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George Plekhanov and the Marxist Turn in Russia

Christopher Read

The desire to work among the people and for the people, the certitude that 'the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves' – this practical tendency of our Narodism is just as dear to me as it used to be. But its theoretical propositions seem to me, indeed, erroneous in many respects. Years of life abroad and attentive study of the social question have convinced me that the triumph of a spontaneous popular movement similar to Stepan Razin's revolt or the Peasant Wars in Germany cannot satisfy the social and political needs of modern Russia, that the old forms of our national life carried within them many germs of their disintegration and that they cannot 'develop into a higher communist form' except under the immediate influence of a strong and well-organised workers' socialist party. For that reason I think that besides fighting absolutism the Russian revolutionaries must strive at least to work out the elements for the establishment of such a party in the future. In this creative work they will necessarily have to pass on to the basis of modern socialism, for the ideals of Zemlya i Volya do not correspond to the condition of the industrial workers. And that will be very opportune now that the theory of Russian exceptionalism is becoming synonymous with stagnation and reaction and that the progressive elements of Russian society are grouping under the banner of judicious 'Occidentalism' ...

Moreover, the so-called terrorist movement has opened a new epoch in the development of our revolutionary party – the epoch of conscious political struggle against the government. This change in the direction of our revolutionaries' work makes it necessary for them to reconsider all views that they inherited from the preceding period. Life demands that we attentively reconsider all our intellectual stock-in-trade when we step on to new ground.¹

George Plekhanov's pamphlet *Socialism and Political Struggle* (1883), together with its sister publication *Our Differences* (1885), stand at multiple intersections. They were written at a decisive moment, first in the evolution of Russia's political history, second in the development of Marxism in Russia and beyond and third at a critical point in Plekhanov's life (1856–1918). All three aspects interacted with each other. Plekhanov was well aware of the multiple turning points. In his own words, the 'change in the direction of our revolutionaries' work makes it necessary for them to reconsider all views that they inherited from the preceding period. Life demands that we attentively reconsider all our intellectual stock-in-trade when we step on to new ground.² The remainder of the extract above summarized the new direction. What had brought about this moment of change and what was Plekhanov's response?

On 13 March 1881, Tsar Alexander II, initiator of the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and an ensuing set of reforms of the judicial system, army service and local administration, was mortally wounded by the second of two bombs thrown at his carriage. The assassination was hardly surprising. It followed several near-misses in the preceding three years. Members of the leading terrorist group, *Narodnaya volya* (The People's Will), had blown up a reception room in the Winter Palace, derailed a royal train and tunnelled under the main thoroughfare in St Petersburg, Nevsky Prospekt, filled it with explosives and waited for the tsar to pass over the spot. But it was, as the terrorists intended, a shock. However, it was not the shock they had planned for. Their motives were complex but a key notion was that, by cutting down figures of authority, with the tsar as the ultimate target, the terrorists would encourage the downtrodden peasantry, deceived by the false promises of emancipation since it brought them not the desired land so much as debt, to take action against their local tyrants. Instead, the peasantry were confused, and to no little extent horrified, by the ghastly death of the omnipotent, but not invulnerable, autocrat. If anything they were sympathetic to the dead tsar and his family.

Alexander's son and heir, Alexander III, and his entourage believed the root cause of the assassination was an excess of reform and they set about undoing what they saw as the damage which had been done. Limited concessions to noble and elite representation were reversed. Under the lugubrious and reactionary gaze of the Procurator of the Holy Synod, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, a policy of 'russifying' the empire was undertaken to quash the recalcitrant minorities. Pogroms were set up against Jews. From the revolutionary perspective, two decades of expansion had come to a halt and for more than ten years the movement was moribund.³

In his 25,000-word pamphlet of 1883, Plekhanov became one of the first to take stock of the situation and laid out directions which influenced the Russian revolutionary movement for a generation. Plekhanov himself had followed the trajectory of that movement. To simplify, it had come of age in the 1860s, fuelled by disappointment at the limited scope of reform. In particular, nothing was done to even hint at a constitution and modification of the outworn and increasingly anachronistic autocratic system. Incredibly, even into the twentieth century, Russia had wide-ranging censorship, complete bans on all political parties, no legal form of politics and no national assembly even for the elite. Activist intellectuals in the 1860s were outraged at the absence of any progress in this direction. Many turned to revolution as the only solution. However, it was soon realized that a small group of angry intellectuals would carry no political weight. The solution appeared to be to take up the cause of the peasantry, Russia's vast majority. In the words of the first teacher of the movement, Peter Lavrov (1823–1900), they would become the 'mind, honour and conscience' of the Russian people.⁴ The new tendency became known as populists (*narodniki* in Russian). At first, under the guidance of Peter Lavrov, they thought it would be sufficient to propagandize the peasants by explaining their revolutionary strategies to them. For a variety of reasons this had failed to excite peasant discontent by the mid-1870s. Some populists believed it was necessary to simply carry on over a much longer period. Land and Liberty, a small breakaway group, including Plekhanov, thought otherwise. A bolder, more dramatic effort was, they argued, to include, in limited circumstances, terror. It was in the wake of the failure of this second strategy by 1881 that Plekhanov came to his re-evaluation and move to new principles.

The extract above, by which Plekhanov introduced his contribution to what he called the reconsideration of all inherited views, encapsulates his response. The key propositions are: (i) to retain the concept that the working masses will achieve their own emancipation; (ii) a spontaneous peasant uprising⁵ such as that the narodniks had worked for would not take place; (iii) it was necessary to form a party, though details of what this meant were sparse; (iv) industrial workers would be at the heart of the new strategy; (v) ideas of a 'separate path' for Russia, what he calls 'exceptionalism', should be abandoned; (vi) Russia's future lay in following the 'western' model, what he calls 'Occidentalism' (also translated as 'westernization'). Plekhanov's final point is perhaps the most difficult to grasp today but was of the utmost significance to Russia, and arguably to the subsequent history of Marxism in general. It is (vii) to realize there was a new epoch ushered in by the terrorists, that of '*conscious political struggle*'⁶ which,

especially to us, begs the question 'what did they think they had been doing prior to that?' Incidentally, though it is not explicit at this point, Plekhanov broke with terrorism as a counter-productive tactic. This scepticism is only hinted at here in his dismissive phrase 'so-called terrorism'.⁷ Instead, Russian revolutionaries needed 'to pass on to the basis of modern socialism', a concept we will need to explore further.

The proposition that the working masses, a formula that included industrial and agrarian workers and, in Russian conditions, a significant part of the peasantry, should achieve its own emancipation was a standard Marxist proposition.⁸ Marx had argued that revolutionary class consciousness would evolve organically among the proletariat as they contemplated their situation in the capitalist structure. They would realize their struggle was not against individual employers but against the system itself. Proposition (iii), on the need for a party, risks contradicting this view. Marx himself had spent little time thinking about such a requirement. Forming a party was not necessarily a contradiction, in that such a party could be composed of the working masses, but the implication and practice which Plekhanov had in mind was that intellectuals like himself would have a significant role in organizing and, albeit reluctantly in theory, leading such a party. In practice, this contradiction dogged the harmonious development of such parties in Russia and beyond. It also had implications for the crucial notion of 'political struggle' to which we will shortly return.

Propositions (ii) and (iv) are also linked. In a straightforward and highly understated way, Plekhanov, in these two statements, consigned the whole preceding history of the Russian revolutionary movement to the dustbin of history. The assumption of the narodniks and narodism,⁹ as Plekhanov calls it, had been to instigate a 'spontaneous' peasant uprising. There is of course an unacknowledged contradiction here, too, in that the incendiary actions of the leading narodnik propagandists and/or terrorists mitigated the idea of 'spontaneity'. However, the idea was that, while narodnik action might set such a revolution in motion, it would, they surmised, be too vast for them to control. In that sense it would be 'spontaneous'. Be that as it may, Plekhanov was announcing a revolution in the revolution. Peasants would no longer be the major focus. Instead, the urban, industrial working class would be the main target of revolutionary action and the locomotive dragging history forward. This was a remarkable proposition in that, in the 1880s, Russia had a miniscule industrial working class, which was barely 2–3 per cent of the population against the overwhelming mass of peasants who constituted some 85–90 per cent. The notion, therefore, seemed far-fetched and was one of the key reasons why

Plekhanov had only the tiniest handful of supporters in the decade following the publication of *Socialism and Political Struggle*.

Propositions (v) and (vi) are two aspects of one concept. As an extension of his turn away from the peasantry Plekhanov also breaks with what was considered another major foundation of narodism: that Russia would follow its own path of development which would be different from the west. In particular, most narodniks believed Russia could avoid capitalism and move directly from its current quasi-feudal set-up to socialism. There were many reasons for this, one of which was that the survival of communal and redistributive land holding among the peasantry constituted a major step towards a socialist society. Ironically, almost at this very moment, Marx appeared to be siding with the narodniks.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Plekhanov threw his entire weight behind ideas of westernism (*zapadnichestvo* in Russian, translated as 'Occidentalism' above), that is, that Russia had no special path to follow but would, by and large, follow the other leading powers through capitalism and industry to socialism.

And so, on to the final proposition, that there was a 'new epoch of conscious political struggle' which would enable the revolutionary movement and Russia 'to pass on to the basis of modern socialism'. Since this was the proposition which inspired Plekhanov's title for the pamphlet it obviously had considerable meaning for him. What was it? For Plekhanov, this proposition encapsulated and underpinned all the rest. In Marx's lifetime (he died, coincidentally, at almost the same moment as Plekhanov published this pamphlet)¹¹ workers' struggles had tended to take place outside the state. This was not least because Marx had argued bitterly with Mikhail Bakunin in the First International over the latter's prioritizing of the struggle against the state over 'economic' struggle in the form of class struggle conducted through trade unions and the like. For Plekhanov, a key legacy of his own narodnik past was that the future lay in the realm of political struggle, that is, in Russia's case, the need for a constitution as a basis for everything else. Hence the need for a political party. And when Plekhanov talks about 'modern socialism' he means worker-based Marxism. This also implies a break with all forms of Russian exceptionalism because they have become 'synonymous with stagnation and reaction'. It also embodied his firm rejection of terrorism as a counter-productive form of revolutionary activity which merely provided the state with an excuse to repress with a high degree of public approval.

Anyone familiar with Russian Marxism, particularly in its Leninist form, will immediately recognize all of the above propositions. They were firmly embodied in Bolshevik and Menshevik ideologies by 1917. Not for nothing is Plekhanov

often described as ‘the father of Russian Marxism’.¹² However, the path to acceptance of his ideas was steep and stony. For almost a decade Plekhanov was almost isolated. At one point he is said to have joked, while he and some companions were enjoying rowing a boat on Lake Geneva, that, if the boat sank, it would be the end of Russian Marxism. Nonetheless, In September 1883 Plekhanov joined with his old friend Pavel Axelrod, Lev Deutsch, Vasili Ignatov and Vera Zasulich in establishing the first Russian-language Marxist political organization, the Emancipation of Labour Group (*Gruppa Osvobozhdenie Truda*) but it remained tiny and uninfluential throughout most of the reign of Alexander III (1881–94).

As Alexander’s reign came to an end, hope was renewed in wide sectors of elite Russian society, from liberal landowners to revolutionary intellectuals. The new tsar, Nicholas II, was quick to quash such expectations. In a key speech in January 1895 he claimed that expectations of reform were ‘senseless dreams’ and that it was his firm intention ‘to uphold the principles of autocracy as firmly’ as his late father.¹³ Even so, society was stirring. In the early 1890s a distinct Social Democratic trend, along the lines defined by Plekhanov in 1883, began to separate itself definitively from narodism. Plekhanov himself had engaged in bitter polemics over the new direction in 1885 in his well-known work *Our Differences*, but it was only eight to ten years later that he began to have a substantial following. As Plekhanov had done in the 1880s, followers of the new tendency were at pains to define their distinctiveness compared to the narodniks/populists. Between 1890 and 1903, Social Democracy, though it remained small and isolated, emerged as an established political/intellectual tendency and as an embryonic political party. In particular, a young polemicist from the deep provinces, Vladimir Ulyanov, better known as Lenin, took up the theme. The first substantial surviving items from Lenin’s ever-sharp pen were polemics against the narodniks, notably his articles ‘What the “Friends of the People” Are’ and ‘The Heritage We Renounce’ (1898).¹⁴

It also defined itself, in a polemic that is often misunderstood today, against the ‘economist’ tendency which prioritized economic struggle over political struggle – the very distinction which Plekhanov had initially rebelled against. The debate against the economists around 1900–5 contains many of the propositions supposedly directed by Bolsheviks against Mensheviks. In particular, Lenin’s seminal early work *What Is to Be Done?* was initially read as a classic Social Democratic demolition of the economist tendency before it was reread as an attack on the ‘Menshevik’ conception of a political party.¹⁵ Even though considerable argument swirled around them, the new movement

embraced the guidelines laid down by Plekhanov. It looked exclusively to Marx and the Marxist tradition for inspiration. It prioritized the working class as the foremost power advancing the revolution. It developed into a political party which sought to establish a constitution as a step towards socialist revolution. It rejected the populist idea that Russia could evade the capitalist stage of social development. It scorned any notion that Russia was an exception to the economic laws of historical advance. It completely rejected terror as an effective revolutionary tactic.

These remained the principles of the Bolshevik Party when it came to power. It was still inspired by the 'conscious' and 'modern' form of socialism focused on political struggle as outlined by Plekhanov. It went further and established them as definitive principles of international communism and, as such, they had a great influence on the history of the twentieth century and may still have life in the future. Ironically, Plekhanov himself broke with Lenin long before his death in 1918, alienated by the heavy-handed, ruthless, authoritarian and undemocratic streak he perceived in his former protégée.

Further Reading

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