

The study of history has never been mere curiosity, a withdrawal into the past for the sake of the past . . . Historical science has been and remains an arena of sharp ideological struggle; it has been and remains a class, party history . . . Our ideological opponents contend that the Party spirit of Soviet historiography is incompatible with objective scientific research . . . [But] the great force of Marxist-Leninist doctrine is that it places in the researcher's hands the only correct and scientific creative method of objective, comprehensive study of social phenomena and processes.

Editorial, "Soviet Historical Science at a New Stage of Development," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 8 (1960).

Marx captured the Hegelian god of history and brought him to earth to reign over a dialectic of modes of production and property relationships. The process of transubstantiation, however, did not destroy the mystical quality of history, which persists in Marxist social theory. The sense of mystery behind Marx's system consists precisely in the ineluctable flow of the dialectic, that life force which brings men — unaware and often unwilling — inevitably to the threshold of communism.

With Marx the ultimate cause or first mover of history becomes any change in the methods of production and exchange; all other factors are derivative. "The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual process of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness."¹ Tradition, natural conditions, institutions, and ideas may exert an influence upon events; but they can only modify, accelerate, or retard the process of the historical dialectic. Thus in attempting to understand any phenomenon, the Marxist historian must cut through the superstructure ("the legal, political, religious, aesthetic, or philosophic — in short, ideological — forms") to discern its substance, or economic foundations. These foundations "can be determined with the precision of natural science."²

The Marxian thesis that the economic factor is the determining element in all historical situations has generated a rich literature

1. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy — Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*, ed. L. S. Feuer (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), p. 43.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

of scholarly dispute over the nature and extent of his economic determinism. Already in 1890 Engels wanted to clarify (or revise) the doctrine. Writing to Joseph Bloch he avers:

According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life . . . The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure — political forms of the class struggle and its results . . . also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form.³

Whatever the exact parameter of the secondary role accorded to the superstructure, clearly it is the inconsistencies or “contradictions” in material life which propel the Marxian dialectic of historical materialism. The basis of economic causation is always a lack of fit between the material or technological modes of production and the societal relationships imposed upon economic activity. Marx is principally concerned with the phenomenon of British industrialization, which he sees as a classic example of the incongruity of a production relationship (private ownership of factories) made obsolete by new methods of production (communal work) within the factory. The derivative social situation is in acute contradiction with the primal material factors: a revolutionary moment exists. This revolutionary moment is only the most recent in the long line of crises that have propelled human historical experience from one epoch to a higher stage of economic and social development.

At a certain stage of their development the material forces of production in society come into conflict with the existing relations of production, or — what is but a legal expression for the same thing — with the property relations within which they had been at work before. From forms of development of the forces of production these relations turn into their fetters. Then comes the period of social revolution.⁴

The concept of historical movement as progress remains unquestioned by Marx and his followers, whether revisionist or orthodox.

Perhaps the most complex aspect of Marxian historical theory is the problem of the political actor. Marx opens his argument in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* with the proposition:

3. Engels to Joseph Bloch, London, September 21–22, 1890, in *ibid.*, pp. 397–398.

4. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in *ibid.*, pp. 43–44.

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." Vital to his argument is the theory of a dominant class within every society, which exploits other classes and creates a repressive state to enforce its economic interest. Economic contradictions are acted out on the social level through the continuous struggle of the repressed class against the ruling class and its tool, the state. On the heels of victory for the oppressed class follows the crystallization of a new pattern of class antagonisms based upon the new economic system, which will in turn culminate in violent class struggle. The historical actor is thus the emergent class, and Marx's revolutionary appeal is so directed.

Historical materialism requires an adaptive human being, and the Marxian man is favored with a plastic nature. Man's ideas, goals, interests, and behavior are class-engendered. The human being is environmentally determined; a man's environment is structured by society and, more particularly, by his class position within society. When it is remembered that for Marx the hidden basis of any society is its system of material production, the argument comes full circle back to the economic factor.

But Marx wants more to change the world than to explain it, and this dichotomizes his view of man and his theory of history. He is apparently caught in a contradiction between economic determinism and revolutionary activism, and this dilemma is displayed most clearly in his treatment of the historical actor. On the one hand, he pictures men as enmeshed in production relationships and political tradition independent of their will. On the other, he attacks Feuerbach for what he sees as his typically German preoccupation with the contemplative, abstract side of philosophy. Marx insists that materialism must be practical activity. Further, "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."⁵

However, the real question for Marx does not consist of choosing between the passivity of historical determinism and revolutionary activism, since he manages to have some of both. Rather his dilemma is one of defining the historical context within which man can meaningfully act. Men do not control their circum-

5. Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, in *ibid.*, p. 244.

stances; even their consciousness is determined by their social existence. But history, as noted before, is cunning and possesses a mysterious sense of timing.

No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed, and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society. Therefore mankind always takes up only such problems as it can solve, since, looking at the matter more closely, we will always find that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.⁶

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.⁷

From time to time, then, historical conditions are appropriate for class actions, and at these historical moments the emergent class moves decisively in the direction established by the dialectical process.

Marx's concept of the political leader is never fully enunciated in his writings; but it is possible to derive from scattered remarks what might be called a theory of interchangeable leadership. The figure of the individual leader is of incidental importance to Marx, since the leader appears within the economic context and is historically significant only as a class agent. If Napoleon had not appeared, the historical situation would have generated another leader to act his part. Like any other element of the superstructure, the individual leader can act only within the historical situation presented; his power is to modify, accelerate, or retard a single incident pertaining to a necessary outcome.

Even the communists are significant only as "the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country . . . which pushes forward all others"; "they do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mold the proletarian movement."⁸ Although the communists possess a clear understanding of the historical process and ultimate class

6. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in *ibid.*, p. 44.

7. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *ibid.*, p. 320.

8. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *ibid.*, p. 20.

goal which is beyond the average member of the class, they have no interests distinct from those of the proletarian class as a whole, no separate and self-conscious identity.

Such, then, is Lenin's heritage of historical theory. But with Lenin's appearance historical determinism becomes activism, because Lenin reads Marx in the imperative voice. Lenin's unique perception is that history is more than the majestic Hegelian force moving the world: history provides the situations within which the revolutionary hero acts. Lenin thus opted for the activist Marx, who hoped and worked for revolution in 1848; he personalized Marx's concept of the communist party and identified it with the Bolshevik faction. His choice of Marx the incendiary author of the *Manifesto* and revolutionary organizer over the scholarly Marx was neither sudden nor without ambivalence. The thrust of the Bolshevik argument moved progressively from the anatomical science of revolution to the art of creating the revolution; it paced the worsening crisis as Marx's arguments had in 1848.

Was Lenin's insistence on revolutionary action simply a function of his own temporal position in the history of Russia, that is, a classically Marxist analysis of the leader as the necessary product of his class and time? We will never know whether, had Lenin died in exile, another such leader would have appeared. But class as a determining category in Lenin's case must be dismissed, for he had no hereditary claim as spokesman for the proletariat; his family was of the petty landed gentry. The argument that his activism can be explained entirely by the Russian context must also fail, for other professed Russian Marxists of his day disputed bitterly his vision of the role of the Russian workers as well as his analysis of the historical moment in 1917.

Lenin never set out for the scholar's delight an integrated theory of history. Historical materialism had been invented, and Hegel was standing quite firmly on his head: Lenin saw his task to be that of the Marxist apostle to Russia who would lead the few, convert the masses, and usher in the revolution. Faced with such a role and sensing the approach of the revolutionary moment, the faithful cannot be allowed to remain passive; they must seize history and shake it until it yields its promise. Despite the paucity of his philosophical writing, however, Lenin's interpretation of

Marxism runs deeper than a mere apologia for tactical decisions: his activist concept of history is central to his unique brand of Marxism. Such an argument becomes more plausible when we look at one of Lenin's early works, before the idea of revolution had become completely suffused in the political maneuvers and tactical quarrels of 1917.

Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*, published in 1902, is more analytical than most of his works and provides an unusually compact selection of statements and assumptions relevant to his concept of history. In trying to define the nature and functions of the nascent Russian social-democratic party, Lenin comments on the uses of history. Because social democracy is "essentially an international movement . . . starting in a young country," it can be successful "only on the condition that it assimilates the experience of other countries." But mere acquaintance with this historical evidence is not sufficient. "A critical attitude is required . . . and ability to subject it to independent tests."⁹

The notable feature in Lenin's historical references is their instrumental quality, which is reminiscent of the Machiavellian utilization of history as a kind of treasure chest of illustrative examples. This does not mean that the two approaches can be equated; indeed they cannot be, except in this shared concept of history as a didactic tool. Machiavelli, of course, lacked that vision of history as progressive development which is essential to Marx and Lenin. The point here is simply that Lenin sees an instrumental side to history which is not present in Marx: historical examples will be consciously used by the leader and the party to move history forward.

In delicate balance with this instrumental facet of Lenin's view of history is his insistence upon the uniqueness of the Russian situation. Because of the severity of autocratic repressions, the Russian worker will have to withstand "trials immeasurably more severe" than those of his German brother. "History has now confronted us with an immediate task which is *more revolutionary than are the immediate tasks* that confront the proletariat of any other country. The fulfillment of this task . . . places the Russian proletariat in the vanguard of the international revolutionary proletariat."¹⁰ Lenin then admonishes the Russian social demo-

9. V. I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* (New York: International Publishers, 1929), p. 28.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

crats to be inspired with the same devoted determination and energy that marked the Russian revolutionists of the seventies (who were most certainly not workers or peasants). In the same context he manages to convey the impression that Engels's designation of the German workers as occupying the leading position among the European proletariat referred to a particular, and long past, episode.¹¹

The development of the socialist movement, then, is seen by Lenin as culminating in a particular country, Russia, in which history has cunningly prepared the greatest contradiction of all time. This national fixation is obviously antithetical to Marx's historical theory, which, because it dealt in economic (and therefore transnational) categories, anticipated a general European revolution.

Moreover, Lenin defines the uniqueness of the Russian situation as essentially political. It is the antisocialist laws, the "gloom of autocracy and the domination of the gendarmes," which define the Russian historical moment; according to Marx's criteria, though, Russia was not ripe for revolution because it was insufficiently capitalistic and industrialized. When Lenin discusses the problem of the peasantry, it is almost entirely in political rather than economic terms, reflecting again his determination to elude Marx's pessimistic prognosis for a backward and preponderantly peasant economy.

Lenin's political focus appears most sharply in his quarrels with those Russian Marxists nicknamed the Economists. He denounces their slogan "Politics always obediently follows economics" as a crude vulgarization of economic materialism.¹² Material or economic conditions are not, then, the sole — or even the ultimate — causal factors in history. The Economists' plea of "unfavorable conditions," as justifying the political passivity of most social-democratic groups in Russia during the 1890s, is flayed by Lenin as an untrue and cringing excuse for their own lack of perception and courage. Not the material environment but the leaders' lack

11. Lenin reproduces a passage from Engels's *Peasant War in Germany*, which credits the German workers with two advantages: they belong to the most theoretical nation of Europe, and the Germans were the last to appear in the labor movement. He then concludes: "Engels's words proved prophetic. Within a few years, the German workers were subjected to severe trials in the form of the anti-Socialist laws; but they were fully armed to meet the situation, and succeeded in emerging from it victoriously." Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

of sufficient training was to blame for the stagnation.¹³ Thus Lenin's analysis of this historical situation is a startling reversal of Marx.

Essentially the same argument is made with respect to the current (1902) period: "the principal cause of the present crisis in Russian Social-Democracy is that the *leaders . . . lag behind the spontaneous rising of the masses . . .* The most serious sin we commit is that we *degrade* our political and *our organizational* tasks to the level of immediate, 'palpable,' 'concrete' interests of the every-day economic struggle."¹⁴

Such statements exhibit more than tactical preferences. They betray a perception new to Marxists: that of historical movement as politically rather than economically engendered. Certainly Lenin believes that every leader moves within a given set of economic conditions, but this assumption had become a truism and even an excuse for inaction by the dull and fearful. Historical events are caused and mastered by the political activities of men who can read the present as well as the past in the light of the Marxist dialectic and who can act artistically as well as scientifically to force the historical moment to fruition. Marx has been politicized.

Central to Lenin's political and activist view of history is his theory of spontaneity and class consciousness. Left to their own devices, that is, acting out of material deprivation alone, the proletariat can achieve only a trade-union consciousness — a purely economic set of demands and program of action.

The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness, i.e., it may itself realize the necessity for combining in unions, to fight against the employers and to strive to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation, etc.

The workers can acquire class political consciousness *only from without*, that is, only outside of the economic struggle, outside of the sphere of relations between workers and employers.¹⁵

The social democrats must bring this consciousness to the workers through political agitation.

As Plekhanov pointed out as early as 1904, Lenin's argument

13. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33, 76.

was non-Marxist because it denied the fundamental Marxist tenets that material conditions determine thought and that objective factors alone — economic necessity — would drive the proletariat to a socialist revolution.¹⁶

Leopold Haimson's analysis of the development of Bolshevism shows the deep roots in Russian intellectual history of the conflicting concepts of consciousness and spontaneity. These terms came to stand for complex clusters of ideas about rationalism and feeling, economic determinism and voluntarism, which altered their content depending on the times and the individuals. He correctly points out that in the Russian context

even the most deterministic of Russian Marxists, even Plekhanov, had been agreeable to the active supervisory role that Social Democracy would exercise in Russia's transformation; thus it was that most of them had been reconciled to the completely independent political role that Social Democracy would maintain as the sole responsible agent of the historical process . . . even the Revisionists supported the political activities of Social Democracy as positive efforts toward Russia's awakening to political life.¹⁷

Lenin, however, went beyond this general position to insist that political consciousness and spontaneity are two discrete categories. He rejects Marx's expectation that spontaneous workers' revolts will develop of themselves into a self-conscious class movement. But Lenin does see a relationship in time between spontaneity and consciousness, which he develops in an historical analysis of the widespread strikes of the late 1890s.

this strike movement certainly bore a spontaneous character. But there is a difference between spontaneity and spontaneity. Strikes occurred in Russia in the seventies, and in the sixties . . . accompanied by the "spontaneous" destruction of machinery, etc. Compared with these "revolts" the strikes of the nineties might even be described as "conscious," to such an extent do they mark the progress which the labor movement had made since that period . . . Definite demands were put forward, the time to strike was carefully chosen, known cases and examples in other places were discussed, etc. While the revolts were simply uprisings of the oppressed, the systematic strikes represented the class struggle in

16. G. V. Plekhanov, "The Working Class and the Social Democratic Intelligentsia," *Iskra*, nos. 70-71 (July 25-August 1, 1904); as cited in Leopold Haimson, *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 193.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

embryo, but only in embryo . . . the workers were not and could not be conscious of the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social system, i.e., it was not yet Social-Democratic consciousness.¹⁸

By recognizing a temporal rather than a causal relationship between spontaneous worker revolts and class-conscious revolution, Lenin requires conscious political action, which he defines as the exclusive province of a party of professional revolutionists. And a definition of the propelling force of history as not only political but conscious in the Russian context requires the Leninist party and its leader, who go beyond a scientific interpretation of the course of history to shape its course. Both Russian history and its Bolshevik leader are unique; and such a leader can demand the overleaping of stages of history and the conditions for revolution thought essential by Marx. When the subjective factors for revolution present themselves, the god of history "requires" the hero to rewrite the theory of history. Thus Lenin on the eve of revolution in 1917 said: "It would be naive to wait for a 'formal' majority on the side of the Bolsheviks; no revolution ever waits for *this* . . . History will not forgive us if we do not assume power now."¹⁹ "To hesitate is a crime."²⁰

Although Lenin has rewritten Marx's theory of history in the active voice, he retains much of the same ambivalence toward history that plagued Marx. The past is evil, oppressive, and rushing toward destruction: it must be repudiated by the revolutionist. Yet the past is literally the passport to the future, and history represents the dynamic process that culminates in communism. This attraction-repulsion syndrome is always subtly at work in Soviet historiography, as symbolized by the early post-Revolution establishment of institutions for the study of history.²¹

18. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, p. 32.

19. N. Lenin, Letter to the Central Committee, the Petrograd and Moscow Committees of the RSDLP, September 25-27, 1917, in *Collected Works of V. I. Lenin* (New York: International Publishers, 1932), XXI, book I, p. 222.

20. N. Lenin, Letter to the Central Committee, Moscow Committee, Petrograd Committee, and Bolshevik Members of the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets, October 16-20, 1917, in *Collected Works of V. I. Lenin*, XXI, book II, p. 69.

21. The Socialist Academy for the Social Sciences was set up under the Marxist historian M. N. Pokrovsky in 1918. The Commission on History of the Party and the October Revolution ("Istpart") was created by a Sovnarkhom decree in April 1920 to collect party documents and memoirs and other materials relating to the October Revolution and the Civil War; and the Red Archives were founded in 1922.