

1. REPUDIATING ECONOMISM AND BERNSTEINISM

THE STRATEGIC REVOLUTIONARY TASK OF THE PROLETARIAT

Lenin was still in his youth when he embarked on the revolutionary road in the late 1880s. Russia was then under the brutal, reactionary rule of tsarist autocracy. The labouring masses, the workers and peasants, were cruelly exploited and deprived of all political rights. The proletariat, which grew with the development of capitalism, began to organize mass strikes. These were the circumstances in which Marxism began to spread in Russia and the first Marxist circles came into being. But these Marxist circles had very few connections with the working-class movement, and were not yet aware of the necessity of conducting propaganda and agitation among the workers. The basic, immediate task of the Russian Marxists then was to unite socialism with the working-class movement and weld the scattered Marxist circles into a united workers' party. The next steps would be to lead the proletariat to overthrow the tsarist autocracy, to bring about the socialist revolution and to build a socialist society.

Among the Russian Marxists at that time, the great Lenin was the one with the profoundest and clearest understanding of these historical tasks. In 1894, he wrote

“What the ‘Friends of the People’ Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats¹”, in which he said:

When its advanced representatives have mastered the ideas of scientific socialism, the idea of the historical role of the Russian worker, when these ideas become widespread, and when stable organisations are formed among the workers to transform the workers’ present sporadic economic war into conscious class struggle — then the Russian **WORKER**, rising at the head of all the democratic elements, will overthrow absolutism and lead the **RUSSIAN PROLETARIAT** (side by side with the proletariat of **ALL COUNTRIES**) *along the straight road of open political struggle to* **THE VICTORIOUS COMMUNIST REVOLUTION.**²

This was the strategic revolutionary task which Lenin very explicitly placed before the Russian proletariat and the Marxists, and he waged a bitter struggle against all anti-Marxist trends for its realization.

Narodism was then the chief obstacle to the spread of Marxism and the founding of a Marxist workers’ party. It denied the inevitability of capitalism developing in Russia, refused to recognize the proletariat as the most advanced and most revolutionary class, and despised the great strength of the masses and preached individual terrorism. Plekhanov and his Emancipation of Labour group dealt a decisive blow to the Narodniks, but the destruction of Narodism in the ideological field was far from complete. This task fell to Lenin. In his work “What the ‘Friends of the People’ Are and How They

¹ At that time “Social-Democrats” was the name used by the Communists. — *Tr.*

² *Collected Works*, Moscow, Vol. 1, p. 300.

Fight the Social-Democrats”, Lenin thoroughly refuted the theories and political programme of the Narodniks, expounded the theory that the proletariat is the most advanced and revolutionary class in society, and for the first time advanced the idea of an alliance between the Russian workers and peasants as the principal means of overthrowing tsardom, the landlords and the bourgeoisie. He pointed out that the Narodniks of the nineties had renounced revolutionary struggle against the tsarist government and had begun to preach reconciliation with it, and that far from being the “friends of the people”, they were in fact spokesmen of the kulaks.

Lenin smashed Narodist ideology. He also made a thorough critique of “legal Marxism”. The “legal Marxists” tried to use the fight against Narodism to subordinate the working-class movement to the interests of the bourgeoisie. Peter Struve, a prominent “legal Marxist”, was an apologist for capitalism which he extolled; he urged that “we acknowledge our lack of culture and go to capitalism for schooling”. Lenin pointed out that these “legal Marxists” were bourgeois liberals who were trying to change Marxism into bourgeois reformism, ignored class contradictions and renounced the theory of proletarian revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

THE FIGHT AGAINST ECONOMISM WITH ITS WORSHIP
OF SPONTANEITY AND ITS OBSESSION
WITH ECONOMIC STRUGGLES

The successor to “legal Marxism” was economism, which in turn became prevalent. In 1897 Lenin was sent into exile by the tsarist government to a remote village

in Siberia. He closely followed the activities of the "Economists". In 1899 a group of "Economists" issued a manifesto, in which they maintained that the workers should engage only in economic struggles and leave political struggles to the bourgeois liberals, and they opposed the founding of a political party of the proletariat. When Lenin read this manifesto, he called a meeting of the Marxist political exiles living in the vicinity, who adopted "A Protest by Russian Social-Democrats" which Lenin drafted. Subsequently, he wrote a series of articles including "Our Programme" and "A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social-Democracy". After his term of exile ended, Lenin went abroad and in 1902 completed his famous work "What Is to Be Done?". In these writings he sharply denounced the "Economists" for their betrayal of Marxism and called on Marxists to wage a resolute struggle against them, to establish a revolutionary political party of the proletariat and to conduct political struggle against tsarism.

The fundamental error of the "Economists" was their subservience to the spontaneity of the working-class movement. They believed that an independent ideology could arise of itself out of the working-class movement. They accused the Marxists of "belittling the significance of the objective or the spontaneous element of development", "overrating the importance of ideology" and exaggerating the role of the conscious element. Lenin argued that socialist ideology cannot be formulated spontaneously by the working masses, and, by their own efforts alone, they are able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions and fight the employers and to compel the government to pass necessary legislation, etc.

Socialist ideology can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge and is introduced to the workers from without. The workers very readily accept socialism because of their social status. However, bourgeois ideology is far older in origin than socialist ideology, is more fully developed and has at its disposal immeasurably more means of dissemination. Therefore, in opposing the inculcation of a scientific socialist consciousness into the workers, the "Economists" were in fact helping the bourgeoisie to spread their ideological influence. Lenin wrote:

Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the *only* choice is—either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course. . . . Hence, to belittle the socialist ideology *in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree* means to strengthen bourgeois ideology.¹

He also said:

. . . *all* worship of the spontaneity of the working-class movement, all belittling of the role of "the conscious element", of the role of Social-Democracy, *means, quite independently of whether he who belittles that role desires it or not, a strengthening of the influence of bourgeois ideology upon the workers.*²

Lenin pointed out that to belittle the role of revolutionary theory and of the Party would result in burying the revolutionary movement of the proletariat, because "there

¹"What Is to Be Done?", *Collected Works*, Moscow, Vol. 5, p. 384.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 382-83.

can be no strong socialist party without a revolutionary theory",¹ and "without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement".²

The "Economists" asserted that the watchword for the working-class movement was "Struggle for economic conditions", that a kopek added to a ruble was worth more than any socialism or politics, and that when the workers fought, they must know that "they are fighting, not for the sake of some future generation, but for themselves and their children".³ To defend themselves the "Economists" argued that "according to the theories of Marx and Engels the economic interests of certain classes play a decisive role in history, and, *consequently*, . . . particularly the proletariat's struggle for its economic interests must be of paramount importance in its class development and struggle for emancipation".⁴ Refuting these arguments Lenin said:

The fact that economic interests play a decisive role *does not in the least imply* that the economic (i.e., trade-union) struggle is of prime importance; for the most essential, the "decisive" interests of classes can be satisfied *only* by radical *political* changes in general. In particular the fundamental economic interests of the proletariat can be satisfied only by a political revolution that will replace the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie by the dictatorship of the proletariat.⁵

¹"Our Programme", *Collected Works*, Moscow, Vol. 4, p. 211.

²"What Is to Be Done?", *op. cit.*, p. 369.

³Quoted by Lenin in "What Is to Be Done?", *ibid.*, p. 381.

⁴*Ibid.*, footnote on p. 390.

⁵*Ibid.*, footnote on pp. 390-91.

To confine the task of the proletariat to the economic struggle meant to confine the workers to the position of eternal slavery, unable to rid themselves of tsarist autocracy and bury capitalism. This, of course, did not in any sense mean that Marxists should belittle the significance of economic struggles. Lenin pointed out that the Social-Democrats must organize working-class economic struggles. "But to forget the political struggle for the economic would mean to depart from the basic principle of international Social-Democracy, it would mean to forget what the entire history of the labour movement teaches us."¹ For Social-Democracy to confine its activity to the economic struggle was tantamount to political suicide. "There is not and never has been a Social-Democracy anywhere in the world that is not inseparably and indivisibly bound up with the political struggle. Social-Democracy without the political struggle is a river without water. . . ."²

It was true that the "Economists" did not exclude politics altogether. They even spoke about the necessity of "lending the economic struggle itself a political character". But as Lenin pointed out:

. . . the pompous phrase about "lending the economic struggle *itself* a political character", which sounds so "terrifically" profound and revolutionary, serves as a screen to conceal what is in fact the traditional striving to *degrade* Social-Democratic politics to the level of trade-union politics.³

¹"Our Programme", *op. cit.*, p. 212.

²"Apropos of the *Profession de foi*", *Collected Works*, Moscow, Vol. 4, p. 287.

³"What Is to Be Done?", *op. cit.*, p. 405.

Trade Union politics worked to improve the conditions of labour through "legislative and administrative measures" without touching the capitalist system. As Lenin said, they were the bourgeois politics of the working class and very, very far from socialist. The revolutionary Social-Democratic Party always included the struggle for reforms among its activities, but the workers were not "children to be fed on the thin gruel of 'economic' politics alone". It was necessary to raise the initial political consciousness the workers acquired in economic struggles to the height of socialist, political consciousness and to subordinate the partial struggle for reforms to the entire revolutionary struggle for freedom and socialism.

In matters of organization, the worship of spontaneity was manifested in the praise lavished by the "Economists" on the prevailing organizational disunity, and in the clannish outlook of the Marxist circles and their amateurishness. Since the "Economists" insisted that the task of the proletariat was merely to wage economic struggles against the employers and the government, they saw no need to establish a national, centralized, revolutionary organization. Lenin gave a profound explanation of why it was necessary to establish a centralized, united, revolutionary party of the proletariat. He said, "... the spontaneous struggle of the proletariat will not become its genuine 'class struggle' until this struggle is led by a strong organisation of revolutionaries."¹ He declared, "Give us an organisation of revolutionaries, and we will overturn Russia!"²

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 475.

² *Ibid.*, p. 467.

In his struggle against the "Economists", Lenin systematically clarified the relationship between political and economic struggle, and showed the decisive role of political struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat. He raised the role of theory and the role of the Party to their proper level, and expounded the fundamental thesis that the Party is the product of the integration of the working-class movement with scientific socialism.

THE OPPORTUNISTS OF ALL COUNTRIES PRAISE
EACH OTHER AND COME OUT TOGETHER
AGAINST MARXISM

Economism was the Russian variety of Bernsteinism. While criticizing Economism, Lenin also criticized Bernsteinism.

The German Social-Democrat Bernstein was the first to give full and integral expression to "revision" of the fundamental theories of Marxism. In 1896-98 he published a series of articles under the general title "Problems of Socialism". In 1899 these articles appeared in a book entitled *The Premises of Socialism and the Tasks of Social-Democracy*. In these articles Bernstein opposed proletarian revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Millerand, a leader of the French Socialist Party, provided an "excellent example" of practical Bernsteinism, for he joined the reactionary, bourgeois cabinet of which General Gallifet, the butcher of the Communards, was also a member. Opportunists sprang up everywhere in the international working-class movement as opponents of the revolutionaries. Lenin considered the revolutionaries and the opportunists among the pro-

letariat comparable to the Jacobins and the Girondists in the French revolution of the 18th century. He said:

. . . the strife of the various trends within the socialist movement has from national become international. . . the English Fabians, the French Ministerialists, the German Bernsteinians, and the Russian Critics — all belong to the same family, all extol each other, learn from each other, and together take up arms against “dogmatic” Marxism.¹

He said further:

Hitherto the doctrines of Marx and Engels were considered to be the firm foundation of revolutionary theory, but voices are now being raised everywhere to proclaim these doctrines inadequate and obsolete.²

The Bernsteinians proclaimed that it was necessary to “renovate” Marxism. How did they do it? In his *The Premises of Socialism and the Tasks of Social-Democracy* Bernstein put forward the following views:

1. “. . . I do not . . . make the victory of socialism dependent upon its ‘imminent economic necessity’, but on the contrary hold it to be neither possible nor necessary to give it a purely materialistic justification.”³

2. “Either a relatively growing decrease in the number of capitalists and an increasing wealth in the proletariat, or a numerous middle class — these are the only

¹ *Ibid.*, footnote on pp. 352-53.

² “Our Programme”, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

³ Bernstein, *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie*, I. H. W. Dietz Nachf. G.m.b.H., Berlin, p. 246.

alternatives which the continued increase of production allows.”¹

3. “. . . the enormously increased wealth of the European states, in conjunction with the elasticity of the modern credit system and the rise of industrial Kartels, has so limited the reacting force of local or individual disturbances that, at least for some time, general commercial crises similar to the earlier ones are to be regarded as improbable.”² “. . . there is no urgent reason for concluding that such a crisis will come to pass for purely economic reasons.”³

4. “. . . the more the political organizations of modern nations are democratized the more the needs and opportunities of great political catastrophes are diminished.”⁴ “. . . social democracy would flourish far better by lawful than by unlawful means and by violent revolution.”⁵

5. “. . . the movement means everything for me and that what is usually called ‘the final aim of socialism’ is nothing. . . .”⁶

As soon as he had read Bernstein’s book, Lenin wrote angrily:

. . . its contents amaze us more and more. Theoretically — incredibly weak; repetition of other people’s ideas. Phrases about criticism, and not even an attempt at serious and independent criticism. In practice

¹ Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, London, p. 50.

² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

— opportunism . . . unlimited opportunism and possibilism, and *cowardly* opportunism, at that. . . . One can hardly doubt that it will be a fiasco.¹

Commenting on Bernstein's "new" arguments and reasonings, Lenin said:

Denied was the possibility of putting socialism on a scientific basis and of demonstrating its necessity and inevitability from the point of view of the materialist conception of history. Denied was the fact of growing impoverishment, the process of proletarianisation, and the intensification of capitalist contradictions; the very concept, "*ultimate aim*", was declared to be unsound, and the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat was completely rejected. Denied was the antithesis in principle between liberalism and socialism. Denied was *the theory of the class struggle*, on the alleged grounds that it could not be applied to a strictly democratic society governed according to the will of the majority, etc.²

The essence of Bernsteinism was an attempt to tamper with the theory of Marxism and to vulgarize it, to substitute reforms for revolutionary struggle and to turn the revolutionary party of the workers into a reformist party.

Lenin made a penetrating analysis of the relationship between reform and revolution. He said:

Revolutionaries, of course, will never reject the struggle for reforms, the struggle to capture even minor and unimportant enemy positions, *if* these will serve

¹"To M. A. Uliyanova", *Collected Works*, 4th Russian ed., Moscow, Vol. 37, p. 209.

²"What Is to Be Done?", *op. cit.*, p. 353.

to strengthen the attack and help to achieve full victory. But they will never forget that sometimes the enemy himself surrenders a certain position in order to disunite the attacking party and thus to defeat it more easily. They will never forget that only by constantly having the "ultimate aim" in view, only by appraising every step of the "movement" and every reform from the point of view of the general revolutionary struggle, is it possible to guard the movement against false steps and shameful mistakes.¹

In his article "Our Programme", Lenin solemnly declared:

We take our stand entirely on the Marxist theoretical position. . . . It made clear the real task of a revolutionary socialist party: not to draw up plans for re-fashioning society, not to preach to the capitalists and their hangers-on about improving the lot of the workers, not to hatch conspiracies, *but to organise the class struggle of the proletariat and to lead this struggle, the ultimate aim of which is the conquest of political power by the proletariat and the organisation of a socialist society.*²

Lenin showed up the Bernsteinians' threadbare arguments about the so-called "renovation" of Marxism and "freedom of criticism". Their "renovation" of Marxism was in fact nothing but fragments of backward theory borrowed from the bourgeois press, "the theory of concession — concession to the most vicious enemies of the

¹"The Persecutors of the Zemstvo and the Hannibals of Liberalism", *Collected Works*, Moscow, Vol. 5, p. 74.

²*Collected Works*, Moscow, Vol. 4, pp. 210-11.

proletariat, the governments and bourgeois parties who never tire of seeking new means of baiting the socialists".¹ The "freedom of criticism" of Marxism that they demanded was actually the freedom from all integral and deeply thought-out theory and the freedom to introduce bourgeois ideology into the socialist movement. Their opposition to "dogmatism" and "ossification of thought" was simply a cover to hide their theoretical impotence, an anti-Marxist tactic. Lenin said:

What a handy little word "dogma" is! One need only slightly twist an opposing theory, cover up this twist with the bogey of "dogma" — and there you are!²

He went on to say:

The shouts will rise that we want to convert the socialist party into an order of "true believers" that persecutes "heretics" for deviations from "dogma," for every independent opinion, and so forth. We know about all these fashionable and trenchant phrases. Only there is not a grain of truth or sense in them.³

Lenin ruthlessly combated revisionism and defended the purity of Marxism. At the same time, he held that it was necessary to study Marxism in a creative way and to enrich it with the practical experience of revolutionary struggle. He said:

We do not regard Marx's theory as something completed and inviolable; on the contrary, we are convinced that it has only laid the foundation stone of the

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

² "Revolutionary Adventurism", *Collected Works*, Moscow, Vol. 6, p. 197.

³ "Our Programme", *op. cit.*, p. 211.

science which socialists *must* develop in all directions if they wish to keep pace with life.¹

He stressed the "*independent* elaboration of Marx's theory", because "this theory provides only general *guiding* principles, which, *in particular*, are applied in England differently than in France, in France differently than in Germany, and in Germany differently than in Russia".²

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 211-12.

² *Ibid.*, p. 212.