

# interpretation

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# interpretation

Volume 11 number 1

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# Marx and Lenin

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The dispute over the relationship of Marx and Lenin concerns the meaning of Marxism in practice. Was the Lenin-led Russian revolution of 1917 a Marxist revolution? And beyond that, is the post-Lenin Soviet Union, including that of Stalin, faithfully executing Marx's vision and testament? Are we dealing here with a political movement guided by a radically revolutionary Western philosophical teaching, or with a despotic, violent, bureaucratic home grown Russian tradition of absolutism, or with some mixture of both? At stake is an adequate understanding of Marx's thought and an appreciation of its political consequences.

The two principal lines of interpretation are well settled. On one side, the hard-line Soviet communists and the hard-line Western anticommunists frequently agree: Lenin, and the Soviet Union, are thoroughly Marxist. On the other side, Western liberals like Robert Tucker are inclined to see a break between Marx and Lenin, and between Lenin and Stalin.

The present essay will argue that the core of Marx's thought was his lifelong dedication to the revolutionary transformation and liberation of humanity. His relative indifference toward the historical-determinist side of his own doctrine can be seen most easily in his repudiation of "orthodox Marxism" in the case of Russia, which Marx thought could achieve socialism without passing through the stage of capitalism. Therefore Lenin's revisions of Marxist dogma, undertaken in order to make possible the radical revolution in Russia, conformed to the essential Marx. And Stalin's extension of Lenin was executed in the same spirit.

## MARX

Marx's fundamental conception of the political mission of philosophy never wavered from the time of its first programmatic statement in his essay entitled "Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction."<sup>1</sup> In

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1. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 53-65. This edition will henceforth be referred to as *Marx*. Quotations from this essay in the text are my translations from "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung," Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, I (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1961), 378-391.

that essay Marx set forth the kernel of his revolutionary thesis. Philosophy has already exposed the false promise of otherworldly salvation put forward by religion, a promise that was meant to conceal the political oppression under which people actually live. The next and final task, initiated by Marx, is to abolish the political conditions for the religious illusion by destroying the existing order of society and liberating men from their dependence on men, just as they have been liberated from their supposed dependence on God. The *spirit* of this revolution is Marx's radicalized Hegelianism; the *matter* must be found in the one class of men in existing society that has nothing of its own, has no stake in maintaining the current order, and has everything to gain from a complete annihilation of it. That class, says Marx, is the proletariat.

The philosophical core of Marx's program lies in its novel account of the relation of theory to practice, of head to heart, of reason to passion. These pairs, which have hitherto been distinct, will become one through the revolution. Action, the revolutionary negation of the existing state of things, will be perfectly rational, for it will now be informed by the philosophical consciousness that seeks the liberation of mankind from chains. On the other hand, thought without action is now meaningless. With the successful culmination of the critique of religion, thinking has gone as far as it can go without becoming politically active. Philosophy is ready to be at once completed and abolished (*aufgehoben*). Matter is ready to be informed by reason: the only barrier to the embodiment of reason in things is some men's passionate attachments to existing conditions. Hence passion, the anger of the revolutionaries, can cancel the reactionary passion of the good citizen, issuing in a future state of affairs that is completely rational. Physical violence in the service of negation of the present *is* reason, for through violence the long night of men's dependence on God, on other men, and on things will finally end.

As a consequence of the incipient union of theory and practice, theory becomes criticism, not for the sake of stating the truth in speech, but to destroy the enemy. "Its [criticism's] essential feeling is *indignation*, its essential task *denunciation*. It is not a matter of knowing whether the opponent is a noble, equal-born, or interesting opponent; what matters is to *strike* him."

Reason becomes passion; but the passion of the philosopher is not enough. "It is the philosopher in whose brain the revolution begins." But: "The weapon of criticism cannot replace the criticism of weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force, but theory too becomes a material force as soon as it seizes the masses." The insight of the philosopher, passionately expounded, will become the angry consciousness of the people. The people, the material embodiment of philosophy, will then carry out the revolution that will culminate in "universal human emancipation."

Marx has made up his mind about the nature of the revolution before he ever turns his attention to the actual men and women who compose the industrial working class. The "proletariat" first emerges as that group in society which is capable of being seized by Marxist theory, and its expected openness

to Marxism is attributed to its supposed utter degradation, its “radical chains,” its total enslavement in contemporary society. It is the “passive” vehicle of the revolutionary consciousness and purpose discovered by philosophy. It is this passive capability that defines the proletariat here, not the empirical fact of its being the industrial working class.

It is worth noting that Marx in this essay speaks of man as essentially free, not as laborer. The later account of man as laborer may be understood as an elaboration on the present statement of man as free, for the meaning of human labor is that man makes himself: as his own product, he does not depend for what he is on anything outside of himself.<sup>2</sup>

From here we turn to the *1844 Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology* for an account of “universal human emancipation” or communism, the goal of the revolution. We do so in order to explain more fully Marx’s theoretical convictions about human nature. Communism is that condition in which mankind has overcome all dependence on anything outside of itself, and in which no individual man is dependent on any other man. The existence of private property, namely property held by some to the exclusion of others, not only makes the nonowners dependent on the owners for their subsistence; property also enkindles the artificial passion of avarice in the heart of the owner, a passion that attaches him to something outside himself, his property. By abolishing private property, communism will abolish all desire that people now have to possess things of their own to the exclusion of others (*Marx*, pp. 70–93). Even the bodily senses, which we might have thought were irreducibly private, will change their character. From being narrowly individual, they will become human and social. “Need or enjoyment have consequently lost their egotistical nature. In the same way, the senses and enjoyments of other men have become my own appropriation” (*Marx*, p. 88). Communism will overcome not only private property but privacy as such. The family too, with private spouses and private children, will be abolished. In such a state of things there will no longer be a distinction between “one’s own” and “the common,” for men will not think of their own as anything apart from the community. Therefore the rule of some men over others for the sake of their own private advantage will disappear. With the only ground of controversy abolished, politics will give way to the noncontroversial management of economic production (*Marx*, p. 193).

Marx’s communist vision rests on the remarkable premise—especially remarkable for a professed materialist—that man’s body, with its seemingly indisputable quality of belonging to each, can become essentially common. The doubtless fact that each dies his own death cannot faze Marx’s deep faith in man’s socialized destiny.<sup>3</sup> Not even his own human nature limits man: com-

2. Marx describes man as *homo faber* in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, *Marx*, pp. 70–93.

3. Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. I: *The Founders* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 413–414.

munism means “the casting-off of all natural limitations” (*Marx*, p. 192).<sup>4</sup> If man is to be truly free, he must become in every sense “master and owner of nature,” in Descartes’s phrase.<sup>5</sup>

As Marx became older he began to realize that the existing working classes were not quite totally dehumanized have-nots, human prime matter waiting to be formed by Marx’s theory-inspired indignation in the service of revolution. The real-world workers never ceased disappointing Marx with their contemptible backsliding and gullibility to bourgeois blandishments. Therefore Marx gradually developed a doctrine of a party organization of intellectuals and advanced workers who could lead the proletariat into the revolution. A party distinct from the workers themselves becomes necessary to the extent that the workers are not the embodiment of pure negation posited in the Hegel essay discussed earlier. So far as the workers do have things of their own—and of course most workers were and are far from the destitute near-animals Marx had spoken of—they will be afflicted by the very same bourgeois passions and prejudices that move their rulers. As far as I know, Marx never confronted the reason for proletarian backwardness with the clarity that I have just stated it, but his doctrine of the party is implicitly addressed to this difficulty. The *Communist Manifesto* says that the party has “over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement” (*Marx*, p. 484). The party is the organizational embodiment of the philosophical truth announced in the Hegel essay, and it mediates between the isolated philosopher Marx in his study and the ignorant, unformed masses of the workers.

Since Marx never faced (except in passing) the degree to which the workers were infected by bourgeois passions or otherwise failed to develop real revolutionary ardor, he never had to conduct an explicit discussion of the gap between the workers and the communist party.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps Marx suppressed the problem for tactical reasons: he might have feared the charge of “Blanquism,” of forcing an elitist revolution from the top down onto an unwilling populace. Or perhaps he deceived himself by allowing his fervent hope for revolution to divert him from a cold reckoning with the fact of worker recalcitrance. In any event, Marx also avoided an account of the role of the party during and after a revolutionary seizure of power by the proletariat. There is a direct proportion between the strength of lingering bourgeois habits in the workers and the need for a philosophical elite to oversee the transition to communism. Marx’s silence

4. The expectations from communism in Plato’s *Republic* are less extravagant because Socrates is aware that nothing can change the private character of the body (*Republic* 464d).

5. *Discourse on Method*, Part 6.

6. He touches on the gap in “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League” (*Marx*, pp. 501–511) and in the circular letter “Der Generalrat an den Foederalrat der romanischen Schweiz” (“The General Council [of the International Workingman’s Association] to the Federal Council of Romance Switzerland,” 1870). *Marx and Engels, Werke*, XVI (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1964), pp. 386–387.

on this question provided a legitimate opening for Lenin, who was compelled to grapple with the fact, by the year 1900 obvious to everyone, of worker indifference to radical revolution.

The doctrines for which Marx is so famous—dialectical materialism, the internal contradictions of capitalism, the invariable stages of the history of economic development, the historical inevitability of revolution<sup>7</sup>—all these were part of Marx's articulation of the changing structure of material conditions that renders them ripe for revolution. Marx of course was convinced that the logic of the historical process points without question to man's ultimate liberation and socialization. But whenever a conflict arose between the details of any of these doctrines and the possibility of achieving the revolution in some other way, the doctrines were always the first to go. Just as the Hegel essay anticipates, the project for the emancipation of man is the core, and the material for its realization is only the periphery.

Evidence for this claim goes well beyond the notorious sketchiness and self-contradictions of Marx's written statements on many of his best-known doctrines.<sup>8</sup> It is simply this: during the last five years of his life, Marx explicitly and repeatedly jettisoned the "orthodox Marxism" of his earlier career, and he did so precisely with a view to Russia. Tibor Szamuely has summarized the relevant letters and statements of Marx on this topic in his fascinating study, *The Russian Tradition*.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout his life, Marx's opinions on Russia had been governed by this statement in the *Critique of Political Economy*: "No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have 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 itself" (*Marx*, p. 5). Since Russia was still mired in its feudal stage, no communist revolution could be expected until capitalism had fully developed. Engels' 1875 attack on Tkachev, undertaken at Marx's suggestion, was strictly orthodox. He ridiculed Tkachev for believing that Russia's tradition of the village commune (*obshchina*) could provide a unique occasion for bypassing the ravages of capitalism and proceeding directly to a socialist revolution (Szamuely, pp. 294–300).

But suddenly Marx changed his mind. In an 1881 letter to the Russian Marxist Vera Zasulich, he asserted that "there is no inevitability about a capitalist development in Russia—rather, the contrary." Further: "If the revolution takes place at the proper time, if it concentrates all its forces on assuming the untrammelled development of the village commune, then this latter would shortly become the basic feature of the rebirth of Russian society and the basic

7. Clear statements of these doctrines may be found in *Critique of Political Economy* (*Marx*, pp. 3–6), *The German Ideology* (*Marx*, pp. 148–163), *Capital* (*Marx*, pp. 294–302).

8. Kolakowski, pp. 325–334, 363–375.

9. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974.

feature of its superiority to the countries that remain under the yoke of capitalism" (Szamuely, pp. 378–379). Somewhat more cautiously, Marx repeated the point in his 1882 preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx, p. 472). Moreover, Marx threw his tactical support to the Russian Narodnaya Volya ("People's Will"), a conspiratorial terrorist organization aiming at a seizure of political power on behalf of the people. And after Marx's death in 1883 Engels carried on this new Marxism that anticipated revolution without broad participation by the proletariat or people. Russia, he said, "is one of those exceptional cases where a handful of people can *make* a revolution. . . . And if ever the Blanquist fantasy of convulsing an entire society by means of a small conspiracy had any chance of success then the place is undoubtedly Petersburg" (Szamuely, p. 402). Remarkably, this letter was written as a deliberate repudiation of Plekhanov, the founder of orthodox Marxism in Russia, who had been conscientiously applying the principles of Marxist fundamentalism to the Russian situation.

This revealing episode in the careers of Marx and Engels is typically suppressed or casually dismissed in scholarly as well as Soviet treatments of Marxism.<sup>10</sup> But Marx and Engels' reversal is so striking, and so enduring, that it cannot be ignored. They were clearly opposing their earlier revolutionary politics, which had apparently been "founded not on conspiracy but on the laws of historical development, encompassing not a small elite but the whole working class, directed not at a coup d'état but at a great popular socialist revolution" (Szamuely, p. 388). But of how much importance was the earlier "orthodox Marxism" to Marx himself? Evidently very little. Engels reports that in Marx's later years he was accustomed to say, with a view to the rapid popularization of orthodox Marxism, "In that case I know only that I am not a Marxist myself!" (Szamuely, p. 389).

For Marx the core was always the revolution. Everything else in his teaching was subject to revision. When prospects for a European upheaval began to disappear, especially after the utter failure of the Paris Commune in 1871, Marx began to lose heart (Szamuely, pp. 373–376). The dramatic successes of the Russian terrorists may have kindled in Marx a new hope, one which was not dependent on the unreliable industrial proletariat. His turn to the avowedly violent, elitist Narodnaya Volya is in an important sense a return to the original, radical Marx: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it."<sup>11</sup> If there was no present likelihood of revolution in Europe, Russia seemed to offer a new opportunity. If Marx had lived long enough, he might have elaborated the implications of his embrac-

10. Pointed out by Szamuely, pp. 371, 379, and 402. Examples: Kolakowski barely mentions it, p. 259; Tucker suppresses it in his selections "On Social Relations in Russia," *Marx*, pp. 665–675; Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx*, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 273–274, mentions the episode but passes it over with minimal comment.

11. "Theses on Feuerbach," no. 11, *Marx*, p. 145

ing the *Narodnaya Volya*, which certainly could have led to a reassessment of the revolutionary potential of the workers. Instead, after his death, the power of the orthodox doctrines that he had spelled out over so many years overwhelmed the lesser known, cautious steps he had taken more recently in a different direction.

However, the revolutionary heart of Marx, most visible in his earlier writings, but pulsing beneath the surface of all his works, endured. A kindred spirit was needed to revive this Marx from the detritus of his admirers and revisers. That spirit was Lenin.

## LENIN

*What Is to Be Done?* (1902), Lenin's most important book, puts forward a renewed revolutionary Marxism that frankly confronts the disappointingly non-revolutionary character of the working class in the late nineteenth century. Lenin argues that the workers are incapable of spontaneously developing true revolutionary consciousness and that a tightly organized, elite, conspiratorial Marxist party must therefore take upon itself the task of leading the workers to revolution.

The background of *What Is to Be Done?* is as follows. Marx's economic predictions had turned out to be simply incorrect. The growing "Industrial Reserve Army" of the unemployed, the declining rate of profit, the impoverishment of the workers, the collapse of a middle class between bourgeoisie and proletariat, the increasing radicalization of the workers<sup>12</sup>—none of these things had occurred or appeared likely to occur. Quite the contrary: profits were increasing, and so were workers' wages; unemployment was low; the middle class was growing; and workers were increasingly satisfied with their material circumstances. Where had Marx gone wrong?

Eduard Bernstein, whose *Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus* appeared in 1899, provided one response. Following Marx's own teaching that Marxism is a workers' movement, Bernstein argued that the workers' party, the Social Democrats, should follow the spontaneous desires of the workers for social and economic reforms, postponing indefinitely the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Bernstein's "revisionism" is, of course, the ancestor of today's European Socialist parties. Within Russia, Bernstein's views were adopted by a portion of the Social-Democratic party that became known as "Economists."

Lenin directs most of his fire in *What Is to Be Done?* against this heresy of Economism. By abandoning the destruction of capitalism, under which men can never be free, he argues, the Economists have abandoned Marxism. Lenin's alternative has two principles: (1) the revolutionary consciousness which the

12. These claims are advanced in *Capital* and the *Communist Manifesto*.

intellectuals already possess will never be attained by the workers through the spontaneous development of working-class anger in the historical dialectic; (2) the party is the instrument for the formation, preservation, and dissemination of that consciousness. Lenin reaches his first principle through the observation that by themselves, spontaneously, the workers can only achieve trade union consciousness (concerned with wages, job security, unemployment compensation, and the like) and not revolutionary consciousness (which seeks to destroy capitalism root and branch). Left to themselves, the workers will be dominated by the regnant bourgeois ideology (chapter 2). They will only become revolutionary when the intellectuals, armed with Marxist theory, come into active contact with them. Hence the central importance of agitation and propaganda. The vehicle of this activity is the party.

The teaching on the party is Lenin's second principle. There is an essential difference, he insists, between an organization of workers and an organization of revolutionaries (chapter 4). A trade union must be large and open to all workers. But a revolutionary organization must be small, secret, and conspiratorial. It is essential that those in the party know what they are about, and they can only do so if they are thoroughly educated in the tenets of Marxism. Most workers are not. Talent and intelligence are rare qualities, and they are indispensable for effective revolutionaries. Only dedicated, educated, full-time professionals can form the proletariat into a revolutionary class, and only they will be immune from the insidious effects of bourgeois ideology. There is no place for freedom of criticism within the party (chapter 1): since the party professionals are already in possession of the truth, freedom to criticize amounts to freedom to advocate bourgeois ideology. Nor should the party be democratic: only those who know the truth are qualified to determine its leadership and membership. Finally, the party organization must be tightly centralized so that there will be no confusion about the mission to be accomplished or the means to be adopted.

There is no doubt that Lenin in *What Is to Be Done?* goes well beyond Marx's explicit statements. But there is also no doubt that he is responding here to a very real problem for orthodox Marxism, namely worker indifference to the revolution, in the spirit of the young (and old) Marx. The primacy of consciousness over the spontaneous historical process goes back to Marx's initial assertions in the Hegel essay. There he presented himself as a philosopher whose conclusions compelled him to look for a historical, empirical vehicle for the realization of his theory. And Lenin's doctrine of the party follows from the discovery of worker recalcitrance. In the face of that recalcitrance, Lenin appropriately turns to an organization that will institutionalize Marx's insight and infuse it into the proletariat. The temporary split between Marxist intellectuals and actual workers had already been noted by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* and the *Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League*. Lenin faced that difference squarely and proceeded to think

through what kind of party would be needed to close the split. The historical facts at the turn of the century were such that either the core of Marx had to go, or the periphery. Lenin jettisoned the periphery, Bernstein the core.

Lenin, however, did not want to reject Marx's teaching on capitalism. He tried to preserve it in the face of the manifest continuing strength of capitalism by attributing that strength to the export of finance capital to the countries and colonies of what is now called the "third world." The super-profits gained through this *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (as he entitled his book published in 1917), enabled the European bourgeoisie to bribe its proletariat into contented submission. His argument contains the germ of the now familiar Soviet claim of Western exploitation of the third world, and it even suggests the inference that entire countries can stand to other countries in the relation of bourgeoisie to proletariat.<sup>13</sup> This clever revision certainly cannot claim to represent orthodox Marxism. But again, it modifies obviously false Marxist dogma in the spirit of Marx's teaching that the material conditions are becoming ripe for revolutionary upheaval.

In *Imperialism* Lenin followed Marx in his quest for a dialectical-materialist historical process that would guarantee the overthrow of capitalism and the transition to socialism. Therefore his overall teaching, like Marx's, suffers from a tension between its philosophical-voluntarist core and its apparently determinist periphery. Also like Marx, Lenin never satisfactorily explained the relation between the two strains in his thought. And finally, both men turned away from determinism when they dealt with the Russian situation, Marx in his support of Narodnaya Volya, Lenin during the actual experience of the Russian revolution, as we will now see.

Lenin takes the final step in his extension of Marx to cover the actual condition of the workers in "*Left-Wing*" *Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. Written in 1920, during the third year of Bolshevik rule in Russia, it reflects the harsh lessons of the revolution. Lenin learned that his earlier account of the workers' consciousness was if anything too optimistic. They are not only indifferent to revolution; they oppose it. To some extent the workers are positively reactionary (*Lenin*, pp. 573-575). Although industrial capitalism has been abolished in Russia and all the landlords and capitalists have been killed or driven out, the bourgeoisie is stronger after the revolution than before it (pp. 552-553). The class struggle will continue "for years after the proletariat's conquest of power" (p. 569). The institutions of capitalism were easy to overthrow, but two stubborn obstacles remain: (1) "force of habit," the powerful attachment to "the forces and traditions of the old society" (p. 569), and (2) "small-scale production," which continues "spontaneously and on a mass scale" (p. 553). Lenin calls "habit" what we referred to earlier as "bourgeois passions," the inclination of people to acquire, love, and defend what is their own

13. *The Lenin Anthology*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1975), pp. 251-259. Hereafter referred to as *Lenin*.

to the exclusion of others in the community. Springing from and reinforcing this “force of habit in millions and tens of millions” are “millions upon millions of petty proprietors” and “small commodity producers” whose private mode of production continues to foster the nonsocialist habits that stand in the way of the transition to communism (pp. 569–570). “Small-scale production” presumably includes everything from helping a neighbor mend a fence to raising vegetables in a private garden. Since the workers (and *a fortiori* the rest of the people) “can (and must) be remolded and re-educated only by very prolonged, slow, cautious organizational work,” the party must continue to rule dictatorially on behalf of the workers just as it earlier took the lead in making the revolution (p. 569). “The force of habit of millions and tens of millions is a most formidable force,” and only “absolute centralization and rigorous discipline in the proletariat,” supervised by the vigilant class consciousness of the proletarian vanguard of intellectuals, can bring the revolution to ultimate success (pp. 553–569). This process will take “very many years” (p. 574). The “proletarian vanguard,” Lenin admits, is the Politburo of the party, consisting of Lenin and a handful of close colleagues (p. 572). We may infer that the tenacity and breadth of lingering bourgeois habits, which Lenin apparently did not foresee, led him to this logical restriction of revolutionary authority to the small body of unquestionably trustworthy and enlightened officials at the head of the party. Lenin’s unbreakable faith in Marx’s vision of emancipated humanity at the end of the struggle permitted him no other solution. He is simply extending the principle of *What Is to Be Done?*, namely, that those who possess the philosophic wisdom concerning what is to be done must exclude others from power to the extent that those others remain unenlightened and tainted by bourgeois ideology. The stronger the bourgeois “force of habit,” the smaller and more despotic must be the governing organization of revolutionaries. Against such immense resistance, against the disheartening appearance that human nature remains the same after the revolution as before it, only the wisest and firmest men can be entrusted with the terribly difficult mission of leading mankind to communism. With Stalin we reach the end of this road: in the face of such tremendous opposition, both within and without the Soviet Union, only one man, the wisest and strongest of all, can be entrusted with the task of building socialism.

Lenin is sometimes reproached for vulgarizing Marx, making him crude, blurring his philosophical subtleties because of his own preoccupation with the revolution.<sup>14</sup> This charge is, in one sense, self-refuting: Marx’s “philosophy” means nothing if not the union of theory and practice. It is true that Lenin’s incessant refrain of “revolution, revolution” appears rather crude in contrast with Marx’s wide-ranging and sophisticated interests. Lenin’s insistence on the

14. *Lenin*, p. xlvi; see the remarks of Kolakowski on what he calls Lenin’s “excursion into philosophy,” *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. II: *The Golden Age*, pp. 447–458 (although Kolakowski’s general assessment of Lenin’s relation to Marx is close to my own: pp. 381–384).

impossibility of separating philosophy from practice may, however, show him to be a more consistent Marxist than Marx himself. Nor can Lenin's understanding of the fundamentals of Marxism be faulted. If anything, he correctly drew the conclusions about the role of the party that Marx approached but never really faced—and which were certainly implicit, at least for the Russian situation, in his post-1877 embrace of the *Narodnaya Volya*. The real “vulgarizers” are those scholars who miss the central point of Marx's life when they appeal to the superiority of pristine theory over rude practice. In this opinion they show that they are still unawares under the spell of the older view, repudiated by Marx, that philosophical insight is higher than and separate from political action.

Likewise, it is often asserted that Lenin's real roots are to be found in “the native Russian, non-Marxist revolutionary tradition,” and indirectly in the “Russian autocratic tradition” of the Tsars, onto which he engrafted his own highly idiosyncratic brand of Marxism.<sup>15</sup> In the first place, the nineteenth-century Russian revolutionaries, far from arising spontaneously from native soil, were inspired by the French Revolution (whence the name “Russian Jacobinism”) and by the radical socialist tendency in French and German philosophy. And beginning with Tkachev in the 1850s, these revolutionaries were directly influenced by Marx himself.<sup>16</sup> *Narodnaya Volya* explicitly held Marx in high regard (Szamuely, pp. 381–384). The extent of Marx's effect on Russian socialists who were not orthodox Marxists has not been properly appreciated, partly because Marxist historians have vigorously denied it, and Western scholars have generally accepted that denial (Szamuely, pp. 319, 382).

Second, the alleged Russian tradition of autocracy has been much exaggerated. Religious and political customs restrained the authority of the Tsars, and by the eve of World War I there was a considerable degree of political and private liberty in Russia.<sup>17</sup> Certainly old Russia had its share of cruel monarchs; but so did England and France. Peter the Great, who is often singled out as the exemplary Russian autocrat, hated the Russian traditions he inherited, and he tried to destroy them by whatever means he could; in return, Peter was “probably personally the most hated of all Russian Tsars.”<sup>18</sup> After Lenin seized power by force of arms in 1917, he was compelled to employ “organized, systematic mass terror” in order to secure his dictatorship against

15. Tucker, in *Lenin*, pp. xxvi and xxxiii; on Lenin's debt to Tkachev, see also David Shub, *Lenin: A Biography*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 73.

16. Szamuely, pp. 194–195, 233, 289. Although Szamuely makes every effort to minimize the connection between the Russian revolutionary tradition and its European antecedents, the evidence he presents rather supports the opposite view.

17. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Mortal Danger: How Misconceptions about Russia Imperil America* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1981), pp. 14–16. This book is a healthy antidote to the widespread tendency in Western scholarship to attribute the evils of Soviet politics to the Russian heritage rather than to Marxism.

18. Szamuely, pp. 92–110, whose evidence contradicts his contention that Peter was merely a variant on an older Russian despotic tradition.

the opposition and then open revolt of “every stratum of the Russian people” (Shub, pp. 348, 353).

We have shown in what sense Lenin was a Marxist. It should now be evident that the government of the Soviet Union, including and especially the reign of Stalin, has remained faithful to the fundamental goal of Marx: the transformation of the human condition through revolutionary action. After 1917, now that the dictatorship of the proletariat or rather of its vanguard has become actual, the manifest persistence of bourgeois habits and ideas must somehow be dealt with. So the violence praised by Marx in the Hegel essay as the embodiment of reason becomes applied not only against former members of the bourgeoisie, but also against those workers (and others) who continue to be corrupted by the old ways. Even party members, who fervently profess their Marxism, are suspect, for their ranks are shot through with place-seekers and men ambitious for private gain. Hence violence may have to be used against them as well. In fact, insofar as anyone in the society still partakes of the old, bourgeois passions, the chief of which is the desire to have things of one’s own apart from the community, all men are enemies of the people and are legitimately subject to despotic treatment as long as those passions endure.

The despotism and wholesale violence of Marxism in practice arise not in spite of but because of the high ideals of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. The Bernsteinian revisionists and other “soft” Marxists<sup>19</sup> who lowered their sights became good parliamentary democrats. Radical Marxism maintains that what was traditionally called human nature is changeable—“man makes himself”—and that man can and will become a wholly social, communal being, leaving behind forever his private passions and concerns. All can live together in harmony and peace. If Marxism is right, mankind should pay any price and bear any burden in order to bring about this millennium. To accept and to accommodate man’s selfishness and other present limitations would be a betrayal of humanity. The ignorant, reactionary masses must be compelled for their own good to adopt the ideas and attitudes that will make possible the eventual transition to pure communism. The ruling wise men or man must stop at nothing to eradicate the remaining bourgeois passions and ideology, especially if education and propaganda alone have not yielded their expected result. If the current governments of the Soviet Union and China appear moderate in contrast with the Maoist and Stalinist periods, that is perhaps only because the party officials fear that they, like Stalin’s underlings, might well be caught in the whirlwind—or else because they have tacitly abandoned their Marxist faith.

But what if the premise of Marxism is wrong? What if ambition, the desire for private gain, and the irrational preference for one’s own are sown in the

19. The expression is from Bertram D. Wolfe, *Three Who Made a Revolution*, 4th ed. rev. (New York: Dell Delta, 1964), p. 157.

nature of man? What if the love of immortality and truth, man's deepest longing, issues in an activity that can be shared only by a few thoughtful friends—an activity that, when politicized, never escapes the despotism of authoritative opinion from which it begins? If these things are so, a Marxist-Leninist political regime will always be in a state of cold or hot war against the most powerful as well as the most noble propensities of the people, who will forever be hiding their true concerns from the party's watchful eye. The supposedly wise rulers will tyrannize over a permanently "reactionary" populace. These rulers will consist of a fanatical minority that, like Lenin, places its faith in the illusory promise of the eventual total liberation of humanity; a larger group consisting of those giving mouth-loyalty to Marxism for the sake of the private profit or honor that comes from offices of political power; and the largest group, those who are mixtures of these two qualities.

Marxism-Leninism exercises a tremendous attraction over Westerners disgusted by the crass display of greed and self-indulgence unleashed by modern liberalism. It also appeals strongly to non-Westerners who, having seen their own traditions corroded by Western skepticism and freedom, and wishing to vent their inchoate resentment over this loss, enviously desire to pull down those who have profited under the post-traditional liberty and gladly embrace a "scientific" rationalization for their own despotic passions. Marxism is also impressively backed by the authority and might of the Soviet Union, now emerging as the world's most powerful nation. In light of these facts, the most urgent theoretical question of our time is the question concerning the nature of man. For unless this question is answered, we will not know whether Marxism-Leninism is mankind's best hope or a monstrous injustice.

But we are not entirely in the dark about this question. For our own Declaration of Independence epitomizes, according to its author, the thought of a long tradition of political philosophy stretching back to Cicero and Aristotle.<sup>20</sup> That tradition, whatever its disagreements, teaches men to respect and to cultivate their reason yet without forgetting the limits forever imposed on reason by the human passions. A return to the classical roots of free government will enable us confidently to oppose the radical prescriptions of Marxism-Leninism in argument and in action.

20. Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825.