**Hegemony and Intervention: Alan Shandro’s Lenin**

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**Abstract**

Alan Shandro’s *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony* is an original and powerful exploration of the philosophical underpinnings of Lenin’s politics. Against both mainstream dismissals of Lenin’s supposed elitism and minority attempts to reduce him to the status of a talented Second International Marxist, Shandro powerfully reasserts the claim that the Leninist moment was the point at which Marxist politics finally came of age. If Shandro can be faulted for his tendency to dismiss other contemporaneous contributions to the renewal of Marxism, his book nonetheless shows that Lenin’s understanding of the struggle for hegemony was both a pivotal moment in this process that remains an indispensable contribution to Marxism. Shandro shows that Lenin asked a fundamental political question: how are we as socialists to intervene in concrete political movements without succumbing to the hegemony of bourgeois ideology on the one hand or retreating into sectarianism on the other. He persuasively argues that the left still has much to learn from Lenin.

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The centenary of the October Revolution is an obvious moment to reassess Lenin’s legacy. More so, as the various left-reformist projects that have emerged across the globe in recent years and which have put the idea of socialism back on the political agenda, have nonetheless experienced problems that invite the kind of critical assessment associated with his analysis of reformism (Blackledge 2013). Unfortunately, these political developments have occurred as Lenin’s reputation is at its nadir. Amongst mainstream historians and theorists not to say activists the myth that Leninism led to totalitarianism is so deeply enshrined as to almost defy rational critique (Le Blanc 2014, 55-57; Callinicos 2007, 18).

There has, however, been a powerful eddy against the direction of mainstream opinion: recently authors such as Tamás Krausz, Paul Le Blanc, Auguste Nimtz and most importantly Lars Lih have added to earlier studies by Kevin Anderson, Tony Cliff, Neil Harding, Chris Harman, Paul Le Blanc, Marcel Liebman, Michael Löwy, Georg Lukács, Ernest Mandel and John Molyneux to demolish much of the Lenin myth. Lih’s book in particular has proved popular amongst a minority of activists’ keen to embrace the positive image he paints of Lenin as an advocate of proletarian self-emancipation.

Unfortunately, in demolishing one Lenin myth, Lih has contributed to the creation of another. By contrast with the claim that Lenin was the author of a voluntaristic break with orthodox Marxism, Lih’s Lenin is an “aggressively unoriginal” thinker operating within what he calls the orthodox “Erfurtian” tradition - so-called after the Programme of the German Social Democratic Party written by Kautsky, Bebel and Bernstein and agreed at the Party’s Erfurt Congress in 1891 (Lih 2009). While widely applauded, Lih’s interpretation of Lenin has been challenged both for his tendency, theoretically, to reduce Lenin to the status of a talented Russian Kautskyan, and politically for fudging the distinction between revolutionary and left reformist politics (Blackledge ed. 2010; Corr and Jenkins 2014).

Alan Shandro’s *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony* marks an important and largely successful intervention into this debate. He has produced a powerful interpretation of Lenin’s thought that incorporates insights associated with the democratic interpretation of his politics without losing sight of the fundamental and innovative contribution he made to the renewal of Marxism. Specifically, Shandro’s goal has been to reconstruct the emergence of what he calls, following Gramsci, the “[anti-]metaphysical event” in Lenin’s theory and practice: that is the moment in the evolution of his understanding of Marxism when he fully grasped hegemony as the “terrain where the logic of political strategy and leadership intersects the practical – economic, cultural and pedagogic - organisation of everyday life” (Shandro 2014, 3; Gramsci 1971, 357).

In so doing, Shandro has confronted a problem faced by all of us who believe that there is something important and of lasting significance in Lenin’s politics. Because Lenin, like many truly ground-breaking thinkers, was very much aware that he stood on the shoulders of giants, he tended to downplay his own importance as a theoretical and political innovator. Indeed, and by contrast with modern academia’s obsession with novelty, Lenin probably accepted Chernyshevsky’s claim that

“A preoccupation with originality destroys originality itself, and true independence is given only to those who do not stop to think of the possibility of not being independent. Only the feeble talk of their strength of character. And only the man who is afraid of being easily discomfited is afraid of exposing himself to the influence of others. Current preoccupation with originality is a preoccupation with form. A man who has any real content will not worry unduly about originality. Preoccupation with form leads to baseless fabrications and emptiness” (Chernyshevsky quoted in Cliff 1975, p. 34).

If Lenin was the last person to care about such superficial trappings, for conjunctural political reasons from the late 1890s onwards he sought to position himself as a defender of “orthodox” revolutionary politics; standing, first, with Karl Kautsky against the explicit revisionism and reformism of Eduard Bernstein and his Russian co-thinkers, and then against the tacit revisionism of Kautsky and his fellow travellers from a perspective informed by the “pope of Marxism’s” earlier writings.

While Shandro accepts this narrative, he has produced a useful counter to Lih’s interpretation of it. He shows that Lenin did much more than merely defend “orthodoxy” at the turn of the last century: he was a creative thinker who deepened the classical Marxist tradition. The central problems with Lih’s attempt to reduce Lenin to the status of a mimetic Russian Kautskyan is that it skirts over the facts that, first, as Nimtz points out, Lenin’s orthodoxy owed much more to the writings of Marx and Engels than it did to Kautsky (Nimtz 2014a, 47), while, second, and much more significantly, orthodoxy of whatever stripe was compelled to confront new problems at the turn of the last century which demanded new solutions. Not only had imperialism transformed the political terrain on which socialists operated, but it did so alongside the deepening institutionalisation of working-class reformism (Blackledge 2014). This later development was of particular significance because, though a coherent theory of imperialism could be and was developed through the extension of the architecture of *Capital* (Callinicos 2009, 25-52), before their deaths Marx and Engels hadn’t developed anything like an adequate theory of reformism upon which their followers could build (Johnson 1980; Fernbach 1974). If the practical implications of this gap in their politics had always been problematic, this difficulty significantly worsened in the decades after their deaths as institutionalised working-class reformism, particularly as embedded through the trade-union and social-democratic bureaucracies, enormously expanded in size and scope (Steenson 1981; Schorske 1983).

Lenin’s greatness as a Marxist stems in large part from his contribution to a collective attempt, alongside Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky and a number of lesser figures, to renew the classical Marxist tradition by addressing the novel practical problems it confronted at the turn of the last century (Blackledge 2012, 114-134). Of course, the increasing political moderation of their opponents within the socialist movement made it relatively easy for these thinkers to portray themselves as mere defenders of orthodox revolutionary politics against revisionism. So, just as Lenin downplayed the novelty of his own work by framing much of it as a defence of Kautsky’s earlier politics against his later writings, Trotsky similarly insisted that his path-breaking theory of permanent revolution dovetailed with Kautsky’s initial analysis of the 1905 Revolution (Blackledge 2006c, 12-14).

Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg were unquestionably right to stress the continuity from Marx and Engels’s writings through to their own works. Nonetheless, these three thinkers were also innovators: each of them made a major contribution to the renewal of Marxism in this novel context. This novelty is most obvious in both Trotsky’s break with fatalistic conceptions of historical materialism and Luxemburg’s analysis of the contradiction between the revolutionary potential of workers’ self-activity and the conservatism of the labour bureaucracy. But it is also very much apparent in Lenin’s analysis, in *The State and Revolution*, of the democratic potential of soviets as the organic alternative to his retrieval of Marx and Engels’s analysis of the state as an alien power.

*The State and Revolution* is, nonetheless, a famously incomplete text that sits somewhat awkwardly within Lenin’s *oeuvre*. For though it addresses the central political problem of the age (Blackledge 2017), Lenin’s argument that human freedom demanded the existing state be smashed and replaced by soviet power is uncharacteristically innocent of a systematic discussion of the role of a revolutionary party in that process (Shandro 2014, 272). This gap in Lenin’s argument is one of the reasons why this booklet has often been presented as the democratic and utopian Other to his supposedly undemocratic and elitist conception of the revolutionary party (Price 2007). Indeed, in sharp contrast to *The State and Revolution*, the one aspect of Lenin’s legacy that is almost guaranteed a cold reception amongst modern leftists is his theory of the revolutionary party as outlined in *What is to be Done?.*

According to his critics, Lenin transposed a semi-Jacobin and voluntarist theory of organisation onto Marxism, transforming the latter from a democratic into a totalitarian project (Holloway 2010, 225). Lih has demolished this myth to show, first, that Lenin placed workers’ self-activity at the core of the socialist project, and, second, that the content of *What is to be Done?* was fairly uncontroversial amongst opponents of revisionism within the Socialist International when it was first published in 1902. But whereas Lih merely points to the inconsistencies of subsequent Marxist criticisms of Lenin’s supposed elitism – taking some pleasure, for instance, in pointing out that far from contradicting Lenin’s politics, Luxemburg’s celebration of the creativity of workers in struggle actually depended upon unsigned articles he had written – Shandro goes much further to explain the rational core of orthodox Second International Marxist criticisms of Lenin as a response to the novelty of his understanding of Marxism (Shandro 2014, 120; 352).

Through an interrogation of the primary literature, Shandro shows that, although the key criticisms of Lenin in the period after the initial split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks at the 1903 Party Congress were framed as a defence of the idea of proletarian self-emancipation, Lenin’s relationship to this idea was not one of denial – he could hardly deny this idea and remain a Marxist – but rather was informed by a refusal to deduce from it a simplistic model of the revolutionary process (Shandro 2014, 116ff). Just as Marx in the *Grundrisse* had insisted that the concrete can only adequately be understood as the complex concentration of many determinations, Lenin resisted simple abstractions as he sought to grasp reality in all its complexity: “there is no such thing as abstract truth, truth is always concrete” (Marx 1974, 101; Shandro 2014, 120; 248-9; Lenin 1960-70, vol. 7, 478).

So, while Lenin agreed that socialism would come through workers’ self-emancipation, he took this to be the beginning rather than the end of Marxist political theory. This is a point of the first importance. For by contrast with the residue of political fatalism inherited from Marx by even the best of Second International Marxists (Molyneux 1978, 31; 44; 116), Lenin recognised that because real world social movements were arenas of ideological and political contestation, socialists would need to do much more than simply propagandise socialism within spontaneous movements from below if they wanted to win hegemony within them: practical politics demanded that they *intervene* within these movements to shape their development (Shandro 2014, 123; 197; 203; 239; 245; Harman 1968-9).

By focusing on this aspect of Lenin’s politics Shandro casts fresh light on his break with Second International Marxism. In effect, he has constructed a powerful philosophical defence of Lenin’s contribution to Marxist politics that avoids reducing his ideas either to a variant of Kautskyism (Lih 2009) or to a relatively unproblematic application of Marx and Engels’s approach to politics (Nimtz 2014a, chapter 2; Krausz 2014, 360). In so doing, he has effectively contributed to what Lih calls the “activist interpretation” of Lenin – a tradition going back to Lukács and including works by Cliff, Le Blanc, Liebman, Harman, Mandel, Molyneux and more recently Bensaïd and Callinicos (Lih 2006, 14).

Regrettably, Shandro doesn’t situate his arguments within this tradition. In fact, except in passing he says remarkably little about any of the secondary literature on Lenin. So, while he acknowledges that Althusser, Balibar, Cliff, Gruppi and Harding outlined sophisticated “social-scientific” assessments of Lenin’s concern with the concrete, with the exception of Harding his discussion of their work does not go beyond suggesting that none of these writers succeeded in “demonstrating the consistency of Lenin’s ‘concrete’ account with the Marxist thesis of proletarian self-emancipation” (Shandro 2014, 120). Harding does get another mention, but only to suggest that he, alongside Liebman, failed properly to grasp Lenin’s conception of hegemony (Shandro 2014, 205-7; 179). Shandro discussion of Lukács is a little more substantial, but here to his critique of this seminal study of Lenin is far too brief to support his controversial claim that Lukács’s “conception of the revolutionary process has greater affinity with the distinctive themes of Menshevism than with Lenin” (Shandro 2014, 178). Indeed, Shandro’s attempt to justify this claim seems particularly ill-judged: whereas he writes that Lukács’s conceived the revolutionary party as “a kind of prefiguration of communist society”, even a cursory reading of Lukács’s *Lenin* reveals this interpretation of his work to be a highly problematic: Lukács seems rather straightforwardly to conceive the revolutionary party not in prefigurative terms but as “an instrument of class struggle” (Shandro 2014, 178-9; Lukács 1970, 26; 1971, 304).

By not adequately engaging with the more serious contributions to the secondary literature on Lenin, Shandro has missed an opportunity not merely to situate his thesis within this literature but also to clarify his own important contribution to it. That we would benefit from this is apparent from the one moment in his book where he does attempt a rounded engagement with another serious Lenin scholar: an appendix on Lih’s *Lenin Rediscovered* taken from a symposium I edited in *Historical Materialism* a few years ago (Blackledge ed 2010). In this essay, he clearly articulates his own positive thesis that Lenin’s politics cannot be subsumed within the “Erfurtian Marxist” tradition (Shandro 2014, 352-3). This point is well made, and the activist tradition would undoubtedly embrace his conclusions. However, by not unpicking the strengths and weaknesses of these earlier attempts to comprehend Lenin’s contribution to Marxism Shandro risks obscuring what he adds to this tradition.

As it happens, it is not too difficult to unpick what Shandro adds to the activist tradition. He has articulated a clearer understanding of the philosophical co-ordinates of what Michael Löwy takes to be the defining characteristic of Lenin’s thought: the fact that through his attempts to articulate concrete analyses of concrete situations, his conception of Marxism breaks with the last vestiges of fatalism by putting “politics in command” (Löwy 1993, 71).

This focus on the ethico-political dimension of the class struggle is highlighted by title of Shandro’s book. On the one hand *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony* refers to a specific debate on the Russian left that had roots going back two decades before the publication of *What is to be Done?*. On the other hand, and more interestingly, it illuminates more general lessons from this experience.

Beginning with the Emancipation of Labour Group in 1883, the Russian Marxist movement had argued that, by contrast with populist hopes that socialism might come through the old peasant communes, Russia was heading towards a bourgeois revolution at the turn of the last century. However, whereas the English and French Revolutions of 1649 and 1789 had been led by the emerging middle classes, the Russian middle classes were too weak and cowardly to act in this way. Consequently, or so Georgi Plekhanov argued, the bourgeois revolution would ironically enough be won or lost by the actions of the proletariat (Baron 1963, 109).

Lenin agreed with this analysis of the coming Russian revolution, but framed the problem of proletarian hegemony within the revolution somewhat more concretely. For him, hegemony was something the working class had to *win* in the struggle against autocracy. This is in essence the problem he addressed in *What is to be Done?*. Starting from the general perspectives outlined by Plekhanov in 1883, Lenin asked how these perspectives were to be implemented at the turn of the century as the workers’ movement was growing in strength but where the socialist left had thus far failed to rise to this new challenge - his book was written in response both to an earlier abortive attempt to launch a Russian Social Democratic Party and to revisionist attempts to rationalise this failure by arguing that the socialist movement should focus not on winning working-class political hegemony within the broader revolutionary movement but rather on supporting workers’ struggles over immediate economic reforms within the system.

Lenin looked to overcome the first problem by challenging the influence of the Russian revisionists. Superficially, this was an odd way to proceed as the explicit revisionists (economists) were already very much on the retreat within the Russian socialist movement prior to the publication of *What is to be Done?*. Lih makes much of this point, and explains Lenin’s decision to frame his critique of the socialist newspaper *Rabochee delo* in terms of a critique of economism as a shrewd political move to portray his opponents as proponents of reversal to universally derided (amongst social democrats) break from orthodoxy (Lih 2006, 218-9; 283-290).

While true in so far as it goes, Lih’s assessment of Lenin’s critique of *Rabochee delo* obscures more than it reveals. By focusing primarily on what Lenin wrote rather than what he did, Lih’s interpretation of Lenin as a pure and simple orthodox Marxist underestimates the evolving character of his thought. Shandro, by contrast, agrees with those who argue that beneath the surface, Lenin was doing and gradually theorising something increasingly different to the orthodox “Erfurtian” approach to politics (Harman 2010).

The Erfurt Programme was a relatively brief document (1300 words) that famously included both minimum and maximum demands. Whereas the minimum programme included demands for electoral, educational and health care reform, alongside the ending of sex discrimination and the eight-hour day, the maximum programme was for socialism as an end goal that would function as a general solution to these and more problems:

“Only the transformation of the capitalist private ownership of the means of production … into social property and the transformation of the production of goods into socialist production carried on by and for society can cause the large enterprise and the constantly growing productivity of social labour to change for the hitherto exploited classes from a source of misery and oppression into a source of the greatest welfare and universal, harmonious perfection. This social transformation amounts to the emancipation not only of the proletariat, but of the entire human race, which is suffering from current conditions.” (Erfurt Programme)

Insofar as Kautsky addressed the problematic relationship between the minimum and maximum demands of the Erfurt Programme he argued that the socialist party, by invoking the ultimate goal of socialism, would draw together the particular struggles for reforms within the system into a general struggle for socialism against the system: “It is the task of the Social Democratic Party to shape the struggle of the working class into a conscious and unified one and to point out the inherent necessity of its goals” (Erfurt Programme).

For his part, the elderly Engels powerfully criticised the Erfurt Programme for bypassing the need for a revolution: “The political demands of the draft have one great fault. It lacks precisely what should have been said. If all the 10 demands were granted we should indeed have more diverse means of achieving our main political aim, but the aim itself would in no wise have been achieved” (Engels 1990, 225).

If Engels was right about this weakness – and Lenin’s retrieval of the Marxist theory of the state was of pivotal importance to overcoming this problem – there was a more basic issue with the way the relationship between the maximum and minimum parts of the Programme was framed. Despite appealing for militants to shape the workers’ struggle in the direction of socialism, the Erfurt Programme essentially assumed, as Marx had assumed when he penned the rules of the First International three decades earlier, that there was a relatively unproblematic relationship between the struggle for reforms within capitalism and the broader struggle for socialism against it. And just as Marx expected that as the various moments of the movement for reforms from below deepened they would tend towards workers’ power, in 1891 Kautsky, Bebel and Bernstein (as joint authors of the Erfurt Programme) agreed that struggles over the minimum demands would naturally flow into a struggle for the maximum demand (Collins and Abramsky 1964, 39-55; Salvadori 1979, 31).

Kautsky reiterated this approach a decade later in his critique of the revised programme of the Austrian Social Democratic Party. According to the Lenin myth, it was by embracing the arguments outlined in this document that Lenin revealed himself as a pre-Marxist elitist. According to Kautsky:

“Socialism, as a doctrine, certainly has its roots in modern economic relationships just like the class struggle of the proletariat, and just like the latter, emerges from the struggle against the poverty and misery of the masses that capitalism creates. But they arise simultaneously, not one out of the other, and on different conditions. Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. Indeed, modern economic science is as much a condition of socialist production as, say, modern technology but, with the best will in the world, the proletariat could no sooner create the former than the latter. They both arise out of modern social relations. The bearer of science is not the proletariat but the bourgeois intelligentsia; modern socialism originated with individual members of this stratum, who initially communicated it to intellectually advanced proletarians, who in turn introduce it into the proletarian class struggle where circumstances permit. Socialist consciousness is thus something introduced into the class struggle from without and not something that emerged originally within it.” (Shandro 2014, p60; Kautsky 2014, pp342-3; Lenin 1960-70, vol. 5, pp383-4)

Commentators who have read nothing more of Kautsky than these lines tend to fixate on their influence on Lenin as the basis for his supposed worry that workers couldn’t become class conscious through their self-activity. One of the great strengths of Shandro’s book is that it shows that this interpretation of both Lenin’s and Kautsky’s conceptions of class consciousness is profoundly mistaken. By returning to Kautsky’s original essay – which he helpfully translates in full as an appendix to his book (Kautsky 2014) - Shandro is able to show that when Kautsky wrote of class consciousness both in his critique of the Austrian Party and in the Erfurt Programme he was much less concerned about who might be able to attain it, than its substance as a form of reflexive intentionality directed towards overcoming the contradiction between the specific interests of workers in struggle and the general interest in socialism as the end goal of the movement (Shandro 2014, 22-3; 61-3; 166).

Understanding class consciousness in strategic terms had roots going back to Marx’s first writings on the topic. Thus, in the *Holy Family* he had argued that class consciousness was already apparent amongst large sections of the working class as awareness of their “historic task” (Marx and Engels 1976, 37). If subsequent history proved that levels of working-class consciousness could diminish as well as grow, Marx and Engels tended to assume that class consciousness would grow as a relatively simple function of increasing working-class self-activity. At the turn of the last century Kautsky, Luxemburg and Trotsky continued to accept the veracity of this general model despite the fact that, as Kautsky pointed out, the English experience showed there was no simple correlation between “economic development and the class struggle” and the emergence of socialist class consciousness. This insight underpinned his claim that “consciousness of the ‘ultimate goal’” doesn’t so much emerge spontaneously within the working class as it functions as the ideological cement which introduces “unity into the proletariat’s struggle for emancipation” (Kautsky 2014, 342). Unfortunately, though this strategic conception of class consciousness illuminates the necessarily political dimension of socialist practice, Kautsky didn’t adequately explore its practical consequences (Shandro 2014, 9). Indeed, despite his reference to the English experience, he continued to assume that there was a relatively unproblematic relationship between struggles for the minimum demands and the broader struggle for the maximum demand.

It was this framework that informed subsequent Menshevik criticisms of Lenin in the wake of the split within Russian Social Democracy in 1903. Whereas Lenin focused on the political dimension of the struggle for hegemony, his “orthodox” critics tended to conceive class consciousness in terms of a simple expression of proletarian self-activity (Shandro 2014, 166). Insofar as the Menshevik argument bypassed the problem of the spontaneous character of working-class reformism it underestimated the forces that would tend to subordinate the workers’ movement to a bourgeois ideology. It was for this reason that Lenin was right to criticise the Mensheviks and their allies as tacit economists.

For his part, Bernstein’s negative contribution to socialist theory stemmed from his awareness that the relationship between the immediate struggles for reforms and the idea of revolution was actually much more problematic than Kautsky imagined. Though the conclusion he drew from this insight, that the socialist movement should drop all the cant about revolution to focus instead on the struggles over immediate demands, was unpalatable, it did at least serve to force orthodoxy to confront this problem. In his response to revisionism Kautsky did land some punches on Bernstein’s caricature of Marxism (Kautsky 1983). However, he addressed neither the general contradiction between the struggle for minimum demands and the broader maximum programme nor the more specific issue of the structural limitations of trade unionism. Consequently, he refused to confront those bureaucratic interests within the workers’ movement that helped reproduce the reification of the distinction between day-to-day struggles for reforms and the broader goal of socialism. In effect, his critique of revisionism lacked social depth, and as a purely formal critique it proved to be politically sterile.

As Carl Schorske detailed, the revisionism that Bernstein gave voice to at the end of the nineteenth century had much deeper roots than the class character of his milieu. Far from being a middle-class importation into the workers’ movement, it had a solid basis within the workers’ movement as institutionalised through the trade union and Social Democratic Party bureaucracies (Schorske 1983). For all the power of his critique of Bernstein, Kautsky failed to challenge the emerging hegemony of this reformist layer because he failed fully to grasp both sides of the contradictory unity between the struggle for reforms and the struggle for revolution (Salvadori 1979). Despite the fact that his historical study of the early Christian Church had gestured towards a materialist analysis of bureaucratic conservatism, in the lead up to the First World War he remained wilfully blind to the growing hegemony of the reformist bureaucracy within the German labour movement (Blackledge 2006b, 348).

Though Lenin shared with Kautsky a conception of class consciousness as a strategic flipside to spontaneous social movements, he had a much clearer sense of the problematic relationship between spontaneous struggles from below and the final goal of socialism. Consequently, he was much better prepared to resist organic reformism within the workers’ movement. In *What is to be Done?* he infamously wrote:

“There is much talk of spontaneity. But the spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology … for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade-unionism … and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie. Hence, our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is to combat spontaneity, to divert the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy.” (Lenin 1960-70, vol. 5, p384).

Read superficially this passage suggests an ideological retreat to the elitism Marx had overcome in his *Theses on Feuerbach*. But though this has been the dominant interpretation of Leninism in the twentieth-century, it simply does not fit with the rest of Lenin’s *oeuvre*. The one-sided nature of Lenin’s formulation of the relationship between spontaneity and socialist consciousness in this passage is best understood, as Lenin himself argued a year later, as a consequence of his polemical zeal in combatting economistic conceptions of the relationship between spontaneity and socialist consciousness. He insisted that the economists’ uncritical championing of the spontaneous movement from below was politically dangerous because it was blind to the problem of the spontaneous character of bourgeois ideology. To combat this error, he stressed the opposite case: “We all now know that the ‘economists’ have gone to one extreme. To straighten matters out somebody had to pull in the other direction – and that is what I have done. I am sure that Russian Social-Democracy will always vigorously straighten out whatever has been twisted by opportunism” (Lenin 1960-70, vol. 6, p491).

If this method lent itself to polemical exaggeration, as Hal Draper points out it should be noted that even within *What is to be Done?* Lenin suggested a much more satisfactory dialectical account of the relationship between spontaneity and socialist consciousness. Thus, in a footnote he wrote:

“It is often said that the working class *spontaneously* gravitates towards socialism. This is perfectly true in the sense that socialist theory reveals the causes of the misery of the working class more profoundly and more correctly than any other theory, and for that reason the workers are able to assimilate it so easily, *provided*, however, this theory does not itself yield to spontaneity, *provided* it subordinates spontaneity to itself. Usually this is taken for granted, but it is precisely this which *Rabocheye Dyelo* forgets or distorts. The working class spontaneously gravitates towards socialism; nevertheless, most widespread (and continuously and diversely revived) bourgeois ideology spontaneously imposes itself upon the working class to a still greater degree” (Lenin 1960-70, vol. 5, p386).

Draper comments that this conception of the relationship between spontaneity and consciousness underpins Lenin’s understanding of the material basis of politics: “there are several things that happen ‘spontaneously’, and what will win out is not decided only by spontaneity” (Draper 1999, 191).

Lenin sought to strengthen revolutionary politics by combatting what he saw as the organic limitations of the struggle for reforms. As he argued in the snappily titled “Persecutors of Zemstvo and the Hannibals of Liberalism” (1901), “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” (Lenin 1960-1970, Vol. 5, 74). While this approach clearly builds on the Erfurt Programme’s distinction between minimum and maximum demands, it also points beyond the limitations of this framework. For by assessing each moment in the struggle from the perspective of what Lukács would later call the “actuality of the revolution” Lenin suggested a dialectical account of the relationship between means and ends within which the immediate movement is constantly criticised from the perspective of the end goal (Lukács 1970, pp. 9-13). This non-linear model of the relationship between the maximum and minimum demands signalled a break with one of the last vestiges of fatalism within Marxism (Shandro 2014, 26; 197).

Lenin recognised that reformists, revolutionaries and all manner of other political tendencies struggle for hegemony within social movements. He consequently insisted that socialists must act as more than mere cheerleaders of particular struggles if they wanted to help workers’ and other groups realise the socialist potential of these struggles (Shandro 2014, 189). Understood in terms of contested relations within social movements, Lenin’s claim that class consciousness comes to the working class from without is best understood not as an undialectical retreat to pre-Marxist elitism, but rather as the necessary subjective element within the class struggle as socialists intervene in specific struggles with a view to linking these struggles together into a broader movement towards the ultimate goal of socialism (Shandro 2014, 26). It is not a question, as Marx put it before he became a Marxist, of workers’ acting as the brawn of the revolution while philosophers act as its brain (Marx 1975, 257). Rather, Lenin addressed a burning practical problem: how to ensure the myriad local struggles, which Kautsky’s Menshevik followers believed would simply be expressive of proletarian hegemony as they deepened, could *actively* be knitted together by overcoming spontaneous bourgeois elements within then into a broader strategy for socialism (Shandro 2014, 166).

In fact, as Shandro points out, Lenin’s idea of socialism is not imposed on these struggles but rather serves as the distillation of lessons from past struggles. Indeed, so far from being an elitist retreat from Marxism, Shandro shows that through its critical engagement with the movement from below “Leninism” is the highest expression of the tendency within Marxism actually to *learn* from the spontaneous movements from below (Shandro 2014, 147; 200). And, contra the myth of Lenin’s voluntarism, these lessons constituted the basis on which Bolshevik political interventions were made

This lens illuminates the real difference between Lenin and the younger Kautsky. Despite the formal similarities between their (non-elitist) claims that class consciousness comes to the working class from without, whereas Kautsky assumed a linear relationship between immediate workers’ struggles and the struggle for socialism, Lenin recognised that because the dominant ideas in society are the ideas of the ruling class, spontaneous working-class movements would be characterised, as Shandro phrases it, by the “contradictory unity of proletarian experience and the ideological influence of the bourgeoisie” (Shandro 2014, 199-200). If spontaneous tendencies towards socialism within the workers’ movement meant that workers could become receptive to socialist ideas, the fact that bourgeois ideology was also reproduced spontaneously within the working class meant that progress in this direction was not automatic (Shandro 2014, 134). Consequently, the hegemony of socialist ideas within the class struggle could not be assumed but must rather be *fought* for.

It was on the basis of this insight that Lenin clarified the distinction between party and class within Marxist theory. By contrast with Marx and Engels who used these terms in unsystematic and often contradictory ways reflecting vestiges of fatalism in their politics, Kautsky who understood this relationship to be “constituted as a given” and Luxemburg who claimed that “social democracy … is itself the proletariat” (Johnston 1967; Shandro 2014, 75; 185; Molyneux 1978), Lenin recognised that it was only on the basis of a clear distinction between the socialist party as a relatively homogeneous group of militants orientated to the goal of socialism, and the working class as a heterogeneous group characterised by a plurality of individual beliefs and involved in a myriad of differing local struggles, that the party was able properly to frame its interventions within concrete struggles. According to Lenin, the aim of a socialist vanguard party was not to substitute itself for the working class as the agent of socialist transformation, but rather to win hegemony for socialism within the working class and to win working-class hegemony within society more generally so that the working class could realise its potential as the leading agent of the socialist transformation of society (Shandro 2014, 173-4; Harman 1968-9). This perspective built on the approach to politics Marx outlined in the *Communist Manifesto*, but did so on the basis of a much clearer awareness of the intrinsic barriers to socialist advance within the workers’ movement.

One fundamental consequence of this insight was that whereas Marx and Engels had fought for the workers’ party’s political independence from liberalism (Nimtz 2014a, pp. 20; 23; Marx and Engels 1974), Lenin added that because middle-class elements did not have a monopoly on bourgeois ideas within the workers’ movement, the party must maintain its political independence from that other conduit of bourgeois ideology: institutionalised working-class reformism. Only by so doing could it hope to intervene within workers’ struggles to ensure they did not become subordinate to liberalism (Shandro 2014, 200).

The novelty of this approach illuminates the flaws both of Lih’s attempt to reduce Lenin to the role of a Russian Kautskyite and Nimtz’s claim that Lenin merely picked up and ran with Marx and Engels’s analysis of reformism (Blackledge 2006a; forthcoming). Lenin’s account of the spontaneous nature of working-class reformism suggests a much stronger conception of working-class reformism than is to be found in the writings of not merely Kautsky but also Marx and Engels.

Unfortunately, the fundamental power of Lenin’s model of the spontaneous character of working-class reformism was somewhat weakened by his attempt to integrate it with the much less useful concept of a labour aristocracy. Regrettably, Shandro, who exhibits a disappointing tendency to posit Lenin as the *only* source of Marxist renewal in the first decades of the last century (Le Blanc 2015), continues to embrace the labour aristocracy thesis long after it should have been consigned to the dustbin of history (Shandro 2014, 264-5; cf Post 2010). Nonetheless, it is relatively easy to unpick the idea of a labour aristocracy from Lenin’s thought and to instead integrate his insights into the spontaneous character of working-class reformism within a broader theory that incorporates something along the lines of Luxemburg’s account of the conservatism of the labour bureaucracy as the foundations of a Marxist politics adequate to the modern world.

If it is unfortunate that Shandro treats the theory of the labour aristocracy with far more reverence than it is due, this is a relatively small complaint about what is largely an excellent book. By extending Lih’s partial demythologisation of *What is to be Done?*, Shandro has reasserted Lenin’s positive and lasting contribution to Marxism. Whereas Erfurtian Marxism was unable adequately to conceive the relationship between struggles for reforms within capitalism and the struggle for socialism against it, because Lenin recognised the contradictory unity of working-class experience and bourgeois ideology he was able to frame an approach to politics that was at once integrated into the real movement against the present state of things without succumbing to the pressure to limit these movements to what is possible within capitalism. This approach was best summed up in his famous claim that:

“It cannot be too strongly maintained that … the Social-Democrat’s ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth before all his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for all and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat.” (Lenin 1960-1970, vol 5, p. 423)

Shandro’s exploration of the philosophical underpinnings of this argument reveals the innovative nature of Lenin’s politics not as a voluntaristic and elitist retreat from Marx’s insights but as a dialectical and revolutionary deepening of our understanding of the subjective dimension of Marxist political theory. As such he has written a book that deserves serious attention across the left. Shandro’s book asks a fundamental question: how are we as socialists to intervene in concrete political movements without succumbing to the hegemony of bourgeois ideology on the one hand or retreating into sectarianism on the other. If Lenin alone did not provide all the answers to what a hegemonic socialist project should look like, Shandro shows that an adequate approach to this problem is impossible without integrating into it the insights he bequeathed us. Against both the mainstream dismissal of Lenin’s supposed elitism and the minority attempt to reduce him to the status of a talented Second International Marxist, Shandro powerfully reasserts the claim that the Leninist moment was the point at which Marxist politics finally came of age.

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