at the second congress:

Every Party member and everyone who has any dealings with the Party, has the right to demand that any statement submitted by him be placed, in the original, before the Central Committee, or the editorial board of the Central Organ, or the Party Congress.

This rule seems to have been designed to prevent secret expulsions and other abuses of power by party officials that plague all “Leninist” organisations, abuses which are almost always justified on the grounds of “democratic centralism”. The term has been abused to such an extent that it no longer conveys the organisational norms that prevailed within the RSDLP among Mensheviks (who first coined the term) and Bolsheviks alike until the 1917 revolution.
Lenin famously defined “democratic centralism” as “freedom of discussion, unity in action”. Cliff appropriately quotes Lenin on what this meant in practice:

After the competent bodies have decided, all of us, as members of the party, must act as one man. A Bolshevik in Odessa must cast into the ballot box a ballot paper bearing a Cadet’s name even if it sickens him. And a Menshevik in Moscow must cast into the ballot box a ballot paper bearing only the names of Social Democrats, even if his soul is yearning for the Cadets.

Note what “freedom of discussion, unity in action” did not mean. It did not mean that the minority had to publicly champion the “line” or argument of the triumphant majority. “Unity in action” for a dissenting minority simply meant acting in concert with the majority, not singing their tune or arguing for their “line”. Nowhere did Lenin say “a Bolshevik in Odessa must argue with his workmates that supporting the Cadets is the way to go”, or “a Menshevik in Moscow must convince everyone he knows to vote Social Democrat even if his soul is yearning for the Cadets”. A line of action and a line of argument are two different things; “unity in action” did not mean unity in argument or political position.

Given this understanding of what “democratic centralism” meant to Lenin and the RSDLP, the following lines by Cliff are wildly, unfathomably wrong:

A couple of months later, in January 1907, Lenin went so far as to argue for the institution of a referendum of all party members on the issues facing the party – certainly a suggestion that ran counter to the whole idea of democratic centralism.

Polling the party to determine the party’s course of action is antithetical to “democratic centralism” only if we use Cliff’s definition of the term and not Lenin’s. The answer to Cliff’s question, “What had happened to the democratic centralism so dear to Lenin?” is simple: nothing.

Cliff’s failure to understand the meaning of “democratic centralism” becomes a problem again in chapter 17 when he discusses a Menshevik-led party trial of Lenin in 1907. Surprisingly, Cliff agrees with the Mensheviks that Lenin was guilty of violating party discipline, writing:

Lenin’s behavior at the trial is very interesting, because it shows the relentless way in which he conducted a faction fight against the right wing of the party. As the trial opened, Lenin calmly acknowledged that he used “language impermissible in relations between comrades in the same party”, but he made absolutely no apology for doing so. Indeed, in fighting the Liquidationists and their allies in the movement, he never hesitated to use the sharpest weapons he could lay his hands on. Moderation is not a characteristic of Bolshevism.

The incident that precipitated the trial occurred after the Mensheviks in St. Petersburg created an electoral bloc with the Cadets in defiance of the majority of the local RSDLP organisation. Lenin wrote a pamphlet attacking the Mensheviks for doing so. The Mensheviks retaliated against Lenin by having the RSDLP central committee, on which they had a majority, charge Lenin with violating party discipline. So it was the Mensheviks who were violating the rules of the RSDLP, not Lenin.

The Bolshevik Party: not formed in 1912

In chapter 17, Cliff discusses Lenin’s fight against the liquidationist trend in the RSDLP. He notes that a January 1910 RSDLP conference vote forced Lenin to disband the Bolshevik faction, close its newspaper and break off relations with the “boycottists” in their ranks while the Mensheviks were obliged to do the same: disband their faction, close their newspaper and break with the liquidators in their midst. Lenin dutifully complied. His Menshevik counterparts did not.

After the Mensheviks proved unwilling to follow through with their obligations, Lenin launched a new weekly paper at the end of 1910, Zvezda. Cliff omits this fact and instead picks up the story with the Prague Conference held in January 1912. He also omits the fact that this conference elected a pro-party Menshevik (one of two who attended) to the
RSDLP’s central committee. This is important because the 1912 Prague Conference is almost always referred to as the beginning of the Bolsheviks as a separate party from the Mensheviks. Cliff evades this issue by referring to those elected to the central committee in 1912 as “hards”, a term used nowhere else in Building the Party.

After chapter 17, Cliff claims the RSDLP’s daily newspaper Pravda played “a central role in building the Bolshevik Party”, declares that the Bolsheviks became “a mass party” in 1912-1914 and says that the Bolshevik Duma deputies “finally ended” relations with their Menshevik counterparts in late 1913 (when World War One broke out the deputies issued a joint statement, so this is false). Based on these claims it is clear that Cliff adheres to the myth that the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks separated into two parties in 1912.

However, a cursory glance at Lenin’s writings in 1912 reveals how wrong this view is. Shortly after the 1912 Prague Conference, Lenin wrote the following in an explanatory note to the International Socialist Bureau:

In all, twenty organisations established close ties with the Organising Commission convening this conference; that is to say, practically all the organisations, both Menshevik and Bolshevik, active in Russia at the present time.

The 1912 Prague Conference separated pro-party Mensheviks and Bolsheviks from the liquidators. The Menshevik-Bolshevik divide did not culminate in two separate parties until the 1917 revolution. Cliff’s account of the 1912-1914 period is terribly flawed because it is predicated on falsehoods. The Bolsheviks were not a party, therefore they could not “become a mass party”, nor could Pravda have played “a central role in building the Bolshevik Party” because such an entity did not yet exist. This explains why, when Lenin referred to Pravda’s success against its liquidationist rival Luch he wrote, “four-fifths of the workers have accepted the Pravdist decisions as their own, have approved of Pravdism and actually rallied around Pravdism” instead of using the terms “Bolshevist” and “Bolshevism”.

Cliff’s treatment of the history of Lenin and Pravda is just as error-ridden as the rest of Building the Party. For example, he claims, “Lenin practically ran Pravda”. What he neglects to mention is that 47 of Lenin’s articles were rejected and that many of Lenin’s published articles were heavily edited to weaken their factional content. If Lenin “practically ran Pravda”, why would he reject so many of his own articles and censor himself politically? Pravda was run by a team of editors, not by Lenin and the initiative for it came from the lower ranks of the party. It was not “Lenin’s Pravda” as Cliff claims, but a workers’ paper to which Lenin was one contributor among many (Plekhanov, Rosa Luxemburg and Kautsky also wrote for it). The overwhelming majority of Pravda’s content, including poems and humour columns, was written by workers, not by higher-ups in the party or the paper’s editorial team.

Conclusion

Building the Party has so many gross factual and political errors that it is useless as a historical study of Lenin’s actions and thoughts. This conclusion is inescapable for anyone who reads the book closely and compares it with the writings of Lenin and the historical record. Those who read Building the Party and take it seriously will need to unlearn the falsehoods and misinformation contained in its pages if they want a reasonably accurate picture of Lenin’s work in the context of the Russian socialist movement of the early twentieth century.

Bookmarks in Britain and Haymarket Books in the US should think twice before republishing, selling and profiting from Building the Party since it contains so many errors, falsehoods and lies about Lenin.

**Dedicated to anyone and everyone who has sacrificed in the name of “building the revolutionary party”**
“Revolutionary method in the study of Lenin – A response to Pham Binh”

By Paul Le Blanc

Amid a continuing crisis of capitalism, the renaissance of Lenin studies – what I once referred to as “Lenin’s return” – continues. Aspects of this find reflection in new books, new articles, symposiums and debates as we attempt to clarify the actuality of Lenin’s thought and example, and (for some of us) their relevance for the situations we face.

In this context, a seemingly major and devastating critique of Tony Cliff’s 1975 volume Lenin: Building the Party, 1893-1914 has just been put forward by Pham Binh. It appears that Pham is an activist in the US Occupy movement and is also very interested in the history of Bolshevism and the ideas of Lenin. Such a thing should be a source of joy for me, since I am very involved in Occupy Pittsburgh, and I have a similar intense interest in the history of Bolshevism and the ideas of Lenin.

But I have found Comrade Pham’s article, “Mangling the Party: Tony Cliff’s Lenin”, to be disappointing – rendered much less useful than it could have been, given that its obvious purpose is to persuade the reader that Tony Cliff’s book is little more than a mass of “egregious misrepresentations” and “has so many gross factual and political errors that it is useless as a historical study of Lenin’s actions and thoughts”. This is a demolition job. It doesn’t offer much that we can use and build on as we face the challenges of today and tomorrow.

**Revolutionary method**

One can argue, in response, that sometimes it is necessary to clear away obstructions in order to be able to develop more positive contributions. But it seems to me that the polemical single-mindedness of this essay gets in the way of the quest for truth and the genuine commitment to revolutionary method, which are ideals that Comrade Pham extols in what strikes me as the best part of the essay. There we find a criticism of Cliff’s problematical emphasis on Lenin’s presumed method of “bending the stick” (defined as one-sidedly distorting reality in order to emphasise what is deemed the “necessary” political point). I agree with Pham that Lenin’s revolutionary method was better than that, striving to keep “the whole process of development in mind instead of isolating its individual elements”. This does not mean that Lenin was always successful in this. More than that, I think Pham’s essay itself does not live up to this standard.

His single-mindedness regarding the “task at hand” (demolishing Tony Cliff) results in a significant amount of misinformation. For example, we are told that Cliff’s work on Lenin “was the first book-length political biography of Lenin written by a Marxist”, which ignores the invaluable contribution of the early 1930s by Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s comrade, co-thinker and companion, who focused systematically on his political thought and practice – Reminiscences of Lenin. Actually, if Krupskaya’s substantial volume is taken together with Leon Trotsky’s The Young Lenin and Moshe Lewin’s Lenin’s Last Struggle (both of which also precede Cliff’s work), we have a comprehensive account of Lenin’s political life. There is also Marcel Liebman’s important work, Leninism Under Lenin, an English translation (from the 1973 French edition) appearing first in 1975.
Hitting even closer to home for me personally, Comrade Pham writes that Cliff “shaped the approach” that I took in my study*Lenin and the Revolutionary Party.* I do not know why he seems so self-assured about this – especially since it is not true. For what it is worth, those who shaped my approach to Lenin include (aside from Lenin himself) the following: George Breitman, E. H. Carr, James P. Cannon, Isaac Deutscher, Hal Draper, Nadezhda Krupskaya, Moshe Lewin, Ernest Mandel and Leon Trotsky. I read Cliff after my approach to Lenin was basically in place.

I noted in the introductory comments to my book that there is some common ground between Cliff’s approach and mine. In the same book, I suggested problematical qualities in Cliff’s work. I have more than once expressed differences with his interpretation of Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* (and I am in basic agreement with the work of Lars Lih on this matter), and I took seriously the critique of Cliff’s book by my friend Bruce Landau many years ago. Other problems have been noted. Even before he published the charge, Lars Lih alerted me to the fact that at least one section of Cliff’s first volume on Lenin contains, almost word-for-word, passages from Solomon Schwarz’s important study *The Russian Revolution of 1905: the Workers’ Movement and the Formation of Bolshevism and Menshevism* – with footnotes citing Schwarz but with the actual passages presented as if Cliff himself had written them.

In spite of this, I respected and continue to respect Cliff’s very substantial effort to draw together a comprehensive survey of Lenin’s political thought and to relate that to the historical realities Lenin faced. I also respect his desire to connect all of this with the issues, problems and challenges facing today’s revolutionary activists. I am alert to the criticisms of problems in Cliff’s political practice that negatively influenced his historical writing (some of this even comes through in Ian Birchall’s just-published sympathetic biography *Tony Cliff: A Marxist for His Time*), but I don’t think this justifies a one-sided dismissiveness.

Related to this, I have learned to develop an approach in my own discipline as an historian that cuts across the kind of polemic Comrade Pham has written. Figuring out “what happened in history” is a collective project and process, with various imperfect contributions helping us to get closer to an adequate understanding. It makes no sense to denounce as liars and fools and scoundrels those who were ahead of us in wrestling with the material, but who, we think, may have gotten it wrong.

On top of this, I believe that a genuine strength of Cliff is that he actually approaches the material as someone who is steeped in collective traditions and experiences of the Marxist movement, which involves attempting to apply revolutionary Marxism to political realities of one’s own time. This may sometimes yield misunderstandings (reading back into Lenin one’s own specific notions), but sometimes it also yields insights regarding how political realities – and the interplay of Leninist theory and practice – can be understood.

**Pro-Lenin/anti-Lenin**

There is another problem related to what Comrade Pham does in this article. I am concerned that it could slide into its opposite – from a defence of Lenin’s ideas to a full-scale sectarian assault on those ideas. As it stands now, the comrade makes reference, with that unfortunate self-assurance, to the “secret expulsions and other abuses of power by party officials that plague all ‘Leninist’ organisations”. One can certainly find examples of this in one or another group (even those not self-identifying as “Leninist”), but as someone who has belonged to more than one organisation considering itself to be Leninist, and as a scholar who has studied other such organisations, I must challenge this assertion that “secret expulsions and other abuses of power” plague all such organisations that I have belonged to and studied. It is simply not true.

Pham goes further than this when he quotes the following passage from Cliff about what happened after the Bolshevik/Menshevik split at the 1903 congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party: “With the aid of Krupskaya in Geneva and a group of supporters operating inside Russia, [Lenin] built a completely new set of centralised committees, quite regardless of Rule 6 of the party statutes, which reserved to the Central Committee the right to organise and recognise committees.” Pham denies that Lenin, Krupskaya and others did such things, adding: “If Cliff’s statement is true, then Lenin was a hypocritical and ruthless faction fighter who attacked his political opponents
for not playing by party rules that he exempted himself from.” God forbid that what Cliff wrote is, more or less, true! Where would that leave us?

The problem is (and no serious historian of the period disagrees) that Lenin and Krupskaya and Bolshevik supporters in Russia actually did put together a network of Bolshevik groups in Russia operating separately from the Menshevik faction. These were later described in detail by such veteran Bolsheviks as Osip Piatnitsky and Cecilia Bobrovskaya, among others (including Krupskaya).

In any event, the logic of failing to keep “the whole process of development in mind” instead of isolating its individual elements’, reflected here in the single-minded focus on proving Tony Cliff wrong, can result in getting one’s own facts wrong and ultimately – despite one’s intentions – validating all-too-common anti-Lenin diatribes. A more complex, comprehensive, dialectical method would be better, both historically and politically.

Heffalumps versus history

All too often, we humans prove to have limited patience and we pretend (sometimes even to ourselves) to know more than we actually do know. Attempting to “connect the dots” to secure a mental picture of what’s what, we connect “dots” that aren’t actually there – which ends up giving us the picture (for example) not of an elephant but of a heffalump. The one is a real creature that might be found in the wild, the other an imaginary creature in the imaginary brains of Winnie the Pooh and his friend Piglet. There are many “horrible heffalumps” (and even “heffable horrilumps”) unleashed by polemists who take the time to secure only a partial understanding of what they are talking about. But we should try to do better than that as we seek an understanding of what happened in history.

Serious activists can benefit by turning their attention to those who went before us, to learn both positive and negative lessons from previous experiences of those who were trying to do the same kinds of things that we hope to do. The history of Russian revolutionaries – especially of the Bolsheviks – offers much that can be of value. This requires that we do better than what Comrade Pham has offered us in this recent critique.

It seems to me that Pham himself is capable of doing better than offering us heffalumps. There are genuine strengths, for example, in his discussion of what “democratic centralism” actually meant, strengths consistent with some of what Cliff says (as Pham acknowledges) and with the extended discussion offered in Lenin and the Revolutionary Party. It is an approach for dynamically combining freedom of expression and unity in action, taking decision making seriously so that decisions are actually carried out and tested in practice. As Pham notes, this concept is not unique to Lenin – the very term was put forward by the Mensheviks.

There was much common ground between those who were Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, and this was especially true before the split among members of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) who would divide into those two factions. Following Lars Lih, Comrade Pham seems to “get” this. That is why it is confusing to find, as the first “big” point in Pham’s polemic, an angry insistence that there was no correspondence between Lenin’s thinking and the 1890s pamphlet by future Mensheviks Julius Martov and Arkadi Kremer, On Agitation.

Cliff suggests that Russian Marxism in general in the 1890s tended to be “mechanical, one-sided, stagiest, or ‘economist’” – and that this included Plekhanov, Lenin and the authors of On Agitation. Some historians (such as Lars Lih) argue that this critical generalisation is overdrawn. The fact remains that the pamphlet played an important role (at the time supported by Lenin, as Neil Harding, among others, emphasises) in helping the movement move beyond study circles and toward practical class-struggle agitation. Further thought and experience would result in the theoretical evolution of all concerned and eventually in Bolshevik/Menshevik divergences. Pham should not feel he must contest the truth of Cliff’s comment about common ground between Lenin and the authors of On Agitation, nor throw Lenin quotes at us to emphasise the difference between him and someone like Martov (who was, by all accounts, Lenin’s close friend, comrade and co-thinker as the 19th century gave way to the 20th). Doing so gets in our way of understanding the actual history of Russia’s revolutionary movement.
Pham also devotes considerable energy to arguing that in 1905 “Lenin and the Bolsheviks never fought about either recruiting workers to party committees or democratising the party at the third congress [of the Bolshevik organisation]”. He adds, with emphasis: “It simply did not happen.” He then cites a very brief 1500-word report from the Bolshevik central committee (reproduced in Lenin’s Collected Works) which does not mention this debate, which Pham seems to feel “proves” his point. What he fails to note, however, is what is said by others active in the movement at that time (the well-documented account of Bolshevik-turned-Menshevik Solomon Schwarz, Krupskaya’s memoirs, Trotsky’s biography of Stalin) about the actuality of just such a debate. In a scholarly dispute with me on the matter, Lars Lih, while minimising its significance, at least acknowledges the fact that there was such debate but argues that Lenin was wrong about the realities and unfair to those Bolshevik comrades on the other side of the debate, who outvoted him. Such matters are worth discussing now, as they were then – but Pham, too focused on making Cliff look bad, misses the opportunity to join in the discussion.

An even more embarrassing mistake comes when Pham writes: “Cliff adheres to the myth that the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks separated into two parties in 1912. However, a cursory glance at Lenin’s writings in 1912 reveals how wrong this view is.” He then takes a very cursory glance, quoting one sentence from a report by Lenin after the 1912 Prague conference, and based on this, Pham assures us:

“The 1912 Prague Conference separated pro-party Mensheviks and Bolsheviks from the liquidators. The Menshevik-Bolshevik divide did not culminate in two separate parties until the 1917 revolution.”

Pham seems unaware that Lenin at this point considered all Mensheviks to be liquidators, more or less, except for a handful of “party Mensheviks” around Plekhanov (only two or three of whom participated in the Prague conference).

A more knowledgeable historian than Comrade Pham, Isaac Deutscher (hardly a Cliff adherent), in The Prophet Armed: Trotsky 1879-1921 (page 198), tells us: “Early in 1912, the schism was brought to its conclusion. At the conference in Prague Lenin proclaimed the Bolshevik faction to be the Party.” Trotsky says the same thing in his biography of Stalin (page 136): “Having thus gone all the way in breaking with the Mensheviks, the Prague Conference opened the era of the independent existence of the Bolshevik Party, with its own Central Committee.” Gregory Zinoviev, who was involved in the 1912 Prague conference, recounts in his History of the Bolshevik Party (page 170) that this was the moment “to break finally with them [the Mensheviks] and build our own independent organization based upon the resurgent workers’ movement”. In a succinct biography of Lenin (page 112), the highly respected Lars Lih affirms that Lenin decided to cut the Gordian Knot of factional strife “by simply deciding that his group was the real party”, elaborating: “After a series of institutional manoeuvres, the so-called Prague Conference of January 1912 – consisting of Lenin, Zinoviev, and about fourteen Bolshevik practiki from Russia – elected a new Central Committee and thus a new party.”

In Reminiscences of Lenin, Krupskaya explained (pages 230, 231): “The results of the Prague Conference were a clearly defined Party line on questions of work in Russia, and real leadership of practical work. ... A unity was achieved on the C.C. without which it would have been impossible to carry on the work at such a difficult time.”

As such eyewitnesses as Trotsky and John Reed note in their accounts of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks already existed as a separate, independent organisation – there was no need to carry out an organisational split in the midst of the revolutionary upheaval.

Activist conclusions

Comrade Pham comments very negatively on two sentences from Building the Party (page 110): “The leadership of a revolutionary party must provide the highest example of devotion and complete identification with the party in its daily life”, Cliff wrote. “This gives it the moral authority to demand the maximum sacrifice from the rank and file.” Pham comments: “At no time did Lenin use his position as a party leader to demand ‘maximum sacrifice from the rank and file’.” He adds: “This sounds like something from the Stalin era or from Mao’s Little Red Book which is full of timeless, moralistic phrase mongering.” I think the comrade is wrong in making this accusation – doing an injustice to
Cliff, to Lenin and to the revolutionary activists who must join together to bring about the fundamental changes that can have some hope of bringing about a better world.

First of all, Cliff’s emphasis is that those who would offer leadership in a revolutionary organisation have a responsibility, in their own lives, to be absolutely devoted and committed to the revolutionary cause, struggle, movement, organisation. They will have no right to ask of others what they themselves will not be prepared to give. This is Cliff’s point in the quoted passage, and I do not recognise this as inherently Stalinist or Maoist. It is a revolutionary truism.

Nor is it true that Lenin never called on party members (leaders as well as rank and file) to make “the maximum sacrifice”. In his well-known 1900 article “The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement” (in the selection of Lenin’s writings I edited for Pluto Press, Revolution, Democracy, Socialism, pages 135-136), he said such things as this:

> We must train people who will devote the whole of their lives, not only their spare evenings, to the revolution ... If we have a strongly organised party, a single strike may turn into a political demonstration, into a political victory over the government. ... Before us, in all its strength, towers the enemy fortress which is raining shot and shell upon us, mowing down our best fighters. We must capture this fortress, and we will capture it, if we unite all the forces of the awakening proletariat with all the forces of the Russian revolutionaries into one party which will attract all that is vital and honest in Russia.

An element of “maximum sacrifice” is surely suggested in this passage, although for many that involves – far more than “sacrifice” – giving all that we have (our time, our creative energy, sometimes our very lives) for a struggle that will, in fact, positively enhance humanity’s future and therefore the meaning of our lives.

To argue against such things, to minimise what it will take to bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old, it seems to me, is not helpful. It may be this is unfair, and that Comrade Pham has other, more fruitful conclusions that flow from his critique. If so, he has not expressed them clearly. Aside from the strange assertion that present-day publishers should not keep Tony Cliff’s book in print, it is not clear what activist conclusions he would have us draw from what he has written. One can only hope that in future contributions he will do better than this.

Works cited


_________. “Lenin Disputed”, Historical Materialism, 18.3 (2010).


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1 My understanding is that Pham Binh uses the Asian tradition of putting the family name first and individual name second, so I will refer to the comrade by his family name.

2 A major point in the Landau pamphlet was that Cliff was closer to Rosa Luxemburg’s organisational views than to any kind of Leninism, which then seemed more plausible to me than it does today.
When I discovered that Paul Le Blanc had responded to my review of Tony Cliff’s Building the Party I was hoping for the scholarly and thorough approach he used in writing his book Lenin and the Revolutionary Party. What I found was quite the opposite.

Le Blanc begins his response by claiming that my book review’s “obvious purpose is to persuade the reader that Tony Cliff’s book is little more than a mass of ‘egregious misrepresentations’ and ‘has so many gross factual and political errors that it is useless as a historical study of Lenin’s actions and thoughts.’ This is a demolition job. It doesn’t offer much that we can use and build on as we face the challenges of today and tomorrow.”

I drew my conclusions about Cliff’s book only after I closely studied what Lenin said and did and compared it to what Cliff claimed Lenin said and did. The more I studied, the more striking the divergences became.

As someone who was a member of the US International Socialist Organization for many years and used Building the Party as a text to (mis)educate people on Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the nature, scale and pervasiveness of Cliff’s distortions continually shocked me as I discovered them.

Le Blanc evades my documentation of Cliff’s distortions and ignores whether the evidence I presented in my book review supports my conclusion. Instead he rejects my conclusion from the outset because he does not share it and makes spurious charges against me and poorly documented assertions about the history of the Bolshevik party.

Le Blanc criticises me for not “offer[ing] much that we can use and build on as we face the challenges of today and tomorrow”. My 6000 word piece was a book review, a comparison between what Cliff said about Lenin’s words and actions and Lenin’s actual words and actions. A book review of Building the Party is not the place to discuss revolutionary strategy for the historic Occupy uprising, a topic I have addressed at length in “Occupy and the tasks of socialists”.

No one on the US socialist left has written a response to that piece despite its international circulation and if Le Blanc is interested in discussing the “challenges of today and tomorrow” I suggest he start there instead of Cliff’s book.

Le Blanc continues:

As it stands now, the comrade makes reference, with that unfortunate self-assurance, to the “secret expulsions and other abuses of power by party officials that plague all ‘Leninist’ organisations”. One can certainly find examples of this in one or another group (even those not self-identifying as “Leninist”), but as someone who has belonged to more than one organisation considering itself to be Leninist, and as a scholar who has studied other such organisations, I must challenge this assertion that “secret expulsions and other abuses of power” plague all such organisations that I have belonged to and studied. It is simply not true.
Sadly, two of the “Leninist” groups Le Blanc belonged to engaged in such practices, the first most dramatically in the 1980s under the reign of Jack Barnes and the second more recently during the past two years (and perhaps earlier as well; most group members know almost nothing of the group’s history).

I speak with self-assurance because I was alerted to these events by some of the individuals involved. In the digital age expulsions even in the most secretive organisations can no longer be done without anyone knowing. All it takes to find about such incidents is a bit of diligence, curiosity, and a Google search.

Le Blanc states: “The problem is (and no serious historian of the period disagrees) that Lenin and Krupskaya and Bolshevik supporters in Russia actually did put together a network of Bolshevik groups in Russia operating separately from the Menshevik faction.”

This is not a problem because I never argued otherwise. What I challenged and what Le Blanc did not address in his reply to me was Cliff’s claim that Lenin organised “a completely new set of centralised committees, quite regardless of Rule 6 of the party statutes, which reserved to the Central Committee the right to organise and recognise committees”.

Does Le Blanc agree that Lenin broke rule six by organising “completely new” committees after the 1903 congress? Yes or no?

Le Blanc:

What [Binh] fails to note, however, is what is said by others active in the movement at that time (the well-documented account of Bolshevik-turned-Menshevik Solomon Schwarz, Krupskaya’s memoirs, Trotsky’s biography of Stalin) about the actuality of just such a debate. In a scholarly dispute with me on the matter, Lars Lih, while minimising its significance, at least acknowledges the fact that there was such debate but argues that Lenin was wrong about the realities and unfair to those Bolshevik comrades on the other side of the debate, who outvoted him.

The debate at the 1905 third congress was over how to recruit workers, not whether to recruit workers. No one argued against recruiting workers to party committees as Cliff claimed.

On the myth that the Bolsheviks formed a separate party from the Mensheviks in 1912, Le Blanc says:

A more knowledgeable historian than Comrade Pham, Isaac Deutscher (hardly a Cliff adherent), in The Prophet Armed: Trotsky 1879-1921 (page 198), tells us: “Early in 1912, the schism was brought to its conclusion. At the conference in Prague Lenin proclaimed the Bolshevik faction to be the Party.” Trotsky says the same thing in his biography of Stalin (page 136): “Having thus gone all the way in breaking with the Mensheviks, the Prague Conference opened the era of the independent existence of the Bolshevik Party, with its own Central Committee.” Gregory Zinoviev, who was involved in the 1912 Prague conference, recounts in his History of the Bolshevik Party (page 170) that this was the moment “to break finally with them [the Mensheviks] and build our own independent organization based upon the resurgent workers’ movement”. In a succinct biography of Lenin (page 112), the highly respected Lars Lih affirms that Lenin decided to cut the Gordian Knot of factional strife “by simply deciding that his group was the real party,” elaborating: “After a series of institutional manoeuvres, the so-called Prague Conference of January 1912 – consisting of Lenin, Zinoviev, and about fourteen Bolshevik practiki from Russia – elected a new Central Committee and thus a new party.” In Reminiscences of Lenin, Krupskaya explained (pages 230, 231): “The results of the Prague Conference were a clearly defined Party line on questions of work in Russia, and real leadership of practical work. ... A unity was achieved on the C.C. without which it would have been impossible to carry on the work at such a difficult time.”

Not one of these pieces of evidence comes from a primary source. These accounts were written more than a decade after the events of 1912 (in Lars T. Lih’s case almost a century elapsed since).
Le Blanc does not address or explain Lenin’s words (words I quoted in my review) to the International Socialist Bureau written in 1912:

In all, twenty organisations established close ties with the Organising Commission convening this conference; that is to say, practically all the organisations, both Menshevik and Bolshevik, active in Russia at the present time. (My emphasis.)

Le Blanc does not mention the text of a resolution passed by the 1912 Prague conference:

The Conference deems it its duty to stress the enormous importance of the work accomplished by the Russian Organising Commission in rallying all the Party organisations in Russia irrespective of factional affiliation, and in re-establishing our Party as an all-Russian organisation. The activity of the Russian Organising Commission, in which Bolsheviks and pro-Party Mensheviks in Russia worked in harmony, is to be all the more commended since it was carried out under incredibly trying conditions due to police persecution and in face of numerous obstacles and difficulties arising out of the situation within the Party. (My emphasis.)

Worst of all, Le Blanc resorts to quoting Zinoviev’s History of the Bolshevik Party in a misleading way to support his claim that the Bolsheviks formed a separate party from the Mensheviks at the 1912 Prague conference. Here is the full, unabridged sentence from Zinoviev:

After the 1908 conference, and more especially after the 1910 plenum, we Leninist Bolsheviks said to ourselves that we would not work together with the liquidator Mensheviks and that we were only awaiting a convenient moment to break finally from them and form our own independent organization based upon the resurgent workers’ movement. (Le Blanc excluded the words I emphasised.)

Le Blanc’s evidence proves that it was the “liquidator Mensheviks” that the Prague 1912 conference broke with, not the Mensheviks as a whole. If he, Cliff, Trotsky and Deutscher are right that the Bolsheviks formed a party separate from the Mensheviks at the 1912 Prague conference then Lenin, Zinoviev and the 1912 Prague conference resolution are wrong.

When our views about history are contradicted by facts we should modify our views to better fit the facts, not change the facts to fit our views. I hope Le Blanc as a professor of history can agree with me on this despite my status as a rank amateur.
“Five Points in response to Pham Binh”

By Paul Le Blanc

“The creation of healthy, democratic and cohesive revolutionary organisations on the Leninist model is both possible and necessary, in my opinion.”

I am sorry that Pham Binh has chosen to respond in the way that he has to my criticism of his article (“Mangling the party: Tony Cliff’s Lenin”). I will make only a few comments here to help clear up misunderstandings.

1. My critical comment about Pham’s article not providing us with anything useful for those engaged in today’s struggles was not a judgment about him as a person or about all things that he may have written about the Occupy movement or anything else. A substantial review article having to do with building the revolutionary party, however, should contain (in my opinion) something of value for those of us who are committed to such things.

2. Pham writes: “Does Le Blanc agree that Lenin broke rule six by organising ‘completely new’ committees after the 1903 congress? Yes or no?”

Yes, the rule was broken. But the functioning of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) had already been broken (as described in Lenin’s One Step Forward, Two Steps Back), which I think justified the actions of Lenin and his comrades in ignoring rule 6 and setting up a Bolshevik organisation in Russia independently of the RSDLP central committee. In the aftermath of the 1903 Party congress, the Bolshevik majority on the central committee was (legally) transformed into a Menshevik majority (actually, a totally Menshevik body), which most certainly did not “organize ... direct ... or conduct undertakings” of the Bolshevik groups. To repeat, this was done, instead, by Lenin, Krupskaya and others.

3. It is a definite plus that Pham now agrees that a debate actually did take place at the 1905 Bolshevik conference, a debate that initially he denied had taken place. (By the way, relating to point #2 above, this conference was also organised independently of the Menshevik central committee.) Pham now says: “The debate at the 1905 third congress was over how recruit workers, not whether to recruit workers.” Okay.

4. Pham mistakenly asserts that I utilise only secondary sources in showing that the Bolsheviks became a separate party in 1912. But the accounts of participants in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (such as Krupskaya and Zinoviev and Trotsky) are primary sources. Also, the fact remains that the “liquidators” were considered by Lenin and company to be not only those (such as Potresov) who called for liquidating the illegal party organisations, but also those Mensheviks (such as Martov) who refused to break from the liquidators, together accounting for almost all of the Mensheviks. A very small group of “party Mensheviks”, who were gathered around Plekhanov, were invited to join with the Bolsheviks to set up a separate party without “liquidators”. Only a couple of them (without the participation or support of Plekhanov) were involved in the conference. The documents Pham quotes do not obliterate these realities, which are established by a number of primary as well as secondary sources. If Pham wishes to believe that the
Bolsheviks did not have an independent party until some unspecified time in 1917, it is – of course – his democratic right to do so.

5. In his article, Pham made reference to the “secret expulsions and other abuses of power by party officials that plague all ‘Leninist’ organisations”. In my critique, I wrote that “as someone who has belonged to more than one organisation considering itself to be Leninist, and as a scholar who has studied other such organisations, I must challenge this assertion that ‘secret expulsions and other abuses of power’ plague all such organisations that I have belonged to and studied. It is simply not true.”

Pham responds: “Sadly, two of the ‘Leninist’ groups Le Blanc belonged to engaged in such practices, the first most dramatically in the 1980s under the reign of Jack Barnes and the second more recently during the past two years (and perhaps earlier as well; most group members know almost nothing of the group’s history).”

For those who are curious, much of the negative history of the Socialist Workers Party of the United States in the 1980s (from which I was expelled) is documented in three books of documents available on-line:

http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fit/struggleindex.htm

http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fit/revprinindex.htm

http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fit/rebuildindex.htm

I have been a member of the International Socialist Organization since 2009 and would not agree that it can be characterised as being anything like the US SWP of the 1980s. I do not believe there have been “secret expulsions” and regardless of one or another former member complaining of undemocratic abuses, it strikes me as a fairly open and democratic organisation. Another Leninist organisation to which I belonged was the Fourth Internationalist Tendency (1984-92), an admirable and quite democratic group, in my view – see http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fit/fitpaul.htm.

From my studies, the same is basically true of the Bolshevik party under Lenin. In the United States, it is also true of the Communist Party of the United States up to 1924 or so, the Communist League of America, the Workers Party of the United States and the Socialist Workers Party from 1938 at least up to the 1960s or 1970s. I do not claim that this is an exhaustive list.

These are the reasons that I reject Pham’s assertion that “secret expulsions and other abuses of power by party officials . . . plague all ‘Leninist’ organisations”.

The creation of healthy, democratic and cohesive revolutionary organisations on the Leninist model is both possible and necessary, in my opinion. It is important for us to learn from those who went before us, both positive and negative lessons, in order to help build the organisations, movements and struggles that can move us to a socialist future. In other contexts and writings, it is to be hoped that Comrade Pham can contribute positively to such efforts.
Pham Binh’s criticism of the late British Marxist Tony Cliff’s *Lenin: Building the Party* (“Mangling the Party”), published in the Australian journal *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal*, is substantially wrong on many points; but its chief defect is that it is a hatchet job.

According to Binh, *Building the Party* is a “useless” book, so full of “gross factual and political errors” as well as “falsehoods and misrepresentations” that the reader who has had the misfortune of coming into contact with it will have to “unlearn … if they want a reasonably accurate picture of Lenin’s work”. Cliff’s book, Binh claims, contains so many errors, falsehoods and “lies” that its US publisher, Haymarket Books, should “stop selling and profiting” from it.

The intention to malign Cliff is made clear from the very first paragraphs. According to Binh, Cliff’s statements that Lenin “adapted himself perfectly to the needs of industrial agitation” and “combined theory and practice to perfection” are comparable to the way the Stalin’s Lenin cult treated Lenin—apparently because of the use of the word “perfection”.

One would think that what Binh describes as “the first book-length political biography of Lenin written by a Marxist” (by a staunch anti-Stalinist no less) would deserve a more serious and measured response. One might expect that Binh would offer us at least the outlines of his own version of a “reasonably accurate picture” of Lenin. What he gives us instead is a series of poorly aimed potshots that occasionally hit their mark, but often miss badly.

That’s not to say that *Building the Party* is free of errors, or is the last word on Lenin. Cliff was not averse to paraphrasing passages of other authors without attribution (for example, the opening passage of *Building the Party* is lifted practically verbatim from chapter 9 of Trotsky’s *The Young Lenin*). Binh is correct in pointing out that Lenin did not “practically run” *Pravda*. Cliff’s treatment of *What is to Be Done?* is not very strong, and so on. Yet whatever Cliff’s errors, and whatever we may disagree with in his biography of Lenin, none of this adds up to it being worthless book by a deliberate falsifier.

Moreover, there is much that is valuable in *Building the Party*. It was one of the first political biographies of Lenin that was not written either from a Stalinist or a Cold War perspective. Second, rather than bad paraphrasing and distorting interpretation, Cliff let’s Lenin do a great deal of the talking. Though it comes from a different book (Marcel Liebman’s 1973 book, *Leninism Under Lenin*), this statement about Lenin sums up, I think, what Cliff admirably conveys about Lenin:

> Among all the leading socialists of Europe, he was the only one in whom the qualities of the theoretician were combined to such an extent with those of the practical politician—the only one to have actually created a party.
Admittedly, Cliff’s book is less a full biography of Lenin, than, to quote Cliff’s contemporary and fellow British Socialist Workers Party member Duncan Hallas, “a manual for revolutionaries” that “might well have been called Building the Party – Illustrated from the Life of Lenin”. But that is also what gives the book its vitality.

What is surprising is that in his in zeal to expose Cliff’s alleged errors, Binh commits quite a few of his own. Let’s look at a few examples that illustrate this.

**Lenin the agitator**

Up until the mid-1890s, the time when the young Lenin moved from populism to Marxism, the Russian socialist movement was organised chiefly around the dissemination of propaganda to a small number of workers by drawing them into educational study circles, around the expectation that a workers’ party in Russia would form eventually, based on the proliferation of these circles throughout Russia. To turn away from this political cul-de-sac the Jewish Bundists Kremer and Yuri Martov wrote *On Agitation* in 1894. (The Bundists had been having great success organising workers.) It called for social democrats (i.e., socialists) to move from study circles to “agitation among the factory workers on the basis of existing petty needs and demands”. The idea was that the workers’ own experience in economic struggles would eventually guide them toward more radical conclusions.

According to Binh, it is an “egregious misrepresentation” to say that Lenin’s ideas in this period “coincided exactly” with those expressed in *On Agitation*. Lenin was not one to shy away from polemics. Yet during this period he not only failed to publicly disagree with *On Agitation*, he joined forces with its co-author, Martov, in 1895 to form the St. Petersburg League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class, and spent some months before his arrest engaging in the very factory agitation that *On Agitation* recommended. Moreover, before forming this new organisation, as Cliff notes, Lenin participated in a meeting with other social democrats who “accepted the basic thesis” of *On Agitation*.

A cursory glance at Lenin’s articles in this period show that in this period they did not directly assault the autocracy, but focused on drawing very limited conclusion in line with *On Agitation*. Lenin’s article, “What are our ministers thinking about?”, which Binh seems to think contradicts Cliff’s narrative, for example, is about how government ministers are afraid of workers acquiring knowledge. “Without knowledge the workers are defenceless”, reads the final sentence, “with knowledge they are a force!”. This was the most political article Lenin wrote in this period. The last sentence of Lenin’s lengthy pamphlet, entitled “An explanation of the law on fines imposed on factory workers”, concludes in the following way: “Once they have understood this, the workers will see that only one means remains for defending themselves, namely, to join forces for the struggle against the factory owners and the unjust practices established by the law.”

For Lenin, implementing the directives of *On Agitation* did not mean abandoning the political struggle against the autocracy (hence the statement in Lenin’s “draft program” that socialists should focus their attention mainly on the workers’ struggle for their “daily needs” rather than exclusively. Yet by Lenin’s own account, he considered this period of agitation an important stage in the development of Russia’s socialist movement.

As Lenin notes in a letter to Plekhanov (Binh quotes this for other purposes without recognising that it undermines his argument), the emphasis on agitation at that time was “the legitimate and inevitable companion of any step forward in the conditions of our movement”. When the turn to agitation produced a reformist trend, “economism”, that made limiting socialist activities to economic agitation a principle, Lenin turned against it.

Binh writes: “Cliff later states in Building the Party that ‘[n]ot to point out the direct connection between the partial reform and the revolutionary overthrow of Tsarism is to cheat the workers, to fall into liberalism.’” Binh then pointedly asks: “Did Lenin fall into liberalism at this early stage of his career?” By using this quote, which appears far later in the book, Binh seems to think he has “caught” Cliff in a contradiction. Cliff’s statement, however, is really only a paraphrase of the same arguments Lenin made over and over again against the economists—that they had fallen into liberalism.
Lenin and party rules

According to Binh, Cliff’s version of Lenin favoured “informal or loose rules”. Cliff’s statement that Lenin had a “distaste for red tape and rule mongering” is meant to prove this. Binh then spends quite a bit of space showing that Lenin cared about rules. But Cliff, of course, makes no such case. Cliff simply shows that Lenin was for simple and streamlined rules, not “informal or loose rules”, as Binh claims. Cliff does make the point that Lenin’s faction was “for a long time very informal”. But this is explained by a quote from Lenin’s article “Letter to a comrade on our organisational tasks”, which is quoted by both Cliff and by Binh (though Binh thinks that by extending the quote he is proving that Cliff is deliberately omitting important information), in which Lenin explains that formal rules should wait until the constitution of a formal party structure and the establishment of detailed reporting of members to the party about their work.

What is true, and is illustrated in Cliff’s biography, is that Lenin was willing on some occasions to overlook the formal rules if he thought political necessity outweighed organisational formality—that is, when he considered the survival of the revolutionary wing of social democracy was at stake. Cliff raises this because this is the exact opposite of the characterisation of all of the anti-Lenin cottage industry that exists in the bourgeois academy: that Lenin was a proto-totalitarian because of his obsession with rules and party membership.

Party membership

At the 1903 party congress at which the party split between Bolshevik (majority) and Menshevik (minority) factions, there was a debate between Lenin and Martov over what constituted a party member. Lenin did not consider the debate serious enough to split over (as Cliff notes), but Lenin later considered the debate important in what it revealed about the two tendencies: it foreshadowed deeper differences that were to deepen and sharpen over the coming years.

Martov argued that people who were loosely associated with the party but not very active should be considered party members. Lenin wanted only those who played a regularly active role in the party to be members. Martov wanted a broader, looser party. Lenin wanted a party that distinguished, in his words, between “those who chatter and those who do the work”. Martov wanted a party that strove to embrace the whole working class; Lenin wanted a party that consisted only of the class’s most active, militant and class-conscious “vanguard”. (All of this is revealed in the minutes of the debate and what Lenin said about the debate in One Step Forward, Two Steps Back.)

Binh downplays the significance of this debate by pointing out that at the April 1906 “Unity” congress, which brought the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks back together, the delegates voted for Lenin’s 1903 congress definition of a party member. What the significance of this is, other than indicating that the 1905 revolution drove the Mensheviks briefly leftward and more closely in alignment with the Bolsheviks, is beyond me. According to Binh, we are to dismiss the significance of anything that happened in the Russian socialist movement if Lenin does not refer to it in his exceedingly brief outline of the Bolsheviks pre-revolutionary years in Left Wing Communism.

The 1912 split

Binh claims that Cliff is wrong to say that the 1912 Prague RSDLP conference finalised the split between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, heralding the transition from the Bolsheviks from a faction to a party. In doing so, he confuses form with content. Lenin and his supporters in the Bolshevik faction called an all-party conference that invited various factional representatives within Russia’s socialist movement. It was presented, in form, as an official congress of the RSDLP, not as a split conference of the Bolsheviks.

In content, the conference, dominated by Bolsheviks, was called to create a party centre—one that could declare itself “the” party—shorn of the anti-party liquidators and all those who wanted a party that included them (in essence, the vast majority of Mensheviks). The “liquidators” were those who wanted a purely legal organisation and who considered an illegal party apparatus “passé”. Under the autocracy, even liberals could not legally express their opinion in favour of a constitutional monarchy. Hence “liquidation” meant a turn to reformism and away from revolution.
To accomplish the split, a “Bolshevik” conference could have declared itself the “Bolshevik” Party. But it was tactically more advantageous to manoeuvre in such a way as to formally expel the liquidators and their defenders (which included Martov and all the other key leading Mensheviks) from what they declared the “official” RSDLP—which is exactly what the Prague conference did. This also made sense because Lenin wanted the official sanction and funds that came with recognition from the International Bureau. Thus the fact that Binh has “discovered” that Lenin refers to Pravdists rather than Bolsheviks really proves nothing.

But why waste ink on this? The outcome of the period 1912-1917 was that two independent political parties entered the arena of struggle in 1917. The irreconcilable differences between these two parties, which led one to support soviet power and the other to oppose it, led to a Bolshevik victory over the opposition of the Mensheviks, and later to the founding of a new international that was based upon soviet power and the need for revolutionary Marxists to organisationally separate themselves from social-democratic reformism. Can a debate over the exact date when the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks split shed any more light in these critical developments in the history of the socialist movement?

Did Lenin fight with the ‘committeemen’ in 1905?

According to Cliff, in 1905 Lenin had a debate at the party’s third congress with the Bolshevik “committeemen”—the party organisers on the ground—about admitting more workers into the leadership of the party. Binh says the debate did not happen. His proof? Cliff’s case is “lifted wholesale” from a book by a Menshevik (and former Bolshevik), Solomon Schwarz, and that Lenin wrote a “glowing” report about the conference and didn’t mention any argument. The “inescapable” conclusion, says Binh, is that Cliff either didn’t read this report, or he “knowingly repeated a falsehood”.

The only problem is that Mr Schwarz is right—it did happen. Schwartz quotes the records of the congress (published by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1959, no less) extensively, and they show that there was indeed such a debate, a back and forth that included booing and hissing on the part of Lenin’s opponents. At one point, a speaker in favour of bringing more workers onto the local party committees complains that workers are being excluded because the standard for admitting them is higher than that for admitting revolutionary students. According to the stenographer’s record, at this point Lenin shouted “True!” and the majority shouted “Not true!” But since Schwartz has a certain inexplicable “taint” in this discussion (apparently being a Menshevik disqualifies you from ever telling the truth), let’s simply quote Lenin’s Collected Works. Here are a few excerpts from Lenin’s “Speech on the Question of the Relations Between Workers and Intellectuals within the Social-Democratic Organizations”.

In my writings for the press I have long urged that as many workers as possible should be placed on the committees. The period since the Second Congress has been marked by inadequate attention to this duty—such is the impression I have received from talks with comrades engaged in practical Party work. … It will be the task of the future center to reorganize a considerable number of our committees; the inertness of the committee-men has to be overcome. (Applause and boooing.) (http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/3rdcong/18.htm)

Lenin then proposed that to overcome “demagogy” the congress should vote on a resolution for more workers to be on the committees. At another point in the debate, Lenin remarks:

I could hardly keep my seat when it was said here that there are no workers fit to sit on the committees. The question is being dragged out; obviously there is something the matter with the Party. (http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/3rdcong/20.htm)

Why is any of this important at all? Because all of the bourgeois academic “Leninologists” agree that Lenin favoured an “elitist” party led by intellectuals on account of his alleged belief that workers were incapable of reaching socialist consciousness. This debate completely cuts against that evaluation. The debate also shows us something that was a hallmark of Lenin’s Marxism—his willingness to push for changes in tactics and organisational forms when changing
conditions demanded it—but always with the goal firmly in mind: to build a party of workers capable of leading the fight against autocracy.

**On stick bending**

This leads us to the question of “bending the stick”.

“This readiness to bend the stick too far in one direction and then to go into reverse and bend it too far in the opposite direction was a characteristic that he retained throughout his life… At every stage of the struggle, Lenin would look for what he regarded as the key link in the chain of development. He would then repeatedly emphasize the importance of this link, to which all others must be subordinated”, writes Cliff of Lenin.

Binh interprets Cliff’s stick-bending metaphor as meaning “deliberately and one-sidedly overemphasising something one day and then the opposite thing the next day in different circumstances”. Bending the stick, says Binh, means “one-sided overemphasis and distortion”.

Though I think a legitimate point can be made that this is not the best metaphor (bending the stick “too far” in one direction) to describe Lenin’s method, this is a flippant characterisation of what Cliff is presenting (as if he is saying that Lenin flip-flopped from one day to the next). Moreover, Cliff’s characterisation is not at variance with Lenin’s own explanations of his behaviour.

Cliff quotes Lenin thus:

> The whole art of politics lies in finding and taking as firm a grip as we can of the link that is least likely to be struck from our hands, the one that is most important at the given moment, the one that most of all guarantees its possessor the possession of the whole chain.

After which Cliff states:

> He often returned to this metaphor and in practice always obeyed the rule that it illustrated; during the most critical periods he was able to set aside all the secondary factors and grasp the most central one. He brushed aside anything that could directly or indirectly divert him from the main issue. (http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap14.htm)

Lenin said of *What is to be Done?*, “We all now know that 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.” Another version of this translates Lenin as saying, “We all know that the economists bent the stick in one direction. In order to straighten the stick it was necessary to bend it in the other direction.” On another occasion, after the outbreak of the 1905 revolution, when Lenin was attempting to push the Bolsheviks toward more energetic practical work, he wrote: “We have ‘theorized’ for so long (sometimes—why not admit it?—to no use) in the unhealthy atmosphere of political exile, that it will really not be amiss if we now ‘bend the bow’ slightly, just a little, ‘the other way’ and put practice a little more in the forefront.”

Binh writes:

> It was Lenin’s appreciation for the totality of development not “stick bending”, that led him to write polemics against economists, Mensheviks, followers of Bogdanov, liquidators, “left” communists, and Karl Kautsky, all of whom did not make the transition from one stage of the “heroic scenario” to the next by adapting themselves to the new “tasks”.

Profound as this point is, it is identical to what Cliff argues in several places. For example:

> At the same time a clear scientific understanding of the general contours of historical development of the class struggle is essential for a revolutionary leader. He will not be able to keep his bearings and his confidence
through the twists and turns of the struggle unless he has a general knowledge of economics and politics. Therefore Lenin repeated many times that strategy and tactics must be based “on an exact appraisal of the objective situation”, while at the same time being “shaped after analyzing class relations in their entirety”.

(http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/work...lenin1/chap14.htm)

Lenin describes his own approach, I think, well in a 1907 piece that looks retrospectively back on the *Iskra* period, when Lenin argued hard to create an organisation of professional revolutionaries:

> To maintain today that *Iskra* exaggerated (in 1901 and 1902) the idea of an organisation of professional revolutionaries, is like reproaching the Japanese, after the Russo-Japanese War, for having exaggerated the strength of Russia’s armed forces, for having prior to the war exaggerated the need to prepare for fighting these forces… Unfortunately, many of those who judge our Party are outsiders, who do not know the subject, who do not realize that today the idea of an organization of professional revolutionaries has already scored a complete victory. That victory would have been impossible if this idea had not been pushed to the forefront at the time, if we had not “exaggerated” so as to drive it home to people who were trying to prevent it from being realised. (http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/work...pref1907.htm)

Yet no one can read Lenin without seeing that every major turning point found him looking (and studying) “for what he regarded as the key link in the chain of development” and then “repeatedly “emphasising its importance”. Hal Draper called this feature of Lenin’s “characteristic of Lenin the man, and not merely Lenin the Marxist”. In 1915, Lenin fondly quoted a French philosopher who wrote, “Strong ideas are those that give impetus and create scandals, that provoke indignation, anger, irritation among one kind of people, enthusiasm among others.”

Draper rightly points to the perils involved in Lenin’s method:

> Whatever benefits there are in this method, his contemporaries got; the same cannot be said for the generation or two that tried to learn from his writings Without understanding that, in reading Lenin, it is as important to know what he is polemically concerned about at the moment as it is to understand what he is saying. If there ever was a case where “authority by quotation” is misleading, it is the business of matching texts from Lenin. (http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1953/defeat/chap3.htm)

Certainly Cliff does not always use the term correctly to describe Lenin’s behaviour. For example, he argues at one point that Lenin’s turn from study circles to agitation is an early example of stick bending, whereas Lenin did not convince others of the need for agitation—others convinced him. But Binh presents us a caricature of Cliff that makes Binh’s own assessment, which in reality mirrors much of what Cliff presents, appear more insightful than it actually is.

**Conclusion**

Why a review of a book written more than three decades ago; one, moreover, that most people haven’t even read? If we are to judge by the article’s dedication -- “to anyone and everyone who has sacrificed in the name of ‘building the revolutionary party’” -- Binh must be exorcising some pretty haunting political demons. Given the weakness of Binh’s case, what possibly could be his motivation for writing this? To quote one contributor to *Marxmail* on the Binh’s article—why this “exercise in misguided and unproductive pedantry?”

To get at what he is saying, it is necessary to refer to another of Pham’s writings, “Bolshevism in context”, a reply he wrote to a speech by Paul Le Blanc:

> “Leninists” project their conceptions of organization back in time onto the Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party to the point that the actual historical development of the RSDLP becomes incomprehensible.

This is precisely one of the things Cliff avoids in his treatment of Lenin. In his review of Cliff’s book, Duncan Hallas adds a “word of caution”, after which he quotes Lenin’s famous statement about the organisational structure of the
communist parties promulgated by the Comintern in 1921. Lenin agreed with it, but considered it to be “too Russian”, explaining: “I am sure that no foreigner can read it.” Not, said Lenin, because it is written in Russian, but because “we have not learnt how to present our Russian experience to foreigners”. Hallas continues:

It is the spirit, not the letter, of the Bolshevik experience that is valuable. The differences between the Russia of 1910 and Britain – or Germany or the USA or wherever – in the 1970s are enormous.

It is simplemindedness to believe that the answer to today’s problems can be found by an “appropriate” (actually, often highly inappropriate) reference to Lenin’s life and works without consideration of the circumstances of the time.

One of the great strengths of Cliff’s book is that it sets Lenin’s changing and developing ideas in the context of the struggle, of the living movement and the concrete yet ever-changing conditions in which it fought to exist and to grow.

What Binh says next in this article shows that it is he who wishes to “project” his “conceptions of organization back in time”:

The Bolsheviks believed the working class should play the leading role in overthrowing the Tsar and establishing a capitalist democracy; the Mensheviks argued (logically) that only the capitalist class could play the leading role in establishing their rule via a capitalist democracy (the Bolshevik idea of a worker-led revolution voluntarily handing power to their exploiters and enemies didn't make any sense to them).

The point is that the “revolutionary Marxist program” did not separate the Bolsheviks from the Mensheviks for most of the RSDLP’s history. What separated them was the actual class struggle and their practical orientation to it. When the program they shared with the Mensheviks became an impediment to fighting for the interests of the working class, the Bolsheviks modified it.

This is a quite charitable presentation of the Mensheviks’ views, whose “practical orientation” in the “actual class struggle” was determined by a fundamentally different conception of the role of the working class in the struggle against tsarism. To say that both were for the overthrow of autocracy tells us practically nothing, since the populists, the Socialist Revolutionaries, were for the same thing.

The Mensheviks wished to subordinate the interests of the working class to those of the bourgeois liberals. The Bolsheviks considered the bourgeoisie counterrevolutionary—that is, a class that would in the face of upheaval turn against the revolution. The leading role in the struggle should therefore fall to the working class, in alliance with the peasantry. The Mensheviks worried that the spectre of workers’ power would “frighten” the bourgeoisie away from the revolution; the Bolsheviks wanted to build an independent working-class party so that the bourgeoisie could not hold the working class in lead strings.

Binh wishes to call these irreconcilable differences strategic rather than programmatic. Yet each had a diametrically opposed conception of the nature of the coming revolution. In one scenario the exploiters of the working class lead the revolution; in the other the workers lead the revolution against their exploiters. A cursory glance at the history of the conflict between these two factions shows that the Mensheviks’ line was “an impediment to fighting for the interests of the working class” well before 1917. When a strategic difference becomes one of entirely different class orientations, then I think we can safely say that the strategic differences are also principled, programmatic differences—the kind that Lenin considered “split” questions.

Binh appears to be taking Trotsky’s pre-1917 “conciliationist” line (which Trotsky later repudiated) that the differences were not substantial enough (since both saw Russia’s revolution as “bourgeois”) for a split. After the Prague congress Trotsky attempted to organise the “August Bloc”, an effort to unite all the different factions of the movement. It began to collapse immediately after its first gathering. “The great historical significance of Lenin’s policy”, Trotsky later wrote of his policy of unity at any cost, “was still unclear to me at that time, his policy of irreconcilable ideological
demarcation and, when necessary, split, for the purposes of welding and tempering the core of the truly revolutionary party”.

Binh apparently rejects these conclusions. Perhaps his model is the August Bloc. This isn’t a guess. He says in his article “Occupied and the tasks of socialists”:

Out of clouds of pepper spray and phalanxes of riot cops a new generation of revolutionaries is being forged, and it would be a shame if the Peter Camejos, Max Elbaums, Angela Davises, Dave Clines and Huey Newtons of this generation end up in separate “competing” socialist groups as they did in the 1960s. Now is the time to begin seriously discussing the prospect of regroupment, of liquidating outdated boundaries we have inherited, of finding ways to work closely together for our common ends.

Above all else, now is the time to take practical steps towards creating a broad-based radical party that in today’s context could easily have thousands of active members and even more supporters.

First of all, is absurd to compare the sectarian rivalries of the 1960s, in which Maoist and Stalinist sects without practically identical politics railed at each other about who is the “true vanguard”, to the factional disputes in the Russian movement between its revolutionary and reformist wing—organisations that had become mass parties in 1905 with deep roots in the working class. Secondly, a “united” socialist organisation that has in its ranks both those who consider North Korea, China and Vietnam socialist, and those who think that they are bureaucratic despotism; both Stalinists and genuine Marxists; and both supporters and opponents of the Democratic Party would be a still-born project. It is one thing for leftists of different politics to “work together”—this has and will continue to happen. It is another thing to think that simply lumping forces together with diametrically different politics and methods of work will create any kind of functional, practical unity. Certainly that is one lesson of the Bolshevik experience worth preserving. That is not to say that broad socialist party independent and in opposition to the Democratic Party wouldn’t be a great advance if such a thing were possible in the United States today—what Binh proposes, however, would not produce such a result.

Viewed from a pre-1914 prism, the disagreements and organisational maneuvring in the Russian socialist movement perhaps appear, as it does in Binh’s piece, as a tempest in a teapot: the differences were not “programmatic”, the disagreements are “exaggerated”, and so on. But the collapse of the Second International in 1914 and its capitulation to wartime chauvinism surely puts all of these disputes, as the did for Lenin, in a completely new light. From here, he suddenly realises that what he has been doing in Russian—attempting to draw organisational lines of demarcation between revolutionaries and reformists—is an international task. In 1918, as Europe begins to enter its own revolutionary ferment after the October Revolution, Lenin laments, “Europe’s greatest misfortune and danger is that it has no revolutionary party.” The founding of the Communist International was aimed at solving that problem.

Today we are very far from such considerations. There are no mass workers’ parties of any political stripe. Despite the growing crisis of capitalism and the re-emergence of struggle and revolutionary ferment, working-class organisations and the left remain weak internationally. There are no genuine revolutionary parties; indeed, there are no examples yet of successful new “broad-based” left parties. As revolutionaries, our task is not to turn our back on the project of building a revolutionary party, that is, a party of revolutionary workers, but to determine in what ways we can play a role in creating the conditions in the future where one can begin to take shape.

There are only two possible conclusions as to what is Binh’s purpose: either he is merely providing a “service” by pointing out how useless and damaging Building the Party is, and therefore saving countless activists from its deliberate falsehoods. Or Binh wrote this to make a particular case, about Lenin and “Leninism”, that there is no “Leninist conception of the party”, defined as one that organises only revolutionary workers, the vanguard of the class, and creates organisational lines of demarcation between itself and reformists. This framework would explain many of Binh’s points, for example, that there was no split in 1912, or his downplaying of Lenin and Martov’s difference over party membership. If this is indeed his, albeit weak, case, he should have gone about it in a less backhanded manner.
“Paul D’Amato and the Red Condom”

By Louis Proyect

In the latest installment in the ISO’s defense of Tony Cliff against Pham Binh’s critique (the entire exchange can be seen here), Paul D’Amato makes a highly revealing statement in the conclusion of an article titled “The Mangling of Tony Cliff“:

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Out of clouds of pepper spray and phalanxes of riot cops a new generation of revolutionaries is being forged, and it would be a shame if the Peter Camejos, Max Elbaums, Angela Davises, Dave Clines and Huey Newtons of this generation end up in separate “competing” socialist groups as they did in the 1960s. Now is the time to begin seriously discussing the prospect of regroupment, of liquidating outdated boundaries we have inherited, of finding ways to work closely together for our common ends.

Above all else, now is the time to take practical steps towards creating a broad-based radical party that in today’s context could easily have thousands of active members and even more supporters.

First of all, is absurd to compare the sectarian rivalries of the 1960s, in which Maoist and Stalinist sects without [I believe that the comrade editor of the ISO magazine meant “with” rather than “without” here] practically identical politics railed at each other about who is the “true vanguard”, to the factional disputes in the Russian movement between its revolutionary and reformist wing—organisations that had become mass parties in 1905 with deep roots in the working class. Secondly, a “united” socialist organisation that has in its ranks both those who consider North Korea, China and Vietnam socialist, and those who think that they are bureaucratic despotism; both Stalinists and genuine Marxists; and both supporters and opponents of the Democratic Party would be a still-born project. It is one thing for leftists of different politics to “work together”—this has and will continue to happen. It is another thing to think that simply lumping forces together with diametrically different politics and methods of work will create any kind of functional, practical unity. Certainly that is one lesson of the Bolshevik experience worth preserving. That is not to
say that broad socialist party independent and in opposition to the Democratic Party wouldn’t be a great advance if such a thing were possible in the United States today—what Binh proposes, however, would not produce such a result.

You’ll note that D’Amato does not include Cuba alongside the other “bureaucratic despotisms” (a curious term given the ISO’s past insistence on describing such societies as “state capitalist”. Maybe that’s because it would irritate Paul LeBlanc, who despite his enthusiasm for the ISO’s approach, might still consider Cuba an exemplary society despite the onerous conditions it operates under. More to the point, is it really useful to apply the term “socialist” to Cuba, if it is one that can only be satisfied by a powerful industrialized country of the sort that Marx and Engels wrote about in the 19th century as being the first expected to break with capitalism?

One can certainly agree with D’Amato that we cannot build a party with supporters of the Democratic Party but that is something of a red herring since the CPUSA or the Committees of Correspondence would have little interest in a broad based socialist party to begin with.

This is not the only example of wariness about such a project heard from an ISO leader. In 2007 Todd Chretien gave a speech titled “Lenin’s theory of the party” that drew a sharp distinction between Eugene V. Debs and V.I. Lenin. It sounds very much like the sort of thing that would be presented to “newbies”, some of it bordering on the comical—especially the business about Lenin scratching his head:

Lenin developed a very different approach. He began with an idea very similar to Debs’ because that was basically how all socialist parties in the world—from Germany to the United States to France—organized at that time. Lenin started with that broad tent idea that the central issue was for all socialists to form a single, united party. At first they tried at the local level in Petersburg in the early 1890s, forming a group called the League for the Emancipation of Labor—perhaps not the best name anyone ever thought up. Lenin and his friends did have some early success, organizing protests and inspiring strikes or influencing spontaneous ones, and they were able to introduce socialist ideas to an important number of workers. However, this type of organization faced two problems. First, just like in the American Socialist Party, tension began to develop between emerging left and right wings. Compounding that problem in Russia was the question of tsarist repression. A couple of years after forming the league, Lenin and most of the other leaders found themselves in prison. So, after sixteen months in solitary confinement, Lenin scratches his head and says, “Well, that really didn’t work. We can’t just go around handing out leaflets, asking everyone to join us, because the police just send spies to get our membership lists. [missing closed quote in the original]

Even if this was intended to enlighten new-comers to the socialist movement, it is not that far removed from what LeBlanc and other ideological heavyweights stated in response to Lars Lih in a Historical Materialism symposium that I discussed a while back. They gave props to Lih for documenting Lenin’s commitment to building a party modeled on Kautsky’s party in Germany, but insist that Lenin came up with something new under the impact of the betrayal of socialist parliamentarians in 1914, when they voted for war credits. This breach was only a culmination of growing differences over principle that was reflected earlier in 1912 when Lenin broke with the Menshevik “liquidators”.

I summarize all the arguments against Lih here but will include just one example below to give you a sense of their consensus around the idea that Lenin built a party of a “new type” unlike the swamp that Eugene V. Debs presided over, or the Russian social democracy before Lenin wised up and booted the Mensheviks. These are Paul LeBlanc’s words:

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 was building a very different party than the actual SPD.

D’Amato feels that Pham Binh wants to destroy all the progress that the left has made since 1912-1914, when Lenin moved inexorably toward purging the Mensheviks from the Russian revolutionary movement. He likens him to Leon Trotsky, whose cardinal sin was trying to keep the party together. Let’s repeat what D’Amato wrote:
Binh appears to be taking Trotsky’s pre-1917 “conciliationist” line (which Trotsky later repudiated) that the differences were not substantial enough (since both saw Russia’s revolution as “bourgeois”) for a split. After the Prague congress Trotsky attempted to organise the “August Bloc”, an effort to unite all the different factions of the movement.

If you want to get the full flavor of what Lenin thought of Trotsky’s efforts, I recommend “The Liquidators Against the Party“:

There is one little lesson to be drawn from this affair by those abroad who are sighing for unity, and who recently hatched the sheet Za Partiyu in Paris. To build up a party, it is not enough to be able to shout “unity”; it is also necessary to have a political programme, a programme of political action. The bloc comprising the liquidators, Trotsky, the Vperyod group, the Poles, the pro-Party Bolsheviks, the Paris Mensheviks, and so on and so forth, was foredoomed to ignominious failure, because it was based on an unprincipled approach, on hypocrisy and hollow phrases. As for those who sigh, it would not be amiss if they finally made up their minds on that extremely complicated and difficult question: With whom do they want to have unity? If it is with the liquidators, why not say so without mincing? But if they are against unity with the liquidators, then what sort of unity are they sighing for?

Gosh, who would want to be a latter-day Leon Trotsky given this searing indictment? As should be obvious from this, there were two parties in Czarist Russia, one was reformist and the other was revolutionary. Trotsky’s sin was trying to mix the two together, coming up with a Debs-type formation that would have certainly been inadequate to overthrowing the capitalist system in 1917. Forming the Bolshevik Party was necessary to keep the workers movement free from class-collaborationist germs—a red condom so to speak.

There’s only one problem with this. When Lenin issued the April Theses in 1917, he was opposed by a majority of the Bolshevik Central Committee. Was there a hole in the condom?

Meanwhile, the promiscuous Trotsky who liked to sleep around with reformists was the only prominent socialist leader who embraced the April Theses, understanding them as consistent with his own theory of permanent revolution. Within the year, Trotsky decided that Lenin was right all along on the “broad” party question and became committed to safe sex, the end-product of which is the various abortions of the Fourth International and parties that grew out of it like Tony Cliff’s international organization. All were committed to the idea that you formulate a “true” program of revolutionary socialism and indoctrinate new members into holding high its banner. Sadly, history has pointed out the similarity between this methodology and that of the Jehovah’s Witnesses or Scientology.
“United States: Another socialist left is possible – a reply to Paul D’Amato”

By Pham Binh

The first response to my “Occupy and the tasks of socialists“ piece to be written by a leading member of an US socialist organisation is emblematic of what is wrong with the US socialist left.

I am referring to “The mangling of Tony Cliff“, written by Paul D’Amato, International Socialist Organization (ISO) member and managing editor of the International Socialist Review. He responds to my Tasks piece in his reply to a book review I did, writing:

Binh appears to be taking Trotsky’s pre-1917 “conciliationist” line (which Trotsky later repudiated) that the differences were not substantial enough (since both saw Russia’s revolution as “bourgeois”) for a split. After the Prague congress Trotsky attempted to organise the “August Bloc”, an effort to unite all the different factions of the movement. It began to collapse immediately after its first gathering. “The great historical significance of Lenin’s policy”, Trotsky later wrote of his policy of unity at any cost, “was still unclear to me at that time, his policy of irreconcilable ideological demarcation and, when necessary, split, for the purposes of welding and tempering the core of the truly revolutionary party”. Binh apparently rejects these conclusions. Perhaps his model is the August Bloc. This isn’t a guess. He says in his article “Occupy and the tasks of socialists“:

Out of clouds of pepper spray and phalanxes of riot cops a new generation of revolutionaries is being forged, and it would be a shame if the Peter Camejos, Max Elbaums, Angela Davises, Dave Clines and Huey Newtons of this generation end up in separate “competing” socialist groups as they did in the 1960s. Now is the time to begin seriously discussing the prospect of regroupment, of liquidating outdated boundaries we have inherited, of finding ways to work closely together for our common ends.

Above all else, now is the time to take practical steps towards creating a broad-based radical party that in today’s context could easily have thousands of active members and even more supporters.

First of all, is absurd to compare the sectarian rivalries of the 1960s, in which Maoist and Stalinist sects without practically identical politics railed at each other about who is the “true vanguard”, to the factional disputes in the Russian movement between its revolutionary and reformist wing—organisations that had become mass parties in 1905 with deep roots in the working class. Secondly, a “united” socialist organisation that has in its ranks both those who consider North Korea, China and Vietnam socialist, and those who think that they are bureaucratic despotism; both Stalinists and genuine Marxists; and both supporters and opponents of the Democratic Party would be a still-born project.

Lesson: if you want to ignite a debate among US socialists about what is to be done here and now in the middle of the Occupy uprising, don’t write about Occupy, write a critical review of a Lenin biography written in 1975 by someone who died over a decade ago. Then the sparks will fly.
This is exactly what’s wrong with us, the US socialist left. The fact that there has been almost no concrete and explicit discussion on the US socialist left about the new tasks Occupy’s eruption has created for us is disturbing. What little discussion happens around these issues occurs either in international forums like Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal or on the personal blogs of unaffiliated socialists like Unrepentant Marxist instead of through the US socialist left’s existing infrastructure — web sites, newspapers and magazines. This is another strong indicator that something is deeply wrong with us and how we operate.

To reply to D’Amato’s points: we are not in situation remotely comparable to early 20th century Russia, no one is trying to unite forces with diametrically opposed practical orientations under one roof, nor am I remotely comparable to Trotsky (a real shock to some, no doubt).

The words “North Korea” do not belong in any serious discussion about socialist organising in the context of Occupy. Period.

D’Amato claims it is “absurd to compare the sectarian rivalries of the 1960s, in which Maoist and Stalinist sects with practically identical politics railed at each other about who is the ‘true vanguard’, to the factional disputes in the Russian movement between its revolutionary and reformist wing” a few lines after he makes that very comparison between my call for liquidating the outdated, inherited boundaries that divide today’s US socialist left and the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky’s foolish 1912 attempt to unite all factions of Russia’s socialist movement in an attempt to paper over profound practical differences.

What basis for unity?

Absurd comparisons aside, D’Amato raises a crucial point: on what basis can or should the socialist left unite?

D’Amato’s answer focuses on the negatives, on the divides he claims we can’t bridge. He writes: “a ‘united’ socialist organisation that has in its ranks both those who consider North Korea, China and Vietnam socialist, and those who think that they are bureaucratic despotism; both Stalinists and genuine Marxists; and both supporters and opponents of the Democratic Party would be a still-born project.”

Paul LeBlanc, a prominent ISO member, defends the Cuban government and does not support the “call for the revolutionary overthrow of that regime by the Cuban working class”. Does this make the ISO a “still-born project”? My answer is no. Perhaps D’Amato disagrees.

D’Amato continues:

It is one thing for leftists of different politics to “work together”—this has and will continue to happen. It is another thing to think that simply lumping forces together with diametrically different politics and methods of work will create any kind of functional, practical unity. Certainly that is one lesson of the Bolshevik experience worth preserving. That is not to say that broad socialist party independent and in opposition to the Democratic Party wouldn’t be a great advance if such a thing were possible in the United States today—what Binh proposes, however, would not produce such a result.

D’Amato’s formulations raise more questions than they answer. Are we to believe that the International Socialist Organization, Solidarity, Socialist Action, Socialist Organizer and Socialist Alternative have “diametrically different politics and methods of work” that preclude “any kind of functional, practical unity” in a common socialist organisation?

There’s no doubt that a political party requires a coherent vision and program or platform. The real question is: why must that coherence include a single point of view or a narrow range of views on what precisely the USSR was, or what
Cuba is? Does anyone in the 99% have a burning desire to know where we stand on these historical and theoretical issues when so many of us face mortgage foreclosure, eviction and long-term unemployment?

If the ISO can include in its ranks comrades who disagree on Cuba, what reason is there for organisational boundaries to separate most groups on the socialist left? Why insist that each group replicate each other’s publications, study groups, educational and public meetings with almost identical political content as Dan Dimaggio pointed out instead of pooling our scarce resources and creating a more fruitful division of labour so that the socialist left can communicate with people in a 21st century manner as the far right has begun to do?

These are the questions we should be debating and figuring out answers to, not who is a modern-day Menshevik and what can’t be done.

Many comrades have asked me, “why can’t socialist groups work on joint projects using the ‘united front’ method where we ‘march separately, strike together’?”

Of course we can continue to work together on a united front basis. United fronts are necessary, but not sufficient for the tasks Occupy has put before us. Limiting our cooperation to united fronts means accepting the weak, fractured state of the socialist left inherited from our predecessors as a given instead of challenging, undermining, circumventing and eventually overcoming it.

Marching separately in the middle of a major social upheaval makes it difficult for us to strike together in the way that we need to if we want to have a meaningful, practical impact on the direction and character of Occupy.

Egypt’s Revolutionary Socialists figured this out and, in conjunction with other forces, launched the Workers’ Democratic Party; why can’t we do the same?

If the socialist left emerges from Occupy somewhat larger, with more cooperation between some of its component parts, and its present divided state intact, then we will have failed to capitalise on a once-in-a-generation opportunity to unify our ranks, re-merge with the working class and make socialism a force to be reckoned with on the US political landscape once again. Missing such an opportunity would be criminal, especially when almost one-third of the population of the United States has a positive view of socialism.

The question remains: on what basis can or should the socialist left unite?

I don’t have all the answers (remember, I’m not Trotsky).

My suggestion is to start with the obvious: opposition to capitalism (theory) and fighting all forms of austerity (practice). Every self-respecting socialist and even some who identify with anarchism could get together in a common organisation on this theoretical-practical basis.

What about …?

What about reform versus revolution? What about the Democratic Party? What about (insert your worrisome issue here)?

As D’Amato says, “Today we are very far from such considerations.” These issues can only be resolved along the way, in practice, as we run up against them in our common journey in a common organisation that does not yet exist, but can and should.

The socialist left produces very convincing propaganda explaining “the need to break with the Democratic Party” but has proven unable to engineer such a break in the past seven decades. Refusing to unite “as a matter of principle” with forces and people who disagree with us (or who are confused, undecided or vacillate) on the Democratic Party in a common socialist organisation is the first step to ensuring that such a break never happens.
The Socialist Party of the Eugene V. Debs era established a tradition of (1) refusing to vote for Democratic politicians, (2) opposing what was then called “fusion” with the Democratic Party and (3) competing with both parties of the 1% wherever and whenever possible. This tradition arose on the basis of the experience gained by the populist movement, the first of many grassroots uprisings diverted by the Democratic Party.

The US socialist left can revive this old tradition for the following reasons. Half of the voting population abstained from presidential elections even before Occupy. The popularity of Ron Paul among occupiers and young people is a strong indication that people are so desperate for someone to run against the political system that they are willing to overlook the racist newsletters his campaign opportunistically produced for fundraising purposes, his opposition to regulating Wall Street and his refusal to break with the Republican Party. Last but not least, for many occupiers, President Obama was their last hope that the US political system might be able to somehow redeem itself. Nothing inspires direct action like electing a fresh-faced newcomer talking about hope and change who puts a knife into your back the minute he becomes commander-in-chief.

Now is the time for us to think big, take bold initiatives and fearlessly experiment. Doing so will lead to difficulties, false starts and even failures, but without failures in Wisconsin and Bloombergville Occupy Wall Street would not have succeeded. We cannot continue to cling to the existing state, methods and boundaries of the socialist left out of fear, inertia, or both, if we hope to create a broad revolutionary movement that threatens the rule of the 1% in this country.

Multi-tendency party

What would a common socialist organisation look like? How would it function?

Again, these are issues we have to figure out in practice, as we go along. Socialism cannot be designed or created by an enlightened few armed with a detailed “Marxist” blueprint; if we wish to remain true to that vision, a common socialist organisation that unites various trends cannot be dismissed because we don’t know in advance what it will look like, how it will work, the concrete moments of its development.

What we can say with certainty is this: rejecting the multi-tendency model leaves us with its opposite, the single-tendency model. This model has crippled both the Stalinist and the Trotskyist wings of the socialist movement internationally for decades, although in radically different ways, producing defeats of world-historic proportions for the former and competing sects, mutual excommunications and permanent irrelevance for the latter.

Multi-tendency groups already exist on the US political scene: the John Reed Society at Harvard, the Revolutionary Students Union on campuses in Utah, the Socialist Student Union at the University of Michigan. They are far from being “still-born projects”. They produce propaganda, engage in agitation, put on cultural events, create literature and bring people together socially, recreating on a small scale the vibrant, comradely culture that was once part and parcel of our movement’s glory days when Big Bill Haywood, Eugene Debs, Lucy Parsons, Emma Goldman and other titans differed with one another while fighting the battles we read about in our labour history books.

Another socialist left is possible. We can build it together.

Anyone who wants to participate in making these possibilities into realities should email thenorthstar.info@gmail.com.
The Occupy movement has been having a profound impact on the socialist left in the United States. I want to share some information on this, focusing on my own experience, and relate it to broader issues of Marxism and organisation that I have been engaged with for some time.

In my native Pittsburgh, members of the International Socialist Organization, the Party for Socialism and Liberation, the Workers International League and Committees of Correspondence, plus a number of independent socialists have been active (some more, some less) in the Occupy movement. I know similar things can be said of the Occupy movement in a number of other cities. More than this, one can easily find substantial reports, animated discussions and analyses about the Occupy movement in publications and on websites associated with the International Socialist Organization (ISO), Solidarity, Socialist Action, Committees of Correspondence, Freedom Road Socialist Organization, the Socialist Party, Socialist Alternative, Workers International League, Workers World Party, the Party for Socialism and Liberation – and I am confident that the list is not complete. All of this is easily accessible online. And all of these organisations, I think, are wrestling with the question of what new tasks are raised for us by the Occupy movement in which many of us are actively involved.

Some (for example Pham Binh in a recent contribution published in *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal*) have called for us all to merge together in a single revolutionary organisation, implying that this would make us more effective at this key moment. Based on my own experience, it seems obvious to me that this would be a serious mistake. Here I will argue that there is a better approach, consistent both with my experience and with a party-building perspective that I have been writing about for some time.

**Coming together in a common revolutionary party**

In Pittsburgh, members of the Party for Socialism and Liberation, the Workers International League and my own ISO are not in the same organisation. This has not prevented us from working quite well together in anti-war, pro-public transport and Occupy-related struggles. If instead – in an effort to create a single socialist group – we were enmeshed in struggles with each other over what should be our common political program, how we should define the very conception of socialism, etc., I think our ability to work effectively would be undermined. Now we can agree to disagree on certain principled questions (to be discussed and debated in appropriate contexts) while forming a positive working relationship around questions where we stand on common ground.

Ultimately, people from these groups may come together in the same revolutionary socialist organisation – just as many Bolsheviks, for example, found themselves together in the Russian Communist Party with comrades who had been Mensheviks, Left-Socialist Revolutionaries, Bundists, anarchists and others. There was a similar coming-together process in the formation of the early Communist movement in the United States and other countries. Momentous experiences and historical forces have a way of bringing revolutionaries from different backgrounds together. Such
forces are at work, and such experiences are shaping up, that can bring such an outcome to the United States in the future.

Many of us on the US socialist left agree on the need for such an organisation. A working-class revolution and socialist transformation in the United States will not come about spontaneously. It will come about only if knowledgeable activists and skilled organisers, dedicated to such goals, work very hard to bring them about. This would add up to a US equivalent to what Bolshevism was in Russia. Such a thing cannot be forced through cobbling together different socialist groups. Nor will it be a replica of Russian Bolshevism. But the effort to bring such a thing into existence can be strengthened, as we are intimately involved in the struggles of our time, by critically engaging with the ideas and experiences of Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, and other revolutionary Marxists from the 20th century’s early communist movement, as well as by the history of US class struggles and revolutionary traditions.

As we engage in the struggles of today and tomorrow, the theory and history of those who went before should be pondered and shared as widely and deeply as possible. Those who are growing into effective activists and organisers in the mass struggles unfolding in our time can benefit from this. Such activists, and the growing number of workers and oppressed people who increasingly share in their vision, also absorbing their knowledge and political skills, can grow into a powerful force to bring about the political, social and economic transformation that we need. As a mass phenomenon, this becomes part of a broad labour-radical subculture, nourishing a revolutionary class consciousness that will animate a substantial and increasingly influential layer of the working class – which constitutes a working-class “vanguard” that is the only serious basis for the US equivalent of Bolshevism.

As Lenin explained in *Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*, any effort to create a cohesive, disciplined revolutionary party in the absence of such a development will result in phrase-mongering and pretentious clowning destined to fall flat on its face. (Many of us have certainly seen examples of that!) Yet as Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg and others have also emphasised, it will take the dynamic and creative interplay of genuine mass struggles and a serious party of the socialist vanguard to bring about the revolutionary power shift, the radical democracy, and the socialist reconstruction of society that are so badly needed. That is the goal, and its realisation transcends current existence of all existing organisations on the US socialist left.

Today there is no Leninist party in the United States. There is no “embryo” or “nucleus” of such a party in our country (although some would-be Leninist groups would not agree with this, because they think they are that). The responsibility of all is to help create the preconditions for the crystallisation of a labour-radical subculture, a revolutionary class consciousness, a mass vanguard layer of the working class, an accumulation of experience and understanding, and cadres that will bring into being an organisation, a genuine party, that can help usher in what Eugene V. Debs once called “the third American revolution”. The coming together of a revolutionary workers’ party is not possible now – the effort to force that into being, whether through self-appointment of one or another small group or through some hot-house mergers of small groups, will be counter-productive.

For now, we must immerse ourselves in the struggles of our time, create united fronts of socialists and others, carry out serious education on what actually happened in struggles of the past, engage in the serious-minded discussion and debate necessary for continuing political clarification. Debate and united struggle can go together. In 1905, Lenin called for “a fighting unity” of socialist and revolutionary groups against the tsarist regime while urging Russian activists “not to spoil things by vainly trying to lump together heterogeneous elements. We shall inevitably have to . . . march separately, but we can . . . strike together more than once and particularly now.” Insisting that “in the interests of the revolution our ideal should by no means be that all parties, all trends and shades of opinion fuse in a revolutionary chaos”, Lenin emphasised that “only full clarity and definiteness in their mutual relations and in their attitude toward the revolutionary proletariat can ensure maximum success for the revolutionary movement” (“A Militant Agreement for the Uprising”, in Lenin, *Revolution, Democracy, Socialism*, pp. 177, 179-180).

The challenge of Occupy
As one who has been immersed in Occupy Pittsburgh from its inception, I am seeking to apply this orientation to the realities around me. Along with many others in this remarkable movement, I have been engaged in an intensive thinking, thinking, thinking process, finding the new experiences challenging and changing me in multiple ways. There is much that I still must process before drawing all of the conclusions that are inherent in the unfolding reality of Occupy. But there are several things I am certainly able to state for purposes of this discussion.

The statement of principles adopted by Occupy Pittsburgh in November 2011 (consistent with those adopted by Occupy Wall Street in New York) gives a sense of the nature of our struggle:

We recognize that this prevents genuine democracy and deprives us of our liberties, sacrifices our health, safety and well-being, threatens our relationship with the rest of the world, has destroyed and continues to destroy cultures and peoples throughout the world, and critically compromises the ecological systems that sustain life itself.

We are a nonviolent, decentralized movement working to create a just society.

We are claiming a space for public dialogue and the practice of direct democracy for the purpose of generating and implementing solutions accessible to everyone.

To this end, we are exercising our rights to assemble peacefully and to speak freely, thus demonstrating our commitment to the long work of transforming the structures that produce and sustain these injustices.

Also to that end, we are working against all forms of inequality and discrimination including those based on age, ability, diagnosis, size, religion or lack thereof, class, culture, immigration status, nationality, history of incarceration, housing status, race, color, ethnicity, indigenous status, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation.

We stand in solidarity with those who have come before us, in Pittsburgh and elsewhere, who have fought for political, social and economic justice.

We are united, in strength and courage with the Occupations around the world. We are your next-door neighbors. We are your friends. We are your relatives. We are the 99%.

The Occupy movement, in its opposition of the 99% to the 1%, creates, in highly popularised form, a class analysis that is consistent with Marxism. The modern-day system of corporate rule and exploitation overseen by the wealthy 1% (and their servants in the upper fringe of the 99%) is what we mean by capitalism. The heart and soul, and great majority, of the 99% are the working class (blue collar, white collar, unemployed, etc.). The goal of establishing the democratic control of the 99% over our economic and political life is what we understand as socialism. This actually reflects radical traditions that run deep in the history of the United States.

It was, for example, Martin Luther King, Jr., who emphasised that the triple evils of racism, exploitation and war are interrelated and deeply rooted in the very nature of the US social-economic system, insisting that the “whole structure must be changed... American must be born again!” (See “Where Do We Go From Here”, in A Testament of Hope, pp. 250-251.) What the Occupy movement has done, and the way it has defined itself, has resonated powerfully among millions of people in the United States. We in the Occupy movement have a responsibility to be true to that, and to sustain and expand it to the best of our abilities. What we are about, as defined in the Occupy Pittsburgh statement, involves winning the overwhelming majority of the 99% in support of and struggle for the commitments and goals of replacing the power of the 1% with the power of the 99%.

Socialists involved in Occupy have a responsibility to explain how we see things – that this movement of and for the 99% is basically a working-class movement, and that its stated goal of waging a struggle for universal human rights, a central aspect of which is economic justice (the possibility of a decent life for each and every person), is – along with
the notion of rule by the people over our economic and political life – what socialism is all about. More than this, our Occupy movement represents a life-giving revitalisation for the labor movement as a whole.

In the United States, the trade union movement has often been mistakenly identified as “the labour movement”, but it is only a defensive fragment of the labour movement. Once upon a time, the trade unions were built by radicals and revolutionaries – varieties of socialists and communists and anarchists and other labour radicals (some of whose voices can be found, for example, in the anthology Work and Struggle). They provided militancy, broad social vision and tough-minded democracy that gave life to the unions. They also built mass movements for social reforms (universal suffrage, an eight-hour workday, an end to child labour, for public education, women’s rights, opposition to racism, and more), and some of them laboured to build working-class political parties, although this had much less success in the US than in other countries. A full-fledged labour movement consists of all these elements.

Since the 1930s and 1940s, there has been a narrowing of the labour movement to the trade unions alone, accompanied by a marginalisation of the radicals and revolutionaries, and an accommodation with the corporations and the pro-capitalist state (and entanglement with the pro-capitalist Democratic Party). Over the years, the spirit has increasingly gone out of this fragmented labour movement, with hierarchy and bureaucracy crowding out rank-and-file democracy, and with workers feeling increasingly alienated from this fragment of a movement that claims to speak for them. Much of the current union leadership recognises that it is caught in a dead-end. Facing an extended onslaught from the big business corporations of capitalism, combined with economic downturn, it seems unlikely that the unions will be able to survive unless there is a change in the nature and orientation of the labour movement. More than anything the union leadership has been able to generate in recent decades, the Occupy movement has powerfully placed issues of economic justice in the national consciousness and mainstream political dialogue. It has tilted political reality in a way that opens up new possibilities and new, life-giving spirit for organised labour.

This helps to explain the unprecedented support by organised labour for the radicalism of the Occupy movement, and a strong trend within Occupy toward working together with unions and certain reform struggles (for health care, public transport, education, etc.), which helps to bring into being a larger, more diverse, multifaceted working-class movement. One of the strengths of Occupy Pittsburgh has been its commitment to a close working relationship with the unions and other elements of the broadly defined working class of the Pittsburgh area. This defines the primary responsibility of socialists in the Occupy movement: helping to build a sense of class consciousness and class struggle, helping to nurture an undercurrent of socialist consciousness, helping to advance the possibility of a mass socialist consciousness and mass socialist movement in the foreseeable future, connected with real struggles for economic justice through direct confrontation with the wealthy 1% of corporate capitalism.

We have been subjected to evictions of our Occupy encampments from the public spaces (Pittsburgh, one of the last, being finally dislodged several days before this writing), where we directly and vibrantly confronted the authority of the capitalist power structure. There are important challenges we face while seeking to reorient to the new situation.

One challenge is represented by two fractions among some of our anarchist brothers and sisters – some of whom want to build more or less utopian “communities” and activist “families” as alternatives to the status quo (apart from both the 1% and from the 99%), others inclined to break with the unions and mount masked minority confrontations against the 1%, independently of the 99%. In either case, the resulting isolation of Occupy activists, it seems clear, would be bound to marginalise our movement.

A very different challenge comes from powerful forces – particularly among our trade union allies – that will be pushing in this presidential election year to draw all activism into the camp of the pro-capitalist Democratic Party. “There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organizations in the entire world”, Trotsky noted as World War II was beginning to unfold. “It is their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power.”

His analysis is worth lingering over: “They have to confront a centralized capitalist adversary, intimately bound up with state power... In the eyes of the bureaucracy of the trade union movement the chief task lies in ‘freeing’ the state from
the embrace of capitalism, in weakening its dependence on trusts [the big business corporations], in pulling it over to their side” (Trotsky, “Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay”, in *Writings in Exile*, p. 211). But the state in capitalist society is essentially an instrument for preserving the exploitative system of capitalism. Likewise, the presumed means for winning this capitalist instrument to “our side” – the Democratic Party – is absolutely committed to preserving the capitalist system. Given these realities, subordinating our struggle to a hoped-for Democratic Party victory is a highly dubious pathway for Occupy and the working class as a whole.

Such challenges are hardly new. Rosa Luxemburg noted the two dangers many years ago: “One is the loss of mass character; the other, the abandonment of its goal. One is the danger of sinking back to the condition of a sect; the other, the danger of becoming a movement of bourgeois [capitalist] social reform” (Luxemburg, “Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy”, in *Socialism or Barbarism*, p. 101).

This challenging moment is exactly the wrong time for socialists to channel their attention and energies into the project of merging into a multi-tendency socialist organisation. If all the members of all the socialist organisations in the United States were prepared to adhere to some ideal program and orientation free of “non-essentials” and sectarianism, and were able to do that quickly and efficiently, then such a notion could be considered reasonable. But to state the matter like that is to highlight its impossibility. On the other hand, I know from my experience that the kind of “fighting unity” Lenin spoke of – involving cooperation among members of different socialist groups, and united front type efforts – is something that is definitely possible and fruitful.

What we need to build with others, in this context, is an increasingly influential, dynamic, explicitly working-class current in the Occupy movement, a community-labour Occupy, which is both inclusive and politically independent. “The Occupy moment” may pass before the end of 2012. But for now socialists must remain committed to Occupy, and to helping draw its energies and activists into mass struggles of and for the working-class, around issues of transit, health care, education, housing, jobs, economic justice, environmental preservation, opposition to war, etc., at the same time doing what we can to build class consciousness and socialist consciousness.

In this context, and in the future struggles, socialists and their various organisations will have an opportunity to help create the pre-conditions a unified revolutionary party. This will involve the development struggles and a subculture that will help bring into being a class-conscious layer of the working class. It will also involve the accumulation and education and development of cadres, the organising experience and testing of political perspectives, the united front efforts and more that will create the possibilities for the creation of a mass revolutionary party of the working class. Many of us, currently in one or another organisation or in no organisation at the present, will be part of that.

**Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky**

In the face of new and challenging realities, it seems to me that it makes sense to share and make use of the ideas of Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and others associated with their revolutionary Marxist orientation. Their theorisations are based on a considerable amount of political experience accumulated by the global labour movement, buttressed by analyses coming from some of the finest minds associated with the revolutionary tradition. Given the persisting dynamics of global capitalism, the Marxism of Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and others from the early Communist movement continue to have considerable resonance for our own time. The Occupy movement, and the larger revitalised working-class movement that is struggling to come into being, can be helped enormously if revolutionary socialists engage in critically and creatively applying our perspectives to the realities around us, and within the next phase of Occupy and working-class struggles.

**Works cited**


“Falling out over a Cliff”

By Lars T Lih

An interesting debate has broken out concerning certain issues in the history of Bolshevism. Pham Binh started things off with a vociferous attack\(^1\) on the first volume of Tony Cliff’s biography of VI Lenin.\(^2\) Paul Le Blanc leapt in to defend Cliff and to dismiss Pham’s criticisms.\(^3\) Pham and le Blanc had a further exchange,\(^4\) and Paul D’Amato also weighed in.\(^5\)

My contribution to this discussion restricts itself to two specific issues: the 3rd Congress in 1905 and the Prague Conference in 1912. I feel compelled to make a statement because my work is cited both by Pham and Le Blanc; more to the point, I have familiarised myself with the original Russian-language sources for both episodes and therefore feel I have something to say. On one issue - the 1905 Congress - I will repeat a critique of Cliff that I have made twice before, since, insofar as I know, no-one has really responded to it. On the other issue - the 1912 Conference - recent study of primary sources has caused me to change my mind, with the result that I am cited in defence of views I no longer hold.\(^6\)

On the substance of these two historical issues I side with Pham against Cliff and his defenders. I must make clear, therefore, that my essay has nothing to say about any of the other issues concerning Cliff’s politics or about his Lenin biography as a whole that were brought up in the discussion. (Pham asserts that Cliff’s work “shaped the approach of subsequent investigations by academics like Lars T Lih”. Absolutely not, in my case.)

Even though I disagree with Cliff about the two episodes discussed in this essay, he is for the most part following reputable authority, and hardly to be singled out. Still, when an influential writer such as Cliff enshrines long-standing errors - and when writers with well-deserved reputations defend Cliff on precisely these errors - the cause of historical understanding requires critical attention to his interpretation.

‘Committee men’

Due to a Menshevik boycott, the 3rd Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Worker Party (RSDWP) in spring 1905 was exclusively Bolshevik in composition. Among the various debates that took place at this congress, one concerned the problem of recruiting workers to positions on local underground party committees, as opposed to the intelligenty (people with education), who then predominated.

In 1975, Tony Cliff published an influential description of this debate. Basing himself on earlier academic analyses, Cliff portrayed a dramatic showdown between Lenin, who wanted workers on the committees, and the Bolshevik komitetchiki or ‘committee men’, who did not. According to Cliff, the ‘committee men’ (members of local party committees) cited Lenin’s *What is to be done?* (1902) to support their case, and Lenin in response was forced to repudiate one of the book’s principal theses.
In 2006, in my book *Lenin rediscovered*, I did a fresh analysis of the original Russian-language congress records and concluded that Cliff’s description of the debate was factually inaccurate and highly misleading. Anyone who accepts and defends Cliff’s version of events at the 3rd Congress does not, in my considered view, understand either *What is to be done*? or the nature of Lenin’s relations to the larger Bolshevik collective. In 2010, I reprised this critique in the *Historical Materialism* symposium on *Lenin rediscovered*. Rather naively, I thought that further serious discussion of this issue, especially on the left, would at least take into account my detailed argument. But in 2012, a debate on this very issue has burst out as if my earlier critique did not exist. Pham Binh’s basic point is the same as mine: namely, that Cliff was badly mistaken when he portrayed the Bolshevik debate as a clash over the inherent desirability of having workers on local party committees. Pham does cite my work, but unfortunately, only on an irrelevant side issue. Instead of referring to my account of the actual debate, he builds his case on a Lenin document that proves little (these points are discussed below in more detail).

Nevertheless, I strongly agree with Pham’s essential position. Paul Le Blanc and Paul D’Amato defend Cliff, but they completely ignore my detailed account of the 3rd Congress. Worse still, Le Blanc characterises my position in such a misleading way that I appear to side with Le Blanc against Pham, which is definitely not the case.

I am forced to state my position for a third time - partly to clear up confusion about it, but mainly to try to get people to address the real issues at stake. After describing what actually happened in 1905, I will give Cliff’s description of the congress in his own words, restate my critique of Cliff and finally look at the current discussion.

Let us now turn to events at the 3rd Congress of the RSDWP in 1905. There was indeed a debate on the issue of recruiting workers to the committees. It was quite emotional; Lenin was strongly involved and sorely disappointed at the narrow defeat of a resolution offered by himself and Alexander Bogdanov (who drafted the text). There was a debate - but what was this debate about? The following statement by Pham Binh is entirely correct: “The debate at the 1905 3rd Congress was over how to recruit workers, not whether to recruit workers. No one argued against recruiting workers to party committees, as Cliff claimed.”

No-one at the congress disputed the goal of getting workers onto the committees, no-one thought the existing state of affairs was satisfactory, no-one thought that worker recruitment would hurt the work of the committees. In fact, a common objection to Lenin’s particular resolution was that it was too damned obvious, that it only reiterated goals that everybody shared, and that it did not go on to suggest any concrete solutions to what was admittedly a real problem.

The hugely interesting debate among the delegates was over the empirical realities on the ground. Were there enough available workers who were qualified for committee work? What were appropriate standards for assessing worker qualifications? Should these standards be the same as for intellectuals? Were the *intelligenty* on the committees in some way prejudiced against workers? Most of the delegates with recent practical experience in the underground thought that the most promising way to get more workers on the committees was to provide workers with the necessary qualifications by means of the kind of party education that (so it was claimed) had recently been neglected. In consequence, after Lenin’s resolution was turned down as unneeded, a resolution proposing this solution was passed unanimously (with one abstention). It contained the following language:

Under these circumstances [a “colossal growth” in the revolutionary proletarian movement], the recruitment of the greatest possible number of purposive workers to leadership roles in the movement in the capacity of agitators, propagandists and especially as members of local centres and all-party centres takes on exceptional importance, since such workers have the most direct connections to this movement and help connect the party to it. Precisely the inadequate number of such political leaders among the workers explains the comparative predominance observable up to now of *intelligenty* in party centres.

In other words: the congress unanimously recognised the urgency of recruiting workers to “party centres” at all levels.
The issue debated at the 3rd Congress - how to recruit workers to party committees under repressive underground conditions - is quite distinct from problems of party democracy. Issues of party democracy arose on three levels: the relations of the committees to the mass of social democratic members in a particular locality; the relation of the committees to higher party centres; the relation of the party to society as a whole. All three levels came up for discussion at the end of 1905. Some writers connect this later discussion to the earlier debate and see a year-long battle between Lenin and various 'committee men'. For example, in his usually reliable book Lenin and the revolutionary party, Paul Le Blanc writes about 1905: “Later in the year, Lenin wrote that it was ‘absolutely necessary to create … new legal and semi-legal organisations’.” After describing Lenin’s proposals made at the end of the year, Le Blanc comments: “At the 3rd Congress in April 1905, the Bolshevik committee men had revolted against such ideas and defeated a proposal offered by Lenin and Bogdanov reflecting this new orientation.”

This is incorrect and misleading. First, the political and social context at the end of the year was entirely different from the spring, because in the meantime the October Manifesto had granted widespread political freedoms, giving rise to a short-lived period called the ‘days of freedom’. Party democratisation was now conceivable on a much wider scale than under the vastly different underground conditions of the spring, when “creating new legal organisations” was not on the agenda. Second, Lenin’s proposals in late 1905 about party democratisation were not particularly controversial. To take his pronouncements made during the ‘days of freedom’ and retrofit them to the 3rd Congress in spring 1905, as Le Blanc and other writers do, is useful for making the praktiki look undemocratic, but it is not founded in fact.

Cliff’s account

Let us now turn to Cliff. The first thing about his account that caught my attention was his claim that people who opposed putting workers on the committees used What is to be done? to ‘buttress their position’. If this claim were true, it would present a real challenge to my own reading of What is to be done? To ensure that there is no ambiguity about his position, I will cite an extensive passage from Cliff. He writes as follows:

At the 3rd Congress, in the spring of 1905, Lenin and Bogdanov proposed a resolution urging the party to open its gates wide to workers, who should be brought forward to take a leading role in it, to “make every effort to strengthen the ties between the party and the masses of the working class by raising still wider sections of proletarians and semi-proletarians to full social democratic consciousness, by developing their revolutionary social democratic activity, by seeing to it that the greatest possible number of workers capable of leading the movement and the party organisations be advanced from among the mass of the working class to membership on the local centres and on the all-party centre, through the creation of a maximum number of working class organisations adhering to our party, by seeing to it that working class organisations unwilling or unable to enter the party should at least be associated with it” (VI Lenin Collected works Vol 8, Moscow 1977, pp409-10).

The debate at the congress waxed very fierce. [Here follows a long section of snippets from the debate culled from secondary sources.]

Most of the delegates to the congress were committee men who were opposed to any move that would tend to weaken their authority over the rank and file. 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”. Lenin’s resolution was defeated by 12 votes to 9½. It was not the last occasion on which he found himself in a minority among the Bolshevik leaders, and even booed at a Bolshevik congress.

The unfortunate Lenin had to persuade his supporters to oppose the line proposed in What is to be done? He denied that he had “at the 2nd Congress … any intention of elevating my own formulations, as given in What is to be done? to ‘programmatic’ level constituting special principles”. [Cliff goes on to give further excerpts from Lenin’s remarks – remarks made in 1907, not at the 3rd Congress in 1905.]

I now turn to my own critique of Cliff. His account of the 3rd Congress is factually incorrect and highly misleading for the following reasons.
1. The issue at the 3rd Congress was not over whether the party “should open its gates wide to workers” - an impossible move in underground conditions.

2. Cliff gives the impression that congress delegates objected to the absolutely non-controversial parts of Lenin’s resolution: for example, “make every effort to strengthen the ties between the party and the masses of the working class”. No-one opposed such boilerplate statement of aims.

3. What is to be done? was not mentioned by opponents of Lenin’s resolution, nor indeed by anybody in this debate. In fact, the debate did not bring out the discontinuity in Lenin’s views, but exactly the opposite: Lenin affirmed that he had already made similar proposals in earlier writings, and other delegates praised his continuity on precisely this point.

4. Cliff writes: “Most of the delegates to the congress were committee men who were opposed to any move that would tend to weaken their authority over the rank and file.” Nothing in the debate provides a foundation for this motive-mongering (and besides, one would think that a worker member or two would strengthen the authority of the committee). Cliff’s assertion that “most” of the delegates felt this way is belied a few lines down, when Cliff reports the close vote (12 to 9½) on Lenin’s resolution.

5. I have not found any speaker asking for “extreme caution” in admitting workers to the committees. In any event, such an opinion was marginal.

6. Lenin did not “have to persuade his supporters to oppose the line proposed in What is to be done?”, nor did he in fact do so. Cliff also creates a very misleading impression by putting Lenin’s 1907 remarks in his mouth during this 1905 debate.

7. Cliff does not mention the resolution that the congress did pass on the subject of worker recruitment, nor the strong, authoritative endorsement quoted above of the goal of getting as many workers on the committees as possible.

Such are Cliff’s factual and interpretive errors. But errors of this kind are not really the basic problem for me. More important is the implied story that the unadvised reader of Cliff will take away with him or her. Cliff’s account of the 3rd Congress only makes sense in the framework of an incorrect larger story that goes something like this:

In 1902, Lenin published a book entitled What is to be done? That advocated keeping workers off the committees, or at least using “extreme caution” in recruiting them. This message was deeply imbibed by readers of the book and inspired the early Bolsheviks. Thus anti-worker sentiments were part of Bolshevism from the beginning. In 1905, Lenin realised that this anti-worker sentiment was inappropriate, so he himself changed course and disowned What is to be done? But he failed to change the outlook of party activists, who clung in a mindless way to what their leader had advocated earlier, and thus remained loyal to Lenin’s earlier anti-worker sentiments.

Anyone who defends the factual accuracy of Cliff’s account should realise that they are ipso facto endorsing this background story. For my part, I think this implied story is nonsense and should be strongly rejected. Cliff’s account is a classic instance of what I call the ‘Lenin vs the Bolsheviks’ narrative. It also illustrates how some leftist accounts provide strong support to the academic interpretation of What is to be done? as imbued with ‘worry about workers’.

Exchanges

Let us now take a look at the recent discussion of this issue. As I stated before, Pham’s critique of Cliff’s description of the 3rd Congress is essentially correct. Unfortunately, there are some vulnerabilities in Pham’s presentation that were quickly picked up by his opponents.

First, Pham’s original formulation was not as precise as it could have been: “The problem with Cliff’s account is that Lenin and the Bolsheviks never fought about either recruiting workers to party committees or democratising the party at the 3rd Congress. It simply did not happen.” In response to criticism, Pham clarified his position (as cited earlier): “The debate at the 1905 3rd Congress was over how to recruit workers, not whether to recruit workers. No-one argued
against recruiting workers to party committees, as Cliff claimed.” This formulation is absolutely correct. Pham is also correct to say that there was no debate about democratising the party at the 3rd Congress.

Secondly, Pham neglected to refer to the strongest support for his case, namely, my analysis of the actual course of the 1905 debate. Pham does cite my work, but unfortunately only on a side issue: namely, Cliff’s rather free use of secondary sources. I agree with Pham’s critics that this issue is irrelevant to whether or not Cliff is substantively correct.

Instead of pointing to the actual congress debates, Pham built his case by using a glowing report about the 3rd Congress written by Lenin soon afterwards. The whole point of this report is to wax enthusiastic about the accomplishments of the congress, not to bring up any disappointments. Pham’s critics are right to dismiss this evidence.

Nevertheless, Le Blanc and D’Amato hardly advance the discussion when they completely ignore the strongest evidence for Pham’s assertion, as set forth in Lenin rediscovered and Historical Materialism. Instead, they write as if the last scholarly word on this topic was given by Cliff’s sources, especially Solomon Schwarz, who was a participant in the 1905 revolution and who many years later wrote a useful academic monograph on 1905. D’Amato suggests that the only reason to reject Schwarz’s account is pure political prejudice, claiming that Pham must believe “Schwarz has a certain inexplicable ‘taint’ in this discussion (apparently being a Menshevik disqualifies you from ever telling the truth).”

The issue is not Solomon Schwarz’s worthiness. The issue is whether Cliff’s description of the 3rd Congress is factually correct. Cliff based his account not only on Schwarz, but on the anti-Lenin academic scholar, John Keep. I examined the congress records directly and came to the conclusion that Keep and Schwarz were tendentious and incorrect in the conclusions they drew from the debate. But I am happy to engage their work, because - unlike Cliff, Le Blanc and D’Amato - they actually had read the relevant source material.

The congress proceedings are not hard to obtain. Of course, they are in Russian and not available in English. I will readily participate in scholarly debate with anyone who consults this source and finds my empirical account inaccurate or misleading.

Most upsetting to me, Paul Le Blanc pulls me directly into the debate in a way that suggests I side with him against Pham. I am therefore compelled to clarify the matter. Le Blanc writes in his first post:

In a scholarly dispute with me on the matter, Lars Lih, while minimising its significance, at least acknowledges the fact that there was such debate, but argues that Lenin was wrong about the realities and unfair to those Bolshevik comrades on the other side of the debate, who outvoted him. Such matters are worth discussing now, as they were then - but Pham, too focused on making Cliff look bad, misses the opportunity to join in the discussion.

To which I respond: I do not acknowledge that the debate described by Cliff - a debate about whether admitting workers to the committees was a good thing - ever took place. I do not minimise the significance of Lenin’s stand in this debate: I stress it, but I see its significance in exactly opposite terms from Cliff. Cliff sees Lenin’s effort to get workers on the committees as evidence of discontinuity with his earlier stand, whereas I see it as evidence of continuity.

Paul D’Amato correctly sees that Lenin’s stand on worker recruitment in 1905 creates severe problems for “bourgeois academic ‘Leninologists’”. What he does not see is that, by stressing discontinuity, Cliff agrees with the “bourgeois academic ‘Leninologists’” and gives support to their reading of What is to be done? According to Cliff, Lenin could only call for workers on the committees by persuading his supporters to disavow “the line proposed in What is to be done?”

Do I argue that “Lenin was wrong about the realities”? Well, I did offer the opinion in Lenin rediscovered that perhaps people who had direct recent experience on the ground were better informed on certain practical underground conditions than Lenin, who had been forced to live abroad for several years. When I studied the proceedings of the 3rd
Congress, I saw an engrossing, focused debate about empirical realities, a debate in which everyone, including Lenin, participated as equals. I learned a great deal about how the underground functioned just by (as it were) hanging around and overhearing this debate. And, after doing so, I was extremely put off by Cliff’s paltry melodrama of the wise Lenin vs the foolish, arrogant ‘committee men’ who only want to keep the workers at bay.

Le Blanc evidently has enough confidence in his knowledge of the empirical realities of the Russian underground in early 1905 to declare that Lenin was definitely right and the ‘committee men’ were wrong. I do not share this confidence. But we need not discuss this issue, since it is marginal to the question of whether or not Cliff gives us an accurate picture of the debate at the 3rd Congress.

If anyone defends a writer against criticism, they must be assumed to endorse what that writer says, unless they explicitly state otherwise. And, of course, it would be disingenuous to mock the “embarrassing mistakes” of Cliff’s critics without noting one’s own disagreement with some of Cliff’s factual assertions. We must therefore assume that Le Blanc and D’Amato believe that the congress delegates who opposed Lenin “buttress[ed] themselves with quotations from What is to be done?” I would just like to ask them to present what evidence they have for this assertion.

We must also assume that Le Blanc and D’Amato agree both with Cliff and “bourgeois academic ‘Leninologists’” about the anti-worker slant of Lenin’s What is to be done? If Cliff’s account of the congress is correct, Lenin “had to persuade his supporters to oppose the line proposed in What is to be done?” in the vain hope of getting them to support worker recruitment to local committees. I can only say that I disagree profoundly with this reading.

Prague Conference

January 2012 was the centenary of the 6th (or Prague) Conference of the Russian Social Democratic Worker Party. At least, this was the conference’s official name. But at the time and ever since, many people saw the Prague Conference as a purely Bolshevik gathering, called for the explicit purpose of constituting the Bolsheviks, hitherto a faction within the RSDWP, as a separate party. Should we also be now commemorating the centenary of the Bolsheviks as an independent political organisation?

Such is the general consensus - a consensus challenged by Pham Binh with his assertion that during this period “the Bolsheviks were not a party”. Although Pham’s criticism is directed against Cliff, Cliff’s position on this issue reflects a wider consensus, so that no specific discussion of his position is required here. In rebutting Pham’s assertion and defending the consensus, Paul Le Blanc cites Zinoviev, Krupskaya, Trotsky, Isaac Deutscher and myself (distinguished company indeed!). He could also have cited Stalin (responsible for the 1938 Short course of party history, which sees the Prague Conference as the inaugural conference of a “party of a new type”) and the anti-Lenin academic historian, Carter Elwood (author of the most detailed factual study of the conference in English).

On this issue, Le Blanc cites me correctly and with justice. I did share the consensus as late as last spring, when my Lenin (2011) was published. Since that time, however, I have become immersed in newly available primary sources about the conference and the vastly complicated internal politics of the RSDWP during this period, and I have had to revise my judgment. I now side with Pham on this issue. Lenin and the Bolsheviks did not set out to organise their faction as a separate party; they vehemently denied they had done so after the conference, and they were justified in making this denial.

I should note that Pham and I arrived at this conclusion completely independently of one another, so that the credit for publicly challenging this well-established consensus goes to Pham. He based his challenge on his reading of certain of Lenin’s pronouncements during this period. The Lenin passage cited by Pham is not unique; similar sentiments can easily be found scattered through Lenin’s writings in 1911-12 (which are difficult reading even in English, given the hard-to-decode alphabet soup of émigré organisations and political tendencies).
I became interested in the Prague Conference as a result of rereading Carter Elwood’s 1982 essay, ‘The art of calling a party conference’. Elwood’s essay is a superb factual introduction to the amazingly complex ins and outs of RSDWP politicking in 1912, but, in my view, its interpretive framework is highly unsatisfactory. In trying to get a sense of the conference and its context, I at first merely followed the trail blazed by Elwood, but I soon realised that newly available primary sources made a more independent judgment possible. A partial stenographic record of the conference itself (all that survives) was first published in Soviet journals in the late 80s. In 2008, a substantial volume - over 1,100 pages - was published, containing not only the conference record, but also the newly discovered record of the counter-conference called by Trotsky and others in Vienna in August 1912, as well as over 250 further documents from the period that comment on events from all possible factional angles. I have only very recently finished a survey of these documentary riches, preparatory to writing a review essay on Elwood’s Lenin for Canadian Slavonic Papers. I had planned to announce my change of mind in the review, but the unexpected outbreak of a debate over this very issue forces me to speed up the process.

I wish I could say that I was justified in my previous assertions by the unavailability of these new primary sources, but, alas, a careful reading of Lenin should have been sufficient for a better understanding. Yes, strange as it may seem, Isaac Deutscher is wrong and Pham Binh is right - and it would not be the first time that an unprejudiced reading of Lenin material has given rise to a justified challenge to entrenched historical orthodoxies.

The ideological map of Russian social democracy was hugely complicated during this period, with both major factions divided among themselves, with crucial issues cross-cutting factional loyalties, with major fault lines between the émigrés abroad and the praktiki based in Russia as well as between ‘national’ organisations such as the Jewish Bund and underground organisations in ethnic Russia. The following remarks are perforce severely simplified and serve only to bring out the main point.

What happened was something like this: the general aim of calling an ‘all-party conference’ - one in which all factions had due representation - was widespread in social democracy in the period 1910-12. People felt that such a conference would help bring unity to a scandalously divided party and also that it would be able to set up leadership bodies inside Russia itself in order to give national direction to local social democratic organisations. Lenin felt the need for such a conference so strongly that in spring 1911 he took the initiative in calling it. Working through improvised organisations that sometimes had a Bolshevik majority and sometimes did not, he set in motion a process that resulted in a conference composed mainly of young praktiki from Russia that held a two-week session in Prague during January 1912. The conference, which had a strong Bolshevik majority, declared certain specific, very small groups of so-called “liquidationist” writers to be “outside the party”. It elected a new central committee that thenceforth laid claim to the moral authority of a duly elected, representative central party institution.

The above factual account is not controversial. What is controversial is how we read Lenin’s intentions and how we assess the result. From the moment Lenin and others began the process of calling this conference, his critics within the party - an impressively panoramic array of figures, ranging through all factions, including the Bolsheviks - declared that his conscious intention was to usurp party institutions for the sole benefit of the Bolshevik faction, that the conference itself was no more than a Bolshevik gathering, and that the central committee elected by the conference had no all-party authority whatsoever. This critique - voiced with special energy by Lev Trotsky - is the origin of the later standard story.

What comes out with terrific force from the new documents (although it is certainly present in Lenin’s published writings) is the Bolshevik reaction to this critique. They denounced it as vile and completely baseless slander. At all times - when the conference was being organised, during its sessions, and afterwards - they maintained that it was based on a good-faith effort to contact all existing underground party organisations in Russia, regardless of faction, and to invite them to send representatives. They also maintained that in the main they had succeeded in calling a genuinely representative conference, despite the problems imposed by police repression and obstruction by people like Trotsky. The Bolsheviks granted that there were no delegates from the non-Bolshevik national organisations, but not because the conference organisers had not invited them: rather because they refused to attend. When attacking Trotsky’s
counterconference in Vienna (the so-called August Conference), they maintained (and, it seems, with good reason) that their own conference was much more representative of the underground organisations in the ethnically Russian portion of the empire.

**Contemporary comments**

I will document this Bolshevik response with a number of expressive comments made at the time. These examples are illustrative of a stance defended energetically and repeatedly throughout this whole period.

**Lenin:** In response to criticism from fellow Bolsheviks of the process by which the conference was being organised, Lenin set out his views on how to overcome factional difference. The polemic in the last sentence is directed at Trotsky.

The factions [fraktsii] arose out of the relations between the classes in the Russian Revolution. The Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks only formulated answers to the questions with which the objective realities of 1905-07 confronted the proletariat. Therefore, only the inner evolution of these factions, of the ‘strong’ factions, strong because of the deepness of their roots, strong because of the correspondence between their ideas and certain aspects of objective reality - exclusively the inner evolution of precisely these factions is capable of securing a real merger of the factions: ie, the creation of a genuinely and completely united party of proletarian Marxist socialism in Russia.

A practical conclusion follows from this: only a rapprochement in the work of these two strong factions - and only insofar as they purge themselves of the non-social democratic tendencies of liquidationism and otzovism [recallism] - represents a real party policy [that is, a policy aimed at protecting the party as a whole], a policy that really brings about unity; not easily, not smoothly and by no means immediately, but in a way that will produce real results, as distinguished from a way based on a multitude of quack promises of an easy, smooth, immediate merger of ‘all’ factions.\(^{21}\)

This does not sound like the manifesto of a man determined to rid the party of Mensheviks and to create unity by the equally “easy, smooth” way of restricting the party to a single faction. Lenin’s analysis also does not give much support to the assertion by Le Blanc and D’Amato that Lenin more or less equated Menshevism with “liquidationism”.

**Zinoviev:** Zinoviev played a central role in organising and running the conference. The following passage is taken from a manifesto of the émigré commission set up to organise it. It represents a basic statement of intent to the rest of the party:

In the localities [in Russia], all social democratic workers - Bolsheviks as well as Mensheviks, and also workers connected to the *Vpered* group and to [Trotsky’s émigré newspaper] *Pravda* - harmoniously carry out work together and together fight against the liquidators-legalists, who almost everywhere separate themselves from party groups and work completely independently of our party. And these social democratic workers will never refuse to participate in the all-party enterprise [of calling a conference] due to considerations of a narrow factional nature or those arising out of the competition between small émigré circles; they will never put a brake on [the calling of] this conference or try to create splits [in the manner of our émigré opponents].\(^{22}\)

Zinoviev’s statement brings out the crucial distinction between émigré factional groups and the factions as they existed among social democratic workers in Russia. For example, he was very hostile to the émigrés who made up the dissident Bolshevik *Vpered* group, but he wanted to include Russian workers who identified with *Vpered* in the conference. Indeed, even the émigré *Vpered* group had been invited to join the organising commission (true, over Lenin’s and Zinoviev’s protest), but they refused.

**Sergo Ordzhonikidze:** Ordzhonikidze, who later became famous as Stalin’s commissar of heavy industry, was a young Bolshevik praktik at the time of the conference. No-one played a greater role than he did in actually organising it by travelling around Russia, making contact with party organisations and obtaining representatives (sending a
representative implied local support for the whole Bolshevik-initiated process of organising an all-party conference). In late 1911, he responded energetically to criticism (made by the groups referred to below as ZOK and TK: don’t ask me to explain!) to the effect that Ordzhonikidze’s Russian Organising Commission (ROK) had deliberately given the conference a pro-Bolshevik tilt, even creating fictive organisations to do so. After refuting specific criticisms, Ordzhonikidze summed up:

What has ROK been doing during this time [autumn 1911]? It conducted energetic work toward the re-establishment of local organisations. It approached the national parties, the Caucasian Regional Committee and other organisations that have not yet been enlisted, as well as individual well-known comrades. It has carried out and is carrying out work toward the calling of an all-party conference, and not a factional one, as loudly claimed by the members of ZOK and TK, who themselves make up the worst of the factions. And, finally, it will call an all-party conference, in spite of all the efforts of its opponents.  

Stalin and Pravda: One outcome of the Prague Conference was the setting up of a daily, legal social democratic newspaper in Russia itself. As Zinoviev points out in his party history, Pravda was conceived of as a joint production of the Bolsheviks and Plekhanov’s “party Mensheviks”. Stalin wrote the lead editorial of the very first issue of Pravda in April 1912, and made the following exhortation:

We do not in the least intend to gloss over the disagreements that exist among the social democratic workers. More than that: in our opinion, a powerful movement, one that is full of life, is inconceivable without disagreements - a ‘complete identity of views’ can exist only in the graveyard! [A rather grim quip, given later developments] But that does not mean that points of disagreement outweigh points of agreement. Far from it! Much as the advanced workers may disagree among themselves, they cannot forget that all of them, irrespective of faction, are equally exploited, that all of them, irrespective of faction, are equally without rights.

Hence, Pravda will call, firstly and mainly, for unity in the class struggle of the proletariat, for unity at all costs. Just as we must be uncompromising towards our enemies, so must we yield to one another. War upon the enemies of the labour movement, peace and harmonious work within the movement - that is what Pravda will be guided by in its daily activities.

The official English translation of Stalin’s writings mistranslates fraktsi as “groups” rather than “factions”. Thus Stalin’s editorial is made to seem compatible with the standard Stalinist line that the Prague Conference three months earlier had already created a party without factions - or rather, consisting of only one faction.

The above statements and a vast amount of other documentation demonstrate how far from the truth it is to say (as does Deutscher) that “at the conference in Prague Lenin proclaimed the Bolshevik faction to be the party”. The truth is that Lenin and the Bolsheviks proclaimed just the opposite, and they proclaimed it with energy, persistence and at the top of their voices. Either the Bolsheviks genuinely thought they had really organised an all-party conference irrespective of faction or they were out-and-out liars, as claimed by their party foes.

Outcome

But perhaps, despite Bolshevik intentions, the actual result was a factional conference and a one-faction party? In that case, how do we account for the presence of the “party Mensheviks” - that is, Mensheviks who defended the existence of the illegal underground and therefore strongly rejected “liquidationists” who thought the underground was outmoded? Le Blanc acknowledges their presence at the conference, but seems to dismiss it as of no significance, since these Mensheviks were few in number. But surely there is a principled difference between a RSDRP conference with a large Bolshevik majority, and a Bolshevik conference, where Mensheviks of any description would be unwelcome.

There were 14 voting delegates at the conference, of whom two were Mensheviks: slightly under 10%. One of these two was elected to the new central committee precisely as a gesture of outreach to other Mensheviks. These Mensheviks fully participated in the proceedings, and there was even a debate in which one of the Mensheviks
supported Martov’s interpretation of the general political situation. Of course, he was voted down - just as he would have been at any party congress or conference where the Bolsheviks had a solid majority. So the question arises: if you want to proclaim that your faction is the party, why bend over backwards to include members of the enemy faction?

The conference declared that the contributors to certain specific, named “liquidator” publications were henceforth “outside the party”. (D’Amato states that the conference “formally expelled the liquidators and their defenders”. This is incorrect: the conference did not formally expel either the liquidators as a whole or “defenders” such as Martov, as shown by the relevant conference resolution.) Lenin fully expected and desired some other Menshevik groups - in particular, Martov’s - to refuse to accept this exclusion.

From the point of view of émigré politics, this was outrageous. But, according to Lenin, we should not look at the party through the émigré end of the telescope, in which Martov’s group bulked large, but through the Russian end, in which Martov, Vpered and other groups looked very small and uninfluential, while “party Mensheviks” and non-factional social democratic workers bulked very large indeed.

It remains to be said that the Bolsheviks did invite the non-Bolshevik “national” parties - Latvian, Polish and Jewish - and seem to have sincerely regretted that at least the Latvians and the Poles did not see fit to accept. To a large extent, Bolshevik predominance at Prague was guaranteed not by the overt intentions of the Bolsheviks, but by the refusal by other émigré groups to participate.

Now a word about the historiography of the Prague Conference: that is, the image of this conference in historical memory. As I have documented, during 1911-12, Lenin and his followers rejected as vile slander the charge that the Prague Conference was meant to be exclusively Bolshevik. But later on this charge did not seem to be so slanderous: first, because the organisational separation of the factions went on apace (to a large extent because of Menshevik initiatives) and, second, because the idea of an ideologically homogenous party seemed more attractive after the betrayal of 1914 and the formation of the Comintern. So, looking back, there was a tendency to mark 1912 as the time of the final break with Menshevism. This tendency reached its climax in Stalin’s Short course (1938), in the section entitled “Prague party conference, 1912. Bolsheviks constitute themselves as an independent Marxist party”. Stalin’s textbook went on to draw appropriate lessons from this version of events: “The party strengthens itself by purging its ranks of opportunist elements - that is one of the maxims of the Bolshevik Party, which is a party of a new type fundamentally different from the social democratic parties of the Second International.” I believe this Stalinist meme of a “party of a new type” created at Prague is a principal source of today’s standard story.

What about the later retrospective comments by participants in the process, such as Trotsky, Zinoviev and Krupskaya? Trotsky did not have to change his mind about what happened, but only his evaluation of events: he violently attacked Lenin in 1912 for usurping the party in the name of his faction, but later on he felt this usurpation was justified.

When we read Zinoviev’s later comments, we find some slippage from his own perspective of 1912, as reflected in documents from the time of the conference. He no longer stresses the effort to organise an “all-party” conference and tends to simply equate Menshevism with liquidationism. I think this is understandable, given later events. His later accounts cannot be called a fully satisfactory account of even his own earlier outlook.

Zinoviev wrote about the Prague Conference twice: in general terms in his party history written in the early 20s; and in more concrete detail in reminiscences set down in 1932, but only published in the 1980s. Zinoviev’s characterisation of the conference is, I believe, ambivalent. On the one hand, he certainly does describe it in hindsight as the time when the Bolsheviks became a separate party, and to that extent he supports today’s standard story. On the other hand, a certain scrupulousness about events in which he himself participated gets in the way of a consistent narrative. A good example of this ambivalence comes from his 1932 reminiscences:

Lenin (and the Bolsheviks) came to the idea of a full split with the opportunists and the creation of his separate Bolshevik party not right away, but only in the years 1911-12, and even at that time VI wanted to continue to have a bloc (in one party) with party-Mensheviks, with the Luxemburgist Poles, with the party Latvians and so
on [in an earlier passage Zinoviev writes that these non-Bolshevik groups were “invited and included in the ranks of his separate Bolshevik party, and not at all for ‘diplomacy’”]28

In other words: Lenin came to the idea of an exclusive Bolshevik party only in 1911-12, and indeed, not even then!

In contrast, Krupskaya’s memoirs pose a challenge to today’s standard story. Le Blanc quotes from her memoirs: “The results of the Prague Conference were a clearly defined party line on questions of work in Russia and real leadership of practical work ... A unity was achieved on the central committee, without which it would have been impossible to carry on the work at such a difficult time.” This statement in no way supports his case. Krupskaya says the party - that is, the RSDWP - achieved some essential political unity at Prague, and this helped party activity in Russia. As we have seen, this result had always been the aim of the conference organisers, and (so Krupskaya claims) this result had indeed been achieved.

Krupskaya’s actual assessment of the significance of the conference is as follows:

The Prague Conference was the first conference with party workers from Russia which we succeeded in calling after 1908 and at which we were able in a business-like manner to discuss questions relating to the work in Russia and frame a clear line for this work. Resolutions were adopted on the issues of the moment and the tasks of the party … The results of the Prague Conference were a clearly defined party line on questions of work in Russia, and real leadership of practical work. Therein lay its tremendous significance.29

A rather more modest “tremendous significance” than the creation of an exclusively Bolshevik party!

Another useful description available in English by a participant in the conference is Osip Piatnitsky’s Memoirs of a Bolshevik. Indeed, his book is the best introduction in English to the complex background and actual course of the conference. Piatnitsky published his book in the mid-20s, before Stalinist orthodoxies had set in, so that he describes an attempt to build an “anti-liquidator bloc” of various tendencies, Bolshevik as well as non-Bolshevik. Piatnitsky writes that at the beginning of the conference, Ordzhonikidze’s organizational commission “proposed that the delegates should constitute themselves an all-Russian party conference with the right of electing central party bodies; for the organisational commission had taken every possible measure to ensure that all party trends and organisations should be represented at this conference (Plekhanov, Gorky, the Vpered group, the SDP of Poland and Lithuania and other anti-liquidator currents had been invited).”30

To conclude: memoirs from participants have to be read critically, but on the whole they confirm the view taken by Pham and supported by newly published documents.

‘Waste of ink’?

Paul D’Amato tells us that this whole issue is not one on which we should waste any ink. Since the ultimate outcome in 1917 was the existence of two separate parties, accuracy about the process by which this result took place seems to him unimportant. (“Can a debate over the exact date when the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks split shed any more light in these critical developments in the history of the socialist movement?”)31

I believe that accuracy about “the exact date” is crucial for a number of reasons. If Isaac Deutscher states that “at the conference in Prague Lenin proclaimed the Bolshevik faction to be the party” and if Paul Le Blanc uses Deutscher’s authority to squelch a critic without bothering to examine the new evidence brought forth by this critic - then pointing out that even Deutscher can be mistaken clears the way for real debate.

The standard story about the Prague Conference is part and parcel of larger interpretations of Bolshevik history. For example, Stalin’s Short course makes the 1912 Conference the climax in the process of creating a “party of a new type” based on a monolithic outlook – a specific and in my view a deeply flawed interpretation of Bolshevik history. Stalin draws various lessons from his version of events: for example, the need to continually purge the party of “opportunists”.

55
Then there is the matter of organisational ethics. If Lenin’s true aim was to establish the Bolsheviks as a separate party, then we have to interpret his public denials in a very cynical way. For example, D’Amato offers this comment:

To accomplish the split, a ‘Bolshevik’ conference could have declared itself the ‘Bolshevik’ Party. But it was tactically more advantageous to manoeuvre in such a way as to formally expel the liquidators and their defenders (which included Martov and all the other key leading Mensheviks) from what they declared the ‘official’ RSDLP - which is exactly what the Prague Conference did. This also made sense because Lenin wanted the official sanction and funds that came with recognition from the International Bureau.  

D’Amato’s description of Lenin’s duplicity (sorry, “advantageous tactical manoeuvring”) is essentially the same as the one made by Lenin’s most vehement critics at the time - only D’Amato seems to approve of rather than condemn Lenin’s behaviour. After all, it helped Lenin fool the Europeans and get party funds! (By the way, if Lenin’s aim was to get the European socialists on board, he failed pretty badly: see Elwood’s informative essay, ‘Lenin and the Brussels “unity” conference of July 1914’).

I am not a member of any left organisation and so I cannot comment on whether this kind of casual cynicism is the norm - I seriously doubt that D’Amato would apply it to issues today. But, speaking as a historian, I maintain that Lenin would have been severely annoyed by this defence: ah, that Lenin, he was a clever one - by stating the exact opposite of his real intentions, he reaped factional and financial advantage! As opposed to the D’Amatos on the left and the Elwoods on the right, I maintain that Lenin actually behaved in an honest way during this episode, saying what he meant and meaning what he said.

Let me put it this way. If the standard story is correct, and Lenin really did have the conscious intention of using the Prague Conference to make the Bolshevik faction equivalent to the party as a whole, then he thoroughly deserves the severe condemnation he received from his political foes at the time and from such informed anti-Lenin historians as Carter Elwood. Any such secret intention on his part meant that the process of calling the conference was deeply dishonest and calculated in a disloyal way to wreak as much damage as possible on the parent organisation. The claim that the new central committee had the moral authority of an all-party institution was precisely the breathtaking chutzpah condemned by Trotsky at the time. As for the Bolsheviks themselves, they look less like a political faction and more like a cult, with a manipulative leader surrounded by minions (who understand the secret aims of the leader and work to implement them) and dupes (who actually believe the leader’s stated intentions and naively think they are helping the party as a whole).

But, since there is no real reason to believe Lenin had any such secret intention, these dire conclusions do not follow.

2 T Cliff Building the party London 1975.
6 For my thoughts on another issue raised in the discussion, Cliff’s ‘bend the stick’ shtick, see Historical Materialism Vol 18, No3, 2010.
8 See Historical Materialism Vol 18, No3, 2010.

12 For detailed citations, see Lenin rediscovered pp540-43.


15 JLH Keep *The rise of social democracy in Russia* Oxford 1966.

16 In fact, they can be found at this online link: http://publ.lib.ru/ARCHIVES/K/KPSS/_KPSS.html.


19 Recently republished with some significant changes in C Elwood *The non-geometric Lenin* (London 2011), a retrospective collection of the articles of this important scholar of Lenin and Russian social democracy.


21 ‘The new faction of conciliators, or the virtuous’ (October 1911), in VI Lenin *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii* Vol 20, pp335-36 (my translation); for English version, see www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1911/oct/18b.htm.


23 Ibid.

24 *Pravda* April 22 1912.

25 I Deutscher *The prophet armed* London 2003, p164


27 www.marx2mao.com/Other/HCPSU39i.html.


32 Ibid.

33 C Elwood *The non-geometric Lenin* London 2011
There has been a competing set of political agendas underlying the recently initiated historical debate over how to understand Lenin and the Bolsheviks. From the standpoint of revolutionary socialism, this aspect of the debate is hardly cause for dismay. As activists we are appropriately attempting to get a handle on “what is to be done”. This does not absolve us of the responsibility to get the history right. But for Marxists the point is not simply to understand history, but also make use of such understanding to help change the world.

In initiating an attack on the presumably false “Leninism” provided by Tony Cliff’s 1975 work Building the Party (the first volume of his political biography of Lenin), Pham Binh was laying the groundwork for a political argument. That became clear in his contribution “Another socialist left is possible“, submitted late in the series of exchanges that he initiated: advocating the creation of a multi-tendency socialist organisation, contrasted with the ideal of a Leninist party which he contends bears little relation to the actual theory and practice of Lenin. In responding to him, I sought to challenge what I saw as serious historical inaccuracies, but I have also been concerned to defend what I see as a valuable Leninist tradition that is a resource for revolutionary activists of today and tomorrow. (Paul D’Amato obviously had a similar motivation, but I will allow him to speak for himself rather than trying to speak on his behalf.) My own political agenda is made fully explicit in my own just-published “Revolutionary Organisation and the ‘Occupy Moment.’”

Lars Lih has now intervened in this debate with what seems like a strictly scholarly agenda. His intervention includes an attack on some of what I wrote, so I feel compelled to respond – but given the nature of his approach, I will do so more strictly as a scholar of the Russian revolutionary movement. Some readers may find this too “academic” for their tastes, although an exploration of what happened in history, especially in regard to Lenin and his comrades, has obvious (if indirect) connections to political activism. The necessarily collective process of getting the history right is vitally important as we wrestle with what to do next.

Before going further, I need to re-emphasise what I have said a number of times already – my great appreciation of Lars Lih over his wonderful contributions to the field of Lenin studies. He is a scholar of considerable integrity, in my opinion, whose work is greatly enhanced by the fact that he is fluent in Russian and has an incredibly fine mind and delicious wit and iconoclastic bent, facilitating a fruitfully critical-minded approach to the study of Lenin. I also consider him to be a friend with whom it has been a pleasure to share ideas – and sometimes to debate.

Being an iconoclast with integrity does not mean that one is inevitably right when he smashes some presumably “iconic” interpretation of what happened in history. There are times when Lars gets something wrong – as he himself would admit. In his intervention in this debate, I think he gets more than one thing wrong.
In his article, Lars deals with two issues: a debate at the Bolshevik Third Congress in 1905 between Lenin and some of his “committeemen” comrades, and on whether the Bolshevik party was formed in 1912. In the present contribution, I will focus on the first issue.

Regarding the 1912 conference that resulted in the Bolshevik party coming into being as a distinct entity, Lars writes the following: “Lenin and the Bolsheviks did not set out [emphasis added] to organize their faction as a separate party, they vehemently denied that they had done so after the Conference, and they were justified in making this denial.” I think that the emphasised words may be key. Regardless of what Lenin and his comrades “set out to do”, I am inclined to see 1912 as the year that the Bolshevik party came into being, flowing from what actually happened at the Prague conference. The fact that Lenin and his comrades hoped to unite with “party Mensheviks” independently of the Menshevik liquidators does not mean that this is how things turned out – “the Prague Conference opened the era of the independent existence of the Bolshevik Party, with its own Central Committee”, as Trotsky put it years later, in an account that seems consistent with what Zinoviev and Krupskaya also described after the fact.

The Mensheviks and most others who were invited to treat the Prague conference as authoritative did not do so. As Lars himself notes, “they refused to attend”. Nor did they adhere to the version of the organisation established in Prague in 1912. While responding sharply to critics, Lenin and his Bolshevik comrades did not seem shocked or disheartened by the Menshevik boycott, nor did they reverse gears hoping to retrieve the non-Bolshevik comrades who refused to join them. They forged ahead as a Bolshevik party. Or so it seems, despite the interesting details Lars provides.

But Lars has promised to share with me a more thorough account of his findings and analysis. At his suggestion, I will want to consider what he has to share in that more thoroughgoing account before responding more substantially. As Lars notes, he will in fact be disagreeing with his own recent assertion in his fine short biography Lenin. Will I need to defend Lars from himself or instead fundamentally revise my own understanding? That remains to be seen.

But there is plenty to do in responding to what he says about 1905. In a note of friendly warning to me, Lars told me that I would not like what he had to say. And he is right.

**Tony Cliff is not the issue**

A fundamental flaw in Lars’s account of what I have written is that he seems to feel my primary purpose in disagreeing with Pham Binh is to defend Tony Cliff – an impression that might have been reinforced by the misleading title Pham gave to his polemic with me: “Paul Le Blanc’s Defence of Tony Cliff’s Building the Party”. While I do offer a partial defence of Cliff as not deserving to be trashed in the way Pham trashes him (even Lars defends Cliff a little bit on that score), that is at most a secondary concern of mine. I was primarily concerned about what I saw as distortions of history and a rejection of Leninism, not the defence of Tony Cliff.

As I have explicitly stated many times, I have never accepted Cliff’s assessment of Lenin’s What Is To Be Done? and, even before Lars wrote Lenin Rediscovered, in my own book Lenin and the Revolutionary Party, I have defended that work in ways that are consistent with the way Lars himself defends it. Consequently, I never accepted Cliff’s assertions that the 1905 debate, which took place among the Bolsheviks, involved Lenin backing away from his 1903 work. When he describes the 1905 debate as a situation in which “the unfortunate Lenin had to persuade his supporters to oppose the line proposed in What is to be Done?” (Building the Party, p. 175), Cliff is quite simply wrong. I have never thought or said otherwise.

Therefore, when Lars protests, “I do not acknowledge that the debate described by Cliff – a debate about whether admitting workers to the committees was a good thing – ever took place”, I can only say that I agree with him. Lars does not disagree with the fact that there was such a debate (which is the point I was making in regard to Pham’s seeming denial), but he insists: “Cliff sees Lenin’s effort to get workers on the committees as evidence of discontinuity with his earlier stand, whereas I see it as evidence of continuity.” I completely agree with Lars on this.
And if Pham also agrees, then this particular point of contention has pretty much evaporated. And yet contention seems to persist.

There was a 1905 debate – what was it about?

Lars says something else that is a bit unfair: “Le Blanc evidently has enough confidence in his knowledge of the empirical realities of the Russian underground in early 1905 to declare that Lenin was definitely right and the ‘committeemen’ were wrong. I do not share this confidence.”

Actually, in his Historical Materialism article responding to one of my friendly critical comments on his book, Lars shows an inclination to line up with the “committeemen” against Lenin, while I (relying more on a retrospective account by Nadezhda Krupskaya) am inclined to lean in Lenin’s direction. But I am quite willing to entertain the thought that Lenin was wrong and the “committeemen” right in this debate. I look forward to more work by those who have access to the Russian-language sources (especially Lars) to add more to our knowledge that could allow for a final judgment to be made.

To say it again: my primary point in this aspect of the debate with Pham was that such a debate did take place – as Lars, Krupskaya and others documented. My understanding was that Pham was denying the existence of such a debate. When he restated his position, saying “the debate at the 1905 third congress was over how recruit workers, not whether to recruit workers”, I offered a positive word in response: “Okay.”

Sadly, in his remarks Lars seems insistent – for reasons that make no sense to me – that I share Tony Cliff’s interpretation of the 1905 debate, and he therefore allows himself to write: “We must assume that Le Blanc and D’Amato agree both with Cliff and ‘bourgeois academic Leninologists’ about the anti-worker slant of Lenin’s What Is To Be Done?” This is grotesque, having nothing to do with what I have ever thought or written.

It is clear to me that the 1905 debate had nothing to do with Lenin backing away from What Is To Be Done? or with his Bolshevik comrades being stuck in the booklet’s “authoritarian” and “elitist” and “anti-worker” logic. In my view, Lenin’s 1902 work was permeated with a revolutionary, democratic and socialist spirit and logic, and it was “pro-worker” in multiple ways. It seems to me that Lars and I are therefore in agreement about what the debate was not about.

In what Lars writes, however, it is not entirely clear to me what he believes the debate was actually about. If, as he explains to us, (a) Lenin was in favour of a certain kind of transformation of the Bolshevik organisation, and if (b) all his comrades agreed on the need for such a transformation, and yet (c) Lenin’s resolution on such transformation was voted down as “unnecessary” while (d) another resolution was passed which seemed to affirm the need for such a transformation, and yet (e) the discussion throughout was “quite emotional” – then what on Earth was going on? Lars assures us that “the hugely interesting debate among the delegates was over the empirical realities on the ground”. In stressing this, he strongly resists as utterly at variance with the facts anything “making the praktiki look undemocratic”, as well as the notion that there was any underlying or longer-term tension between Lenin (and certain other Bolsheviks) on the one hand and some of the Bolshevism’s practical underground cadres on the other. Given the fact that the debate was so fierce, the account Lars insists on doesn’t quite add up.

Krupskaya versus Lih

To repeat, once again, my interpretation comes primarily from Lenin’s comrade and companion Nadezhda Krupskaya. In his Historical Materialism article, Lars complained about the 1960 English translation of Krupskaya’s Reminiscences of Lenin, so I will utilise the 1930 translation of Memories of Lenin that says basically the same thing (pages 124-127 in the former, pages 137-140 in first volume of the latter). Given some of the innuendo that has crept into the discussion, it seems necessary to provide a very substantial extract of the account provided by Krupskaya. Readers who have read this far, however, are probably truly concerned with what she is writing about and consequently should find it quite interesting. In any event, coming neither from Le Blanc nor Cliff, but rather from
someone fluent in Russian and with full access to the proceedings of the Third Congress, here is how Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’s trusted comrade discussed the 1905 debate:

By this time the organizations in Russia had taken definite shape. They took the form of illegal committees working under drastically difficult conditions of secrecy. Owing to these conditions, the committees hardly anywhere had factory workers among their members, though they had a great deal of influence over the labor movement. The leaflets and “instructions” of the committees corresponded to the mood of the working masses, and the latter felt they had a leadership; the committees, therefore, enjoyed great popularity, but for the majority of the workers their activity was obscured by a haze of secrecy. The workers frequently met apart from the intellectuals in order to discuss the fundamental problems of the movement...

The “Komitetchik” [nickname for the members of the illegal local Party Committees working in Russia] was usually a fairly self-assured person, who realized what great influence the work of the committees had over the masses; he generally did not recognize any inner-Party democracy whatever. “This democratism only leads to us falling into the hands of the authorities; we are already quite well enough connected with the movement”, the Komitetchiks would say. And inwardly, these committee members always rather despised “the people abroad”, who, they considered, just grew fat and organized intrigues. “They ought to be sent to work under Russian conditions” was their verdict. The Komitetchiks did not like to feel pressure from abroad. At the same time, they did not like innovations. They were neither desirous nor capable of adapting themselves to the changing conditions.

In the period 1904-1905 these members of the committees bore tremendous responsibilities on their shoulders, but many of them experienced the utmost difficulty in adapting themselves to the conditions of increasing opportunities for legal work, and to the methods of open struggle... At the Third Congress there were no workers present – or, at any rate, not a single prominent worker. ... On the other hand, there were many committee members. If this is not borne in mind, a great deal of the matter in the reports of this Congress will not be properly understood.

The question of the “bridling” of the foreign center was not only raised by the Komitetchiks, but also by other prominent Party workers... There was a good deal of loose talk on this matter, but Vladimir Ilyich did not particularly take it to heart...

The question of bringing workers on to the committees was fraught with much greater contention. Vladimir Ilyich vigorously defended the idea of including workers. The people abroad, Bogdanov and the writers, were also in favor. The Komitetchiks were against. Both sides became very heated. The members of the committees insisted that no resolution be passed on the subject; indeed, it would have been impossible to pass a resolution that workers should not be brought on to the committees.

In his speech in this discussion Vladimir Ilyich said: “I think we should consider the question more broadly. To bring workers on to the committees is not only an educational but also a political task. The workers have a class instinct, and even with little political experience they quite quickly become steadfast Social Democrats. I would very much like to see eight workers on our committees for every two intellectuals. If our written counsel, that as many workers as possible should be brought on to the committees, proves inadequate, it would be as well to issue this advice in the name of the Congress. If you get a clear and definite instruction from the Congress, you will have a radical means of fighting demagogy: it will be the express will of the Congress”.

Even before this occasion, Vladimir Ilyich had firmly championed the necessity of bringing the largest possible number of workers on to the committees. He already wrote about this in 1903 in his Letter to a Petersburg Comrade. Now, in defending this standpoint at the Congress, he became very heated, and even made interruptions. When Mikhailov (Postolovsky) said: “So in practical work very small demands are made of intellectuals, but extremely big demands are made of workers”, Vladimir Ilyich cried out: “That is absolutely true!” His exclamation was drowned in a chorus of – “Not true!” from the Komitetchiks. When Rumyanstiev said: “There is only one worker in the Petersburg committee, although work has been going on there for fifteen years”, Vladimir Ilyich shouted: “What a disgrace!”

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Afterwards, when the debates had ended, Ilyich said: “I could not sit still and listen to them saying that there were no workers suitable to be members of the committees. The question drags on, and it shows there is a malady in the Party. Workers must be brought on to the committees”. If Ilyich was not very much concerned that his viewpoint met with such a rebuff at the Congress, it was simply because he knew that the approaching Revolution would itself radically cure the Party of this incapacity to make the committees working class in composition.

Perhaps Krupskaya got it wrong. “Lenin and the Bolsheviks never fought about ... recruiting workers to party committees”, Pham stated quite categorically in his opening polemic. ”It simply did not happen.” Lars tells us that Pham is right. Simply because Krupskaya offers this interpretation of what happened does not necessarily mean that what she says is fully accurate or adequate. But Lars tells us: “I will be happy to engage in scholarly debate with anyone who consults this source and finds my empirical account inaccurate or misleading.” So he should start, perhaps, with Nadezhda Krupskaya if he disagrees with her account.

And then, perhaps, he has a responsibility to do the same with Solomon Schwarz, at the time a Bolshevik (later a Menshevik) who also had full access to the sources, was fluent in Russian and offers a similar account in The Russian Revolution of 1905: The Workers’ Movement and the Formation of Bolshevism and Menshevism (on pages 217-221). Lars tells us that he concluded, after examining the records, that Schwarz’s account was “tendentious and incorrect” in the conclusions he drew from the debate (though Schwarz’s “conclusions” arguably could be separated with his actual account of the debate, which is consistent with Krupskaya’s). Actually, an examination of Lenin Rediscovered reveals no critique or even mention of Schwarz’s account – not even in footnotes or bibliography. In his Historical Materialism article, the consideration of Schwarz he offers consists of three sentences: “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”. On the following page he tells us simply that the account is “deeply distorted” (147, 148). He doesn’t exactly make much of a case here.

For what it’s worth, I engaged with both Schwarz and Krupskaya before Cliff’s book was published, and it is their accounts – not Tony Cliff’s – on which I drew when discussing these matters in Lenin and the Revolutionary Party (so I never felt I was presenting “Cliff’s account”, let alone that I was endorsing his flawed interpretation of What Is To Be Done?). And to repeat, I am quite happy to entertain the thought that Lars is right and Krupskaya wrong regarding the issues under discussion, the nature and dynamics of the “committeemen”, etc. But in what he has actually presented, for those who have no way of reading through the Russian-language primary sources, there is – so far – no reason to decide that the account of Lars Lih is superior to that of Nadezhda Krupskaya.

**Being honest**

To be honest, I was startled to read the story Lars tells in his current intervention: Lars Lih conscientiously put forward his well-researched account of the Bolshevik Third Congress back in 2006, in Lenin Rediscovered, and then he went on with his life, thinking all was well when – lo and behold! – what he believed he had resolved way back then somehow pops up again in 2012 as if he had never written his account in the first place.

In fact, I wrote an appreciation of his book, with the friendly criticism regarding the 1905 debate, back in 2006, at the request of the editors of Historical Materialism, for a symposium on his book that remained unpublished for several years. But Lars had access to my article from the very beginning, our correspondence was initiated by that article, and our friendship followed. We also had an interchange on these matters at the Historical Materialism conference a year or so after his book was published. When the symposium was finally published in a 2010 issue of Historical Materialism, it turned out that Lars had responded severely to my 2006 article in his essay that appeared in the same issue of Historical Materialism. I responded to what Lars wrote in two different articles – one in the Summer 2011 issue of a publication called Jacobin, back-to-back with an article that he wrote, and another article, including an even more substantial response, which appeared in the June 14, 2011 issue of Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal, which has also carried material Lars has produced.
Given all of this, Lars’s surprise surprises me. But it seems of a piece with his persistent assertion that I agree with Tony Cliff’s interpretation of *What Is To Be Done?*, repeated yet again in his current intervention, despite my clear and consistent denials.

I believe that Lars is quite honest – so I am baffled to find myself, over and over again, in this strange loop. Here is what appears to me to be an explanation: If one accepts Krupskaia’s account of the 1905 debate, including her critical attitude (and Lenin’s) toward certain negative qualities to be found among the “committeemen” – Lars seems to feel – then one necessarily “must” subscribe to Cliff’s flawed understanding of *What Is To Be Done?* and to the stupid notion of “Lenin against the Bolsheviks”. I don’t think that’s true at all.

If I am going to continue being honest, there is yet another matter. Although Lars expresses agreement with Pham, I do not think that the quality of thought and analysis that get the two of them to their seemingly “identical” conclusions is comparable. Lars has a responsibility to encourage Pham to do better than he has done. He does that up to a point (his gentle admonition to be less severe in his judgments of Cliff, his similarly gentle admonition regarding the utter inadequacy of using a brief report on the Bolsheviks’ 1905 congress to conjure away the existence of a sharp debate), but it seems to me that he is too lenient.

Fortunately, in encouraging Paul D’Amato and me to do better than we have done, he is not too lenient at all. Unfortunately, it seems to me, the admonitions are largely misplaced – certainly on the issues having to do with 1905. Of course, I have also admonished him to do better as well, and it seems to me that if he does so he will add substantially to our knowledge, as he has done in so many ways up to now. And I will look forward to strolling with him down the Bolshevik pathway of 1912, to see what we can make of what happened way back then.

At the same time, while trying to get the history right, those of us engaged in revolutionary activism will continue to wrestle with “what is to be done” to change the world for the better.

**Works cited**


“Some Thoughts on Lih’s intervention in the ‘Cliff/Lenin Debate’”

By Pink Scare (anonymous blogger)

Note: I wrote this post a couple of weeks back and didn't have the chance to “revise” it until recently (although, by “revise” I should not like to imply that the following post is anything more than a sketchy jumble of half-formed thoughts). I see now that Lih's polemic has since drawn return fire from Le Blanc among others. I thought I would go ahead and post this anyway, even if it is less interesting now than it might have been earlier this month.

Many readers may have noticed a debate, instigated by a polemic by Pham Binh against Tony Cliff's biography of Lenin, which has subsequently generated several replies and rejoinders from Lars T. Lih, Paul Le Blanc, and Paul D'Amato. In what follows, I'd like to discuss some of what I take to be shortcomings of the intervention made by Lih in particular, although I'd like to say something about the debate in general as well.

Of course, I am not a scholar on Lenin, I do not speak Russian, and I have not examined closely many of the relevant primary sources here. I do not aim to make a move within the terms of the debate such as they've been defined thus far, though it is interesting in many ways. Instead, I want to take a step back and ask a broad question about the political character of the debate itself (with an eye to make sense of Lih's contribution in particular).

That question is the following: what exactly is the political significance of discussing certain aspects of the history of the Russian workers movement in general, and of Lenin's role within that movement in particular? This question is unavoidable and everyone in the debate has a position—whether it is explicitly stated or merely implicit. In evaluating Lih's contribution we shall have to get clear on what his answer to this question is.

Now, I'd like to preface my remarks by saying that, in general, I find great value in Lih's work on Lenin. It is refreshing, rigorous and urgently needed in times such as these. In blowing apart the “textbook” interpretation of Lenin (e.g. that he was, from the beginning, an authoritarian monster always plotting to expand his own personal power, etc.) through careful scholarship, Lih has done the Left a great service. His short book on Lenin, which summarizes many of the conclusions he reaches in his 800 page tome, *Lenin Rediscovered*, is extremely useful and carefully argued.

But Lih—far more than the other players in the debate—avoids the political question above and tries to distance himself from judgments about political conviction, value and significance. In order to position himself as a mere scholar—rather than activist—Lih repeatedly invokes his expertise and specific role as a “historian” (as well as his command of Russian and the primary sources) which leads him to verge on being pedantic at moments. There are, to be sure, academic spheres in which this non-political posture is important and, indeed, itself politically useful. Getting people to actually look at what Lenin said, even in an ostensibly “neutral” way, is a huge improvement over dismissing it out of hand as “totalitarian”.

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Still, although there is instrumental value in casting one's arguments in certain ways in certain contexts, one cannot avoid judgments about political significance. So far as I can tell, Lih, however, explicitly avoids making such judgments in favor of an ideal of scholarly neutrality. Intervening in this debate, Lih argues that the main question seems to be whether or not we get the right answer to specific points of detail relating to matters such as the 3rd Congress in 1905 and the Prague Conference in 1912. Lih even concedes that his main motivation for entering the debate is to get it right on these two specific points of detail.

But the question remains: why is this significant? What, politically speaking, is at stake here?

There is no such thing as a purely academic, purely neutral assessment of the historical facts. Why not? I don't mean to suggest that there's no such thing as “getting it right” in the arena of historical research. Contra the totalizing suspicion toward truth among some postmodern theoreticians, there is such a thing as getting the facts right (or wrong). Rather, what I mean to say is that when doing historical work there is no way to avoid substantive value judgments—which are ultimately political in nature—that guide our assessment of what is significant and what is insignificant within the set of all historical facts. We can't study everything, and nor would we want to. We study, debate, and discuss some historical ongoings because they have practical significance for us. And we ignore others because they lack significance.

To illustrate: There is a fact of the matter about what Lenin ate for breakfast on June 13th of 1904, but nobody gives a damn. One could be “substantively right” (or wrong) about whether the number of times Lenin used a past-tense verb in his corpus is even or odd, but nobody gives a damn. There is a fact of the matter about how many leaves fell on the ground in the fall of Petrograd in 1903. Again, nobody gives a damn.

So, when doing historical work, there is no neutral way to proceed. We can't avoid making some judgment about what's important—and worth studying and writing about—and what's not. And importance isn't some fuzzy personal matter that bottoms out in claims about individual “preference” or taste. Importance or significance is a social, political and public matter that people can (and do) argue about with one another. Significance is always significance for us, right here, right now. We have to justify, then, why we read Lenin right here, right now, rather than, say, phone books. Our answer, inevitably, will something to do with our practical political commitments, goals and self-understanding.

The only unbiased, purely neutral way to proceed would be to say that everything is significant—how many leaves fell on the ground in 1903 (and every year before and after), whether Lenin consumed an even or odd number of meals in his lifetime, the exact volume in liters of ink used by Lenin in 1917, and so on and so forth. But of course, such a neutral posture is completely absurd—and useless.

So, while Lih—and Pham Binh to to the extent that he instigated the debate—focus the attention of large swaths of the Left on various points of detail in the Russian socialist movement, we have to ask: why are we debating this right now? How does this advance the struggle? How does this help us to clarify our assessment of the present conjuncture? And, in particular: how does it help us get clearer on what kind socialist organization we need today?

Since the whole exchange was instigated by Pham Binh's piece, he bears a greater burden of explanation here than other participants. But the biggest drawback of his polemic against Cliff's Building the Party, in my estimation, is that he does not clearly and explicitly answer these political questions. As I say above, considerations about significance and politics necessarily motivated Pham to write the piece in the first place. But these are neither explicitly stated nor defended adequately with argument. What does come through clearly, however, is the sense that Pham thinks Cliff's book is of zero value and should be thrown in the dustbin of history. He makes it sound as if the most important debate right now is, in some sweeping sense: “Tony Cliff: Yay or Nay?” But I'm not convinced that that is so and, from the looks of it, neither is Paul Le Blanc or Paul D'Amato. As both of them point out in their contributions, this debate ought to be about the relevance of Lenin thought and practice to contemporary political struggle. Pace Lih—and perhaps Pham as well—I don't think that defending some of the substance and practical import of Cliff's book commits one to
being a “Cliffite” or agreeing with everything Cliff said.

Scholarship and historical accuracy aside, Cliff’s book was self-consciously written with an eye to draw practical conclusions about organizing a socialist organization in the here and now. Whether or not his book is a success on this score is one question. But the narrow, merely “academic” question of pure scholarship, while undoubtedly related, is ultimately another matter.

The real question, in my estimation, is this: how does the debate about Lenin's thought and practice speak to where the socialist movement is and where it ought to be heading? On this question, Lih's intervention and Pham's polemic are basically silent.

There is, of course, Pham's virtually unexplained dedication to his piece which reads “to anyone and everyone who has sacrificed in the name of ‘building the revolutionary party’”. But a substantive political claim like this should defended in the body of the article, not added as garnish by way of dedication. It also conflates a series of historical claims Cliff makes with the practical points he offers activists as to how one should build a revolutionary group. The litany of quibbling complaints about this or that error made by Cliff does nothing in the way of substantiating or elucidating the claim that “building the revolutionary party” is a bankrupt political goal.

If there is one relatively clear political implication of Pham's intervention, it seems to be that Lenin was “an orthodox Kautskyist” and that the distinction between Second International reformism (associated with Kautsky and the SPD) and early Third International revolutionary politics (associated with Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Lenin) is historically inaccurate. But I have a hard time seeing how any good comes from blurring the line between the trajectory of the late Second International and the trajectory of the revolutionary energy running through the development of figures such as Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and Gramsci. Was Lenin an avid “Kautskyist” in some sense at one point in his development? Sure. So was Rosa Luxemburg, who initially moved to Germany with the aim of building Kautsky's SPD. But what matters for socialists today is when, where, and why he (and, for that matter, Trotsky, Luxemburg and others) broke with Kautsky, and why they thought it necessary to build an entirely new international. What matters today is how events like the 1917 October Revolution were organized and what we can learn from them. (The errors and ultimate defeat of the German Revolution are similarly important to study and understand here). I don't see how this goal is advanced by muddying the waters so much that Lenin and Kautsky appear to us today as pals.

Lih also offers little insight into the questions that really matter here. The self-understanding of his intervention seems to be more academic than political. He seems more interested in setting the record straight about his scholarship than he is in advancing our understanding of the contemporary conjuncture and struggles within it. That's fine, as far as it goes. But insofar as we're to take what he says seriously and accord it practical significance, we need answers to the questions raised above. Yet he doesn't deliver in his intervention into the discussion. Even his claim that Lenin's polemical interventions should be taken at face value (rather than critically examined as potentially strategic maneuvers within a contested field of debate) lacks political umph.

Now, I'm not saying that history doesn't matter for the Left today. Nothing could be further from the truth. Some historical debates and arguments on the Left are extremely important. But others matter less and still others shouldn't really matter at all. We need to be clear about which is which. Everything depends on what our tasks are and what shows up as significant for us given what we're up against right now.
The broad sweep of the character of today’s left - its divisions, profound and trivial, and the strengths and weaknesses of its practice and theory - hinge, one way or another, on one concept: the ‘Leninist party’, or ‘combat party’, or ‘party of a new type’ ...

Stalinists justify their purges and bureaucratism on the basis of the ‘iron discipline’ supposedly bequeathed to the communist movement by Lenin. Anarchists accuse Lenin of envisaging an enlightened dictatorship of intellectuals over the benighted working class.

Trotskyists justify every other pointless split on the need to purge their ranks of ‘centrists’. Even, as with the recent ructions in Workers Power, when the organised left attempts to break from this practice, it self-conceives as breaking with Lenin, thus leaving him to the tender mercies of the bureaucrats.

The core idea in this narrative is that Lenin broke decisively with the mainstream of the Second International - whereas the latter aimed to build slightly diffuse ‘parties of the whole class’, Lenin aimed to build a delimited, highly disciplined party of ‘professional revolutionaries’. He came to this conclusion in 1901, with the publication of What is to be done?; or he came to it in the revolutionary days of 1905; or he came to it in 1912, with the de facto Bolshevik-Menshevik split; or in 1914, with the outbreak of World War I; or in 1915, after rereading Hegel’s Logic.

He came to it consciously, or unconsciously - or unconsciously and then consciously. This innovation marked him out as the great Marxist of his time (Trotskyists, Stalinists and Maoists); a petty bourgeois bureaucrat (anarchists and council communists); or a hopeless Blanquist (the late Kautsky). Whatever the details, his break is decisively important.

It should be said, at the outset, that all these loaded variations on the same theme have one other thing in common - they are historically false. Cracks, at least, are starting to appear in this monolithic narrative. Lars Lih, a scholar of Russian left history, has done much of the more recent legwork, in his book Lenin rediscovered and short biography, Lenin, as well as other writings.

Lih argues that Lenin drew the essential points of his strategy from the Second International mainstream, especially its foremost leader, Karl Kautsky; that he aimed to build a mass socialist party on the model, so far as it was applicable to tsarist despotism, of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD); and that he foregrounded the question of political freedom and vehemently opposed those who argued for a focus on low-level agitation that could produce meaningful concrete actions ... as does most of today’s far left.

The latter has responded to Lih’s work in a slightly two-faced manner, promoting it on the basis that it proves conclusively that Lenin was not an aspiring Bonaparte throughout his political career, but simply ignoring much of the
fine detail, which places most Trotskyist groups squarely against Lenin on general political questions. This approach, too, is failing, as is obvious from the expanding debate on Lih’s work taking place in and around the American International Socialist Organisation - formerly allied to the Socialist Workers Party in this country, until a bitter and basically apolitical split a decade ago.

The debate was initiated by Pham Binh, an ex-member of the ISO, who advanced a scathing critique the biography of Lenin written by SWP founder-guru Tony Cliff; ISO comrades Paul D’Amato and Paul Le Blanc responded, as did comrade Lih.

This is, on one level, a discussion about abstruse points of history; but there can be few of those where the stakes among Marxists are higher. At issue is the whole political method of the contemporary far left, founded on a particular reading of Bolshevism’s trajectory from 1903 to 1917 (and interpreted either positively or negatively). Also at issue, it has to be said, is the post-1920s mainstream of Hegelian Marxism, which in the work of Georg Lukács and the young Karl Korsch was equally founded on a philosophisation of 21-conditions Bolshevism, and an argument that Lenin made a clean and decisive break from the Second International centre.

Not all of these issues apply to all participants in the debate. Le Blanc is a latecomer to the ISO, has less invested in defending Cliff’s Lenin, and has highlighted the importance of political freedom to Lenin’s political thought in different ways. The same cannot be said of Paul D’Amato, who in his response to Binh is left squaring the impossible circle; he is unwilling to call Lenin anti-democratic, yet he defends an account of Lenin’s political work in which the latter comes out as a great man with a good nose, a distaste for procedural fussing and a habit of wildly and cynically overstating the case to reposition a given debate (the infamous ‘stick-bending”).

Indeed, D’Amato quite unwittingly puts his finger on the matter when he claims that Cliff’s textual jiggery-pokery is justifiable on the grounds that his book is not a work of academic history, but - in the words of Duncan Hallas - “a manual for revolutionaries” that “might well have been called Building the party - illustrated from the life of Lenin”. Cliff mobilises a caricature of Lenin precisely for his own political purposes, which at that time amounted to transforming the International Socialists definitively into the sect we now know as the SWP.

Already political

Another, anonymous, commentator - obviously close to the ISO - takes the only route left open: avowing suspicion at the debate’s relevance. Lih is criticised for focusing on two particular disputes in 1905 and 1912, and failing to justify doing so in terms of present political priorities. “We have to justify ... why we read Lenin right here, right now, rather than, say, phone books. Our answer, inevitably, will [have] something to do with our practical political commitments, goals and self-understanding.”

The problem is that Lenin’s behaviour, at these junctures and others, has been mobilised by the left, Cliff included, to justify concrete political practice - and still is. Reading Lenin rediscovered, an extended commentary on What is to be done?, is quite an odd experience, since Lih’s position is that the latter is simply an incidental polemic to which Lenin assigned no great significance until his opponents spuriously seized on it to hammer him. It is a book that argues in substance that it should not have had to be written.

Simply doing the history in an academic fashion - as Lih does, with scrupulous attention to detail - is already political, because the issues themselves have already been politicised. The far left has imagined itself to be following the royal road to October 1917; but it has actually ended up weak, demoralised and divided into a swarm of competing sects. Debunking the myths of October, and the myth of the Bolshevik break from ‘Kautskyism’, leaves the way open to try something different.

“What matters for socialists today,” our anonymous author says, “is when, where and why [Lenin] (and, for that matter, Trotsky, Luxemburg and others) broke with Kautsky, and why they thought it necessary to build an entirely new international.” Indeed, that does matter (although the very different circumstances obtaining today maybe do not
qualify it for immediate importance). But the more significant question is surely: what was it about Lenin and Bolshevism that allowed it to make revolution, where all others failed? It is partly, to be sure, the question of 1914 and the split in social democracy; but Luxemburg, unlike Lenin, was unable to build effective opposition to the social-chauvinist traitors; and Trotsky later acknowledged his hopelessness in this period with lacerating self-criticism.

The truth is that, unlike the followers of Trotsky (whose conciliationism was utterly hopeless) and Luxemburg (whose ambiguous connection to mass-action leftism led her primarily to build sects), the Bolsheviks emerged into a revolutionary situation a mass party, with profound roots in the class, untainted by August 1914. It was precisely the perspective of building mass revolutionary workers’ parties, inherited through Kautsky from Marx and Engels, that allowed the Bolsheviks to win out.

The more that serious work is done on this question, the more cold war historiography (in both its Soviet and anti-communist forms), and the Trotskyist myth of ‘Leninism’, are debunked. The whole edifice is built on air - or, in its more sophisticated forms, philosophy ... which amounts to the same thing.

Of course, only the most self-defeating of conspiratorial sects would argue that larger parties as such are worse than smaller ones; but innumerable justifications exist for political practices destined for diminishing returns. D’Amato excoriates Pham Binh for daring to advocate unity of the socialist left: “a ‘united’ socialist organisation that has in its ranks both those who consider North Korea, China and Vietnam socialist, and those who think that they are bureaucratic despotism; both Stalinists and genuine Marxists; and both supporters and opponents of the Democratic Party would be a stillborn project”.

Pham Binh, in reply, rather acidly points out that none other than Paul Le Blanc is a supporter of ‘socialist’ Cuba, and that has not blocked his path to ISO membership in good standing. He probably does, in fact, underestimate the strategic importance of differences on the left - but he is right, nonetheless, to argue for the democratic unity of Marxists.

The Bolsheviks were more than a little prone to enormous and wideranging polemics in their ranks: Bukharin very obviously represented a different trend, in the 1910s, to Lenin, to name one example, and the two came into dispute repeatedly. What is important is disciplined unity in action, and acceptance of (rather than full agreement with) the party programme as a guide to action. With those conditions met - both formulations of Lenin, as it happens - it is right and proper to let the fur fly on disputed issues great and small.

Enforcing ideological unity on particular interpretations of the class character of Stalinism, or any other point of dispute in theory, is simply the road to split after split. Any ISO member should know better (but, given the ISO’s characteristically laissez-faire attitude to educating recruits, probably does not) - for a cigarette-paper difference on the character of the anti-globalisation movement, the ISO was summarily expelled from the SWP’s ‘international’. The SWP claimed, of course, that it was terribly important, that the ISO was drifting into ‘abstentionism’ and so forth; it was all nonsense. A healthy culture of debate (and perhaps a democratic vote on the matters of immediate practical significance) would have resolved things perfectly productively.

That the Bolsheviks managed to build such a culture under conditions of tsarist autocracy is one of their greatest achievements; that we cannot do so under relatively benign political regimes is the surest mark of our desperate condition.

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1 ‘Mangling the party of Lenin’ Weekly Worker February 2.
4 ‘Falling out over a Cliff’ Weekly Worker February 16.
See especially Lukács’s *Lenin: a study in the unity of his thought*.

http://pink-scare.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/politics-of-debate-overlenin.html.

Pink Scare’s (PS) response to the debate ignited by my review of Tony Cliff’s Lenin: Building the Party affords me the opportunity to clarify issues of secondary importance like timing, judgments, method, and implications that did not fit with the content of my responses to the Cliff book’s two defenders, Paul Le Blanc and Paul D’Amato. In addition, I will discuss the role of Lars Lih in this little firestorm.

PS is appreciative but ultimately dissatisfied with Lih’s contribution because he does not spell out the practical implications of his research for revolutionary Marxists today and instead adopts a “non-political posture” of “scholarly neutrality.” Le Blanc and D’Amato also tried to fault my book review for similar reasons, namely, that it did not situate Cliff’s book in today’s context, although my views on party building today were made abundantly clear in two different articles prior to the Cliff debate and one article after it.

It seems no one is allowed to examine the historical record surrounding Lenin or challenge anyone else’s presentation of Lenin’s work without including a detailed how-to manual for today’s revolutionary.

This line of criticism fails to address a very basic point: why should a book review of Cliff’s Lenin (written in 1975) include a discussion of how what Lenin did is applicable today when Cliff’s book contains no such discussion of how its content should be applied by Cliff’s group, the International Socialists (successor to the British Socialist Workers Party) in their political context of the mid-to-late 1970s? Surely what is good for the goose is good for the gander.

I mirrored Cliff’s narrow focus on Lenin and the history of the Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP). If my book review or Lih’s contribution suffered because neither of us drew up a balance sheet of applicable lessons for today, the same is equally true of Cliff’s book, although our contributions have not been shown to contain the kind of errors that marred Cliff’s Lenin.

Timing

So the question remains: why did I review Cliff’s book in early 2012?

Why re-litigate battles from a century ago as battles today rage in the streets of New York City, Athens, and Homs?

In fact, I began my review of Cliff’s Lenin began around the time I wrote The Bolshevik Experience and the ‘Leninist’ Model in summer of 2011, before Occupy Wall Street (OWS) broke out almost literally on my doorstep. The lull in OWS activity following the November 15 eviction allowed me to complete this project, since I had far more important things to do during the encampment than re-read Cliff.
This explains the “odd” timing of the book review. What prompted me in the first place to look at Cliff’s book carefully, chapter by chapter, in summer of 2011 was Lars Lih’s response to Chris Harman and Paul Le Blanc in *Historical Materialism* 18. Here, Lih mentioned some of Building the Party’s factual errors. I was curious to see if there were any errors that Lih had not brought to light. The rest, as they say, is history.

**Judgments**

Does it follow then, as PS claims, that, “Pham thinks Cliff’s book is of zero value and should be thrown in the dustbin of history. He makes it sound as if the most important debate right now is, in some sweeping sense: ‘Tony Cliff: Yay or Nay?’”

My book review never claimed that Cliff’s *Lenin* has “zero value and should be thrown in the dustbin of history.” I was much more careful and specific, arguing that the book was “useless as a historical study of Lenin’s actions and thoughts.” Believe it or not, plenty of books have value even if they are not historical studies of Lenin’s thoughts and actions. Cliff’s *Lenin* is no exception.

The value of Cliff’s *Lenin* is a separate issue from any sort of sweeping judgment of Tony Cliff as a man, writer, or revolutionary. He wrote about a huge range of subjects during the almost 90 years of his life. One book, no matter how awful or problematic, is an insufficient basis for making a “yay or nay” judgment on someone’s life and work. Anyone who read my book review and thought that my goal was to “get Tony Cliff” or make such a judgment has probably spent too much time in the marginal and unhealthy environment known as the socialist movement where strawmen, sweeping personalistic condemnations, and sweeping yays and nays have become the rule rather than the exception.

**Method**

PS says that the body of my review consisted of “quibbling complaints about this or that error made by Tony Cliff.” Getting the meaning of democratic centralism wrong, distorting Lenin’s attitude towards party rules, failing to represent Lenin’s view of the famous 1903 Menshevik-Bolshevik dispute as expressed in painstaking detail in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, and ignoring the fact that the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks did not become separate, independent parties until 1917 hardly constitutes quibbling for any serious student of Bolshevism.

If all of the above is quibbling, it begs the question of what exactly for PS would constitute significant distortions, inaccuracies, flaws, or factual errors? Should we rest content that the moral of the story – we must build a revolutionary party! – is the correct one? If so, why bother being accurate at all?

**The Value of Accuracy**

Historical accuracy is paramount if we are trying to use history as a guide to action.

We cannot learn from what happened unless we actually know (and acknowledge) what happened. History, like the present, will always be contested to some degree, but intelligent debate over what happened, when, and why is not possible when those involved in such disputes maintain their views despite a growing body of evidence that contradicts the factual basis for their particular interpretation. Paul Le Blanc’s insistence that the Bolsheviks became a separate party from the Mensheviks in 1912 at the Prague Conference falls into this category because, to adhere to this interpretation, one must ignore or downplay the testimonies of conference participants such as Lenin and Zinoviev as well as a slew of documentary evidence from the period since all of it points in the opposite direction. Why the 1912 issue is important I will examine later in this piece.

Cliff’s *Lenin* has value – as a cautionary tale of how not to approach the work of others (Lenin’s primarily, but also that of scholars) and how not to handle historical documents and complex issues. (*Building the Party’s* Russian-language citations are copied from secondary sources without proper attribution, making it almost impossible for anyone else to look at the material he used to write his book.)
The single most important lesson we can learn from Cliff’s *Lenin* is the necessity of putting the work of Lenin and the Bolsheviks back into its proper historical context, which is the international social democratic movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s. This Cliff did not do in his zeal to “prove” this or that point about the nature of the revolutionary party (a loaded concept that deserves to be unpacked), the nature of said party’s internal regime, and its alleged leadership style. By contrast, Lih’s work will withstand the test of time and the harshest of critical examinations because he seeks to understand Lenin historically, as he was, as he evolved over time, *regardless of the implications for revolutionary organizers today*.

Lih has no dog in our fight, nor should he. Claiming that he “position[s] himself as a mere scholar—rather than activist—[who] repeatedly invokes his expertise and specific role as a ‘historian’” and, as a result of such so-called positioning, “offers little insight into the questions that really matter here” as PS does is ridiculous for the following reason: no matter how wonderful Lih’s scholarship on Lenin is, *he is not going to do our thinking for us. Drawing out the implications of his work is our job, not his.*

Any student of that era, those issues, or the man (Lenin) would do well to imitate Lih’s method in approaching the history of Bolshevism if they really want to mine that experience for the valuable lessons it undoubtedly contains.

When studying history we should focus on precisely that – history. Engaging in historical study focused on “advancing our understanding of the contemporary conjuncture and struggles within it” as PS suggests will inevitably distort what we get out of looking at events that occurred yesterday, yesteryear, and a century ago, especially when they happened in foreign countries whose cultures, languages, and traditions are not readily comparable to our own. Approaching the past with a “what do I get out of it in the here and now?” or a “what in this is immediately applicable to my situation?” mentality is to blind ourselves to history’s rich contradictions and nuances in favor of something simplistic and readily digestible.

**Clarifications**

The dedication of my book review “to anyone and everyone [who] has sacrificed in the name of ‘building the revolutionary party,’” has nothing to do with declaring that project to be a “bankrupt political goal,” despite what PS seems to think. If that is what I thought I would just come out and say it.

I don’t mince words.

The dedication is a reference to the fact that generations of socialists all over the world have made personal sacrifices of one sort or another in the name of the title of Cliff’s book, *Building the Party* under the assumption that their efforts would contribute in some way to the creation of a Bolshevik-type party. I have no problem with people choosing to make such sacrifices, but choosing to do so based on severe distortions or a nonexistent historical precedent is a different story.

PS’s concluding words compel me to clarify where I don’t stand on some questions as well:

If there is one relatively clear political implication of Pham’s intervention, it seems to be that Lenin was “an orthodox Kautskyist” and that the distinction between Second International reformism (associated with Kautsky and the SPD) and early Third International revolutionary politics (associated with Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Lenin) is historically inaccurate.

I am mystified how anyone could read my book review of Cliff’s *Lenin* and my replies to Paul Le Blanc and Paul D’Amato and write that Cliff getting Lenin wrong has “one relatively clear political implication” on issues such as Lenin’s relationship to Karl Kautsky or the Third International’s relationship to the Second. Cliff’s book did not delve into those topics at all and neither did I. Perhaps I am somehow being confused or conflated with Lih since he has actually done work on Lenin’s take on Kautsky?
Whatever the case, I would never be so stupid to think that the distinction between the Second and Third Internationals “is historically inaccurate.” I do believe that the character of those distinctions has been profoundly misunderstood by “Leninists.” That topic, along with “Leninism” and whether the Bolsheviks really constituted a “party of a new type,” will be addressed in a future piece that I began before OWS.

Stay tuned.

The Importance of 1912

To be candid, these debates have zero importance beyond the ranks of historians like Lih and those who continue to find inspiration in or lessons to be learned from the Bolsheviks. But the issue of 1912 looms large for those of us in the latter milieu because of statements like this from D’Amato:

The outcome of the period 1912-1917 was that two independent political parties entered the arena of struggle in 1917. The irreconcilable differences between these two parties, which led one to support soviet power and the other to oppose it, led to a Bolshevik victory over the opposition of the Mensheviks, and later to the founding of a new international that was based upon soviet power and the need for revolutionary Marxists to organisationally separate themselves from social-democratic reformism. Can a debate over the exact date when the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks split shed any more light in these critical developments in the history of the socialist movement?

My answer to his closing question is unequivocally “yes!”, although the evidence indicates that there is no single “exact date” in 1917 when this separation took place. It was a process, more like balding than a divorce.

The reason I say yes is because the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were part of the same broad multi-tendency party from 1903 until 1917 that “Leninists” today strenuously reject as a bankrupt model doomed to fail.

The 1917 Russian revolution proves that this model is anything but bankrupt or doomed in advance. The differences between the two factions were not always irreconcilable. To insist otherwise would be ahistorical (or undialectical, if you prefer). Lenin’s writings up until 1917 are filled with rejections of the notion that there could or should be two “organisationally separate” RSDLPs, one Menshevik, the other Bolshevik.

(Interesting fact: the phrase “Bolshevik Party” never occurs in Lenin’s Collected Works during the 1912-1916 period except as explanatory editorial notes written by people other than Lenin. Only in 1917 does Lenin himself speak and write of the Bolsheviks as a party.)

Conflating the liquidationists, the Mensheviks, and social-democratic reformists (Bernsteinists) with one another as D’Amato does makes all of this impossible to understand or even acknowledge. Neither Lenin nor the Bolsheviks were what we call “Leninists,” nor did they who build a “party of a new type” totally unlike and superior to their international social democratic brethren. The historical evidence indicates that they were revolutionary social democrats who defended what they considered to be orthodoxy from the likes of Eduard Bernstein and later, the man who did more than anyone else to create that orthodoxy, Kautsky.

All of this goes to show how history’s rich complexities and ironies clash with the simplistic and distorted accounts of the Bolsheviks and Lenin put forward by detractors and would-be imitators alike. What (if anything) this means for us today is a matter of debate, but historical falsehoods and fictions (when we know better!) should not be part of that debate.

Lenin and Occupy

Many socialists have cheered Lih’s demolition of the textbook interpretation of Lenin’s work without examining how many of our own preconceptions on the subject are now part of the same pile of rubble.
The fact that Occupy has functioned *in practice* like the much-sought-after but never replicated vanguard party that Lenin helped create in early 20th century Russia has also escaped much of the Marxist left. These two developments are not coincidental.

Leon Trotsky’s description of the party as “a lever for enhancing the activity of the advanced workingmen” captures exactly how Occupy has functioned. In the space of four weeks, OWS mobilized more workers and oppressed people than the entire U.S. socialist left combined has in four decades. OWS did not begin with a program or a series of demands but with an *action that inspired tens of thousands of others to act, speak, march, occupy, and rise up in an elemental awakening (or stikhiinyi in Russian).*

Inspirational leadership is the core theme of Lih’s *Lenin* biography and underpins Lenin’s writings as well. Consider his words from *Left-Wing Communism* explaining why and how the Bolsheviks triumphed against all odds during the 1917 revolution and the brutal civil war that followed:

> [T]he Bolsheviks could not have retained power for two and a half months, let alone two and a half years, without the most rigorous and truly iron discipline in our Party, or without the fullest and unreserved support from the entire mass of the working class, that is, from all thinking, honest, devoted and influential elements in it, capable of leading the backward strata or carrying the latter along with them. … I repeat: the experience of the victorious dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia has clearly shown even to those who are incapable of thinking or have had no occasion to give thought to the matter that absolute centralisation and rigorous discipline of the proletariat are an essential condition of victory over the bourgeoisie. … This is often dwelt on. However, not nearly enough thought is given to what it means, and under what conditions it is possible.

It should go without saying that Occupy at six months does not resemble a disciplined, centralized organization steeled over two decades of battles. That is not the important part of the comparison. It’s what lies *underneath* the discipline that Lenin described as “an essential condition of the Bolsheviks’ success” that is the key:

> The first questions to arise are: how is the discipline of the proletariat’s revolutionary party maintained? How is it tested? How is it reinforced? First, by the class-consciousness of the proletarian vanguard and by its devotion to the revolution, by its tenacity, self-sacrifice and heroism. Second, by its ability to link up, maintain the closest contact, and—if you wish—merge, in certain measure, with the broadest masses of the working people—primarily with the proletariat, but also with the non-proletarian masses of working people. Third, by the correctness of the political leadership exercised by this vanguard, by the correctness of its political strategy and tactics, provided the broad masses have seen, from their own experience, that they are correct.

If there any words to describe the thousands of occupiers who continually defy cops in riot gear, risking beatings, arrests, and wanton brutality simply to maintain a presence in an ostensibly public space, they are *tenacity, self-sacrifice, and heroism.*

That same tenacity, self-sacrifice, and heroism led four college students to sit-in at a segregated lunch counter in the South, sparking a new phase of the civil rights movement as thousands launched similar sit-ins. That same tenacity, self-sacrifice, and heroism led a small band of Black activists to don leather jackets and berets and carry shotguns in one hand and law books in the other in 1966. Calling themselves the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, they succeeded at winning mass support in the Black community in short order. The tenacity, self-sacrifice, and heroism of the Industrial Workers of the World (or Wobblies) is the stuff of legend.

It was OWS’s tenacity, self-sacrifice, and heroism in the face of New York Police Department (NYPD) Inspector Anthony Bologna’s pepper spray rampage on September 24, 2011 that ended the isolation that marked week one of the occupation and allowed it to link up, maintain close contact, and merge with the masses in weeks two and three. NYPD repression did for OWS what Bloody Sunday did for the Russian revolution in 1905 (although thankfully no one was killed).
The correctness of Occupy’s tactics and political strategy is deeply felt by huge numbers of people because both have proven to be unmatched in effectiveness. This mass feeling explains why the ideas, values, and methods that animated OWS such as General Assemblies, modified consensus, autonomy, horizontalism, direct action, and direct democracy dominate all corners of Occupy. All of this has become the uprising’s common sense, its animus.

Huge numbers of people look to Occupy for “how to live and how to die.”

The excitement over Occupy’s calls for a May 1 general strike and the anticipation felt by almost everyone about the prospect of an American Spring are a symptom of Occupy’s vanguard role. Occupy has also assumed another aspect of what is typically associated with Lenin and the vanguard party:

[T]he Social-Democrat’s ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation.

OWS played this role from its inception, marching against the execution of Troy Davis. Solidarity was automatic. Shortly after Davis was murdered by the state of Georgia on September 21, 2011, signs appeared at OWS that read: “I’ll believe corporations are people when Texas executes one!” A “single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation” indeed.

By standing up to tyranny, oppression, and police brutality directed against people of color, Occupy has won enduring respect and created alliances with a variety of racial and religious minority communities. It has gone from being for the 99% to being by the 99%, which brings us to the next compelling overlap between Occupy and Lenin’s ideas.

Derided by the Marxist left for being vague, populist, blurry, or class collaborationist, the 99% is in fact synonymous with Lenin’s vision of a revolution accomplished by the narod, which Lih rightly notes has an emotional punch in Russian that the English version (the people) lacks. Add the peasantry, students, and all of Russia’s oppressed peoples together with the working class and it would probably be numerically close to the 99% espoused by Occupy.

Lenin’s vision of revolution was fundamentally inclusive, not exclusive, and the same is true of Occupy’s vision. So where does all of this leave the socialist movement in the United States? Does that mean (try not to cringe) that Lenin is no longer relevant? The answer to these questions depends on what you take from the Bolshevik experience.

At one point in his career, Lenin set out to unify scattered local informal groups of intellectuals and workers known as circles into something resembling the German Social Democratic Party. Six months into the greatest explosion of mass struggle in almost half a century, today’s socialist left is much smaller numerically than the Socialist Labor Party was at its low point (6,000 in 1898) and growing at a snail’s pace, if that. Today, socialist groups generally do not have contact with, much less productive, ongoing, working relationships with one another nationally, or even locally.

Imagine the Russian circles that Lenin sought to unite all declaring that political differences with their counterparts across town or in other parts of Russia were too great to be in the same organization. Instead of uniting, they formed separate membership organizations, published rival newspapers, and competed with one another for individual adherents. Do this and you get some idea of how the problems Lenin faced stack up to the problems we face.

Since we don’t have Tsarist repression to deal with, since we have the “air and light” Kautsky said we needed for a successful political workers’ movement, the only people to blame for this sorry state of affairs are ourselves (and our predecessors). Any observer who looks at our movement will not feel inspired to join up and make sacrifices for a great cause; they are more likely to feel despair, frustration, and bewilderment at the foolish, needless, endless, and counterproductive divisions that are keeping us weak despite the greatest opening in a generation (or three).
Unless we start *doing* something different, we are not going to end up with anything different than what we have now, no matter how badly we want it or how hard we work. When you’re stuck in a hole, the first thing to do is to *stop digging*.

If there’s anything we can learn from Lenin and apply now, it’s that if we *rise to the tasks* before us and get our act together, we can turn our movement around and make it a factor of the first order in American politics again.
The response by blogger ‘Pink Scare’ to the debate ignited by my review of Tony Cliff’s *Lenin: building the party* affords me the opportunity to clarify issues of secondary importance. Things like timing, judgments, method and implications did not fit with the content of my responses to the Cliff book’s two defenders, Paul Le Blanc and Paul D’Amato. In addition, I will discuss the role of Lars T Lih in this little firestorm.

PS is appreciative, but ultimately dissatisfied with Lih’s contribution, because the latter does not spell out the practical implications of his research for revolutionary Marxists today and instead adopts a “nonpolitical posture” of “scholarly neutrality”. Le Blanc and D’Amato also tried to fault my book review for similar reasons - namely, that it did not situate Cliff’s book in today’s context - although my views on party-building today were made abundantly clear in two different articles prior to the Cliff debate and one article after it. It seems no-one is allowed to examine the historical record surrounding Lenin or challenge anyone else’s presentation of Lenin’s work without including a detailed ‘how to’ manual for today’s revolutionary left.

This line of criticism fails to address a very basic point: why should a book review of Cliff’s *Lenin* (written in 1975) include a discussion of how Lenin’s actions are applicable today when Cliff’s book contains no such discussion of how its content should be applied by Cliff’s group, the International Socialists (predecessor of the British Socialist Workers Party) in their political context of the mid- to late 1970s? Surely what is good for the goose is good for the gander.

I mirrored Cliff’s narrow focus on Lenin and the history of the Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). If my book review or Lih’s contribution suffered because neither of us drew up a balance sheet of applicable lessons for today, the same is equally true of Cliff’s book, although our contributions have not been shown to contain the kind of errors that marred Cliff’s *Lenin*.

**Timing and judgments**

So the question remains: why did I review Cliff’s book in early 2012? Why re-litigate battles from a century ago, as battles today rage in the streets of New York city, Athens and Homs?

In fact, I began my review of Cliff’s *Lenin* around the time I wrote ‘The Bolshevik experience and the “Leninist” model’ in the summer of 2011, before Occupy Wall Street (OWS) broke out almost literally on my doorstep. The lull in OWS activity following the November 15 eviction allowed me to complete this project, since I had far more important things to do during the encampment than reread Cliff.

This explains the ‘odd’ timing of the book review. What prompted me in the first place to look at Cliff’s book carefully, chapter by chapter, in the summer of 2011 was Lars Lih’s response to Chris Harman and Paul Le Blanc in...
**Historical Materialism** No. 18. Here, Lih mentioned some of *Building the party*’s factual errors. I was curious to see if there were any errors that Lih had not brought to light. The rest, as they say, is history.

Does it follow then, as PS claims, that, “Pham thinks Cliff’s book is of zero value and should be thrown in the dustbin of history. He makes it sound as if the most important debate right now is, in some sweeping sense, ‘Tony Cliff: yay or nay?’”

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The value of Cliff’s *Lenin* is a separate issue from any sort of sweeping judgment of Tony Cliff as a man, writer or revolutionary. He wrote about a huge range of subjects during the almost 90 years of his life. One book, no matter how awful or problematic, is an insufficient basis for making a “yay or nay” judgment on someone’s life and work. Anyone who read my book review and thought that my goal was to ‘get Tony Cliff’ or make such a judgment has probably spent too much time in the marginal and unhealthy environment known as the socialist movement, where straw men, sweeping personalistic condemnations, and sweeping yays and nays have become the rule rather than the exception.

PS says that the body of my review consisted of “quibbling complaints about this or that error made by Tony Cliff”. Getting the meaning of democratic centralism wrong, distorting Lenin’s attitude towards party rules, failing to represent Lenin’s view of the famous 1903 Menshevik-Bolshevik dispute, as expressed in painstaking detail in *One step forward, two steps back*, and ignoring the fact that the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks did not become separate, independent parties until 1917 hardly constitutes quibbling for any serious student of Bolshevism.12

If all of the above is quibbling, it begs the question of what exactly for PS would constitute significant distortions, inaccuracies, flaws or factual errors? Should we rest content that the moral of the story – we must build a revolutionary party! - is the correct one? If so, why bother being accurate at all?

**Accuracy**

Historical accuracy is paramount if we are trying to use history as a guide to action.

We cannot learn from what happened unless we actually know (and acknowledge) what happened. History, like the present, will always be contested to some degree, but intelligent debate over what happened, when, and why is not possible when those involved in such disputes maintain their views despite a growing body of evidence that contradicts the factual basis for their particular interpretation. Paul Le Blanc’s insistence that the Bolsheviks became a separate party from the Mensheviks in 1912 at the Prague Conference falls into this category because to adhere to this interpretation one must ignore or downplay the testimonies of conference participants such as Lenin and Zinoviev, as well as a slew of documentary evidence from the period, since all of it points in the opposite direction.13

Why the 1912 issue is important I will examine later in this piece.

Cliff’s *Lenin* has value - as a cautionary tale of how not to approach the work of others (Lenin’s primarily, but also that of scholars) and how not to handle historical documents and complex issues (*Building the party*’s Russian-language citations are copied from secondary sources without proper attribution, making it almost impossible for anyone else to look at the material he used to write his book).

The single most important lesson we can learn from Cliff’s *Lenin* is the necessity of putting the work of Lenin and the Bolsheviks back into its proper historical context, which is the international social democratic movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s. This Cliff did not do in his zeal to ‘prove’ this or that point about the nature of the revolutionary party (a loaded concept that deserves to be unpacked), the nature of said party’s internal regime and its alleged leadership style. By contrast, Lih’s work will withstand the test of time and the harshest of critical examinations
because he seeks to understand Lenin historically, as he was, as he evolved over time, regardless of the implications for revolutionary organisers today.

Lih has no dog in our fight, nor should he. Claiming, as PS does, that he “position[s] himself as a mere scholar - rather than activist - [who] repeatedly invokes his expertise and specific role as a ‘historian’” and, as a result of such so-called positioning, “offers little insight into the questions that really matter here” is ridiculous for the following reason: no matter how wonderful Lih’s scholarship on Lenin is, he is not going to do our thinking for us. Drawing out the implications of his work is our job, not his.

Any student of that era, those issues or the man (Lenin) would do well to imitate Lih’s method in approaching the history of Bolshevism if they really want to mine that experience for the valuable lessons it undoubtedly contains.

When studying history we should focus on precisely that - history. Engaging in historical study focused on “advancing our understanding of the contemporary conjuncture and struggles within it”, as PS suggests, will inevitably distort what we get out of looking at events that occurred yesterday, yesteryear and a century ago - especially when they happened in foreign countries, whose cultures, languages and traditions are not readily comparable to our own. Approaching the past with a ‘what do I get out of it in the here and now?’ or a ‘what in this is immediately applicable to my situation?’ mentality is to blind ourselves to history’s rich contradictions and nuances in favour of something simplistic and readily digestible.

Clarifications

The dedication of my book review to “anyone and everyone [who] has sacrificed in the name of ‘building the revolutionary party,’” has nothing to do with declaring that project to be a “bankrupt political goal”, despite what PS seems to think. If that is what I thought I would just come out and say it. I do not mince words.

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PS’s concluding words compel me to clarify where I do not stand on some questions as well:

If there is one relatively clear political implication of Pham’s intervention, it seems to be that Lenin was “an orthodox Kautskyist” and that the distinction between Second International reformism (associated with Kautsky and the SPD) and early Third International revolutionary politics (associated with Luxemburg, Trotsky and Lenin) is historically inaccurate.

The importance of 1912
To be candid, these debates have zero importance beyond the ranks of historians like Lih and those who continue to find inspiration in or lessons to be learned from the Bolsheviks. But the issue of 1912 looms large for those of us in the latter milieu because of statements like this from D’Amato:

The outcome of the period 1912-17 was that two independent political parties entered the arena of struggle in 1917. The irreconcilable differences between these two parties, which led one to support soviet power and the other to oppose it, led to a Bolshevik victory over the opposition of the Mensheviks, and later to the founding of a new international that was based upon soviet power and the need for revolutionary Marxists to organisationally separate themselves from social democratic reformism. Can a debate over the exact date when the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks split shed any more light in these critical developments in the history of the socialist movement?

My answer to his closing question is unequivocally ‘yes!’ – although the evidence indicates that there is no single “exact date” in 1917 when this separation took place. It was a process - more like balding than a divorce.

The reason I say yes is because the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were part of the same broad, multi-tendency party from 1903 until 1917 that ‘Leninists’ today strenuously reject as a bankrupt model doomed to fail. The 1917 Russian Revolution proves that this model is anything but bankrupt or doomed in advance. The differences between the two factions were not always irreconcilable. To insist otherwise would be ahistorical (or undialectical, if you prefer). Lenin’s writings up until 1917 are filled with rejections of the notion that there could or should be two “organisationally separate” RSDLPs: one Menshevik, the other Bolshevik. (Interesting fact: the phrase “Bolshevik Party” never occurs in Lenin’s Collected works during the 1912-16 period except as explanatory editorial notes written by people other than Lenin. Only in 1917 does Lenin himself speak and write of the Bolsheviks as a party.)

Conflating the liquidationists, the Mensheviks and social democratic reformists (Bernsteinists) with one another, as D’Amato does, makes all of this impossible to understand or even acknowledge. Neither Lenin nor the Bolsheviks were what we call ‘Leninists’, and they did not build a ‘party of a new type’ totally unlike and superior to their international social democratic brethren. The historical evidence indicates that they were revolutionary social democrats who defended what they considered to be orthodoxy from the likes of Eduard Bernstein and, later, the man who did more than anyone else to create that orthodoxy, Kautsky.

All of this goes to show how history’s rich complexities and ironies clash with the simplistic and distorted accounts of the Bolsheviks and Lenin put forward by detractors and would-be imitators alike.

What (if anything) this means for us today is a matter of debate, but historical falsehoods and fictions (when we know better!) should not be part of that debate.

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1 http://pink-scare.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/politics-of-debate-overlenin.html
2 ‘Mangling the party of Lenin’ Weekly Worker February 2.
3 http://links.org.au/node/2718
5 ‘Falling out over a cliff’ Weekly Worker February 16.
9 http://spnyc.org/home/2012/02/17/another-socialist-left-is-possible.


14 See ‘VI Lenin and the influence of Kautsky’ Weekly Worker September 3 2009.
I would like to respond to two problematical contentions advanced by Pham Binh in his article ‘Wanting to get Lenin wrong’ (Weekly Worker March 29). One of these contentions is about my motivation for disagreeing with his interpretation of Lenin’s thought, and the other has to do with a historical question - when the Bolsheviks became a separate party. This is part of an extended debate having to do with history and politics (Lenin and the Bolsheviks; tasks facing socialists today). My own contributions touching on these questions can be found at http://links.org.au/taxonomy/term/579.

Firstly, Pham has yet again tagged me as “a defender of Tony Cliff”. In my opinion - stated quite explicitly in a previous contribution - Tony Cliff is not the issue. I share the view of Lars T Lih, Paul D’Amato and others that aspects of Pham’s attack on Cliff are unfair, but I had no interest in entering this debate as “a defender of Tony Cliff”. That Pham chooses to insist otherwise has more to do with his fixation than with my motivation.

I have based neither my own interpretation of Lenin nor my criticism of Pham on Cliff’s writings. I have indicated this more than once, in articles appearing in Historical Materialism and Links. This should also be evident from a careful reading of my book, Lenin and the revolutionary party. I was motivated to disagree with Pham’s interpretation of Lenin and the Bolsheviks because I think it is based on factual errors and faulty analysis, independently of anything that Tony Cliff has written.

Secondly, while I have expressed my own disagreements with aspects of Cliff’s interpretation of Lenin’s thought (especially with the way he deals with Lenin’s 1902 polemic, What is to be done?), I do believe that Cliff is closer to the truth than Pham regarding when the Bolsheviks became a separate party. Pham says it happened at some unspecified time in 1917 - though he acknowledges that he is at a loss about precisely when this happened (telling us it was “more like balding than a divorce”). Cliff says it happened in 1912, and for all practical purposes he is right.

Pham is basing himself on what seems to me a misreading of Lars Lih’s criticism of another historian, Carter Elwood. At issue was a January 1912 conference in Prague of the Russian SocialDemocratic Labour Party (RSDLP) organised by Lenin and other Bolsheviks close to him. There are actually three parts to Elwood’s position:

1. the Bolsheviks became a separate party in 1912 based on what happened at the Prague conference;
2. this was what Lenin set out to accomplish;
3. Lenin was able to accomplish this only by lying about what he was actually doing.

Lars strongly argues against point 3 and raises questions about point 2. So far as I am aware, in his critique of Elwood, he does not argue against point 1. There is much evidence in Lenin’s writings (two of which are included in the Pluto
Press selection that I edited, *Revolution, democracy, socialism* and in the writings of others from that period that the Prague conference actually did result in an independent Bolshevik party.

Martov and other Mensheviks, and Trotsky as well, by denouncing and rejecting the Prague conference (and instead organising an RSDLP conference of their own in Vienna in August 1912 - the so-called August Bloc), may be partly responsible for the actual outcome. Lenin may have hoped these comrades would behave differently, without necessarily expecting them to. The door was open for them to become part of the version of the RSDLP that emerged from the Prague conference. But, given the dynamics of their own politics and the overall situation, they could not go through that door. Lenin and his Bolshevik co-thinkers went forward anyway.

This does not invalidate Lih’s argument (with which I basically agree): Lenin was fairly open about what he was doing, and he did not lie. It does run counter to Pham’s assertion, however, that the Bolsheviks did not become a distinct party in 1912, as a result of the Prague conference, but instead crystallised at some undefined time in 1917.

Pham says it was important that “the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were part of the same broad, multi-tendency party from 1903 until 1917” and today socialist groups should likewise, in his opinion: join together into a multi-tendency organisation. It is not necessary, however, to minimise the meaning of the 1912 Prague conference to make such an argument. Nor is it clear that the “broad, multitendency” RSDLP is the best model for genuine socialist unity.

Even when the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were actually part of the same RSDLP for the period that we agree they were (1903 to 1912), they seemed to function as incredibly hardened factions: separate newspapers; divergent strategies which they worked - separately – to implement; separate delegations in the duma; separate factional conferences; separate funds; separate leadership bodies; etc. I would be surprised if this is the kind of “socialist unity” that Pham is actually advocating for our own time. I think it might be more fruitful to reach for practical unity among revolutionary socialists - perhaps at some point leading to organisational unity - through working together in united-front efforts in the struggles of today.
“Both Pham Binh and Paul Le Blanc are wrong”

By Marc Macnair

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The debate on Tony Cliff’s *Lenin* (volume 1: *Building the party*) and on the significance of 1912 in the history of Bolshevism, rumbles on. This contribution should be read in conjunction with Paul Le Blanc’s response, published in this issue, to Pham Binh’s piece in last week’s paper.

The *Weekly Worker* editors cut Pham Binh’s piece substantially; the full text, ‘Over a Cliff and into Occupy with Lenin’, is available on Louis Proyect’s blog. Our cuts were partly for space reasons, but also partly political. The larger part of what we cut from Pham Binh’s article is directed to arguing that the ‘Occupy’ movement represented the 21st century equivalent of Bolshevism.

Our front-page story last week was Jim Creegan’s very much more cautious assessment of the partial convergence and partial conflict between ‘Occupy Oakland’ and organised labour in the form of the International Longshore Workers’ Union. Comrade Creegan does not speak for the CPGB, but the editors’ view was that what he had to say was closer to the politics we want to promote than are comrade Binh, who tends to idolise the ‘Occupy’ movement.

The question is not just one of US left politics, any more than it is just one of the history of the workers’ movement. Comrade Le Blanc’s piece draws out a political question which is fundamental for the left. Should we aim in the short term for a “multi-tendency” party with – if necessary - open factions with their own press and organisation? Or is the better approach, as Le Blanc argues and as Alex Callinicos has argued in the past, “to reach for practical unity among revolutionary socialists - perhaps at some point leading to organisational unity - through working together in *united front efforts* in the struggles of today” (emphasis added)? Le Blanc has argued this view at more length in a separate article in the Australian Democratic Socialist Organisation’s *Links* journal. This aspect of the debate was absent from James Turley’s intervention two weeks ago.

The problem of 1912 in this context is that comrade Le Blanc and others make a myth of that year as the moment at which Bolsheviks and Mensheviks became two *parties*, rather than two *public factions*, to substitute for the old myth of 1903 as the moment of the ‘real’ or ‘decisive’ split. The reasons for the myth are partly discussed in comrade Turley’s article. But doing so obscures what 1912 was in reality about: the choice between, on the one hand, the line of the Bolsheviks and the pro-party Mensheviks led by Plekhanov and, on the other, that of the ‘liquidators’ who argued for the replacement of the illegal party, with its ‘sectarian’ commitments to the overthrow of the regime, by a broad-front party focused on ‘the struggles of today’.

**Unity**
The CPGB has fought in the short term for the unity of the Marxist left in a common party, on the basis of a platform for common action, which includes at the most fundamental level:

- the ideas of working class political independence under capitalism and of the goal of working class rule, as opposed to various forms of the idea of the people’s front;
- the international unity of the working class, as opposed to various forms of left nationalism;
- radical democracy both in the state (as opposed to the various monarchies, presidencies, sovereign supreme courts, and so on) and in the workers’ movement (as opposed to the dictatorship of the trade union bureaucracies and the party bureaucracies big and small).

The last of these points necessarily implies fighting for a party which can have public organised factions with - if necessary - their own press and organisation; though we argue that it is preferable for the disputes within the party to be fully ventilated in public in the party’s common press.

The internal debates, disputes and nuances of opinion within the party are, in our view, the common property of the militants who read the party press and eventually of the working class as a whole. It is through - as far as possible - participating in these debates, and through the broadest possible democratic self-organisation, that the working class develops itself as a potential ruling class. Hence the party has no right to privacy from the class and the leading committees have no right to privacy from the party.

‘Multi-tendency party’

What I have just said, however, is not what is meant by Pham Binh when he argues for a ‘multi-tendency party’ - as can be seen from the arguments idolising ‘Occupy’ which we did not publish. Nor is it what is meant by a “multi-tendency party” by Louis Proyect, who has broadly backed Pham Binh against the comrades from the International Socialist Organisation, or by the Mandelite Fourth International in their arguments with the British Socialist Workers Party over this issue over the last 15-20 years.

For these comrades the practical meaning of a “multi-tendency party” is one which unites ‘revolutionaries’ (understood not as advocates of the overthrow of the constitution and the creation of working class rule - peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must - but as advocates of the mass-struggle ‘revolutionary rupture’) with ‘reformists’ - a category very difficult to identify at the present date, but which certainly includes left nationalists, people’s frontists and supporters of the organisational forms of the dictatorship of the bureaucracy in the workers’ movement.

Our conception does not exclude the possibility of the participation of ‘reformists’ in this sense, or even ‘reformist’ factions, in a unified communist party. The question is, on what terms? From the beginning of the development of reformism, the reformists have wanted to insist that unity is only possible if they are in control: that is, that the party make no public commitments inconsistent with their projects, that they control the leadership, and that those to their left (if they are to be permitted to organise at all) use diplomatic language towards them. The policy began with the (originally unsuccessful) efforts of the right to stifle Marxist criticism in the precursor of the German Social Democratic Party in the 1880s.5

Unity on the reformists’ terms has, in reality, been the character of many “multi-tendency” parties - like Rifondazione Comunista in Italy, like the Brazilian Workers’ Party. In the case of the Scottish Socialist Party it involved Trotskyists pretending to be reformists (and in the process becoming left nationalists). Through the mechanism of ‘consensus’ it was the character of the World and European Social Forums. Its effect is - if you actually comply with the principle – to silence the argument for anything beyond what the reformists are willing to see argued.

The fate of these projects has been diverse, but largely negative. The Brazilian Workers’ Party became merely a participant in the dance of Brazilian clientelist bourgeois politics - at best an equivalent of the British Labour Party.
Rifondazione blew up over real political issues - participation in a government which was, in turn, participating in the imperialist war in Afghanistan - and collapsed. The SSP split and collapsed for reasons which at first sight appear completely apolitical, but in reality reflect its leaders’ decision to play the bourgeois political game - on the one hand by building a personality cult of Tommy Sheridan; on the other by adopting statist policies on prostitution which turned Sheridan’s personal life into a point of political weakness.

Meanwhile, the anarchists and semi-anarchists episodically reinvent the square wheel of ‘direct action’ coupled with the ‘tyranny of structurelessness’: producing, as they have always produced, ephemeral spectacles which draw in wider forces briefly, but evaporate quickly; groups of semi-terrorist provocateurs heavily infiltrated by the police and used by them to make the state appear more attractive than the mass movement (‘black bloc’, etc), and longer lasting micro-groups even more fissile than the Marxist left.

The underlying problem is the extreme fragmentation of the Marxist left, our refusal to unify as Marxists and our repeated hopes that this or that small group in isolation can ‘catch the tide’ of this or that ‘left reformist’ or ‘mass movement’ and outgrow its small-group rivals so as to marginalise them. This prevents any group having sufficient organised weight and credibility as an alternative to be able even to negotiate partial unity with the left reformists (united fronts) on anything but the reformists’ terms - which silence the political alternative to reformism.

The problem is exacerbated by and interlinked with the fact that the far left’s organisational forms are commonly - to be frank – less democratic than the Chinese Communist Party’s. In the first place, who on earth not blinded by the cult of the personality of Lenin (or of Cliff, or whoever) would imagine that a group whose leadership remains stable in an individual or a very few individuals for decades is the political representative of a future democracy? Second and equally important, the regime of secret internal discussion and monolithic external unity produces and reproduces split after split.

In other words, the recent history suggests that both Pham Binh and Paul Le Blanc are wrong about 21st century politics. Pham Binh is wrong because the ‘broad movement’ or ‘broad party’ conception without solving the problem of unity of the Marxists does not work as anything other than a form of process by which dissent is recuperated into the bourgeois political game.

Paul Le Blanc is wrong because the idea of the left groups cooperating through ‘united front’ policy is both a diluted form of the ‘broad movement’ policy and fails to get to grips with the problem of the dictatorship of the labour bureaucracy of the small groups.

Witness what has become of the British SWP’s ‘united front’ orientation, argued by Alex Callinicos against the Mandelites as comrade Le Blanc now argues it against the ‘Occupy’ enthusiasts: from the SWP suppressing their own ideas for the sake of unity in Respect, to splitting Respect on a totally unprincipled basis, producing small splits in their own organisation on an equally unprincipled basis, and substituting mere SWP fronts which pretend to unity while actually displaying disunity.

**History**

We argue about history in this context for two reasons. The first is indicated by what I have just said, which concerns the recent history from the 1990s up to the present day. In this sense we cannot avoid talking about history: all arguments about what might work in the future are drawn from what we believe happened in the past. This is true even where, as in the physical sciences, ‘what happened in the past’ means tightly controlled experiments; and even where, in everyday life, what is involved is trivial ideas like ‘the sun will rise tomorrow’ (because it routinely has in the past) or ‘if I don’t put my foot on the brake I will run into the car ahead of me’). In this sense, anyone who argues that we should not talk about history when deciding what to do in the future is either a fool or a liar.

More narrowly, we argue about the history of Bolshevism because our common project is in a very basic sense for the working class to take over running the society. And in October 1917 a coalition of workers’ parties and organisations
did oust the political representatives of the capitalist class from power in Russia and create a new constitutional order which aimed to be the frame of the class rule of the working class.

How long workers’ power survived in Soviet Russia is a matter of debate; for anarchists and ‘council’ communists it was at best very brief, for Trotskyists and ‘left’ communists it lasted into the 1920s before succumbing to a ‘counterrevolution within the revolution’; ‘official’ communists from the 1930s characterised the regime as ‘socialism as distinct from workers’ power, and on their terms this ‘socialism’ lasted till 1991; for Maoists ‘socialism’ in the USSR was overthrown by the Khrushchev administration in the 1950s. But on any argument except that of the full anarchists, workers’ power in Russia lasted longer than the Paris Commune or other workers’ uprisings.

Meanwhile, there were widespread revolutionary movements of the working class in far more countries in 1918-20, most notably in Germany, Austria, Hungary and Italy; and all these movements ended in defeat.6

Hence, we argue about the history of Bolshevism in order to draw lessons from it about what might work in the future.

**Leftwing communism**

The beginning of this sort of argument was when, in the year 1920, Lenin wrote his pamphlet *Leftwing communism: an infantile disorder.*7 This was part of a polemic in the Communist International with what became the left and council communist tendencies. The actual line Lenin defended in this pamphlet was in substance completely orthodox Bebel and pre-1914 Kautsky, and common ground between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks (except the liquidators) until 1914. But to say so would have cut no ice: Kautsky had gone over to the right, -1914 Kautsky, and common ground between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks (except the liquidators) until 1914. But to say so would have cut no ice: Kautsky had gone over to the right, and among the principal leaders of the ‘lefts’ were Herman Gorter and Antonie Pannekoek, who had polemised against Kautsky on just these issues in 1910-12.

Lenin therefore tactically represented the line he was arguing as the result of the long experience of the history of the Bolshevik Party, which had succeeded in making the revolution in 1917 where the western left had failed in 1918-20, as opposed to the limited party experience of the western left (hence ‘infantile disorder,’ meaning ‘childhood disease’). In the process he rewrote the history of Russian social democracy before 1917 so as to write back the independent party existence of the Bolsheviks all the way to 1903.

The new history of Bolshevism, and the idea that the left worldwide had to learn from the uniquely successful experience of Bolshevism, rapidly became orthodoxy. It is reflected in Grigory Zinoviev’s 1923 *History of the Bolshevik Party.*8 It is reflected, unsurprisingly, in Stalin’s *History of the CPSU(B) (short course).*9 And it is also reflected in Trotsky’s writings, where he refers to the history of Bolshevism, following from his sharply self-critical attitude in the 1930s to his own conduct and views on the party question before 1917. There are only a few limited exceptions where he polemises directly with the CPSU leadership majority’s, and later Stalinist, attacks on his history. It is, therefore, unsurprising that Cliff’s *Building the party* uses the same general framework.

Because the version in *Leftwing communism* rapidly became an orthodoxy, the result is that if it is unreliable, all witnesses producing after 1920 recollections of earlier events, who may have been influenced by *Leftwing communism*, are also unreliable. This is not only (obviously) true of Bolsheviks, but also of (for example) Menshevik witnesses, who rapidly adopted the 1920 narrative in support of the idea that Lenin had always been an unprincipled power-seeker and manoeuvrer. From these sources the version of the cold war academy was shaped. For some people the adoption of this narrative was clearly cynical; for others, however, it seems to have been a ‘false memory syndrome’ resulting from reinterpreting the past through 1920 eyes.

In what I have said so far I de facto assume that the *Leftwing communism* narrative is unreliable. This point is, in fact, not difficult. Its unreliability is visible from comrade Le Blanc’s own *Lenin and the revolutionary party* (1990), or from any systematic reading of the relevant volumes of Lenin’s *Collected works*, or of the RSDLP congress and conference resolutions of the period.10 When comrade Le Blanc argues, as he does here, that 1912 was the beginning of an independent Bolshevik Party, he is already contradicting Lenin’s 1920 narrative. It is a valuable bonus, but not strictly
essential, that the unreliability of the *Leftwing communism* narrative is strongly confirmed by Lars Lih’s scholarly work in the Russian-language sources.

It follows, then, that the left is still required to ask questions about the ingredients of Bolshevik success and the failure of the western socialist movement in 1917-20; but also that we have to ask these questions without the framework of Lenin’s *Leftwing communism* narrative of the history of Bolshevism.

**Two questions**

There are two modern questions at issue; and 1912 is relevant to only one of them.

The first question is the viability of a party which conducts its debates in the open and has, where necessary, public organised factions. 1912 is quite irrelevant to this. The reason is that it is perfectly clear that, whether they were a separate party or not, the Bolsheviks continued to conduct their internal debates in public *into and after* 1917.

Witness, for example, the debate over policy towards the provisional government, of which Lenin’s *April theses* were part: conducted in the public press of the all-Russian central committee on one side, and of the Vyborg district committee on the other. Witness the refusal of the Bolshevik CC in November 1917 (overriding Lenin) to expel Zinoviev and Kamenev for carrying their opposition to the seizure of power into the *bourgeois* press. Witness the left communists in the debate over Brest-Litovsk in 1918. Indeed, even after the 1921 ban on factions, a good deal of the debates of the 1920s were carried on in the public press.

In rejecting public debate of internally disputed issues, the Trotskyist left has, in fact, adopted a norm of *Stalinism*. In doing so, since the Trotskyists do not have a state to give them financial backing and global credibility, or a secret police to marginalise dissent, they have committed themselves to a ‘party’ form which *cannot* sink real roots in the working class or get beyond a few thousand members.

The second question is the basis of worthwhile unity. To this question 1912 *is* relevant; but it has to be placed in a degree of context.

In the 1890s and early 1900s the SPD and Second International were vigorously promoting the idea that broad-based unity of the socialists could provide the basis of a breakthrough - as the 1875 Gotha unification had provided the basis of the SPD’s breakthrough.

It should be emphasised that - contrary to a common view on the far left - the SPD itself, and the unitary parties it supported, were *not* conceived as ‘parties of the whole class’, but as organised parties founded on a definite political programme, of the general character of the SPD’s *Erfurt programme*. The anarchists had been excluded from the Second International in 1896.

One of the products of this unity policy was the 1903 attempt to unify the divided Russian left in the form of a second congress of the stillborn RSDLP, founded in 1898. The planned 1903 party had the same character as the SDP’s other unity projects: it was to be based on a programme and included advocates of working class power, *not* the whole of the Russian socialist left - which included the Social Revolutionaries and their peasant-based socialism.

In fact, the 1903 Congress produced a new split, with both sides claiming to be the ‘real’ party, though the Bolsheviks had a majority of the delegates - hence their name: ‘Majorityites’. The split issue was whether the congress majority was entitled to remove long-standing members of the editorial board of the newspaper *Iskra*.

The subsequent history included independent action of the two factions in 1905; reunification in 1906, continued into 1907; a new debate on participation in the elections for the third duma on a restricted franchise which separated, on the one side, the Mensheviks and Lenin and his immediate supporters from, on the other side, the ‘Otovists’ and similar factions - mostly drawn from the ranks and leaders of the Bolsheviks - who argued for a boycott tactic. This led to a formal split in the Bolshevik faction and the constitution of the *Vperyod* group in 1909-10.
Meanwhile, a section of the Mensheviks began to argue that the right solution was to dissolve the illegal party and build a broad labour party not based on a definite programme, but committed to legality. These were the ‘liquidators’.

Lenin and his wing of the Bolsheviks continued his bloc with the Plekhanov group among the Mensheviks, which had initially developed in the struggle against Vperyod, into calling the Prague conference of the RSDLP in 1912. The idea of the Prague conference was to reconstitute the RSDLP organisation, and to do without the liquidators. Far more detail can be found in Lars Lih’s February 16 Weekly Worker supplement. As he points out, of only 14 delegates at the conference - a small number - two were Mensheviks: a minority, but definitely not a trivial one.

Other Mensheviks and the national-minority parties rejected the 1912 conference, and formed various alternative organisations. The RSDLP constituted at Prague and its rivals contested the 1912 fourth duma elections separately, and the ‘Prague RSDLP’ had considerably more success. The period 1912-14 was one of limited political opening and a rise in the direct class struggle, and in this context the ‘Prague RSDLP’ grew and sank roots rapidly, while the rival groups tended to break up into their component parts.

The 1912 bloc, however, was broken up when on the outbreak of war Plekhanov took a social-chauvinist line and in doing so joined up with the right wing of those who had boycotted 1912 - and this new formation obtained, as war supporters, a degree of legality denied to both Bolshevik and other opponents of the war. It was 1914 which in this way created the ‘Mensheviks’, ‘Bolsheviks’ and Mezhrayontsi (non-faction anti-war social democrats) who went into 1917.

Although this is an obscure history of manoeuvres among émigrés and their supporters within Russia, both 1903 and 1912 display real underlying political issues which are still relevant today. In essence, they are about the question I have discussed above: unity on whose terms?

The Mensheviks in 1903 lost the vote on the question of the editorial board, and walked out in order to deny the congress decision legitimacy. The question here is: is the right of long-standing leaders to continue as leaders to override majority decision-making?

In 1912 the question was: should the illegal party be revived on the basis of its existing programme, or a new broad-front party (perhaps a ‘multi-tendency party’) created on the basis of nothing but a commitment to legality?

The curious paradox about 1912 and 2012 is thus that the large majority of today’s far left, while defending Stalinist organisational norms on the basis of variant forms of the myth of Bolshevik history created in 1920, defend the actual politics of the liquidators: the abandonment of any practical struggle for the fundamentals of Marxism in favour of the constitution of one or another sort of broadfront party. We have to get beyond both sides of this politics.


3 ‘Fur flies over Lenin’ Weekly Worker March 22.


5 This is more clearly brought out by the academic biographers than by more general histories of the SPD: eg, GP Steenson Karl Kautsky 1854-1938: Marxism in the classical years (Pittsburgh PA 1978); WH Maehl August Bebel: shadow emperor of the German workers (Philadelphia, PA, 1980); RH Dominick III, Wilhelm Liebknecht and the founding of the German Social Democratic Party (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982); in all cases references to the SPD right attempting to suppress the public expression of dissent from their ideas are passim.

6 The rightwinger A Read’s The world on fire:1919 and the battle with Bolshevism (London 2008) in spite of its biases provides the most geographically broad-ranging survey of the high tide of the workers’ movement.

7 www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc.


10 Lenin’s Collected works are available at www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/cw/index.htm; resolutions, etc in RH McNeal (editor) 
Resolutions and decisions of the CPSU Vol 1; R Carter Elwood The RSDLP 1899-October 1917 Toronto, 1974.
How odd it would be, one century after the fact, to hear the following over the air waves: NEWS FLASH! THE BOLSHEVIKS BECAME A POLITICAL PARTY IN 1912! In fact, it was the opposite “news” that flashed across a little corner of the internet’s far-left end. A young activist in the US socialist movement, Pham Binh, making positive reference to the outstanding contributions of historian Lars Lih in challenging myths regarding Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’s revolutionary organisational perspectives, advanced his own challenging re-interpretation of Lenin’s thought and practice, claiming to have exploded “the myth that the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks separated into two parties in 1912.”¹

Admittedly Pham’s primary purpose was not to open new pathways in Lenin scholarship, but to enhance the theoretical-historical legitimacy of a proposed pathway in the struggles of today: the idea that socialists (including those seeing themselves as “Leninists”) should merge into a single organisation despite significant political differences, since – contrary to various myths – this is the sort of thing that Lenin himself thought and said and did. I critically engaged with Pham, on practical political grounds but also in defence of the traditional notion that the Bolsheviks did, in fact, become a separate party in 1912.² Without necessarily sharing his activist agenda, Lars Lih proceeded to weigh in, quite generously (though with far greater nuance) on the side of Pham’s re-interpretation of the 1912 events.³

What is to be done by activists of today does not stand or fall on whether the Bolsheviks actually became an independent party in 1912. The purpose of the present contribution is not to derive strategies or tactics, from days of yore, for revolutionaries of 2012. I am concerned here exclusively with advancing our collective understanding of what did and did not happen in the Russian revolutionary movement a hundred years ago. Those who are not interested in that should stop reading. Those who find the history interesting are invited to continue. Those who would like to utilise an understanding of that history in order to evaluate some of the practical assertions of Pham Binh may also find something of value here.

In what follows, I will first offer a statement of the alleged “myth” from two respected scholars with divergent political perspectives. This will be followed by a sketch of the historical context out of which the 1912 conference was organised, and then an examination of Lenin’s own views advanced before the 1912 conference and reflected in what actually happened at that conference. We will conclude by surveying the assessments by various revolutionary activists who lived through this period as to the meaning of the 1912 developments.

What will be argued here – hopefully with sufficient documentation – is that, for all practical purposes, the so-called “myth” was a reality.

Given a certain amount of confusion, contentiousness and innuendo that has crept into this discussion, I must apologise to readers in advance for the fact that, rather than offering crisp summaries of what the political combatants of the early 20th century had to say, I will allow them to speak their own piece. What follows will be interlarded, I am afraid, with substantial quotations from primary sources.
The ‘Myth’

The year 1912 has been commonly seen, by those in the know, as the time when a revolutionary faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP), the Bolsheviks led by V.I. Lenin, established their own independent party – independent, that is, from others in the RSDLP who had a different approach than the Bolshevik-Leninists. “Bolshevik” refers to what was the majority faction in a 1903 dispute at the RSDLP’s Second Congress, and the “Mensheviks” were the minority faction – though the fortunes and sizes of each would fluctuate in the succeeding years of revolutionary struggle, marked by upsurge, repression, renewed insurgency in the face of the absolutist monarchy and its capitalist junior partners in the Russian Empire in the years leading up to the First World War. “Social Democrats” of this period were socialists who, following the perspectives of Karl Marx, believed global capitalism was creating a social surplus and a growing working class in each country that could, through the workers’ own struggles, bring about working-class rule over society’s political and economic life.4

The basis for the split in the RSDLP had to do with two basic issues, one political and the other organisational. In the struggle to carry out a democratic revolution that would overturn the tsarist autocracy and pave the way for a socialist revolution, the Bolsheviks favoured the political independence and hegemony (leadership or predominance) of the working class, and its alliance with the vast peasant majority to carry through and consolidate the revolutionary overthrow. The Mensheviks argued that the democratic revolution would need to usher in a thoroughgoing capitalist industrialisation and modernisation of Russia in order to pave the way for the possibility of socialism (a notion which Lenin did not openly contest until 1917). This meant, they concluded, that there must be a firm alliance of the working class with the capitalist class, and Lenin denounced this as a class-collaborationist betrayal of the revolutionary Marxist program. The organisational differences were less clear cut. For example, both embraced the concept of democratic centralism, meaning freedom of discussion and unity in action, which was first clearly put forward by the Mensheviks. But the Mensheviks had a reputation for being organisationally “soft” in deference to personalities, while the Bolsheviks had earned a reputation for being more “hard” in prioritising efficient organisational functioning.5

“Early in 1912, the schism was brought to its conclusion”, according to Isaac Deutscher. “At a conference in Prague Lenin proclaimed the Bolshevik faction to be the Party.” Deutscher, a distinguished historian with admittedly pro-Lenin sympathies, felt this enabled Lenin’s Bolsheviks to move forward as the force that would lead the Russian Revolution of October/November 1917. But he insisted that the split was not simply the work of Lenin and his Bolsheviks. Leading Mensheviks such as Pavel Axelrod, Julius Martov and Theodore Dan had concluded by 1910 that the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks could not remain in the same party – a conclusion which Lenin shared – and they “were no less determined than Lenin to carry the schism through to the end. The main difference was that while Lenin was shouting it from the housetops, Martov, Axelrod, and Dan kept their design to themselves and sought to put it into effect through a subtle tactical game.” While convinced that “the split was both inevitable and desirable”, however, they hoped to place “the odium of the schism on Lenin”.6

Carter Elwood, a widely respected historian of Russian Bolshevism (with admittedly anti-Lenin inclinations), whose meticulous research is acknowledged even by those disagreeing with his interpretations, has told a similar story in his essay “The Art of Calling a Party Congress (Prague 1912)”, though he is harder on Lenin and easier on the Mensheviks. The 1903 split in the RSDLP had led to factionalism so divisive that entirely separate Bolshevik and Menshevik organisations persisted within the official framework of the RSDLP. There was considerable pressure from RSDLP members, “particularly rank and file members in the underground”, to maintain party unity, and they were “encouraged by the results of the ‘Unification’ Congress held in Stockholm in 1906 and the ‘Unification’ Plenum of the Central Committee which met in Paris in January 1910. In each instance, the émigré leaders were forced to acknowledge the principle of party unity and to agree to work in common leadership bodies.” But this totally collapsed in 1912:

The two factions met separately that year – the Bolsheviks in Prague during January, the Mensheviks in Vienna during August – and the outcome was in effect the creation of two separate Social Democratic parties, each with its own leadership bodies, program and contacts with the underground. Never again would the two factions
meet together. From 1912 to 1917, instead of working in concert for the overthrow of the autocracy, they were in competition for worker support. The ultimate winner of the contest was V. I. Lenin and his Bolshevik Party.\textsuperscript{7}

This is the commonly accepted account that has been dismissed as a myth. There was no Bolshevik Party in 1912, we are told – there was only a Russian Social Democratic Labor Party of which the Bolsheviks were a loyal faction. This is partly true. There was never something officially entitled “The Bolshevik Party”. What Lenin and his comrades were intent on doing in 1912 was simply to reorganise the RSDLP, and that was the name of the organisation emerging from the Prague conference. One could add, along with our “myth busters”, that it is a Stalinist (and Cold War anti-communist) fiction to assert that Lenin intended to create “a party of a new type” (breaking from the old model associated with the pre-1914 Second International), and that he finally realised this intention in 1912.

While one might argue with certain details or nuances in what such historians as Deutscher and Elwood have put forward, however, we will see that the so-called “myth” is not a myth at all. It describes what came into being: not the Stalinist “party of a new type” and not a multi-tendency party uniting Bolsheviks and Mensheviks – but, for all practical purposes, an independent Bolshevik party.

Fragmentation and liquidation

In the years following the defeat of the 1905 revolutionary upsurge, the RSDLP was afflicted by a fragmentation that went beyond the Bolshevik/Menshevik split. According to Menshevik historian Boris Sapir, “the Party as an organized whole did not exist at the time... There were scattered groups around different leaders, not properly linked together, feeling their way amid the disappointment and apathy pervading Russian society” in the aftermath of the 1905 defeat. While “the less centralized Menshevik apparatus was the more disorganized”, the Bolsheviks also hardly existed as a cohesive whole.\textsuperscript{8}

One could identify at least seven distinct RSDLP currents existing by 1911, three associated with the Mensheviks, three others associated with the Bolsheviks, and then an independent “anti-factional” current associated with Leon Trotsky.\textsuperscript{9}

A majority of Mensheviks were either (a) liquidator-Mensheviks associated with Alexander N. Potresov or (b) non-liquidator Mensheviks associated with Julius Martov and Theodore Dan. A smaller grouping consisted of what were called “Party-Mensheviks” associated with George Plekhanov.

Among the Bolsheviks there were also three: what might be called a “hard” majority grouped around Lenin, a more conciliationist grouping that favoured RSDLP Bolshevik/Menshevik unity (including V.P. Nogin, Alexei Rykov), and an ultra-left grouping associated with Alexander Bogdanov, Gregory Alexinsky and Anatoly Lunacharsky, known as “Forwardists” based on the name of their paper, in Russian Vperyod. One of the questions associated with this latter faction was whether the RSDLP should refuse to participate in the parliamentary body established by the tsar, the Duma; a minority of its supporters answered with an unequivocal “yes” to boycotting, and became known as otzovists or “boycotters”. As a whole, the Forwardist-Bolsheviks inclined more sharply toward illegal underground work and away from legal reform activities, also emphasising a philosophical and cultural orientation which veered away from traditional Marxist perspectives. The Leninist Bolsheviks insisted on the necessity of combining, in a cohesive and well-organised manner, underground activity to advance revolutionary socialism with serious legal work (work in trade unions, the unemployed movement, educational-cultural clubs, even insurance societies, as well as in the electoral arena) to build a mass socialist workers’ movement.

It is worth considering Trotsky’s very interesting orientation, described years later. “In 1904—that is, from the moment differences of opinion arose as to the nature of the liberal bourgeoisie—I broke with the Minority [Mensheviks] of the Second Congress”, he noted, “and during the ensuing thirteen years belonged to no faction.” In his view, “the intra-party conflict came down to this: as long as the revolutionary intellectuals were dominant among the Bolsheviks as well as among the Mensheviks and as long as both factions did not venture beyond the bourgeois democratic revolution, there was no justification for a split between them; in the new revolution, under the pressure of the labouring masses, both factions would in any case be compelled to assume an identical revolutionary position, as they did in [the
revolutionary upsurge of] 1905.” (Trotsky latter would abandon this orientation, incorporating Lenin’s organisational perspectives into his own.)

Given the Mensheviks’ and liquidators’ centrality to the “myth-buster” re-interpretation of the 1912 Prague conference, we will need to give special attention to the meaning of liquidationism and its connection with the various components of Menshevism. And in order to do that, it makes sense to give attention to the two of “grand old men” of Menshevism – George Plekhanov and Pavel Axelrod.

According to Menshevik historian Boris Sapir, Plekhanov “was no forebear of Menshevism nor a Menshevik by temperament. He was the father of Russian Marxism, siding now with the Mensheviks, now with the Bolsheviks, only to become estranged from both.” It would seem that only relatively small clusters in the underground (for example in Kiev) and a handful of émigrés were associated with him. In contrast, according to Sapir, “Menshevism with all its good and bad traits as a political system, and its specific moral approach to the Russian labor movement, was the creation” of Axelrod. Leading figures among the Mensheviks “undertook no important steps without his approval”, which meant that “the leaders of Menshevism from 1907 or 1908 to 1914, insofar as one can speak of central leadership, were Dan, Martov, and Potresov, supported by Axelrod.”

Axelrod insisted, over and over again, that “we cannot, in absolutist Russia, ignore the objective historical requirement for ‘political cooperation’ between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie”, and the need for “the development of Russian capitalism” meant that “the working class could and should enter into agreements with liberal democratic bodies and afford them support.” As later explained by Menshevik veteran Lydia Dan, Axelrod’s call after 1905 for a workers’ congress – which was conceived as a means for dramatically broadening the working-class movement – shook “a certain party patriotism that we were all more or less imbued with”, among both Bolsheviks and many Mensheviks in the RSDLP. “So, naturally enough, it was not easy to reconcile yourself with the idea that the dominant line would not be the consolidation of the RSDLP but a loose inchoate organization which could attract a very large number of nonparty and not completely conscious members of the proletariat with only leanings in our direction.” Mensheviks as well as Bolsheviks asked what such an orientation would mean for the already existing RSDLP. Some felt it meant “everything should be disbanded”, notes Lydia Dan. “Axelrod didn’t say that, but he passed over in silence the issue of what to do with what remained of the party – to maintain an independent existence or merge into the broad-based open organizations.”

Potresov and others around him forged ahead to make precisely such a liquidationist argument, insisting that post-1905 realities had already decided the issue: “Can there exist in sober reality, and not merely as the figment of a diseased imagination, a school of thought that advocates what has ceased to be an organic whole?” The RSDLP had already fallen apart in the wake of 1905. He likened the concerns of his critics to “playing with toy soldiers in the face of tragedy”, and predicted that a “new” and “wider” workers’ movement “would in its own good time” transcend the shambles of the old. Yet advocating an exclusively legal labour movement under the conditions of tsarism certainly had problematical qualities. “Entrenching themselves in trade unions, educational clubs and insurance societies, they carried on their work as cultural propagandists, not as revolutionaries”, is how Trotsky described the Menshevik liquidators. “To safeguard their jobs in the legal organizations, the officials from among the workers began to resort to protective coloration. They avoided the strike struggle, so as not to compromise the scarcely tolerated trade unions. In practice, legality at any price meant outright repudiation of revolutionary methods.” Potresov’s liquidationism – giving greater stress to the worker-capitalist alliance than was the case with many of the other Mensheviks – also explicitly challenged the traditional notion in the RSDLP that the workers must play the predominant (hegemonic) role in the democratic revolution. “Plekhanov alone is responsible for the [idea] of hegemony”, he complained. “There always was the dual picture of extreme amiability toward possible liberal allies and actually what can only be called dictatorship of social democracy in the Russian revolution.”

Martov and Dan (associated with the Menshevik paper Gołos, or “Voice”) did not fully agree with Potresov’s liquidationism – either organisational or theoretical. Uneasy with the proposal to jettison the notion of working-class hegemony in the democratic struggle, they also insisted that it would be necessary for revolutionaries to combine both
legal and illegal work under the repressive political conditions existing in Tsarist Russia. Yet as Boris Sapir suggests, the line was blurred between Menshevik liquidators and non-liquidators:

The immense majority of Mensheviks in Russia were enthusiastically engrossed in founding and serving workers’ organizations. They preferred to shelve underground activities even if they felt that this “corrective” to the legal movement might in the long run prove necessary. Theoretically they probably agreed with Martov that the Party in Russia should be “an illegal organization of Social-Democratic elements fighting for an open labor movement, that is, among other things, for its own existence.” In practice, however, little was done in this direction ...\footnote{14}

While Martov and other co-thinkers were prepared to vote more than once against the ideas of liquidationism, therefore, they were not prepared to break with the liquidators and place them outside of the RSDLP. To do so would fracture the main forces of Menshevism, including among the non-liquidator Mensheviks, and for all practical purposes would give predominance in the RSDLP to the Leninist Bolsheviks. This Martov and the others were absolutely unprepared to do.

Plehanov agreed with (and had helped develop) the Menshevik perspective of a worker-capitalist alliance. With the challenge to his cherished notion of “working-class hegemony” and to his sense of “party patriotism”, however, he indignantly broke from the Menshevik mainstream, and the organized clusters who shared his orientation came to be known as Party-Mensheviks. Within the Menshevik majority he became known, disdainfully, as “the Bard of the underground”, while, in the words of one Bolshevik historian (Zinoviev), “he gave us energetic assistance against those who would bury the party”. Carter Elwood stresses: “Perhaps even more significantly, his Party Menshevik followers in Russia increasingly cooperated with their Bolshevik counterparts on the local level.”\footnote{15}

There had been more than one attempt at achieving unity between the Menshevik and Bolshevik factions. At the 1910 plenum of the RSDLP’s broad central committee, it was believed by many that a rough unity had finally been achieved, with denunciations of both extremes in the RSDLP – boycottism (otzovism) on the left and liquidationism on the right. As it turned out, however, there seemed to be no practical consequences flowing from these official positions, nor was the practical disorganisation of the RSDLP reversed. Among RSDLP émigrés, polemics continued, and practical activists in Russia made do as best they could. As Bolshevik organiser Gregory Zinoviev observed at the time, “in the localities [in Russia], all Social Democratic workers—Bolsheviks as well as Mensheviks, and also workers connected to the Vperyod group and to [Trotsky’s émigré newspaper] Pravda—harmoniously carry out work together and together fight against the liquidators-legalists, who almost everywhere separate themselves from party groups and work completely independently of our party.”\footnote{16}

Reaching for clarity: two parties

“The end of 1910 was marked by a revolutionary upsurge”, Krupskaya notes. “Between 1911 and 1914 every month, right up to the outbreak of the war in August 1914, saw symptoms of the rising working class movement... The proletariat was not what it had been. It had behind it [thanks to the revolutionary events of 1905] the experience of strikes, of a number of armed uprisings, of a sweeping mass movement, and years of defeat. That was the crux of the matter. This made itself evident in all ways, and Ilyich threw himself into the living vortex with all his ardor ...”\footnote{17}

Lenin more than ever felt a sense of urgency about the development of a revolutionary party that would be up to the great tasks of the near future. “Ilyich simply could not stand this diffuse, unprincipled conciliationism, conciliationism with anyone and everyone which was tantamount to surrendering one’s positions at the height of the struggle.” He felt keenly that “the thing was to have a united Party centre, around which the Social-Democratic worker masses could rally. The struggle in 1910 was a struggle waged for the very existence of the Party, for exercising influence on the workers through the medium of the Party. Vladimir Ilyich never doubted that within the Party the Bolsheviks would be in the majority, that in the end the Party would follow the Bolshevik path, but it would have to be a Party and not a group.”\footnote{18}
By “not a group” Krupskaya seems to mean not simply a factional fragment, but rather the entire RSDLP. The “Bolshevik path” involved adhering to the notion of working-class hegemony in the struggle for a democratic revolution in Russia, building a worker-peasant alliance to carry through that revolution, combining both legal and illegal work within the framework of a well-organized and cohesive party.

Consequently, at the party school which the Leninist Bolsheviks organised near Paris, both Bolshevik-Forwardists and Party-Mensheviks were admitted along with Leninist Bolsheviks. “The same line was pursued at the Prague Party Conference in 1912”, Krupskaya noted later. “Not a group, but a Party pursuing a Bolshevik line. Naturally, there was no room in such a Party for Liquidators, against whom forces were being rallied. Obviously, there could be no room in the Party for people who had made up their minds beforehand that they would not abide by the Party decisions.”

Krupskaya added: “With some comrades, however, the struggle for the Party assumed the form of conciliation; they lost sight of the aim of unity and relapsed into a man-of-the-street striving to unite all and everyone, no matter what they stood for.”

In close consultation with Lenin, Lev Kamenev authored an important pamphlet in the summer of 1911 entitled The Two Parties, designed to win comrades to the perspective of an RSDLP which would follow the Bolshevik line. According to Kamenev’s authorised biographer of the mid-1920s, the pamphlet “signaled the final break with the Mensheviks”. According to Lenin’s laudatory introduction to the pamphlet, “Kamenev has proved conclusively that, in point of fact, the liquidationist group represents a separate party, not the R.S.D.L. Party.” While Lenin identified Potresov and those around him as the key liquidators, he went on to identify “Mr. Martov and the Golos group trailing behind” the liquidators – widening the net further when he denounced “the intrigues of the circles abroad (such as the Vperyod and Golos circles, and the Trotskyites), who have fully demonstrated that they ignore the decisions of the Party, and that they refuse to give up an iota of their ‘freedom’ to support the liquidators.”

Concerned not to alienate unconvincing comrades whom he hoped to win over, Lenin added: “Unfortunately, there are still quite a number of people who are sincerely opposed to liquidationism, but do not understand the conditions under which the struggle against it has to be waged.” Such well-meaning “conciliators” argued that European social-democratic parties must be able to contain both reformists such as Eduard Bernstein and revolutionaries such as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky – a notion that Lenin did not contest. But the Russian liquidators had gone far beyond the reformists – “they are also trying to build a separate party of their own, they have issued the slogan that the R.S.D.L.P. does not exist; they pay no heed whatever to the decisions of the R.S.D.L.P.” He concluded that in most parties of the Socialist International “an opportunist guilty of but one-tenth of what the Potresovs, Igorevs, Bers, Martovs, Dans and their like have done and are doing against their Party and in defiance of its decisions would not be tolerated in the ranks of the party a single month.”

It would be a mistake to assume that Lenin was forcing such intransigence into the pamphlet of poor “mild-mannered” Kamenev. In correspondence with his comrade, pressing for revisions, he commented:

(1) We must not call for a break with the conciliators. This is quite uncalled for and incorrect. A “persuasive” tone should be adopted towards them, by no means should they be antagonised. (2) The split should be discussed with more tact, always choosing formulations to the effect that the liquidators have broken away, created and proclaimed a “complete break”, and that the Party ought not to tolerate them (“and the conciliators ought not to confuse issues”), and so on.

This is certainly the line that was put forward in the final version of The Two Parties. Lenin’s concluding comments actually indicate the gist of the conference he and others organised in Prague five months later:

In Russia … the illegal workers’ circles have been drawing away from the liquidators, and are dissociating themselves from them to an ever greater extent with each passing day, at the same time slowly and laboriously building up the revolutionary R.S.D.L.P. The task of the adherents of the Social-Democratic Labour Party is to help these circles, to translate the decisions of the R.S.D.L.P. into practical work, and to put an end to the game.
of agreement with the windbags abroad (the Golos group, the strongest group abroad, are also mere windbags). Membership of the Party means fighting for the Party. All talk about “agreement” with the liquidators who are building a non-Social-Democratic party, is a violation of the duty deriving from Party membership.25

Lenin’s desire to win the Bolshevik conciliators, and especially the working-class activists inside Russia influenced by conciliastionist moods, did not mean that he held back from sharp polemics against conciliationism.

In an autumn 1911 polemic “New Faction of the Conciliators, or the Virtuous” he was unrelenting. He blasted “conciliator” claims that the factional struggle in the RSDLP was primarily over organisational matters: “In reality, it is by no means the organisational question that is now in the forefront, but the question of the entire programme, the entire tactics and the whole character of the Party, or rather a question of two parties—the Social-Democratic Labour Party and the Stolypin labour party of Potresov, Smirnov, Larin, Levitsky, and their friends.” (Stolypin was the tsarist minister of the interior and later prime minister – this being a slam at the liquidators’ rejection of the illegal work.) The choice was between a genuinely socialist party and “a liberal labor party”. Mensheviks around the Golos of Martov and Dan were dismissed as “subservient to the liquidators”. He emphasised: “In substance the present Party crisis undoubtedly reduces itself to the question of whether our Party, the RSDLP, should completely dissociate itself from the liquidators (including the Golos group) or whether it should continue a policy of compromise with them.”26

Lenin was dismissive of both Trotsky’s non-factional faction (at the time organised around the paper Pravda) and the Bolshevik-Forwardists as not representing serious “trends” in the RSDLP. For him a trend meant a group with a set of well-defined political ideas that have been “widely disseminated among a broad strata of the working class”, which therefore applied only to Bolshevism and Menshevism, excluding those around Trotsky and the Forwardists. He added: “It is the first duty of revolutionary Social-Democrats to isolate these non-Social-Democratic and unprincipled groups that are aiding the liquidators. The policy which has been and is being pursued by Bolshevism and which it will pursue to the end despite all obstacles is to appeal to the Russian workers who are connected with Pravda, over the heads of these groups and against them.”27

Similarly, conciliationism was an impediment to what must be done: “the policy of your petty group hinged only on phrase-mongering, often very well-meaning and well-intentioned phrase-mongering, but empty nonetheless. A real approach to unity is created only by a rapprochement of strong factions, strong in their ideological integrity and an influence over the masses that has been tested by the experience of the revolution.” The legitimate political components of the RSDLP were represented by the Leninist Bolsheviks and the Party Mensheviks associated with Plekhanov:

Bolsheviks, unite—you are the only bulwark of a consistent and decisive struggle against liquidationism and otzovism. Pursue the policy of rapprochement with anti-liquidationist Menshevism, a policy tested by practice, confirmed by experience—such is our slogan. It is a policy that does not promise a land flowing with the milk and honey of “universal peace” which cannot be attained in the period of disorganisation and disintegration, but it is a policy that in the process of work really furthers the rapprochement of trends which represent all that is strong, sound, and vital in the proletarian movement.28

Two conferences: January and August 1912

The Bolshevik-organised All-Russia Conference of the RSDLP was held in January 17-30, 1912, according to the Gregorian calendar (or according to the Julian calendar of tsarist Russia January 5-17), in the city of Prague. In his later History of the Bolshevik Party, Gregory Zinoviev, one of the organizers of the conference, explained:

After the 1908 conference, and more especially after the 1910 plenum, we Leninist Bolsheviks said to ourselves that we would not work together with the liquidator Mensheviks and that we were only awaiting a convenient moment to break finally from them and form our own independent organization based upon the resurgent workers’ movement.
Our group decided that such a moment had arrived at the beginning of 1912, and called a party conference in Prague which was to re-establish our party [i.e., the RSDLP] which had been routed since 1905.29

The approach in organising the conference reflected the general orientation outlined by Lenin in 1911 – this was not seen or presented as a split-off of the Bolsheviks, but rather as a serious and necessary drawing together of the RSDLP. This is precisely how Krupskaya framed her discussion of it in Reminiscences of Lenin:

The Prague Conference was the first conference with Party workers from Russia which we succeeded in calling after 1908 and at which we were able in a business-like manner to discuss questions relating to the work in Russia and frame a clear line for this work. Resolutions were adopted on the issues of the moment and the tasks of the Party, on the elections to the Fourth Duma, on the Social-Democratic group in the Duma, on the character and organizational forms of Party work, on the tasks of the Social-Democrats in the anti-famine campaign, on the attitude towards the State Insurance for Workers bill before the Duma, and on the petition campaign.

The results of the Prague Conference were a clearly defined Party line on questions of work in Russia, and real leadership of practical work.

Therein lay its tremendous significance. A Central Committee was elected at the conference … [and] candidates were nominated to replace arrested members … A unity was achieved on the C.C. without which it would have been impossible to carry on the work at such a difficult time. Undoubtedly the conference was a big step forward in that it put a stop to the disintegration of the work in Russia.30

Questions were raised afterward regarding precisely who was invited to the presumably “All-Russia” gathering of the RSDLP. Of course, the Leninist Bolsheviks were fully represented, but as Lenin explained in correspondence with a comrade, the announcement for the conference ”stated clearly and precisely that the Vperyod group + Trotsky + Plekhanov were invited, and the nationals [the Polish and Lettish organisations, and the Jewish Bund] three times”. He confided that he personally had opposed the invitation to Trotsky and the Forwardists, and also to Plekhanov (who by this time had indicated his disagreement with the conference). But as happened more than once before and after, he had been over-ruled by his comrades. On the other hand, the Menshevik liquidators and their partially critical comrades around Golos were not included among the invitees (and would be announced as having been expelled, at the Prague Conference, from the RSDLP).31

Apparently some of the Forwardists came to the Prague Conference, and also at least two of the Party-Mensheviks (one representing a “bona fide” organisation of workers from Kiev). Lenin warned his correspondent:

Don’t believe rumours. Neither the Plekhanovites nor the Vperyod people, no one left the Conference. There were in all two pro-Party Mensheviks. The one from Kiev behaved with extreme correctness and on the whole went with us. The one from Ekaterinoslav behaved with extreme obstructiveness, but even he did not leave the Conference and only moved “protests” in the spirit of Plekhanov.32

Krupskaya also remembered “the dispute between Savva (Zevin), the Ekaterinoslav delegate ... and the Kiev delegate David (Schwartzman) and also, I believe, Sergo. I remember Savva's excited face.” She explained:

I forget exactly what the dispute was about, but Savva was a Plekhanovite. Plekhanov had not come to the conference. ‘The make-up of your conference,’ he had written in reply to the invitation, ‘is so uniform that it would be better, that is, more in the interests of Party unity, if I took no part in it.” He worked Savva up accordingly, and the latter moved protest after protest at the conference in the Plekhanov spirit. Later, as we know, Savva became a Bolshevik. The other Plekhanovite, David, sided with the Bolsheviks.33
Zinoviev also discussed the participation of the Party-Mensheviks: “This conference has a major historical significance. Present at the conference, incidentally, were two or three delegates who were supporters of Plekhanov and had arrived straight from party activity in Russia. Plekhanov himself however declined to take part, contending (and quite correctly) that the aim of the Prague Conference was to split from the Mensheviks. Plekhanov characteristically recoiled at the last minute from a split from the Mensheviks.” Zinoviev added:

At the Prague Conference the Bolsheviks predominated overwhelmingly. A new layer of Bolsheviks was represented there which had grown up and politically natured in the phase of the counter-revolution which lasted approximately from 1907 to 1911...

The conference at Prague consisted in effect of a handful of delegates (some 20 to 25 in number) led by Comrade Lenin, and took upon itself the presumption to proclaim itself to be the party and to break once and for ever from all other groups and sub-groups. This conference deposed the old Central Committee which had half rotted away and said to itself: it is we who are the party; whoever is not with us is against us; we will conduct a sharp struggle against everyone who refuses for his part to fight liquidationism.34

Plekhanov was hardly the only person negatively impressed by the gathering. V.S. Voytinsky (Woytinsky), a Bolshevik conciliator who soon went over the Menshevism, reports that RSDLP members in Siberian prison camps heard of the conference “with mixed feelings. A few Bolsheviks accepted it as the rebirth of the party, but the great majority considered the whole affair a bluff and the new Central Committee a fraud.” According to the leading Menshevik Theodore Dan, “in Prague the Bolshevik Conference ... definitively split the Russian Social-Democracy” and generated “a bitterness never seen before”.35

With the energetic assistance of Trotsky, an alternative All-Party Conference of the RSDLP was organised. It included the bulk of the Mensheviks, the Bund, members of the Polish organisation, plus some Bolshevik-Forwardists and Bolshevik conciliators. According to one Menshevik activist, Eva Broido, “in August 1912, at a party congress held abroad, the split between us and the Bolsheviks was made definitive; Trotsky’s group and the Jewish ‘Bund’ siding with the Mensheviks. The Social-Democrats in the Duma continued for some time to present a united front to the public. But a ‘united’ social-democratic party had ceased to exist, and the gulf between the two points of view grew ever wider.”36

This was, if anything, a rosy view. Trotsky himself had hoped (he indicates in his memoirs) that the Leninist Bolsheviks would also feel compelled to attend and that RSDLP unity would be finally achieved – but no such luck. “The conference met in Vienna in August, 1912, without the Bolsheviks, and I found myself formally in a ‘bloc’ with the Mensheviks and a few disparate groups of Bolshevik dissenters. This ‘bloc’ had no common political basis, because in all important matters I disagreed with the Mensheviks.”37 The disparate forces that had gathered at the August conference quickly fell apart.

A report from the tsarist secret police, the Okhrana, commented: “According to agents’ information, the only well-organized and cohesive faction in the RSDLP at the present time is the Bolshevik-Leninist faction. They established their ‘all-Russian’ Conference, they have their Central Committee, their illegal organs abroad and legal ones in Russia, they have their committees.”38

Martov’s biographer Israel Getzler, drawing from Menshevik sources, describes the results of the split as devastating for his hero’s organisation:

When at long last the August bloc of Mensheviks, Bundists, Trotsky’s Pravda group, and the secessionist left wing of the Polish Socialist Party ... was formed in Vienna on August 1912 (springing ironically from Lenin’s initiative, not Martov’s or even from that of Trotsky, who organized it) it could do little more than register the fact that the Bolsheviks had captured and purged the Russian Social Democratic Party, controlled its institutions and its funds, and were forging ahead in conquering positions in the open areas of activity which they had
hitherto spurned, such as the legal press, trade unions, and the Duma. The Mensheviks found themselves harassed and beaten in their own favorite areas of activity.

Getzler notes that in April 1912 the Bolsheviks were producing a daily newspaper in Petersburg in 29,000 copies, while the Mensheviks published only a more modest weekly paper. While by May the Mensheviks succeeded in establishing their own daily newspaper, the Bolshevik daily continued to sell twice as many copies. He adds: “Late in 1912 in the elections to the workers’ electoral colleges to the Duma six Bolsheviks were elected and not one Menshevik.” Lenin was able to report all this and more, with abundant statistics, to leading bodies of the Socialist International that were investigating the Russian situation. He was able to add: “But let us assume for a moment that our opponents (numerous in the opinion of the intellectualist groups and Party groups living abroad) are right. Let us assume that we are ‘usurpers’, ‘splitters’, and so forth. In that case would it not be natural to expect our opponents to prove, not merely with words but by the experience of their activities and their unity that we are wrong.”

The truth was cruel for those who had angrily opposed the line advanced by Kamenev and Lenin in The Two Parties. Nothing had prevented them (except their own inability to do so) from forging an inclusive, unified party that would outstrip the Leninist Bolsheviks who reorganised the RSDLP. As Kamenev summarised it a dozen years later:

The year 1912 was a year of changes. In January the Bolsheviks broke off the last remains of organizational connections with the Mensheviks, and formed their own purely Bolshevik Central Committee at their own Bolshevik conference (at Prague). They excluded the liquidators from the Party, and proclaimed a program of revolutionary action. After the blood-bath on the Lena [where striking workers were shot down by tsarist troops], a stormy wave of proletarian movement arose, for the first time since 1905. This movement appropriated the program and tactics of the Bolsheviks in their entirety. The “Bolshevist epidemic” (to use the malicious term coined by the Mensheviks at the time) began to spread, and presently gained the final victory. The awakening labor movement removed the liquidators systematically from every position which they had contrived to gain during the previous sorrowful years of counter-revolution.40

The way it was

One is struck by Carter Elwood’s assertions, in his classic essay, “The Art of Calling a Party Conference”, that all along Lenin had sought “a homogenous party united behind his program and accepting his unquestioned leadership”, scheming to create “an all-Bolshevik ‘party of a new type’”. This notion, a throwback to interpretations shared by Stalinism on the one hand and Cold War anti-communism on the other, has been effectively challenged by the work of such historians as Lars Lih.41 More than this, the evidence presented here indicates that Lenin was not always “in control” (how could he be?) and was by no means surrounded by “yes men” – without question he had earned great authority, but there was no “unquestioned leadership.”42

Lenin was clearly struggling not for a “party of a new type” but rather (a) for a party which he believed conformed to the social-democratic model of the pre-1914 Second International, and (b) for a party that would be true to the principles and perspectives of revolutionary Marxism. Before World War I he was inclined to think that these two were or could be the same thing. (New experiences – a horrific global war, a powerful surge of revolution, and a desperate civil war – would open new pathways of thought and practice.)

While there was no thought of a “party of a new type” in 1912, it would be a mistake to think that the Prague conference yielded a “multi-tendency” party in which Bolsheviks and Party-Mensheviks joined together as equal partners. Plekhanov, the theoretical centre of the Party-Mensheviks, spurned the conference, and of the two or three Party-Mensheviks present, one functioned as an ineffectual dissident and one was more or less absorbed into the immense Bolshevik majority. Krupskaya’s and Zinoviev’s comments suggest that at least some of the Party-Mensheviks became part of this Bolshevik-dominated incarnation of the RSDLP but it is not clear to me to what extent the Party-Mensheviks persisted as a distinctive tendency within this party. Other Party-Mensheviks, including Plekhanov himself, remained independent of it, joining with some Bolshevik-conciliators to publish four issues, in
1914, of a periodical called *Yedinstvo* (Unity), a polemical target of Lenin’s RSDLP. Additional research will certainly shed light on such matters.

The door to the reorganised RSDLP was open, of course, to Plekhanov, to Trotsky, even to Martov if any of them had been willing to go through it – but this would have meant absolutely and definitively breaking with the liquidators and those inclined to trail along with the liquidators. And also, under those circumstances, it would have meant being part of a party that more or less adhered to “the Bolshevik line”. These were not things they were prepared to do (although five years later Trotsky and a number of others chose to do precisely that).

For all practical purposes, therefore, the party that emerged from the Prague All-Russia RSDLP Conference of 1912 was a Bolshevik party. That is not a myth. It happens to be the way it was.

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11 Sapir, 355


14 Sapir, 356-357.


17 Krupskaia, 215.

18 Ibid., 211, 205-206.

19 Ibid., 206.

20 Ibid.


23 Ibid, 227.


27 Ibid., 271, 273, 274.

28 Ibid., 274, 275.


30 Krupskaia, 229-230.


32 Ibid.

33 Krupskaia, 227-228.


38 Elwood, 35.


41 Elwood, 19, 34. Lars Lih has written a fine critical review of Elwood’s important volume of essays, tentatively entitled “The Non-Geometric Elwood”, which includes a critique of Elwood’s account of the 1912 Prague conference – the review should appear soon. Lih’s demolition of the “textbook” Cold War anti-communist interpretation of Lenin can be found in *Lenin Rediscovered* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 200). Also valuable is Lars T. Lih, *Lenin* (London: Reaktion, 2011). Others in past years effectively challenging this “textbook” anti-Leninism include such political activists as James P. Cannon, C.L.R. James, Hal Draper, and Ernest Mandel, and such scholars as Moshe Lewin, E. H. Carr, Isaac Deutscher, and Robert C. Tucker. These lists are hardly exhaustive. (One might add ... Tony Cliff, Duncan Hallas, Chris Harman.)

42 Elwood himself, in his illuminating article “Lenin and *Pravda*, 1912-1914”, in *The Non-Geometric Lenin*, 37-55, documents the fact that in regard to the central paper of the Bolshevik-dominated RSDLP, Lenin – highly respected as he was – simply did not run the show: more than once he was thwarted by tough-minded comrade-editors, his advice being ignored, his articles rejected, etc.

“A faction is not a party”
By Lars T Lih

In recent online debate, the question of Lenin’s thoughts on the relation between Bolshevism and the party as a whole has come up frequently. I would like to shed some light on this question by examining his views at three different points: 1912, 1917 and 1920. In this first instalment I look at material from 1912.

Lenin’s views on this topic in the years before World War I can be summed up succinctly: Bolshevism was a faction (fraktsiia), a part of a larger whole: namely, the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). Bolshevism was a party within the party: just as the RSDLP stood for a specific platform within the society at large, Bolshevism stood for a specific set of tactical views within the larger Social Democratic whole. Like a political party vis-à-vis society, the Bolshevik faction had particular views about how to run the party: it propagated those views and tried to ensure that the central party institutions were inspired by them. But even if Bolshevism had control of the central committee, it did not become the party. One could still be a member of the party, but not a Bolshevik - in fact, this was seen as the normal situation. Fraktsiia ne est’ partiia: a faction is not a party.

But, one may ask, if these were the views of Lenin and other Bolsheviks, what about the Prague conference of January 1912, when the Bolsheviks attained a large majority on the central committee? Aren’t we assured by many writers today that this conference represented the creation of a new Bolshevik Party, where the former fraktsiia became the whole partiia? Nevertheless, if we look at sources from the period, one thing becomes overwhelmingly clear: Lenin and the Bolsheviks as a whole did not set out to create a Bolshevik Party, did not think they had organised the conference for this purpose. Not only was this outcome not a goal: it hardly even made sense to them.

Recently Paul Le Blanc has written a long and instructive essay on the Prague conference which concludes that “for all practical purposes, the party that emerged from the Prague All-Russian RSDLP conference of 1912 was a Bolshevik party”.¹ The key words here are “for all practical purposes”. Paul points to a number of reasons for equating Bolshevism and the party: the new central committee was composed overwhelmingly of Bolsheviks; the Bolshevik effort to forge a coalition with “party Mensheviks” never amounted to much; the other factions did not acknowledge the legitimacy of the central institutions voted in by the Prague conference and they tried (not very successfully) to set up competing institutions; there is direct organisational continuity between the 1912 central committee and the Communist Party of 1918 that added ‘Bolshevik’ to its official name.

All this is true, but in no way clashes with my earlier statement about the outlook and aims of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1912. Paul’s argument to the contrary is partly a matter of sources. He says he is relying on “primary sources”, by which he means material coming from direct participants in party life before the war. But he relies overwhelmingly on sources written after the event and particularly after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Using memoirs and other afterthe-
event sources is always tricky, but there are a number of reasons why they are particularly unreliable in the case of the Prague conference. By the 1920s, there were indeed two parties, leading to a tendency to retroject current views back to the earlier situation. Furthermore, and most importantly, by the 1920s the whole idea of having factions in the party was delegitimised.

Another reason why later sources are unreliable is that the internal party situation in 1912 was insanely complicated. A historian friend of mine told me that he “couldn’t get his head ahead around 1912” – and that was my own attitude before I got so fascinated by the topic that I took a couple of months off simply to absorb the details necessary to read documents from the period. Many later sources spend only a sentence or a paragraph on inner-party conflicts in 1910-14 (the most useful memoirs are those that have the space to describe party life during this period in detail). We should be aware that any source that reduces the conflict to ‘Bolsheviks vs Mensheviks’ is radically oversimplifying. (I too will be forced to vastly simplify the situation in order to bring out the main point.)

Paul Le Blanc does use one source that comes directly from the prewar period: Lenin’s own writings. I think that if you take all of Paul’s references directly to Lenin’s writings, a rather different picture emerges than the one set forth in his own main conclusions. For example, he accurately notes that in 1912 Lenin did not yet contest the legitimacy of having an opportunist wing in a social democratic party - which leaves us with the strange picture of Lenin creating a Bolshevik Party in which opportunism was allowed.

Nevertheless, I believe that Paul does not sufficiently allow for the possibility that the Bolshevik outlook in 1912 cannot be directly deduced from what turned out to be, “for all practical purposes”, the actual outcome. In my own essay, I will bring up some themes from the writings of Lenin and others that Paul has not brought out or not sufficiently emphasised. In doing so, I will make heavy use of the Lenin material made available in Paul’s own excellent Lenin anthology Revolution, democracy, socialism (London 2008).

One other point about sources before beginning. As mentioned above, the Soviet Communist Party radically delegitimised factions within the party. The regime was therefore embarrassed by the way Lenin and others talked about factions during this period. To lessen the embarrassment, at least in translation, they simply refused to translate fraktsiia as ‘faction’, but relied on euphemisms such as ‘group’ or ‘section’. I have found instances of this practice in translations from Lenin, Stalin and Krupskaya. In the discussion below, I have corrected these falsified translations.

*Fraktsiia ne est’ partiia*

One document touching on our theme is worth quoting at length, since Lenin sets out his views unambiguously on the difference between the party and a faction. The scene is a meeting of the Bolshevik faction in 1909. Lenin is arguing that a faction - defined as a group with “a specific tactical physiognomy” - can exclude members on criteria that would be improper for the party (the text is taken from Revolution, democracy, socialism pp202-03, retranslated when necessary):

> In our party Bolshevism is represented by the Bolshevik faction. But a faction is not a party. A party can contain a whole gamut of opinions and shades of opinion, the extremes of which may be sharply contradictory. In the German party, side by side with the pronouncedly revolutionary wing of Kautsky, we see the ultra-revisionist wing of Bernstein. That is not the case with a faction. A faction in a party is a group of like-minded persons formed for the purpose primarily of influencing the party in a definite direction, for the purpose of securing acceptance for their principles in the party in the purest possible form. For this, real unanimity of opinion is necessary. The different standards we set for the unity of a party and the unity of a faction must be grasped by everyone who wants to know how the question of the internal discord in the Bolshevik faction really stands.

Lenin then advances his idea that ‘liquidationism’ and Menshevism should not be equated, since “a minority of Mensheviks” is also antiliquidationist. He assures his Bolshevik audience that he is not going soft on Menshevism:
There is no question of sinking our tactical differences with the Mensheviks. We are fighting and shall continue to fight most strenuously against Menshevik deviations from the line of revolutionary social democracy. Needless to say, there is no question of the Bolshevik faction dissolving its identity in the party. The Bolsheviks have done a good deal toward making partyist positions dominant, but much remains to be done in the same direction. The Bolshevik faction as a definite ideological trend in the party must exist as before.

Lenin ends by praising the Bolsheviks for being the faction most dedicated to “preserving and consolidating” the party: that is, repelling challenges to its basic programme and institutions. Precisely because of this role, “in this hour of adversity it would be truly a crime on our part not to extend our hand to partyists in other factions who are coming out in defence of Marxism and partyism against liquidationism”.

Lenin could not be clearer: a faction is a different sort of entity than the party, with very distinct criteria for membership. The current danger to the party does not arise out of the tactical views that define the Menshevik faction. The fight against these tactical views must continue, but in a very different spirit than the fight against liquidationism. The Bolsheviks should seek to lead the party, but certainly not become the party.

If Lenin consciously set out in 1912 to create a Bolshevik Party, then he must have radically altered his views on these subjects between 1909 and 1912. Did he? In her memoirs, Nadezhda Krupskaya offers her opinion on this topic:

The experience of the Capri school had shown how often the factionalism of the workers was relative and idiosyncratic. The thing was to have a united party centre, around which all the social democratic worker masses could rally. The struggle in 1910 was a struggle waged for the very existence of the party, for exercising influence on the workers through the medium of the party. Vladimir Ilych never doubted that within the party the Bolsheviks would be in the majority, that in the end the party would follow the Bolshevik path, but this would have to be a party and not a faction. Ilych took the same line in 1911, when a party school was being organised near Paris to which Vperyod-ists and partyist-Mensheviks as well as Bolsheviks were admitted. The same line was pursued at the Prague party conference in 1912. Not a faction, but a party carrying out a Bolshevik line.

Paul Le Blanc gives some of the passage (in the misleading Sovietera translation) and comments: “By ‘not a group’ Krupskaya seems to mean not simply a factional fragment, but rather the entire RSDLP.” Paul’s comment is correct as it stands, but it should not be taken to mean that Krupskaya wanted the Bolshevik faction to become “the entire RSDLP”. Just the opposite: she envisages the Bolsheviks fighting for their views, not by declaring themselves the party, but rather by convincing the majority of the party.

Consider the following sentence from the passage just quoted: “The struggle in 1910 was a struggle waged for the very existence of the party, for exercising influence on the workers through the medium of the party.” The struggle discussed here by Krupskaya was not over which views, Bolshevik or Menshevik, should be propagated by the party. That was a different, more normal, less existential struggle. Rather it was about a perceived threat to the very institutional existence of an underground party and its mission of propagating the basic social democratic programme shared by both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Just for this reason the Bolsheviks could appeal to rightminded Mensheviks to join them in their struggle.

When put alongside Lenin’s pronouncements from 1909, we find that Krupskaya is stating with extraordinary clarity that Lenin did not change his views between 1909 and 1912 and that he continued to see a fundamental difference in kind between a faction and the party.

Two parties

In the memoirs of the Georgian Menshevik, Gregory Uratadze, we find the following accurate description of party affairs in this period:
A fiercer struggle blazed up around ‘liquidationism’ than around Bolshevism and Menshevism. The party lexicon was enriched by new terms: ‘liquidator’, ‘anti-liquidator’, ‘partyist’ [someone who wanted to preserve the underground], ‘Leninist partyists’, ‘Bolshevik partyists’, ‘Menshevik partyists’, ‘liquidator undergrounders’, ‘Trotskyist-partyist’, ‘Trotskyist liquidators’, ‘Plekhanov liquidators’, and so on. And all this in one party!  

The terms ‘liquidationism’ and ‘liquidator’ were important enough to generate corresponding terms for their opponents: partiinost and partiets, which can be translated as ‘partyism’ and ‘partyist’. The partyists claimed that they were defending the very existence of the party from attack. This is the reason why the liquidationist-partyist divide was so passionate and why, as Uratadze shows, it cut across the usual factional lines.

The Bolshevik attack on liquidationism can be summed up by saying that this tendency posed an existential threat to the party and that therefore other factional differences should not interfere with a coordinated fight against it. The case against liquidationism had two major headings:

(a) By repudiating the need for an illegal underground, the liquidators put into jeopardy the very existence of a social democratic party that preached socialism and anti-tsarist revolution - views that could not be expressed legally in Stolypin’s Russia (Stolypin was the prime minister in Russia during much of this period)

(b) The liquidators were also guilty of sabotaging efforts to revive central leadership bodies and they had done their best to prevent the resuscitation of the central committee or the calling of an all-party conference.

We do not need to pronounce a verdict on the justice of these accusations. The point is that the Bolsheviks claimed that, unlike normal factional struggles to control party policies, the liquidators posed a threat to the very existence of the party (in Krupskaya’s words) as a “medium” for “exercising influence over the workers”.

The case against liquidationism is set forth in the rather extensive (over 200 pages) Two parties, written by Lev Kamenev in 1911: that is, at the very time the Prague conference was being organised. As Kamenev relates, his book was written in close consultation with Lenin. It can therefore be called a manifesto in which the Bolsheviks explained what they were trying to accomplish with the Prague conference.

In 1924, when the book was republished (just when the anti-Trotsky polemics it contained would do most good, from Kamenev’s point of view), he wrote in the preface of the reprint: “The title of the whole work - Two parties - points to the fact that, despite the formal unity of the party, we looked on the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks not as two factions of one and the same party, but as two hostile parties fighting each other.”

This is a good example of retrospective tidying-up. In the preface to the first edition of 1911, Kamenev wrote something rather different:

As firm proponents of the most merciless ideological struggle against groups and grouplets that are nourished by the counterrevolutionary atmosphere, we are also equally firm proponents of the unity under the banner of the party of all revolutionary Marxists - irrespective of faction and tendency and in spite of these or those differences on concrete questions of current politics … The RSDLP must apply its energy and all its strength toward helping and serving in a comprehensive way, irrespective of faction and tendency, all worker circles, groups and associations, legally or illegally working toward the resurrection and strengthening of proletarian organisation in Russia [my emphasis].

The contrast is striking. In 1924, Kamenev says that he argued for regarding Mensheviks as a separate and hostile party. When we read what he actually wrote in 1911, we find he appeals to all social democrats “without distinction of faction” to join the fight against liquidationism. In fact, Kamenev insists that ever since 1909 the idea of reaching out to the partyist-Mensheviks has “determined the whole internal party course of the Bolsheviks”.

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Kamenev is saying as insistently as he can: you don’t have to be a Bolshevik to support our drive to exclude the liquidators. Our motive is not to impose specifically Bolshevik views on the party, but rather to save the party for all of us.

The slogan “two parties” was therefore not a call to create a new party - and certainly not to create a new party designed to propagate specifically Bolshevik views. In fact, this slogan represented an attempt to defend the old party against people who (Kamenev claimed) were trying to build a new party. Kamenev is saying to the liquidators: go ahead and create your new party - no doubt there are people who will support it - but don’t do it in a way that wrecks the RSDLP.

Perhaps the objection will be made that the “partyist Mensheviks” were actually a very small minority and that “for all practical purposes” the Bolshevik wager on a coalition with them failed. This objection is factually based (at least if we restrict ourselves to émigré politics), but nevertheless it does not challenge my description of what the Bolsheviks thought they were doing. They thought they were creating a cross-factional bloc against a specific existential threat to the very functioning of the party. In 1910, for example, Lenin says in a letter that he thinks that Menshevik workers in Russia itself were overwhelmingly partyist. In 1915, even after many disappointments with Plekhanov (the one party leader associated with Menshevik partyism), he still wrote that “the best Mensheviks” were revolted by liquidationism.

Lenin really believed in the possibility of such a cross-factional bloc. Hostile observers at the time and later thought all that this talk of “party Menshevism” was a ruse and an excuse to obtain an all-Bolshevik party. Underneath it all, they say, he equated liquidationism with Menshevism as such. It seems to me that anyone who says that Lenin was consciously creating a Bolshevik Party is committed to a similar view about Lenin’s duplicity.

**Party of a new type**

A split in a party can be justified on two very different grounds. One is: your views are unacceptable; you must go. The other is: only my views are acceptable, only my group can stay. The first view excludes a specific group. The second view excludes all except a specific group.

Which type of justification was used at the Prague conference? Clearly, the first one. Besides all the arguments I have just reviewed, we can point to the resolutions of the conference, in which only a very specific group of writers grouped around a couple of newspapers were pronounced “outside of the party”.

This type of exclusion was not incompatible with the practice of ‘parties of an old type’, if by that we mean the social democratic parties of western Europe during the Second International. These parties had been set up to propagate a certain message, and they were willing to cast off groups that denied the essentials of this message - most famously, in the case of the anarchists in the 1890s. In his defence of the Prague conference, Lenin brought up this episode, along with other actions of discipline and exclusion undertaken by western social democratic parties.

Lenin further insisted that he was not trying to exclude the opportunists in general - in other words, he was not trying to purge the Menshevik faction as a whole. Any such description of what he was trying to do, he told European socialists, was a vile slander. He insisted that no European party would have tolerated the sabotage and indiscipline attributable to the liquidationists for a second. Like the song says: “If you’d have been there, if you’d have seen it, you would have done the same.”

There is a long-standing interpretation of what happened at the Prague conference: namely, that it inaugurated a ‘party of a new type’, one that contrasted strongly with the social democratic parties of the old type by a new emphasis on homogeneity. The logic of exclusion is now said to be the second type, according to which one faction becomes the entire party. The logic that Lenin earlier restricted to the faction - unanimity of outlook by “like-minded individuals” - was now (so it is claimed) extended to the party as a whole. From now on, only those who agreed with Bolshevism were welcome in the party.
This interpretation was enshrined in the famous Short course of party history created by Stalin’s government in the late 30s. Obviously, it was congenial to a regime that had delegitimised factions within the party. Unfortunately, it was also at odds with historical documents – so much so that the records of the Prague conference were not even published until the late 1980s. This same logic of a ‘party of a new type’ is also central to the interpretation of the work of Carter Elwood, the main academic investigator of the Prague conference.

In his Lenin anthology, Paul Le Blanc writes:

The RSDLP was hopelessly divided by factions of liquidator and non-liquidator Mensheviks, Leninist and anti-Leninist Bolsheviks, and others - including a faction against factionalism led by Trotsky! Lenin and those around him conclude that effective revolutionary work could not be accomplished by such an entity, and in 1912 they reorganised themselves as the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, distinctive from all other entities bearing that name … (p198).

Le Blanc explicitly rejects the ‘party of a new type’ interpretation. Nevertheless, his words might be read (incorrectly, I believe) as implying that Lenin regarded a multi-factional party as per se ineffective, so that he made sure that only one faction remained in his new “reorganised” party. Le Blanc fails to make clear enough that Lenin’s case was rather that party work was made ineffective, not by the profusion of factions, but by the doings of one particular group: namely, the liquidators.

Lenin recognised that there were many people in the party who were opposed to the liquidators, but who disagreed with the necessity of excluding them - or perhaps simply disagreed with his method of excluding them. These people had to make a choice, but Lenin was nevertheless perfectly happy to have them in the party and he cannot be said to have excluded them in any meaningful way.

In my opinion, the argument over whether or not the Bolshevik Party was created in 1912 is less important than strongly rejecting any ‘party of a new type’ interpretation and any assertion that Lenin was now applying the logic appropriate to factions to the party as a whole. The historical record overwhelmingly shows that, as of 1912, Lenin believed that “A fraction is not a party.”

Usurpation or continuity?

In a section of his anthology that he entitles ‘Final break with the Mensheviks’, Le Blanc gives us Lenin’s report to the western European socialists about the recent Prague conference. In this report, Lenin has this to say about the process of organising the conference: “In all, 20 organisations established close ties with the organising commission convening this conference: that is to say, practically all the organisations, both Menshevik and Bolshevik, active in Russia at the present time” (p204).

A funny way of organising a final break with the Mensheviks, one might think: making a good-faith effort to represent all Russian underground organisations regardless of faction. The paradox goes further, since Lenin insisted on continuity between the leadership institutions elected at Prague and the older party. He claimed that the central committee elected at Prague was the authoritative representative of that party and the faithful executor of earlier party decisions (especially party conferences in 1908 and 1910, in which Mensheviks participated and agreed to the relevant resolutions).

If the purpose of the Prague conference was to set up a Bolshevik Party, then Lenin was making a strikingly arrogant claim to possession of the mutual patrimony of both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. And indeed a common hostile label for him within the party was ‘usurper’. If his aim really was to set up a distinct Bolshevik entity, this label seems appropriate.

In Paul D’Amato’s contribution to the recent discussion, he acknowledges that the way Lenin described his activities to European socialists was duplicitous, if in fact Lenin was doing what D’Amato claims he was doing. D’Amato evidently justifies this duplicity as all in a good cause. In any event, I think he has a better insight into the problem than
Paul Le Blanc, who does not seem to recognise any contradiction between his description of Lenin’s activities (setting up a ‘distinct Bolshevik entity’) and Lenin’s own description in the report to the Second International.

Whether or not the Bolsheviks actually did make a good-faith effort to organise a true ‘all-party conference’ is a vexed question. In my own survey of documents from the period, I was impressed by the Bolsheviks’ consistent and energetic insistence that they were not organising a factional conference. Some non-Bolshevik opinion also partially supported their claim to represent at least the underground organisations of Russia proper.

I will add the strictly personal opinion I have expressed elsewhere: if indeed Lenin wanted to create a Bolshevik Party, he set about it in a way that was deceptive, disloyal, destructive and not to be imitated.

After Prague

Looking at social democratic activity between January 1912 (the date of the Prague conference) and 1914, I do not find much evidence that people were thinking in terms of two separate parties. Rather, people continued to think of the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks as two factions of a single party, factions with separate organisations and devoted (as they always had been) to destructive internecine warfare, but who still thought of themselves as parts of an ill-defined but meaningful whole. In other words, the post-1912 situation did not seem qualitatively new.

A couple of examples, just to show what I mean. A month or so after Prague, the newspaper set up by the conference, Pravda, published its first issue, which contained an editorial - written, as it happens, by Josif Stalin - which made a bid for party unity irrespective of faction. In the fight between Pravda and its rival Luch over the choice of social democratic candidates for the upcoming legislative elections, both sides based their pitch on the idea of party unity. Pravda called for party discipline, and Luch called for a common front.

During 1912-14, Lenin often defended the legitimacy of the Pravdists (NB: not the Bolsheviks as such) by saying that they represented a large majority of social democratic workers in Russia. That is to say, despite the exclusion of certain ‘liquidator’ groups at the Prague conference, Lenin still automatically thought in terms of an opportunist minority among the workers as a legitimate part of social democracy, even though misguided.

In his history of the party, written in the 1920s, Zinoviev makes what I consider to be misleading comments about Prague as “the moment of complete rupture with the Mensheviks” (for example, he also says, quite incorrectly, that there were no Mensheviks present at the conference). It is therefore quite revealing that immediately after making the comment just quoted, he goes on to say: “the final break from the Mensheviks came not in 1912, but in 1917 … Up till that minute everyone thought that after the fall of tsarism social democracy would manage to unite itself and that the Bolsheviks would merge with the Mensheviks.”

I have reported my impressions, but certainly this is a topic that could use more research.

To conclude: Paul Le Blanc makes a good case that after Prague, the RSDLP was “to all practical purposes” a Bolshevik Party. But this conclusion tells us nothing about how Lenin and the Bolsheviks viewed the relation between faction and party. The historical record is hardly ambiguous on this point: they believed (or acted as if they believed) that a faction and the party were different kinds of things - the Bolsheviks were a faction and not a party, and the Prague conference was in truth what it claimed to be: namely, an all-party conference. They rejected as a slander the idea that they were purging the party of opportunism. They did not think in terms of a ‘party of a new type’, but instead justified what they were doing by norms common to the Second International as a whole.

We are free to accept or reject these views, but not free, I think, to claim that the Bolsheviks did not hold them.

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3 L Kamenev *Dve partii* Paris 1911 (my translation).

4 L Kamenev *Dve partii* Leningrad 1924.

5 *Ibid* p103.


7 G Zinoviev *History of the Bolshevik Party: a popular outline* London 1973 (original Russian edition 1923), p12. The citation can also be found at www.marxists.org/archive/zinoviev/works/history/ch01.htm. Zinoviev’s discussion in his history lectures of different possible birth dates for the Bolshevik Party is highly relevant to the present discussion of 1912.
“Bolshevism and party building – convergence and questions”

By Paul Le Blanc

Revolutionary upheavals are made possible by the coming together of a number of diverse factors, one of which is the organisation, accumulation of experience and proliferating influence of conscious revolutionaries.

“Did the Bolshevik Party become the leading party of the Russian proletariat, and hence the Russian nation, by chance?”, asked Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci in 1924. A brilliant and knowledgeable analyst, he answered his own question: “The selection process lasted thirty years; it was extremely arduous; it often assumed what appeared to be the strangest and most absurd forms.” He added that the process involved “struggles of factions and small groups; ... it meant splits and fusions ...” (Gramsci, Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926: 210).

Would-be revolutionaries of later years, sometimes hoping to make sense of their own “absurdities” and small-group struggles, have often looked for insights into the tangled history of this Bolshevik party that was led by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Of course, when Gramsci referred to a selection process of thirty years, he was factoring in the experiences of the late 19th century before the Bolshevik party actually came into being. In a recent article, I have made the case -- supporting the assertion of many others – for 1912 being the year that Bolshevism crystallised as a distinct party.

The Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) that emerged from the January 1912 “all-Russia” conference in Prague, under the auspices of Lenin and his co-thinkers, did not present itself as “the Bolshevik party” – but it provides important clues as to the party-building perspectives associated with the Bolshevik tradition. This is an important question historically, and it is also of interest to would-be revolutionaries of today. It is hardly surprising that a debate has erupted (gathered in Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal) around this historical question as revolutionary struggle appears to have forced its way, once again, onto the global agenda.

Convergence

It seems to me that a useful and clarifying convergence has developed in the online debate on the development of the Leninist conception of the revolutionary party – at least between Lars Lih and myself – with some issues still tantalisingly left up in the air. Lars has just published the first of a promised three-part series on Lenin’s views on the party in 1912, 1917 and 1920 (in the May 3, 2012, issue of the Weekly Worker – http://www.cpgb.org.uk/article.php?article_id=1004820). I want, first of all, to bask in what strikes me as the areas of agreement, then brood over some possible disagreement, and finally turn to the up-in-the-air issues.

It seems to me that there are three broad areas of agreement between Lars and myself.

1. For all practical purposes, an independent Bolshevik party emerged from the Prague RSDLP conference of January 1912 (a fact codified by the Vienna RSDLP conference of August 1912). At the time it was not projected, by Lenin and his Bolshevik co-thinkers, as the creation of a Bolshevik party – but this is what it turned out to be.
2. This development did not represent some pre-conceived notion on Lenin’s part of creating any kind of “party of a new type” – for Lenin and his Bolshevik co-thinkers it represented, instead, the healthy realisation of what they perceived to be the Social-Democratic organisational model.

3. For Lenin and his Bolshevik co-thinkers, the organisational principles of *democratic-centralism* definitely allowed for, even assumed, the existence of tendencies and sometimes even more hardened factions within the same organisation, so long as majority decisions were respected by all – “freedom of discussion, unity in action”. (The term “democratic centralism” was first introduced and embraced by the Mensheviks in the RSDLP, but was also taken up and embraced even more consistently by the Leninist Bolsheviks.)

These three points are essential, it seems to me, for providing a coherent history of pre-1917 Bolshevism that does not ride roughshod over the known and documented facts. Our convergence around them constitutes a genuine forward movement in this discussion.

**Critical questions**

There are, however, certain critical questions raised by Lars that bring clouds into this sunny reality – but clouds are not always a bad thing. First, there is a methodological issue, but then something more substantive.

The methodological issue has to do with a certain kind of *primary source* material – memoirs or recollections. Here is a critical comment Lars makes about one aspect of my use of such sources:

> He says he is relying on “primary sources”, by which he means material coming from direct participants in party life before the war. But he relies overwhelmingly on sources written *after the event* and particularly after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Using memoirs and other after-the-event sources is always tricky, but there are a number of reasons why they are particularly unreliable in the case of the Prague conference. By the 1920s, there were indeed two parties, leading to a tendency to retroject current views back to the earlier situation. Furthermore, and most importantly, by the 1920s the whole idea of having factions in the party was delegitimised.

First of all, I want to acknowledge what seems to me the partial validity of Lars’s point. Even setting aside the possibility of conscious distortion, the mind often plays tricks. Our memories of past thoughts or perceptions from “way back when” are sometimes coloured, or even seriously distorted, by what came after. Of course, what people say or write in the midst of the actual past events might also prove to be misleading – especially in a situation such as that existing in 1911 and 1912, when, as Lars so aptly puts it, “the internal party situation ... was insanely complicated”.

Sometimes, however, after-the-fact recollections have the advantage of helping us see the forest from the trees, making some retrospective sense of the welter of contemporary detail. It seems to me, in such a situation, that one must draw from a diverse set of recollections and also weigh the reliability of the various memoirists. (I think, for example, that Krupskaya’s *Reminiscences of Lenin* generally proves to be more reliable than *Stormy Passage* by the Bolshevik-turned-Menshevik Woytinsky on what Lenin thought and said.) If the same event is recalled and the same point made by several Bolshevik witnesses, several Menshevik witnesses, plus Trotsky, and if these can be harmonised with the documents of the time (including Lenin’s writings), then it seems to me one can conclude – to use the example of this particular case – that for all practical purposes a Bolshevik party came into existence in 1912. (One could add that if a scholar’s interpretation of what happened in 1912 happens to be totally at variance with how all or most participants later described it, that interpretation is, to put it mildly, problematical.)

Lars goes on to say: “Paul does not sufficiently allow for the possibility that the Bolshevik outlook in 1912 cannot be directly deduced from what turned out to be, ‘for all practical purposes’, the actual outcome.” I agree with the point that the Bolshevik outlook of 1912 is not necessarily consistent with the actual outcome – so I am happy that Lars would choose to focus attention on something that I have not sufficiently emphasised, especially when he adds: “In doing so, I
will make heavy use of the Lenin material made available in Paul’s own excellent Lenin anthology *Revolution, democracy, socialism* (London 2008).”

What follows in Lars’s essay are a number of good and valid points. There is a problem, however, with what he says about Zinoviev’s 1920s account. Lars writes: “In his history of the party, written in the 1920s, Zinoviev makes what I consider to be misleading comments about Prague as ‘the moment of complete rupture with the Mensheviks’ (for example, he also says, quite incorrectly, that there were no Mensheviks present at the conference).” In fact (on pages 170-171 of the English language New Park edition) we find Zinoviev saying: “Present at the conference, incidentally, were two or three delegates who were supporters of Plekhanov and had arrived straight from party activity in Russia.”

These Mensheviks, of course, were not associated with the liquidator current headed by Potresov nor the Menshevik current conciliatory to the liquidators, headed by Martov and Dan – these were excluded from the Prague conference (as indicated in Lenin’s letter to G. L. Shklovsky of March 12, 1912, in *Collected Works*, vol. 35: 25-26), unlike the “party-Mensheviks” associated with Plekhanov. Lars is quite reasonable when he asserts: “Lenin really believed in the possibility of such a cross-factional bloc.”

But then an ambiguity creeps in: “Hostile observers at the time and later thought all that this talk of ‘party Menshevism’ was a ruse and an excuse to obtain an all-Bolshevik party. Underneath it all, they say, he equated liquidationism with Menshevism as such.”

It seems quite clear, from Lenin’s writings at the time (quoted extensively in my earlier contribution) that Lenin did not equate liquidationism with the Menshevism represented by Martov and Dan – only the party-Mensheviks associated with Plekhanov were exonerated. One can argue that this was unfair to Martov and Dan, who did not subscribe to all the tenets of liquidationism, and were certainly more left wing than Potresov. But Lenin’s point, expressed in his August 1911 introduction to Kamenev’s pamphlet *Two Parties*, was that they tolerated and were in alliance with the liquidators, that they were politically “trailing behind” the liquidators, and consequently had no place in an RSDLP that rejected liquidationism.

After the Prague conference Lenin was even more emphatic. In March 1912, explaining matters to German comrades, he asserted that “the nucleus” of liquidationism was “made up of the majority of Menshevik writers (Potresov, Levitsky, Larin, Martov, Dan, Martynov, etc.)”, approvingly noting that Plekhanov “broke off relations with Martov and Axelrod”. In a communication to Camille Huysmans, secretary of the Second International, Lenin characterised *Golos*, the publication of Martov and Dan, as representing “the liquidationist press”. (See Lenin’s *Collected Works*, vol. 17: 225-228, 539-540, 548.)

What this adds up to is excluding the majority of the Mensheviks from the RSDLP (unless the bulk of the rank-and-file Mensheviks were prepared to renounce their own leaders and newspapers). Of course, if Martov, Dan and their followers would break from the liquidators in the way that Plekhanov and his party-Mensheviks had done, they would be more than welcome in the Prague-initiated RSDLP. From Lenin’s writings at the time, it seems clear that he had no expectation that such a thing would happen.

**Tantalising issues**

This brings us to tantalising issues that remain to be resolved – in part, I think, through more serious engagement with Russian-language sources that, for now, most of us English speakers don’t have access to. Here is how Lars frames it:

Paul Le Blanc ... does not seem to recognise any contradiction between his description of Lenin’s activities (setting up a “distinct Bolshevik entity”) and Lenin’s own description in the report to the Second International.

Whether or not the Bolsheviks actually did make a good-faith effort to organise a true “all-party conference” is a vexed question. In my own survey of documents from the period, I was impressed by the Bolsheviks’ consistent and energetic insistence that they were not organising a factional conference. Some non-Bolshevik opinion also partially supported their claim to represent at least the underground organisations of Russia proper.
I will add the strictly personal opinion I have expressed elsewhere: if indeed Lenin wanted to create a Bolshevik Party, he set about it in a way that was deceptive, disloyal, destructive and not to be imitated.

I think the reality of the “vexed question” with which Lars and the rest of us are wrestling is even more complex than he allows. I do not believe Lenin was “deceptive, disloyal, destructive”. At the same time, he was, (a) not at all naïve about the realities inside the RSDLP and, (b) absolutely committed to the triumph of revolutionary Marxist perspectives within the RSDLP and within the Second International. I will discuss each of these points in turn.

By 1912 it was clear to Lenin that the bulk of the Mensheviks (even Plekhanov himself), as well as Trotsky, had no intention of attending the Prague conference. It was no less clear that they would not adhere to the decisions of the Prague conference and would not become part of the version of the RSDLP emerging from that conference. Nor (except for Plekhanov and his party-Menshevik co-thinkers) was he inclined to make the newly reorganised RSDLP an entity to which they would feel they belonged. He showed no desire whatsoever to reverse course in order to gather together any of these comrades into the Prague version of the RSDLP. He had no inclination to attend the Vienna conference (which Trotsky had apparently hoped he would). Lenin and his Bolshevik co-thinkers simply forged ahead as the RSDLP.

Lars tells us: “A split in a party can be justified on two very different grounds. One is: your views are unacceptable; you must go. The other is: only my views are acceptable, only my group can stay. The first view excludes a specific group. The second view excludes all except a specific group.” The fact is, as Lars insists, that Lenin and his co-thinkers viewed the Prague conference, which they organised and dominated, as representing a spilt of the first kind – a split with liquidationism. Their reorganised version of the RSDLP remained opened to all comrades of the earlier, now disorganised version of the RSDLP who would join them in splitting from liquidationism. They were honest and sincere about this, and were perhaps cautiously hopeful that a significant section of the Menshevik rank and file (perhaps even a leader here and there) would become part of their version of the RSDLP. But after 1912 they were not inclined to have high expectations that this would be so – Lenin least of all.

Then there is the other point to consider, one that – as push came to shove – may have separated Lenin from some of his co-thinkers. It is worth asking to what extent Lenin anticipated this in 1911 and 1912.

Lenin took revolutionary Marxism very seriously. He believed that the purpose of the RSDLP (and the purpose of all the parties of the Second International) was not to be a resting place or an affinity group for diverse congregations of those who considered socialism to be a nice idea. The purpose of the revolutionary party was, instead, to educate, agitate and organize a working-class majority around the perspectives of revolutionary Marxism and socialist revolution. The reformist perspectives of Eduard Bernstein, and the class-collaborationist orientation of Pavel Axelrod, could be tolerated in the party if and only if they were not allowed to dominate and disorganise the revolutionary work of the party.

The heroically revolutionary role of the working class, Lenin felt, was built into the social-economic realities of capitalism. This would enable intelligent revolutionary Marxists to win a majority in the workers’ movement – and if one-time reformists and class collaborationists, after finally losing the debate and the vote, chose to go along with the revolutionary will of the majority, all well and good. And if not – if they flouted the democratic decisions of the party (as the liquidators had done) – they would sooner or later have to be excluded from the party. Since revolutionary Marxism was, in fact, the program and perspective of the Second International and of the RSDLP, Lenin was optimistic and confident, but hardly passive. There was neither deception nor disloyalty nor destructiveness in his intentions, his theory, or his practice. He was determined to build a unified but also scrupulously democratic workers’ party, one which would (as Krupskaya put it) end up following “the Bolshevik line.”

Lenin was neither tactful nor “deceitful” about what he thought – he was “shouting it from the housetops” (to quote Deutscher), in public writings as well as correspondence.

Work to be done
Among the questions up in the air are: (1) how conscious was Lenin beforehand that few non-Bolsheviks would be likely to be part of the Prague RSDLP, (2) how conscious were other Leninist Bolsheviks of the same likelihood, (3) to what extent did Lenin and/or his co-thinkers hope or expect that significant numbers of their RSDLP factional opponents would eventually “come over” to a party following the Bolshevik line, (4) to what extent did Lenin perceive similar dynamics developing in the Second International, and (5) to what extent did any of this impact on how revolutionary-minded working-class activists on the ground, inside Russia, thought and functioned from 1912 through 1917.

I have already indicated my own hunch regarding question #1 – that Lenin believed the RSDLP emerging from the Prague conference would and should be an entity following the Bolshevik line, repellent to the great majority of Mensheviks influenced by Axelrod, Potresov, Martov, Dan (with party-Mensheviks around Plekhanov possibly being a partial exception). But there are certainly different interpretations of this issue that can be advanced and defended.

More research is required, it seems to me, on all of these questions. What they all added up to, it seems to me, is fruitfully suggested by interpretations to be found in the later recollections of participants (especially Krupskaya, Zinoviev and Trotsky, in my opinion) – but our understanding is certain to be enriched by the kind of research that Lars and other scholars with access to Russian-language sources will be able to produce.

How Marxist activists are able to make use of all this in the struggles of today and tomorrow is perhaps the biggest challenge of all.
I have to unbend the stick yet again since comrades in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) mischaracterize where I stand on parties and party-building efforts. First Mike MacNair claimed I advocated a “process by which dissent is recuperated into the bourgeois political game” and now Ben Lewis accuses me of drawing “movementist” and “liquidationist” conclusions. Unfortunately, Lewis cannot be right about my position against MacNair since Macnair acknowledged that I favor multi-tendency socialist parties over single-tendency “Leninist” organizations. If that is liquidationism, then I am as guilty of it as Lenin was in 1912 because he advocated just such a model for the Russian Social-Democratic Party (RSDLP) at that time.

Lars Lih is absolutely correct to point out that liquidationism – that is, dropping the goal of a democratic revolution in autocratic Russia and confining socialist organizing to what the Tsar deemed legal – was viewed by many of the RSDLP’s Menshevik and Bolshevik activists as an existential threat, a danger to all factions and tendencies because it threatened the RSDLP itself. I think Lenin and his comrades were right politically and organizationally in how they handled the problem of liquidationism, and I am certainly not a liquidationist (if I was, I would have written historical articles attacking Lenin and the 1912 Prague Conference as the liquidators did). What Lenin and the Bolsheviks meant by liquidationism is completely at odds with Lewis’s (ab)use of the term.

James Cannon, a founding member of the American Communist Party (CP), was also accused of being a liquidationist since he favored scrapping the CP’s underground, illegal organizing in conditions where legal organizing was both possible and necessary.

In Cannon’s case and in mine the charge is bogus, without any merit whatsoever.

I suspect that Lewis sincerely believes I am a liquidationist because six months ago I called for regroupment on the American socialist left in “Occupy and the Tasks of Socialists,” a position I reiterated in greater detail in “Another Socialist Left Is Possible.” Calling for the liquidation of the existing Marxist groups does not make one a liquidationist in the way Lenin understood it because we in America do not have a mass worker-socialist party to liquidate! Perhaps this is news to Lewis, but for us here in the United States it has been our central stumbling block for the better part of half a century. If we did have such a party, I (and tens of thousands of others) would be part of it and would fight against any attempt to liquidate it under any pretext.

Today, the existing groups on the American socialist left stand in the way of and block the development of such a party. Does Lewis (or CPGB) stand in favor of this status quo, or should the existing divides be liquidated in favor of a qualitatively better organization, more democratic, fluid, and open than the unchanging socialist sects and their proprietary front groups that currently clutter the left landscape? This is the real question that needs to be answered, not
by Lewis and CPGB alone but by all socialists, Marxists, and anti-capitalist revolutionaries, and not by words alone but through deeds, through action.

This is precisely what the Anti-Capitalist Initiative (ACI) seems to be attempting to do and why I believe the project has merit, whatever its flaws. A living, breathing, provisional experiment like ACI has a much better chance at succeeding than a group or publication that focuses on getting the demands, program, formal politics, history, and theory “right” (or criticizing everyone else’s demands, program, formal politics, history, and theory for being wrong) because the former has the possibility of real qualitative transformation and development while the latter can only repeat its criticisms ad nauseum and will in practice go nowhere no matter how right those criticisms are.

The key for ACI (or any new initiative) is whether it develops meaningful democratic mechanisms to create a culture of accountability and comradely, critical, and honest self-reflection, the essential preconditions for straightening out the inevitable political and organizational errors.

The central disagreement I have with CPGB is the following statement by Lewis:

What we say is that unless we openly commit to building a party committed to the programmatic fundamentals of Marxism, with space and room to debate tactical and indeed strategic disagreements, then we will not get anywhere at all. What do we learn from 1912? That at all times, whatever the level of the class struggle, the task of Marxists is to unite all those committed to a Marxist political party.

Our task is not “at all times, whatever the level of the class struggle … to unite all those committed to a Marxist political party.” This is ahistorical. It is also wrong in a situation where the Marxist wing of a crippled workers’ movement is made up of fragmented, competing splinters and slivers. Getting these marginal elements to all agree on the definition of Marxist fundamentals would not help to recreate the powerful worker-socialist movement that Europe’s ruling classes feared and hated at the turn of the twentieth century.

More importantly, making the “fundamentals of Marxism” the precondition for any party-building project guarantees that our efforts never get beyond the conceptual stage of abstraction for a simple reason: there is no consensus about what constitutes “the programmatic fundamentals” of Marxism among Marxists (Marx probably foresaw this absurd situation when he declared, “I myself am not a Marxist”). It would be impossible to obtain even an Occupy-style “modified consensus” margin of 90% on the content of Marxist fundamentals if a national meeting with representatives of all the existing Marxist groups as well as independent socialists were held either in the United States or in the United Kingdom.

Discussions of theory and program should not be a precondition for working together in the same party, network, or whatever word it is we use to label our political associations these days. These discussions can only be fruitful on the basis of common activity, common experience, common struggle, against common enemies and for common goals. A little common sense couldn’t hurt either.

If the CPGB’s “anti-liquidationist” approach of “uniting all those committed to a Marxist political party” had prevailed in 1875, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) would have never gotten off the ground because it was a merger of Marxist and non-Marxist elements (followers of Lasalle) on a thoroughly non-Marxist basis: the Gotha Program. If this merger had not occurred on the basis that it did, there would have been no German SPD, no international social democracy, no Erfurt Program of 1891, no Bolshevism, no Russian revolution, no Lenin. In that case, we would be in really big trouble, building new models from scratch and having to learn all of the painful lessons these experiences gave rise to all over again in a period where the very existence of unions and social safety nets is on the line.

If the permanent marginality of the Trotskyist movement has anything to teach us, it is that the “theory/program/ideology first” approach must be liquidated if we want to make real-world progress. The longer we wait, the less likely there will be a world left for us to win.
“How Lenin’s party became (Bolshevik)”

By Lars T Lih

From 1898 on, there existed a political party called the Rossiiskaia sotsial-demokraticheskaia rabochaia partiia (RSDRP), or Russian Social Democratic Worker Party. Rossiiskaia means “Russian” in the sense of citizens of the Russian state, as opposed to russkaia, which refers to ethnic Russians. Of course, the party title made no reference to either of its two later factions, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks.

At its 7th Congress in March 1918, this party officially changed its name to Rossiiskaia kommunisticheskaia partiia (bol’shevikov) or RKP(B). The party now referred to itself as ‘Bolshevik’, even if only in parentheses. The question arises: did the party ever have an intermediate title such as RSDRP(B) - for example, during the period from April 1917 to March 1918?

No. The label ‘RSDRP(B)’ was occasionally used informally in 1917 (for reasons to be discussed later), along with other improvised labels. Nevertheless, a party with the name ‘RSDRP(B)’ never existed.

The widespread impression to the contrary is due to some energetic camouflage by the Soviet editors and their presentation of Lenin’s works, of the records of party meetings, and the like. The prevailing Soviet historical orthodoxy wanted the party to be officially Bolshevik as early as possible, as a mark of its status as a ‘party of a new type’. Whenever they got a chance, therefore, Soviet editors used ‘RSDRP(B)’ in the titles they provided to historical documents. For example, the book containing the records of the 6th Party Congress in August 1917 has the title Proceedings of the 6th Congress of the RSDRP(B). Yet an examination of the documents themselves shows that the name of the party - the one used by all participants - was still plain old ‘RSDRP’.¹

This demi-falsification by Soviet editors creates a challenge for any investigation of how and why the name of the party was changed. In what follows, I have ignored the titles provided by Soviet editors, but I still rely on their usual conscientiousness about the texts of the documents themselves. I also recognise that making generalisations about what people did not say is always rather tricky. Therefore, the following remarks are somewhat provisional.

When Lenin returned to Russia at the beginning of April 1917 (I am using the old Russian calendar here), he carefully avoided using ‘Bolshevik’ to refer to the party. Several reasons led to this reluctance. First, he had long-standing views about the essential difference between a faction and a party (as explained in my first instalment).² A faction was more homogeneous in outlook than a party, since it was composed of people who ‘thought the same’ (edinomyshlenniki) about important tactical issues. In one of his first statements after arriving in Russia, Lenin emphasised this distinction (the Soviet-era English translation charmingly renders edinomyshlenniki as “comrades-in-ideas”):
On April 4 1917, I had occasion to make a report in Petrograd on the subject indicated in the title [tactics], first, at a meeting of Bolsheviks. These were delegates to the All-Russia Conference of Soviets of Worker and Soldier Deputies, who had to leave for their homes and therefore could not allow me to postpone it. After the meeting the chairman, comrade G Zinoviev, asked me on behalf of the whole assembly to repeat my report immediately at a joint meeting of Bolshevik and Menshevik delegates, who wished to discuss the question of unifying the RSDR Party.

Difficult though it was for me immediately to repeat my report, I felt that I had no right to refuse once this was demanded of me both by my edinomyshlennik i and the Mensheviks, who, because of their impending departure, really could not grant me a delay.³

Further, Lenin had been accused a few years earlier, at the time of the Prague conference in 1912, of having carried out a coup d’etat within the party and of declaring his own faction to be the party. He had vehemently denied the charges back then and he was not disposed to give them ex post facto credit in 1917 by referring to the party as ‘Bolshevik’.

In Lenin’s mind, Bolshevism in the strict sense was a tactical view about the Russian revolution, consisting of a scenario that described the alliance between the socialist proletariat and the peasantry as a whole. After the February revolution and the fall of the tsar, he had serious doubts about the continued applicability of this scenario. In this context - that is, in debates about the correct tactical attitude toward the peasantry - Lenin was willing to talk about Bolshevism, but his comments were rather critical. In fact, he stated that “Old Bolshevism needs to be discarded.” So perhaps Bolshevism in the strict sense was already really a thing of the past - in which case ‘Bolshevik’ was not such a good label for the party.⁴ (Lenin later changed his attitude toward the old Bolshevik scenario.)

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Lenin had his own plans for a renaming of the party: he wanted to abandon ‘Social Democratic’ and replace it with ‘Communist’. The reasoning behind this name change was based on developments in Europe as a whole. The official social democratic parties had disgraced themselves by their support of their respective governments’ war effort. The banner of ‘revolutionary social democracy’ had been sullied beyond repair and had to be replaced. The whole logic of this gesture would be obscured if the Russian social democratic party was known by the extremely Russian name of ‘Bolshevik’.

In a bind

As a result, the appearance of the words ‘Bolshevik’ or ‘Bolshevism’ are few and far between for the first month or so after Lenin’s arrival in Russia. For example, Lenin’s contributions to the ‘all-Russian conference’ of the party held in late April takes up 90 pages or so in volume 24 of his Collected works, yet I have not discovered a single use of ‘Bolshevik’ or related terms in these pages.

Indeed, Lenin found himself in something of a bind when talking about the party. He was extremely reluctant to call it ‘Bolshevik’, he was openly scornful about ‘Social Democratic’, yet the name ‘Communist’ could not be used until a party congress officially made the change. Lenin did occasionally refer to the party as the RSDRP. But for the most part, he relied on euphemisms such as “revolutionary social democracy”, “party of the proletariat” or simply “our party” – the vaguest and most common label.

Such were Lenin’s views - but he soon discovered that the name of the party was not up to him, or even up to the party! People outside the party, both friends and foes, knew it as the party of the Bolsheviks, and - especially in the new context of open politics and electoral competition - their outlook was decisive. We soon find Lenin is talking more and more about “the Bolsheviks” - first, to distinguish the party from its rivals in the eyes of potential supporters and, second, to respond to attacks on “Bolshevik extremism” made by political enemies. Indeed, during April-May 1917, when we find “Bolshevik” or “Bolshevism” in Lenin’s writings, we can bet on finding either “electoral” or “attack” somewhere nearby.

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The most revealing statement on this topic was published in May in a pamphlet explaining the differences between the parties. Lenin was writing for a popular audience and he needed to distinguish the party from “the Social Democrats, the Socialist-Revolutionaries and kindred groups” (NB: he avoids the term ‘party’ for this grouping). In the listing of the various parties, we find the following:

“D. (‘Bolsheviks’). The party which properly should be called the Communist Party, but which at present is named the Russian Social Democratic Worker Party, as united by the central committee, or, colloquially, the ‘Bolsheviks’.”

The clumsy expression “as united under the central committee” was an earlier coinage used to distinguish Lenin’s group from other social democratic claimants. This circumlocution was adopted precisely to avoid identifying the party with the Bolshevik faction. Clearly, it was inadequate as a political brand name in the rough-and-tumble of electoral competition in 1917. The word I have translated as “colloquially” is prostorechie, which has connotations of substandard usage. Lenin is almost saying that only uneducated people label the party as ‘Bolshevik’. Of course, he is referring not to genuinely uneducated people, but rather to political rivals and journalists who refuse to follow the subtleties of correct party usage. Throughout this pamphlet, ‘Bolshevik’ is always found within quotation marks – a typographical manifestation of Lenin’s reluctance.

An illustration of the other main motive for using ‘Bolshevik’ is a passage in a polemical newspaper article published in mid-May. Here Lenin considers various accusations against the “terrible Bolsheviks” made not only by the capitalist newspapers but by the moderate socialists. He then claims that the programme of economic regulation put forward by the moderate socialists was in actuality identical with the “programme of ‘terrible’ Bolshevism” - only, of course, the moderate socialists could not carry it out in practice as long as they continued to make pacts with the bourgeois parties.

Lenin perforce had to become more comfortable using ‘Bolshevik’ when making appeals for support and responding to attacks. But he still seems to have regarded it as an imposition and a distraction from more principled considerations about the party name. The change of party name was so important to him that in March 1918, at a special congress that otherwise was devoted solely to the highly urgent topic of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, he gave an extensive speech about why the name should be changed from ‘Social Democratic’ to ‘Communist’.

At the beginning of this speech, he adds foreigners to the list of people who would insist on using ‘Bolshevik’ as a label for the party: “The central committee proposes to change the name of our party to Russian Communist Party, with ‘Bolsheviks’ in parentheses. We considered this addition to be necessary, because the word ‘Bolshevik’ has acquired a right of citizenship not only in the political life of Russia, but in the entire foreign press that follows the development of events in general outline.”

This curt comment constitutes Lenin’s entire discussion about the inclusion of ‘Bolshevik’ in the party name, even if only in the humble garb of a parenthesis. No references to the glorious past of the Bolsheviks, to the necessity of creating a homogenous party or to the alleged inauguration of a Bolshevik Party back in 1912. My impression is that Lenin was still rather annoyed that ill-informed people’s insistence on using the purely Russian label of ‘Bolshevik’ was getting in the way of his grand and principled gesture of rejecting ‘Social Democracy’ in favour of ‘Communist’.

**Internationalists**

Turning from Lenin to more general usage, we may observe that within the party in 1917 the fundamental political choice was not viewed as ‘Bolshevik vs non-Bolshevik’. The fundamental dividing line was rather the one between ‘internationalist vs defencist’. In the Russian context, an internationalist was someone who wanted to overthrow the provisional government and replace it with a narodnaia vlast: that is, a sovereign authority based on the workers and peasants and expressing itself institutionally through the soviets. An internationalist was also committed to “breaking with the defencists”: that is, refusing to stay in parties that engaged in coalition governments and otherwise indulged in “pact-making” (soglashatelstvo). The ‘internationalist/defencist’ split was strictly analogous to, although not identical with, the ‘anti-liquidationist/liquidationist’ split in 1910-14. Like the earlier split, it was taken for granted that, while all
Bolsheviks were internationalists, not all internationalists were Bolsheviks. In other words, the dividing line between those who were in and those who were out of the party did not run between Bolshevik and Menshevik, but rather somewhere among the Mensheviks.

Thus the consistent official attitude of the RSDRP in 1917 was that it wanted to work with internationalists in other parties and that it welcomed internationalist Social Democrats in the party. As Lenin put in April, “… in regard to various local groups of workers who are aligned with the Mensheviks and the like, but who strive to uphold the position of internationalism against ‘revolutionary defencism’ …, the policy of our party must be to support such workers and groups, to seek closer relations with them, and support unification with them on the basis of a definite break with the petty bourgeois betrayal of socialism.”

The 6th Party Congress was held in August 1917, at a time when the relations between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks who were in the government and the official Soviet leadership were in a very bad way. Governmental repression after the confusion of the July Days meant that Lenin and other top leaders could not attend. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the congress, the delegates enthusiastically received Iurii Larin, formerly a prominent liquidationist and now a spokesman for ‘Menshevik Internationalists’. Larin got special applause when he promised “an immediate break with the defencists” In the name of the party, Bukharin welcomed Larin’s initiative:

I greet with special warmth his declaration about the necessity of a break with the defencists, that ulcer that is eating into not only the party, but all the democratic forces of the country. In order to combat this ulcer, it is necessary to unite all social democrat internationalists. In this hall there is not a single individual that does not feel the necessity of uniting all the living forces of social democracy. Comrades! I am not going to dwell on the differences of opinion mentioned by comrade Larin, but rather I will express the hope that these differences will be outgrown and that social democrat internationalists will be united in one overall party.

Larin admitted the difficulties of overcoming “nine years of disunity”. Thus he dated the party split from 1908, presumably because the last more or less united party congress had been in 1907. Worth noting is the fact that Larin made no references to the Prague conference of 1912 as a significant date in the history of the split. The same could be said of remarks by Mikhail Olminsky, who opened the 6th Congress by looking back at earlier party congresses in relation to the split. More generally, I found not the slightest hint in any of the materials I looked at from 1917-18 that anybody saw the Prague conference as marking the inauguration of a new Bolshevik Party.

Larin promised that Martov himself, the leader of the Menshevik Internationalists, would address the party congress. This visit never materialised, and the mood at the end of the congress was much sourer on this issue than it had been when Larin was applauded. KK Iurenev (a member of the ‘Interregional Group’ to which Trotsky belonged that was now joining the RSDRP) grimly remarked that only “a minority of a minority of the Mensheviks” would end up entering the RSDRP. Nevertheless, he proposed a resolution, accepted by the congress, that contained the following language:

While opposing the dangerous slogan of uniting everybody, social democracy puts forward the class-revolutionary slogan of the unity of all internationalists who break in practice with the Menshevik-Imperialists.

Since it sees this kind of unity as necessary and inevitable, the congress calls on all the revolutionary elements of social democracy to immediately break organisational ties with the defencists and unite around the RSDRP.

View on the ground

A more direct look at the realities on the ground comes from results of a questionnaire circulated among local party organisations and included in the records of the 6th Party Congress. The questions of interest to us are: what is the name of your organisation? Does your organisation contain both Bolsheviks and internationalists, or are you purely Bolshevik? The very existence of these questions indicates that as of August 1917 the party was viewed not as an exclusively Bolshevik party, but as a party in which Bolsheviks dominated.
When we look at the answers, we find a large majority simply called themselves by the name of their locality plus “RSDRP”. A number of local organisations did refer to themselves as “RSDRP (Bolsheviks)”. On the other hand, some had titles such as the following: “Cheliabinsk committee of the RSDRP (internationalists)”.

When asked to describe their factional content, most committees had something similar to the party organisation in the Vyborg district of Petrograd: “Our organisation is a united one, including only internationalists in principle, but in fact consisting almost exclusively of Bolsheviks.”

Or, as the “Odessa committee of the RSDRP” put it, “We unite Bolsheviks as well as uniters (Trotskyists, former partyists) and Menshevik-Internationalists who accept the platform of the Bolsheviks: all internationalists.” (‘Uniters’ and ‘partyists’ are labels from the intraparty squabbles of 1912, so that ‘Trotskyist’ means someone who supported Trotsky’s bid for all-factional unity at that time.)

Usage had not yet settled down, so we find a variety of ways of talking about party organisations and factions. Even though some labels did not continue into the future, we should remember the way, for example, the local soviet in the Vyborg district greeted the 6th Congress - as “the all-Russian congress of the internationalists” and as “the representatives of thorough-going revolutionary social democracy”.

In 1918, as we have seen, the hastily called 7th Congress officially changed the party name and called for substantial programme revisions. The new party programme was adopted in the following year by the 8th Congress. There were extensive debates over the programme at these two congresses, but very little attention was paid to the name change as such. In 1918, proposals to keep ‘Worker’ in the title and to remove ‘Russian’ were quickly dismissed.

One delegate did object to dropping ‘Social Democratic’ from the party’s name. Iurii Steklov felt that the best course was to take steps to end the “political masquerade” of Menshevik groups who called themselves social democratic, even though they had lost all moral right to use this title. He argued that a great deal of political good will would be thrown away if the old name was dropped: “I make bold to assure you that you won’t create any enthusiasm among anybody but Martov and friends by changing this glorious title of the party. We will have to re-educate all the masses who are accustomed to see this word [Social Democrat] as the expression of their own party.”

Steklov therefore suggested that ‘Bolshevik’ be dropped from the parenthesis and ‘Communist’ placed there instead, so that the new name would be ‘RSDRP (Communists)’. He asserted that the word ‘Bolshevik’ had only historical meaning that arose from the “happenstance” that the Bolsheviks had a majority (in Russian bol’shinstvo) at the 2nd Party Congress in 1903.

In response, Bukharin said that by now the masses saw the Bolsheviks as their champions and the Mensheviks as traitors. He followed this argument up with the following remarkable comment: “The issue is that the word ‘Bolshevik’ is a silly one that that has lost all meaning and there is no reason to retain this word. We need to keep it for the present, so that the masses, not being initiated into all the subtleties of the issue, are not puzzled by trying to figure out which party this is, since not everybody is going to read the resolutions of our congress.”

Shortly after the 7th Congress, Bukharin wrote a small book entitled Programma Kommunistov (Programme of the communists). At the very end of this work, he provided an explanation of “why we are called communists”. No mention is made of the presence of the parenthetical ‘Bolshevik’ in the party’s new name. According to Bukharin, the split between communists and social democrats was one that ran through the socialist movement in all countries. As an example of such a split, he mentioned the armed conflict between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks after the October revolution: “Blood marked a boundary line between us. Such a thing cannot and never will be forgotten.”

Some people at the 7th Party Congress saw the parenthetical ‘Bolshevik’ as temporary and proposed that the issue be reconsidered at the next congress in 1919. Although there were extensive debates over the programme at the 8th Party Congress in 1919, the issue of the party’s official name was not mentioned and the party remained ‘RKP(B)’. 125
When we look back at how and why the party became officially ‘Bolshevik’, we see that it did not really decide to give itself this name - rather, it accepted the fact that outsiders insisted on using it. The party took on the Bolshevik label in 1917-18 as the result of an objective process of political competition fuelled by the imperatives of political branding.

Let us consider the case of Iurii Larin, the Menshevik Internationalist who addressed the 6th Party Congress. Larin went to join the party and played a prominent role in the economic policy of the Bolshevik government. Indeed, his daughter later married Bukharin, the Bolshevik leader who greeted his remarks at the 6th Congress. In 1917 Larin still considered himself a Menshevik, and old party hands such as he and Lenin would be aware of traditional conflicts over tactical issues. Nevertheless, as soon as he joined the RSDRP, everybody else would refer to him as a Bolshevik.

This example illustrates the nature of the process. The party did not shrink so that it became only one of the former factions of the RSDRP. Rather, the word ‘Bolshevik’ expanded so that it included everyone in the party, regardless of their former factional affiliation.

In so doing, the impressionistic meaning of ‘Bolshevism’ used by outsiders prevailed over the more precise definition of those versed in internal party affairs. This impressionistic meaning might be paraphrased as the radical movement of the lower classes to take over political power and use it for world revolution and extensive social transformation of Russia - to the horror of some and the enthusiasm of others. Those of us who are interested in party history might ask ourselves: is this more impressionistic definition perhaps the most useful one?

The third and final instalment in this series of articles will look at how ‘Bolshevism’ was used in 1920.

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1 All material from party congresses can be found at this site: http://publ.lib.ru/ARCHIVES/K/KPSS/_KPSS.html.

2 ‘A faction is not a party’ Weekly Worker May

3 VI Lenin Polno sobranie sochinenii (Complete works), Vol 31, p131.

4 There are many misunderstandings about the debate between Lenin and the ‘old Bolsheviks’ in April 1917, but this problem is not relevant to the issue under discussion. For my views, see ‘The ironic triumph of old Bolshevism: the debates of April 1917 in context’ in Russian History 38 (2011), pp199-242.

5 This pamphlet was published in mid-May. Lenin says he wrote it in early April, and it is so placed in the Collected works. Lenin does not say he made no editorial changes before publication, and it seems quite likely that the choice of a label for the party was such a change. Compare the very similar passage in another pamphlet issued around the same time in which Lenin introduced the resolutions of the April conference of the party (Polno sobranie sochinenii Vol 31, p454).

6 VI Lenin Polno sobranie sochinenii Vol 32, pp74-76.

7 An English translation of this fascinating work can be found at www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1918/worldrev/index.html.
Lenin’s pamphlet ‘Leftwing’ communism - his last work of more-than article size - was written in spring 1920 in order to be distributed to the delegates of the 2nd Congress of the Communist International, or Comintern. The message that Lenin intended to send cannot be understood apart from the particular circumstances of this event. Comintern was founded in spring 1919, a time of great enthusiasm and hope about the possibility of soviet-style revolutions sweeping across Europe. Exuberantly confident predictions were made by Lenin and Grigorii Zinoviev that the 2nd Congress of the new international would be a gathering not just of parties, but of new soviet republics. Accordingly, little attention was given to the party as such. As Trotsky put it later, the hope was that “a chaotic, spontaneous [elemental or stikhiinyi] assault” would mount in “ever-rising waves, that in this process the awareness of the leading layers of the working class would become clarified, and that in this way the proletariat would attain state power in the course of one or two years”.

Only a year later, the hopes for soviet revolution in Europe had receded - as it turned out, for good. In spring 1920, Comintern leaders were still confident that they were on the eve of a new revolutionary crisis. Zinoviev brought up his 1919 prediction that soviet revolutions would triumph in one year, and remarked: well, not one year, but the European revolution would still happen in two or three years - let the bourgeoisie enjoy their short respite! But the optimism of the 2nd Congress was nevertheless of rather a grim sort.

In fact, the change in outlook was more than just adding a few years before the expected revolutionary triumph. Bolshevik leaders now realised that, for the time being, Europe had moved out of a revolutionary situation and therefore into a phase in which the only useful activity was preparation for the next crisis. This new diagnosis was not only presented at the congress, but can be found in Lenin’s pamphlet - always, of course, with the most positive possible spin.

The essential feature of the new situation in 1920 was that capitalists were jailing communists and not the other way around. Lenin presented this capitalist repression as the last gasp of a terrified bourgeoisie: “Life will assert itself. Let the bourgeoisie rave, work itself into a frenzy, go to extremes, commit follies, take vengeance on the Bolsheviks in advance and endeavour to kill off (in India, Hungary, Germany, etc) hundreds, thousands, and hundreds of thousands more of yesterday’s and tomorrow’s Bolsheviks. In acting thus, the bourgeoisie is acting as all classes doomed by history have acted.”

Nevertheless, the practical bottom line was: “It is possible that in certain instances, in certain countries, and for more or less brief periods, it will succeed in this [repression].”
Lenin also noted the absence of what for him was a key component of a revolutionary situation (especially well exemplified by Russia in 1917): the inability of the normal elites to rule, because they were overwhelmed by a society-wide crisis of some sort. And an even more crucial marker of a non-revolutionary situation was the mood of the “broad masses”, who were (Lenin observed with regret) “now, for the most part, slumbering, apathetic, hidebound, inert and dormant.”

Lenin’s remark about England thus sums up his attitude to the situation in Europe as a whole: “We cannot tell, and no-one can tell beforehand, how soon the real proletarian revolution will flare up there, and what immediate cause will most serve to rouse it, kindle it, and impel very wide masses who are at present dormant into the struggle. Hence it is our duty to carry on our preparatory work in such a way as to be ‘well shod on all four feet’.”

Given this view on the prevailing non- (and only hopefully pre-) revolutionary situation, the focus was no longer on setting up soviets, but rather on the *party* as a vehicle of revolutionary preparation in a non-revolutionary situation. The question then arises: what kind of party? And Lenin answers: a Bolshevik-type party, as opposed to the philistine, opportunist, careerist parties of the pre-war Second International. The rhetorical contrast between these two kinds of party runs through the pamphlet.

Nevertheless, if we want to understand what type of party Lenin is advocating, we have to dig deeper than this rhetorical contrast, for a number of reasons. Lenin’s rejection of the actual parties of the Second International does not mean he is rejecting its party ideal. For example, in my writings about pre-war Bolshevism, I often employ the term ‘SPD model’: that is, the ideal party best exemplified by German Social Democracy. I show that Lenin was directly inspired by the SPD model when he wrote *What is to be done?* in 1902. Some readers have responded to this interpretation by saying: well, although Lenin may well have been inspired by the SPD model in 1902, he obviously became disillusioned with it later on, as shown by his writings after 1914. But this response overlooks the possibility that Lenin rejected the actual SPD precisely because it failed to live up to the SPD model - and indeed I think this is exactly what happened.

Furthermore, the blanket label, ‘party of the Second International’, overlooks the fundamental fact of the long-standing division within all of these parties between “revolutionary social democracy” and “opportunism”. Opportunism won out in the Second International, and therefore Lenin rejects the international as it existed. But this rejection does not mean he is renouncing his long-standing self-identification as a partisan of “revolutionary social democracy”.

On the contrary: Lenin goes out of his way in *Leftwing communism* to claim that “history has now confirmed on a large, worldwide and historical scale the opinion we have always advocated: that is, that revolutionary German social democracy came closest to being the party which the revolutionary proletariat required to enable it to attain victory”. As the discussion makes clear, Lenin is not choosing sides between Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky in their disputes after 1909 - rather, he is endorsing the long-term wing of German social democracy for which both Luxemburg and Kautsky were the recognised spokespersons up to 1909. (For more on this point, see Lenin’s remarks on Kautsky as discussed below.)

Finally, we should note that the main focus in this pamphlet is not ‘the party in a revolutionary situation’ or, even less, ‘the party in power’ - topics that underline the contrast with the ‘peaceful’ pre-war parties - but precisely “the party doing preparatory work in a non-revolutionary situation”.

The polemical target of the pamphlet - “leftwing communism” – is defined as the outlook of revolutionary leftists who reject the party in principle at any time. As such, the pamphlet was designed as a contribution to a debate at the Comintern 2nd Congress about “the party principle”. A look at this neglected debate provides the essential context for understanding *Leftwing communism*.

The purpose of this debate was to reaffirm “the party principle” as such in opposition to the more anarchistic leftists, who were nevertheless seen as valuable additions to the Communist International - if they could be taught to see the error of their ways. The Bolshevik leaders were not propagating a “new type of party,” as later Stalinist historians had
it. They were propagating the party principle as it had always been understood in the Second International. Indeed, Zinoviev held up for special ridicule some language used by the ‘left’ German Communists: we are founding a party (they wrote) but “not a party in the traditional sense”. According to Zinoviev, this was “an intellectual capitulation to the views of syndicalism and industrialism that are reactionary”. This remark of Zinoviev’s was incorporated into the official resolution of the congress on the subject - putting the congress on record, as it were, against any talk of a “new type” of party.

Paul Levi (the German communist who was the most important non-Russian delegate to the congress) felt that the whole issue of the party principle was old hat. He objected to “focusing the discussion on a question that the majority of the western European working class settled decades ago”. Trotsky objected to Levi’s condescension. Now, Trotsky could have said something like this: ‘Excuse me, but we are not advocating the same old party ideal, but rather a new and refurbished one.’ In reality, he just defended the anarchist and syndicalist delegates to the Congress as more revolutionary in spirit than many social democrats, even though the latter understood the party principle in theory.

Taking all these factors into consideration, the suspicion arises when reading ‘Leftwing’ communism that Lenin is using the revolutionary prestige of ‘Bolshevism’ in order to propagate the party principle as such. Of course, Lenin spends more than a few pages going over the history of Bolshevism for the benefit of the foreign comrades. But, when we look closer at this history, we notice that the specifically Russian aspects of Bolshevism are missing. Bolshevism arose in Russia primarily as a strategy for an anti-tsarist democratic revolution. According to the Bolsheviks, this revolution would succeed only if the socialist proletariat acted as class leader for the peasantry. This whole scenario is absent from Lenin’s historical overview. Indeed, Lenin almost goes out of his way to dismiss the scenario as one that cannot be directly applied to Europe.

Lenin also makes no real attempt to initiate the foreign comrades into the complexities of the factional struggle between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. His lack of interest in this topic can be misunderstood. Lenin writes: “As a trend of political thought and as a political party, Bolshevism exists since 1903.” Mike Macnair reads this and similar statements as an historically absurd claim that Bolshevism was already an independent party organisation in 1903. I read this particular sentence as saying: Bolshevism has existed since 1903, first as a trend of political thought and later as an independent political party. But Macnair is certainly correct that Lenin uses the word ‘party’ in a very vague way in his historical excursus, so that the reader gets no idea when, how and why the Bolsheviks moved from “trend of political thought” to “political party”.

The reason for this is not that Lenin wants to give a misleading impression about the historical evolution of Bolshevism. He is simply not interested in this aspect of Bolshevik history. He is not trying to impress on the foreign comrades the importance of purging the opportunists and moving from factional status to party status. He realises how impossible it would be in a short section to give an adequate picture of the ins and outs of the Russian factional struggle, and he does not try - because his big point is elsewhere.

His big point can be put like this: the ‘SPD model’ is discredited with some justice because the SPD itself has disgraced itself. Nevertheless, it would be disastrous - especially as we are now in a not-yet-revolutionary situation - to reject the model along with the party. To drive this point home, Lenin shows how the model was incarnated in what everybody admitted was a truly revolutionary party: the Bolsheviks. Thus the ‘SPD model’ becomes the ‘Bolshevik model’. The exemplary incarnation of the model has changed - but has the model itself changed?

‘Bolshevism’ and the party principle

Throughout ‘Leftwing’ communism, Lenin sneers at the parties of the Second International as corrupt and degenerate. The question that interests us is: why does Lenin reject these parties? Because they were inspired by a false ideal of what a party should be? Or because they failed to be sufficiently inspired by their own official party ideal - an ideal that Lenin himself explicitly shared in earlier days? I believe an attentive reading of the pamphlet unambiguously confirms the second alternative.
To make this case, we need a sense of what the official party ideal was. I take the liberty of going back to my study, 
*Lenin rediscovered*, which is devoted to Lenin’s outlook circa 1902. In this study I coined the term ‘Erfurtian’ to describe the ideal party of ‘revolutionary social democracy’ - a model that was the basis of the outlook of Russian social democracy. Erfurt was the town where the German Social Democrats in 1891 held their first party congress after regaining legal status and where they produced the immensely influential Erfurt programme. The influence in Russia of Kautsky’s book-length commentary *The Erfurt programme* can hardly be overstated. For all these reasons, ‘Erfurtian’ seemed an appropriate word to describe the outlook of Russian social democrats such as Lenin.

The essential idea for such a party comes from the work of Marx and Engels. The proletariat has a historical mission to take political power and introduce socialism - but this means that the proletariat must be prepared ideologically and organisationally to carry it out. Thus the historical mission of the party is to provide this preparation - to ensure that the proletariat (to use Marx’s own English vocabulary) would be “united by combination and led by knowledge”.

This overall conception of the party’s mission leaves open the question of the concrete strategy and techniques for carrying it out. These techniques had to be worked out, and here the pivotal figure is Ferdinand Lassalle. Lassalle came up with the idea of a political organisation devoted to carrying out a *permanent campaign* (“legal and peaceful, but unwearying, unceasing agitation”) in support of its message. In my view, this project was one of the greatest political innovations of the last century or so, and Lassalle’s crucial role in its development has been unjustly overlooked. But I digress. Here I want to bring out the striking unity of tone between Lassalle, writing in the 1860s, and Lenin, writing in 1920.

Lassalle: “Found and publish newspapers, to make this demand [universal suffrage] daily and to prove the reasons for it from the state of society. With the same funds circulate pamphlets for the same purpose. Pay agents out of the union’s funds to carry this insight into every corner of the country, to thrill the heart of every worker, every house-servant, every farm-labourer, with this cry … Propagate this cry in every workshop, every village, every hut. May the workers of the towns let their higher insight and education overflow on to the workers of the country. Debate, discuss, everywhere, every day without pausing, without ending.”

Lenin: “The communist parties must issue their slogans; real proletarians, with the help of the unorganised and downtrodden poor, should scatter and distribute leaflets, canvass workers’ houses and the cottage of the rural proletarians and peasants in the remote villages … they should go into casual meetings where the common people gather, and talk to the people, not in scientific (and not in very parliamentary) language, they should not at all strive to ‘get seats’ in parliament, but should everywhere strive to rouse the minds of the masses and to draw them into the struggle, to catch the bourgeois on their own statements, to utilise the apparatus they have set up, the elections they have appointed, the appeals to the country they have made, and to tell the people what Bolshevism is in a way that has never been possible (under bourgeois rule) outside of election times…”

In *Lenin rediscovered*, I provided a check-list of eight identifying features of the Erfurtian outlook. Let us quickly run down the items of this list with ‘Leftwing’ communism in hand.

The first item on this list is “Erfurt allegiance”: that is, an explicit statement of loyalty to the SPD model, to the Erfurt programme and to Karl Kautsky as authoritative expounder of the Erfurtian outlook. We can hardly expect to find such explicit statements of allegiance in 1920, given the extreme hostility between Lenin and Kautsky at this point. But the amazing thing is that we actually do find very striking affirmations of Erfurtian allegiance - in particular, to “Kautsky when he was a Marxist”. Lenin gives a page-long quote from Kautsky dating from 1902, and comments with enthusiasm: “How well Karl Kautsky wrote 18 years ago!” And this in a book aimed at readers for whom Kautsky was nothing but a dirty word!

In the Kautsky passage cited by Lenin, we find the following comment: “The Russian revolutionary movement that is now flaring up will perhaps prove to be a most potent means of exorcising that spirit of flabby philistinism and temperate politics which is beginning to spread in our midst and may cause the thirst for battle and the passionate devotion to our great ideals to flare up in bright flames again.” Do we need to change a word to make this a summary
of ‘Leftwing’ communism as a whole? We see that Kautsky in 1902 is already condemning the parties of the Second International for degeneration from their own ideal.7

In this connection, let us take a look at the full title of Lenin’s pamphlet: ‘Leftwing’ communism: an infantile disorder. The standard translation of the subtitle is most misleading in tone, since “infantile disorder” sounds like a dismissive sneer. The Russian original, detskaia bolezn’, means “childhood disease” and refers to mumps, measles and the like. A translation that brings out Lenin’s point better than the standard one is: ‘Leftwing’ communism: a symptom of growing pains. The anarchistic or syndicalist rejection of the party principle is treated as the passing mistake of a rapidly maturing, but genuinely revolutionary spirit.

I bring this point of translation up now because both the metaphor and the underlying argument were first used by Kautsky in The Erfurt programme. We can also find in Kautsky’s writings the argument that unless social democracy showed a proper revolutionary spirit, impatient workers would not only reject the parties, but the party principle as such. In other words, opportunist revisionism had long been seen as giving strength to anarchist illusions.

In another striking passage, Lenin brags about the “granite theoretical basis” enjoyed by Bolshevism since its inception, a basis achieved by “following each and every ‘last word’ in Europe and America in this sphere with astonishing diligence and thoroughness”. We often hear that after 1914 and his break with the Second International, Lenin came to realise that the entire theoretical basis of “Second International Marxism” was faulty and needed to be revamped from the ground up. Well, if Lenin thought this, he was being very remiss in letting slip this opportunity of exhorting the congress delegates to rethink basic precepts of European Marxism of the late 19th century. Instead, Lenin shows his pride in the fact that Bolsheviks had so thoroughly assimilated those precepts.

The next item on my Erfurtian check-list is the aphoristic definition of social democracy as “the merger of socialism and the worker movement”. The idea behind this formula is that socialism will only be achieved when the mass worker movement accepts the socialist programme, and social democracy is the vehicle for bringing about this acceptance. This theme can be seen reflected in Lenin’s insistence in this pamphlet of bringing the message to the workers wherever they are - even if they can only be reached via “reactionary” trade unions and parliaments. Not to undertake this task means neglecting “that function of the proletarian vanguard which consists in training, educating, enlightening and drawing into the new life the most backward strata and masses of the working class and the peasantry”.

This last comment brings us to the third item in the check-list: the project of spreading the socialist message by means of expanding circles of awareness. In ‘Leftwing’ communism, Lenin sums up these expanding circles in the formula “leaders-party-class-mass”. The insistence and confidence that the message will spread to the very wide circle of the non-proletarian “masses”, especially the peasantry, is a core feature of what I have elsewhere called Lenin’s lifelong “heroic scenario”.8

Lenin’s emphasis on leadership is often seen as a great innovation on his part, but in ‘Leftwing’ communism, we find Lenin claiming that his point is the one that is “elementary, simple and clear”. His opponents, the ones who challenge the need for leaders, are said to be “striving to invent something quite out of the ordinary, and in their effort to be clever make themselves ridiculous … Why do we need all this rigmarole, this new Volapük [an invented language like Esperanto]?”

The next item on our list is the ideal of an independent, class-based political party - one that is centralised, disciplined and programmatically pure. We can certainly say that Lenin and the Bolsheviks put a new emphasis on centralisation and discipline because of the challenges of civil war and state-building - but in so doing they were building on long-accepted values in the socialist movement. Lenin’s drive to kick out the “opportunists” should also be seen as based on the old model of a party with a programmatic commitment to a particular message. In the past, the Second International purged itself of anarchists - now it was the turn of the opportunists and the “spineless” centre.

The next three items relate to political goals: political freedom as a proximate goal, party leadership of the whole people, and the ‘hegemony’ strategy of proletarian leadership of the peasantry. These have a much more complicated
relation to Lenin’s message in 1920, and constitute a topic I cannot discuss in this essay. The final defining feature of Erfurtianism in my check-list is internationalism, and this, of course, remains as an ideal.

What is to be done? (1902) and ‘Leftwing’ communism (1920) can almost be said to book-end Lenin’s career. In 1902, Lenin was propagating the European SPD model, suitably modified, for Russia. In 1920, Lenin was propagating the Russian ‘Bolshevik’ model, suitably modified, for Europe. How far do these models differ?

We have to remember the special focus of ‘Leftwing’ communism. Lenin and the other Bolshevik leaders wanted, first, to get across that there was no immediate revolutionary situation in Europe, so that preparation was the order of the day; and, second, to bring the more anarchist-minded delegates up to speed on “the party principle”. These two goals made them stress those parts of the party ideal that were in common between pre-war “revolutionary social democracy” and the new Communist International. The picture would look different if the topic at hand was the role of the party in a revolutionary situation or the role of the party after a soviet-style revolution.

Nevertheless, Lenin’s pamphlet helps us understand a basic, if overlooked, historical role of the Communist International: it preserved the old party ideal in the new, post-war era. Both the spirit and the techniques of the party-organised permanent campaign became basic to the new communist parties. Of course, the new parties tried to be more militant, less ‘careerist’, than the old parties. They nevertheless had to confront the same essential challenge and dilemma: being a revolutionary party in a non-revolutionary situation.

Continuity is perhaps even more striking when we look at the techniques of the permanent campaign. In the generation or so after Lassalle, the socialist parties came up with a whole array of innovative techniques: the party-controlled press, the petition campaign, the rally, the political strike, the mass street demonstration with slogans and banners. Even the English word ‘demonstration’ and the French word manifestation acquired their current political meaning around the turn of the century and were explicitly tied to the socialist parties. The far left has kept these techniques alive and they are still around today, remarkably unchanged. (Will perhaps the social media bring about a real evolution in the techniques of the permanent campaign?)

Thus concludes my three-part series about Lenin’s use of the word ‘Bolshevism’. Obviously, ‘Bolshevism’ is a word that could and still can refer to a wide variety of things. Lenin’s use of the word depended on the rhetorical context. In 1912, in a debate that was restricted to the world of revolutionary social democracy, ‘Bolshevism’ meant a faction that (Lenin insisted) should not be confused with the whole. In 1917, Lenin was forced rather grudgingly to accept the fact that ‘Bolshevism’ was used by the wide public as a label for the party in general. In 1920, we see Lenin himself using ‘Bolshevism’ in order to stress not what was distinctive about Russian Bolshevism, but rather the party as an exemplary incarnation of what used to be called ‘revolutionary social democracy’.

Despite the changing rhetorical use of the term ‘Bolshevism’, Lenin’s basic outlook did not change in its fundamentals over this turbulent period.

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2 Sometimes the 2nd Congress is described as “optimistic” because of enthusiasm about the possibility about a soviet regime in Poland. But actual statements about Poland during the congress are more sober and defensive than this description suggests.


4 See ‘Both Pham Binh and Paul Le Blanc are wrong’ Weekly Worker April 6.

5 As cited in LT Lih Lenin rediscovered Leiden 2006, p59.

6 The list can be found in LT Lih Lenin rediscovered Leiden 2006, pp113-14.
Another theme of Lenin’s pamphlet is the need for flexible tactics, and “Kautsky when he was a Marxist” is cited as an authority on this topic as well.

As described in LT Lih *Lenin* London 2011.


Part one: ‘A faction is not a party’ *Weekly Worker* May 3; part two: ‘How Lenin’s party became (Bolshevik)’ *Weekly Worker* May 17.
“The great Lenin debate – history and politics”

By Paul Le Blanc

The deepening of global crises, the intensification of popular protest and insurgency, and the spread of revolutionary possibilities have been generating renewed interest in Marxism and, along with that, a renewal of Marxism. A key figure in the Marxist tradition – and in the renewal – is the person who was central in the first revolution to be led by revolutionary Marxists: Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

For those who are serious about Marxism, about challenging capitalism, and about revolutionary change, Lenin is a key figure who must be engaged with. Wrestling with and learning from the actual ideas and experience associated with Lenin has become a priority for a significant and growing minority of scholars and activists.¹

Not surprisingly, efforts to get all of this right have generated different ways of understanding what happened in history and (for some of us) how this can be usefully applied to our own present-day realities and future efforts. One of the most recent controversies, in which I have become involved – at one point, tongue-in-cheek, I referred to it as the “Lenin wars” – was initiated by a young activist in the United States named Pham Binh.² Pham, a former member of the US International Socialist Organization (ISO), who left it a few years before I joined it, attacked the late Tony Cliff (a significant figure in the ISO tradition) for writing, a quarter of a century back, a massive political biography of Lenin, whose purpose was, in part, to serve as a guide in the building of the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and its international affiliates. Cliff created an historically inaccurate conceptualisation of Lenin, Pham tells us, in order to advance his own particular political agenda. This is something that Pham himself is guilty of, the purpose of his polemic being to advance his own particular views about the Occupy movement and the tasks of socialists in the United States. His modest contribution makes use of a few Lenin quotes and of the excellent work of Lars Lih, a serious historian and Lenin scholar.³

Lars and I were both drawn into this debate – initially on opposite sides. In the course of our debate, however, there have been fruitful convergences, although certain distinctions and differences remain in our interpretations of the historical material – yet there is between us, I feel, a mutual respect and an openness related to the fact that we more or less share a common methodology. What I want to do here is, first of all, to indicate what that methodology is. Then I want to map out the two areas in which Lars and I have disagreed – a 1905 debate among the Bolsheviks and the meaning of the 1912 Prague “All-Russia Conference” of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP). I will indicate my own understanding of where things stand now in that dispute, offering my own take on the historical actualities. Finally, I will give some attention to the lessons – and also the non-lessons – for our own time of issues related to this controversy, and also related issues that go beyond these particular “Lenin wars”.

Methodology for historians and Marxists
A starting point for our understanding of historical methodology is grasping the fact that the word “history” has two basic meanings. As my good friend Wikipedia puts it: “History is the discovery, collection, organization, and presentation of information about past events. History can also mean the period of time after writing was invented.” I would rephrase that to say that history is, first of all, all the stuff that happened in the past (in a sense, up to this very moment, which has itself just passed into history). But history is also a discipline, the study of the past. Sometimes this second meaning of history is called historiography, which Wikipedia tells us refers “either to the study of history and methodology of history as a discipline, or to a body of historical work on a specialized topic” – for example, Lenin and the Bolshevik party. In a moment I want to talk a bit more about the methodology of history as a discipline, but first I want to touch on the connection of history and politics.

A starting point for me is to focus on the contributions of Marxism to historiography. A central aspect of Marxism is what has been called the materialist conception of history, or historical materialism, which has had a powerful impact on the discipline of history, just as it has had on so many other intellectual disciplines. There have naturally been raging controversies over how to understand historical materialism and how to use it. I will restrict myself here to summarising some of how I understand it and use it. If we want to understand human beings, a key thing we need to grasp is how they sustain themselves – the activities and relationships they enter into, and the resources they use, to get the things that they need (such as food, clothing shelter) and the things that they want. That is, we must look at economics.

Because of its centrality to the human condition and to the lived experience of us all, economics is a key to the shaping of human culture and consciousness and institutions. For at least the past 5000 years, there has been sufficient economic surplus in increasing areas of the world, to allow for economic inequality, with powerful minorities enriching themselves through exploiting labouring majorities – and history is shaped in large measure by these social-economic classes, and the tensions and conflicts and struggles that inevitably arise between them. History is a dynamic totality of contradictory and interacting factors, moved forward by conflicting and evolving potentialities inherent within it – which has led to the rise and decline of different forms of economy, and these different economic systems can be utilised to develop a coherent understanding of the actual shape of history over the centuries. All of these have become truisms in the discipline of history. But there is a key element of Marxism that is more controversial – the unbreakable link between the study of history and the commitment to revolutionary politics.4

Although some historians are not inclined to admit it, even to themselves, there is always an interplay of politics and historiography. If you are a liberal or a conservative or an anarchist or a fascist or a socialist or a racist or a misogynist or an egalitarian or whatever (and some political notions seep into the thinking of even those who see themselves as non-political), that will influence the way you interpret and study and write history. It influences the questions you ask, the answers you seek, the way you interpret the data you find as you explore historical questions. Marx and those who have embraced his orientation are clear and upfront – they seek an understanding of history in order to help change the world in the interest of the exploited and the oppressed, seeking a future without exploitation and oppression. This shapes the way they study and interpret history – and there is nothing wrong with that, especially if they are conscious and honest about it.

At this point, however, it may be fruitful to make a distinction between serious politics and what many of us have labeled sectarian politics. Serious politics seeks to engage with the world as it really is, and with the potentialities for change that are really there. If it is revolutionary politics, it seeks to connect with the actual lives and consciousness and struggles of the exploited and the oppressed in a manner that can have real impact, bringing into being consciousness and struggles that can positively change lives and create the possibility of an actual revolution. If it is sectarian politics, while the stated purpose may be the same, the actual purpose is to sustain a particular universe that is separate from the actual, real-world lives and consciousness and struggles of those inhabiting the larger society. The primary purpose is to validate and sustain the centrality and importance of one’s particular organisation and ideas and specialness.

This approach to politics often spills over into one’s approach to history – a lack of seriousness, the creation of historical narratives on the basis of fragments grabbed from one or another source, but not fully understood, in order to
make a particular sectarian point, to validate your own particular notion or argument about what you believe should be done. References to history are utilitarian – an actual immersion in historical sources and interpretations tends to be dismissed as adventures in esoterica, the primary point being create a sense of historical authority for what we should do – or say – today or tomorrow. This is not good historiography.

For serious Marxist historians, I think it is helpful to have a sense of the integrity of the discipline of history and also a keen sense of what I would call “the activist disadvantage and the activist advantage”. I want to connect this to similar and different qualities that I believe can be found in the approach of Lars Lih and myself. Some of the similarities can be found in our approach to the integrity of the discipline.

A serious historian first of all needs to listen to others. This involves having some familiarity with what other historians have to say (that is, secondary sources) and also to what the actual people you are studying have to say (which refers to what we call primary sources). It is important to be able to give a sympathetic reading to what is being said (that is, trying to understand, really and truly, what the person says and means) but also to give it a critical reading (which means considering possible internal contradictions in what is being said and also contradictions between a secondary source and a primary source, or contradictions between one primary source and another). The right kind of listening also involves the insight that someone, whether an historian or an historical participant, may be wrong about many important things but still get some things right.

Related to all of this, an historian needs to reach for coherence, understanding that history is not simply a jumble of interesting or contradictory or annoying facts, or one damn thing after another. What are the meanings, the causes that bring about certain effects that themselves cause new effects? Where do the ever-present contradictions come from, and how do the contradictions fit together into a coherent whole and explain what happened next? At the same time, it is helpful to hungrily seek things that will challenge the coherence. Sometimes, something that seems to contradict your coherent narrative helps to illuminate something “new” that needs to be grasped in order to get the story right. If you take a short cut to dismiss it or pigeon hole it, you may create a false coherence that distorts the reality.

The secondary sources (that is, the accounts written by historians) that are best are those that utilise and do justice to the primary sources (materials from the period under study – including documents, journals and journalism, recollections from participants, and so on). This raises the question of how one uses primary sources. I have already touched on that, but there is more to be said. For any serious assertion, it is best to have more than one reference point in the pool of historical material, with at least some contextualisation of primary texts. Just because Lenin writes something, for example, does not by itself clinch anything. What was the purpose and what was the context of the document, how does it correspond with other documents by Lenin, how does it correspond to what others were saying at the time, and how does it correspond with retrospective overviews provided by other participants? (Of course, latter-day recollections of participants need to be correlated with documents from the time – the mind can play tricks, and memories are not always reliable.) Understanding how such things fit together helps us understand the actual meaning of the particular Lenin quote. In all of this, it is important, as already suggested, to reach for coherence but also to reach for complexity.

Given the kind of complexity involved here, it is important to understand that history is necessarily a collective enterprise. Various historians who immerse themselves in the historical material may provide useful information and interesting interpretations, but they will inevitably get some of it wrong. Others delving into the material and weighing-in on what they found and how they understand it all, come up with new insights and mistakes, which may be challenged (providing corrections and newer insights, sometimes with mistakes) by someone else. Some aspects of this collective enterprise may result in academic dead ends, or the collective building up of ideological dogmas (more often than not buttressing the status quo). But some of it results in the collective accumulation of more information, more insights, more understanding of what happened in history.

The activist approach: advantages and disadvantages
Before turning to the examination of Bolshevism in 1905 and 1912, I want to take a few moments to consider what I have referred to as “the activist advantage and the activist disadvantage”. Lars Lih’s marvelous book, *Lenin Rediscovered*, primarily sets out to demolish what he refers to as “the textbook” account of Lenin initiated by Cold War anti-communists. But he also advances, secondarily, a critique of Tony Cliff, John Molyneux and me (lumping us together despite our differences).

In this, he correctly notes that we are political activists, and sometimes refers to us as the activist historians. It seems to me that there are both advantages and disadvantages in such activism for one who is seeking to write about the history of Bolshevism. An obvious advantage is that we passionately care about the history and know something about it (for example, we are actually inclined to read Lenin seriously), and we also are absolutely unsympathetic to the project of the Cold War anti-communists – all of which puts us in the same camp as Lars himself. The additional advantage we have is an intimate, inside knowledge (which Lars cannot have) of the pull and tug and swirl of revolutionary politics and of organisational dynamics. Sometimes this can provide insights and clues, an “insider’s” familiarity with the practical meaning that certain theoretical texts may possess.

The activist disadvantage seems to me to have two aspects. I want to take some time on the first before moving on to the second. There is a very natural tendency – which I have already noted – to connect the history with what we perceive as the present-day requirements of our own political activity and projects, and this can all too often result in short cuts and distortions in the way we interpret the history – reading the present into the past in ways that distort what actually happened in the past. Left-wing activists are not the only historians who do this, but it is certainly a temptation and occupational hazard for us.

I think – on the other hand – that there is a strength in this aspect of the “activist disadvantage” that I am criticising. There is a desire, on our part, to ground our perspectives and activities in what actually happened in history, and to give people – our own comrades and others – a sense of what happened in history as part of a left-wing political education and the development of a socialist class-consciousness. There are popularised accounts of history that are consequently developed and shared, in some cases broad overviews such as A. L. Morton’s *A People’s History of England*, Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, Chris Harman’s *A People’s History of the World*, Leo Huberman’s *Man’s Worldly Goods*, Sheila Rowbotham’s *Women, Resistance and Revolution*, Peter Fryer’s *Staying Power*, my own *Short History of the U.S. Working Class*, and so on. There are also popularised works on the Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution, the history of May Day, Marxism and so on. Whatever their limitations or weaknesses, Tony Cliff’s multi-volume works on Lenin and Trotsky fit in to this category, as do a number of popular pamphlets and short books produced by various left-wing organisations. These serve a positive function of providing an entry point for larger numbers of people – activists, workers, students and so on – to an initial understanding of what happened in history and how this might relate to the struggles of today and tomorrow.

Related to such work, however, is the second activist disadvantage: a tendency on our part to settle into a basic, overarching historical narrative – consistent with the traditions in which our organisations are rooted – which we do not question, and which sometimes close us off from seeking new insights into what actually happened in history. This is in contrast to an historian like Lars. In one of my polemics, I shared my appreciation for Lars by noting that “he is a scholar of considerable integrity, in my opinion, whose work is greatly enhanced by the fact that he is fluent in Russian and has an incredibly fine mind and delicious wit and iconoclastic bent, facilitating a fruitfully critical-minded approach to the study of Lenin”. I would repeat the critical side of this too – “being an iconoclast with integrity does not mean that one is inevitably right when he smashes some presumably ‘iconic’ interpretation of what happened in history”. Sometimes he can overstate his case (which enhances the drama of smashing the particular icon), and sometimes even he can get something wrong. But unencumbered by the “activist disadvantage”, Lars has been feeding invaluable and challenging contributions into the collective enterprise of comprehending what actually happened in the history of Bolshevism.

**Creating Bolshevism**

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The recent disagreements between Lars and me have involved two issues: the meaning of a debate that arose among the Bolsheviks at a conference in April 1905, and whether the Bolsheviks became a distinct party as a result of a conference in Prague in January 1912. It seems to me Lars has two primary concerns here. One is to defend his interpretation of Lenin’s pamphlet What Is To Be Done? – as a document that is absolutely consistent with the revolutionary-democratic essence of Marxism and that is profoundly optimistic about the capacity of the working class to make a revolution. (I agree with his interpretation.) His other concern is related to this – that Lenin’s conception of the revolutionary party has nothing to do with the conspiratorial elitism attributed to him by the “textbook interpretation”, but was actually the conception agreed upon by most Marxists throughout the world at that time, including the German Social Democrats grouped around August Bebel and Karl Kautsky (I basically agree with this too). Others in the debate have sought the authority of Lars’s work with a somewhat broader concern in mind – to establish historical-Leninist authority in support of projects involving some variety socialist unity. If Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were part of the same organisation, and if Lenin thought this was fine (as a good Social Democrat embracing – as did the Mensheviks – the orientation of Karl Kautsky), then obviously we should go and do likewise. I will address that question in another talk. Lars has no position on this – he is focused on what actually happened in history.

It seems to me that the dispute between Lars and me has narrowed dramatically on both questions of 1905 and 1912. I will first try to sum up where things stand on the first controversy in a manner that I think Lars might agree with.

In April 1905 at a Bolshevik conference a dispute opened up with Lenin on one side, and on the other some practical Bolshevik activists operating in underground conditions inside Russia who were known as committee men. The debate seems to have involved the question of how open the revolutionary party now could and should be, particularly related to the question of bringing more workers onto the party’s revolutionary committees in the midst of the 1905 workers’ insurgency. A Belgian historian named Marcel Liebman, in his book Leninism under Lenin, argued that this was part of a larger pattern of Lenin’s history – swinging from authoritarian-elitist inclinations (reflected, for example, in What Is To Be Done?) to revolutionary-democratic inclinations (reflected in the dispute with his rigid committee man comrades). Following this interpretation, Tony Cliff argued that the committee men wanted to adhere to the undemocratic ideas in What Is To Be Done? while Lenin wanted to abandon those ideas. It seems clear, however, that the Liebman-Cliff interpretation of Lenin’s 1902 pamphlet is wrong – and that their interpretation of the 1905 debate is therefore seriously flawed.

It is clear, at the same time, that there was a sharp debate in 1905 – with Lenin and some Bolshevik comrades on one side and with a number of Bolshevik committee men on the other – over the question of creating greater openness and workers’ involvement in the Bolshevik organisation inside Russia, and Lenin lost the vote on this question. There are documents from the April conference themselves that show this to be true, and also two “inside accounts” in English – one by Solomon Schwarz, who was a Bolshevik at that time but later became a Menshevik, and another by Lenin’s companion and close comrade Nadezhda Krupskaya. Schwarz’s conclusions are designed to demonstrate dogmatic, sectarian qualities in Bolshevism that even Lenin was uneasy about, while Krupskaya’s conclusion was that these were growing pains in Bolshevism that eventually were overcome in part through Lenin’s efforts – but both tell basically the same story, which is critical of the triumphant committee men. The question remains, who was right – Lenin or the committee men (a leading spokesperson of that time, according to Lars, being Lev Kamenev). Until proof is offered otherwise, I am inclined to trust Krupskaya’s account, with its assumption that Lenin was right. At one point in our debate, Lars leaned toward Kamenev and the committee men as having a firmer grip on the Russian realities. It’s a tantalising question – and only someone like Lars, who is fluent in Russian, can help us to come closer to a resolution of that question.6

Lars Lih is in the forefront of those rejecting the Stalinist notion – propagated in the 1930s (and later embraced by Cold War anti-communists) – that as early as 1902 Lenin set out to establish a “party of a new type” (one that would be qualitatively different from the old Social-Democratic model). At long last this party of a new type came into being – according to that interpretation – with the formal split from the Mensheviks in 1912. More than simply rejecting this, with an iconoclastic flourish Lars announced in a 2012 polemic that he was revising his own judgement, as presented in

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his excellent short biography *Lenin*, published one year earlier, and siding with Pham Binh’s rejection of (as Pham put it) “the myth that the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks separated into two parties in 1912”. Actually, the formulation that Lars advanced was more restrained. He says: “Lenin and the Bolsheviks *did not set out* to organize their faction as a separate party, they vehemently denied that they had done so after the Conference, and they were justified in making this denial”.

After a substantial interchange, which included my substantial and fully documented article entitled “The Birth of the Bolshevik Party in 1912”, Lars offered the following judgement which seems to me to reflect a convergence in our views:

> Recently Paul Le Blanc has written a long and instructive essay on the Prague conference which concludes that “for all practical purposes, the party that emerged from the Prague All-Russian RSDLP conference of 1912 was a Bolshevik party”. The key words here are “for all practical purposes”. Paul points to a number of reasons for equating Bolshevism and the party: the new central committee was composed overwhelmingly of Bolsheviks; the Bolshevik effort to forge a coalition with “party Mensheviks” never amounted to much; the other factions did not acknowledge the legitimacy of the central institutions voted in by the Prague conference and they tried (not very successfully) to set up competing institutions; there is direct organisational continuity between the 1912 central committee and the Communist Party of 1918 that added “Bolshevik” to its official name. All this is true, but in no way clashes with my earlier statement about the outlook and aims of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1912.7

As Lars goes on to say, there remain a number of unresolved issues. One of them he identifies in this way: “I believe that Paul does not sufficiently allow for the possibility that the Bolshevik outlook in 1912 cannot be directly deduced from what turned out to be, ‘for all practical purposes’, the actual outcome.” I think that is an important question, and I think it is even more complicated than what Lars indicates. What did Lenin say in certain polemics and how do some of his formulations compare to what he actually thought (to the extent that this can be determined from correspondence and other documents) is another question. Yet another involves the possibility – probably the inevitability – that what Lenin believed and what some of his Bolshevik comrades believed and said might not be quite the same.

No definitive answers can be provided in this talk, but there are a few things that can be said about the work remaining to be done. To answer these and other questions, it is necessary to give serious attention to what went before, and this in two different ways.

One factor to consider is that the April 1905 Bolshevik conference referred to earlier was actually the Third Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. But only the Bolsheviks attended – the Mensheviks boycotted. Christopher Read, in his 2005 biography of *Lenin* (a book hardly perfect, but with genuine strengths) puts it this way:

> It was thus not entirely Lenin’s fault that when the Third Congress convened in London on 25 April 1905 all the delegates were Leninists. Lenin used the congress ... to establish a Leninist grip on key Party institutions. Existing papers – *Iskra* and *Vpered* – were declared disbanded, and a new paper, *Proletarii*, set up as the official Party newspaper under Lenin’s editorship. An all-Leninist Central Committee was elected... Lenin even wrote to the International Socialist Bureau in Brussels in June demanding it recognize *Proletarii* as the only official newspaper and derecognize *Iskra*.8

In this situation, of course, Lenin was not inclined to completely and definitively split from the Mensheviks, and there were soon efforts – partially successful amid the revolutionary turmoil of 1905 – to heal the breach. The point is, however, that in 1912 we see a very similar scenario, but Lenin and others had already had this experience under their belts and had seen how “unity” turned out in the years following 1905. There were growing frustrations with the growth of liquidationism (abandonment of the revolutionary underground) among a large sector of the Mensheviks, combined with the toleration of and the adaptation toward liquidationism among another large sector of Mensheviks, the passage and flouting of anti-liquidator resolutions, ongoing Menshevik hostility toward the Bolsheviks, and the relative paralysis of the RSDLP.
By 1911 Kamenev and Lenin collaborated in producing the intransigent polemic, *The Two Parties*, and the Leninist Bolsheviks were committed to organising an RSDLP conference in Prague – in a manner similar to what happened in April 1905. With a difference – this time there was an intention to exclude the majority of Mensheviks, and also the anticipation that there might well be a boycott by others. It is interesting to note the take on the situation according to Rosa Luxemburg, speaking for the Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, in the autumn of 1911. By this time, Luxemburg was much closer to Lenin and the Bolsheviks than had been the case six years earlier – but she was alarmed with the practical possibility that two parties would actually be created out of the RSDLP. “In view of the cynical excesses of the factional entities that side with the Liquidators Martov, Dan and Company”, she wrote, “Lenin and his friends began to address the question of convening a Party Conference that would exclude the Golos tendency [that is, Martov, Dan and company]”, adding that “in the political estimation of the Mensheviks, there are no significant differences between our tendency and Lenin’s”. This agreement is evident in how Luxemburg described the internal situation in the non-Bolshevik sectors of the RSDLP: “The orgies of opportunism of the ‘Mensheviks’ and their open support of the Liquidators led ... to the split in the heart of their own faction and to the secession of the ‘party Mensheviks,’ led by Georgi Plekhanov”. While respectful of the party-Mensheviks, Luxemburg was as scornful as Lenin was toward the ultra-left Bolsheviks – the Forwardists – associated with Bogdanov, and also toward Trotsky’s “anti-faction” faction. But she was concerned that the Bolsheviks, in “wanting to form a bloc only with the ‘party-Mensheviks’”, were adopting what she considered a destructive effort to shut out the Mensheviks around Martov and Dan and also the smaller groups. “This stubborn Bolshevik war against all other groups even had the result”, she noted, “that Plekhanov’s group also, made fearful by the isolation of the Leninist faction, definitely back out from an alliance that Lenin saw as the only possibility”.9

The Prague conference of 1912 did not declare the existence of a new Bolshevik Party. It declared the reorganisation and renewal of the RSDLP – but one as much under Bolshevik control as had been the case in 1905. Except now there were no efforts to backtrack in the interests of unity. As Lars Lih indicates, the formal position of Lenin and his comrades was that this version of the RSDLP would not simply and exclusively be the Bolsheviks. And I think Lars is correct when he says (in “Bolshevism and Revolutionary Social Democracy”, the concluding article of his three-part series on Bolshevism in the *Weekly Worker*), Lenin and his Bolshevik comrades were “not propagating a ‘new type of party,’ as later Stalinist historians had it. They were propagating the party principle *as it had always been understood in the Second International.*”10 Their goal was of an organisation conforming to an idealised notion of the German Social Democratic Party, one that did not compromise away its revolutionary birthright but remained true to revolutionary Marxism. What emerged in 1912 was, nonetheless, a Bolshevik party, with a Bolshevik leadership, following a Bolshevik line. To deny that Lenin could even imagine that such a thing might emerge from the 1912 Prague conference is interesting and worth considering, but not entirely persuasive to me. But there is work to be done to clarify what the most plausible answers might be to this and other questions.

*Lessons for our time (and non-lessons)*

At this point I would like to turn to the question of finding lessons – and non-lessons – in all of this for our own time. Obviously, if we are being serious about studying and understanding history, we can’t be satisfied with an approach through which we construct morality tales to validate ourselves, our organisations and specific political projects. Nor can we expect to find ready-made recipes with which to cook up revolutionary dishes for the here and now. We can find lessons and insights that can help us figure out what to do – but we have to be serious as we do that, avoiding uncritical idealisations, and trying to identify similarities and differences between, for example, Lenin’s context and our own.

Nothing that we face is just as it was for Lenin and his comrades. Our 1903 and 1905 and 1912 and 1917 may not look at all like theirs, and the sequence of events may differ dramatically. We should avoid acting and talking as if we were in the equivalent of their 1912 or 1917 when, in fact, we may be closer to the equivalent of their 1898 or 1901. More than this, in our present-day contexts, to the extent that the socialist movement and the working class are not intertwined and interacting in significant ways, we have not gotten beyond square one of revolutionary politics. In
some ways, our reality has little to do with the reality in which there was a Second International or Third International – it is in some ways closer to the reality existing before the creation of the First International.\textsuperscript{11}

By the way, this notion that our pathways cannot possibly duplicate those of Lenin and his comrades happens to constitute a central tenet of “Leninist orthodoxy”. In 1919 he commented that “each nation is travelling in the same historical direction” but each must follow “very different zigzags and byways”. He added that “the more cultured nations are obviously proceeding in a way that differs from that of the less cultured nations. Finland is advancing in a different way. Germany is advancing in a different way.” In 1921 he urged yet other comrades to “refrain from copying our tactics but thoroughly vary them and adapt them to the different concrete conditions”. He told Italian comrades that principles “must be adapted to the specific conditions of various countries. The revolution in Italy will run a different course from that in Russia. It will start in a different way. How? Neither you nor we know.” In 1922 Lenin told comrades in the Communist International that they should not “hang Russian experience in a corner like an icon and pray to it”. I should add that this last comment did not – contrary to some misinterpretations – mean that Lenin believed the Russian experience was irrelevant, but rather that it should be critically studied, assimilated and applied creatively to new and different contexts.\textsuperscript{12}

Related to this, there are certain commonalities between Lenin’s reality and ours. And there seem to be very positive qualities in what Lenin and his comrades were about. Before considering those, I think it may be worth considering what it would mean to give Lenin the attention he deserves – which involves an approach of critical engagement. To study Lenin’s work means in part to read what he had to say in order to understand his thinking. It is important to see not only what he had to say, but to see what he did. What was he hoping to do, what did he think he was doing, what was he actually doing – and to what extent was he aware of what he was actually doing? What were the contexts in which all of this was unfolding? What went wrong and what went right? How did his thinking match up with the historical experience of Lenin and his comrades, and how does it match up with our own experience?

Even though there are many questions to answer, I believe there are clearly certain positive qualities of Lenin and the Bolsheviks that are worth learning from. Despite the frequent assertions of critics and even some would-be supporters, it is not the case that Lenin wanted to create an organisation that would simply be dominated by him. More than once, a majority of his comrades concluded (sometimes rightly, sometimes perhaps not) that he was wrong about one thing or another, and they voted him down – such as in April 1905. In certain contexts, such as whether or not to run some of his polemical articles in the party newspaper, they simply ignored him, to his great chagrin.\textsuperscript{13} While Lenin did not particularly enjoy being disagreed with or voted down, and would fight fiercely for positions he believed to be correct, as was the case in April 1905, he favoured an organisation that functioned like a democratic, cohesive, activist collectivity. In response to a 1921 comment by Adolf Joffe that “the Central Committee – c’est vous”, Lenin strenuously objected that this was simply not true, elaborating: “The old Central Committee (1919-20) defeated me on one giganticly important question, as you know from the discussion. On organizational and personal questions I have been in a minority countless times. You yourself saw many instances when you were a Central Committee member.”\textsuperscript{14} Also worth noting is a point emphasised in Krupskaya’s\textit{Reminiscences of Lenin}:

\begin{quote}
He always, as long as he lived, attached tremendous importance to Party congresses. He held the Party congress to be the highest authority, where all things personal had to be cast aside, where nothing was to be concealed, and everything was to be open and above board. He always took great pains in preparing for Party congresses, and was particularly careful in thinking out his speeches.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Along with this commitment to building a democratic revolutionary organisation, I believe there is sufficient scholarship to demonstrate how seriously Lenin absorbed and engaged, utilised and developed Marxist theory – not as an abstract intellectual disconnected from the workers’ movement, but as a revolutionary intellectual who had become an integral part of the workers’ movement. Analysis, political education, program, strategy and tactics were drawn together by him as a clear, coherent, dynamic totality. And despite inevitable limitations and mistakes, his record as a revolutionary Marxist theorist and political leader adds up to something that is quite impressive and matched by few.
The Bolshevik organisation that Lenin was so central in shaping was impressive as well, infused with a relatively high quality of Marxist theory, containing a diverse range of talented and creative activists and serious thinkers – not afraid to disagree with each other and with Lenin, determined to defend their views, to help test the majority perspectives in practice, and to help make revisions and adjustments as called for, learning through debate and activism and experience. It was a democratic-activist organisation that found a way to engage with the actual consciousness and in the real struggles of working-class activists, and to help forge a class-conscious vanguard organisation that could provide leadership in practical struggles of the here and now in a manner that helped a layer of class-struggle fighters to lead the revolution of 1917.

Kamenev, his longtime comrade and the first editor of Lenin’s collected works, commented that while “the teachings of Lenin as a whole and in all their ramifications are based on the scientific socialism of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels”, there is also a new element, which “consists in the adaptation of the basic principles and methods of Marxism to a historical setting and period entirely unknown to Marx”.16

To do the same thing in adapting the basic principles and methods of Lenin and Bolshevism to our own setting and period, entirely unknown to Lenin and his comrades, strikes me as a challenge that is worth taking up.

Facing problems

While I am inclined to view very positively the Bolshevik-Leninist experience up through 1917, and to assume that we can draw useful insights and lessons from a critical-minded engagement with that 14-year experience, it is also the case that there was a six-year experience after that, before Lenin died, in which what Lars Lih calls “the heroic scenario” failed in the face of disastrous realities. In the pre-1918 scenario, class-conscious workers and their steadfast allies among the poor peasants establish a revolutionary-democratic commune-state which inspires workers’ revolutions throughout the world, setting the stage for the development of a global socialist order of the free and the equal. That’s the scenario.

“Almost from the very first day of the October Revolution”, according to Christopher Read, “Lenin’s hopes and expectations for it began to collapse”. Perhaps this is overstated, but there is enough truth here to help us understand what Lars Lih tells us:

From 1919 his speeches lose their earlier sharpness and become progressively more unfocused, repetitive, digressive. He becomes halting as he searches for a way to match his ideological scenario with events. A new and unexpected quality appears: Lenin is unsure of himself.

Read notes that “Lenin was deeply conscious of the fragility of the forces that had brought him to power, but also of the epochal significance of what was happening”, adding that “in the middle of the First World War, at that time of the most massive human blood-letting ever, refinements of morality seemed not only constricting but obscene. A few sacrifices, a moment of ruthlessness, was not only justified but demanded if millions were to be saved at the front and from the worldwide tentacles of imperialist exploitation”.17 Speaking of the same period, Isaac Deutscher commented many years ago:

Then comes the great tragedy of the isolation of the Russian Revolution; of its succumbing to incredible, unimaginable destruction, poverty, hunger, and disease as a result of the wars of intervention, the civil wars, and of course the long and exhausting world war which was not of Bolshevik making. As a result of all this, terror was let loose in Russia. Men lost their balance. They lost, even the leaders, the clarity of their thinking and of their minds. They acted under overwhelming and inhuman pressures. I don’t undertake to judge them, to blame them or to justify them. I can only see the deep tragedy of this historic process, the result of which was the glorification of violence. But what was to have been a glassful of violence became buckets and buckets full, and then rivers of violence. That is the tragedy of the Russian Revolution.”18
There is much more to be said about this period, and about what Lenin and his comrades did and failed to do, and about the mistakes and blind spots one can find in the earlier period (up through 1917) that may have contributed to the catastrophe that followed.19

Here too, there are lessons to be learned. For some the appropriate lesson is the injunction that we must reject Lenin and all that he stood for. Given the historical realities and our present-day realities, and the outstanding achievement that preceded the catastrophe, I don’t think we can afford to do that. It is, however, especially important for us not only to critically sift through Lenin’s thought and actions during these tragically violent and authoritarian developments, but also to consider the positive ways that he himself sought to overcome and transcend and move beyond the horrors in this final period of his life.

We cannot afford to settle for the superficiality or the morality tales or the dogmatic certainties of sectarianism as we wrestle with the question of what happened in history and with the question of what is to be done. We need to take Lenin more seriously than that, because what the sociologist C. Wright Mills said of Marx is also true of Lenin: “To study his work today, and then come back to our own concerns is to increase our chances of confronting them with useful ideas and solutions.”20

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3 Despite problems in Pham’s methodology, he usefully drew attention to the fact that Lenin did not have the intention, in 1912, of creating the “party of a new type” attributed to him by many – for example, P. N. Pospelov et al., Lenin, A Biography (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 82, 189-191, and Bertram D. Wolfe, “A Party of a New Type”, in Lenin and the Twentieth Century: A Bertram D. Wolfe Retrospective, ed. by Lennard D. Gerson (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1984), 12-41.


8 Christopher Read, Lenin, A Revolutionary Life (London/New York: Routledge, 2005), 78.


