

Was Lenin a Marxist? The Populist Roots of Marxism-Leninism

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Populism and the Origins of Russian Marxism

Lenin's name has been coupled with that of Marx as the co-founder of the theory of 'Marxism-Leninism'. However, despite his emphasis on the role of revolutionary theory, Lenin's original theoretical contributions to the development of Marxism were very limited. His talents were those of a determined revolutionary, in the populist tradition of Chernyshevsky, and a brilliantly effective propagandist and political organiser. His contribution to 'Marxism-Leninism' was to modify Marxist orthodoxy in such a way as to integrate the political and organisational principles of revolutionary populism into Marxism, on the basis of Plekhanov's 'dialectical materialism', whose distinctive interpretation of Marxism was Lenin's constant guide and inspiration. In this paper I want to argue that Lenin never broke from the theoretical and political traditions of Russian populism, but completed Plekhanov's project by assimilating Marxism to the very different theoretical framework of populism.

According to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, populism and Marxism-Leninism constitute two radically opposed political and theoretical traditions. However this is a completely misleading characterisation, for Russian Marxism emerged directly out of populism, and the distinctiveness of Marxism-Leninism can be traced directly back to the theoretical traditions of Russian populism.

The development of Marxism in Russia took place not against but within the populist movement. The early populists were romantic critics of capitalism, who drew heavily on the Hegelian philosophy of history, and particularly on the Young Hegelians' revolutionary interpretation of Hegel's historical dialectic as a process of negation and transcendence. Although they were romantic critics of capitalism, however, the early populists were fierce opponents of idealism, which was associated with the tyranny of religion and the autocracy, and so developed a materialist interpretation of the Hegelian dialectic, according to which the values of freedom, equality and community were not derived from any spiritual world, but were inherent in the existing institutions of peasant life, and above all in the peasant commune, a materialist interpretation of history which was supplemented in the 1860s by Darwin's evolutionism. The most influential philosopher was Ludwig Feuerbach, whose naturalistic materialism was the direct inspiration for both Belinsky and Chernyshevsky, who nevertheless, like all the populists, combined their materialism with a romantic utopianism.

The theoretical problem which the populists faced was that of relating their own utopian vision to the more mundane aspirations of the peasantry, whose conditions of life were supposed to provide the material base for the realisation of that vision, but whose ignorance and limited cultural horizons prevented them from making the socialist vision

their own. Thus, while the material base might be the aspirations of the peasantry, the values and ideals of the new society were those of the intelligentsia. This problem provided the basis for the principal division within the populist movement, which was between those who believed that socialist values were immanent in the conditions of life of the mass of the population, and so put primary emphasis on agitation, and those who believed that the realm of values was the specialist realm of the intellectual, and so put primary emphasis on education.

It is important to emphasise that the division within populism expressed different solutions to a single ideological and political problem, that of legitimating and realising socialist values which are held by only a small minority of the population, the intelligentsia. In this sense they were both variants of what Marx characterised as 'utopian socialism'. Populism looked to the material needs of the peasantry to provide the popular base for a political movement which could realise these values, and in this sense it was committed to a 'materialist' philosophy, but these 'material needs' were themselves defined ideologically by the intelligentsia, for what the populists sought to realise was not the aspirations of the peasantry, but the intellectuals' own values, and in this sense populism was committed to a philosophy which was just as idealist as that which it opposed.

In the 1870s this division separated the anarchists, inspired particularly by Bakunin, from the 'subjective sociologists', inspired particularly by Lavrov and Mikhailovsky, but this was primarily a tactical and even rhetorical division within the populist movement, as both factions moved into the villages to propagandise amongst the peasantry. It was only with the collapse of the populist faith in the peasantry, following the famine of 1890-1, that this division came to assume much greater significance, coming to separate the Social Democrats from the 'legal Marxists', on the one hand, and the anarchists and 'economists', on the other.

Marxism had been influential in Russia from an early stage in the development of populism, for Marx provided the most powerful critique of modern capitalism, and the strongest of arguments for resisting its advance. But the greatest importance of Marxism was that it provided the ideological bridge from romantic populism to modern socialism, providing a scientific theory which could both explain the failures of populism, and point a new way forward. Marx's 'political economy' established the possibility of the advance of capitalism, against the populist belief that the lack of markets made capitalist development impossible in Russia, while also showing the limitations of capitalism, and identifying in the proletariat the social force which would overthrow it. However, the Marxists of the 1890s were ultimately as little concerned with the conditions of the proletariat as had the populists of the 1870s been concerned with the conditions of the peasants. The turn from the peasantry to the proletariat did not come about because the suffering of the proletariat was greater than that of the peasantry, and still less because the proletariat constituted a majority of the population, but because the proletariat was identified as the new vehicle for the old populist hopes, the 'material base' for the

realisation of socialist values. In this sense Russian Marxism developed directly out of Russian populism, in response to changing economic, social and political circumstances.

Plekhanov's Marxism developed in the context of the debates within Russian populism in the 1880s, as Plekhanov turned from the peasantry to the proletariat as the basis of his revolutionary hopes. The laws of historical materialism guaranteed that the development of capitalism, which was destroying the immediate hopes of the populists, would give rise to their ultimate realisation, so that the revolutionary movement could embrace the development of capitalism as a necessary stage on the road to socialism. However this did not mean that revolutionaries had to sit back and wait for the inevitable revolution. Plekhanov's Marxism stressed the active role of ideas and of political organisation in determining the pace of historical development. On the other hand, it was not possible to achieve socialism until the historical process had matured. Thus Plekhanov vehemently opposed the voluntarism of the 'subjective sociologists'. The freedom of action open to the revolutionary movement was not defined by the ability of the subject to transcend its determination by historical laws, but was rather defined by the ability of the revolutionary movement to come to know those laws, and so to accelerate (or retard) the pace of historical development - this was the difference between scientific and utopian socialism. Following Engels's interpretation of Hegel, Plekhanov defined freedom as the knowledge of necessity, and so the ability to control the laws of nature and of history, which had hitherto operated as blind forces. This idea lay at the heart of Plekhanov's reconciliation of a rigidly deterministic materialism with a vigorous political activism. Plekhanov called the philosophy which he developed to express this idea 'dialectical materialism', which opposed both the fatalism implied by a 'mechanical materialism' and the voluntarism implied by 'subjective sociology'.

Plekhanov's Philosophy of History: the Populist Foundations of Dialectical Materialism

Although Plekhanov invented the term, the exposition of the philosophy of 'dialectical materialism' is often attributed to Engels.¹ However Plekhanov's characterisation of 'dialectical materialism' is significantly different from Engels's characterisation of the 'materialist dialectic', and from Marx's own critique of bourgeois philosophy. The difference is quite fundamental, for Plekhanov's 'dialectical materialism' is nothing less than the philosophical materialism of the populist followers of Feuerbach, which was

¹ Plekhanov used the term the term 'dialectical materialism' in an 1891 article in *Neue Zeit*. Lenin adopted the term in his 1894 'What the Friends of the People Are'. The phrase 'the materialist conception of history' dates from Engels's 1859 review of Marx's *Critique of Political Economy*, but the term 'historical materialism' was only introduced in his 1892 Special Introduction to the English edition of *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*.

precisely the philosophy against which Marx and Engels directed their most devastating criticism.²

Plekhanov criticised eighteenth century materialism for its inconsistent adherence to materialist principles, exemplified by the contradiction between the view that '*the opinions of men are determined by their environment*' and the view that '*the environment is determined by opinions*' (*The Development Of The Monist View Of History* (DMVH), p. 21). It therefore fell back into a view of opinions and the environment, manners and the constitution, as mutually interacting forces, without any understanding of the 'historical factor which produced both the manners of the given people and its constitution, and thereby *created the very possibility of their interaction*' (DMVH, p. 24).

The French historians of the Restoration period advanced beyond this dualism, to locate both manners and the constitution in the *civil condition* of men, in which particular property relations determined particular class interests. However this did not resolve the contradiction, since property relations were seen as essentially legal and political relations, the historical development of property relations being explained in terms of the spiritual development of humanity, from the infantile age of feelings, through the adolescent age of passions to the mature age of reason.

The utopian socialists, and above all Saint-Simon, had an inkling of the solution to the puzzle, in relating the development of property to the development of production. However the development of production was ultimately seen as a further expression of human intellectual development, expressing the development of scientific and technical knowledge, repeating the Restoration historians' identification of the historical development of human nature with the development of the individual from infancy through adolescence to maturity.

All of these different formulations of a materialist conception of history fell at the last hurdle, reducing historical development to the moral and intellectual development inscribed in human nature. The result was a profound ambivalence as to the role of human agency in the making of history, as they oscillated between an extreme fatalism and an extreme subjectivism. The belief that moral and intellectual development was subject to determination by natural laws led to fatalism. On the other hand, knowledge of those laws provided the basis for utopian schemes to reform human institutions in accordance with human nature, without any regard for historical laws or institutional constraints. The utopian preoccupation with 'what ought to be' was accordingly associated with a profound disregard for what is. In particular, existing political institutions and political conflicts were seen as merely an expression of an outmoded

² There is a link between Engels and the populist roots of Plekhanov's philosophy, for Engels in his adolescence was a member of the group of Young Hegelians and followers of Feuerbach who provided the philosophical inspiration for the first generation of Russian populists. Indeed, one of Engels' own youthful articles, developing a Feuerbachian critique of Hegel, had a significant impact in Russia in the 1840s.

stage of moral and intellectual development, irrelevant to and inappropriate for the realisation of the utopian schemes, which depended not on the mobilisation of material and political interests, but on the realisation of an *idea*. Thus in the last resort materialism, rather than submit to a paralysing fatalism, reverts to idealism.

The importance of Hegel for Plekhanov was that it was Hegel who broke through the contradiction at the heart of 'metaphysical' materialism in adopting the point of view of dialectics, 'which studies phenomena precisely in their development and, consequently, in their interconnection' (DMVH. p. 92). The dialectical study of an historical process 'presupposes an attentive attitude to its *real* course in *actual fact*' so that dialecticians 'do not content themselves with *abstract conclusions from abstract principles*' (DMVH. p. 101, c.f. pp. 108–9). The importance of Hegel's dialectic is that, in showing that everything is useful in its right place and at the right time, but then becomes harmful, Hegel dispels all Utopias, which claim to provide an ideal valid for all places and all times. Similarly Hegel destroyed the foundations of Utopianism in destroying the idea of an invariant human nature. Hegel certainly retained a universal historical principle, the principle of reason, but this was not at all the human reason of the *philosophes*, but rather an objective reason, of which the philosopher can only become aware *ex post*, through the scientific study of its manifestations. For Hegel 'reason governs history ... in the sense of *conformity to law*' (DMVH. p. 126). This leads to a fundamentally different conception of intellectual development from that of the metaphysicians, who each believed that they had achieved the truth against which all other systems of thought were simply false. Intellectual development is no less subject to historical laws than is any other human institution, adapting to changing historical needs. Thus '*Philosophy is the intellectual expression of its own age ... every philosophy is true for its own age, and mistaken for any other*' (DMVH. p. 127).

The Hegelian dialectic is undoubtedly idealist. But more importantly it is *monistic*, avoiding the dualism into which previous forms of materialism had always degenerated in trying to recover a role for consciousness and subjectivity. For consistent idealists, including Leibniz and Spinoza as well as Hegel, the human and natural world is universally governed by determinate laws which operate independently of human consciousness and human will. However the fact that historical development is governed by such laws in no way undermines human freedom. 'The laws of material necessity themselves are nothing else than the laws of action of the spirit. *Freedom presupposes necessity, necessity passes entirely into freedom*' (DMVH. p. 130). Thus Hegel's rigorous commitment to determinism simultaneously provides a far wider scope for freedom than do the dualists who, 'when trying to delimit *free* activity and *necessary* activity, they thereby tear away from the *realm of freedom* all that region ... which they set apart for *necessity*' (DMVH. pp. 130–1).

This apparent paradox is resolved when it is appreciated that the possibility of any effective exercise of my freedom depends on an understanding of the *necessity* which governs the consequences of my action. The exercise of freedom is only possible on the basis of an understanding of necessity. '*The possibility of the free (conscious) historical*

activity of any particular person is reduced to zero, if at the very foundation of free human actions there does not lie necessity which is accessible to the understanding of the doer' (DMVH. p. 132). While I am not conscious of the necessity which governs the consequences of my actions, those consequences will turn out to be other than those I intended, and so will be determined not by my free will, but by necessity. The necessary outcome of such acts will in turn modify the situation of the individual actors, determining new aims which they will freely pursue. Thus freedom and necessity are not the mutually exclusive categories posited by the dualists, but are inter-penetrating opposites. The consequences of the free acts of individuals are determined according to necessary laws, the outcome of which provides the grounds for new forms of free conscious activity. This interpenetration of freedom and necessity *'also takes place according to definite laws, which can and must be discovered by theoretical philosophy'* (DMVH. p. 134). However, once theoretical philosophy has discovered *'the laws of social and historical progress, I can influence the latter according to my aims'* (DMVH. p. 135) — freedom can only grow out of knowledge of necessity.

Hegel's monism provides the only firm foundation for a science of history. However Hegel reduced the history of social relations to the history of the Idea, which cannot be the determining cause of historical development, since it is no more than the *'personification of our own logical process'* (DMVH. p. 137), the outcome of our reflection on history. All that remains is to set Hegel's philosophy on materialist foundations. The way forward was shown by Feuerbach, who replaced Hegel's Idea by the category of Matter, inverting the Hegelian relationship between thinking and being, a point of view which *'was also accepted by Marx and Engels. It became the basis of their philosophy'* (FPM). However Feuerbach's materialism was incomplete, and still suffered from the defects of those which had preceded it. For Feuerbach the relation between being and thought was a purely contemplative relationship, thought being a passive reflection of matter, so that the laws of history were once again reduced to the laws of nature. Marx finally solves this problem in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, where he *'completes and deepens Feuerbach's ideas'* (FPM) in insisting that the relationship between man and nature is not a *contemplative* but a *practical* relationship, practice providing the key to historical development. Human nature is not an unchanging phenomenon since, as Marx noted in *Capital*, *'whilst man works upon outside nature and changes it, he changes at the same time his own nature'* (quoted FPM). The laws which govern historical development cannot be found in the unchanging human nature of the bourgeois materialists, nor in the disembodied Spirit of Hegel, but must be located in the concrete material interaction between humanity and nature, in the development of *production*. It fell to Marx to provide a materialism which was both monistic and historical in locating the common foundation of social and political institutions, of manners, morals and constitutions, which determined their substantive content and the forms of their interaction, in the development of the *means of production* which mediate the relation of humanity to nature, and provide a materialist explanation for the development of human society by determining the social relations within which production must take place.

Plekhanov is unequivocal in seeing the progressive and autonomous development of the productive forces as playing the determining role in historical development.³ The foundation of Plekhanov's historical materialism is not the 'economic' relations of society, since *the economy of society* and its *psychology* represent two sides of one and the same phenomenon of the "production of life" of men, their struggle for existence, in which they are grouped in a particular way thanks to the particular state of the productive forces. The struggle for existence creates their *economy*, and on the same basis arises their *psychology* as well. Economy itself is something derivative, just like psychology. ... only in a popular speech could one talk about economy as the *prime cause* of all social phenomena. Far from being a prime cause, it is itself a consequence, a "function" of the productive forces.' (DMVH. p. 207).⁴

For Plekhanov the inadequacy of Feuerbach's materialism lay in its failure to find any principle of historical change in the material world. Marx's great advance was to introduce an historical principle into nature, locating that principle in the development of the forces of production. Thus Marx's materialism was not qualitatively distinct from that of Feuerbach, or from previously existing forms of bourgeois materialism, it merely completed and perfected the philosophy of materialism.

Plekhanov claims that his critique of bourgeois philosophy is that of Marx and Engels. However he does not develop his critique by reference to the works of Marx and Engels. In part he can be excused such a neglect, since of course many of the early works of Marx, in which he developed that critique, were not available to Feuerbach. Nevertheless, although Marx's critique of bourgeois philosophy is largely contained in those unpublished early works, he devoted his life's work to developing the critique of the most developed and sophisticated exposition of bourgeois materialism, classical political economy, and Plekhanov almost completely ignores the significance of this critique for his characterisation of Marxist philosophy. Had he done so he could not have avoided recognising that his critique of Hegelian idealism and of French materialism is not that of Marx, but that of the classical political economy of Smith and Ricardo and the philosophy of Feuerbach. Plekhanov remained clear throughout his life that Marx merely developed Feuerbach's materialism to its conclusions. in *In Defence of Materialism* Plekhanov argued clearly that 'none of the fundamental ideas of Feuerbach's philosophy are refuted. Marx is content to amend them, and to demand that these ideas should be applied more consistently than they were applied by Feuerbach ... the materialist views of Marx and Engels have been elaborated in the direction indicated by the inner logic of Feuerbach's philosophy'(pp. 21-22). In *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (ME) Lenin went even further than Plekhanov in reducing Marxism to a vulgar materialism, a literal inversion of Hegelian idealism, and a simplistic identification with Feuerbachian materialism. Lenin condemned Plekhanov as an inconsistent materialist, because Plekhanov believed that ideas were symbols or 'hieroglyphs' of reality, rather than literal 'copies of real things'

³ c.f. DMVH. p. 156–7, 187, 188, 197, 198, 229.

⁴ Plekhanov also falls back into a geographical determinism, for which his Soviet editors administer a stern rebuke (DMVH. pp. 161–3, pp. 270–1.)

(ME, p. 238). Thus Lenin notes, following Plekhanov, that Engels criticised hitherto existing materialism for its mechanical (i.e. its attempted reduction of chemistry and organic nature to the principles of mechanics) and undialectical character (i.e. its failure to grasp the relation between absolute and relative truth: the Machians believe that because truths are relative there can be no absolute truth independent of mankind. They do not understand that 'absolute truth results from the sum-total of relative truths in the course of their development; that relative truths represent relatively faithful reflections of an object existing independently of man; that these reflections become more and more faithful; that every truth, notwithstanding its relative nature, contains an element of absolute truth' (ME, p. 321) - a purely Hegelian and idealist conception of science.), and its residual idealism in the realm of social sciences. Lenin is emphatic: '*Exclusively* for these three things and *exclusively* within these limits, does Engels refute both the materialism of the eighteenth century and the doctrines of Büchner and Co.! On all other, more elementary, questions of materialism ... *there is and can be no difference* between Marx and Engels on the one hand and all these old materialists on the other.'(ME, p. 247)

That Plekhanov's misinterpretation cannot be attributed to his ignorance of much of Marx's early work is shown clearly by the critique of David Ryazanov, who was clear of the limitations of Feuerbach's argument in his Preface to *In Defence of Materialism*, where he denies Plekhanov's assertion that Feuerbach provides the philosophical basis of Marxism. Plekhanov claims that Feuerbach's thesis that 'thought is conditioned by being, not being by thought. Being is conditioned by itself, has its basis in itself' is the 'view of the relations between being and thought which was adopted by Marx and Engels and was by them made the foundation of their materialist conception of history. It was the most important outcome of the criticism of Hegelian idealism which, in its broad lines, had been made by Feuerbach himself' (p. 7). However, Ryazanov qualifies this assertion, noting that 'Marx radically modified and supplemented Feuerbach's thesis, which is as abstract, as little historical, as the "Man" Feuerbach put in the place of "God" or of "Reason"' and then, quoting Marx's sixth thesis on Feuerbach, concludes that 'the basic error of all philosophical systems endeavouring to explain the relations between thought and being, is that, like Feuerbach, they have ignored the fact that "the abstract individual analysed by them really belongs to a specific form of society."' (p. xiii). It is not surprising that Ryazanov was disposed of by Stalin.

Against the common interpretation of Marx as a 'materialist', it is essential to be clear that Marx did not oppose materialism to idealism. In the *German Ideology* (GI), and elsewhere, Marx characterised his starting point as 'materialist', but the term referred not to a philosophical materialism, but to the premise of 'real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live' which can 'be verified in a purely empirical way' (GI, p. 31), a perspective which Marx identified as that of the 'practical materialist, i.e., the *communist*' (GI, p. 56). Engels typically characterised Marx's work as 'materialist', but in the sense of assimilating it to the movement of modern science, which 'no longer needs any philosophy standing above the other sciences' (Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (AD), pp. 39–40), the task of philosophy being only to formalise the 'materialist dialectic', which Engels saw as the characteristic method of modern science. Marx

believed that the opposition between materialism and idealism was a false one, since 'matter' is no less idealist a concept than is the 'idea', so that '*abstract materialism* is the *abstract spiritualism* of matter'.

Marx sought to overcome this false opposition by focussing on *society* as the mediating term between the 'material' and the 'ideal', but society understood not as yet another abstraction, but as the everyday practical activity of real human beings. It is the divorce of individual from society which underlies the false antitheses of the Enlightenment, in eliminating the mediating term between humanity and nature, between the ideal and the material, between subject and object. Thus in his early works Marx criticised materialism and idealism alike from the standpoint of '*human sensuous activity, practice ... practical-critical activity ... human society or socialised humanity*' (First Thesis on Feuerbach), characterising his own position not as a materialism but variously as a humanistic naturalism, or a naturalistic or real humanism: 'Consistent naturalism or humanism is distinct from both idealism and materialism, and constitutes at the same time the unifying truth of both' (*Collected Works* (CW), 3, p. 336). Similarly Marx rejected the equally false antithesis between humanity and nature: '*Society* is the complete unity of man with nature ... the accomplished naturalism of man and the accomplished humanism of nature' (CW, 3, p. 298), a formulation which should not be interpreted as proposing a 'sociological' solution to a philosophical problem, but of transforming the problem from a philosophical to a socio-historical one. Marx declared not the triumph of materialism over idealism, but the triumph of social science over philosophy.

Marx's early critique was directed at both Adam Smith and Hegel, but he certainly did not support the 'materialist' Smith against the 'idealist' Hegel. Marx's position was that the two theories were equally idealist in resting on the categorical oppositions of matter and idea, individual and society, humanity and nature, oppositions which Marx argued were empty abstractions, empty because they are concepts which do not correspond to any determinate existence, and so can have no determinate effects. However this is not only a critique of Smith and of Hegel, for these conceptual oppositions are constitutive of bourgeois thought in general, as that has come down from the Enlightenment.

For Marx the weakness of bourgeois materialism was that it sought to explain social relations by referring them back to a material foundation, which was seen naturalistically, defined by the physical conditions of production. This led it to naturalise what were in reality historically specific social relations, constituted on a particular social foundation. Thus Marx, and later Engels, criticised the earlier materialism for its lack of a systematic and historical perspective, in having a naturalistic view of the world which could not embrace history. To this extent Plekhanov's characterisation of Marx's critique of Feuerbach's materialism is correct. But Marx attributed Plekhanov's errors not to his being insufficiently materialist, in locating history outside nature, but for being too materialist, in reducing history to the history of nature. Certainly Marx criticised Feuerbach's static view of nature, but Feuerbach's was not the last word in bourgeois materialism. While Feuerbach's materialism was restricted in having an unchanging view of human nature, that of classical political economy was not so limited.

It is very significant that in Plekhanov's extensive discussions of the history of materialism he completely ignores the role of classical political economy, and the historical materialism of the Scottish Enlightenment, for the latter proposed a philosophy of history which corresponds exactly to Plekhanov's characterisation of Marx's philosophical revolution. Against the various forms of racial, demographic and climactic determinism proposed by Continental materialism the Scottish Enlightenment offered a philosophy of history which explained the development of manners, morals and constitutions precisely in terms of the stages of development of the 'mode of subsistence', although the latter was not so crudely reduced to the means of production, nor to geographical conditions, as it was by Plekhanov, offering precisely the 'historical' materialism which Plekhanov characterises as that of Marx. Marx, in his tenth thesis on Feuerbach, addressed the limits of this form of materialism in noting that 'the standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or social humanity'. The error of hitherto existing materialism for Marx was *not* identified with its adoption of the standpoint of human nature, but of the abstraction of the human individual from 'the ensemble of social relations' (sixth thesis), which is the historical characteristic of bourgeois society. Marx's standpoint is not that of the act of material production, it is that of 'human society, or social humanity'. Thus Marx did not defend the materialism of political economy against the idealism of Hegel, but criticised both as equally idealist theories of history.

Similarly the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment had precisely the Hegelian view of the relation between freedom and necessity which Feuerbach characterises as that of Marx, which is why they turned to the study of political economy, as the science which could reveal the laws of development of society. Against the romantic idealism of the French philosophes, the political economists believed that the only basis of social reform was the knowledge of the material foundations of history provided by their new science. However 'science' for Marx provides no solution to the dualisms of bourgeois materialism for, as he remarked in his third thesis on Feuerbach, 'the materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men that change circumstances and that the educator himself needs educating. Hence, this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, of which one is superior to society (in Robert Owen, for example).' For Marx knowledge is undoubtedly a weapon in the revolution, but it is not knowledge which makes the revolution, but the proletariat, and knowledge only constitutes a revolutionary weapon when it is embodied in the proletarian movement. The philosophical roots of Bolshevik politics can be traced directly back to Plekhanov's fundamental misunderstanding of the significance of Marx's critique of political economy.

In Hegel's work bourgeois reason finds its summation and its most systematic expression. The great merit of Hegel, according to Marx, was that he pushed bourgeois reason to its limits, so that its speculative foundations stand out starkly in the contradiction between the universal and the particular, which Hegel could only resolve speculatively in the

dialectical development of Reason. In exactly the same way Smith, and later Ricardo, recognised the real contradictions between universal human needs and aspirations and the particular social relations of the capitalist system of production, but again resolved these contradictions speculatively, in the dialectical development of Nature. Whether the supra-human force which makes history is called Reason or Nature is neither here nor there. Thus Marx's critique of Hegelian idealism can be translated immediately into a critique of the idealism of political economy, however 'materialist' political economy might appear at first sight, because it is a critique of their common ideological foundations. Marx no more 'continued the work' of political economy, than he completed that of Feuerbach (Lenin, Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism) The ideological foundations of Hegelian philosophy and political economy lie in their attempt to present bourgeois social relations as the culmination of the history of the synthesis of Reason and Nature, and it is precisely this that characterises them as bourgeois. Consequently Marx's critique of Hegel is a critique of the ideological foundations of all forms of bourgeois social thought, both idealist and materialist.

Marx could apply the method developed in the critique of Hegel's abstract spiritualism to the critique of political economy because the theories were two sides of the same coin.

Like Hegel, political economy is content to describe the alienated forms of social existence, attributing their social character not to their human origins but to an alien power: on the one hand, the Idea, on the other, Nature.

Excursus: Marx, Engels and the Inversion of Hegel

The principal authority for Lenin and Plekhanov's characterisation of Marxism as a philosophical materialism is the famous passage in the Afterword to the Second German Edition of *Capital*, in which Marx wrote: 'My dialectical method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite ... With me ... the ideal is but the material transposed and translated in man's head'. With Hegel the dialectic 'is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell'.

The orthodox interpretation of this passage regards the inversion as *philosophical*, Marx setting the dialectical method on a rational foundation by replacing Hegel's idealist monism with a symmetrical materialist monism. Thus Plekhanov argued that 'Materialism is the direct opposite of *idealism*. Idealism strives to explain all the phenomena of Nature, all the qualities of matter, by these or those qualities of the *spirit*. Materialism acts in the exactly opposite way. It tries to explain psychic phenomena by these or those qualities of *matter*, by this or that organisation of the human, or, in more general terms, of the animal *body*' (*The Materialist Conception of History* (MCH), pp. 13–14). Thus Hegel's dialectical method is valid, once it is appreciated that the dialectical laws are not laws of thought but laws of matter. For Lenin Hegel's 'transition of the

logical idea to *nature*' at the end of the *Logic* 'brings one within a hand's grasp of materialism'. Indeed 'the whole chapter on the "Absolute Idea" ... contains almost nothing that is specifically *idealism*, but has for its main subject the *dialectical method*. The sum-total, the last word and essence of Hegel's logic is the *dialectical method*—this is extremely noteworthy. And one thing more: in this *most idealistic* of Hegel's works there is the *least idealism* and the *most materialism*' (*Philosophical Notebooks* (PN), p. 234).

Against this interpretation it should be noted that Marx defined his inversion not as an inversion of Hegel's *ontology*, but precisely of his *method*, which the orthodox interpretation regards as being untouched by Marx's critique. As noted above, Marx did not characterise his philosophy as a 'materialism', but as a 'humanistic naturalism' or a 'naturalistic humanism'. When he used the term 'materialism' positively he used it as a synonym for 'science'. Marx's extensive discussion of his method, in contrast to that of Hegel, in the 1857 Introduction to the *Grundrisse* contrasts the laborious development of scientific knowledge with the re-presentation of such knowledge by speculative philosophy. Thus Marx's dialectical method is the method of scientific labour, while that of Hegel is the method of speculative philosophy. Marx's inversion of the Hegelian dialectic is not a matter of a *philosophical* inversion which replaces a monistic idealism with a monistic materialism, but of inverting the idealist relation between science and philosophy.

Where does Engels stand between Marx and Plekhanov? The answer, appropriately enough, is somewhere in the middle. In *Ludwig Feuerbach* (LF) Engels referred to the Hegelian system as 'a materialism idealistically turned upside down in *method and content*' (*Selected Works* (SW), ii, 372, my emphasis).

Engels espoused, as Marx arguably did not, a philosophical materialism. Thus he argues that 'it is self-evident that the products of the human brain, being in the last analysis also products of nature, do not contradict the rest of nature's interconnections but are in correspondence with them' (AD 55), and he characterises dialectics, 'the science of the general laws of motion and development of nature, human society and thought' (AD, p. 194), as 'nothing more than the mere reflection' of the flux of reality 'in the thinking brain' (SW, ii, p. 363).⁵ These arguments come directly from Feuerbach, who believed that he had overcome the dichotomy of thought and matter, not by reducing thought to matter, but by integrating the two, thought being not an effect of matter but one of its properties. As a natural being I am not a subject contemplating an object, but a part of the object reflecting on itself, so there can be no contradiction between thought and being. However Engels was dismissive of Feuerbach's materialism, which he regarded as being as metaphysical as Hegel's idealism in resting on abstract concepts of 'Man' and 'Nature', rather than on the real historical relations between men and nature. For Engels the 'nature' on which his materialism rests is not a philosophical category but a scientific one, different forms of materialism corresponding to different conceptions of nature emerging

⁵ And many more such formulae are to be found, particularly in *The Dialectics of Nature*.

from science. Historical materialism is made possible by the development of a new conception of nature, which sees the world as constructed not of things mechanically related to one another, but as processes in change. Thus his Feuerbachian argument is not used as a metaphysical prop, but turns into his pragmatic epistemology for which the relation between thought and being is an historical and practical relationship of 'experiment and industry'. However this argument is not used by Engels, as it came to be used by 'dialectical materialism', as an ontological guarantee of the truth of the laws of the materialist dialectic.

Engels's use of the word 'reflection' does not imply either the reflectionist theory of knowledge or the correspondence theory of truth which Lenin attributed to him. Engels repeatedly stresses that 'human history ... cannot find its intellectual final term in the discovery of any so-called absolute truth'(AD, p. 38), and insists on the hypothetical and limited character of all knowledge, a principle which he applies to his and Marx's work (c.f. AD, pp. 57, 83, 92, 125, 129, 207–9, LF, SW, ii, pp. 362–3, 377–8). In contrast to Lenin's argument against the neo-Kantians that such relative truths constitute successive approximations to an absolute truth, marked by the correspondence of the connections established in 'thought' with those existing in 'matter', Engels has a pragmatic view of truth, dismissing the scepticism of Hume and Kant as a product of the chimerical pursuit of 'absolute truth', which has no significance once it is recognised that one can only pursue 'attainable relative truths along the path of the positive sciences', whose methods of 'experiment and industry' make the 'thing-in-itself' into a 'thing-for-us' (LF, SW, ii, pp. 363, 371). Engels's dismissal of Kant may be naïve, but far from serving as an irrationalist critique of science, his materialism serves as a defence of science against philosophy, to support his pragmatism against a Kantian epistemological dualism which sees "consciousness" as 'something given, something opposed from the outset to being, to nature' (AD, p. 55), establishing a gap between thought and reality which can only be bridged by metaphysics, whether metaphysical materialism or speculative idealism.⁶

Although Engels regards Marx's inversion of Hegel as both philosophical and methodological, it is the latter aspect which he constantly stresses, and to which he subordinates Marx's supposed philosophical revolution. He describes Marx's theoretical innovation as a scientific revolution, in contrast to that of Feuerbach, which remained firmly within the antinomies of philosophy. In Marx's case 'the separation from Hegelian philosophy was here also the result of a return to the materialist standpoint. That means it was resolved to comprehend the real world — nature and history — just as it presents itself to everyone who approaches it free from preconceived idealist crochets. It was decided mercilessly to sacrifice every idealist crochet which could not be brought into harmony

⁶ Engels's *Dialectics of Nature* may be equally naïve but it does not set out to revolutionise the natural sciences by applying the laws of the dialectic, but rather to assimilate Marxism to modern science by demonstrating the universality of those laws through a comprehensive survey of the achieved results of the modern natural sciences. Engels claims no scientific advances, but merely wraps scientific findings in the bizarre rhetoric of the dialectic.

with the facts conceived in their own and not in a fantastic interconnection. And materialism means nothing more than this' (LF, SW, ii, p. 608).

Thus Engels follows Marx in seeing the inversion of the Hegelian dialectic as an inversion of the relation between science and philosophy, which becomes possible when science incorporates the principle of the dialectic as its own method.

Modern materialism is essentially dialectic, and no longer needs any philosophy standing above the other sciences. As soon as each special science is bound to make clear its position in the great totality of things and of our knowledge of things, a special science dealing with this totality is superfluous. That which still survives, independently, of all earlier philosophy is the science of thought and its laws — formal logic and dialectics. Everything else is subsumed in the positive science of nature and history.

Consequently the materialist dialectic does not *invert* the idealist relationship between reason and nature, it overcomes that opposition as science becomes aware in its own practice of the dialectical principles of flux and interconnectedness. The dialectical method does not define an irrationalist critique of science, but confirms a scientific positivism.

A Materialist Conception of History?

Plekhanov's resurrection of bourgeois materialism as the principle of Marxism faces the same dilemma that he identified at the heart of hitherto existing materialism. If the development of the manners, morals and constitution of society are determined by the development of the forces of production, how are we to explain the active role of human agency in historical development? It would seem that a monistic materialism has once again condemned us to the populist oscillation between fatalism and voluntarism.

Plekhanov sought to overcome this dilemma by drawing, as we have seen, on the Hegelian analysis of the relation between freedom and necessity to argue that *knowledge* gives us the freedom to overcome necessity. However this does not offer a solution. If knowledge is a mere knowledge of necessity it remains purely contemplative and retrospective. But if knowledge is to be the means of changing the direction of history, then we have returned to the dualism with which Plekhanov charges bourgeois materialism, and the question arises once more of the demarcation of the realms of freedom and necessity. Plekhanov answers this question by distinguishing between the *direction* and the *pace* of historical development, and between the *content* and the *form* of legal, political and ideological superstructures. The direction of historical development is determined by necessity, but its pace is subject to human intervention. The content of superstructures is ultimately determined by the needs of production, mediated by class interests, but the same content may be expressed in a variety of forms.

While the development of the forces of production unequivocally determines the *direction* of historical development, the *pace* of development of the productive forces is by no means independent of the form of the social relations of production. Thus, for example, 'slave labour is not very favourable to the development of the productive forces; in conditions of slavery it advances extremely slowly, but still it does advance' (DMVH, pp. 165–6), while under capitalism the forces of production develop at an historically unprecedented rate.

The legal and political superstructure can also play a part in determining the pace, but not the direction, of historical development. The law and the constitution are determined functionally by the needs of society, which are in turn determined by the '*modes of production and on those mutual relations between people which are created by those modes*' (DMVH, p. 187). Particular legal and constitutional systems express particular ideas, but ideas emerge on the basis of needs, and those ideas which prevail are those which meet society's needs. 'In reality, only that is "ideal" which is useful to men, and every society in working out its *ideals* is guided only by its needs. The seeming exceptions to this incontestably general rule are explained by the fact that, *in consequence of the development of society*, its *ideals* frequently lag behind its *new needs*' (DMVH, p. 188).⁷ It is this lag which enables the law and politics to have an impact on the pace of social development, if not on its direction. 'Political institutions influence economic life. They *either facilitate its development or impede it*. The first case is in no way surprising from the point of view of Marx, because the given political system has been created for the very purpose of *promoting the further development of the productive forces* (whether it is consciously or unconsciously created is in this case all one to us). The second case does not in any way contradict Marx's point of view, because historical experience shows that once a given political system ceases to correspond to the state of the productive forces, once it is transformed into an obstacle to their further development, it begins to decline and finally is eliminated' (DMVH, p. 203, c.f., p. 272).

The social needs which give rise to particular legal, political and ideological superstructures are expressed in particular, and conflicting, class interests. The productive forces determine the economic relations of society. 'These relations naturally give rise to definite interests, which are expressed in *law*', and which give rise to '*state* organisation, the purpose of which is to protect the dominant interests' (MCH, p. 23). The pace of historical development is therefore determined by the outcome of the class struggle which expresses the balance of class forces: 'the further development of every given society always depends on the relationships of social forces within it' (DMVH, p. 298). It is therefore only the concrete study of the relations of social forces which 'can show what is "inevitable" and what is not "inevitable" for the given society' (DMVH, p. 298). Thus, for example, the inevitability of capitalism in Russia was dictated 'not because there exists

⁷ In the same way '*the psychology of society is always expedient in relation to its economy, always corresponds to it, is always determined by it*' (DMVH, p. 206).

some external force, some mysterious law pushing it along that path, but because there is no effective internal force capable of pushing it from that path' (DMVH, p. 302).⁸

The struggle over the forms of law and the constitution does not appear immediately as a struggle between conflicting class forces, but as a struggle between different ideas, which express conflicting class interests. The *content* of these interests is determined by economic relations, but the economic relations do not determine the ideological *forms* in which those interests are expressed. Thus 'the state of social consciousness ... does determine *the form which the reflection of the given interest takes in the mind of man*' (MCH, p. 40).

The relation of ideas to social needs and to class interests is not a simple one. The world of ideas is an autonomous world, subject to its own laws, so that ideas are not the direct expression of class interests. Intellectuals cannot be reduced to the sycophantic spokespeople of particular interests, but their ideas are nevertheless circumscribed by their historical environment, including their particular intellectual milieu, which in turn is related to those of previous epochs, of other countries and of other classes with which they interact. Through these complex interdependencies 'ideas, feelings and beliefs are co-ordinated according to their own particular laws' corresponding to the intellectual forms in which they appear. But at the same time 'these laws are brought into play by external circumstances which have nothing in common with these laws' (DMVH, p. 236).

The relationship between interests and ideas is not, therefore, a genetic relationship, but is rather one of a Spinozist correspondence between the material world of interests and the intellectual world of ideas. This conception obviously corresponds very closely to the reality of Russian political and ideological conflicts, which were fought out amongst intellectuals who had very limited contact with any organised class forces, so that the dividing lines of political conflict were drawn not so much in terms of the social forces in struggle, as in terms of the interests which particular ideas supposedly *represented*.⁹

It should not be surprising to find that Plekhanov ultimately overcomes this Spinozist dualism in classically Hegelian terms. Ideas obey their own laws, but at the same time are

⁸ This account of history is, once again, indistinguishable from that of Adam Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment, whose development of a theory of class, on the basis of the new science of political economy, was designed precisely to identify the contending class interests which determined the course of history.

⁹ This dislocation appeared most starkly in Lenin's critique of economism in *What is to be Done?*, which reached the bizarre conclusion that proletarian consciousness is bourgeois, while that of the radical bourgeois intelligentsia is proletarian. Plekhanov, retaining some link between interests, ideas, and the social forces they represent, looked to an *alliance* between the radical bourgeoisie and the proletariat, which was the point at which Lenin broke with him politically. There can be no doubt that in this division it was Plekhanov who remained closer to Marxism, while Lenin reverted to populism, as indicated by the very title of his text, assimilating Marx to Chernyshevsky.

subject to the laws of material necessity, but the laws of material necessity determine that humanity will transcend the rule of necessity to realise its freedom.

`with the development of the productive forces the mutual relations of men in the social process of production become more complex, the course of that process completely slips from under their control, the producer proves to be the slave of his own creation (as an example the capitalist anarchy of production).' But `the relations of production, social relations, by the very logic of their development bring man to realization of the causes of his enslavement by economic necessity. This provides the opportunity for a new and final triumph of consciousness over necessity, of reason over blind law.

Having realized that the cause of his enslavement by his own creation lies in the anarchy of production, the producer ("social man") organises that production and thereby subjects it to his will. Then terminates the kingdom of necessity and there begins the reign of freedom, which itself proves to be necessity.' (DMVH, pp. 273–4)

The coming revolution is a matter not so much of the realisation of the material interests of the working class or the liberation of the working class from capitalist exploitation, as of the realisation of human reason. The working class appears as the agent of this realisation:

Modern dialectical materialism strives for the elimination of classes. It appeared, in fact, when that elimination became an historical necessity. Therefore it turns to the producers, who are to become the heroes of the historical period lying immediately ahead. Therefore, for the first time since our world has existed and the earth has been revolving around the sun, there is taking place the coming together of science and workers: science hastens to the aid of the toiling mass, and the toiling mass relies on the conclusions of science in its conscious movement (DMVH, p. 279).

Plekhanov offers an extremely powerful critique of voluntarism, but he certainly does not offer a Marxist critique. His standpoint is not the `*human sensuous activity, practice ... practical-critical activity ... human society or socialised humanity*' (First Thesis on Feuerbach) which Marx took as his starting point, but an anonymous `*dialectic*' which is no less idealist for being attributed to natural geographical, technological, biological and psychological processes.

Plekhanov's philosophy makes no sense at all as an interpretation of Marx. But it makes a great deal of sense as a critique of the first generation of populists, who proved unable to

connect their revolutionary ambitions to the material base of the aspirations of the peasantry, and so tempered their philosophical materialism with a voluntaristic romanticism, and it is from this that Plekhanov's work derived its power and its influence in Russia. But it is a critique from within populism, the contrast between materialism and idealism corresponding to the emerging division within the populist movement, and not a critique from the position of Marxism, which would have led Plekhanov to oppose both the 'materialist' and the 'idealist' wings of the populist movement, on the basis of the aspirations of the emerging working class movement. However, such a critique was obviously impossible in Russia in the late nineteenth century, just as it had been impossible in Germany in the early nineteenth century, for such a movement did not yet exist. In Russia socialism remained the preserve of the intelligentsia, and so remained in the realm of ideas. Whereas German Social Democrats could look for the necessity of the revolution to the concrete historical development of the working class movement, as anticipated by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*, in Russia the necessity of revolution could only be defined philosophically, through the principles of 'dialectical materialism' and the mystical laws of 'the transformation of quantity into quality' and the 'negation of the negation'.

Lenin's Populist Interpretation of Marxism

The dilemma faced by Russian Marxists was that their revolutionary ideas ran far ahead of the degree of development of the workers movement. This inevitably gave the intelligentsia a leading role in the revolutionary movement, a role which Plekhanov's 'dialectical materialism' served to justify philosophically. It was the intellectuals who could transmit the lessons learnt in the more advanced countries, and embodied in the scientific laws of historical materialism, to the Russian proletariat. These laws enabled revolutionary intellectuals to grasp scientifically the connection between the interests of the working class and the ideals of socialism, even where this connection was not yet apparent to the workers themselves. However this brings us back to the political dilemma of populism. What is the political imperative of a revolutionary movement in which the mass of the population has not yet become aware of the ideas which express their objective interests? Will revolutionary ideas inevitably emerge from the agitation of the working class as the workers come to self-consciousness through struggle, as Bakunin had believed, and as was argued by the 'economists' and 'ultra-leftists' against whom Lenin fought so vigorously? Or should revolutionary ideas be disseminated by a patient process of propaganda, education and evangelizing, as the 'subjective sociologists' had believed, and as the 'Legal Marxists' came to argue? Or should the revolution be taken in hand by a small group of dedicated revolutionaries, armed with a vision of a just society, as Chernyshevsky had argued, and as the terroristic wing of populism, from which Lenin emerged, believed?

The orthodox Marxist answer to this question was a combination of the first and second answers: Social Democracy developed the class-conscious workers' movement through agitation, organisation and education. In the case of Russia this would necessarily be a

long-drawn out historical process, for the working-class remained a small minority of the population. The latter also implied that the working class would have to look elsewhere for allies in its struggle, for without allies it would be crushed by the autocratic state. The peasantry could not provide such an ally, for it was a doomed class which sought to resist the development of capitalism. Instead the social democratic movement had to look abroad, to the international workers movement and the prospect of a world revolution, and had to forge a tactical alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie, with which it shared an interest in democratic reform against the tyrannical rule of the autocracy. Although Plekhanov legitimated the role of the intelligentsia in the revolutionary movement in terms of a philosophy of history which had nothing in common with Marxism, politically he remained attached to Marxist orthodoxy in assigning the leading role in the revolution to the organised working class movement.

Nevertheless, Plekhanov's philosophy of history could be given an altogether different interpretation. If the intelligentsia has a privileged access to the scientific understanding of reality, and if the role of ideas in history is to accelerate the necessary development of the historical process, why should the intelligentsia wait on the historical development of the working class movement? Should not the revolutionary intelligentsia itself play the leading role in history, seizing power by whatever means might be necessary, looking to whatever social classes and strata might be mobilised in its support, and taking whatever measures might be necessary to pursue its historic role? This was precisely the logic which drove the first generation of radical populists into terrorism, and it was the logic which led Lenin to transform Plekhanov's 'dialectical and historical materialism' into the ideology of Bolshevism. The privileged status of the intelligentsia, which was established by Plekhanov's philosophy, is realised in the Leninist conception of the Party, which represents the working class not because it is the political form through which the mass of the working class represents its interests, but because it is the institutional form in which the revolutionary ideology is mobilised as an historical force. Lenin could justly criticise Plekhanov for not following the logic of his own philosophy through to its political conclusions. This was why Lenin could vigorously criticise Plekhanov politically, while remaining slavishly faithful to Plekhanov's philosophy. But Lenin's transformation of Plekhanov's political theory was not in the direction of Marxism, but rather assimilated Plekhanov's Marxism back into the populist traditions from which Lenin had emerged. While Plekhanov used the populist philosophy to bridge the gap from populist to Marxist politics, Lenin used it to reverse the movement, and to put the revolution back on the Russian agenda.

The populist roots of Lenin's political thought are obvious and well-known. Revolutionary populism had four distinctive features which Lenin brought into the centre of his Marxism and which formed the core of 'Marxism-Leninism'.

First, it stressed the active role of revolutionary ideas in determining the course of history, and so gave the intellectuals a prominent political role. This was the element which was developed by Plekhanov and adopted from him by Lenin. The orthodox Marxism of the Second International certainly did not underestimate the role of ideas in historical

development, but revolutionary ideas emerged out of the revolutionary movement, however much intellectuals might play a role in their formulation. Although Kautsky's theory gave the intellectuals a special position in the struggle for socialism, it did not give them any special authority. For Lenin the spontaneous struggle of the working class is inevitably a sectional struggle for economic aims. It is only the scientific theory of Marxism which can reveal the wider class perspective which is necessary to advance beyond trades union demands to a political struggle. This perspective is provided by the intellectuals, and institutionalised in the Party, which expresses the political interests of the class as a whole against the sectional interests of its component parts. For Kautsky, by contrast, there is no such divorce of economic from political struggles and the revolution depends not on the leading role of the vanguard Party, representing the class as a whole, but on the *fusion* of socialist ideas with working class struggle. 'The socialist movement is nothing more than the part of this militant proletariat which has become conscious of its goal' (*The Class Struggle*, p. 183). With the integration of socialism and the labour movement the socialist party is able to transcend the limits of any sectional representation, and to express the aspirations of all the non-capitalist classes and strata, so that the 'ways of feeling' of the proletariat 'are becoming standard for the whole mass of non-capitalists, no matter what their status may be' (*The Class Struggle*, p. 210).

Second, populism stressed the power of the revolutionary will, expressed through a disciplined organisation of dedicated revolutionaries, in realising the revolutionary ideal. This was the idea which Lenin took from his revolutionary mentor, Chernyshevsky, but one which had been rejected by orthodox Marxists, who stressed the mass democratic character of the proletarian movement.

Third, it was marked by a radical rejection of the state, and opposition to any involvement in constitutional politics, on the grounds that the state was essentially the agent of capitalist development, while the basis of the new society lay outside the state, in the commune and in co-operative production. It accordingly had an insurrectionary view of the revolution, the task of which was to destroy the economic and political forces of capitalism to set free the elements of socialism. This idea was also rejected by orthodox Marxists, who certainly did not believe that socialism could be achieved by electoral means, but who regarded the democratisation of the state and the achievement of civil liberties as a primary condition for the development of the workers' movement, and political agitation as a primary form of propaganda. Orthodox Marxists also rejected the populist belief that the material base of socialism lay in the commune and co-operative production, believing instead that it was necessary to take control of the state in order to nationalise the means of production, to provide the material base of socialism. Lenin's revolutionary Party, by contrast, provided a means of organising which did not require democracy or civil liberties, while his conception of the leading role of the Party dispensed with the need to develop the self-consciousness of the working class. On the question of the material base of socialism Lenin was more ambivalent. He rejected the populist faith in the commune, and the revisionist faith in co-operative production, but before the revolution he wavered between a commitment to the soviet as providing the material and political base of the new society, with the state serving only a transitional

role as the instrument of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', and an orthodox belief in the state as providing a more permanent basis of the new society. In the event, he combined the worst of both viewpoints, soon institutionalising a dictatorial state as the permanent basis of the new society.

Fourth, populism was most fundamentally characterised by its faith in the revolutionary role of the peasantry. This was the point at which orthodox Marxism broke most decisively with populism, on the grounds that the peasantry was a doomed class, which could therefore play only a reactionary role, and that its conditions of life were such that it could never unite as a self-conscious class force. For this reason Plekhanov and the Mensheviks looked to the liberal bourgeoisie for a political alliance against the autocratic state. On the other hand, in the most advanced capitalist countries Germany the proletarianisation of the rural population meant that the latter could play a positive role in the revolutionary movement not as peasants, but as workers. Lenin, in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, proposed a critique of populism which paradoxically maintained the role attributed by the populists to the peasantry, in arguing that the extent of the capitalist development of Russian agriculture was such that the Russian peasantry was already well on the way to destruction. While this meant that it was no longer possible to look to the rural commune as the basis of socialism, it also meant that the rural population could still play a revolutionary role. Lenin's conception of revolutionary politics meant that it did not matter that the rural population was not organised as a part of the proletariat, and did not express proletarian or socialist aspirations, for the operative interests and aspirations of the peasantry were not those expressed by the peasants themselves, but those expressed on their behalf by the revolutionary party. Unfortunately for the peasantry, Lenin's characterisation of their condition was quite wrong. The mass of the Russian peasantry had not been proletarianised by 1917, any more than they had been in 1899, as Lenin had to recognise when he introduced the NEP, or than they were in 1929, when Stalin decided to take matters into his own hands, and accelerate the necessary course of history by proletarianising the peasantry by force.

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