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PLEKHANOV, UTOPIANISM, AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

A new perspective on Plekhanov emerged in the era of perestroika, when formerly unthinkable thoughts were voiced, and even the sanctity of Lenin and the Bolshevik revolution called into question.

In mid-1989 ARGUMENTY i FAKTY, featured an article on Plekhanov in response to questions its readers had raised as to whether the Plekhanov alternative was better than the Leninist one. Later that year, Voprosy istorii published a long-suppressed Plekhanov letter to the Petrograd workers soon after the October revolution that fundamentally criticizes the Bolshevik seizure of power. In a newspaper interview a year later, Gavriil Popov, asserted: "the current... crisis stems from the seventy year long experiment... a voluntarist attempt" - he also call it "premature" and "utopian" - which outran the development of productive forces, violated basic ideas of Marxism; and failed to take into consideration the views of leading Marxists like Plekhanov".

Popov's statement echoes Plekhanov's judgement that it made no sense in a backward country like Russia to press on beyond the February upheaval that overthrew tsarism and looked to the creation of a democratic political order. Let us try to gauge the accuracy of his perception of the Russian revolutionary process, the cast of thinking that led him to oppose Lenin and the Bolsheviks so vehemently, and the feasibility of his own prescriptions.

Even while still a narodnik, Plekhanov had encountered and showed great respect for Marxian ideas, seeking to demonstrate that the narodnik program was not utopian but consistent with "the law of economic development". In the west, because the once prevalent peasant commune and the collectivist instincts associated with it had been eroded by the

advent of private property and individualism, the western peoples were destined to attain socialism by way of the collectivistically-minded proletariat generated by the capitalist system. In contrast, in overwhelmingly agrarian Russia, the collectivistic peasant commune remained intact; it did not "bear within itself the elements of its own doom"; and, accordingly, Russia possessed the essential ingredients for the transition to socialism on a different basis than the west.

Once he became convinced that industrial capitalism was making inroads, that under the impact of money economy and commodity production the formerly egalitarian Russian commune was breaking down, in Plekhanov's eyes the narodnik outlook was discredited. Although industrial development and the dimensions of the proletariat were still modest, the dynamic of commodity production ensured the future dominance of capitalism. It behooved the revolutionary movement to gear its thinking and its activity to the objective course of historical development upon which the country had embarked. To do otherwise, to rely upon structures that history was consigning to oblivion, was to be hopelessly subjective, irrational, utopian.

To prove his case, Plekhanov imagined the likely outcome of a successful revolution of the kind the narodniki anticipated. Such a revolution would inevitably adopt a peasant program. But as the peasants favored a general distribution of land, not a socialist system of property relations, the outcome would diverge radically from narodnichestvo's cherished goal. Alternatively, he projected the possibility that a revolutionary committee might seize power and choose to retain it, despite the divergence between the people's aims and the committee's own objectives. If it then attempted a socialist organization of production, in the absence of both the objective conditions and popular approval of this program, "it would have to seek salvation in the ideals of 'patriarchal and authoritarian communism', introducing into those ideals only the change that a socialist caste would manage the national production instead of the [Peruvian] 'Children of the Sun' and their officials". In other words, the revolutionists would be obliged to rule despotically.

Having earlier considered Marxism consistent with narodnichestvo, now he opposed the "scientific" quality of the one to the "utopianism" of the other. His mission as he saw it was to divert the revolutionary movement from a utopian to a scientific course. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of this point for the positions he would later take.

Now convinced that Russia's backwardness ruled out a socialist revolution in the near term, Plekhanov believed that it was destined in the not distant future to experience a bourgeois-democratic revolution like that of France in 1789. He anticipated developments thereafter like those he perceived in Germany: the robust growth of the capitalism, the multiplication of the proletariat, and the progressive expansion of the socialist movement, leading to a second, a socialist, revolution. Plekhanov went so far as to declare: "there are no essential differences between Russian history and the history of western Europe".

In point of fact, he included in his revolutionary prospectus, sometimes not, elements at odds with the European experience. Central to his revolutionary tactics was Marx's admonition in *The Communist Manifesto* that the socialists should fight alongside of the bourgeoisie in the struggle against absolutism, while simultaneously instilling in the proletariat awareness of the conflict between its interests and those of the bourgeoisie. However, he supposed that the Russian bourgeoisie would be wanting in revolutionary ardor, and that therefore the working class would have to initiate the assault on absolutism. It was the duty of Russian Social Democracy to help bringing the proletariat into the struggle and to ensure that the workers entered the arena as an independent force, capable of securing economic and political rights in the new order. The Social Democrats were to accomplish this by bringing the proletariat to consciousness of its class interests, thus in effect forging a link between the bourgeois and socialist revolutions - which, nevertheless, were to be separated by a protracted interval.

Now and then Plekhanov indicated that Russia's circum-

stances and options differed in other ways as well from those discernible in Europe. Russia need not repeat in detail all the stages of industrial development experienced by the more advanced countries; rather, it could adopt the latest technology and forms of industrial organization, and thus develop its economy more rapidly. Similarly, Russian socialists need not grope their way toward efficacious strategy and tactics, for they could directly appropriate the experience of western labour and socialist movements. Such considerations clearly implied a briefer life for capitalism in Russia than in the west, but Plekhanov tended to deemphasize such factors, to regard them as having only a secondary significance. The same held for his perception that the Russian bourgeoisie was likely to be short on revolutionary fervor. He was confident that the western model was a reliable guide to Russia's future, never imagining that the distinctive circumstances that he had identified or the activist program he advanced might produce a fundamentally different pattern of development.

On becoming a Marxist, Plekhanov's attitude toward the peasantry underwent a sharp reversal. He was now prone to view the peasants with distrust. In their desire to perpetuate small-scale production, they betrayed their attachment to reactionary, petty-bourgeois illusions. Besides, their "political indifference and mental backwardness" made the peasants a principle bulwark of autocracy. On these scores, and seemingly unaware or forgetful of the great positive role the rural population played in the early stages of the French revolution, Plekhanov was inclined to discount the peasants in the impending revolution, although he did not completely write them off.

Down to 1905, the Russian Social Democrats generally subscribed to Plekhanov's adaptation of Marxism to Russia, wherein the two-stage revolutionary scheme was central. Then, the upheaval of 1905 propelled a variety of social forces into the field of struggle, revealed something of the relationship among them and, more generally, of the dynamics of the Russian revolutionary process. The events of 1905 therefore constituted a confrontation between a carefully

devised theoretical construction and political reality.

Lenin and Trotskii each detected major deviations from the theoretical premises. They responded by formulating new schemes, tailored to Russia's distinctive circumstances as revealed in the revolution. Impressed by what he took to be the half-heartedness of bourgeois activism and the strength of peasant insurrection, Lenin declared that absolutism would give way not to a bourgeois regime but to a "revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry".

As for Trotskii, the events of 1905 led him to formulate his theory of permanent revolution, according to which the socialist revolution would occur soon after the destruction of absolutism.

In contrast, Plekhanov refused to admit that the events of 1905 seriously challenged his revolutionary prospectus. Nevertheless, he did acknowledge certain not insignificant deviations. He recognized the leading role taken by the proletariat, but after having devoted his life to the promotion of proletarian class-consciousness, he could now write with irritation: "The difficulty with us is not in recognizing the antagonism of interests of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

In our ranks, the recognition of this antagonism has already attained, one might say, the firmness of a prejudice". Genuine class consciousness, he insistently emphasized, also required recognition of the limits placed on social change by the country's level of economic development. Accordingly the Social Democrats had the duty of inculcating in the proletariat awareness that Russia was ripe only for a "bourgeois" revolution, and the folly of attempting to go beyond that stage.

Plekhanov hurled against the Bolsheviks in 1905 - 1906 reproaches reminiscent of those he had earlier employed against various narodniki. They did not understand what goals were historically attainable, they failed to base their tactics on real conditions, and to harmonize means and ends. In rejecting objective criteria and seeking to achieve unattainable ends by magical means, they resembled earlier revolutionists whom Engels had called "alchemists of revolution". In short, he

represented them as captives of utopian thinking, and he also likened Lenin to narodnik figures whom he had stigmatized as Blanquists, for assuming that a revolutionary clique could seize power and wilfully carry out a social revolution.

Plekhanov refused to yield even after an inquiry he made among western socialists showed that most of them perceived the Russian revolution in terms much more akin to Lenin's perspective than his own. They sensed the contradiction at the heart of the Russian revolution, that between the principal moving forces of the revolution and the economic and social backwardness of Russia, between the impulse to transcend the bourgeois revolution and the absence in Russia of the preconditions for establishing a socialist order. Lenin and Trotskii hammered away at the objective necessity of going beyond a bourgeois revolution, while tending to underrate Russia's socio-economic backwardness. Plekhanov harped on Russia's backwardness, taking it as absolutely decisive for the definition of the situation, and managing somehow to discount the moving forces. Both positions were onesided, but in 1905 - 1906 and 1917 Plekhanov's position seemed to be the more vulnerable of the two.

The appearance in February 1917 not just of a moderately liberal provisional government but also of soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies signalled that the revolution had already transcended bourgeois limits. Yet the moderate socialists who dominated the soviets for six months were still under the influence of Plekhanov's two-stage scheme, acutely aware of Russia's backwardness, and therefore determined to prevent the revolution from advancing further. Had they been more responsive to the demands of soldiers and peasants, taken Russia out of the war, and given their blessings to the land seizures gaining momentum in the countryside, they might have succeeded. They chose to do otherwise, however, and were swept away by the Bolsheviks, who promised peace, land, and bread. Still, it should not be forgotten that in pressing on from one revolution to another, Lenin abandoned the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry, and in effect acted out the theory of permanent revolution that

Trotsky had sketched in 1906.

Standing well to the right of the moderate socialists in 1917, Plekhanov had even less chance than they to prevail. An ardent supporter of the allied cause from the beginning of the war, he continued in the same vein after his return to Russia at the end of March. It was soon apparent that his political agenda, with victory over the Germans given precedence over all else, was out of tune with the temper of revolutionary Petrograd. Incessantly urging restraint upon insurgent workers, soldiers, and peasants who were bent on settling scores with their masters, and castigating the moderate socialists even for the halfway measures they took to mollify the masses, Plekhanov's influence rapidly declined.

He brought out again all the strictures he had used against Lenin in 1905 - 1906, and new ones as well. Because they left out of account the limits imposed by Russia's level of economic development, he condemned Lenin's calls for a socialist revolution in the April Theses as "ravings". He denounced the Bolshevik leader's program as a negation of Marxism and return to the utopian socialism of an earlier day. Ever and again, he sought to remind the public of Marx's dictum that "no social formation perishes until all the productive forces for which it provides scope have been developed"; and Engels's warning of the disastrous results that would follow a premature seizure of power.

Plekhanov went down to defeat in 1917, but what was it that triumphed, and how? The Bolsheviks, led by Lenin and Trotsky took power in what they hailed as a socialist revolution. Much of the politically active proletariat no doubt shared this assessment. As for the peasants, they had forcefully carried out a distribution of the land among themselves, a movement that the Bolsheviks endorsed. However, the Bolshevik slogan "Land to the peasants!" contradicted the agrarian plank of their party's program. In 1917 Lenin virtually appropriated the agrarian program of the Socialist Revolutionaries, as a way of aligning the Bolsheviks with the peasants' most immediate demands.

The agrarian revolution of 1917 was objectively a bour-

geois revolution: it converted masses of rural people who had possessed no land into property holders, or people with insufficient land into more viable holders than before. Such an agrarian revolution had little or nothing in common with Lenin's conception of socialism. How a government committed to family farming (within a communal context) was a puzzle with which the Soviet regime would have to grapple again and again.

Earlier in his career (but not in 1905 - 1906 or 1917), Plekhanov had floated the idea that the overthrow of autocracy might trigger socialist revolution in the west, and that might facilitate a swift transition to socialism in Russia. In 1917 Lenin and Trotskii both banked heavily on just such an occurrence as the means to offset Russia's socio-economic backwardness. They could not imagine that a socialist government in backward Russia could endure, much less go on to build a socialist order. Nevertheless, they chose to take power, hoping that their revolution would inspire the proletarians in Germany and elsewhere to overthrow their rulers; and the socialist regimes that would rise could be depended upon to help Soviet Russia create a socialist society. The Bolsheviks gambled for high stakes, but they lost. The problem of socialist government facing a largely non-socialist or even anti-socialist population then became more acute.

After the Civil War, in order to restore agricultural production, Lenin felt compelled to concede to the peasants, yielding to them control of their enterprises and the disposal of their product. Later, Stalin went on the offensive, violently forcing through the collectivization of agriculture. This counter-revolutionary measure nullified what was for the peasants the historic achievement of 1917. These post-revolutionary developments cannot but remind us of Plekhanov's analysis and refutation of the narodnik program. Lenin's concession to the peasantry represented the imperative of a party which had taken power in a largely peasant-supported revolution to adopt a program consonant with peasant interests.

Stalin's revolution involved the despotic imposition upon an unwilling population of a program stemming from an inflexible application of ideology. The so-called command administrative

system, seen by many as the root of the Soviet crisis, in that same totalitarian order that Stalin erected as a necessary accompaniment of this crucial step.

It turns out that there is no simple answer to the question: "Was Plekhanov's alternative better than Lenin's way?" In the long term, that is from the present-day perspective, Plekhanov's alternative appears distinctly preferable. But his alternative was not a live option in the turbulent revolutionary conditions of 1917. He was defeated in the political arena by Lenin and Trotskii, who recognized that it was impossible to yoke a class-conscious proletariat with a bourgeoisie in a "bourgeois" revolution of the earlier west European kind. For his part, Plekhanov was no less certain that it would be impossible to unite the proletariat with a "backward" peasantry in a genuinely socialist revolution. It was impossible, he believed, to violate the laws of history, and still succeed in building a socialist order worthy of the name. Each side grasped part of the truth, neither the whole truth, about a great historical event pregnant with contradictions.