

# **The Dialectical Path of Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice: A Reply to David North**

**Alex Steiner, March 8, 2004**

“Dialectic training of the mind, as necessary to a revolutionary fighter as finger exercises to a pianist...”

Leon Trotsky, Dec. 15, 1939

## **Introduction**

What follows is a reply to a letter from Dave North to myself dated June 20, 2003. That letter was in turn motivated by an exchange of correspondence between myself and Vladimir Volkov. The issues discussed in this correspondence are crucial for the future of the International Committee. I have taken the liberty of reproducing all the relevant correspondence in the appendix in the hope that this will facilitate a discussion on the issues that have been raised.

Dear Dave,

Before commenting on the substantive issues that you raise in your letter of June 20, it is necessary to address a number of complaints you make about my attitude. You claim that in my remarks on Plekhanov, I present “a facile approach to a very complex issue.” While asserting that “it is legitimate to adopt a critical attitude to Plekhanov”, you suggest that rather than undertaking a serious examination of Plekhanov, my remarks amount to nothing more “than copying a few passages from Lenin’s Volume 38 (Philosophical Notebooks) in which he criticized Plekhanov’s conception of dialectics.” You then assert that the purpose of my citing Lenin’s criticisms of Plekhanov was to appeal to the authority of Lenin, “from which there is no appeal.” This characterization of my letter to Vladimir is to say the least, highly inaccurate.

To put the matter into context, I had a discussion with Vladimir at the Detroit Conference at which time a number of philosophical issues were touched on. I was then able to have another discussion with Vladimir in New York a couple of weeks later, during which the issue of Lenin’s philosophical differences with Plekhanov came up. Vladimir it seems was not aware of Lenin’s critique of Plekhanov. This greatly surprised me as Vladimir is clearly a person with a keen interest in theoretical questions. How could he not be aware of Lenin’s critique of Plekhanov? I did not have the quotes handy at the time but I promised Vladimir that I would get back to him by mail with the quotes from Lenin’s Philosophical Notebooks and the citations. My letter to Vladimir, which you characterized as a “facile approach to a very complex issue”, was in fulfillment of that pledge. As is clear from the context of the letter, it was never meant to be an in-depth critique of Plekhanov, but was an informal compilation of quotes from Lenin and the accompanying citations. The purpose of the letter was to acquaint Vladimir with this material and to give sufficient citations so that Vladimir could locate the quotes himself in their proper context in the Russian edition of Lenin’s Collected Works. I made a bare minimum of interpretative comments in my letter. Your objections to my letter therefore completely miss the point. You condemn me for what I did not attempt to do – provide an in-depth critique of Plekhanov. At the same time you more or less dismiss the importance of what my letter documents, namely Lenin’s critique of Plekhanov.

Above and beyond the question of Steiner’s or North’s assessment of Plekhanov, I think we cannot disinter Plekhanov’s contributions to Marxism without considering Lenin’s critique of Plekhanov. In this regard, I think your characterization of my “critique” only serves to obscure the issues. You write that “underlying [my] critique of Plekhanov (and Kautsky) is the conception that the essential roots of the betrayal of 1914 are to be found in a found a false epistemology.” This is of course not my view of the betrayal of 1914.

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In order to make your case, you have to take certain quotes from my letter to you out of context. I was first of all replying to a letter in which you made the following assertion:

“The cause of this degeneration [of Plekhanov ] is not to be explained merely by reference to false epistemological conceptions. As Trotsky stressed, Plekhanov’s tragedy arose above all from his protracted, decades long isolation from Russia as a revolutionary exile.”

Therefore, it was in your letter that the formulation that the betrayals of 1914 were the result of a “false epistemological conception” first came up. When I wrote in reply to your letter that,

“Lenin was looking for the philosophical roots behind this betrayal”,

I was directing my statement to your remarks and taking issue with them. I was suggesting that if you are attempting to provide a general explanation of the betrayals of 1914 then it would be appropriate to discuss the historical background of early twentieth century capitalism, the rise of imperialism and of a labor aristocracy and the consequent corruption of a layer of the working class. However, I was also suggesting that such explanations by themselves are entirely insufficient to explain the reaction of a particular individual. If you read what I wrote in context, it should be clear that I am not discussing the general question of why Social Democracy as a whole betrayed the working class in 1914, but the more specific question of why certain individual leaders of Social Democracy, namely Plekhanov and Kautsky, lent their services to this betrayal. And to answer **this** question, it is necessary to investigate the theoretical weaknesses of Messieurs Plekhanov and Kautsky. Thus, your rendering of my position as “the collapse of the Second International – one of the turning points in world history – was essentially the product of an intellectual failure of a few individuals”, is a complete non-starter.

## **Plekhanov and the Tragic View of History**

If, as you claim, it was not the theoretical weaknesses of Plekhanov and Kautsky that lead to their betrayal, then what was it? It is certainly legitimate to look elsewhere for the cause of Plekhanov's repudiation of Marxism. But your attempt to locate this cause fails and lands you in an insoluble contradiction. You write that,

“Notwithstanding his [Plekhanov's] extraordinary erudition and his profound knowledge of the theoretical foundations of Marxism, the political concept of the Russian Revolution which he had developed in the 1880s and 1890s – that of a bourgeois democratic revolution in which the working class would be obliged to play a subordinate role – had been overtaken by the events of 1905.”

Your version of Plekhanov paints him as a man whose ideas are always “overtaken by events”. This is a tragedy from which there is no deliverance. History assigned to him a role and he played it out to its predestined end. It was not his fault that history proved to be more complex than he had envisioned. In the end, Plekhanov is seen to be a great if tragic figure on the historical stage. This may be a good version of Greek tragedy, but it hardly rises to the level of a theoretical investigation of one man's strengths and weaknesses

Throughout your account of Plekhanov, you write as if he had nothing to do with his own development, as if forces completely outside of him were directing him, much as the fates guided Oedipus toward his final denouement. Thus you say that,

“The actual unfolding of the first Russian Revolution created a relation of class forces that had not been anticipated in Plekhanov's political perspective,” and

“Plekhanov was trapped in a political dilemma from which he could find no escape.” You make similar statements about Kautsky, writing that,

“But by 1909, this conception of revolution was being overtaken by events.”

Indeed, no one can anticipate every turn of historical events, and Plekhanov's failure to anticipate the leading role of the working class and the counterrevolutionary role of the bourgeoisie in the first Russian Revolution is not in itself a blameworthy matter. But why was “Plekhanov then trapped in a political dilemma from which he could find no escape” as you say? Why was it not possible for Plekhanov to reorient his political perspective based on the new and unanticipated developments? If you recall, in 1917 Lenin too was faced by a political situation that he did not anticipate. The emergence of the leading role of the soviets, the revolt in the armed forces and the support of the peasants for the

initiatives of the working class, as well as the machinations of the opportunists to reconstitute state authority behind a Constituent Assembly dominated by the bourgeoisie, convinced Lenin that his old formula of “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry” had been superseded by events. Lenin was able to dramatically reorient first himself and then the Bolshevik party to the new perspective of “All power to the Soviets”. Why was Lenin able to reorient his perspective at a decisive moment of revolutionary struggle, and why was Plekhanov not able to do so? Could this have something to do with Lenin’s study of the dialectic in the initial months of World War I?

Here I think your quote of Plekhanov’s biographer Baron is telling. Commenting upon Plekhanov’s failure to recognize the changed role of class forces in the 1905 Revolution, Baron writes,

“Astonishing as it may seem, he who always preached the superiority of the dialectical mode of thought, of the necessity always to take into account the conditions of time and place, failed to detect, let alone resolve, the unique difficulties of the Russian situation.”

(Baron, p272-273)

Although Baron’s treatment of Plekhanov is historically accurate and sympathetic, he is not a Marxist and expresses his disdain for Marxist theory on many occasions. As Baron elsewhere makes clear, he shares the liberal anti-communism that defined the American intelligentsia during his generation, the generation that came of age in the American Century, the 1950’s and early 1960’s. Thus, he follows those like Lionel Trilling who thought that the righteous intentions of revolutionaries such as Lenin and Trotsky lent themselves to a totalitarian outcome because of their adherence to a dogmatic doctrine. Baron is part of an intellectual tradition that claimed to locate the roots of Stalinism in Bolshevism and Lenin’s theory of a vanguard party. Given this intellectual background, it should come as no surprise that Baron is most enthusiastic about Plekhanov’s criticism of Lenin and of the dangers of his concept of a centralized revolutionary party. At the heart of the Marxist doctrine that Baron and other anti-Marxists attacked was the dialectic. Baron’s thesis is that Plekhanov was a great and tragic figure. What gave Plekhanov the aura of tragedy was his commitment to an illusory doctrine revolving around the dialectic. The statement you quote is in fact a good example of another jibe by Baron at the dialectic. He is asking in effect, that if the dialectic is such a profound tool for orienting oneself in a changing world, then how come that great master of the dialectic, Georgi Plekhanov, was unable to reorient himself to the most important event in his political life? Baron’s implicit reply would be that the dialectic is a fraudulent philosophical construct. In reply to Baron, I would say that the fault lies not with the dialectic, but in Plekhanov’s one-sided understanding of the dialectic.

I can certainly agree that Plekhanov was a great and tragic figure, but only with the qualification that his tragedy was at least partially of his own making. In my letter to you I emphasized that although Plekhanov’s isolation from the working class conditioned him, this historical fact by itself could not explain his slide into opportunism. I pointed out that Lenin was also a political exile throughout the crucial years prior to the Russian

Revolution, yet Lenin was able to make a profound development of Marxism in this same period. You take issue with my statements ascribing Plekhanov's betrayal to his philosophic weaknesses. Instead, you provide the following alternative explanation:

“In the end, the tragedy of Plekhanov's life arose out of the belated character of the Russian democratic revolution. The isolation he suffered was of a historical rather than merely physical character. To claim, as you do, that “Lenin was just as isolated as Plekhanov” misses the political essence of the issue. Viewed in the vast expanse of its turbulent history, the two men represented different epochs in the development of the Russian Revolution. Plekhanov personified an epoch, which ended in 1905, whose central task consisted in creating the theoretical and initial programmatic foundations for the independent revolutionary organization of the Russian proletariat. Lenin's epoch – whose central task was the preparation of the conquest of power by the working class – began with the revolutionary eruptions of that year.”

Your explanation essentially boils down to the fact that Plekhanov's difference with Lenin stemmed from the fact that the former “personified an epoch, which ended in 1905”, whereas Lenin personified another epoch, one “whose central task was the preparation of the conquest of power by the working class.” But this explanation explains precisely nothing. When you say that Plekhanov “personified an epoch”, ***this expression is but a metaphor that under the guise of an explanation, merely restates the problem in more poetic words.***

What are you saying other than that Plekhanov adapted to the non-revolutionary forms of struggle that characterized that epoch. But this leaves unanswered the question of why he did so. And why it was that others, both younger Marxists such as Lenin, as well as contemporaries such as Mehring, did not adapt to the prevailing forms of political life and were able to swim against the stream of the reformist tendencies that eventually overtook the majority of the Social Democracy? To this question you have no answer.

To reinforce your point, you quote Trotsky's analysis of the evolution of German Social Democracy. In explaining why reformist tendencies built up in German Social Democracy despite the fact that its official ideology was revolutionary Marxism. Trotsky writes,

“Ideology is an important, but not a decisive factor in politics.”

You attach great significance to this statement and quote it to reinforce your earlier point that a philosophical outlook is a minor or secondary factor in the determination of political activity. However, if you read Trotsky in context, rather than making a blanket statement about the relatively unimportant role of philosophy he is pointing to the contradiction between the official ideology of Social Democracy, and the actual philosophical outlook that underlay its day to day practice. The practical activity of Social Democracy was of a reformist nature and eventually the philosophical outlook of a dominant section of the party expressed this. This operative philosophy was in contradiction to the official positions of Marxism, a contradiction that was eventually

resolved by the open repudiation of Marxist revolutionary doctrine on the part of the reformist majority. Trotsky's discussion explains why the official ideology of revolutionary socialism was supplanted by another outlook, one rooted in an adaptation to non-revolutionary conditions. Your interpretation of this passage would minimize the role of consciousness and human agency at the altar of objective conditions. Yet if we examine Trotsky's opus as a whole, we find that far from minimizing the role of consciousness, Trotsky continually insists that consciousness is both a reflection of day-to-day practice and a vehicle for its transformation.

He makes this point explicitly in a later work, in his *Lessons of October*,

“The most favourable conditions for an insurrection exist, obviously, when the maximum shift in our favour has occurred in the relationship of forces. We are of course referring to the relationship of forces in the domain of consciousness, i.e. in the domain of the political superstructure, and not in the domain of the economic foundation, which may be assumed to remain more or less unchanged throughout the entire revolutionary epoch. On one and the same economic foundation, with one and the same class division of society, the relation of forces undergoes change depending upon the mood of the proletarian masses, depending upon the extent to which their illusions are shattered and their political experience has grown; the extent to which the confidence of intermediate classes and groups in the state power is shattered; and finally the extent to which the latter loses confidence in itself.” (*Lessons of October*, New Park, 38-39)

Furthermore, when Trotsky writes that “ideology is an important, but not a decisive factor in politics,” he is doing so in the context of an analysis of the collapse of German Social Democracy. He is not addressing the more specific question of Kautsky's political betrayal. In other words, given the degeneration and ultimate betrayal of German Social Democracy, why did Kautsky, who in a previous period defended orthodoxy against the revisionists, capitulate to the right wing? Trotsky is not addressing this latter question in this particular essay. It is however the very question that Trotsky will turn to in his last great political struggle, some 25 years following the collapse of the Second International. You conflate these two questions in a procedure that merely spreads confusion. You write for instance,

“How much richer is this analysis, which locates the tragedy of Social Democracy and Kautsky's own life in the objective historically-determined contradictions of Germany's capitalist development and its peculiar relation to the political practice and strategy of the working class, than one which claims to trace all problems “back in the end to the question of philosophy and dialectics.”

If we look further we will find that when Trotsky did write about the political collapse of particular individuals, he did not begin his discussion with the economic conditions, or the fact of their political isolation, but rather he sought to locate the source of political degeneration in the attitude of these individuals to the dialectic. This is how Trotsky approached the desertion of Burnham and Schachtman from the Fourth International in

his last great political battle, just weeks before his assassination. In his Open Letter to Burnham, he writes,

“Anyone acquainted with the history of the struggles of tendencies within workers’ parties knows that desertion to the camp of opportunism and even to the camp of bourgeois reaction began not infrequently with rejection of the dialectic... Again, it is impermissible to discount an even more important fact, namely, that all the great and outstanding revolutionists, first and foremost, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Franz Mehring – stood on the ground of dialectic materialism... The examples of Bernstein, Kautsky and Franz Mehring are extremely instructive. Bernstein categorically rejected the dialectic as ‘scholasticism’ and ‘mysticism’. Kautsky maintained indifference toward the question of the dialectic, somewhat like comrade Schachtman. Mehring was a tireless propagandist and defender of dialectic materialism. For decades he followed all the innovations of philosophy and literature, indefatigably exposing the reactionary essence of idealism, neo-Kantianism, utilitarianism, all forms of mysticism, etc. The political fate of these three individuals is very well known. Bernstein ended his life as a smug petty-bourgeois democrat; Kautsky from a centrist, became a vulgar opportunist. As for Mehring, he died a revolutionary communist.” (In Defense of Marxism, New Park Publications, 95)

Trotsky is maintaining that it was indeed their philosophical weaknesses that prepared Bernstein and Kautsky to play their respective roles, while contrasting them to Mehring, whose intransigence as a voice for revolutionary politics was prepared by his attention to dialectics. He further emphasizes this point by providing yet another example:

“In Russia three very prominent academic Marxists, Struve, Bulgakov and Berdayev began by rejecting the philosophic doctrine of Marxism and ended in the camp of reaction and orthodox church. In the United States, Eastman, Sidney Hook and their friends utilized opposition to the dialectic as cover for their transformation from fellow travelers of the proletariat to fellow travelers of the bourgeoisie. Similar examples by the score could be cited from other countries.” ( In Defense of Marxism, 95)

Finally Trotsky considers what appears to be a counter example to the above argument.

“The example of Plekhanov, which appears to be an exception, in reality only proves the rule. Plekhanov was a remarkable propagandist of dialectic materialism, but during his whole life he never had the opportunity of participating in the actual class struggle. His thinking was divorced from practice. The revolution of 1905 and subsequently the World War flung him into the camp of petty-bourgeois democracy and forced him in actuality to renounce dialectic materialism. During the war Plekhanov came forward openly as the protagonist of the Kantian categorical imperative in the sphere of international relations: ‘Do not do unto other as you would not have then do unto you.’ The example of Plekhanov only proves that dialectic materialism in and of itself still does not make a man a revolutionist.” ( In Defense of Marxism, 95)

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I believe that Trotsky's assessment of Plekhanov is entirely too generous. As I will argue subsequently, Plekhanov's version of the dialectic was superficial and fatally flawed. His inability to reorient himself in the new situation following the 1905 Revolution was a dramatic confirmation of the one-sided nature of his version of the dialectic. If I am correct in my assessment of Plekhanov, then his example is no longer an exception to the relationship between the dialectic and revolutionary practice that Trotsky has been enunciating. Whether I am correct or not in my assessment of Plekhanov, the important point to bear in mind is that Trotsky considered one's attitude to the dialectic a key if not the sole determinant in one's attitude toward revolutionary politics - and in his estimate the case of Plekhanov was simply an exception from the general rule. In either case, Trotsky main point holds. He is forcefully asserting in 1940 that one's politics does point back "in the end to the question of philosophy and dialectics."

## **Lenin's Critique of Plekhanov**

In my letter to Vladimir I cited some of the sources in the Philosophical Notebooks (Volume 38 of Lenin's Collected Works) for what could be construed as Lenin's critique of Plekhanov. Unfortunately, Lenin never wrote a definitive essay on Plekhanov. We are therefore left with only the marginal notes in the Philosophical Notebooks and a few brief comments in later writings. If we are to make sense then of Lenin's attitude toward Plekhanov, a high degree of interpretative work is required. In fleshing out Lenin's views on Plekhanov we must enlist not only the brief remarks devoted explicitly to Plekhanov, but other comments that Lenin made elsewhere that illustrate his contrasting views on philosophical questions. Furthermore, the background for our interpretation should not be limited to Lenin's explicit remarks on philosophy, but ought to incorporate Lenin's practical and political statements from such key works as *State and Revolution*, *Imperialism and the Trade Union Debate* that illustrate Lenin's concrete application of dialectics.

Let us begin with Lenin's most damning statement about Plekhanov:

“Plekhanov criticizes Kantianism .. more from a vulgar-materialistic standpoint than from a dialectical-materialist standpoint ...”

“Marxists criticized (at the beginning of the twentieth century the Kantians and Humists more in the manner of Feuerbach (and Buchner) than of Hegel.”

In your letter you claimed that I deliberately “did not complete the quotation, for without the entire passage it is not possible to understand the significance of the critique.” I fail to see why anyone should object to my producing an abbreviated quote in an informal letter whose purpose is to provide citations that can be checked in the Russian edition. In any case, your fuller quotation of the same paragraph does not illuminate as much as you think.

You make the case that “Plekhanov's work in this struggle [against the Machists] was of limited value because he had failed to engage the Machists on the vital question of natural science. Plekhanov, with his well-known verve and wit, demonstrated the incompatibility of Machism with materialism. He denounced their blundering in the sphere of philosophy. But he avoided the truly critical issue raised by the Machists: the implications of the new discoveries in the field of physics for materialism. This is precisely what Lenin meant when he stated that Plekhanov refuted Kantianism “from the threshold.”

According to you, “the truly critical issue” behind Lenin’s critique of Plekhanov was the latter’s failure to investigate “the implications of the new discoveries in the field of physics for materialism”. I think by localizing Lenin’s critique to this particular chapter of the history of Marxism, you illegitimately narrow the scope of Lenin’s remarks.

It is true that Lenin was critical of Plekhanov’s role in the debate with Machsists, an incident to which he alludes in the marginal comment. However, that hardly encompasses the most important element of Lenin’s critique. To make such a statement is to take Lenin’s enterprise completely outside of the historical circumstances in which he found himself. Let us recall that it was the period between August and December 1914 when Lenin embarked on the study of Hegel’s Science of Logic. Lenin spent most of his time in the crucial opening months of World War I studying Hegel. Do you think this was a coincidence? Or is it not reasonable to suppose that the betrayal of the principles of socialist internationalism by the defenders of orthodox Marxism, Plekhanov and Kautsky in particular, did not weigh heavily on Lenin’s mind as he worked his way through Hegel? Furthermore, did Plekhanov not enlist the services of Kant to aid him in justifying his sudden transformation from an internationalist to a Russian patriot? Thus, when Lenin finds Plekhanov’s earlier assessment of Kant inadequate, I think it is reasonable to suppose that in this passage Lenin is trying to find the philosophical source above all of Plekhanov’s betrayal of socialist internationalism in 1914. There is a lot more at stake here than simply the fact that Plekhanov failed to grapple with “new discoveries in the field of physics.”

Elsewhere you minimize the significance that Plekhanov’s betrayal of socialist internationalism held for Lenin. You write that,

“Of all the major political leaders of the Second International, the role played by Plekhanov in 1914 was the least surprising.”

To reinforce this point, you add a couple of pages later,

“Though the circumstance of the climactic betrayal of 1914 were certainly extraordinary, it is something of a myth that it came as a surprise.”

But just what is myth and what is reality here? According to Plekhanov’s biographer Stephen Baron, Plekhanov’s transformation into a supporter of the Czarist Army shocked Lenin when he first heard the news. As Baron describes it,

“In October [1914], Plekhanov went to Lausanne to address a gathering of Russian Social Democrats that included Lenin. The Bolshevik chief had already heard something of his former mentor’s attitude but had refused to credit the story. It was “simply impossible” for him to believe that Plekhanov, the intransigent Marxist, had become a defensist.” As Lenin listened to Plekhanov’s speech, however, he recognized that the impossible had come to pass.” (Plekhanov, *The Father of Russian Marxism*, p. 324)

Nor was Lenin the only Marxist who was shocked by Plekhanov's turn. Angelica Balabanoff, the Italian Socialist leader and an internationalist, was stunned to hear Plekhanov say,

"So far as I am concerned if I were not old and sick I would join the army. To bayonet your German comrades would give me great pleasure." (Baron, p. 324)

It is also well known that Lenin, though well aware of the opportunist tendencies within the German Social Democracy, was still shocked when the majority of the parliamentary faction of the party voted for war credits. Trotsky too was surprised by the depth of the betrayal. The following is his account of that terrible day:

"The telegram telling of the capitulation of the German Social Democracy shocked me even more than the declaration of war, in spite of the fact that I was far from a naive idealizing of German socialism. "The European socialist parties," I wrote as early as 1905, and reiterated more than once after ward, "have developed their own conservatism, which grows stronger the more the masses are captured by socialism. In view of this, the Social Democracy can become, at a definite moment, an actual obstacle in the way of an open conflict between the workers and the bourgeois reaction. In other words, the propagandist socialist conservatism of the proletariat party may at a certain moment obstruct the direct struggle for power by the proletariat." I did not expect the official leaders of the International, in case of war, to prove themselves capable of serious revolutionary initiative. At the same time, I could not even admit the idea that the Social Democracy would simply cower on its belly before a nationalist militarism.

When the issue of the Vorwaerts that contained the report of the meeting of the Reichstag on August 4 arrived in Switzerland, Lenin decided that it was a faked number published by the German general staff to deceive and frighten their enemies. For, despite his critical mind, Lenin's faith in the German Social Democracy was still as strong as that... I did not think the Vorwaerts a fake; my first personal impressions in Vienna had already prepared me for the worst. Nevertheless, the vote of August 4 has remained one of the tragic experiences of my life. What would Engels have said? I asked myself. To me, the answer was obvious. And how would Bebel have acted? Here, I was not so certain. But Bebel was dead. There was only Haase, an honest provincial democrat, with no theoretical outlook or revolutionary temper. In every critical situation, he was inclined to refrain from decisive solutions; he preferred to resort to half-measures and to wait. Events were too great for him. And beyond him one saw the Scheidemanns, the Eberts, the Welses." (My Life, Pathfinder Press, p. 246-247)

If anyone was in a position to anticipate the depth of the betrayal of 1914, it was Rosa Luxemburg, who as a leader of the left wing of the German and international movement, was personally acquainted with many of the architects of the turn to social patriotism. Yet this is how Luxemburg's reaction was portrayed by her biographer, Paul Frolich:

“The decision of her party [to vote for war credits] was a heavy blow to Rosa Luxemburg. much more so than the shock of the Brussels conference [at which the international bureau heard the leader of Austrian Social Democracy, Victor Adler, proclaim that his party would do nothing to counter the war plans of the bourgeois government of Austria.]... The capitulation of German Social Democracy, its desertion to the imperialist camp, the resultant collapse of the International, indeed the seeming collapse of her whole world, shattered her spirit.” (Rosa Luxemburg, p 205)

Although by that time Plekhanov was in the right wing of Russian Marxism and became increasingly isolated following his failure to support the working class in the 1905 Revolution, he nevertheless remained a stalwart defender of Marxist orthodoxy against open revisionists such as Bernstein. He also remained a staunch socialist internationalist until the very outbreak of the war. There was thus plenty of reason for Lenin and others to be taken aback by Plekhanov's transformation into a Russian patriot. Given this historical context, I think it is entirely reasonable to suggest that Lenin's critique of Plekhanov's failure to grapple with Kant was directly related to the events of 1914.

That being said, it remains to be determined what was the precise nature of Lenin's philosophical assessment of Plekhanov and the latter's relationship to Kant.

In his many writings in which he addresses the philosophy of Kant, Plekhanov's overriding theme is that Kant was a skeptic who represented a half-way point between idealism and materialism. This was expressed succinctly in a letter Plekhanov wrote to Kautsky,

“The philosophy of Kant for me signifies nothing else but an armistice between the discoveries of natural science and the ancient religious tradition.” (quoted in Baron, p.179)

Plekhanov noted that Kant's positing of a noumenal world consisting of things-in-themselves, which are essentially unknowable, was set up alongside a phenomenal world that, while accessible to us, was limited to knowledge given by our sense perceptions. Plekhanov thus tends to see Kant in terms similar to Hume, as a skeptic who denied the possibility of knowledge of an objective world. Plekhanov's assessment leans too heavily on the skeptical side of Kant. He does not give proper notice to Kant's development from Hume. It is ironic that Kant is seen as a skeptic for his intent was to answer the skepticism of Hume with a system of thought that would validate the outlook of Newton's laws of motion while at the same time “saving the appearances.” (Hume's philosophy opened an abyss between the supposed objectivity of scientific laws and our

sense perceptions. According to Hume, we only can have sure knowledge of our own particular sense perceptions and any inference from this to the state of the external world is merely a matter of custom and habit and can never be validated.) Kant thought the only possibility of legitimating scientific knowledge was to place a sharp demarcation between the claims of science and observation, and the more speculative claims that had been indulged by traditional metaphysics. The former was a legitimate type of knowledge, though it was limited in its scope. The latter, consisting of speculation as to whether time had a beginning, or if the world was infinite or finite, he considered an illegitimate form of reason.

Plekhanov's assessment of Kant as merely a skeptic who proclaimed the unknowability of the world and its laws, although one-sided, was nevertheless used with good effect in his polemics against Bernstein. For it was Bernstein and his followers who justified their rejection of the objective basis for socialism by invoking a bastardized version of Kant to proclaim the unknowability of the world. Conversely, Bernstein leaned on another pillar of Kant's architectonic, his ethics, in an attempt to locate a substitute for the historical necessity for socialism. In Kant's ethics Bernstein claimed to have found an adequate basis for the socialist enterprise. Plekhanov had little trouble disposing of Bernstein's arguments.

When Lenin was reexamining these issues in light of the betrayal of Plekhanov and other defenders of orthodoxy in 1914, he was impressed by the inadequacy of the critique of Kant rendered in 1898. Lenin found in Hegel's critique of Kant a much deeper engagement with certain fundamental philosophical issues than he found in Plekhanov. At the heart of Hegel's critique of Kant, but not Plekhanov's, was the question of dialectics. That is why Lenin writes the following in his Hegel Notebooks:

“Work out: Plekhanov wrote probably nearly 1000 pages (Beltov + against Bogdanov + against Kantians + basic questions, etc. etc. on philosophy (dialectic). There is in them nil about the Larger Logic, its thoughts (i.e. dialectic proper, as a philosophic science) nil!!” (CW Volume 38: 277)

This fragmentary note, while somewhat cryptic, when examined in the context of Lenin's other notes about Plekhanov during this period, is remarkably consistent with the statement we quoted at the start, that “Plekhanov criticized Kant more in the manner of a vulgar materialist.” What Lenin has in mind is that Plekhanov's critique of Kant, while emphasizing Kant's skepticism and agnostic position vis a vis materialism, never examines these issues in terms of Kant's attitude toward the dialectic. Hegel on the other hand, in discussing Kant, pays tribute to the fact that Kant developed the dialectic, coming to the very threshold of dialectical thinking, but at the very last moment rejected it as illegitimate. It is worth quoting the passage in which Hegel diagnoses the role of Kant, one that Lenin copied in full:

“It will always stand out as a marvel how the Kantian philosophy recognized the relation of thought to sensuous reality, beyond which it did not advance, as only a relative relation of mere Appearance, and perfectly well recognized and enunciated a higher unity of both

in the Idea in general and, for example, in the Idea of an intuitive understanding, and yet stopped short at this relative relation and the assertion that the Notion is and remains utterly separate from reality – thus asserting as truth that which is declared to be finite cognition, and denouncing as an unjustified extravagance and a figment of thought what is recognized as truth of which it established the specific notion.” (Science of Logic, Miller, p. 592)

Here Hegel traces the sources of the skeptical element in Kant’s thought to his consignment of dialectical thinking to the realm of an illegitimate speculation – one “that remains utterly separate from reality.” Hegel is indicating that Kant separated appearance from Essence, failing to recognize that appearances are not just “illusions”, but grant us a contradictory access to the essence of things. Lenin explicitly welcomes this aspect of Hegel’s critique of Kant when he writes,

“The movement of a river – the foam above and the deep currents. But even the foam is an expression of essence.” (CW Volume 38, p. 130)

What is the significance of Lenin’s rebuke of Plekhanov? He is saying that in all his critical writings on Kant, Plekhanov paid scant attention to the “dialectic proper, as philosophical science”. This is where the philosophical and political questions begin to converge. A good hint of what Lenin has in mind is contained in another criticism of Plekhanov, this from the essay fragment, On the Question of Dialectics. You bring up this very same quote yourself, in passing accusing me of “a truncated passage from Lenin’s essay, “On the Question of Dialectics,” which includes the following sentences:”

You then go on to supply your fuller version of this quote:

“The correctness of this aspect of the content of dialectics must be tested by the history of science. This aspect of dialectics (e.g., in Plekhanov) usually receives inadequate attention: the identity of opposites is taken as the sum-total of *examples* [‘for example, a seed,’ ‘for example, primitive communism.’ The same is true of Engels. But it is ‘in the interests of popularization...’] and not as a *law of cognition* (and as a law of the objective world).” [Volume 38, p. 357]

The interesting thing to note is that your “corrected” version of this quote contains less of the original quote than my “truncated” version. Your citation begins with a discussion of “the correctness of this aspect of dialectics”, which is completely incomprehensible without reference to the previous paragraph, which you do not quote. We are left wondering exactly what aspect of the dialectic Lenin is discussing. In my transcription of this quote, I did provide the previous paragraph, omitting only some references in parentheses that were not essential to convey what was meant.

Let us reconstruct what Lenin writes prior to the quote you cited in order to make sense this “aspect of the content dialectics.” He writes, [and this time I include the parenthetical references]

“The splitting of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts (see the quotation from Philo on Heraclitus at the beginning of Section III, “On Cognition”, in Lasalle’s book on Heraclitus) is the *e s s e n c e* (one of the “essentials,” one of the principal, if not the principal characteristics or features) of dialectics. That is precisely how Hegel, too, puts the matter (Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* continually *g r a p p l e s* with it and *combats* Heraclitus and Heraclitean ideas).” (CW Volume 38, p 357)

Lenin is then starting his discussion of dialectics with a consideration of a whole, and the cognition of its contradictory parts. He is clearly here siding with Hegel and the latter’s critique of formalistic thinking that keeps opposites apart. A whole may be whatever is an object of cognition. It could be a natural organism such as platypus, or a social whole, the modern capitalist state for instance, or the ancient Greek polis, or it can be a creation of the imagination, a work of art such as the Mona Lisa, or even a thought. Whatever the object, Lenin is saying, formal thought can at best provide only a crude approximation. To capture a whole in its development, we must first identify its contradictory parts and see how they are determined by their relationship to the whole and to each other. This whole, our object of investigation, emerges, through the interpenetration of opposites, as a new entity, although one determined by its own negation. A dialectical investigation of a whole must be able to identify the contradictory elements within a whole and follow their process of transformation.

In the case of Russian society, this whole was composed of classes in definite relations to each other. The changing nature of these relationships determined the trajectory of the evolution of this society. It was a truism among Marxists that following the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, capitalist social relations would soon take root and wipe out the remnants of the obshchina, the Russian peasant commune. The emergence of capitalist social relations, according to this prognosis, would give rise both to a liberal bourgeoisie with a vested interest in a constitution and democratic reforms, and a modern working class. The early Russian Marxists, Plekhanov above all, therefore suggested that the progress of the working class and its eventual emancipation was tied, for an entire historical period, to the cause of the liberal bourgeoisie. This was what Plekhanov argued against the Russian populists. It can be argued that throughout his political career, whether he was defending revolutionary principles against the Economists and the Revisionists, or opposing the Soviets in the 1905 revolution, or taking the standpoint of Russian patriotism in 1914, he was consistent. It is not Plekhanov that changed, but the world around him. In 1905, the Russian working class demonstrated that it was not content to wait for the bourgeoisie to lead a revolution, while the bourgeoisie demonstrated that it had no interest in leading a revolution, but only wanted to gouge out a small role for itself from the monarchy. Plekhanov, who still believed himself a defender of the working class and its cause, threw in his lot with the cause of the bourgeoisie, thinking that the working class had overreached itself and threatened to upset what he viewed as the inevitable march of history. It was the same logic that led him to become a social patriot in 1914. He thought that the cause of the Russian working class would be served by supporting the Russian bourgeoisie, who were at one with the war aims of the autocracy. Somehow, Plekhanov had missed the moment of transformation into opposites, the moment where the bourgeoisie had been transformed

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from a relatively progressive social force to a backward one. To identify this decisive moment, the study of empirical data is of course indispensable, but by itself it is insufficient. One must be able to make sense of the facts. This is where Plekhanov fell short of the mark. He thought formalistically and could not cognize the whole as it was changing into something new.

Here we can cite another quote from Lenin's Hegel Notebooks, where after reading Hegel's summary of the dialectical method in the chapter on the Absolute Idea, Lenin writes his own summation of what has been presented:

“The crux lies in the fact that thought must *apprehend* the whole “representation” in its movement, but **for that** *thought* must be dialectical.” (CW Volume 38, 227, emphasis in original)

The ability to anticipate and respond to a changing situation is the greatest test of the practical side of dialectical thinking. Despite all his erudition and his appreciation of the history and literature of Marxism, Plekhanov failed this test. Despite his formal adherence to dialectics he thought in terms of fixed schema. I believe it was a consideration such as this that motivated Lenin to castigate Plekhanov for never paying attention to this crucial aspect of the dialectic.

You argue that Lenin is criticizing Plekhanov for not exploring the implications for dialectics of the new discoveries of science. This is your interpretation of Lenin's statement,

“The correctness of this aspect of the content of dialectics must be tested by the history of science.”

Certainly Lenin is here recalling the debate with the Machists. It was in the course of that discussion that Lenin doubtless first became aware of Plekhanov's theoretical weaknesses. Up till then, Lenin considered Plekhanov's word on philosophical issues to be impeccable, despite their sharp political differences. However, what is there in the statement that you quote that implies that Lenin's critique of Plekhanov was limited to his failure to grapple with the natural sciences? Is it not obvious that Plekhanov's failure to grapple with August 4, 1914 had now become a much bigger and more immediate issue?

## **The Implications of Ignoring the Dialectic – A mechanical outlook.**

The essence of Lenin's critique of Plekhanov's philosophical work is that it bends Marxism back in the direction of vulgar materialism. What could Lenin have meant by this? Did not Plekhanov devote many essays throughout his career to the exposure not only of idealist opponents of Marxism, but to the weaknesses of vulgar materialism?

It is indeed the case that Plekhanov wrote many essays in which he ridiculed vulgar materialism as well as idealism. His key argument against vulgar, mechanical materialism is that it cannot account for history. This is how he characterizes the views of the materialists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century,

“Whenever they began speaking of the historical development of mankind, they forgot their sensationalist view of “man” in general and, like all the philosophers of “enlightenment” of that age, affirmed that the world (i.e., the social relations of mankind) is governed by opinions (c'est l'opinion qui gouverne le monde). In this lies the radical contradiction from which the materialism of the eighteenth century suffered, and which, in the reasoning of its supporters, was divided into an entire series of secondary and derivative contradictions, just as a bank note is exchanged for small cash.”(The Development of the Monist View of History, CW Volume I, 550)

In what sense then was Lenin justified in characterizing Plekhanov as holding out an olive branch to vulgar materialism, if indeed his criticism is justified at all? To answer this question we should define what we mean by “vulgar materialism”, as the term has been used in Marxist polemics sometimes rather indiscriminately. It can refer to the crude view of some early materialists that “The brain excretes thoughts in the same way that the liver excretes bile,” or the equally crude notion encapsulated by the slogan, “You are what you eat.” On the other hand, some extremely sophisticated arguments for a form of materialism among contemporary philosophers and scientists have also been characterized as a form of “vulgar materialism”. A case in point is the critique of the sophisticated arguments of Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, who argue for a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of “Man as a [genetic] machine”, by the Marxist biologist Richard Lewontin .

What is it that ties all these disparate thinkers to the label of vulgar materialism? I think the key to this is found in yet another fragmentary note penned by Lenin in his Hegel Notebooks. In summarizing the chapter on the Absolute Idea, Lenin writes,

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“Alias: Man’s consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it.” ( CW Volume 38, 212)

The vulgar materialist, whether crude or sophisticated, always insists that man’s consciousness reflects the objective world, but forgets the second part of Lenin’s thesis, that it also **transforms** (a better word than “creates”) the world from which it has arisen.

Here Lenin is restating a point made by Marx in his famous summary of the materialist conception of history in the Preface to the Critique of Political Economy:

“It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of productions or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operate hitherto... Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformation it is always necessary to distinguish between material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.”(Critique of Political Economy, 21)

Precisely how consciousness transforms the world, how that is “men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out” is the subject of historical, sociological and philosophical science. Plekhanov correctly notes that the great failure of the 18<sup>th</sup> century materialists lay in their inability to provide a coherent theory of historical and social development. Lacking this, they fell back to the idealist explanation of history that always traces historical changes to the opinions of men. Yet Plekhanov himself fails to appreciate the decisive role that the active ideological struggle entails. Ultimately, he views history as a force that determines man and fails to see that man through his conscious struggle , at crucial junctures, also determines history. This is borne out by remarks Plekhanov makes in his famous essay, *The Role of The Individual in History*. There Plekhanov argues that the emergence of an individual suited to accomplish great historical tasks is more or less inevitable given the right set of antecedent conditions. In discussing the role of Robespierre during the French Revolution he writes,

“Let us assume that he was an absolutely indispensable force in his party; at all events, he was not its only force. If the accidental fall of a brick had killed him, say, in January 1793, his place would of course have been taken somebody else, and though that person might have been inferior to him in every respect, the events would nevertheless have taken the same course as they did when Robespierre was still alive.” (CW II, 306-307)

He makes a similar argument regarding the role of Napoleon:

“Napoleon’s power seems something quite exceptional to us because other forces similar to it did not go over from the possible to the actual. And when we are asked what would have happened had there been no Napoleon, our imagination is confused and it seems to us that without him the social movement, on which his power and influence rested, could not have taken place at all.” (CW II, 309)

“At all events, results “opposite” to those which arose from Robespierre’s energetic action were out of the question. Nor could they have arisen even if Bonaparte had been struck down by a bullet at the Battle of Arcole, let us say. What he did in the Italian and other campaigns could have been done by other generals. They would probably not have displayed the same talent as he did and would not have won such brilliant victories; nevertheless, the French Republic would have emerged victorious from the wars it was waging because its soldiers were by far the best in Europe.” (CW II, 307)

. In his discussion of Napoleon, Plekhanov is revisiting an area that was once discussed by Engels. In a letter to Starkenburg in 1894, Engels comments that,

“This is where the so-called great men come in for treatment. That such and such a man and precisely that man arises at that particular time in that given country is of course pure accident. But cut him out and there will be a demand for a substitute, and this substitute will be found, good or bad, but in the long run he will be found. That Napoleon, just that particular Corsican, should have been the military dictator whom the French Republic, exhausted by its own war, had rendered necessary, was an accident; but that, a Napoleon had been lacking, another would have filled the place, is proved by the fact that the man has always been found as soon as he became necessary: Caesar, Augustus, Cromwell, etc.”

Engels is here refuting the idealist notion of the great man of history, as propounded by Carlyle. He notes that “great men” are as much products of a previous historical evolution as they are necessary agents of history. He thus makes the point that the contingent fact that this particular individual arose in this particular place is not simply an accident. Rather, it is a contingency that expresses necessity. Thus he says that even if this particular individual, Napoleon, was not available, someone else would have come along. What is not so clear is whether the substitute Napoleon would have been adequate to the tasks. Engels seems to indicate that this is the case, but his attempts to justify it are not very convincing. First of all, the argument that “the man has always been found as soon as he became necessary” provides no guarantee this will continue to be the case in the future even if it were the case in the past. Furthermore, whatever merits this argument may have in relation to the history of the bourgeois revolution, it cannot be extended *mutatis mutandi* to the epoch of the proletarian revolution, where the role of consciousness and leadership becomes more much critical. Engels implicitly recognized this when he wrote about the mistakes committed by the leadership of the Paris Commune - in which we had a case where history failed to produce the right men even though they were “necessary.” (See his critical remarks on role of the Proudhonists and Blanquists in the Paris Commune in his 1892 Preface to the Civil War in France - MECW Volume 27, p187)

Plekhanov however goes a step beyond Engels. He codifies the line of thought Engels expressed in the 1890s and through his published works becomes instrumental in inaugurating a dogma that had an invidious effect on the socialist movement. As far as Plekhanov is concerned, an individual will always be found at a crucial juncture to carry out a historical task. Furthermore, while it may be an accident of history whether that individual has all the talent of a great man such as Napoleon or Robespierre, it is more or less guaranteed that the individual in question will prove adequate to the tasks at hand. In this way, Plekhanov accounts for an inevitable march of historical progress that continues more or less unabated despite the vicissitudes and fortunes of individuals.

The non-dialectical essence of Plekhanov's outlook is here quite evident. He sees the relationship between a historical process and individuals as a one-way street. The march of history determines the individual characters of people. He fails to appreciate that the actions of individuals sometimes can have a decisive effect on the further direction of the march of history. He also assumes that history will always find an individual that is adequate to carrying out the tasks required. In this way he can maintain his schematic conception of inevitable stages of historical evolution. There is however no basis to assume that history provides some guarantee that the right individual will always come upon the scene, or as Plekhanov says, if not Napoleon, then a substitute for Napoleon who may not be as brilliant as Napoleon, but will prove good enough to get the job done. How do we know that a substitute Napoleon will be good enough to get the job done? Of course, we don't. A substitute Napoleon can also fail, in which case history takes a different and unanticipated turn. Plekhanov could not imagine a fundamentally different outcome to the historical process. That is the conclusion he explicitly draws in summing up the lessons to be learned from his historical illustrations:

“Because of the specific qualities of their minds and natures, influential personages can affect the individual features of events and some of their particular consequences but they cannot alter their overall trend, which is determined by other forces.” (CW II 308)

Contrast this with Trotsky's assessment of the role of Lenin in the Russian Revolution:

“Is it possible, however, to say confidently that the party without him (Lenin) would have found its road? We would by no means make bold to say that. The factor of time is decisive here, and it is difficult in retrospect to tell time historically. Dialectical materialism at any rate has nothing in common with fatalism. Without Lenin the crisis, which the opportunist leadership was inevitably bound to produce, would have assumed an extraordinarily sharp and protracted character. The conditions of war and revolution, however, would not allow the party a long period for fulfilling its mission. Thus it is by no means excluded that a disoriented and split party might have let slip the revolutionary opportunity for many years.” (History of the Russian Revolution, 349)

Nor was this just a passing thought. Trotsky returned to this subject several years later, this time stating his opinion of the indispensable role of Lenin even more forcefully:

“For the sake of clarity I would put it this way. Had I not been present in 1917 in Petersburg, The October Revolution would still have taken place – on the condition that Lenin was present and in command. If neither Lenin nor I had been present in Petersburg, there would have been no October Revolution: the leadership of the Bolshevik Party would have prevented it from occurring – of this I have not the slightest doubt! If Lenin had not been in Petersburg, I doubt whether I could have managed to overcome the resistance of the Bolshevik leaders. The struggle with “Trotskyism” (i.e., with the proletarian revolution) would have commenced in May, 1917, and the outcome of the revolution would have been in question. But I repeat, granted the presence of Lenin the October Revolution would have been victorious anyway. The same could by and large be said of the Civil War...” (Diary in Exile, 46).

One cannot imagine Plekhanov writing anything like this. Plekhanov’s argument in his essay on the Role of the Individual in History is one of the clearest expressions of the philosophical vacuum at the center of the Second International. He introduces a mechanical form of historical determinism into Marxist philosophy, one that denies the role of human agency. In doing so, he forgets entirely the first term of Marx’s epigram that,

“Men make their own history, but not in conditions that they themselves have chosen”.

He prefers to concentrate on the qualifying clause. The result is an attitude of fatalism and passivity toward historical events.

In fairness to Plekhanov, it needs to be said that unlike the epigones of the Second International, he was not a superficial thinker and recognized that the logic of his position led to fatalism. As if anticipating future critics, he writes,

“But if the individual features of events are determined by the influence of general causes and do not depend upon the individual qualities of historical personages, it follows that such features are determined by general causes and cannot be altered, no matter how much these personages may change. The theory thus assumes a fatalistic nature.” (CW Volume II, p. 312)

Plekhanov recognizes the problem with this viewpoint, namely,

“Fatalism would have appeared here as the consequence of the individual disappearing in the general.” (CW II, p.313)

He protests that this argument does not touch “the present-day materialist view on history, in which there is also room for the particular...”

Yet when he tries to explain how this works itself out he falls back precisely onto Carlyle and the great man theory of history.

A great man he says,

“...is a hero, not in the sense that he can halt or change the natural course of things, but in the sense that his activities are the conscious and free expression of that necessary and unconscious course. Therein lies all his significance, all his power. But it is a vast significance and an awesome power.” (CW II, p. 314)

Plekhanov’s qualifications do not in the end provide a satisfactory account of the role of the individual in history. When all is said and done, the great man can only be deemed great in retrospect, if his actions proved to be in consonance with “that necessary and unconscious course.” Since it is assumed that the “great man” will always emerge when needed, we need not do anything special to bring about the happy confluence of great men with the necessary conditions of their activity. Thus Plekhanov’s protests notwithstanding, he did not get out of the bind of fatalism.

Interestingly enough, it is at this point that Plekhanov the arch materialist, comes closest to Hegel the arch idealist. For it is to Hegel’s philosophy of history from which Plekhanov borrows the notion that the seemingly arbitrary confluence of individual actors upon the stage of history work their way, through the “cunning of reason” to establish an ever more progressive development of Spirit. To be sure there is a kernel of truth in Hegel’s conception - historical processes are law governed. Conjoined with this idea however is also the idealist-inspired illusion, inherited by Plekhanov, that the law governed process of history proceeds despite the intentions and conscious acts of human beings who are little more than puppets in a shadow play. Plekhanov inherits the weakest part of Hegel’s legacy. (I shall leave aside for now the question of whether this interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy of history is in fact justified. The relevant issue here is that this was the interpretation accepted by and utilized by Plekhanov.)

History is for Plekhanov, as it was for Hegel, an inevitable forward march into the future. Progress is guaranteed and there is no possibility of reversals. Herein lies the philosophical basis for Plekhanov’s inability to grasp the complex rhythm of the changing social relations in Russia, of the not insignificant impact of the work of Russian Social Democrats themselves on the consciousness of the Russian proletariat. Ironically, the man who did more than anything else to found this movement could not recognize its creative and transformative role. For Plekhanov, the working class remained an object of history, not its subject.

Plekhanov’s biographer comes to much the same conclusion. He writes,

“Taking his Marxian writings as a whole, one sees that Plekhanov’s account of the movement to socialism unmistakably depended upon a “natural” evolutionary process, in conformity with law ... he did not quite manage to bring voluntarism into a perfect balance with determinism – even at the level of logical argument. How much more likely it was that imbalances might arise at the level of practice.” (Baron, 116)

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For Plekhanov, history was the subject and human beings were mere objects impressed by history for working out of its ‘iron laws.’ This turns the relationship between men and history upside down. It is an example of the type of false consciousness that is engendered in bourgeois society, one that Marx dissected in *Capital* in his discussion of commodity fetishism, where the relationship between men and things is turned upside down. I note that in your letter you criticize me for objecting to this inverted view of the relationship between human agents and historical laws.

First you quote a line from my letter to Vladimir,

. “And if you cannot account for the development of knowledge, your practice becomes circumscribed by the world and its ‘laws.’”

You reply with the following comment.

“This is not a correct statement of the problem. Our task is not to escape from the world and its laws, but to correctly understand them – through the development and correction of concepts that reflect ever more accurately the nature of a ceaselessly changing objective reality.”

My point of course had nothing to do with an attempt “to escape from the world and its laws”. I was alluding to the fact that without revolutionary theory, one remains imprisoned within the forms of false consciousness engendered by bourgeois society where the inexorable laws of the market work their way “behind the backs” of men. I was making the same point made by Engels, that our task is to transform, through the revolutionary inauguration of a new cooperative society, a law ‘in itself’ into a law ‘for us’. Engels expressed this thought in the following memorable terms:

“Man’s own social organization, hitherto confronting him as a necessity imposed by nature and history, now becomes the result of his own free action. The extraneous and objective forces that have hitherto governed history pass under the control of man himself. Only from that time will man himself, more and more consciously, make his own history – only from that time will the social causes set in movement by him have, in the main and in a constantly growing measure, the results intended by him. It is the ascent of man from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom.” (*Socialism Utopian and Scientific*, p. 72-73)

Plekhanov’s notion of a linear progression of history, far from being based in the works of Marx, was squarely in opposition to Marx. It is well known that Plekhanov’s close collaborator of many years, Vera Zaslitch, wrote a letter to Marx in 1881 asking him for his opinion about the fate of the Russian peasant commune. This was a critical issue for revolutionaries in Russia at the time as there was a fierce debate between the Narodniks who believed that a transition to socialism might be possible based on the ancient collectivist bonds of the peasant commune, and those who inspired by a superficial acquaintance with Marxism, thought that Russia would necessarily have to go through a stage of capitalist development before socialism would be possible. Plekhanov and

Zasulich, were at that time leaders of a breakaway group from the Narodniks and were becoming interested in Marxism. Marx reply showed that his Marxism was not constrained by linear schematic theories of inevitable developments. He wrote,

“In analyzing the genesis of capitalist production, I said:

“At the heart of the capitalist system is a complete separation of ... the producer from the means of production... the expropriation of the agricultural producer is the basis of the whole process. Only in England has it been accomplished in a radical manner... But all the other countries of Western Europe are following the same course. (*Capital*, French edition, p. 315).

“The ‘historical inevitability’ of this course is therefore expressly restricted to the countries of Western Europe. The reason for this restriction is indicated in Ch. XXXII ‘Private property, founded upon personal labour ... is supplanted by capitalist private property, which rests on exploitation of the labour of others, on wage labour.’ (loc. Cit. p. 340)

“In the Western case, the one form of private property is transformed into another form of private property. In the case of the Russian peasants, however, their communal property would have to be transformed into private property.

“The analysis in *Capital* therefore provides no reasons either for or against the vitality of the Russian commune. But the special study I have made of it, including a search for original source material, has convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia. But in order that it might function as such, the harmful influences assailing it on all sides must first be eliminated, and it must then be assured the normal conditions for spontaneous development.” (Cited in “Late Marx and the Russian Road”, Theodore Shanin, editor, p. 124)

It is not necessary to comment upon the literature that has been written about this key exchange. Suffice it to say that Marx showed in his reply to Zasulich that his thinking was not encumbered by any kind of schematic adherence to a stages theory of history.

Marx and Engels reiterated this view in the Preface to the Second Russian Edition of the *Communist Manifesto*.

“The *Communist Manifesto* set out to announce the inevitably approaching dissolution of modern bourgeois property. In Russia, however, we find that the fast-blossoming capitalist swindle and newly-developing bourgeois landed property stand face to face with peasant communal ownership of the greater part of the land. This poses the question: Can the Russian *obshchina*, a form, albeit heavily eroded, of the primitive communal ownership of the land, pass directly into the higher, communist form of communal ownership? Or must it first go through the same process of dissolution which marks the West’s historical development?

“Today there is only one possible answer. If the Russian revolution becomes the signal for proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, then Russia’s peasant communal land-ownership may serve as the point of departure for a communist development.” (Cited in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, p. 139)

Far from regarding the development of capitalism in Russia as inevitable, Marx hoped that the pain of capitalist development could be bypassed were the revolution to strike prior to the complete eradication of the peasant commune. In his clearest statement of opposition to the fatalism of a stages conception of history, Marx wrote, in a letter to the editorial board of a Narodnik periodical,

“I have come to the conclusion that if Russia continues along the path it has followed since 1861, it will lose the finest chance ever offered by history to a people and undergo all the fateful vicissitudes of the capitalist regime.” (*Late Marx and the Russian Road*, 135)

Marx’s rejection of a “stages” theory of history, as was Trotsky’s in his theory of Permanent Revolution, provides dramatic evidence that there was nothing “inevitable” in the embrace of such concepts on the part of the leadership of the Second International. That latter notion seems to be your contention when you quote Kautsky’s statement,

“Thus it does not even occur to us to want to foment a revolution or to prepare the conditions for one.”

Your comment on this statement is quite revealing. You say,

“When this passage was originally published, no Marxist would have found anything amiss in this statement. It represented a “classic” Marxian conception of socialist revolution as the outcome of the law-governed and irresistible development of socio-economic contradictions in bourgeois society. But by 1909, this conception of revolution was being overtaken by events.”

Your suggestion, when you write that “no Marxist would have found anything amiss in this statement” is that this was the best that could be achieved by Marxist theorists at the time. I think that Marx’s intervention into the discussion of the Russian peasant commune clearly demonstrates the opposite. What you call the “classic” Marxian conception of socialist revolution became in the hands of Kautsky a caricature of Marx’s materialist conception of history. His rigid framework and evolutionary ideas were in stark contrast to the dynamics of social-historical developments in which the role of parties and ideas come into conflict with prevailing economic and political forms in a complex interaction. Kautsky and Plekhanov saw the latter merely as conditioned by the more fundamental economic forces but failed to grasp they were at the same time conditioning. All you can say about Kautsky’s conception is that it was, like Plekhanov’s, “overtaken by events”. You have nothing to say about the philosophical basis for Kautsky’s conception of the class struggle, nor of Social Democracy as a whole. Were you to explore that dimension,

then you would have to discuss the debt Kautsky owed to the Darwinian theory of evolution and the gradualist, anti-dialectical and anti-revolutionary implications conclusions that were drawn from this tradition.

It is well known that Marx and Engels were early admirers of Darwin. Less well known is the fact that their initial enthusiasm later gave way to a more guarded and skeptical attitude toward Darwinism when some of the implications of Darwin's theories became explicit with the rise of Social Darwinism. In the decade after the publication of *Origin of the Species*, some of Darwin's German followers, particularly the biologist Ernst Haeckel, adapted Darwin's theory of natural selection to serve as the ideological underpinning for the then emerging Prussian imperialism. Theories rooted in biological determinism were used by Haeckel and his followers to explain that the destiny of the newly unified German state dominated by Prussia lay in colonizing the African continent. These backward ideas had a big following among the liberal middle classes and threatened to become entrenched in the Social Democratic movement. It is against this background that Engels embarked, in works such as *Dialectics of Nature*, on a wide-ranging critique of the vulgar materialist foundations of Social Darwinism. One example of Engels involvement in this ideological battle should suffice:

“The whole Darwinian teaching of the struggle for existence is simply a transference from society to living nature of Hobbes's doctrine of *bellum omnium contra omnes* and of the bourgeois-economic doctrine of competition together with Malthus's theory of population. When this conjurer's trick has been performed... the same theories are transferred back again from organic nature into history and it is now claimed that their validity as eternal laws of human society has been proved. The puerility of this procedure is so obvious that not a word need be said about it.” (Letter to P. Lavrov, n12-17 November 1875).

It is not accidental that in conducting his critique of the vulgar materialist Haeckel, Engels turned to the *Logic and Philosophy of Nature* of Hegel. For it was in these works that Engels found the conceptual apparatus to combat the anti-dialectical and crude empiricism put forward by Haeckel as well as the earlier schools of vulgar materialism identified with Vogt, Buchner and Molleschot. Thus, when Lenin turned to Hegel to combat the vulgar materialists of his day, he was following a path that had already been trod in a previous generation by Engels.

One can provide many examples throughout *Dialectics of Nature* wherein Engels subjected the gradualist interpretation of Darwinian evolution to a sharp critique. Yet it

was precisely these views that took hold and eventually dominated the German Social Democratic Party. Doubtless you are also aware of the battle Marx and Engels had to wage to get the editors of the German Social Democracy to publish Engels polemic against the anti-dialectician Duhring. Nor is it necessary to remind you of the ongoing battle Marx waged with the leaders of the German Party over fundamental theoretical and programmatic issues in such pieces as his Critique of the Gotha Programme. I cannot explore this rich history in this limited context, but it should be evident that there is little substance to the contention that the level of theoretical development represented by Kautsky or Plekhanov was the best that could be expected in its time. Marx and Engel's conflict with those conceptions demonstrate otherwise.

Returning to our consideration of the implications of non-dialectical thinking, we have at our disposal an example from the theoretically pregnant polemical writings of Lenin that bears out dramatically the difference between adherence to a theory of inevitable stages of history and a dialectical conception of the interplay between economics, politics, ideology and the role of consciousness as classes come into conflict.

In his critique of the Junius Pamphlet, written by Rosa Luxemburg under a pseudonym, Lenin demonstrated the practical utility of his study of Hegel's Logic. He writes,

“Of course, the fundamental proposition of Marxian dialectics is that all boundaries in nature and society are conventional and mobile, that there is not a single phenomenon which cannot under certain conditions be transformed into its opposite. A national war can be transformed into an imperialist war, and vice versa. For example, the wars of the Great French Revolution started as national wars and were such. They were revolutionary wars because they were waged in defence of the Great Revolution against a coalition of counter-revolutionary monarchies. But after Napoleon had created the French Empire by subjugating a number of large, virile, long established national states of Europe, the French national wars became imperialist wars, which in their turn engendered wars for national liberation against Napoleon's imperialism...

It is highly improbable that this imperialist war of 1914-1916 will be transformed into a national war, because the class that represents progress is the proletariat, which, objectively, is striving to transform this war into civil war against the bourgeoisie; and also because the strength of both coalitions is almost equally balanced, while international finance capital has everywhere created a reactionary bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that such a transformation is impossible: If the European proletariat were to remain impotent for another twenty years; if the present war were to end in victories similar to those achieved by Napoleon, in the subjugation of a number of virile national states; if imperialism outside of Europe ( primarily American and Japanese) were to remain in power for another twenty years without a transition to socialism, say, as a result of a Japanese-American war, then a great national war in Europe would be possible. This means that Europe would be thrown back for several decades. This is improbable. But it is not impossible, for to picture world history as advancing smoothly and steadily without sometimes taking gigantic strides backward is undialectical, unscientific and theoretically wrong.” (CW Volume 19, p. 204-204)

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It should be kept in mind that Lenin's critical comments were directed toward a member of the Internationalist wing of the German Social Democracy, one for whose overall views he was sympathetic. All the more important is his admonishment against the theoretical confusion evinced in some of the formulations of Junius. His comments about the possibility of "Europe thrown backward for several decades" can be taken as a direct challenge to the theoretical complacency of Plekhanov and Kautsky. In relating these comments to dialectics, Lenin is making the same point that he does in the Philosophical Notebooks when he castigates Plekhanov for ignoring the essence of dialectics. Finally, Lenin sums up his argument on the issue of national wars by relating the discussion to the need for theoretical clarification of the new international.

"It would be a very deplorable thing, of course, if the "Lefts" began to be careless in their treatment of Marxian theory, considering that the Third International can be established only on the basis of Marxism, unvulgarised Marxism." (CW Volume 19, p. 206)

Lenin would again raise the same issue several years later, in a speech to the Communist International:

"...revolutionaries sometimes try to prove that the crisis is absolutely insoluble. This is a mistake. The bourgeoisie ... are committing folly after folly, thus aggravating the situation... but nobody can "prove" that it is absolutely impossible for them to pacify a minority of the exploited with some petty concessions and suppress some movement of uprising of some section of the oppressed and exploited. To try to "prove" in advance that there is "absolutely" no way out of the situation would be sheer pedantry or playing with concepts and catchwords. Practice alone can serve as real "proof" in this and similar questions." (The Communist International in Lenin's Time, Proceeding and Documents of the Second Congress, Vol I Pathfinder Press, p.118-119)

We find Trotsky echoing this line of thought, when addressing the Third Congress of the Communist International, he summed up the elements of the dialectic of the objective and subjective that are requisite for a revolutionary strategy:

"It has more than once happened in history that a given society, a given nation, or people, or a tribe, or several tribes and nations, living under similar historical conditions, have run up against the impossibility of developing any further on a given economic foundation – slavery or feudalism – but inasmuch as no new class existed among them capable of leading them out to the main highway, they simply fell apart. The given civilization, the given state, the given society, disintegrated. Mankind has thus not always moved upwards from below in a steady rising curve. No, there have been prolonged periods of stagnation and there have been regression into barbarism... a society that is unable to move forward, falls back, and if no class exists to lift it higher, this society begins to fall apart, opening the road to barbarism." (The First Five Years of the Communist International , Volume 2, New Park Publications, p. 3)

Later in the same remarks, Trotsky explicitly discusses the importance of dialectics for understanding this confluence between the objective and subjective:

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“From a superficial standpoint there appears to be some sort of contradiction here: We have brought the bourgeoisie for judgment before the court of Marxism, i.e., the court of scientific knowledge of the historical process, and found it obsolete, and yet at the same time the bourgeoisie discloses a colossal vitality. In reality there is no contradiction here at all. This is what Marxism calls the dialectic. The gist of the matter lies in this, that the different aspects of the historical process – economics, politics, the state, the growth of the working class – do not develop simultaneously along parallel lines.” (p. 5)

In concluding his point, Trotsky hits at the decisive role of consciousness in the drama of history in the following memorable flourish:

“History has provided the basic premise for the success of the revolution – in the sense that society cannot any longer be develop its productive forces on bourgeois foundations. But history does not at all assume upon itself – in place of the working class, in place of the politicians of the working class, in place of the Communists, the solution of this entire task. No, History seems to say to the proletarian vanguard (let us imagine for a moment that history is a figure looming above us), History says to the working class, ‘You must know that unless you cast down the bourgeoisie, you will perish beneath the ruins of civilization. Try, solve this task!’ Such is the state of affairs today.” (p. 6)

One can hardly imagine a sharper juxtaposition to the anti dialectical notions that pervaded the Second International. Contrast Trotsky’s view of the dynamics of the objective with the subjective in the historical process with the thoroughly mechanical and fatalistic notion put forward by Kautsky in his popular treatise, *The Class Struggle*:

“The capitalist social system has run its course; its dissolution is now only a question of time. Irresistible economic forces lead with the certainty of doom to the shipwreck of capitalist production. The substitution of a new social order for the existing one is no longer simply desirable, it has become inevitable.” (*The Class Struggle*, Kerr Publishers, p. 117)

To be sure, Plekhanov as a theorist stood head and shoulders above Kautsky. Yet as we have seen, Plekhanov was likewise committed to the same fatalistic view of “history” as a force that solves all problems irrespective of the conscious acts of individuals or even of classes. Another example from Plekhanov’s writings illustrating the same complacent attitude toward history should suffice:

“Some members of society defend the old order: these are the people of stagnation. Others – to whom the old order is not advantageous – stand for progress; their psychology changes in the direction of those relations of production which in time will replace the old economic relations, now growing out of date.” (*In Defense of Materialism*, p. 192)

In highlighting this side of Plekhanov we do not by any means wish to deny Plekhanov's achievements. One could easily make the case that without Plekhanov, the Marxist movement in Russia would never have achieved the high theoretical level that produced such great revolutionaries as Lenin and Trotsky. Plekhanov's sharp critique of Narodism was above all responsible for establishing Marxism as the dominant revolutionary tendency within Russia by the 1890's. To give him his due, Plekhanov, unlike Kautsky and the rest of the Second International theorists (with the exception of Franz Mehring), had a genuine appreciation for Hegel and the philosophical traditions of German idealism that were so instrumental in the genesis of Marx's views. This doubtless reflected the different conditions prevalent in Russia compared to that of Germany and the rest of Western Europe in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hegel had embodied the great traditions and aspirations of the revolutionary bourgeoisie. His work grew out of the intellectual ferment resulting from the French Revolution. In a memorable passage in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel notes that following the French Revolution, "the World Spirit crossed the Rhine". In Germany, in contrast to France, what could not be accomplished politically, because of the backwardness of Germany, which was then split into numerous semi-feudal princely states, would have a purely theoretical afterlife. After the post-Napoleonic reaction and the beginnings of the consolidation of the German nation under the domination of the Prussian bourgeoisie, revolutionary doctrines, even the most speculative, fell out of favor. Whereas by the 1840s, the German bourgeoisie had no further use for Hegel or the dialectic, for whom as Marx said it was 'a scandal and an abomination', the same was not the case among the enlightened liberal and radical intelligentsia in Russia. There, the struggle against autocracy, the principles that animated the French Revolution, still had resonance in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Were Hegel still living, he would have said that after the suppression of the uprisings of 1848 and the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871, "the World Spirit crossed the Volga", where it would realize its incarnation in the form of the Russian Revolution.

The great intellectuals and revolutionaries who preceded Plekhanov - Belinsky, Herzen and Chernychevsky - all were profoundly influenced by Hegel. It was Herzen who coined the description of dialectics as "the algebra of revolution." Plekhanov's appreciation for Hegel came out of this tradition and marks a sharp contrast with the pro forma attitude toward Hegel exhibited by Kautsky. There is nothing else in the annals of the Second International that comes close to the meticulously detailed review of Hegel's views that Plekhanov presented in his essay, *On the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Hegel's Death*. One can argue that it was due to his having taken Hegel seriously that Plekhanov was able to strike out against Bernstein's attack on Marx. The leading edge of Bernstein's attack on the philosophical front, it should be recalled, was the repudiation of dialectics.

Nevertheless, despite his genuine appreciation of Hegel, Plekhanov's grasp of dialectics was one-sided and fatally flawed. **This** was Plekhanov's weakness – not the biographical fact that he was born in a time when reaction prevailed forcing him to spend his entire career as a Marxist in exile. It was to point to this weakness in Plekhanov's philosophy that Lenin, in his reflections on the role of dialectics and its relation to revolutionary practice, thought it significant to note that whereas Plekhanov had much to say about Hegel and the history of philosophy, there was,

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“...about the large Logic [Hegel’s Science of Logic] , in connection with it, its thought (i.e., dialectics proper, as a philosophical science) nil!!”

And in diagnosing the failure of Plekhanov, Lenin was rethinking entirely the version of Marxism that passed for orthodoxy within the Second International. The work that went into the study of Hegel in 1914 was the crucial theoretical preparation for the building of the new international.

## **The Relationship Between Materialism and Empirio-Criticism and the Hegel Notebooks**

An important key to grasping your own philosophical position is your failure to provide a coherent account of the relationship between Lenin's early foray into philosophy, his 1908 work *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, and the *Philosophical Notebooks* of 1914-1915. (The Stalinist editors of Lenin's collected works have tried to blunt the significance of Lenin's turn to Hegel in 1914 by combining in Volume 38 the *Hegel Notebooks* proper with other notes written at an earlier period reflecting a different stage in Lenin's philosophical development. My own references to the *Philosophical Notebooks* are strictly limited to the material from the 1914-1915 period.)

In trying to make sense of the relationship between the two works, you write the following:

“One of the platitudes of Lenin “scholarship,” shared by both partisans and opponents of the Bolshevik leader, is that the *Philosophical Notebooks* represents a fundamental transformation of Lenin's understanding of Marxism, a repudiation of the “vulgar” materialism of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.”

After quoting one of these opponents of Lenin, you conclude,

“Such assessments are based on a rather superficial reading of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Far from representing an entirely new point of departure in his theoretical work, Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* represented a continuation, summing up and deepening of philosophical and methodological issues that had preoccupied him since the earliest stages of his political activities.”

The first thing to be said here is that an assertion is not a demonstration. Your case is that the *Philosophical Notebooks* do **not** “represent a fundamental transformation of Lenin's understanding of Marxism.” You make the assertion, but where is the demonstration? Indeed you do not even attempt to demonstrate the validity of your statement. There is no historical-philosophical examination of the text of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* compared with the text of the *Philosophical Notebooks*.

The only argument you present to press your case is that opponents of Lenin support the thesis of a break in continuity between the two works. That statement is true, but what does it tell us about the substance of the controversy? Rather than enlightening us on the substantive issues it suggests a false amalgam that merely confuses. It should be evident that the question of whether or not the *Philosophical Notebooks* represent a break from *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* can be determined independently of the partisan

nature or motives of the participants in the debate. And while it is easy to understand why opponents of Lenin would like to stress the lack of continuity between the two works, thereby demonstrating Lenin's "voluntarism" and inconsistency, it should also be evident that supporters of Lenin may have an entirely different motivation for taking one side or the other in this dispute.

In your attempt to elucidate the nature of the relationship between the two works, you say the following:

"Far from representing an entirely new point of departure in his theoretical work, Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* represented a continuation, summing up and deepening of philosophical and methodological issues that had preoccupied him since the earliest stages of his political activities."

It is clear that you deny a break in continuity between the two works, but you also seem to indicate that there is some sort of advance, "a summing up and deepening", represented by the *Philosophical Notebooks*. You do not elucidate however, in what manner this "deepening" occurs. Your formulation, without any specific examples citing the texts of the two works, is altogether too vague to be of any service. We are left bereft of any idea of how the *Philosophical Notebooks* represented an advance over the earlier work.

My own view is that the *Philosophical Notebooks* represent both a continuity and a break with the earlier Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. This is in general the nature of a dialectical supercession, an *Aufhebung* to use Hegel's term, in which that which is new represents at once both an annulling and a preservation of that from which it has emerged. What is preserved in this case is the defense of materialism.

The background to the 1908 work, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, was the dawn of the revolution in physics that is still underway. The discovery of electro-magnetism, the first formulation of the special theory of relativity and other events that rocked the foundations of the mechanical world outlook inaugurated by Newton elicited a philosophical reaction that questioned the existence of an objective world. Philosophical trends such as vitalism, neo-Kantianism, intuitionism came together with a form of radical empiricism giving rise to the Empirio-Critics. Lenin saw the need to battle this philosophical trend. He interpreted the new developments in science not as evidence that "matter disappears" but that the old mechanical outlook of conceiving the objective world had to be reformulated with the richness of a dialectical outlook informed by the newest developments in physics.

At the same time, Lenin still maintained in 1908 a mechanical theory of cognition. This is evident in such statements as the following:

"...it is ... beyond question that mechanics was a copy theory of real motions of moderate velocity, while the new physics is a copy of real motions of enormous velocity.

The recognition of theory as a copy, as an approximate copy of objective reality, is materialism.” (Lenin, C.W. Volume 14, p. 317)

“Our sensation, our consciousness is only an image of the external world, and it is obvious that an image cannot exist independently of that which images it. Materialism deliberately makes the “naïve” belief of mankind the foundation of its theory of knowledge.” (Lenin, C.W. Volume 14, p. 69)

Lenin’s description of a theory of cognition in 1908 did not go beyond formulations that saw ideas as mere copies or images of reality. There is no notion of a dialectical path of cognition, or of a transformation of the subjective into the objective. Indeed, given the overall theoretical level of the Second International at this time, it is hard to see how Lenin could have gone beyond such formulations. At the same time, it is undoubtedly true that Lenin began to differentiate himself from the mechanistic conceptions prevailing in the Second International. For example, in one of his first published works, he writes the following,

“The objectivist speaks of the necessity of a given historical process; the materialist gives an exact picture of the given socio-economic formation and the antagonistic relations to which it gives rise. When demonstrating the necessity for a given series of facts, the objectivist always runs the risk of becoming an apologist for these facts; the materialist discloses the class contradictions and in so doing defines his standpoint. The objectivist speaks of “insurmountable historical tendencies”; the materialist speaks of the class which “directs” the given economic system, giving rise to such and such form of counteraction by other classes... He does not limit himself to speaking of the necessity of a process, but ascertains exactly what class determines that necessity.” (Collected Works, Vol I, p. 400-401).

This very early works shows the premium that Lenin attached to the active role of human agency in determining the outcome of history in a spirit that is foreign to that of Plekhanov. It was Lenin’s insistence on the active role of a conscious party guided by theory that eventually lead to Plekhanov’s split from Lenin in 1903, even before they had developed differences over the nature of the Russian Revolution. Thus, I think it can be said that Lenin’s revolutionary instinct carried him beyond the fatalism of Plekhanov and Kautsky, though he was still in 1908 limited by the theoretical conceptions that he inherited from them.

This had changed considerably by the time Lenin worked through Hegel’s Science of Logic. In the latter notes, Lenin still sometimes uses the term “reflection” to denote the relationship between ideas and reality, but this is no longer a passive reflection that merely accepts images from an external world. Rather he is emphasizing the active role of consciousness in deriving concepts and separating appearance from essence. For instance,

“The reflection of nature in man’s thought must be understood not “lifelessly”, not “abstractly”, not devoid of movement, not without contradictions, but in the eternal process of movement, the arising of contradictions and their solution.” (Lenin, C.W. Volume 38, p. 195)

Or take the following oft-repeated statement:

“Thought proceeding from the concrete to the abstract ... does not get away from the truth but comes closer to it. The abstraction of matter, of a law of nature, the abstraction of value, etc., in short all scientific abstractions reflect nature more deeply, truly and completely. From living perception to abstract thought, and from this to practice, - such is the dialectical path of the cognition of truth, of the cognition of objective reality.” (Lenin, C.W. Volume 38, p. 171)

Or as a final example we have following statement that summarizes Lenin’s new view of the transformation of the subjective into the objective:

“The thought of the ideal passing into the real is profound: very important for history. But also in the personal life of a man it is clear that this contains much truth. Against vulgar materialism. NB. The difference between the ideal from the material is also not unconditional, not *uberschwenglich* [inordinate].” (Lenin, C.W. Volume 38, p. 114)

There is nothing like this in his earlier philosophical work. There he emphasized the dichotomy between the ideal and the real. Here he is emphasizing both their dichotomy and their unity. The relationship of the ideal to the real is a unity in difference.

Note also the statement, “against vulgar materialism”. This brings us to another issue in which the Hegel Notebooks represent a significant advance over the 1908 work. In the former work, the issue was the defense of materialism against the challenge of skepticism and philosophical agnosticism. Both these ideological trends had gained a foothold in Russian Marxist circles and threatened to tear the movement apart.

By 1914 however, Lenin recognized a new and even more malignant philosophical trend, one that had derailed the leaders of the Second International. This was vulgar materialism. The dangers arising from this camp were not broached in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. But in the Philosophical Notebooks, Lenin is so sensitive to the wrecking operation carried out by the vulgar materialists of the Second International that he can write the following:

“...intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism” (Lenin. C.W. Volume 38, p. 276)

In making this point, Lenin is recapitulating an insight contained in Marx’s first Thesis on Feuerbach, where he says,

“The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things, reality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the *object*, or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence in contradistinction to materialism, the *active side* was set forth by idealism – but only abstractly, since of course, idealism does not know real sensuous activity as such.”

I note that you quote the same passage from Marx, but in your desire to make a polemical point you eliminate the sentence that refers to how “the active side was set forth by idealism”. This is not accidental, but reflects your own failure to assimilate the importance of Lenin’s critique of Plekhanov, which you elsewhere dismiss as “exaggerated”. That is perhaps why in attempting to make sense of Lenin’s criticism of vulgar materialism in Volume 38, you are unable to articulate anything about “the active side”. Thus you say,

“To the extent that mechanical materialism does not explain the real objective origins of consciousness, it is unable to correctly explain the role of the conscious factor in history.”

Your conception of accounting for the conscious factor in history is that we get a correct account of “the real objective origins” of consciousness. But how is this anything more than a treatment of consciousness as an **object** of contemplation – in other words to repeat Marx, **not subjectively!** What Marx has in mind is that for the old materialism, consciousness can only be conceived as a derivative product of other, objective conditions. Granted it is that. But if that is all we have to say about consciousness, then we get ourselves into the hopeless riddle articulated in Marx’s third Thesis,

“The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated.”

The materialist doctrine derived from the Enlightenment that is the object of Marx’s critique was a form of mechanical materialism. It ultimately stumbled because it could not provide an answer to the riddle of how the educator could be educated – in other words how does consciousness develop out of a social practice that includes itself. The mechanical separation of ‘circumstances’ from ‘consciousness’ which saw the latter as a passive reflection of the former could never explain how the ‘circumstances’ could change.

Idealism on the other hand develops the active side of consciousness, i.e. it conceives of man as not simply the product of objective conditions that determine his fate, but as the author of his own history, this being the essence of freedom. But Marx notes that whereas idealism grasped this active side, it developed it abstractly, outside of mankind’s real objective history. The problem is how to put these two sides together, each of which contains a partial truth. For Hegel who likewise conceived of this problem, but in his own fashion also abstractly, the solution was in the positing of the Absolute Idea that unites the Theoretical Idea and the Practical Idea.

For Marx, the solution lies in what he called ‘practical-critical activity’. But what kind of activity is this ‘practical-critical activity’? This is a question you do not ask. I believe it is the answer to this question that Lenin is searching when he notes that the difference between the ideal and the real is relative. In other words, what the mechanical materialists got wrong, as well as the abstract idealists, is that the barrier between objective conditions and consciousness is constantly being breached – the one transformed into the other. ( This doesn’t mean that the objective does not remain predominant. Therefore this is still a form of materialism, but of an entirely different sort than that conceived by the 18<sup>th</sup> century materialists.) That is what is meant when we say that the objective and the subjective are a unity in difference. Rather than exploring this dimension of what Marx meant by “practical-critical activity”, you conflate this notion of Marx with the common notion of “practice”, saying later on that for Lenin,

“Of immense importance was the reintroduction of the concept of practice as an essential category of cognition, in the sense that the development of knowledge is not simply a theoretical question but a practical one.”

Your statement that the development of knowledge is “not simply a theoretical question but a practical one” begs the question. What kind of practice are we talking about? How is this practice to be conceived in such a way that it is what Marx called “objective”? I don’t think it is necessary for me to add that Marx’s first Thesis is often quoted by people who think that Marx is making the trivial point that thinking by itself is insufficient, one must be active and actually do something. This also elides the issue of whether we can dismiss a distinct “theoretical practice” that accompanies and gives sustenance to practical activity. Without a dialectical grasp of the objective and subjective as a unity in difference, the final statement from Marx’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Thesis makes no sense:

“The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.”

Before leaving the topic of the relationship between Lenin’s Hegel Notebooks and his earlier Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, I would like to refer to two precedents to the position you have adopted, namely that the Hegel Notebooks represent nothing new in the thinking of Lenin. The first of these precedents can be found in the otherwise excellent review of the Philosophical Notebooks published by Cliff Slaughter in the article Lenin on Dialectics. ( I will shortly discuss sections of this document that I think have a lasting value, but here I wish to comment on the flawed account Slaughter presents of the relationship between Materialism and Empirio-Criticism and the Hegel Notebooks.)

Slaughter, in replying to arguments made by commentators who saw an epistemological break between the theory enunciated in 1908 and that found in the Hegel Notebooks, writes,

“It is important to see that this case is sustained on a very narrow basis: instead of an examination of the actual work of Lenin, including Materialism and Empirio-Criticism,

we are usually presented with truncated extracts from the latter work, which distort its meaning, or with a series of short quotations from the Notebooks which are supposed to show that Lenin renounced his philosophical past.”

But Slaughter then proceeds to provide not “truncated” extracts from *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, but no extracts at all! To be sure there are some quotations from *Friends of the People* and other earlier works showing that Lenin was aware of dialectics, but nothing about his remarks on the theory of knowledge in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

When he tries to summarize how he views the relationship between the pre-1914 Lenin and the post 1914 Lenin, Slaughter lapses into vague formulations about a “dialectical development” and a “deepening” without providing any specifics. If there is a case to be made in support of his thesis, Slaughter does not make it in this essay from 1962.

The other precedent to your approach can be found in the work by the late Soviet philosopher, E. V. Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism*. Ilyenkov’s argument is that the dialectical theory of cognition announced in the Hegel Notebooks is already implicit in the 1908 work *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. His argument is not based on a close examination of the actual text of either work. Rather, it is one long variation on the theme of Lenin’s insistence, in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, that the difference between the absolute and the relative is itself relative. Ilyenkov deems this to be sufficient proof that Lenin was already a finished dialectician in 1908. He writes,

“The conception of dialectics as the logic and theory of knowledge of modern materialism, which permeates the entire text of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, was formulated a bit later – in the *Philosophical Notebooks*. But implicitly it is the essence of Lenin’s position in 1908 as well. . . in the chapter about the recent revolution in natural science. . . he investigates in particular, the dialectic contained in the concept of objective truth, the dialectical relationship between the relative and the absolute (the unconditional, which is established definitively and for all time) which constitutes objective knowledge.” (New Park Publications, p. 144)

Ilyenkov’s argument is not very convincing because it is based neither on a close comparison of the two texts, nor on the historical circumstances surrounding the composition of these works. Ilyenkov manages, in a discussion of Volume 38, to never even mention “vulgar materialism”. Nor does he mention the circumstances under which Lenin wrote this work. Not a word about World War I and the betrayal of the leadership of the Second International. This cursory treatment of the historical context is in sharp contrast to his consideration of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, where he devotes a great deal of space to the background of Mach, Bogdanov and the debates inspired by the new physics and their impact on politics.

I believe that your treatment of the relationship between Materialism and Empirio-Criticism and the Hegel Notebooks shares the weaknesses of Slaughter and Ilyenkov's earlier foray in this area. You echo their denials of a break in continuity between the two works but come up short when called upon to provide evidence validating your contention.

In the Hegel Notebooks, Lenin discusses vulgar materialism in relation to the mechanical conceptions of history and the non-dialectical view of the relationship between consciousness and objective reality that dominated the Second International. He does not after 1908 revisit the philosophical trends arising out of the scientific revolution. This is a pity for if he did, it would have been clear that vulgar materialism comes to play a more prominent role than the skepticism and agnosticism that Lenin noted in 1908. It is a legacy from which we still suffer. An investigation of cultural and philosophical trends in the latter half of the last century would have to come to terms with the fact that vulgar materialism in its various incarnations has become the most invidious form of bourgeois ideology that we face today. This does not mean that subjective idealism and agnosticism have quit the scene. The role of postmodernism and popular notions of cultural relativism still command a large following, particularly in academic circles. At the same time however, we are witness to the fact that theories rooted in biological determinism have gained a new respectability among scientists and academics. The reactionary implications of such theories are well known and have been with us at least since the heyday of biological determinism when Broca measured skulls to prove that white people have bigger brains and therefore are more civilized and intelligent. Today a new generation of Darwinian fundamentalists proclaim the existence of "selfish genes" and the innate inheritance of intelligence. In the contemporary field of what is called "philosophy of mind", our modern vulgar materialists are busy reducing the workings of consciousness to the behavior of neurons. If at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, those who were disoriented by the new developments in science proclaimed that "matter disappears", it is just as true to say that their modern descendants, at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are now proclaiming that "consciousness disappears". Lenin dealt with the first of these trends in 1908. He recognized and began the battle against the second of these trends in 1914. That is how I see the relationship between the Philosophical Notebooks and Materialism and Empirio-Criticism.

## **History, Epistemology and Lenin's Criticism of Engels**

In the course of your June 20<sup>th</sup> letter, you single out what you consider to be an impermissible criticism of Engels. You do this by objecting to my citation of Lenin's criticism of Engels. You write,

“What, I wondered, led you on a search for such a quotation? Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century Engels had been a favorite target of philosophical idealists who hold him responsible for “vulgarizing” the views of Karl Marx with an excess of materialism. Lenin, whose admiration for Engels knew no bounds, was very familiar with this tendency.”

The answer to your first question is that I cite this criticism because it is part of the historical record. It needs no other justification. Even if you disagree with my interpretation of this quote, why is it illegitimate to cite it? Should not students of Marxism and Lenin be aware of it?

Perhaps instead of asking why I pointed to this passage by Lenin, you should ask why Lenin felt impelled to write it in the first place. The answer I believe is apparent if we recall Lenin's motivation in turning to a study of dialectics in the first place. That is, he is questioning the philosophical foundations upon which the old International had been built. A consideration of Engels then naturally comes to mind, for it was Engels above all, who was the most influential teacher of the Marxist method in the early days of the Second International. Let us recall that Engel's *Anti-Duhring*, a popular summary of Marxism in the form of a polemic against a philosophical opponent, was the most widely read tract by far among socialist workers. Many times more workers were familiar with *Anti-Duhring* than Marx's *Capital*.

You attempt to delegitimize any discussion Lenin's criticism of Engels by casting it in the light of an amalgam with “philosophical idealists who hold him [Engels] responsible for “vulgarizing” the views of Karl Marx...” Rather than constructing false amalgams, it would be more productive to pay some attention to the content of what Lenin is saying. Let us repeat the offending passage:

“The correctness of this aspect of the content of dialectics must be tested by the history of science. This aspect of dialectics (e.g., in Plekhanov) usually receives inadequate attention: the identity of opposites is taken as the sum-total of *examples* [‘for example, a seed,’ ‘for example, primitive communism.’ The same is true of Engels. But it is ‘in the

interests of popularization...'] and not as a *law of cognition* (and as a law of the objective world)." [Volume 38, p. 359]

In your eagerness to prove that it is inconceivable that Lenin ever criticized Engels, you write that,

"It is clear that this passage does not constitute a criticism of Engels. Lenin states that the use of "examples" by Engels to elucidate such dialectical laws as "the identity of opposites" is "in the interest of popularization," which Lenin considered entirely legitimate."

When Lenin writes "it is in the interest of popularization" he is undoubtedly qualifying his reference to Engels. I would interpret him to be saying that in his presentation of dialectics, Engels limited himself to examples, which had a certain value for pedagogical purposes. At the same time Lenin is saying that the use of such examples had the unfortunate effect of creating a false impression that dialectics is a science that can be mastered by reference to some examples, thus transforming it into a lifeless scholastic endeavour. Lenin's criticism is therefore guarded and qualified, but I don't think that your absolute dismissal of any critical element toward Engels in Lenin's statement is in any way justified by an examination of the text. Lenin is not blaming Engels for those who reading him later misinterpreted him but he is presenting a warning about the method of presentation that Engels adopted. He is saying that teaching dialectics solely by reference to examples is insufficient and likely to result in the vulgarization of the dialectic. Your statement therefore that Lenin considered Engels use of examples "entirely legitimate" is not supported by a reading of the text. The issue is not the use of the examples, but the substitution of examples for an in depth examination of the philosophical basis for dialectics. When an exposition is for popular consumption, as Engels writings were, then the adoption of this method is excusable, but its dangers should be recognized.

Note that Lenin's criticism of Plekhanov in the same paragraph comes without this qualification. Plekhanov is actually the chief target of Lenin's criticism here. It goes without saying that Lenin considered Engels a master dialectician and his criticism of him is restricted to his pedagogical method.

On the other hand, the use of examples as a substitute for philosophical inquiry is at the heart of your remarks about my supposed lack of attention to history. Your position essentially is that any discussion of philosophy as such is illegitimate unless it is subsumed under a discussion of historical examples. How else to interpret the following remark from your letter?

"In Lenin's reading of Hegel's Logic, it is the historically-evolving character of thought-forms and human knowledge that constitutes among the most critical of epistemological issues. When he stated (with a certain degree of exaggeration) that Plekhanov and others

had “paid no attention” to this essential aspect of dialectics, Lenin had in mind the manner in which they had transformed Marxian concepts into unchanging formulae that were to be imposed upon objective reality.”

Again, I must reiterate that “this aspect of dialectics” to which Lenin refers is “the splitting of a single whole and the **cognition** [my emphasis] of its contradictory parts.” There is no reference here to “the historically–evolving character of thought-forms” as you put it. I need not repeat that there is no “degree of exaggeration” in Lenin’s remarks.

On the face of it, your contention makes little sense. If according to Lenin, “this aspect of the dialectic” to which Plekhanov paid no attention was the “historically evolving character of thought”, then how can we explain Plekhanov’s many essays, such as for instance his Unaddressed Letters, in which the “historically-evolving character of thought” is the main topic? Understanding the “historically-evolved character of thought” was if anything Plekhanov’s strength, not his weakness. Plekhanov’s weakness lies elsewhere, in his inability to formulate a dialectical theory of cognition.

Elsewhere you try to avoid the difficulty of your interpretation of Lenin by equating a dialectical theory of cognition with history.

“ It was precisely because the materialism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had not uncovered the underlying laws of historical development that it could not explain the evolution of knowledge. How is it possible to provide a materialist account of the development of knowledge” without history?”

The trick behind your conflation of epistemology and history is the fact that the development of knowledge is a temporal event, therefore it has a “history” in the sense that one can arrange different moments of the process of cognition in chronological order. While this is true, it is a trivial truth that tells us little about what these moments of cognition are and how they are transformed. Furthermore, temporality is not the same as history. By the latter we are commonly referring to the social process whereby the fates of nations and peoples are transformed through the contradictory movement of productive forces and social relations.

Dialectics encompasses the forms of motion of nature, society and thought. The forms of the dialectic are furthermore different in each of these realms of being. By collapsing the investigation of the dialectic of thought (theory of knowledge as such) into history, you have in effect erased it as a legitimate part of the dialectical world outlook. Furthermore, it should be obvious that one can do a kind of history, even a materialist explanation of history, that is not dialectical. Aristotle in his Politics for instance presents what is essentially a materialist interpretation of history and even traces the evolution and collapse of different states to the underlying struggle of classes. We also have the example of the French materialist historians such as Guizot, whom Marx rightfully credited with depicting the underlying motives of history in terms of the struggle of different classes. Your statement therefore that, “The philosophical limitation of mechanical materialism was, indeed, rooted in its ahistorical character”, leaves out any

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account of why their account was ahistorical. This is rooted in the old materialists embrace of non-dialectical forms of thinking. Plekhanov explained this nicely in the following passage:

“But if human nature is something constant, then it is patently absurd to wish to explain, with its help, mankind’s historical fortunes, which are changeable in their essence; if human nature is given to change, then one should ask oneself the following question: why does that change take place?” (Essays on the History of Materialism, CW Volume II, p. 142)

Inasmuch as historians such as Guizot ultimately fell back on arguments about an unchanging human nature, their attempts to provide a coherent explanation of history stumbled into unresolved riddles. What was wrong with mechanical materialism was precisely that it was **mechanical**. It’s inability to account for history was embedded in its holding the opposites of the objective and subjective apart.

In the next section I will explore the practical implications of this philosophical outlook.

## **Adventures of the Dialectic: 1962-2004**

The theoretical questions we have been discussing have a profound practical implication. It is not simply a matter of interest to academics whether or not Lenin insisted on a dialectical theory of cognition. For involved in the question of the nature of cognition is the issue of the relationship between the party and working class and the development of revolutionary class consciousness. The challenge facing the revolutionary movement is how it can be an agent in the transformation of the consciousness of the working class. If the revolutionary movement is dominated by a mechanical conception of history in which the working class is conceived of not as a subject of history but merely as an object, then a policy of passively waiting for the inevitable radicalization to occur and prove the correctness of our perspective inevitably follows.

I think there are great dangers and warning signs that such an attitude has taken hold in the International Committee.

At the same time, I do not at all discount the important achievements of the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee.

But the movement cannot afford to rest on its laurels.

That is why I brought up Lenin's Philosophical Notebooks to comrade Volkov. You take great umbrage at my introduction of this topic. You particularly object to my characterization of the fortunes of Volume 38 in the last two decades. Thus, when I said that,

"In the 1970's the movement used to be trained on the basis of reading Lenin's volume 38.", You write,

"No Alex, that is not really the case." You continue, "During the 1970s, the movement was *mistrained* on the basis of a *false reading* of Volume 38. Healy and Slaughter introduced into the International Committee, under the cover of a study of the *Philosophical Notebooks*, a vulgar rehash of the sort of pseudo-dialectical Left Hegelianism that Marx, Engels and Lenin had long before subjected to withering criticism. The political purpose served by the theoretical charlatanry of Healy and Slaughter was the evasion of the difficult political problems posed by the upsurge of class struggle in the wake of the events of May-June 1968. The "thoroughgoing struggle against idealist ways of thinking" was, according to Slaughter, more critical "than questions of agreement on program and policy." This bizarre maxim was a complete departure from the theoretical traditions of the Marxist movement. The issue of dialectical method was separated entirely from the problem of political analysis and

programmatic clarification. The so-called “practice of cognition” invoked Hegelian categories to justify Healy’s increasingly intuitive and pragmatic politics. [*Trotskyism versus Revisionism*, Volume 6 (London, 1975), p. 83] This form of theoretical charlatanism has been utterly discredited within the International Committee.”

You are correct that in my informal letter to Vladimir I erred in saying that the struggle on philosophical issues took place “during the 1970s”. It is true that for most of the 1970’s, Healy’s increasingly subjective interpretation of Lenin’s Volume 38 dominated discussion of philosophy within the movement, and thereby the movement was mistreated. I should have been more precise in my chronology. What I was getting at in my letter to Vladimir is that there was an important turn toward philosophical issues in the movement that were inspired by a reading of Volume 38. This actually happened in the early 1960’s and shaped the movement for the next decade. Healy’s “practice of cognition” was a sorry caricature of this turn toward dialectics. I was expressing my frustration to Vladimir that in the aftermath of the defeat of Healy in the International Committee, the baby had been thrown out with the bathwater. That is, we had not only rid the movement of Healy’s gross distortion of dialectics, which as you state “invoked Hegelian categories to justify Healy’s increasingly intuitive and pragmatic politics”, but we had also abandoned any serious study of dialectics.

We can say that the period from 1962 to roughly 1973 represented an era in which the movement took a healthy and fruitful turn toward the philosophical foundations of Marxism whereas in the period from about 1973 to 1985 a philosophical and political degeneration predominated. While there is no clear dividing line, the launching of the WRP in 1973 marks some kind of turning point, as you yourself have explained in your obituary of Gerry Healy. We should keep in mind however that there were signs of problems even before 1973, such as the manner in which the split with the OCI was handled. Likewise, not everything that happened after 1973 can be explained as part of a systematic degeneration. We are talking about overall trends and the conclusion is inescapable that there was a different palette to the movement from the early 1960s to the early 1970s than to the period that followed from 1973 to 1985. I might add that it was in the former period, characterized by the rising tide of the world revolution -during which we saw the May-June events in France, the mass movement against the Vietnam War in the U.S. and the revolt against Stalinism in Eastern Europe – that the International Committee undertook the turn toward the study of dialectics. Not accidentally, this was the period in which all the leading members of today’s movement were trained. Were this not the case, it would be hard to see from whence came the forces that finally took on and rescued the movement from Healy’s wrecking operation in 1985. On the other hand, the period from 1973-1985 was characterized by the diminished expectations arising out of the failed revolutionary struggles of the previous period. The struggles of the working class in France and elsewhere were thrown back thanks to the treachery of its leadership. The anti-war movement died and failed to generate an ongoing radicalization either in the working class or among the largely middle class students. It was in this period of the decline of the tempo of the revolution that Healy’s “practice of cognition” began to dominate discussions within the International Committee.

Therefore, it is important to distinguish Healy's later misuse of dialectics with the legitimate turn toward a study of Lenin's Philosophical Notebooks that was inaugurated by the International Committee shortly after their publication in English in the early 1960's.

The turn to a study of Lenin's Philosophical Notebooks, first proclaimed in the article, Lenin on Dialectics by Cliff Slaughter, was part of a turn, only partially realized, to the philosophical foundations of Marxism as an integral part of the struggle against Stalinism and revisionism.

This turn toward the philosophical foundations of Marxism was at the heart of the struggle by the International Committee in the early 1960's against the return of the Socialist Workers Party to the camp of the Pabloites. The pretext for their reunification with the Pabloite United Secretariat was agreement about the nature of Castroism and the Cuban revolution.

Slaughter's article, Lenin on Dialectics, published shortly after Lenin's Philosophical Notebooks became available in English, was an important statement on the role of dialectics in the training of the revolutionary movement. Slaughter notes that a study of Lenin's Philosophical Notebooks,

“...will prove absolutely invaluable in the process, now beginning, of developing Marxist theory to answer the revolutionary tasks of the working class in this and every other country. Just as Lenin made his enormous original contribution to theory as part of the construction of a revolutionary leadership at the beginning of the century, so theoretical development today will be made only as part of the living struggle to overcome the betrayals and the theoretical degeneration of the Social-Democratic and Stalinist movements. Overcoming the consequences of those betrayals is not a question of words, but of building an alternative leadership which can arm the working class with the developing theory required to achieve consciousness of its historic role and the necessary strategy of class struggle.”

“In reading Lenin, therefore, our aim is not to find recipes for our present problems, but to gain an insight into the method used by this outstanding thinker and political leader. With the use of this method, Lenin made important discoveries about the nature of world capitalism and about the social relations and ideologies of his own time, particularly in Russia. These discoveries have received more study than the method itself, and yet Lenin's use of the dialectical method was the key to his ability to analyse new stages in economic and political developments, and to his mastery of political strategy and tactics.”

Later Slaughter emphasizes the historical impetus behind Lenin's turn to Hegel – the outbreak of world war and the betrayal of the Second International.

“Lenin’s study of Hegel in 1914-1915 helped to heighten his awareness of the universality and depth of this method and so equipped him for the even greater task of reorienting the socialist movement of the whole world. This could not be done on an empirical basis alone. The facts studied for Lenin’s *Imperialism* and his work on the Second International and the Russian Revolution were selected and had meaning only in the framework of the dialectical method roughly drafted in the Notebooks, with its stress on the interconnection of all aspects of phenomena, the identity of opposites, the need to go deeper and deeper into the practice of men in changing nature and themselves. A return to the study of Lenin’s practice and method today is an essential part of the solution of our revolutionary tasks.”

Even more than 40 years after they were written, it is hard to improve on these words. Elsewhere, Slaughter contrasts the dialectical method with that of the method that spontaneously emerges within the working class- empiricism. He correctly identifies empiricism as the method utilized by those revisionist forces that emerged within the Trotskyist movement in the post-war period.

“Lenin’s Notebooks on Hegel might appear obscure and a not very pressing pre-occupation, when big things are happening all over the world. However, it is exactly on the theoretical front that the sharpest and most uncompromising struggle must be waged. A mistaken conception here can mean a whole mistaken method, the relations between the facts becomes totally misunderstood, and disastrously wrong conclusions will be drawn. For example, some ‘Marxists’ assume that Marxist method has the same starting point as empiricism: that is to say, it starts with ‘the facts’. It is difficult to understand why Lenin and others should have spent so much time on Hegel and the dialectical method if this were true. Of course every science is based on facts. However, the definition and establishment of ‘the facts’ is crucial to any science. Part of the creation of a science is precisely its delimitation and definition as a field of study with its own laws: the ‘facts’ are shown in experience to be objectively and lawfully interconnected in such a way that a science of these facts is a meaningful and useful basis for practice. Our empiricist ‘Marxists’ in the field of society and politics are far from this state of affairs. Their procedure is to say: we had a programme, based on the facts as they were in 1848, or 1921, or 1938; now the facts are obviously different so we need a different programme. For example, the spurious ‘Fourth International’ of Pablo’s group decided some years ago that the Stalinist bureaucracy and its counterparts in various countries were forced to act differently because of changed objective circumstances (‘facts’). New ‘revolutionary currents’ were abroad in the world, more recently particularly in the colonial revolution. The consequences of this ‘mass pressure’ would be to force the bureaucrats to act contrary to their wishes and to lead the workers to power.”

Slaughter concludes the discussion on the dangers of empiricism with a sketch of how this method differs from a genuine dialectical method. “It is a false and non-Marxist view of ‘the facts’ which leads to these revisionist ideas. What our ‘objectivists’ are saying, with their message ‘history is on our side’, is this: look at the big struggles taking place, add them together without analysing them, go on your impressions of their significance, and add all these together – and you have ‘the facts’. Colonial revolutions

are successful here, and successful there, and in another place; then the colonial revolution is a fact. Nationalist leaders like Nkrumah and Mboya and Nasser make ‘anti-imperialist’ speeches and even carry out nationalizations; this suggests history is tending irreversibly and inexorably to force non-proletarian politicians in a socialist direction. But ‘objectivism’ of this kind is a collection of impressions and not a rich dialectical analysis of the whole picture, with the parts related to one another. A truly objective analysis begins from the economic relations between classes on a world scale and within nations. It proceeds through an analysis of the relations between the needs of these classes and their consciousness and organization. On these it bases its programme for the working-class internationally and in each national sector. A list of the ‘progressive forces’ is not an objective analysis! It is the opposite, i.e., simply a collection of surface impressions, an acceptance of the existing unscientific consciousness of the contemporary class struggle as held by the participants, primarily by petty-bourgeois politicians who lead the national movements and bureaucratized labor movements.”

Rather than minimizing the struggle on methodological issues, “Lenin and Dialectics” even insists that an incorrect methodological approach has life and death consequences. One example, of the seriousness of the philosophical issues from the history of Bolshevism was the trade union debate of 1920. This important debate pitted Lenin against Trotsky and Bukharin. The substantive issues at stake in this discussion have been discussed elsewhere and are not my immediate concern. But we can learn a great deal about Lenin’s attitude toward the relationship between philosophy and politics if we examine how he approached the problems that were posed. In making his points, Lenin introduced what was in effect a refresher course in the dialectical method. He noted that Trotsky was not proceeding dialectically, but abstractly.

“It was a mistake in method for Trotsky to ‘start from the economic tasks’ and condemn Lenin for being too ‘political’; ‘...one must not approach a wide subject like this without pondering over the special features of the political aspect... politics are the most concentrated expressions of economics.’ Trotsky’s mistaken policy of ‘shaking-up’ the unions ‘flowed from this wrong method’, ‘and if this mistake is not admitted and corrected, it will lead to the fall of the dictatorship of the proletariat’, said Lenin”. (Lenin on Dialectics, p 30)

It is then a matter of record that in a key document of the International Committee, a point is made that Lenin considered that a “wrong method” could, if not corrected, “lead to the fall of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

In one of the most important statements issued by the International Committee, *Opportunism and Empiricism*, written at the time of the split with the Socialist Workers Party, the assessment of Castroism was framed squarely in the context of a discussion of philosophical method. Allow me to quote from this statement written in 1963:

“Empiricism, ignoring the history of philosophy, rejects the dialectical theory of knowledge as ‘metaphysics’. Only the dialectical materialist view can explain the world, because it includes a materialist explanation of the development of our concepts as well

as of the material world which they reflect. Empiricism must be rejected, not made more 'consistent.' There are many sides to this methodological error of Hansen's.

Trotsky warned the SWP leadership in his last writings that they must encourage a determined struggle on the theoretical front against the 'American' philosophy of pragmatism, a more recent development of empiricism; unless this was done, there would be no real Marxist development in the U.S." (Trotskyism Versus Revisionism, Volume 4, p. 76)

The movement within the International Committee to turn to the philosophical foundations of Marxism thus goes back to the very earliest days of the struggle against the Socialist Workers Party, when the Socialist Labour League was leading the struggle for Marxism. It is a distortion of the history of the movement to identify the turn to Volume 38 in this period with the caricature that it later became with Healy.

The documents produced by the International Committee during and after the split with the Socialist Workers Party provide the most dramatic evidence that the struggle on questions of philosophy has always been the critical heart of the project of building revolutionary leadership in the working class. This is expressed in a report presented to the International Committee shortly after the SWP reunified with the United Secretariat.

"Pabloite revisionism arose specifically as an adaptation to the dominant bureaucracies in the labour movement. The failure to develop Marxist theory after Trotsky's death exposed the cadres of the Fourth International to this bourgeois pressure through the bureaucracy. We can only overcome the split which this brought about by understanding this process in all its aspects. Such an understanding can only come from the actual struggle against revisionism in all its manifestations, theoretical, political and organizational. We shall see that the revisions are so deep that they affect the whole theory and method of Marxism." (Trotskyism Versus Revisionism, Volume Four, p. 189)

This important document noted that the 1953 split with the Pabloites left unanswered the most important questions.

"The Socialist Workers' Party leadership, ...reacting empirically to the actions of Pablo in 1953, actually initiated the formal split in the International, yet within a few years find themselves 're-united' with the Pabloites. **The formal rejection of some of the consequences of Pablo's revision of Marxist theory was not enough. Because Cannon and his group did not explore the roots of this revisionism (and all this should have pinpointed the theoretical responsibility of the Socialist Workers Party) the same forces which produced Pablo eventually overtook the Socialist Workers Party.**" (My emphasis A.S. p.190)

The same document indicts the leadership of the SWP for never taking seriously Trotsky's imprecation to turn the party to a study of dialectics.

“What Cannon betrayed in a phrase about ‘the given circumstances’, Hansen has developed into a whole case, arguing that dialectical materialism is the same as ‘consistent empiricism’. What a contrast with Trotsky’s warning to the Socialist Workers’ Party! The ideas of pragmatism and empiricism have their direct and concrete expression in the domination of opportunism in the labour movement. The revisionists’ attempt to assimilate empiricism to Marxism is the natural accompaniment of their capitulation to the opportunist bureaucracies. In this way is justified the characterization of the July 26<sup>th</sup> movement leaders in Cuba as ‘natural Marxists’, the Pabloite faith in the Soviet bureaucracy’s capacity for transforming itself, etc. In all this it is indicated that without conscious theory men will respond to ‘objective forces’ and arrive at the path of Marxism. This is a clear abandonment of the Transitional Programme, with its stress on the decisive question of resolving the subjective problems of the world revolution.

**“It is in this sense that the fight for dialectics is the fight to build the world party in every country. Neither can succeed without the other.** [my emphasis. A.S.] Dialectical materialism will only be understood and developed in the struggle to build the party against all enemies. The party can be built only if there is a conscious fight for dialectical materialism against the ideas of other classes. It is on revolutionary theory that the ability of the party to win the political independence of the working class is based. Marxism is a developing theory; it develops in the practice of revolutionary parties who ‘discover’ reality by acting to change it. Trotsky’s warning about the fight against pragmatism was seen by the Socialist Workers’ Party leadership only as a suggestion that one or two comrades should interest themselves in questions of philosophy – the consequences is before us now. An explanation of the degeneration of Pablo, Cannon and others will be incomplete if it ignores this side of the question: the neglect of theory since Trotsky’s death. It was this which halted Cannon’s rejection of Pablo in 1953 at the level of a few programmatic points, preventing the necessary deeper analysis.

“We have a parallel for this development in the historical relationship between Marx and Lenin. Lenin made gigantic developments of Marxist theory after a historical gap during which the exposition of Marxist ideas on various subjects went alongside the deepening degeneration of the Socialist movement in the Second International.” [ my emphasis A.S. p 193-194]

I finished my note to Comrade Volkov with the following thought:

“Since the break with Healy these issues have been ignored. I think this is a big mistake.”

You reply, “What issues? What mistake?”

I must ask you in turn, “Do you now consider the turn toward epistemological issues within the International Committee in 1963 to have been a mistake?”

If so, then you should rewrite much of the history of the International Committee. If, on the other hand, you still think the issues that were posed in 1963 were legitimate, then the answer to your rhetorical question is right in front of you. The issues that were raised, in

1963, and by Trotsky in 1940, were the struggle against pragmatism and empiricism through a theoretical clarification of the theory of knowledge of Marxism. The turn toward Volume 38 was an initial expression of the International Committee's resolve to make that theoretical breakthrough, notwithstanding its later hideous transformation by Healy. The break with Healy in 1985 was an important milestone in the sense that it saved the International Committee from complete destruction. It now appears however that a serious study of the philosophical foundations of Marxism has been a casualty of the 1985 split along with its demiurge, Healy's caricature of that endeavour. This is what I think has been a big mistake.

I think the consequences of this mistake are evident in the recent series of lectures on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the International Committee. I note that in all the lectures presented by the leaders of the International Committee, hardly any attention was focused on the break in 1963 with the Socialist Workers Party. It is either ignored or mentioned in passing as another event in a long chronology of betrayals. For instance, the following is the sum total of words Chris Marsden devotes to the 1963 split,

“Even James P. Cannon and the Socialist Workers Party leadership were to abandon their stand in 1953, and by 1963 had reunified with the Pabloites on an unprincipled basis.”

This is somewhat astonishing when one considers that the 1963 split was by far a more significant event in the history of the International Committee than the initial 1953 split with Pablo. It was, after all, in the course of battle against the opportunism of the SWP that most of the sections of what now exists as the International Committee can trace their origin. What the reunification of the SWP with the Pabloites in 1963 exposed was that a defense of orthodox Marxist principles was a wholly inadequate basis for combating the effects of opportunism within the workers movement. In 1963, the International Committee, lead by the Socialist Labour League, went beyond a mere restatement of orthodox principles, necessary as this was, and began the long road toward an investigation of the philosophical origins of opportunism in the workers movement. It was in this context that the International Committee armed itself with a study of Lenin's Hegel notebooks beginning in the early 1960's. The difference between 1953 and 1963 is in some ways analogous to the difference between the defense of orthodoxy against Bernstein on the part of Kautsky and Plekhanov in 1898, and the turn toward a study of Hegel by Lenin after the betrayal by the orthodox defenders of Marxism made dramatically evident the inadequacy of relying on a restatement of orthodox principles to combat revisionism. Not once are these crucial lessons of the 1963 split mentioned in any of the talks given on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the International Committee. It seems that we have altogether forgotten that which has distinguished the International Committee from all the pretenders to Marxist orthodoxy.

To take another example, consider Nick Beams statement on how the struggle against opportunism is waged,

“...Opportunism – the betrayal of the independent historical interests of the working class for short term gains – is not a product of bad individuals, but the political expression of the pressures generated by objective conditions.”

What Beams does is replace the “bad man” theory of history with a “bad circumstances” theory of history. Political betrayals are not the product of bad men, but of bad circumstances. What both these theories deny is the role of conscious ideological and theoretical work in effecting the outcome of the struggle against opportunist tendencies. If we look at how Beams accounts for the 1963 split with the SWP, his “bad circumstance” theory of history becomes evident.

“Less than 10 years after the issuing of the Open Letter all the issues which had arisen in 1953 were to reemerge as the Socialist Workers Party in the United States moved to reunify with the Pabloites on the basis of a common position on Cuba – that Castro’s petty bourgeois movement had established a workers’ state and even that Castro himself had become an ‘unconscious Marxist’.

“The British Trotskyists sought to deepen the struggle against Pabloism and defended the continuity of the Fourth International. Against great odds and under conditions of relative isolation, they defended the programmatic foundations of the movement, insisting that the positions advanced by the SWP leadership on Cuba meant nothing less than the liquidation of the Fourth International.”

The first thing to be noted is that Beams account provides no explanation at all as to why the opportunism that the SWP fought against in 1953 “reemerged” in 1963. Why is it that sometimes “bad circumstances” infect some people with the disease of opportunism and not others, while at other times, those same people that had fought against opportunism have themselves become infected. Beams account is just another version of the tragic view of history that you have articulated in your account of Plekhanov. We are presented with a chronology of one betrayal after another. These betrayals we are told, are the result of bad circumstances. This is essentially a version of the history of the International Committee that is incoherent. The facts are all there, but they are presented in the manner of crude empiricism – just one damn thing after another. They make no sense, and no lessons can follow from this history. Missing an explanation of Cannon’s theoretical weakness and his degeneration, what are we to make of a history wherein a man of such extraordinary courage and intelligence succumbed to the pressure to become an opportunist? The unstated moral behind this narrative is that if a person of the caliber of Cannon was vulnerable to the pressures of opportunism then it must take a very rare moral character of extraordinary fortitude to withstand all the pressures to become an opportunist. This lands us once more in the idealist quagmire that posits that history is dependent on the moral character or lack of it of a few extraordinary individuals.

I note that in your account of the degeneration of the SWP leadership in your 1988 work, *The Heritage We Defend*, you reject the facile explanation that “bad circumstance”, in this case isolation from the workers movement, can account for the turn toward

opportunism. Speaking of the period in the late 1950's when the SWP's perspective was dominated by a policy of regroupment toward non-working class forces, you write,

“Under conditions where, to the untrained eye, the position of capitalism appeared impregnable, Marxists had the responsibility to reveal the contradictions that were building to a renewal of the crisis and a new upsurge of the class struggle.

“This theoretical work was all the more necessary to combat those tendencies that were, under the cover of regroupment, working might and main for the repudiation of the SWP's traditional “proletarian orientation,” insisting that there existed no serious opportunities for party work outside the middle-class milieu of protest politics.

“It is, of course, true that the SWP worked under *relatively* unfavorable conditions. But the material possibilities for overcoming the isolation were developing out of the contradictions of the capitalist system and the struggles of the working class.” (The Heritage We Defend, p. 343-344)

Note also that Beams version of the 1963 split emphasizes precisely the opposite point than that made in the documents of the period. Beams focuses on the fact that the British Trotskyists “defended the programmatic foundations of the movement”, when the 1963 documents insisted on the inadequacy of that approach. To reiterate, in 1963, the International Committee wrote that,

“An explanation of the degeneration of Pablo, Cannon and others will be incomplete if it ignores this side of the question: the neglect of theory since Trotsky's death. It was this which halted Cannon's rejection of Pablo in 1953 at the level of a few programmatic points, preventing the necessary deeper analysis.”

This side of the question is precisely what is ignored in Beams presentation. Yet I note that in your own 1991 obituary of Gerry Healy, you wrote a remarkable appreciation of the importance of the Socialist Labour League's turn toward a study of the Hegel Notebooks as an essential part of the struggle against revisionism. You wrote then approvingly of the essay by Cliff Slaughter that we have previously cited, Lenin on Dialectics,

“The SLL recognized the relevance of Lenin's concentrated work on dialectics for its struggle against opportunism. At a time when the Pabloites were justifying their abandonment of the theory of permanent revolution on the basis of “facts” like the victory of Ben Bella in Algeria and Castro in Cuba, which supposedly proved that petty-bourgeois nationalists could lead socialist revolutions, the SLL called attention to the reactionary role played by bourgeois empiricism in the elaboration of such popular revisionist ideas.” (Gerry Healy and His Place in the History of the Fourth International, 1991, p. 77-78)

Why is there not a single mention of this important struggle today? The upshot of forgetting the lessons of the 1963 struggle is that it is no longer possible to account for

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the degeneration of Cannon and a whole generation of veteran Trotskyists. Furthermore, whereas the 1963 documents emphasize that the struggle against opportunism could not stop at the level of a reaffirmation of orthodox principles but must go to the philosophical foundations of opportunism, the account of 2003 ignores completely the theoretical issues and simply reaffirms the need to restate orthodox principles. Finally, where we see that the 1963 documents correctly relate the struggle on philosophical issues to Trotsky's battle in 1940 against the opponents of the dialectic in the SWP, in 2003 Trotsky's struggle in 1940 is never even mentioned.

The International Committee is no longer able to provide a coherent account of its own history.

## **Where is the International Committee Going?**

In summing up you pose the question of how the philosophical issues I have raised related to the practical work of the International Committee.

“During the past 18 years the International Committee has produced an extraordinary range of political and theoretical work. We have subjected to analysis the most difficult political issues – among them, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the decay of the trade unions, and the contemporary significance of bourgeois nationalism. In each case we have not simply reasserted “orthodox” positions, but creatively developed and adapted the Marxist program to the new historical conditions. Moreover, each day the theoretical vitality, programmatic clarity, and political astuteness of the International Committee is attested to by the publication of the World Socialist Web Site.

You do not seem to consider these political and programmatic achievements a particularly important indication of the ICFI’s theoretical strength. But, please tell us, what political indications do you see that the International Committee is making a “big mistake” in matters relating to philosophy? In what form has our theoretical deficiency manifested itself?”

I don’t think it is necessary for me to restate my support for the work of the International Committee. My criticism of your position and the present orientation of the International Committee is expressed from the perspective of a close supporter who is troubled and concerned with the recent course of events. My purpose is not to denigrate the achievements of the World Socialist Web Site. Nor would I deny that the International Committee has done some very important work in analyzing the breakup of the Soviet Union, the decay of the trade unions, the significance of bourgeois nationalism and the implications of globalization. These are all important theoretical achievements for which you have a right to be proud. You should also feel a sense of accomplishment in the wide readership that has been won to the World Socialist Web Site and the recent series of successful conferences.

But there is an old saying within the movement that I learned from Gerry Healy in his better days - whenever you think that your perspectives have been confirmed, you must take that as a warning, for that is the moment of greatest danger for the movement. Given the self-congratulatory air of triumphalism I detect in the talks on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the International Committee – an atmosphere captured by the title of Peter Schwarz’s talk – “The Founding Principles Have Been Confirmed” - I think this old lesson has been

forgotten. The International Committee today stands upon the precipice of seeing its perspective confirmed without recognizing the dangers.

I might add that when I have tried to raise some of the issues I have enunciated in informal discussions with members and supporters of the WSWS, the usual reply has been something to the effect, “The WSWS gets 30,000 hits a month and you can’t argue with that kind of success.” I think you have been around the movement long enough to know that such crude expressions of pragmatism do not speak very highly of the theoretical level of those who express such thoughts. People who think this way are likely to become seriously disoriented at the next turn of the class struggle.

The problem is not so much that the specific analysis of this event or that event is wrong, rather the problem is that such analysis becomes the totality of the political work of the movement. With few exceptions, the movement no longer actively intervenes into the struggles of the working class to build an alternative leadership. The “confirmation of perspectives” in this sense is precisely the problem. The “perspective”, our best determination of the tempo and line of development of the objective situation, is one in which the role of the working class is seen as something separate from our struggle to transform its consciousness as well as our own. This becomes the practical expression of the viewpoint enunciated in your thoughts on Plekhanov, one that sees the working class as the object of history instead of as its subject, or in the words of Lukacs, as the identical subject-object of history. Thus, the turn away from questions of theory is accompanied by a turn away from the working class.

If we revisit the situation of the Socialist Workers Party in the immediate aftermath of the split with Pablo in 1953 we will find a situation that is analogous to the one we face today. As you document in *The Heritage We Defend*, The Socialist Workers Party leadership began to have second thoughts about the split with Pablo almost immediately after it happened. They failed to follow up the restatement of political principles with a struggle on the theoretical front. The result was that by 1957 the SWP, reacting to the downturn in working class militancy and the pressures of McCarthyism, began to turn away from the working class to a coterie of middle class liberals, radicals and refugees from the Stalinist movement. This policy, known as “regroupment” came to a head with the support of the SWP for an “independent” socialist ticket in the elections in New York in 1958. In order to maintain a coalition with liberals, Stalinists and labor bureaucrats, the SWP agreed to forego having its own representative run for office and agreed to abstain from any mention of its socialist program. This was clearly a harbinger of an adaptation to opportunism that would soon culminate in a return to Pabloism.

I think there has been an analogous situation in the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee as a whole. Leading up to and immediately following the split with the WRP in 1985, some important theoretical work was done. Of particular note was the excellent statement by the International Committee analyzing the degeneration of the WRP, “How the Worker Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism,” the 1988 reply to Banda, “The Heritage We Defend” and the Healy obituary published in 1991, “Gerry Healy and His Place in the History of the Fourth International”. It was critical to expose

Healy's "practice of cognition" as a sorry caricature of the dialectical theory of knowledge. However, there has been no substantive discussion of dialectics within the movement since the early 1990's. Promises made in the aftermath of the battle over Healy's caricature of dialectics, that the training of Marxists on the basis of a renewed investigation into the roots of pragmatism and empiricism within the workers movement would proceed on a new basis, have been entirely forgotten. I was astonished to hear in a recent exchange with a leading member of the British section of the International Committee, Chris Talbot, that the struggle against empiricism is no longer an important issue for the International Committee. In a private letter to me commenting on the work of Scott Meikle, Talbot made the following assertion,

"The problem with this emphasis [against empiricism ] is that it assumes that vulgar materialism and empiricism are the main philosophical opposition faced by Marxists... That may have been the case for the circles Meikle was writing for, twenty years ago, but it is certainly not true today. From reading your Heidegger article I am sure you are well aware of the degeneration of thought that has taken place in modern bourgeois academic and media circles." [ Letter from Chris Talbot, 8/12/02 ]

I have no doubt that Talbot here is not just expressing a personal opinion but is reflecting a common conception that has taken hold in the International Committee. That conception is that, unlike the case in 1963 when the SLL had to wage a life and death battle against pragmatism and empiricism in order to save the movement, these issues are no longer of primary importance today. Evidence that this is indeed the case can be gathered from the lack of attention to a theoretical critique of pragmatism and empiricism in the movement's press. There has in fact not been a single article devoted to a Marxist critique of pragmatism or empiricism for over 20 years. The attitude that such matters are unimportant, hardly worth paying attention to, become part of a vicious circle where the lack of attention to these issues is rationalized by its supposed lack of importance, whereas its lack of importance is employed to justify further neglect of the subject. The inevitable result is that the "theory" of the relative unimportance of pragmatism and empiricism in the workers movement becomes a self-serving rationale for neglecting these critical questions. The notion that the historical character of bourgeois consciousness in the working class, either in its empiricist or pragmatist form has been superceded by trendy academic theories that are more important is a dangerous illusion. Yet it is precisely this kind of thinking that is used to justify the turn away from the philosophical issues that motivated the International Committee in an earlier period.

While the supposed prevalence of postmodernism is presented as a justification for giving short shrift to empiricism and pragmatism, neither has there been any serious confrontation with postmodernism in the pages of the WSWS. What there has been are a few commentaries on some of the more outrageous excesses of certain postmodernists. Much hay was made about the so-called Sokal affair, for instance. The ludicrous statements made by Irigaray or Lacan about science provides an easy target which however only masks over the fact that the deeper epistemological issues involved with postmodernism were never seriously explored. There has not been to this day an in-depth

study and critique of any of the major figures associated with postmodernism such as Derrida, Foucault or Bataille.

On a deeper level, the superficial jabs aimed at postmodernism have served to cover over the lack of attention to pragmatism and empiricism. Furthermore, under the banner of a struggle against postmodernism, a bridge has been built to scientists of an empiricist persuasion. This in itself is not a bad development, but only if the differences between Marxism and empiricism or mechanical materialism are not swept under the rug. Unfortunately, this has not been the road followed. Rather, the pages of the WWSWS have often featured uncritical praise for the biological determinists Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett who are portrayed as allies in the fight against religion and mysticism. That they may be, but neither should it be forgotten that they are also opponents of the dialectic.

Indeed, Dawkins is a brilliant writer and since the recent passing of Carl Sagan and Stephen Jay Gould, the foremost propagandist for science and atheism in our time. Max Eastman and Sidney Hook played a similar role in the 1930's. I am not suggesting that Dawkins work be ignored. I am only insisting that Dawkins philosophical opposition to the dialectic should not be ignored.

(An example of the uncritical attitude toward Dawkins can be found in the review of his book "Unweaving the Rainbow", <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/jan1999/daw-j08.shtml>

And a review of a lecture by Dawkins, "A Blow Against Mysticism",

[http://www.wsws.org/public\\_html/prioriss/iwb1-27/dawkins.htm](http://www.wsws.org/public_html/prioriss/iwb1-27/dawkins.htm)

for Dennett, we have the following review of his book, "Consciousness Explained",

[http://www.wsws.org/public\\_html/prioriss/iwb1-27/dawkins.htm](http://www.wsws.org/public_html/prioriss/iwb1-27/dawkins.htm)

For a critique of Dawkins from a dialectical viewpoint, I refer to Richard Lewontin's book, "The Dialectical Biologist", Stephen Jay Gould's "Structure of Evolutionary Theory", Stanley Salthe's, "Evolving Hierarchical Systems" Columbia University Press, 1985 and "Development and Evolution" MIT Press, 1993. I have also critiqued Dawkins and Dennett in several unpublished essays that I can make available upon request.)

The lack of any critical distance from contemporary scientific opponents of the dialectic such as Dawkins and Dennett is eerily reminiscent of the unprincipled philosophical bloc established by Max Shachtman in the Socialist Workers Party in the late 1930's with Max Eastman and Sidney Hook. Trotsky rightly saw this philosophical alliance as a precursor to a political betrayal:

"Precisely here begins Shachtman's betrayal – not a mere mistake as I wished to believe last year; but, it is now clear, an outright theoretical betrayal. Following in the footsteps

of Burnham, Shachtman teaches the young revolutionary party that ‘no one has yet demonstrated’ presumably that dialectic materialism affects the political activity of the party. ‘No one has yet demonstrated’, in other words, that Marxism is of any use in the struggle of the proletariat. The party consequently does not have the least motive for acquiring and defending dialectic materialism. This is nothing else than the renunciation of Marxism, of scientific method in general, a wretched capitulation to empiricism. Precisely this constitutes philosophic bloc of Shachtman with Burnham and through Burnham with the priests of bourgeois ‘Science’.” (From a Scratch to the Danger of Gangrene, In *Defense of Marxism*, New Park, p. 144)

Parallel to the reevaluation of contemporary philosophical trends there has been a reevaluation of the history of philosophy. This has been particularly evident in relation to an uncritical enthusiasm over the Enlightenment in the pages of the World Socialist Web Site for the past several years. Increasingly, Marxism has been portrayed as the modern continuation of the Enlightenment. All but forgotten is the fact that Marx inherited and took to a higher level the critique of the Enlightenment found in Hegel. This view is spelled out in one of Marx’s earliest published pieces, his essay *On the Jewish Question*. There he takes as a given the inadequacy of the bourgeois liberal conception of freedom and equality. He writes,

“Thus none of the so-called rights of man goes beyond egoistic man, man as he is in civil society, namely an individual withdrawn behind his private interests and whims and separated from the community. Far from the rights of man conceiving of man as a species-being, species life itself, society appears as a framework exterior to individuals, a limitation of their original self-sufficiency. The only bond that holds them together is natural necessity, need and private interest, the conservation of their property and egoistic person.” (Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed David McLellan, p. 54)

In recent years, a series of articles have presented a reassessment, and in my opinion a distortion, of the Marxist critique of liberal political and social theory. While it is certainly correct to defend the gains represented by bourgeois theories of constitutional law from the ahistorical attacks of the postmodernists, this impulse has been developed one-sidedly to the point where the critique of bourgeois theories has become emasculated. Icons of bourgeois liberalism such as Hobbes, Locke and Jefferson have been elevated at the expense of the historical ancestors of modern communism, Winstanley, Munzer or Babeuf. I thought it somewhat peculiar that a recent obituary of the historian Christopher Hill criticized him for not recognizing the importance of Locke while at the same time barely mentioning Hill’s most important book, *The World Turned Upside Down*, where Hill drew a memorable portrait of those personages involved in the English Revolution who went beyond the bounds of bourgeois property relations. (“These the times... this the man”: an appraisal of historian Christopher Hill, by Ann Talbot, [http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/mar2003/hill-m25\\_prn.shtml](http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/mar2003/hill-m25_prn.shtml) ) In that book you will find the following spirited defense of one of the great precursors of the communist movement while at the same time providing a critique of the misanthropic bourgeois philosopher Thomas Hobbes.

“For Hobbes, reason 'is nothing but reckoning (that is adding and subtracting) of the consequences of general names agreed upon for the marking and signifying of our thoughts.' But for Winstanley Reason is Love, is Christ rising in the sons and daughters of God: the bloom is restored to science, to the universe which is the clothing of God. Winstanley's mythological, poetic approach is at the opposite pole to Hobbes's abstractions, just as it is poles apart from Hobbes's Calvinist assumptions about the inherent selfishness and competitiveness of natural man. Hobbes thought that man's ruling passion was fear of death: Winstanley wanted all men to choose life, and to have it more abundantly" (392-3).

Hill was here echoing the assessment made by Marx, who located Hobbes in the tradition of mechanical materialism. Writing in the 1840's Marx said:

“In its further development materialism became one-sided. Hobbes was the one who systematized Bacon's materialism. Sensuousness lost its bloom and became the abstract sensuousness of the geometrician. Physical motion sacrificed to the mechanical, geometry was proclaimed the principal science. Materialism became hostile to humanity. In order to overcome the first anti-human incorporeal spirit in its own field, materialism itself was obliged to mortify its flesh and become an ascetic. It appeared as a being of reason, but it also developed the implacable logic of reason.” (The Holy Family, from McLellan, p. 152)

The reevaluation of the Enlightenment has served a definite political function. It has served to justify a philosophical blurring of the lines between socialism and liberalism. Indeed, about the only criticism made of liberalism in recent years is that liberalism is cowardly and has betrayed its own principles. I might add that the door has been left open, mostly through a lack of criticism, to the suggestion that liberalism and socialism are not necessarily irreconcilable opposites. In your essay, “Socialism, Historical Truth and the Crisis of Political Thought in the United States”, you provide the following summary of the political views of the philosopher John Dewey:

“Dewey repeatedly argued that nothing that was essential to liberalism, as he understood it, required that its fate be tied to that of the capitalist system. Rather, Dewey insisted, the democratic principles espoused by American liberalism, above all a commitment to social equality, were in irreconcilable conflict with the contemporary development of capitalist society.”

While correctly singling out Dewey as a paragon of courage and intellectual integrity in comparison to the cowardly liberals who supported the Moscow Trials, you fail to make the obvious rejoinder that Dewey was mistaken in thinking that liberalism was somehow compatible with socialism. Dewey repeats the same error that was made in the previous century by John Stuart Mill who also came to the conclusion at the end of his career that socialism was compatible with his version of liberalism and utilitarianism. In the case of Mill, Marx never tired of pointing to the logical fallacies in which Mill was entwined.

Indeed the view that the problem with liberalism is that it is cowardly and betrays its own principles has been increasingly presented in the writings of the Socialist Equality Party. What this elides is that the very principles of liberalism are rooted in the bourgeois conceptions of abstract right and the laws of the capitalist market. The portrayal of liberalism as cowardly, moribund and impotent – complete with its attendant sexual imagery – has become something of a staple of political commentary in the World Socialist Web Site in recent years. While there is certainly a great deal of truth to this judgment, contemporary liberalism is indeed a pale shadow of what it was in the heyday of the New Deal, it is also the case that this assessment of liberalism has become a kind of mantra in the pages of the WSWS, purporting to be the universally overlooked explanation behind all the social ills that beset American culture.

The WSWS regularly features many articles that are of good journalistic quality but fail to get beyond the surface of events. The reason is that there is a lack of theoretical clarity, and where that happens, pragmatism and impressionism fill in the theoretical gaps. The history of our movement has demonstrated time and time again that when theoretical issues are ignored the inevitable result is that one is no longer able to consistently adopt the standpoint of the working class. In practice, one finds oneself analyzing developments from the standpoint of another class, without even realizing it.

Many articles are not even identifiable as the work of a Marxist publication but are written from an amorphous, radical left wing perspective. That is why it was possible for a Spanish online publication that has no pretensions to being Marxist or revolutionary, to plagiarize more than 200 articles from the WSWS recently. There is something deeply troubling about this episode that the WSWS statements about it completely failed to address. While it is commonplace for political opponents of Marxism to steal ideas and analysis from it, plagiarism on this scale - the wholesale reproduction of hundreds of texts - is unprecedented in the history of the Marxist movement. Would a left-liberal publication have ever dreamed of plagiarizing material from Lenin or Trotsky? By the standards of even the most progressive elements from that milieu Lenin or Trotsky would have been indigestible. The fact that so much WSWS material is all too digestible suggests that it has little or no Marxist flavor. This episode is a small but telling indication of how low the theoretical level of the movement has sunk.

I think there has been a demonstrable and direct relationship between a turn away from theory and a turn away from the working class in the practice of the International Committee. About a decade ago, the International Committee concluded after long discussions and reflections on the experiences of the working class, that the trade unions were no longer capable of playing a progressive role, even to the very limited degree that was achieved in the 1930's. I think this judgment was essentially correct. However what should have followed from that conclusion was a practice aimed at founding new organizations of working class struggle. There were some promising initiatives in this direction on the part of the Australian movement, whereby worker's Committees of Inquiry were founded to investigate victimization by corporate polluters of working class neighborhoods. But this promising work was after a certain period abandoned and nothing seemed to replace it. By the late 1990's, there were no attempts at all to have a

consistent presence in the working class. With the advent of the WSWS, virtually all political work was turned in the direction of journalism. Therefore, the upshot of the discussion on the trade unions was that any form of active intervention in working class organizations was abandoned. I have no doubt that this was not the original intent of the work on the trade unions, but because the analysis failed to challenge the fatalism that grows out of viewing the working class as the mechanically determined object of history, the conclusion that the trade unions were no longer a viable form of working class organization were turned into an excuse for avoiding any kind of struggle to create new forms of working class organization.

Here I find a remarkable analogy with the conclusion of the theoretical struggle against Healy's distortion of dialectics. I don't think that when you carried out the initial critique of Healy's vulgarization of Marxist dialectics, that you intended to avoid discussing dialectics for the next twenty years. But that is precisely what happened.

In the last decade the International Committee has been embarked on its own version of a policy of "regroupment". Lest I be misunderstood, I want to clearly state that there are definite limits to this analogy with the regroupment policy carried out by the SWP in the period 1957-1959. The International Committee has not indulged in the kind of wholesale abandonment of revolutionary perspectives that characterized the SWP in the period leading up to the reunification with the Pabloites. Nevertheless, a tendency has clearly emerged within the International Committee characterized by an abstentionist practice in relation to the working class. This has been accompanied by an orientation in the United States toward disaffected liberals who feel betrayed by the Democratic Party and the mass media. Given the extraordinary turn of political events in the United during the Clinton Administration, this change in orientation was understandable. The combination of the Republican Party having been captured by extreme right wing forces and the extraordinary degree of capitulation to these forces on the part of mainstream liberal leaders left millions of working and middle class people politically disenfranchised. It was correct to attempt a dialogue with these forces, particularly under circumstances where the trade union movement no longer represented any kind of credible political alternative, even from a reformist perspective. It was also correct to expose the anti-democratic right wing conspiracy behind the Clinton impeachment drive, as well as the theft of the 2000 elections in the face of a reactionary "plague on both houses" attitude on the part of practically all the radical groups. However it is essential as part of a dialogue with disenchanted liberals and former liberals, to pose clearly our alternative program for revolutionary socialism. Instead, on crucial occasions, the International Committee has blurred the distinction between liberalism and revolutionary socialism. I believe this political confusion is announced in a statement issued by the Socialist Equality Party launching the Presidential election campaign. There one reads that,

"The necessity for a scientific and socially-motivated utilization of mankind's productive forces and technology – the absence of which threatens the very physical survival of human civilization – poses the historic task of consciously subordinating the profit

motive to the principle of humane, democratic and intelligent social planning – that is, replacing capitalism with socialism.” ([http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/jan2004/stat-j27\\_prn.shtml](http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/jan2004/stat-j27_prn.shtml))

Rather than characterizing socialism as it has been historically conceived within the Marxist movement as the new society of associated producers standing on the foundations thrown up by the overthrow of the law of value, this formulation portrays socialism as “subordinating the profit motive”. In other words, socialism is seen as a kind of capitalism whose excesses have been reigned in, i.e. “subordinated”, to “the principle of humane, democratic and intelligent social planning.” If any statement ever expressed a theoretical and political muddle, surely this one qualifies.

By way of comparison take the following sharp and clear formulations presented in the Transitional Program, wherein liberal and Social Democratic conceptions of “planning” are characterized.

“Liberal capitalism, based upon competition and free trade, has completely receded into the past. Its successor, monopolistic capitalism, not only does not mitigate the anarchy of the market but on the contrary imparts to it a particularly convulsive character. The necessity of ‘controlling’ economy, of placing state ‘guidance’ over industry of ‘planning’ is today recognized – at least in words – by almost all current bourgeois and petty bourgeois-tendencies...The Social Democrats prepare to drain the ocean of anarchy with spoonfuls of bureaucratic ‘planning.’ Engineers and professors write articles about ‘technocracy’. In their cowardly experiments in ‘regulation’, democratic governments run head-on into the invincible sabotage of big capital.”

In contrast to the bureaucratized versions of planning that were then current in liberal circles during the era of the New Deal, the Transitional Program stressed the necessity for workers control, a phrase that does not even appear in the 2004 election manifesto:

“The working out of even the most elementary economic plan – from the point of view of the exploited, not the exploiters – is impossible without workers’ control, that is without the penetration of the workers’ eye into all open and concealed springs of capitalist economy. Committees representing individual business enterprises should meet at conferences to choose corresponding committees of trusts, whole branches of industry, economic regions and finally, of national industry as a whole. Thus, workers’ control becomes a school for planned economy. On the basis of the experience of control, the proletariat will prepare itself for direct management of nationalized industry when the hour for that eventuality strikes.”

Finally, the Transitional Programme, rather than characterizing socialism as a system “subordinating the profit motive”, spells out that socialism rests on the abolition of the profit motive.

“The socialist programme of expropriation, i.e. of political overthrow of the bourgeoisie and liquidation of its economic domination, should in no case during the present

transitional period hinder us from advancing, when the occasion warrants, the demand for the expropriation of several key branches of industry vital for national existence or of the most parasitic group of the bourgeoisie.”

Of course one can argue that during the New Deal liberalism and social democracy were still advancing reformist proposals for social planning whereas today a senile liberalism has abandoned even the mildest reformist proposal and poses no alternative to the right wing policies of retrenchment of even the most elementary forms of public facilities. This observation would be correct, but it fails to alter the fact that the distinction between socialism and liberalism has been blurred. At best such an objection could point to the fact that that in the discussion of socialism found on the WSWS, there is drawn a distinction between socialism and a senile and cowardly liberalism. But it fails to draw much of a distinction between socialism and a renewed or invigorated liberalism, one that came into prominence during the New Deal. What this indicates is that there has been a blind spot in the critique of liberalism.

Until the intervention of the Socialist Equality Party into the California election, any consistent campaign revolving around programmatic demands had been notable by its absence from the pages of the World Socialist Web Site. Instead, article after article on the World Socialist Web Site tacked on a bit of “holiday speechifying” about the need for a “world party of socialist revolution.” A typical example of this methodology is the article on Howard Dean that appeared on Dec 20<sup>th</sup>. The article provided an analysis of the Dean campaign and how the leadership of the Democratic Party had tried to marginalize Dean. The article concludes with the following remarks,

“In the end, the many millions of people opposed to the Bush administration’s policies of militarism abroad and social reaction at home will find no real alternative in Dean or in any other Democratic candidate. Such an alternative is possible only through a break with the two-party system and the emergence of an independent, mass political party of the working class.”

It is certainly the case the case that millions opposed to the Bush administration will find no real alternative in Dean, but nothing in the previous paragraphs of commentary had prepared the reader for this conclusion. In the terms of the transitional program, there is no *bridge* between the present consciousness of the working class and the objective requirements of the situation. The last line, that this alternative “is possible only through a break with the two-party system and the emergence of an independent, mass political party of the working class”, not only comes out of nowhere, but is devoid of any real content. Just how is this “mass political party of the working class” to emerge? What kind of organization in the working class will be necessary to bring about this mass political party, and what is the Socialist Equality Party doing to prepare it? What program will this party adopt? What will be its relationship to the traditional organizations of the working class, most importantly the trade unions? Finally, just what concrete action is the SEP proposing that its readership take to encourage the formation of this party? These are just some of the questions that come to mind if one considers the demand for a “mass

political party of the working class” as part of a serious strategy aimed at mobilizing the working class.

With the SEP’s participation in the California recall campaign last fall and the entry into the 2004 Presidential race, the importance of programmatic issues has been rediscovered. However, I believe that just as the initial turn away from a struggle on programmatic issues was rooted in a turn away from theoretical issues, the return to programmatic issues is largely a pragmatic reaction to current exigencies. While I think this is still a positive turn, unless it is accompanied by a return to theoretical issues, the danger exists that it will serve only to further disorient the movement.

The statement launching the California election campaign contained the first systematic list of programmatic demands within the movement since 1996. However, as I have already indicated, the nature of the program put forward was excruciatingly timid and failed in some respects to differentiate itself from a program of radical reforms. Let us examine the programmatic demands more closely. The California recall campaign contains the following statement - and there is a similar one advertising the 2004 Presidential campaign:

“A socialist program does not mean the nationalization of everything, or the abolition of small or medium-sized businesses, which are themselves continually victimized by giant corporations and banks. Establishing a planned economy will give such businesses ready access to credit and more stable market conditions, so long as they provide decent wages and working conditions.”

If one considers that a huge percentage of all goods and services produced in the United States still come from small and medium-sized businesses, how can these enterprises co-exist with a socialist planned economy? Of course it is silly to talk of nationalization of the mom and pop corner grocery, but do we really want to take responsibility for providing credit to firms that may employ and exploit dozens and even hundreds of workers i.e. medium-sized businesses? The experience of the Soviet Union during the period of the NEP showed clearly that once pockets of “free enterprise” are allowed to coexist within a workers state, these enterprises inevitably seek to free themselves from the confines of the planned economy and come into headlong opposition with the working class. If such was the case with the modest class of relatively better off peasants and NEP-men in the Soviet Union, one can only imagine how much greater pressure would be exerted for a free hand in the market place by the owners of “medium-sized business” in the United States.

Perhaps this demand was included in the belief that it is necessary for the working class to present itself as the ally and saviour of the petit bourgeoisie. That is certainly a necessary element of a program of transitional demands. However, the petite bourgeoisie that can be enlisted as allies of the working class are most certainly not the owners of medium-sized businesses. It is from these strata that some of the most reactionary elements of American society have emerged. Rather, the real potential allies of the working class are the many millions of self-employed professionals whose jobs and

circumstances of life have largely become indistinguishable from the working class in recent years. I am thinking of such professional groups as doctors that have to toil with the vagaries of HMO's, lawyers who have to work for poverty wages at a non-profit institutions, computer consultants who are forced to search for work in a volatile market that is constantly threatened with outsourcing to cheaper intellectual labor abroad, and the second class citizens that comprise the bulk of university faculty today, adjunct teachers and graduate assistants.

There is yet another plank in the list of demands from the California recall campaign that bears some comment.

“ In the case of the most vital and critical industries—the utilities, the oil companies, the banks, the giant multinational corporations—what is required is their transformation into public utilities, under public ownership and democratic control. If California proves anything, it is the intrinsic anarchy and chaos of capitalism. The claim that the “market makes the right choices” is a self-serving lie, peddled by those whose decisions frequently determine the movement of the market—e.g., the corporate CEOs who award themselves eight- and nine-figure incomes and then proclaim that this plundering of their own companies is the result of impersonal market forces.”

The demand for the transformation of the giant oil companies and banks into “public utilities” is put forward here in the context not of workers control, as is called for in the transitional program, but the vague slogan of “democratic control”. Contrast this feeble statement with the following discussion from the transitional program:

“The struggle against unemployment is not to be considered without the calling for a broad and bold organization of *public works*. But public works can have a continuous and progressive significance for society, as for the unemployed themselves, only when they are made part of a general plan worked out to cover a considerable number of years. Within the framework of this plan, the workers would demand resumption, as public utilities, of work in private businesses closed as a result of the crisis. Workers' control in such case: would be replaced by direct workers' management.”

Although the call for ‘public works’ in the transitional program must be understood in the context of the make-work projects initiated during the Great Depression and is therefore of a different character than the current situation of California public utilities, the issue of workers control retains its significance. In the transitional program, the call for public works was coupled with a call for workers control to be exercised through structures created out of the working class itself and completely independent of any government agency. In the programmatic statement for the California election campaign, there is nothing mentioned about workers control nor any call for autonomous organizations of the working class to begin to exercise the prerogatives of management. Without the latter, the call for public works, or nationalization of industries is indistinguishable from a program advocated by certain left wing reformists who dream of achieving the type of welfare state that Britain had in the immediate postwar period when the coal mines were nationalized.

If as I am maintaining, the Socialist Equality Party has been paring down its revolutionary perspective, how has this manifested itself in the work of the movement against imperialism? It is true that there have been many excellent commentaries as well as important historical investigations as part of the campaign against the US imperialism in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, what has been missing is an active intervention within the anti-war movement to forge an alternative leadership and advance our own program for ending imperialist war. Our opposition to imperialism therefore remains on the level of propaganda. We participated in the mass anti-war marches that took place last in April of 2002, and in February and March of 2003. However, we did not march under our own banners with our own slogans. We did give out flyers at these demonstrations but the material we handed out did not propose any active program for workers and youth other than reading our Web Site. We did not call a single meeting of our own at either of the large anti-war rallies of the past 2 years. Finally, when the U.S. aggression in Afghanistan first broke out, it took the Socialist Equality Party nearly a year to organize a public meeting denouncing this act of American imperialism. The war against Afghanistan broke out in November 2001, yet we did not convene a public meeting on the issue in the U.S. until October 4, 2002 when we sponsored an event in Ann Arbor. The first and only meeting in New York took place on Dec 15, 2002. I cannot think of a similar situation in the past 65 years wherein the Trotskyist movement failed to promptly call a public meeting to rally support against imperialist war.

In themselves, these actions, or lack of action may not be very significant. But taken as a whole, they spell out a very disquieting message. The overall practice of the movement is primarily of a contemplative nature in which we are adapting ourselves to a milieu that is distant from if not alien to the working class, whether it be the radical anti-war movement or to liberals angry that they have been politically disenfranchised by the collapse of the Democratic Party. While there is nothing wrong in itself with engaging these forces in a dialogue, this has been bought at the price of abstention from the struggle to build an alternative leadership in the working class. The danger is, and I have just listed a few of the symptoms, that we will adapt our politics to the illusions congenial to these social forces.

I have taken considerable time and effort to reply to your letter from June 20<sup>th</sup> because I believe that the International Committee and the Socialist Equality Party represents the historical continuity of the Marxist movement. But I also believe that the movement is today seriously disoriented and in danger of losing its revolutionary bearings. I do not think this has yet happened, but the signs of danger are everywhere. I urge you and the other leaders of the International Committee to consider the issues that I have raised and begin a frank and wide ranging discussion that involves members as well as supporters of the International Committee. You have nothing to lose in opening up such a discussion and much to gain.

If you agree to have that discussion I am at your disposal.

Comradely, Alex

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## Appendix

### Letter from Alex Steiner to Vladimir Volkov, 5/9/2003

[I have corrected some obvious spelling and transcription errors. Otherwise the letter is reproduced unchanged.]

Dear Vladimir,

I promised I would get back to you with the quote from Lenin where he criticizes Engels. This is done in the essay - unpublished during Lenin's lifetime - *On the Question of Dialectics*. It is included in Vol 38 of the *Collected Works*.

Lenin begins this essay by writing,

“The splitting of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts is the essence of dialectics. That is precisely how Hegel, too, puts the matter.

“The correctness of this aspect of the content of dialectics must be tested by the history of science. This aspect of dialectics (e.g., in Plekhanov) usually receives inadequate attention: the identity of opposites is taken as the sum total of examples “for example a seed,” “for example primitive communism”. The same is true of Engels. But it is “in the interests of popularisation” and not as a law of cognition (and as a law of the objective world.)” p. 357

Later Lenin goes on to make an even stronger criticism of Plekhanov,

“Dialectics is the theory of knowledge of (Hegel and) Marxism. This is the “aspect” of the matter (it is not “an aspect” but the essence of the matter) to which Plekhanov, not to speak of other Marxists, paid no attention”.

He continues,

“Dialectics as living, many-sided knowledge (with the number of sides eternally increasing), with an infinite number of shades ... here we have an immeasurably rich

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content as compared with “metaphysical” materialism, the fundamental misfortune of which is its inability to apply dialectics to the Bildertheorie, to the process and development of knowledge.” p. 360

Note by the way, that Lenin’s main criticism of mechanical materialism was not that it ignores history - that is Chris Talbot’s position - but that it cannot provide an account of the development of knowledge - which I think is correct. And if you cannot account for the development of knowledge, your practice becomes circumscribed by the world as it is and its “laws”. This is another way of saying that the problem with mechanical materialism is that it always undervalues the role of the conscious factor in history and paves the way for opportunism in practice.

These are some of the most important statements Lenin made on philosophy. It demonstrates that he was clearly at odds with the ideas of Marxist orthodoxy, as represented by Plekhanov for instance, but certainly not limited to him. Elsewhere in the Philosophical Notebooks he returns to his scathing critique of Plekhanov. In his notes on Hegel’s Logic, he writes,

“Plekhanov criticizes Kantianism .. more from a vulgar-materialistic standpoint than from a dialectical-materialist standpoint ...”

“Marxists criticized (at the beginning of the twentieth century the Kantians and Humists more in the manner of Feuerbach (and Buchner) than of Hegel.”

Vol 38, p 179

Right after this, Lenin makes perhaps his most damning indictment of the state of Marxism,

“It is impossible completely to understand Marx’s Capital, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel’s Logic. Consequently, half a century later, none of the Marxists understood Marx.” p. 180.

These are critical issues. I hope I have explained to you sufficiently why I think that. In the 1970’s the movement used to be trained on the basis of reading Lenin’s volume 38. Healy turned this into a mystical cult and the result was that he turned dialectics into its opposite. Since the break with Healy these issues have for the most part been ignored. I think that is a big mistake.

Take Care,  
Alex

## **Letter from Dave North to Alex Steiner, 6/3/2003**

Dear Alex,

Greetings from Berlin. It is just about 5 a.m.. and I

will be soon making my way to the airport and the flight back to Detroit. The public meeting on Sunday was successful.

I am glad you are making progress on the two articles, and look forward to seeing them.

Just to give you a heads-up, Vladimir forwarded to me a copy of the letter you wrote to him. Frankly, I am not in agreement with the way you approach (at least in this letter) questions of history. Plekhanov is a gigantic figure in the history of Russian and European socialism. Notwithstanding the passage you cited from Volume 38, that hardly exhausts Lenin's appraisal of Plekhanov's role. The latter's influence on the later generation of Russian Marxists, Lenin included, was unequalled. One might add that it was Plekhanov who launched the struggle against Bernstein and shamed the entire German Democracy into following suit.

By the time Lenin penned that critical observation, Plekhanov, under the influence of the war, had explicitly repudiated past political and theoretical positions. Most significantly, he had declared his conversion to Kantian ethics and its categorical imperative. The cause of this degeneration is not to be explained merely by reference to false epistemological conceptions. As Trotsky stressed, Plekhanov's tragedy arose above all from his protracted, decades long isolation from Russia as a revolutionary exile. And yet, as Healy once wrote correctly in reply to Wohlforth's damning and one-sided assessment of Shachtman, the betrayals committed by Plekhanov after 1914 do not invalidate his immense contributions to the development of Marxist politics and theory between 1880 and 1910. During that critical formative generation, no one, Lenin included, wrote more brilliantly on the significance of Hegel as the mighty precursor of modern (dialectical) materialism.

Make of it what you will, but I am member Number 1 of the Michigan Branch of the G.V Plekhanov fan club. Later this week, the WSWS will publish a series of articles commemorating the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of this brilliant and tragic figure in this history of Marxism.

We intend to disinter the good that Plekhanov did in his life, and urge a renewed critical acquaintance with his many brilliant and profound writings.

All the best,  
David

## **Letter from Alex Steiner to Dave North, 6/3/2003**

Dear Dave,

I cannot now go into an overall assessment of Plekhanov, certainly not right now. But I do not discount his contributions to the Marxist movement - I agree that it was immense. Plekhanov was second to none in his erudition and the brilliance of some of his essays. I was particularly impressed by his literary and art criticism. However that does not absolve us of critically examining his philosophical failures. We know that Lenin was motivated to turn to Hegel in 1914 as a result of the betrayal of Social Democracy, Plekhanov included. Lenin was looking for the philosophical roots behind this betrayal. It was obvious to him that a betrayal of such magnitude did not come out of the blue, but was nurtured over a period of decades. Lenin was therefore trying to understand what it was in the thinking not just of the open revisionists such as Bernstein, but of orthodox Marxists such as Kautsky and Plekhanov, that germinated over the years and that lead, when the historical situation had suddenly changed, to their betrayal. We can debate endlessly, and I think fruitlessly, how much of the blame for this betrayal can be assigned to having adopted an anti-dialectical epistemology, but I think at least for Lenin, it was clear that the rejection, or perhaps we can say the truncation of the dialectic, was critical in laying the groundwork for the betrayal. Certainly Plekhanov's isolation conditioned him. But that by itself does not explain his philosophical shortcomings and his ultimate betrayal. After all, Lenin was just as isolated as Plekhanov. Both spent practically their entire political career in exile. Lenin had practically never addressed a mass meeting of workers until he arrived at the Finland Station. And Kautsky, who was perhaps not as brilliant as Plekhanov, but shared with him the same essential philosophical outlook, was certainly not isolated. But he too betrayed despite his erudition and despite what I have no doubt was his genuine commitment on a subjective level to the cause of Marx and Engels. So I think we do get back in the end to the question of philosophy and dialectics. I look forward to reading the assessment of Plekhanov.

Glad to hear that the meeting in Berlin was successful.

Take Care,  
Alex

## **Letter from Dave North to Alex Steiner, 6/20/2003**

**To: Alex Steinberg**

**From: David North**

**Re: Letter of June 3, 2003**

**Date: June 20, 2003**

Dear Alex:

While I appreciate your June 3 reply to my letter of the previous day, I remain dissatisfied with the manner in which you deal with both Plekhanov's role in the history of the Marxist movement and the political-philosophical significance of Lenin's critique of the man who exercised immense influence on his own development. My initial letter was prompted not simply by your criticism of Plekhanov, but more by what I consider to be a facile approach to a very complex issue. It is legitimate to adopt a critical attitude to Plekhanov; but that requires far more than copying a few passages from Lenin's Volume 38 (*Philosophical Notebooks*) in which he criticized Plekhanov's conception of dialectics. These passages have been cited so frequently that they have assumed the form of an *obiter dictum* from which there is no appeal: "Lenin said ... Lenin wrote ... Lenin condemned ..." End of story. The problem with this approach is that it adds nothing to the sum of our knowledge of the critical historical, political and theoretical questions raised by Lenin's oft-quoted but poorly understood critique. Even more seriously, the citation of these quotes has been used to justify theoretical conceptions that are alien to those held by Lenin as he wrote his important notes on Hegel's *Logic*.

Underlying your critique of Plekhanov (and Kautsky) is the conception that the essential roots of the betrayal of 1914 are to be found in a false epistemology. You write:

“We know that Lenin was motivated to turn to Hegel in 1914 as a result of the betrayal of Social Democracy. Lenin *was looking for the philosophical roots behind this betrayal*. It was obvious to him that a betrayal of such magnitude did not come out of the blue, but was nurtured over a period of decades. Lenin was therefore trying to understand *what it was in the thinking* not just of the open revisionists such as Bernstein, but of orthodox Marxists as Kautsky and Plekhanov, that germinated over the years and that lead, when the historical situation had suddenly changed to their betrayal.

“We can debate endlessly, *and I think fruitlessly*, how much of the blame for this betrayal can be assigned *to having adopted an anti-dialectical epistemology*, but I think at least for Lenin, it was clear that the rejection, or perhaps we can say the truncation of the dialectic, was critical in laying the groundwork for the betrayal. Certainly Plekhanov’s isolation conditioned him. But that *by itself* does not explain his *philosophical shortcomings* and his ultimate betrayal. *After all, Lenin was just as isolated as Plekhanov*. Both spent practically their entire political career in exile. Lenin had practically never addressed a mass meeting of workers until he arrived at the Finland Station.

“And Kautsky, who was perhaps not as brilliant as Plekhanov, *but shared with him the same essential philosophical outlook*, was certainly not isolated. But he too betrayed despite his erudition and despite what I have no doubt was his genuine commitment on a subjective level to the cause of Marx and Engels. *So I think we do get back in the end to the question of philosophy and dialectics.*” [Emphasis added]

The basic problem with this analysis of the betrayal of 1914 is its idealist and ahistorical character. If we accept your interpretation, the collapse of the Second International – one of the turning points in world history – was essentially the product of an intellectual failure of a few individuals. Their dependence upon a false method left them intellectually unprepared for the events of 1914, and so they betrayed. This simplistic and one-sided interpretation ignores the complex socio-economic foundations of revisionism within the Second International as well as the political forms in which revisionism had manifested itself in the years leading up to the outbreak of World War I. The betrayal of Social Democracy and of such leading personalities as Plekhanov and Kautsky certainly “did not come out of the blue.” It was, rather, preceded by a protracted period of political crisis. The failures of these major historical figures were, in the final analysis, the manifestation of the deep-rooted contradictions in the political movements they led and of the epoch in which they lived. Even as Lenin isolated for purposes of theoretical analysis specific epistemological aspects of revisionism, these aspects remained for him elements of a broader historical “whole.”

Of all the major political leaders of the Second International, the role played by Plekhanov in 1914 was the least surprising. Notwithstanding his extraordinary erudition and his profound knowledge of the theoretical foundations of Marxism, the political concept of the Russian Revolution which he had developed in the 1880s and 1890s – that of a bourgeois democratic revolution in which the working class would be obliged to play a subordinate role – had been overtaken by the events of 1905. The actual unfolding of the first Russian Revolution created a relation of class forces that had not been anticipated in Plekhanov's political perspective. Basing himself on the example of the classic bourgeois revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Plekhanov had assigned to the Russian bourgeoisie the leading political role in the impending democratic revolution. But when the Russian bourgeoisie found itself unwilling to play that role, when it revealed that it preferred a political compromise with the tsar to a revolutionary upheaval that threatened its own property interests, Plekhanov was trapped in a political dilemma from which he could find no escape. Given the economic backwardness of Russia and the small size of its proletariat, Plekhanov rejected the possibility of a socialist revolution in Russia. He held that a premature seizure of power by the Russian proletariat, before an extended period of capitalist development under bourgeois rule created the necessary economic prerequisites for socialism, was doomed to disaster. But the Russian bourgeoisie was unwilling to establish the sort of bourgeois democracy within which the ground for the future socialist revolution could be prepared. What, then, was the political alternative open to the working class if the bourgeoisie was unwilling to establish a democratic regime, but it, the proletariat, was not permitted to seize power in its own name? For this question Plekhanov, for all the brilliance of his philosophical essays, had no answer. Indeed, he attempted to ignore the contradiction entirely. As his biographer, Samuel Baron, has noted, Plekhanov refused to acknowledge that the tactics he had devised at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were overtaken by the events at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. "Astonishing as it may seem," writes Baron, "he who always preached the superiority of the dialectical mode of thought, of the necessity always to take into account the conditions of time and place, failed to detect, let alone resolve, the unique difficulties of the Russian situation." [*Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism* (Stanford, 1963), pp. 272-73.]

In the end, the tragedy of Plekhanov's life arose out of the belated character of the Russian democratic revolution. The isolation he suffered was of a historical rather than merely physical character. To claim, as you do, that "Lenin was just as isolated as Plekhanov" misses the political essence of the issue. Viewed in the vast expanse of its turbulent history, the two men represented different epochs in the development of the Russian Revolution. Plekhanov personified an epoch, which ended in 1905, whose central task consisted in creating the theoretical and initial programmatic foundations for the independent revolutionary organization of the Russian proletariat. Lenin's epoch – whose central task was the preparation of the conquest of power by the working class – began with the revolutionary eruptions of that year.

For Plekhanov, the events of 1905 brought the heroic stage of his political career to a definitive end. As Baron writes, “His inability to adjust his outlook to Russian realities as manifested in the Revolution of 1905 made the last decade of his life – politically, at any rate, a protracted, painful, and somewhat meaningless epoch. ... In the area of political affairs, Plekhanov had nothing fresh to contribute.” [Ibid, p. 279]

As for Kautsky, his fate, too, must be studied within the context of the historical dilemma of the German workers’ movement. In Trotsky’s analysis of the roots of the betrayal of 1914, he placed great emphasis on the objective contradictions that confronted the German Social Democracy as a party that proclaimed social revolution as its goal, but which was obliged by prevailing political conditions to pursue, in its daily practice, an essentially reformist policy. Trotsky’s explanation of the relation between theory and the objectively-determined practice of the German Social Democracy is profound and deserves careful study:

“Marxism, of course, was not merely something accidental or insignificant in the German labor movement. Yet there would be no basis for deducing the social-revolutionary character of the party from its official Marxist ideology.

“Ideology is an important, but not a decisive factor in politics. Its role is that of waiting on politics. That deep-seated contradiction, which was inherent in the awakening revolutionary class on account of its relation to the feudal-reactionary state, demanded an irreconcilable ideology which would bring the whole movement under the banner of social revolutionary aims. Since historical conditions forced opportunist tactics, the irreconcilability of the proletarian class found expression in the revolutionary formulas of Marxism. Theoretically, Marxism reconciled with perfect success the contradiction between reform and revolution. Yet the process of historical development is far more involved than theorizing in the realm of pure thought. The fact that the class which was revolutionary in its tendencies was forced for several decades to adapt itself to the monarchical police state, based on the tremendous capitalist development of the country, in the course of which adaptation an organization of a million members was built up and a labor bureaucracy which led an entire movement was educated – this fact does not cease to exist and does not lose its weighty significance because Marxism anticipated the revolutionary character of the future movement. Only the most naïve ideology could give the same place to this forecast that it does to the political actualities of the German labor movement.” [*War and the International* (Colombo, 1971), pp. 59-60]

How much richer is this analysis, which locates the tragedy of the Social Democracy and Kautsky's own life in the objective historically-determined contradictions of Germany's capitalist development and its peculiar relation to the political practice and strategy of the working class, than one which claims to trace all problems "back in the end to the question of philosophy and dialectics." The essential source of Kautsky's downfall lay in the intensification of class conflict in Europe beneath the pressure of imperialism. The political formulae devised by Kautsky in the 1890s – and which had been employed quite successfully against the revisionists – could no longer cover over the widening chasm between the revolutionary objectives formally proclaimed by German Social Democracy and the political implications of its daily reformist practice.

In 1893 Kautsky wrote: "The Social Democratic Party is a revolutionary party, but not a party that makes revolutions. We know that our goals can be reached only through a revolution; however, we also know that it lies just as little in our power to make this revolution as it lies in the power of our opponents to prevent it. Thus it does not even occur to us to want to foment a revolution or to prepare the conditions for one." [Quoted by Kautsky in his 1909 pamphlet, *The Road to Power* (New Jersey, 1996), p. 34] When this passage was originally published, no Marxist would have found anything amiss in this statement. It represented a "classic" Marxian conception of socialist revolution as the outcome of the law-governed and irresistible development of socio-economic contradictions in bourgeois society. But by 1909, this conception of revolution was being overtaken by events. In the face of growing demands for mass action by the working class, Kautsky's distinction between a revolutionary party and "a party that makes revolutions" was being transformed into a theoretical justification for the conservatism of the trade union and party bureaucracy. This objective transformation of Kautsky into the leading spokesman of political centrism in the SPD found programmatic expression in 1910 with his proclamation of a "strategy of attrition" (*Ermattungsstrategie*), which he counterpoised to a "strategy of annihilation" (*Niederwerfungsstrategie*). But even as Kautsky unveiled his new formula, he still attempted to cloak it with renewed declarations of revolutionary intentions. "The strategy of attrition differs from the strategy of annihilation only in the fact that it does not aim at the decisive battles directly, but prepares it long in advance and is inclined to engage in such a battle when it considers the enemy to have been sufficiently weakened." [Quoted *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution 1880-1933* by Massimo Salvadori (London, 1990), p. 140]

Though the circumstances of the climactic betrayal of 1914 were certainly extraordinary, it is something of a myth that it came as a surprise. The collapse of the SPD and the Second International was anticipated in the previous twenty-year history of political and theoretical struggles that arose on the basis of profound changes in the socio-economic foundations of European capitalism produced by the growth of imperialism. The impact of these objective socio-economic processes upon the international labor movement – above all, the growth of privileged and increasingly conservative strata within the

working class – was the principal source of the political opportunism in the Second International that culminated in the catastrophe of August 1914.

The essential premise of your letter of June 3<sup>rd</sup>, as I noted above, is that the primary and essential cause of the betrayal of Kautsky, Plekhanov and other leaders of the Second International lay in a false epistemology. You go on to state that a debate on the extent to which one can assign blame for the betrayal on an “anti-dialectical epistemology” will continue “endlessly” and “fruitlessly.” The first may be true, but the second certainly is not. To assert that a debate over the role played by a false epistemology in the 1914 betrayal must be fruitless is to suggest that the question cannot be answered. I reject this position. The fundamental cause of the collapse of the Second International lay in objectively existing contradictions rooted in the emergence of imperialism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Only within this framework is it even possible to understand the origins and nature of the philosophical tendencies that predominated in the Second International. Lenin understood all too well that these tendencies, which he criticized so profoundly in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, were no less *historically conditioned* than political opportunism. The same objective conditions that favored the vast and organic expansion of the socialist workers’ movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century also contributed to the development of certain methods of thought whose limitations would only become apparent at a much later and more advanced stage of economic and political crisis.

The great task that confronted socialist leaders in the aftermath of Marx’s death in 1883 was the systematization and consolidation of his vast theoretical legacy into a unified and comprehensive scientific world outlook upon which the revolutionary education of the emerging industrial proletariat could be based. The vast pedagogical responsibilities of the socialist movement, as it sought to create and mentor a class conscious proletariat, determined the form and character of the theoretical work of the period. Engels was obliged to devote the greatest portion of his energies to preparing the last two volumes of Marx’s *Capital* for publication. Mehring produced the first major history of the origins and development of the German Social Democratic Party and a biography of Karl Marx. Kautsky devoted a significant portion of his considerable intellectual energies toward the development, on the basis of the materialist conception of history, of the essential programmatic tenets of the socialist workers’ movement. In his *Development of the Monist View of History* and innumerable essays, Plekhanov elaborated the world scientific outlook of “dialectical materialism,” a term which he authored (and for which he has never been forgiven by such bitter anti-Marxists as Leszek Kolakowski). It was on the basis of the theoretical and programmatic foundations created by this extraordinary collective intellectual effort that the authority of Marxism in the European mass workers’ movement was established.

But for all its great achievements, the limitations of the forms of political and theoretical work *as it had developed in the Second International* became increasingly apparent as the 19<sup>th</sup> century drew to a conclusion and the 20<sup>th</sup> century began. The emergence of imperialism with all its vast political and economic ramifications, the growth of internal differentiation within the labor movement, and the intensification of class conflict were indications that the protracted post-Paris Commune era of “organic” socio-economic development was giving way to a new period of revolutionary struggle. This objective transformation underlay the perpetual and deepening crisis of the Marxism of the Second International from the outbreak of the conflict with Bernstein in 1898 to the beginning of World War I in August 1914. In addition to socio-economic and political tendencies, the developments in natural science related to the discovery of the electron contributed significantly, as we shall explain, to the emergence of philosophical revisionism inside the Marxist movement.

Without a serious study of the entire socio-economic, political and theoretical background of the crisis in the Marxist movement that culminated in the betrayal of 1914, it is not possible to understand, let alone make proper theoretical use of Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*. The tendency to detach the *Notebooks* from the historical, political and theoretical issues that preoccupied Lenin over an extended period generally manifests itself in a mystification of his theoretical work. As we learned all too painfully from the experience of the International Committee during the 1970s and first half of the 1980s, such an approach invariably results in an idealist distortion of Marxism and of Lenin’s own philosophical method. Regrettably, your approach to the *Philosophical Notebooks* is heading in the same direction.

Permit me review an earlier letter, dated May 9, 2003, that you wrote to Comrade Vladimir Volkov. I must confess that this letter, which Comrade Volkov forwarded to me, took me by surprise. It began, “I promised to get back to you with a quote from Lenin where he criticizes Engels.” What, I wondered, led you on a search for such a quotation? Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century Engels had been a favorite target of philosophical idealists who hold him responsible for “vulgarizing” the views of Karl Marx with an excess of materialism. Lenin, whose admiration for Engels knew no bounds, was very familiar with this tendency. In his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, he lashed out at the attempt of Victor Chernov, a supporter of Mach, to counterpose Marx to Engels by accusing the latter of “naïve dogmatic materialism” and “the crudest materialist dogmatism.” [*Collected Works*, Volume 14, p. 99] You then produce a truncated passage from Lenin’s essay, “On the Question of Dialectics,” which includes the following sentences:

“The correctness of this aspect of the content of dialectics must be tested by the history of science. This aspect of dialectics (e.g., in Plekhanov) usually receives inadequate attention: the identity of opposites is taken as the sum-total of *examples* [‘for example, a seed,’ ‘for example, primitive communism.’ The same is true of Engels. But it is ‘in the interests of popularization...’] and not as a *law of cognition* (and as a law of the objective world).” [Volume 38, p. 359]

It is clear enough that this passage does not constitute a criticism of Engels. Lenin states that the use of “examples” by Engels to elucidate such dialectical laws as “the identity of opposites” is “in the interest of popularization,” which Lenin considered entirely legitimate. More significantly, the essential idea expressed by Lenin in this passage – that the history of science provides the most fundamental substantiation of dialectics is one that he adopted directly from Engels. Indeed, Lenin could not have been aware just how closely his own conceptions on this critical issue paralleled that of Engels. At the time he wrote his essay on dialectics, Engels’ *Dialectics of Nature* – an extraordinary attempt to incorporate into materialism the latest developments in natural science – remained unpublished. It was not until 1925 that this work was rescued from the archives and published in both German and Russian. In many critical ways, Engels’ *Dialectics of Nature* anticipated Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

It may appear that this is a digression from the issues with which you are most concerned, i.e. Lenin’s philosophical transcendence of Plekhanov and other figures in the Second International. However, if one hopes to understand Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks* rather than exploit a few quotations, it is important to review the history behind the passages you reproduce. There is no indication that you appreciate the extent to which the problem of the relation of dialectics to developments in natural science entered into Lenin’s increasingly critical attitude (over a period of several years prior to 1914) toward Plekhanov’s theoretical work. For example, you reproduce the following part of what you refer to as the “scathing” assessment made of Plekhanov by Lenin:

“Plekhanov criticizes Kantianism more from a vulgar materialist standpoint than from a dialectical-materialist standpoint...”

It is unfortunate that you did not complete the quotation, for without the entire passage it is not possible to understand the significance of the critique. What follows is the full paragraph:

“Plekhanov criticizes Kantianism (and agnosticism in general) more from a vulgar materialist standpoint than from a dialectical-materialist standpoint, *insofar as* he merely *rejects* their views a limine, [from the threshold] but does not *correct* them (as Hegel corrected Kant), deepening, generalizing and extending them, showing the *connections* and *transitions* of each and every concept.”

You also leave out the notation that Lenin placed alongside this aphorism: “Concerning the question of the criticism of modern Kantianism, Machism, etc.” [Volume 38, p. 179]

The point is that this aspect of Lenin’s critique of Plekhanov dated back to the period of the theoretical struggle against Machism. In Lenin’s view, Plekhanov’s work in this struggle was of limited value because he had failed to engage the Machists on the vital question of natural science. Plekhanov, with his well-known verve and wit, demonstrated the incompatibility of Machism with materialism. He denounced their blundering in the sphere of philosophy. But he avoided the truly critical issue raised by the Machists: the implications of the new discoveries in the field of physics for materialism. This is precisely what Lenin meant when he stated that Plekhanov refuted Kantianism “from the threshold.” Lenin, on the other hand, had dealt with the Machists in a far more substantial manner. As Ilyenkov noted in his splendid essay, *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism*, Lenin attacked the Machists precisely where they considered themselves to be strongest – in the sphere of natural sciences. *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* is an extraordinary, audacious and enduring work precisely because Lenin grappled with the epistemological implications of what he referred to as “The recent revolution in natural science.” He insisted that the discovery of the electron and new properties of matter did not invalidate materialism, as the then popular slogan of Machists, “Matter disappears,” suggested.

“‘Matter disappears’,” wrote Lenin in 1909, “means that the limit within which we have hitherto known matter disappears and that our knowledge is penetrating deeper; properties of matter are likewise disappearing which formerly seemed absolute, immutable, and primary (impenetrability, inertia, mass, etc.) and which are now revealed to be relative and characteristic only of certain states of matter. For the *sole* ‘property’ of matter with whose recognition philosophical materialism is bound up is the property of *being an objective reality*, of existing outside the mind.” [Volume 14, p. 260]

Lenin explained that the fate of dialectical materialism, as a comprehensive theory of the development of knowledge, was not dependent upon a fixed conception of the nature of matter. “From Engels’ point of view,” wrote Lenin, “the only immutability is the

reflection by the human mind (when there is a human mind) of an external world existing and developing independently of the mind. No other ‘immutability,’ no other ‘essence,’ no other ‘absolute substance,’ in the sense in which these concepts were depicted by the empty professorial philosophy, exist for Marx and Engels. The ‘essence’ of things, or ‘substance,’ is *also* relative; it expresses only the degree of profundity of man’s knowledge of objects; and while yesterday the profundity of this knowledge did not go beyond the atom, and today does not go beyond the electron and ether, dialectical materialism insists on the temporary, relative, approximate character of all these *milestones* in the knowledge of nature gained by the progressing science of man. The electron is as *inexhaustible* as the atom, nature is infinite, but it infinitely *exists*. And it is this sole categorical, this sole unconditional recognition of nature’s *existence* outside the mind and perception of man that distinguishes dialectical materialism from relativist agnosticism and idealism.” [Volume 38, p. 262]

Lenin viewed the advances in physics as a challenge to the development of Marxism. He detected in Plekhanov’s avoidance of this challenge a theoretical weakness, a tendency to rely on established truths rather than respond creatively to new and heretofore unknown phenomena. In his notes on Deborin’s article on “Dialectical Materialism,” which were written in 1909 and are included in Volume 38, Lenin copied the following passage: “What, indeed, is the essence of the new trend in the sphere of natural science? It is, above all, the fact that the atom, which physicists used to regard as immutable and most simple, i.e., an elementary and indivisible ‘body,’ is found to consist of more elementary units or particles.” Lenin commented in the margins alongside this sentence: “Aha! Plekhanov is silent on this ‘new trend,’ *does not know* it.”

One of the platitudes of Lenin “scholarship,” shared by both partisans and opponents of the Bolshevik leader, is that the *Philosophical Notebooks* represents a fundamental transformation of Lenin’s understanding of Marxism, a repudiation of the “vulgar” materialism of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. The comment of Professor Neil Harding in his book, *Leninism*, is fairly typical: “As we have seen, Lenin’s 1908 reflections on philosophy were wholly concerned with restating the compelling simplicities of materialism as transmitted from Feuerbach to Marx and Plekhanov, but especially as developed by Engels ... For all his profession to be dialectical in his approach, Lenin’s materialism was, at that time, decidedly static.” [Durham, 1996, pp. 225-26] Such assessments are based on a rather superficial reading of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Far from representing an entirely new point of departure in his theoretical work, Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks* represented a continuation, summing up and deepening of philosophical and methodological issues that had preoccupied him since the earliest stages of his political activities. A persistent theme that is to be found in Lenin’s comments on method is his hostility toward any tendency to convert Marxism into an abstract schema. In his brief essay, “Certain Features of the Historical Development of Marxism,” written in 1910, Lenin stressed that “Marxism is not a lifeless

dogma, not a completed, ready-made, immutable doctrine, but a living guide to action...” He noted critically that the growth of Marxism as a mass movement had unavoidably produced a situation where “extremely wide sections of the classes that cannot avoid Marxism in formulating their aims had assimilated that doctrine in an extremely one-sided and mutilated fashion. They had learnt by rote certain ‘slogans,’ certain answers to tactical questions, *without having understood* the Marxist criteria for these answers.” [Volume 17, p. 42] In Volume 38, Lenin’s critique of dogmatism found its most complex and subtle expression.

In your letter to Comrade Volkov, you quote the following passage from Lenin’s essay on dialectics:

“Dialectics as *living*, many-sided knowledge (with the number of sides eternally increasing), with an infinite number of shades of every approach and approximation to reality (with a philosophical system growing into a whole out of each shade) – here we have an immeasurably rich content as compared with ‘metaphysical’ materialism, the fundamental *misfortune* of which is its inability to apply dialectics to the *Bildertheorie* [theory of reflection], to the process and development of knowledge.” (Volume 38, p. 362)

You then make the following comment: “Note by the way, that Lenin’s main criticism of mechanical materialism was not that it ignores history – that is Chris Talbot’s position – but that it cannot provide an account of [the] development of knowledge – which I think is correct. And if you cannot account for the development of knowledge, your practice becomes circumscribed by the world as it is and its ‘laws.’ This is another way of saying that the problem with mechanical materialism is that it always undervalues the role of the conscious factor in history and paves the way for opportunism in practice.”

All this is, as Lenin would have said, a complete muddle. The first part of your comment makes no sense whatsoever. It was precisely because the materialism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had not uncovered the underlying laws of historical development that it could not explain the evolution of knowledge. How is it possible to provide a materialist account of the development of knowledge” without history? The philosophical limitation of mechanical materialism was, indeed, rooted in its ahistorical character. While it correctly asserted the primacy of matter over thought, the old materialism could not explain the origins of the forms of thought – that is, categories and concepts – which constitute the basis of the reflection of the world, in all its complexity, in the human mind. It was through the medium of German idealism, principally that of Hegel, that the historically-conditioned

character of consciousness and its essential thought-forms, was established. The reflection of nature in the human mind is a historically-determined process. In opposition to Kant, for whom the categories of logic were a priori and innate properties of mind, Hegel insisted, albeit from an idealist standpoint, that categories and concepts evolved as stages in man's historically-unfolding cognition of absolute truth. Interpreting Hegel materialistically, Lenin wrote: "Logic is the science not of external forms of thought, but of the laws of development 'of all material, natural and spiritual things,' of the development of the entire concrete content of the world and of its cognition, i.e., the sum-total, the conclusion of the *History* of knowledge of the world." [Volume 38, p. 92]

Marxism is not reducible to historical materialism. It is a world scientific outlook which includes as a critical component element a theory of man's historical development. However, the elaboration of this world outlook would not have been possible apart from and independently of historical materialism, which arose out of and made possible a systematic critique of Hegel's objective idealism. Whereas for Hegel the self-alienation of the Absolute Idea and its reconstitution through the dialectic of logical categories provided the impulse for man's intellectual development, Marx located the driving force of human development in all its manifold aspects in the evolution of labor, the essential and primary form of man's dynamic interaction with the nature from which he arises.

In Lenin's reading of Hegel's *Logic*, it is the *historically-evolving* character of thought-forms and human knowledge that constitutes among the most critical of epistemological issues. When he stated (with a certain degree of exaggeration) that Plekhanov and others had "paid no attention" to this essential aspect of dialectics, Lenin had in mind the manner in which they had transformed Marxian concepts into unchanging formulae that were to be imposed upon objective reality. Against the backdrop of the World War – when German socialists were quoting Marx's denunciation of Russian tsarism in the 1850s to justify the support of the Kaiser, and when Plekhanov was recalling Marx's encomiums to the revolutionary traditions of France (with which Russia was allied) to justify his defense of Russian imperialism – the tragic consequences of dogmatism had become apparent. The dialectical materialist theory of knowledge holds that the concepts through which man cognizes the objective world are themselves subject to change, in accordance with the underlying movement of objective reality. Thus, the categories and concepts of historical materialism must not be treated as finished formulae, but must be critically adapted to and enriched by the changing content of human society *and* the development of natural science as it discovers new properties of matter.

The second part of your comment is as confused as the first. "And if you cannot account for the development of knowledge, your practice becomes circumscribed by the world and its 'laws.'" This is not a correct statement of the problem. Our task is not to escape from the world and its laws, but to correctly understand them – through the development and correction of concepts that reflect ever more accurately the nature of a ceaselessly

changing objective reality. As Lenin states: “Man cannot comprehend = reflect = mirror nature *as a whole*, in its completeness, its ‘immediate totality,’ he can only *eternally* come closer to this, creating abstractions, concepts, laws, a scientific picture of the world, etc., etc.” [Volume 38, p. 182]

Finally, the conclusion of your comment – “This is another way of saying that the problem with mechanical materialism is that it always undervalues the role of the conscious factor in history and paves the way for opportunism in practice” – does not really follow from what was previously written and requires elaboration and clarification. To the extent that mechanical materialism does not explain the real objective origins of consciousness, it is unable to *correctly* explain the role of the conscious factor in history. As a matter of fact, the mechanical materialism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century oscillated between, on the one hand, defining consciousness as merely a direct product of environment, and, on the other, making all progressive changes in the environment dependent upon the alteration of consciousness. In other words, while the old materialists stated correctly, in general terms, the relation of matter and consciousness, in their treatment of the process of social change they veered off into idealism.

It was in a somewhat different manner that the limitations in the materialism of the Second International and its underestimation of the role of consciousness manifested itself. During a protracted period of slow, organic socio-economic development, the Marxists of the Second International devoted their intellectual energies to the analysis and interpretation of the objective processes of historical development. Their theoretical attitude toward society tended to reproduce certain epistemological characteristics of the old materialism that had been noted by Marx – that is, they tended to conceive of society “only in the form of the *object*, or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively.” Thus, they failed “to grasp the significance of ‘revolutionary,’ of practical-critical activity.” [*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 5, (New York, 1976), p. 6]

In the struggle against this theoretical tendency, which became with the outbreak of war the methodology of political prostration and capitulation, Lenin rediscovered in Hegel a vast cache of philosophical ammunition. Of immense importance was the reintroduction of the concept of practice as an essential category of cognition, in the sense that the development of knowledge is not simply a theoretical question but a practical one. Man acquires knowledge in the course of acting upon the world and changing it. “That is,” as Lenin wrote, “the practice of man and of mankind is the test, the criterion of objectivity of cognition.” [Volume 38, p. 211]

This letter has turned out to be far longer than I initially intended. But we have drawn very definite conclusions from the experiences through which we passed in the 1970s and early 1980s. And here we come to the theoretical source of our present disagreement. You wrote to Comrade Volkov, “In the 1970s the movement used to be trained on the basis of reading Lenin’s volume 38.” No, Alex, that is not really the case. During the 1970s, the movement was *mistrained* on the basis of a *false reading* of Volume 38. Healy and Slaughter introduced into the International Committee, under the cover of a study of the *Philosophical Notebooks*, a vulgar rehash of the sort of pseudo-dialectical Left Hegelianism that Marx, Engels and Lenin had long before subjected to withering criticism. The political purpose served by the theoretical charlatanry of Healy and Slaughter was the evasion of the difficult political problems posed by the upsurge of class struggle in the wake of the events of May-June 1968. The “thoroughgoing struggle against idealist ways of thinking” was, according to Slaughter, more critical “than questions of agreement on program and policy.” This bizarre maxim was a complete departure from the theoretical traditions of the Marxist movement. The issue of dialectical method was separated entirely from the problem of political analysis and programmatic clarification. The so-called “practice of cognition” invoked Hegelian categories to justify Healy’s increasingly intuitive and pragmatic politics. [*Trotskyism versus Revisionism*, Volume 6 (London, 1975), p. 83] This form of theoretical charlatanry has been utterly discredited within the International Committee.

You, however, seem to suggest that the International Committee has undergone since the split of 1985 a theoretical degeneration. “Since the break with Healy these issues have been ignored,” you wrote to Volkov. “I think this is a big mistake.”

What issues? What mistake? During the past 18 years the International Committee has produced an extraordinary range of political and theoretical work. We have subjected to analysis the most difficult political issues – among them, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the decay of the trade unions, and the contemporary significance of bourgeois nationalism. In each case we have not simply reasserted “orthodox” positions, but creatively developed and adapted the Marxist program to the new historical conditions. Moreover, each day the theoretical vitality, programmatic clarity, and political astuteness of the International Committee is attested to by the publication of the World Socialist Web Site.

You do not seem to consider these political and programmatic achievements a particularly important indication of the ICFI’s theoretical strength. But, please tell us, what political indications do you see that the International Committee is making a “big mistake” in matters relating to philosophy? In what form has our theoretical deficiency manifested itself?

This brings me to a final point that I would like to make about Volume 38. Lenin's restudy of Hegel's *Logic* found its most significant expression in the quality of his political writings. The study of the great dialectician assisted Lenin in mastering "the art of working with concepts." A study of his major works in the post-1914 period reveals a strengthening of Lenin's powers as a theoretician. We could without difficulty reproduce innumerable sections from Lenin's writings which bear the imprint of his critical reworking of Hegel's *Logic*. His development of the concept of imperialism and of the state comes immediately to mind.

We will not claim that our achievements have been quite so impressive. But we can state that no other contemporary movement claiming to be socialist can point to a record of programmatic clarity and political farsightedness that matches the International Committee. If the International Committee was truly following an incorrect theoretical course, how could it have successfully navigated the treacherous political waters over an extended period (1985-2003) without suffering political shipwreck?

I think, Alex, that your errors in method and politics stem from the fact that you have simply not taken the time to seriously work through the theoretical critique of Healy and Slaughter that was developed by the Workers League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party) between 1982 and 1986. Therefore, you have not subjected your own theoretical conceptions, which were acquired under the tutelage of Healy and Slaughter while you were a member of the Workers League, to a serious reappraisal. For you that is a task that is long overdue.

Notwithstanding our present differences, we value your collaboration and would hope that it can be strengthened in the critical struggles that lie ahead. But I urge you to give the most careful consideration to the issues that I have raised in this letter.

With best regards,

David North