

Georgi Plekhanov and the roots of Soviet philosophy

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Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal – Marxism was born through a critical appropriation of Hegel's method and a radical break with the philosophy of Young Hegelianism.¹ With this, Marx declared that philosophy was over. As he wrote to Ferdinand Lassalle in regards to the Hegelian dialectic, "This dialectic is, to be sure, the ultimate word in philosophy and hence there is all the more need to divest it of the mystical aura given it by Hegel."² Even more explicitly, Engels wrote in an early introduction to his *Anti-Dühring*: "The Hegelian system was the last and consummate form of philosophy, in so far as the latter is presented as a special science superior to every other. All philosophy collapsed with this system."³ Hence, any attempts to revive philosophy i.e. a specific form of ideology, could only be a step backwards from the advance made by Marx and Engels, could only ever be a reactionary project. If carried out within Marxism it can only mean a reversion back to pre-Marxist times, to pre-scientific views in the study of society. Dialectical materialism as the philosophy of Marxism is exactly such a reactionary turn. In fact, dialectical materialism, the ruling philosophy in the USSR, a philosophy which, in whole or in part, countless Marxist-Leninist parties, groups, and sects claim adherence to today, was essentially the product of Georgi Plekhanov. However, Plekhanov's philosophy of dialectical materialism was not and is not synonymous with Marx's method, with scientific socialism. Rather, the former can be more correctly described as neo-Young Hegelian.

In essence, Plekhanov's dialectical materialism was a combination of aspects of Hegel's philosophy, Russian Hegelianism, German Young Hegelianism, and Darwinism all glossed over with a Marxist veneer. Despite this seeming dialectical heritage, Plekhanov's basic method was a consistent reductionism and which flowed from his basic outlook: mechanical materialism. As I will show below, Plekhanov consistently engaged in various forms of determinism: geographical, biological, and technological. In his mechanical materialism, humanity, the subject, was actually the object and the environment, whether social or natural, the object, was the actual subject. Thus, he located the source of all social change not in the activity of humanity, but rather in some external factor which acted as a stimuli on humanity and impelled it forward. Humanity was seen as merely an empty vessel being filled and carried forward by the inevitable evolutionary stream of history. Thus, Plekhanov, in obliterating human agency, reproduced Hegel's teleology.

All of Plekhanov's socio-political analyses and his position on the tasks of socialists were the result of the above method and outlook. In his view "The Social-Democrat studies attentively

¹ "To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter." Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction," in *Marx Engels On Religion* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985), 46.

² Karl Marx, "Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works Volume 40, Letters 1856-59* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1983), 316.

³ Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugene Dühring's Revolution in Science* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 34.

laws and the course of historical development...The Social-Democrat swims with the current of history...The Social-Democrat derives support from evolution.”⁴ Despite the reference to swimming “with the current of history,” on the surface it appears that Plekhanov was simply arguing that in order to intervene in history, a revolutionary needs to study history. There seems to be an emphasis precisely on agency here. However, as he argued more extensively elsewhere,

Engels dedicated his entire life to an extremely lofty aim: the emancipation of the proletariat. He also had his “ideal”, but he was not severed for ever from reality. His ideal was reality itself, but *the reality of tomorrow*, a reality which will be fulfilled, not because Engels was a man of an ideal, but because the properties of the present reality are such that out of it, by its own inner laws, there must develop that reality of tomorrow which we may call Engels’ ideal. Uneducated people may ask us: if the whole point consists in the properties of the reality, then what has Engels to do with it, why does he intervene with his ideals in the inevitable historical process? Cannot the matter do without him? *From the objective standpoint* the position of Engels appears as follows: in the process of the transition from one form to another, reality seized on him as on one of the necessary instruments of the impending revolution.⁵

Here there is no trace of human agency, of what Marx termed “revolutionary practice.”⁶ Instead humans appear as the willing vessels of history, which is making its course towards a pre-ordained destination. It is no accident that here Plekhanov actually echoed Feuerbach and not Marx. In a November 1828 letter to Hegel, Feuerbach wrote:

For the philosophy which bears your name is, as acquaintance with history and philosophy itself teaches, not the affair of a school, but of humanity. At the very least the spirit of the latest philosophy claims, perforce tends, to burst the bounds of a single school, to become a general world-historical and public intuition. There resides in this spirit not only the germ of a higher literary activity, but also of a universal spirit expressing itself in actuality, the spirit, as it were, of a new period in world history. It is thus now a question, so to speak, of founding a Kingdom, the Kingdom of the Idea, of thought which contemplates itself in all that exists and is conscious of itself.⁷

Yet, what Feuerbach wrote was, in its turn, merely an echo of the argument Hegel made at the end of his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*:

⁴ Georgi Plekhanov, “A New Champion of Autocracy, Or Mr. L. Tikhomirov’s Grief (Reply to the Pamphlet: Why I Ceased to be a Revolutionary),” in G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 1* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1961), 422.

⁵ Georgi Plekhanov, “Forward to the First Edition (From the Translator) and Plekhanov’s Notes to Engels’s Book Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy” in G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 1* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1961), 525.

⁶ Karl Marx, “Theses On Feuerbach,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology: Critique of Modern German Philosophy According to Its Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism According to Its Various Prophets* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 616.

⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach, “Feuerbach to Hegel,” in G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 548.

This long procession of spirits is formed by the individual pulses which beat in its life; they are the organism of our substance, an absolutely necessary progression, which expresses nothing less than the nature of spirit itself, and which lives in us all. We have to give ear to its urgency - when the mole that is within forces its way on - and we have to make it a reality. It is my desire that this history of Philosophy should contain for you a summons to grasp the spirit of the time, which is present in us by nature, and - each in his own place - consciously to bring it from its natural condition, i.e. from its lifeless seclusion, into the light of day.⁸

In comparing these arguments of Plekhanov, Feuerbach, and Hegel the terms can be changed but the structure is fundamentally the same: an external, alien force, the true subject, works through an object, humans, towards an inevitable end. For Hegel, it is the Absolute Mind/Spirit/God which works through humanity; for Feuerbach, it is the philosophy of Hegel which works through the Young Hegelians; and for Plekhanov, it is laws of history which works through the working class. What is common to all of these is that there is no focus on human activity.⁹ Lawrence S. Stepelevich has noted about Feuerbach's letter that,

To Feuerbach, Spirit, after 'having worked for centuries upon its development and completion', has finally revealed itself in Hegel's philosophy. It is now the mission of Spirit, acting through its disciples - the Hegelians, particularly, the Young Hegelians - to rationalize the world. In theological terms, which always seem natural in a Young Hegelian context, the redemption of the world by incarnate reason is now at hand, and from Feuerbach on, this 'apocalyptic tone, this sense of historical revolution, was the essential ingredient of Young Hegelian metaphysic'.¹⁰

It is exactly this "Young Hegelian metaphysic," itself an altered Hegelian metaphysic, which Plekhanov reproduced in his dialectical materialism. The discussion and proof of this will take up the bulk of this work.

The Bolsheviks had a high estimation of Plekhanov's philosophy and through them, the latter served as the foundation for the official philosophy of the early and later Soviet state. However, unlike other major Bolshevik leaders, Lenin did not have an uncritical attitude to Plekhanov's philosophical views; indeed, his relationship to his mentor was far more complex. This is shown most explicitly in his *Philosophical Notebooks*. Yet this work was not published in

⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 3: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 553.

⁹ "The theological consciousness is the great lie, the principle of all slavery (and domination), to which our species remains subject for as long as the idea of life goes on being alien to us, for as long as we have no perception of the self-conscious act... The young Hegelians, paradoxical as it may sound, continue to be enmeshed in the theological consciousness; for, although they have renounced the Hegelian "Absolute Spirit," which is a reproduction of the Christian God, although they have given up the Hegelian politics of Restoration and *juste-milieu*, and although they have finally negated the religious dualism, they nevertheless continue to set up the universal, or 'State,' against the individual... because they have never really stepped forth into self-determination." Moses Hess, "The Philosophy of the Act," in *Socialist Thought: A Documentary History*, eds. Alberta Fried and Ronald Sanders (New York: Anchor Books, 1964), 254, 264.

¹⁰ Lawrence S. Stepelevich, "Introduction" in *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence S. Stepelevich (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 5.

Lenin's lifetime. This occurred only in 1929-1930 and even then it took a number of decades before this work was published in various foreign languages.¹¹ There is, in fact, a sharp divergence between Lenin's views of Plekhanov, as expressed in his *Notebooks*, and those expressed in public statements and writings. The fact that this bifurcation has been, and continues to be, largely ignored is a major reason for the uncritical acceptance of both dialectical materialism and the place of Plekhanov in the history of Marxism. Plekhanov has been famously referred to as "The Father of Russian Marxism."¹² As I will show, he was never a Marxist, but rather a neo-Young Hegelian. Therefore, while he was the father of the Russian social-democratic movement, the title of "Father of Russian Marxism," both in theory and practice, belongs more truthfully to Lenin.

Bolshevik opinions on Plekhanov

Lenin repeatedly praised Plekhanov publicly over the course of his career. He was always ready to point to Plekhanov as his teacher and to stress his pioneering role. In 1899, Lenin compared the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* to Plekhanov's *Socialism and the Political Struggle*:

The first *profession de foi* of world socialism, the *Communist Manifesto*, established a truth that has since become an elementary verity—that every class struggle is a political struggle... The first *profession de foi* of Russian socialism, Plekhanov's booklet, *Socialism and the Political Struggle*, which appeared in 1883, reaffirmed this elementary truth in its application to Russia and showed precisely how and why the Russian revolutionary movement must bring about a fusion of socialism and the political struggle, a fusion of the spontaneous movement of the masses of workers and the revolutionary movement, a fusion of the class struggle and the political struggle.¹³

This is high praise indeed. Not merely did Lenin compare the most famous piece of writing by Marx and Engels with Plekhanov's first socialist work, but he also clearly designated Plekhanov as the founder of socialism in Russia. In the USSR, as will be shortly discussed, this work of Plekhanov's was considered his first "Marxist" work. As can be seen, this view had its origins in Lenin's own writings.

Lenin continued to have positive words for Plekhanov even after his political break with him. In 1908, in the course of describing the struggle between Marxism and Revisionism, Lenin pointed out that "We shall simply note that the only Marxist in the international Social-Democratic movement to criticise the incredible platitudes of the revisionists from the standpoint of consistent dialectical materialism was Plekhanov."¹⁴ This emphasis on Plekhanov's philosophical role was later repeated. In 1910, Lenin referred to Plekhanov's 1895 work *The*

¹¹ Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the C.C., C.P.S.U., "Preface," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 38: Philosophical Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), 13.

¹² Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963).

¹³ V.I. Lenin, "Apropos of the *Profession de Foi*," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 4: 1898-April 1901* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 287-288.

¹⁴ V.I. Lenin, "Marxism and Revisionism," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 15: March 1908-August 1909* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 33.

Development of the Monist View of History, as “a book which has helped to rear a whole generation of Russian Marxists.”¹⁵ The following year, Lenin referred to the same book by Plekhanov, arguing that “the ‘formation’ of Russian Marxism” would not have been “possible without Beltov’s explanation of the principles of philosophical materialism.”¹⁶ Thus, Lenin considered that Plekhanov played an absolutely crucial role in the development of Russian Marxism.

However, Lenin regularly pointed out that Plekhanov’s importance lay specifically in his philosophy. So, on the eve of World War I, Lenin declared that Plekhanov was “a socialist who possesses the greatest knowledge of the philosophy of Marxism.”¹⁷ Lenin repeated this idea of Plekhanov’s greatness even after the success of the revolution. In 1921 he went so far as to make the following argument:

Let me add in parenthesis for the benefit of young Party members that you *cannot* hope to become a *real*, intelligent Communist without making a study—and I mean *study*—of all of Plekhanov’s philosophical writings, because nothing better has been written on Marxism anywhere in the world.¹⁸

Aside from the quotations provided above, there truly could be no higher praise coming from Lenin than this. Hence it was only logical that Lenin would add a footnote to this commendation, where he suggested that

By the way, it would be a good thing, first, if the current edition of Plekhanov’s works contained a special volume or volumes of all his philosophical articles, with detailed indexes, etc., to be included in a series of standard textbooks on communism; secondly I think the workers’ state must demand that professors of philosophy should have a knowledge of Plekhanov’s exposition of Marxist philosophy and ability to impart it to their students.¹⁹

¹⁵ V.I. Lenin, “The *Vperyod* Faction,” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 16: September 1909-December 1910* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 269.

¹⁶ V.I. Lenin, “Those Who Would Liquidate Us Re: Mr. Potresov and V. Bazarov,” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 17: December 1910-April 1912* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 74.

¹⁷ V.I. Lenin, “Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Death of Joseph Dietzgen,” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 19: March-December 1913* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 81.

¹⁸ V.I. Lenin, “Once Again On The Trade Unions, The Current Situation and the Mistakes of Trotsky and Bukharin,” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 32: December 1920-August 1921* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 94.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 94; David Riazanov, the founder of the Marx-Engels Institute, stated in 1928 that “Plekhanov’s famous pamphlet, *Socialism and the Political Struggle*...opened the history of revolutionary social democracy in Russia.” Despite the fact that, in the Bolshevik view, Plekhanov’s politics degenerated after 1903, still the Russian Communist Party found his later works to be of value. Thus, Riazanov argued that Plekhanov’s *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, was a “systematic exposition of dialectical materialism.” See, David Ryazanov, “Editor’s Preface,” in George Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (New York: International Publishers, 1928), ix.

This task which Lenin put before the Russian Communist Party was soon carried out.²⁰ More significant is the argument that he had put forth. Previously he claimed that without Plekhanov there would have been no Russian Marxist movement. Now he was going even further to assert that without a study of Plekhanov, a person could not become a “real, intelligent Communist.” Lenin was thus implicitly arguing that Plekhanov could play the same role for the international communist movement as he had played for the Russian and international social-democratic movement viz. that of the teacher of the philosophy of Marxism, i.e. dialectical materialism.

Besides Lenin’s writings, the testimony of his widow Nadezhda K. Krupskaya also attests to the positive opinion he had regarding the importance of Plekhanov. According to her memoirs, which she wrote in the 1930s, Plekhanov was one of the sources of Lenin’s understanding of philosophy:

Marx arrived at Marxism by way of philosophy, by way of the struggle against idealism. Plekhanov in his time had devoted considerable attention to building up evidence in support of the materialist philosophy. Lenin had made a very intensive study of their works and devoted a good deal of time to philosophy while in exile.²¹

Krupskaya reiterated this, noting that “Ilyich had always been interested in questions of philosophy. He had studied it closely in exile, was familiar with everything that Marx, Engels and Plekhanov had written in that field.”²² If what Krupskaya wrote is true, then when Lenin argued that to become a “real, intelligent Communist” one must study “all of Plekhanov’s philosophical writings,” he was arguing that communists should go through the same training he himself experienced. Thus, the importance of Plekhanov’s philosophical thought for an understanding of Lenin, Bolshevism, and Soviet philosophy cannot be underestimated.²³

In light of this, it should be no surprise that other Bolshevik leaders, in considering themselves students of Lenin, should also have voiced a positive appraisal of Plekhanov. For example, Gregory Zinoviev, long-time collaborator of Lenin’s and the first chairman of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, did not hesitate to remind people of the role Plekhanov had played in the history of the Russian Communist Party. Thus, in 1923, he pointed out that in the early 1900s, Plekhanov was “the generally acknowledged leader of our

²⁰ “Plekhanov’s collected works were published in Moscow [beginning in 1923] under the editorship of his student and disciple Ryazanov.” V. V. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy, Volume II* (London: Routledge, 2003), 737.

²¹ N.K. Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin* (New York: International Publishers, 1979), 166.

²² *Ibid.*, 180; In a 1918 speech Zinoviev made the same points: “Not so many years had elapsed since the Populists burned the first Marxist writings of Plekhanov, on which Lenin himself was brought up” and “Comrade Lenin, following the late Plekhanov (here it is necessary to say that he took a great deal from Plekhanov) gave a magnificent analysis of the contending social forces in Russia.” Gregory Zinoviev, *V.I. Lenin: A Speech* (London: Plough Press, 1966), 12, 13.

²³ Indeed, Lenin respected Plekhanov as his mentor so much that he was emotionally affected by the Bolshevik-Menshevik split. Thus, in the words of Krupskaya, “It was very hard for him to have to break with Martov,” but “Hardest of all was it for Vladimir Ilyich to break with Plekhanov.” Even many years later, after WWI had started, Plekhanov’s renegade politics still deeply disturbed Lenin: “Plekhanov’s position worried Ilyich very much. He could not believe that Plekhanov had become a ‘defencist.’ ‘I just can’t believe it,’ he said, adding thoughtfully, ‘it must be the effect of his military past.’” See, Krupskaya, *Reminiscences*, 99, 104, 286.

party.”²⁴ He further stated that when Plekhanov, Axelrod, Zasulich, and others had formed the Emancipation of Labour group in 1883, they therefore had formed “the first Marxist organization in the history of our revolutionary movement,” and hence the Group “had every right to be the chronological point of departure of our party.”²⁵ Beyond these general points, Zinoviev also gave a fuller characterisation of the Bolshevik view of Plekhanov:

On the Development of the Monist View of History. In this work Plekhanov revealed his most brilliant side, giving battle to populism chiefly on another field, that of philosophy, and coming out in defence of materialism. It seems to me that many of our modern academics would act more wisely if instead of criticising Plekhanov with a dilettante’s conceit, as they generally do, were to expound and interpret to a rising generation this remarkable book which whole generations of Marxists studied, and from which they learnt to understand the principles of militant materialism. Plekhanov’s political side was never especially strong. He was a theoretician. He was then the acknowledged ideological leader of the party, if not of an entire generation of Marxist intellectuals and Marxist workers.²⁶

What is striking about the above excerpt is how much Zinoviev merely repeated, almost word for word, what Lenin had previously said: Plekhanov’s important role in Russian history as the initiator of the Marxist movement, his specific philosophical strength, his role as educator for a generation of Russian revolutionaries, and finally, his book on *Monism* as his most crucial work. This basic picture of Plekhanov would continue to be the official Soviet view.²⁷

Leon Trotsky, for his part, also reproduced the essential view of Plekhanov that Lenin had originated. Thus, in a speech made on the occasion of Plekhanov’s death, Trotsky highlighted the fact that the latter had

organized together with his closest colleagues, Vera Zasulich and Pavel Axelrod the “Emancipation of Labour” group, which became the first cell of Russian Marxism... amongst us Marxists of the older generation there is not a single one who has not studied the works of Plekhanov.²⁸

²⁴ Grigorii Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party: A Popular Outline* (London: New Park Publications, 1973), 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 43-45.

²⁷ According to two leading Soviet philosophers, Plekhanov “greatly contributed to the development of the Marxist theory... After 1903, Plekhanov could not understand the peculiarities of the new epoch. He departed from revolutionary Marxism... to the end of his life Plekhanov remained loyal to Marxism, to the cause of the working class. That is why Lenin, while calling the Menshevik tactics ‘the height of banality and meanness’, at the same time stressed that ‘in philosophy Plekhanov upheld the righteous cause’. Plekhanov’s works *The Development of the Monist View of History*, 1895; *Essays on the History of Materialism*, 1896, *The Role of the Individual in History*, 1898, and many others brilliantly expound the Marxist theory... Plekhanov’s philosophical works are rich and convincing, and the popularity and the captivating interest of his exposals make them even today valuable manuals for the study of Marxist philosophy.” M. Rosenthal and P. Yudin, eds., *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967), 352.

²⁸ Leon Trotsky, “In memory of Plekhanov,” accessed 28 October 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/profiles/plekhanov02.htm>.

Trotsky struck the same note in 1922, arguing that “Plekhanov did not create the theory of historical materialism, he did not enrich it with new scientific achievements. But he introduced it into Russian life,” and, further, that “Plekhanov did not create the materialist dialectic but he was its convinced, passionate and brilliant crusader in Russia from the beginning of the eighties... The first Russian crusader for Marxism.”²⁹ Again and again, Plekhanov was described as the originator of Marxism in Russia. Like Lenin and Zinoviev, Trotsky held Plekhanov’s book on *Monism* in high regard calling it “his most triumphant and brilliant pamphlet,” and he referred to Plekhanov’s philosophical works as the “original source of Marxist thought in Russia.”³⁰ So, with regards to Trotsky’s views on Plekhanov, there was nothing that had not been basically stated earlier.

In 1921 Nikolai Bukharin published his famous work *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*.³¹ This book “was meant to serve as an ideological textbook in higher party schools and did serve this function for at least fifteen years”³² Indeed, according to Cohen, thousands upon thousands were educated by it.³³ Thus it stands as one of the earliest Soviet textbooks. In this work Bukharin did not make any explicit statement regarding Plekhanov’s historical and philosophical importance.³⁴ However, in the bibliographies he provided at the end of each chapter, Plekhanov was one of the most cited authors along with Marx, Engels, and Kautsky. The works of his referred to include: *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, *Criticism of our Critics*, *Twenty Years*, and *On the Development of the Monist View of History*.³⁵ The message received by young communists would have been quite clear: Plekhanov was an absolutely crucial source for understanding Marxism.

Shortly after Bukharin’s book appeared, there was an increasing amount of textbooks produced in the USSR i.e. from the mid-1920s onwards.³⁶ This was also the time when the first Soviet philosophical journals and institutions were being formed. It was the students of Plekhanov who were at the forefront of these developments. According to Sergey Mareev, it was the latter’s followers who

²⁹ Leon Trotsky, “A Note on Plekhanov,” accessed 28 October 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1922/04/plekhanov.htm>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Stephen E. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888-1938* (New York: Vintage Books, 1875), 109.

³² Alfred G. Meyer, “Introduction,” in Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 7A.

³³ Cohen, *Bukharin*, 219; “And in so far as the utmost importance has always been attached to the study of theory in the Soviet Union, the same importance was attached to the compiling of textbooks and study guides. The leading role in this regard was played by Bukharin’s textbook *The Theory of Historical Materialism*, which served as a reference book for all students at that time.” Yehoshua Yakhot, *The Suppression of Philosophy in the USSR (The 1920s & 1930s)* (Michigan: Mehring Books, 2012), 13-14.

³⁴ Still, in a work which remained unpublished in his lifetime, Bukharin wrote: “The great service rendered by Plekhanov consists, among other things, in the fact that he overturned many of the distortions to which materialism had been subjected as a result of the arguments of its idealist opponents (for example, the Kantian Friedrich Lange).” Nikolai Bukharin, *Philosophical Arabesques* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2005), 163.

³⁵ Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism*, 32, 51-52, 82-83, 103, 241.

³⁶ Yakhot, *The Suppression of Philosophy*, 14-19.

occupied practically all key positions in the newly-created Soviet ideological apparatus and the system of higher Marxist education. D.B. Ryazanov headed the Marx-Engels Institute [and] A.M. Deborin became in 1921 the editor-in-chief of the journal *Under the Banner of Marxism*. They determined the character of ‘Marxist’ philosophy in the 20s and 30s.³⁷

Lenin put great store in *Under the Banner of Marxism*, which was the first Soviet philosophical journal.³⁸ In one of his last writings he expressed his opinion that “the contributors to *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* must arrange for the systematic study of Hegelian dialectics from a materialist standpoint, i.e., the dialectics which Marx applied practically in his *Capital*” and hence that “the editors and contributors of *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* should be a kind of ‘Society of Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics.’”³⁹ As a part of this project, books about Plekhanov were produced and his ideas were popularised.⁴⁰

Despite the growth of the Soviet textbook industry, in 1938 a work was published which superseded them all, becoming *the* textbook for all communists in the USSR and abroad: the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) Short Course*.⁴¹ Indeed, in the words of the Russian philosophers Guseinov and Lektorsky, the section entitled “Dialectical and Historical Materialism” was “for fifteen years the Bible of Soviet philosophy.”⁴² In its commentary on Plekhanov, this work added absolutely nothing to what had already been stated by Lenin, Zinoviev, and Trotsky:

³⁷ Sergey Mareev, *Iz Istorii Sovetskoi Filosofii: Lukach–Vygotskii–Il’enkov* [From the History of Soviet Philosophy: Lukács–Vygotskii–Il’enkov] (Moscow: Kul’turnaia revoliutsiia, 2008), 17, quoted in Alex Levant, “E.V. Ilyenkov and Creative Soviet Marxism: Introduction to *Dialectics of the Ideal*,” in *Dialectics of the Ideal: Evald Ilyenkov and Creative Soviet Marxism*, eds. Alex Levant and Vesa Oittinen (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 13; Yakhot, *The Suppression of Philosophy*, 1-4.

³⁸ Ibid., 4; The choice of Abram Deborin to head up *Under the Banner of Marxism* was a sensible one. In 1908 Deborin had written *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Dialectical Materialism*, possibly the first textbook on dialectical materialism. Plekhanov worked to get his student’s book published and, when it finally was, he wrote a preface to it. See, Georgi Plekhanov, “On the Study of Philosophy,” accessed 1 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1910/study-philosophy.htm> and Georgi Plekhanov, “Preface to Abram Deborin’s Book *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Dialectical Materialism*,” accessed 1 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1916/deborin.htm>. Lenin was not unaware of Deborin’s work because in 1909 he had read and made a number of critical notations on an article written by the latter. See, V.I. Lenin, “Remarks on Books: A. Deborin. Dialectical Materialism,” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 38: Philosophical Notebooks* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 475-483.

³⁹ V.I. Lenin, “On the Significance of Militant Materialism,” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 33: August 1921-March 1923* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 233, 234.

⁴⁰ Yakhot, *The Suppression of Philosophy*, 6-8.

⁴¹ Ibid., 214; David Bakhurst, *Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy: From the Bolsheviks to Evald Ilyenkov* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 95-46; “In 1938, the famous “Short Course” on the *History of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of the Soviet Union* was published, and its massive worldwide dissemination had no parallel in the international labor movement until Mao Zedong’s little *Red Book* in the 1960s and 1970s.” Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 255.

⁴² Abdusalam A. Guseinov and Vladislav A. Lektorsky, “Philosophy in Russia: History and Present State,” *Diogenes* 56 (2009): 12.

It was to the dissemination of the views of Marx and Engels that the first Russian Marxist group, Plekhanov's 'Emancipation of Labour' group, devoted itself... In combating and exposing the Narodniks Plekhanov wrote a number of Marxist works which were instrumental in rearing and educating the Marxists in Russia. Such works of his as *Socialism and the Political Struggle*, *Our Differences*, *On the Development of the Monistic View of History* cleared the way for the victory of Marxism in Russia. In his works Plekhanov expounded the basic principles of Marxism. Of particular importance was his *On the Development of the Monistic View of History*, published in 1895.⁴³

Once again, these core points were stressed: Plekhanov's role as the founder of Marxism in Russia; Plekhanov as the educator of Russian Marxists; and his work on *Monism* having special significance. It has been argued that Stalin was largely the author of this work.⁴⁴ If this is true then it would merely show that he was in full concurrence with the evaluation of Plekhanov put forth by Lenin and others.

Of course, the Bolshevik view on Plekhanov was not all positive. Plekhanov had his negative side as well. It was Lenin who first drew a line of demarcation in Plekhanov's career. He maintained that

The services he rendered in the past were immense. During the twenty years between 1883 and 1903 he wrote a large number of splendid essays, especially those against the opportunists, Machists and Narodniks. But since 1903 Plekhanov has been vacillating in the most ludicrous manner on questions of tactics and organisation.⁴⁵

Here Lenin established the basic point that Plekhanov was a great Marxist until 1903.⁴⁶ Trotsky repeated this idea in the speech cited previously. There he stated that "In the subsequent development of the revolution Plekhanov abandoned that class which he had so excellently served in the grimmest period of reaction."⁴⁷ Elsewhere he made the distinction between the

⁴³ A Commission of the C.C. of the C.P.S.U. (B), *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) Short Course* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1939), 9, 12.

⁴⁴ David R. Egan and Melinda A. Egan, *Joseph Stalin: An Annotated Bibliography of English-Language Periodical Literature to 2005* (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007), 239.

⁴⁵ V.I. Lenin, "Adventurism," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 20: December 1913-August 1914* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 358.

⁴⁶ In Lenin's later estimation, one of the sources of Plekhanov's break with Marxism was his lack of an analysis of "the fundamental characteristics and tendencies of imperialism as a system of the economic relations of modern highly developed, mature, and over-ripe capitalism." See, V.I. Lenin, "Introduction," in Nikolai Bukharin, *Imperialism and World Economy* (London: Martin Lawrence Limited, 1929), 9. The same point was later made by one of the editors of Plekhanov's *Selected Philosophical Works*: "From the close of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, capitalism entered a new period in its development—the period of imperialism, the period of revolutionary upheavals and battles—which called for a reconsideration of old methods of work, a radical change in the activity of the Social-Democratic parties, and an all-round creative development of the Marxist theory as applied to the new historical conditions. Although he remained an active figure in the international working-class movement and defended and substantiated Marxism, Plekhanov did not clearly grasp the character of the new historical epoch; he was unable to disclose its laws and specific features." See, V. Fomina, "Plekhanov's role in the Defence and Substantiation of Marxist Philosophy (Introductory Essay)," in G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 1* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1961), 16.

⁴⁷ Leon Trotsky, "In memory of Plekhanov," accessed 29 October 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/profiles/plekhanov02.htm>.

“false Plekhanov” and “the real one. The great Plekhanov, the true one.”⁴⁸ This temporal distinction between Plekhanov’s good period and bad period was also reiterated by Zinoviev:

Plekhanov was at that time a Bolshevik in the best sense of the word...Some people know Plekhanov only in the latter years when his star had waned and when he had gone over to the enemy’s camp during the war. But he is in a certain measure one of the founders of Bolshevism.⁴⁹

The *Short Course* basically made the same argument fifteen years later:

At the Second Congress Plekhanov sided with Lenin. But after the Second Congress he allowed the Mensheviks to intimidate him with threats of a split. He decided to ‘make peace’ with the Mensheviks at all costs. It was the deadweight of his earlier opportunist mistakes that dragged Plekhanov down to the Mensheviks.⁵⁰

Thus, we can see a continuity between the Bolshevik and later Soviet official appraisal of Plekhanov’s role in history: Plekhanov was a great Marxist who served the movement in various capacities and to which corresponded his heroic period. On the other hand, Plekhanov, while an important Marxist philosopher, gradually turned his back on the revolutionary movement and his politics underwent a fatal degeneration, to which corresponded his craven period.⁵¹

However, within the above contrast there is a crucial contradiction; but, before analysing the latter, it will be helpful to look at one last article detailing the Bolshevik’s public estimation of Plekhanov. The literary critic Aleksandr Voronsky, a long-time Bolshevik and later member of Trotsky’s Left Opposition, published an article in 1920 on Plekhanov which restated various Bolshevik themes.⁵² Voronsky began by pointing out that “Plekhanov died in tragic circumstances. Before his death he parted not only from the most advanced detachments of the Russian working class; but even the majority of his recent co-thinkers abandoned him.”⁵³ Voronsky continued the theme of duality, arguing that “Plekhanov died an intellectual outcast, despite his enormous and unfading contributions to the Russian and Western European workers’ movement.”⁵⁴ Crowning the imagery between the good and bad Plekhanov, Voronsky recounted

⁴⁸ Leon Trotsky, “A Note on Plekhanov,” accessed 29 October 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1922/04/plekhanov.htm>.

⁴⁹ Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party*, 94-95.

⁵⁰ Commission of the C.C., *History of the Communist Party*, 45.

⁵¹ This parallels what Karl Korsch referred to as “the traditional and orthodox thesis that the theory of the Second International was basically Marxist all along (according to Kautsky) or at any rate until the ‘original sin’ of 4 August 1914 (according to the Communists).” However, as Korsch pointed out, the Second International never, at any point, adopted the “whole of Marxism” in its theory or practice. Rather, “all that was even theoretically adopted were some isolated economic, political and social ‘theories’, extracted from the general context of revolutionary Marxism. Their general meaning had thereby been altered; and their specific content usually truncated and falsified.” Hence, some of the roots of its political degeneration, above all in the realm of theory, were present at its very beginning. See, Karl Korsch, “The Present State of the Problem of ‘Marxism and Philosophy’— An Anti-Critique,” in Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 108, 110.

⁵² Frederick Choate, “A. K. Voronsky Life and Works of a Bolshevik Literary Critic Introduction,” *A. K. Voronsky Website*, 2001, accessed 29 October 2016, <http://www.sovlit.org/akv/Pages/Introduction.html>.

⁵³ A. K. Voronsky, “G. V. Plekhanov,” accessed 29 October 2016, <http://www.marxistsfr.org/archive/voronsky/1920/plekhanov.htm>.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

that Plekhanov had remained silent when the Provisional Government claimed that Lenin and Trotsky had been paid German agents. For the Bolsheviks, “This silence was a great sin, Plekhanov’s sin before the Russian and Western European workers; and it was greater and more bitter than all the other mistakes and errors Plekhanov committed.”⁵⁵ Still, according to Voronsky “we Bolsheviks know yet another Plekhanov...”⁵⁶ We have seen above who this other Plekhanov was, but how does Voronsky characterise him?

Voronsky asserted, in what may be the first instance of the now standard appellation, that Plekhanov was the “father of Russian revolutionary Marxism. He was the first prophet and seer of the workers’ movement in Russia and of the Russian proletarian revolution.”⁵⁷ However, Voronsky went even further, claiming that Plekhanov was

not only the father of Russian Marxism, but of Marxism in general. He is a disciple of Marx and Engels, he is their loyal and orthodox follower, but he belongs to the ranks of those disciples who go further than their teacher, dressing theory in the flesh and blood of new phenomena, events and facts – working over, perfecting and deepening the constructs of their teacher.⁵⁸

This was a very strong, bold claim, one quite close to that of Lenin’s and yet it was a claim surely not far from the mark. For it is exactly the contention of this work that Plekhanov did indeed play an innovatory role in the history of Marxism; however, it was not in the form of deepening and concretising the work of Marx and Engels, but rather of revising it. This, of course, depends on one’s conception of what the essence of Marxism is. Hence it was no accident that Voronsky would further assert that “Marx and Engels made many brilliant and extraordinary statements, but it was Plekhanov who brought everything together into a system.”⁵⁹ This is absolutely true and it is a crucial argument which I will prove below viz. that there is no system of Marxism, as Marx and Engels had an aversion to systems.⁶⁰ Rather, Marx, with the aid of Engels, developed a new scientific method and outlook for comprehending and changing reality.⁶¹ Yet, it was precisely Plekhanov who produced the system of “Marxism” i.e. dialectical materialism.⁶² This is a crucial aspect of Plekhanov’s revisionism, his neo-Young Hegelianism.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ “*Value*. According to Mr. Wagner, Marx’s theory of value is the ‘cornerstone of his socialist system’ (p. 45). Since I have never established a ‘socialist system,’ this is a fantasy of Wagner, Schäffle *e tutti quanti*.” Karl Marx, “Notes on Adolph Wagner’s ‘Lehrbuch der politischen Ökonomie’ (Second Edition), Volume I, 1879,” accessed 29 October 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/01/wagner.htm>.

⁶¹ “We know only a single science, the science of history.” Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 34; “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.” Marx, “Theses On Feuerbach” in Ibid., 617.

⁶² “There is *one* ‘system’, the *system of dialectical materialism*, which includes both political economy and the scientific explanation of the historical process and much else besides.” Georgi Plekhanov, “On A. Pannekoek’s Pamphlet,” accessed 29 October 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1907/pannekoek.htm>.

Finally, Voronsky made a distinction later raised by Zinoviev; specifically he held that “Plekhanov’s mind was immersed in theory. In the realm of tactics he was weak,” i.e. Plekhanov was strong philosophically, but weak politically.⁶³ Voronsky sourced this failing to the two epochs the latter traversed:

Plekhanov belonged heart and soul to the period and epoch of the workers’ movement which took shape, developed and became stronger after the defeat of the Paris Commune. This was a period of legalism, parliamentarianism, and the growth of trade unions within the framework of ‘peaceful struggle.’⁶⁴

Still, despite this, when it came to philosophy “Plekhanov was a dialectical materialist.”⁶⁵ Thus, in light of Voronsky’s overall argument, it is wholly understandable that he would essentially make the same claim that Lenin would make the following year: “Whoever wants to make a thorough study of the philosophical foundations of Marxism has no other choice, and no other books to read, than the books by Plekhanov.”⁶⁶

As should now be apparent through reviewing Bolshevik opinions on Plekhanov, there was a key contradiction in Plekhanov’s revolutionary career between his role as a revolutionary philosopher and his role as a revolutionary politician. Yet this begs a major question: how could he, the consistently greatest Marxist philosopher since Marx and Engels, have been so consistently wrong politically? This is an important question, because underneath it lies another, more fundamental contradiction. More specifically, the assertion that Plekhanov was an excellent philosopher, but a poor politician denies the connection between theory and practice, between a method and its application. It would be to argue that a specific person, despite fully grasping the nature of a tool and being the best teacher about the latter, could only use it but poorly. It would be akin to saying, “This man is one of the greatest flying instructors ever, but he is actually a poor pilot.” However, if a person did not really know how to use a tool, then that person clearly did not truly understand it after all. There would obviously be a deficiency in their understanding.

There are just two ways of dealing with this contradiction. One is to ignore it and pass over in silence, which leads, of course, to no actual resolution. The only way to resolve this contradiction is to admit that there is a connection between theory and practice, and, hence, that if Plekhanov’s practice was faulty then, ergo, so was his theory. This leads us to a further contradiction: to one between Lenin’s private and public stance on Plekhanov. More specifically, despite the former’s fulsome praise of the latter’s philosophical strengths, Lenin, in truth, completely negated that praise in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, to the point of staking new theoretical ground compared to Plekhanov. Yet, Lenin never publicly discussed his methodological break with the latter. Indeed, he never published his notebooks on Hegel and he continued to promote Plekhanov’s philosophical writings until he died.

⁶³ Voronsky, “G. V. Plekhanov,” accessed 30 October 2016, <http://www.marxistsfr.org/archive/voronsky/1920/plekhanov.htm>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Why did Lenin do so, when his private critique was completely at variance with his public promotion? Maybe it was because he deplored the same phenomena Zinoviev saw of academics disregarding the revolutionary heritage? It could also have been a part of Lenin's call for cultural development. In his last days he criticised the rush towards so-called "proletarian culture," and argued that in order to improve the state and society, basic bourgeois culture had to be assimilated.⁶⁷ For newly-minted, and especially young communists, a study of Plekhanov would certainly help develop both culture and a grasp of world and Russian history. As Lenin put his emphasis on study, he undoubtedly implied that it should be carried out critically. Regardless, Lenin's public comments on Plekhanov's philosophy were anything but critical and could only give encouragement and license, especially in view of the commentary of the other leading Bolsheviks, to accept Plekhanov's dialectical materialism. However, the fact is that any full appreciation of Plekhanov's role in the history of Russian Marxism must take into consideration the theoretical rupture Lenin made in the course of his study on Hegel.

Before discussing what Lenin wrote about Plekhanov in his *Notebooks*, it is important to note that in breaking with his mentor, Lenin was at the same time breaking with the ideology of the Second International. For Plekhanov was not merely the father of the philosophy of dialectical materialism in Russia, but also in the international workers' movement. Within the Second International, Kautsky and Plekhanov had a division of labour: the former was the authority on politics and the latter was the authority on philosophy. Kautsky himself recognised this. As the revisionist controversy was just beginning Plekhanov called on Kautsky to attack neo-Kantian philosophy being promoted by Bernstein and his supporters.⁶⁸ Kautsky replied in an 1898 letter stating that "I have never been strong on philosophy. Although I stand entirely on the point of view of dialectical materialism, still I think that the economic and historical viewpoint of Marx and Engels is in the last resort compatible with neo-Kantianism."⁶⁹ Kautsky here showed that he was confused on philosophical questions. He again later expressed that philosophical lack of clarity and his acknowledgment of Plekhanov's importance in a 1909 letter to a comrade who had wanted to know if the teachings of Ernest Mach and Karl Marx were compatible. To the question "is Mach a Marxist?" Kautsky argued that

This depends on what is understood by Marxism. I understand it not as a philosophy, but as an empirical science, a special conception of society. This conception, however, is incompatible with idealistic philosophy, but not incompatible with Mach's theory of knowledge... If you ask me whether Plekhanov correctly teaches Marx's philosophy, I must answer that Marx has proclaimed no philosophy, but the end of all philosophy. That

⁶⁷ V.I. Lenin, "Better Fewer, But Better," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 33: August 1921-March 1923* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 487-488.

⁶⁸ David Joravsky, *Soviet Marxism and Natural Science: 1917-1932* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 15; Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1963), 176.

⁶⁹ Karl Kautsky, "Kautsky to Plekhanov," quoted in Cyril Smith, *Marx at the Millennium* (London: Pluto Press, 1996), 36; "Kautsky generally never attributed any serious significance to philosophical arguments, and therefore published in his journal – without any reservation – all kinds of positivists and empirio-critics." E.V. Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism* (London: New Park Publication, 1982), 19.

Plekhanov is, however, one of the best experts of the Marxian teachings, cannot be doubted.⁷⁰

Kautsky was absolutely correct to argue that in Marx's view philosophy was dead and, ergo, to assert that Marx had not developed a new philosophy, but rather a new science. However, this sharply contradicted what he had previously written in 1906 when he declared that Marx and Engels had founded a "materialist philosophy."⁷¹ It also contradicted what he would write in 1929, where he spoke of "the incompatibility of Marx's philosophy with Kant's."⁷² Since Kautsky was not totally clear about the nature of Marxism, it is understandable that he would defer to Plekhanov in the philosophical aspects of the anti-revisionist battle, and, hence, why Plekhanov was considered the philosophical expert within the Second International.⁷³

Lenin contra Plekhanov

The most important part of Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* are his notebooks which detail his 1914-1915 study of Hegel. Since these notes were not intended for publication, but rather for Lenin's personal use, they have a certain fragmentary character. However, already in the time of Hegel, the thoughts of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus existed only in the form of fragments; despite this, they have been noted for containing an inner coherence.⁷⁴ Likewise, Lenin's notes and comments are internally unified and, even though during his study he only made a handful of critical comments regarding Plekhanov, they too have an underlying logic. This directly relates to Lenin's theoretical repudiation of Plekhanov.

Lenin's first explicit criticism of Plekhanov appeared in the section "Book III (Subjective Logic or the Doctrine of the Notion)." There he wrote two "aphorisms" which concerned "the question of the criticism of modern Kantianism, Machism, etc.:"⁷⁵

1. Plekhanov criticises Kantianism (and agnosticism in general) more from a vulgar-materialistic standpoint than from a dialectical-materialistic standpoint, *insofar as* he merely *rejects* their views a limine, but does not *correct* them (as Hegel corrected Kant), deepening, generalising and extending them, showing the *connection* and *transitions* of each and every concept.
2. Marxists criticised (at the beginning of the twentieth century) the Kantians and Humists more in the manner of Feuerbach (and Büchner) than of Hegel.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Karl Kautsky, "Ein Brief über Marx und Mach," *Der Kampf: Sozialdemokratische Monatsschrift* 10 (1909): 452.

⁷¹ Karl Kautsky, *Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1909), 3.

⁷² Karl Kautsky, "Nature and Society," accessed 1 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1929/12/naturesoc.htm>.

⁷³ Baron, *Plekhanov*, 176-178.

⁷⁴ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 1: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 280-281; George Thomson, *Studies In Ancient Greek Society, Volume II: The First Philosophers* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955), 273; T.M. Robinson, *Heraclitus, Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 4.

⁷⁵ V.I. Lenin, "Conspectus of Hegel's book *The Science of Logic*," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 38: Philosophical Notebooks* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 179.

In the first aphorism Lenin was alluding to Plekhanov's philosophical battle with the revisionists. What is significant, though, is that he characterised the latter's approach in that fight viz. the very fight that helped build Plekhanov's reputation in the Second International, as not "dialectical-materialistic" but as "vulgar-materialistic." In the second aphorism, Lenin referred to both Kantians and Humists. With the latter term Lenin was indicating the Machists, as he had already classified Machism as a form of Humism back in 1909.⁷⁷ Further, he also mentioned Büchner, who was a vulgar materialist, and lumped him with Feuerbach.⁷⁸ Now, as E.V. Ilyenkov pointed out, the two Marxist protagonists who fought the Machists were precisely "Lenin and Plekhanov."⁷⁹ Therefore, it is clear that in the second aphorism Lenin was referring both to Plekhanov *and* himself i.e. he was describing his standpoint in that battle, as detailed in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, as far more vulgar materialist than dialectical. It could not be any other way since Lenin was a student of Plekhanov. However, as Plekhanov was criticised in both aphorisms, the conclusion is that he was at far greater fault because he was always the standard-bearer of "Marxist philosophy," but had been vulgar materialist since the early days of his revolutionary career and afterwards. Thus, Lenin was locating the limitations of Plekhanov's philosophy in a consistent lack of dialectical logic.

Shortly after writing the above-quoted aphorisms, Lenin added a third one which continued his emphasis on the importance of dialectics:

Aphorism: 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!!⁸⁰

On the face of it, Lenin's statement could be taken as an exaggeration. But, considering the amount of time he spent studying Hegel and, more immediately, in the light of his critique of Plekhanov, Lenin certainly meant what he wrote. Of course, such a brief maxim leaves little room for a fully developed and nuanced statement. Still, when Lenin argued that it "is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*," the implication was that it was still possible to gain some degree of understanding without studying "the *whole* of Hegel's *Logic*." Hence, when Lenin asserted that "half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!!" he should be taken to mean that no Marxist *fully* understood Marx. In regards to Plekhanov, we can only conclude that Lenin was arguing, so far, that Plekhanov, because he lacked dialectics, had never truly understood Marx. To be a Marxist, one must grasp dialectics.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Ibid., 179.

⁷⁷ V.I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1947), 105, 111.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 40.

⁷⁹ Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics*, 18.

⁸⁰ Lenin, "Conspectus of Hegel's book *The Science of Logic*," 180.

⁸¹ The notion that dialectics was a dividing line determining whether or not a standpoint could be described as Marxist was not a passing thought of Lenin's. That he continued to adhere to it is shown by his comments on Bukharin in his "Testament:" "Bukharin is not only a most valuable and major theorist of the Party; he is also rightly considered the favourite of the whole Party, but his theoretical views can be classified as fully Marxist only with

Lenin's next criticism of Plekhanov appeared in his "Conspectus of Hegel's Book *Lectures On the History of Philosophy*" in the section "Volume XIV. Volume II of *The History Of Philosophy*." There he jotted down a brief note for later elaboration:

Plekhanov wrote on philosophy (dialectics) probably about 1,000 pages (Beltov + against Bogdanov + against the Kantians + fundamental questions, etc., etc.). Among them, *about* the large Logic, *in connection with* it, *its* thought (i.e., dialectics *proper*, as philosophical science) nil!!⁸²

Of crucial importance is that fact that Lenin alluded to Plekhanov's most famous philosophical works.⁸³ These were writings which, as noted above, were cited in Bukharin's *Historical Materialism* as basic Marxist works. Lenin was arguing that while Plekhanov wrote an incredible amount about dialectics, he did not actually deal with dialectics at all, viz. there was only a superficial treatment of dialectics. Lenin, then, was repeating the criticism quoted above i.e. that over the course of his revolutionary career Plekhanov's work on philosophy lacked dialectics and hence was vulgar materialist in essence. This is further shown in that just before Lenin made this brief comment on Plekhanov's writings, he wrote what can be considered a new aphorism. He stated that "Intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism" and he then explained what he meant by the terms "intelligent" and "stupid:" "Dialectical idealism instead of intelligent; metaphysical, undeveloped, dead, crude, rigid instead of stupid."⁸⁴ Lenin's point was that dialectical idealism (Hegel) was closer to dialectical materialism (Marx) than rigid, i.e. vulgar/mechanical, materialism (pre-Marxist materialism: Feuerbach and Büchner). Thus, not only did Lenin understand dialectical materialism differently than Plekhanov, but he was also arguing that Hegel was closer to Marx than was Plekhanov, the so-called "father of Russian Marxism."

Lenin made his final critical comments on Plekhanov in his unfinished article "On the Question of Dialectics," which was written sometime in 1915. It appears that in this work Lenin sought to sum-up his study of Hegel; as such, it also contains his view on what the core meaning of dialectics consisted of. He began this piece by arguing that

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

great reserve, for there is something scholastic about him (he has never made a study of dialectics, and, I think, never fully understood it)." V.I. Lenin, "Letter to the Congress," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 36: 1900-1923* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 595.

⁸² V.I. Lenin, "Conspectus of Hegel's Book *Lectures On the History of Philosophy*," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 38: Philosophical Notebooks* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 274.

⁸³ In the footnote to this comment on Plekhanov, the Soviet editors pointed out that "Lenin is referring to the following philosophical works by Plekhanov: N. Beltov, *The Development of the Monist View of History*, published as a separate volume in 1895 in St. Petersburg (see *Selected Philosophical Works*, Vol. 1, Moscow, 1960, pp. 542-782); articles against Bogdanov appearing in Social-Democratic periodicals and published in the collection entitled "From Defence to Attack" (1910); articles against the Kantians E. Bernstein, C. Schmidt and others appearing in the journal *Die Neue Zeit* and published in the collection: N. Beltov, "Criticism of Our Critics," St. Petersburg, 1906; and "Fundamental Questions of Marxism," published as a separate volume in 1908 in St. Petersburg." *Ibid.*, 575.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 274.

Lassalle's book on Heraclitus*) is the *essence* (one of the 'essentials,' one of the principal, if not the principal, characteristics or features) of dialectics.⁸⁵

These lines add a greater specification to Lenin's running critique of Plekhanov viz. the latter's lack of dialectics consisted in not engaging with the essential point of dialectics; ergo, Plekhanov's stance could only result in one-sidedness. Therefore, Lenin went on to emphasise that

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).⁸⁶

Lenin here, so to speak, excused Engels because the absence of the essence of dialectics in certain of his works was a result of the goal of popularising Marxism. Lenin likely had in mind Engels' *Anti-Dühring* and his *Ludwig Feuerbach*. Yet it is an undoubted fact that most, if not all, of Plekhanov's writings were intended to popularise Marxist philosophy.⁸⁷ The definite conclusion is that the one-sidedness which existed in Engels's writings was merely incidental and secondary, while the one-sidedness in Plekhanov's writings was essential and primary. Lenin's estimation that a lack of dialectics was inherent in Plekhanov's philosophy further reinforces his charge that the latter always had the character of vulgar materialism and not Marxism.

Near the end of this piece Lenin made his final explicit criticism of Plekhanov's philosophical views. His last comment was not unconnected with his previous statements, but was a further concretisation of his overall critique:

Thus in *any* proposition we can (and must) disclose as in a 'nucleus' ('cell') the germs of *all* the elements of dialectics, and thereby show that dialectics is a property of all human knowledge in general...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.⁸⁸

Lenin here explained in greater detail the meaning of dialectics by stressing the fact that dialectics is simultaneously an aspect of "all human knowledge in general" and "the theory of knowledge" of Marxism. He then finished by noting that Plekhanov and "other Marxists" completely ignored this essential aspect of dialectics. So, as Lenin made his way through analysing the nature of the dialectic, investigating the matter from varying angles, he continued to find Plekhanov wanting i.e. to be undialectical. A major implication of identifying dialectics

⁸⁵ V.I. Lenin, "On the Question of Dialectics," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 38: Philosophical Notebooks* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 357.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 357.

⁸⁷ Baron, *Plekhanov*, 178.

⁸⁸ Lenin, "On the Question of Dialectics," 359-360.

with the theory of knowledge and the emphasis on Plekhanov's failing was brought out shortly after Lenin wrote the above.⁸⁹

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 *Bildtheorie*, to the process and development of knowledge.⁹⁰

In this attack on metaphysical i.e. vulgar materialism, Lenin was clearly not repudiating the theory of reflection. Rather he was highlighting that form of materialism's undialectical understanding of "the process and development of knowledge." By now it should be clear that Lenin had in mind here not merely pre-Marxian materialism, but, above all, Plekhanov. This was because Plekhanov was a vulgar materialist, and as a result, he adhered to a form of sensationalism.⁹¹ Plekhanov's sensationalism and its implications will be analysed in greater detail later on.

In making the above analysis of Lenin's critique of Plekhanov, as found in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, I am not endorsing the position of Raya Dunayevskaya. While she was correct to point out that Lenin broke with Plekhanov, she also argued that Lenin was not merely critical of his work *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, but that he essentially repudiated it and "gained from Hegel a totally new understanding of the *unity* of materialism and idealism."⁹² Thus she spoke of "Lenin's totally new departure in philosophy in 1914 from the vulgarly materialistic photocopy theory he had elaborated in his 1908 publication, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, toward an exaltation of the self-development of thought."⁹³ However, as the quotation from Lenin given above shows, he did not reject the theory of reflection

⁸⁹ "If Marx did not leave behind him a '*Logic*' (with a capital letter), he did leave the *logic* of *Capital*, and this ought to be utilised to the full in this question. In *Capital*, Marx applied to a single science logic, dialectics and the theory of knowledge of materialism [three words are not needed: it is one and the same thing] which has taken everything valuable in Hegel and developed it further." V.I. Lenin, "Plan of Hegel's Dialectics (Logic)," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 38: Philosophical Notebooks* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 317.

⁹⁰ V.I. Lenin, "On the Question of Dialectics," 360.

⁹¹ "Sensationalism, a doctrine in epistemology which considers sensations the sole source of knowledge. If sensations are regarded as a reflection of objective reality, consistent sensationalism under certain conditions leads to materialism (Holbach, Helvétius, Feuerbach)." M. Rosenthal and P. Yudin, eds., *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967), 406; "It is also not true that the world is cognised in our sensations. In sensations the external world is only *given* to us, just as it is given to a dog. It is *cognised* not in sensations, but in the activity of thought, the science of which is logic (which is after all, according to Lenin, the theory of knowledge of contemporary materialism)." Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics*, 29.

⁹² Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy & Revolution: From Hegel to Sartre, and from Marx to Mao* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), 103; "In philosophy the 'party of the golden mean' is the 'party of the brainless', who try to unite materialism with idealism in an eclectic way, by means of smoothing out the basic contradictions, and by means of muddling the most general (abstract, 'cellule') and clear concepts." Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics*, 27.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 100-101; Earlier she spoke of "the duality of Lenin's philosophic legacy – between the vulgarly materialistic *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and the creative dialectics of his *Philosophic Notebooks*." Raya Dunayevskaya, "Marx's Humanism Today," in *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*, ed. Erich Fromm (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 76.

(Bildtheorie), but rather vulgar materialism's understanding of that theory. That the reflection theory as presented in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, at certain points takes a vulgar materialist form of sensationalism is true.⁹⁴ But, that is not true for the entire book; nor does the whole work deal only with epistemology. So Lenin was, to an extent, critical of his work; yet certainly not to the point of disowning it.⁹⁵ Also, at no point did Lenin speak of a "unity of materialism and idealism." That phrase is one that Dunayevskaya coined herself and which she based off of a brief passage in Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* viz. a Young Hegelian work.⁹⁶ It was no accident that Dunayevskaya completely ignored an engagement with the *German Ideology*, which was fulsome in its attacks on idealism.⁹⁷

In opposition to Dunayevskaya and other critics, the eminent Soviet philosopher E.V. Ilyenkov was correct when he stressed the basic continuity between Lenin's two major philosophic writings.⁹⁸ In his last work, written before his tragic suicide, Ilyenkov pointed out that Lenin

turned to a special, critical investigation of Hegelian dialectics later. This is true. But it was by no means in the *Philosophical Notebooks* that he first studied and became familiar with it. As a mature Marxist he had already read Hegel's *Logic* and *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*; here, in the course of a critical analysis of them he had simply sharpened, polished and refined the details of the formulas of his understanding of dialectics, which had already been developed and tested in the fires of practice.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, 86, 108, 144, 274.

⁹⁵ This explains why Lenin had his book republished in 1920, when he argued that "it will prove useful as an aid to an acquaintance with the philosophy of Marxism, dialectical materialism." Ibid., 11.

⁹⁶ "Here we see how consistent naturalism or humanism is distinct from both idealism and materialism, and constitutes at the same time the unifying truth of both." Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981), 136.

⁹⁷ This, in the words of Dunayevskaya, "failure to come to grips" with the *German Ideology* also extends to, and weakens, the otherwise enlightening and informative book written by her student Kevin Anderson on Lenin's study of Hegel. See Kevin Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

⁹⁸ "Thus the French revisionist philosopher Roger Garaudy... in his booklet *Lenin* condescendingly acknowledges the services of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* in presenting the fundamentals of materialism in general, which are neither characteristic of Marxist materialism nor related in any way to dialectics; this, he says, is 'kindergarten materialism' and nothing more. Lenin supposedly first became interested in dialectics only later – at the time of the *Philosophical Notebooks*. The same thing was confirmed by still another representative of philosophical revisionism – Gayo Petrovic from 'Praxis', who added that the study of Hegel's works forced Lenin to introduce substantial corrections in his characterisation of materialism, idealism and dialectics, forced him to seriously limit the activity of the principle of reflection (such is the way that he explains Lenin's sentence: 'man's consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but also creates it'), etc., etc. This statement already represents a direct lie with regard not only to Lenin's understanding of materialism, but also to Lenin's understanding of dialectics." Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics*, 3. Even earlier, in 1938, Karl Korsch tried to drive a wedge between *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and the *Philosophical Notebooks*. See, Karl Korsch, "Lenin's Philosophy," accessed 3 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoe/1938/lenin/app-korsch.htm>. In light of Ilyenkov's comments, it was no accident that Dunayevskaya's piece on Lenin's Hegel notebooks appeared in *Praxis* in 1970. See, Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy & Revolution*, 312.

⁹⁹ Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics*, 23; According to Krupskaya during the period of Lenin's first exile he "usually read books on philosophy – Hegel, Kant or the French materialists – and when he grew very tired, Pushkin, Lermontov or Nekrasov." See, Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, 40. "Hence Ilyenkov argued that Lenin "had perfectly well

Materialism and Empirio-Criticism was Lenin's first major foray into the theoretical foundations of Marxism. He had previously written about dialectics, materialism, class struggle, value, and many other questions of theory, but these were always as a part of larger, more practical-oriented projects. Therefore it should come as no surprise that some of Lenin's formulations in that book would be more Plekhanovian than Leninist. Most students do not separate themselves from their teachers overnight. Further, how easy it is to compare the late and early works of an author and, as a result, to magnify the obvious differences. It is far more difficult, and important, to look for the continuity, for the temporal coherence in their oeuvre.¹⁰⁰

As mentioned above, Lenin did not publish his study of Hegel. The notebooks were only released years after his death. Thus, those Bolshevik leaders who saw themselves as his students only had the chance to read this crucial text years after his death. It took even longer for the books to be mass produced for public consumption, not to speak of translation into foreign languages and global distribution. For most communists then, the discrepancy between the public and the private Lenin on the question of Plekhanov, and its implications for an understanding of dialectical materialism, did not exist. However, it is my contention that the private Lenin was right as opposed to the public Lenin. Regardless of the reasons which impelled him to promote Plekhanov as a source of wisdom on questions of Marxist theory, the fact is that it is Lenin's writings and not those of Plekhanov, which need to be studied if one would "hope to become a *real*, intelligent Communist." Just as Plekhanov wrote of Dietzgen, so we can say of him that one should read the former "*only after the most careful study*" of Marx and Engels because it "will then be easier to see how he *approximates* in his teaching to the founders of scientific socialism, and where he has to *yield ground* to them, *lags behind* them. Otherwise" he "will give the reader, together with not unimportant and not uninteresting, *but in no way new*, details, much and harmful confusion."¹⁰¹

Plekhanov's dialectical materialism

Plekhanov's *Socialism and the Political Struggle* (1883), as previously noted, was described as the first work of Russian Marxian socialism, the initial "Marxist work" in his revolutionary career. It is also the first piece of writing in Plekhanov's *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 1*. Here, therefore, one will find, in embryo, the basic outlook which would characterise Plekhanov's neo-Young Hegelian understanding of Marxism. The basic political conclusions which flowed from that philosophy, and which continued to be maintained by Russian social-democracy for decades to come, are also here first enunciated. Lenin was, consequently, correct to refer to this work as the equivalent of the *Manifesto of the Communist*

grasped the essence of Hegelian dialectics even earlier. We know that while he was at Shushenskoe he became familiar with the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a work where this essence comes through the text much more clearly, vividly and concretely than in the texts of the *Science of Logic* or the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*." See, Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics*, 23-24.

¹⁰⁰ "An unapparent connection is stronger than an apparent one." Heraclitus, "Fragment 47," in *A Presocratic Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*, ed. Patricia Curd and tran. Richard D. McKirahan Jr. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 34.

¹⁰¹ Georgi Plekhanov, "Joseph Dietzgen," accessed 3 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1907/dietzgen.htm>.

Party, for the Russian revolutionary movement. It was here, in the polemics with his erstwhile anarchist and Narodnik comrades, that Plekhanov began to develop his dialectical materialism.

This work of Plekhanov's was primarily aimed at vindicating the necessity for political struggle as against abstentionism, and secondarily, against Russian exceptionalism. As a sign of his fealty to the Marxian brand of socialism, Plekhanov noted in his preface that "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves."¹⁰² Notwithstanding this formal avowal though, he contradicted it substantively throughout this work. Plekhanov criticised the anarchists because they "not only deny any deal with the modern state, they go so far as to exclude from their notions of 'future society' anything that recalls the idea of state in one way or another" and, as a result "The anarchist denies the creative role of the state in the socialist revolution for the very reason that he does not understand the tasks and the conditions of that revolution."¹⁰³ First, Plekhanov made no distinction as to what type of state he meant; simply the "state" in general is mentioned. Yet this is an ahistorical abstraction at best, for every state is essentially a class state.¹⁰⁴ Second, it ignored what Marx had written in *The Civil War in France* (1871) and which was repeated in the 1872 preface to the *Manifesto* viz. "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes."¹⁰⁵ Of course, Marx later stated that

Between capitalist and communist society there lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. There corresponds to this also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*.¹⁰⁶

However, as Marx was talking of a transitional period, he was also speaking about at time when the state would cease to be the state as such. It would no longer be a special detachment of armed men, but the armed and organised proletariat itself; in the words of Engels it would be the "self-

¹⁰² Georgi Plekhanov, "Socialism and the Political Struggle," in G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 1* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1961), 57.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 64, 67.

¹⁰⁴ "As the state arose from the need to keep class antagonisms in check, but as it arose, at the same time, in the midst of the conflict of these classes, it is, as a rule, the state of the most powerful, economically dominant class, which, through the medium of the state, becomes also the politically dominant class, and thus acquires new means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class. Thus, the state of antiquity was above all the state of the slave owners for the purpose of holding down the slaves, as the feudal state was the organ of the nobility for holding down the peasant serfs and bondsmen, and the modern representative state is an instrument of exploitation of wage labor by capital." F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), 280-281.

¹⁰⁵ Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1970), 64; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Preface to the German Edition of 1872," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 32; Marx had noted in his first draft of his *Civil War* that the Paris Commune "was, therefore, a Revolution not against this or that, legitimate, constitutional, republican or Imperialist form of State power. It was a revolution against the *State* itself, of this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people of its own social life. It was not a revolution to transfer it from one fraction of the ruling classes to the other, but a Revolution to break down this horrid machinery of Class-domination itself." This was not published until 1933 and hence Plekhanov could not have seen it, but the same idea was expressed in the published writings Marx and Engels. See, Marx, *The Civil War*, 166, 276-277.

¹⁰⁶ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972), 27-28.

acting armed organization of the population.”¹⁰⁷ The significance of all this is that Plekhanov’s emphasis here, regarding the question of revolution, was on the role of the state and not on that of the working class viz. as opposed to Marx and Engels, his focus was on an impersonal power and not working-class agency. This, then, is the pattern that will be recapitulated over and over again, not just throughout this work, but over his entire career: notwithstanding his formal recognition of the radical activity of the working class, Plekhanov will substantively and consistently portray and treat the working class not as subject, but as object. On the surface, Plekhanov’s thinking appeared to be Marxist, but further analysis will show that, in essence, it was vulgar, crude i.e. mechanical materialist.

For Plekhanov, the power of Marxism was that it teaches revolutionaries the path which society must take and which they must learn if they would submit themselves to it and not fly in the realm of fantasy:

History pays as little attention to the fears of revolutionaries as to the jeremiads of reaction. ‘Economic progress’ does its work without waiting for the anarchists or the Blanquists to put their intentions into practice. Every factory founded in Petersburg, every new wage-worker employed by a Yaroslavl handicraftsman strengthens the ‘flame of progress’ ...In order to make themselves revolutionary in substance and not in name alone, the Russian anarchists, Narodniks and Blanquists should first of all have revolutionised their own heads, and to do so they should have learned to understand the course of historical development and been able to lead it instead of asking old mother history to mark time while they laid new, straighter and better beaten roads for her.¹⁰⁸

This is Plekhanov’s first intimation of his neo-Young Hegelian view of history as an inevitable force.¹⁰⁹ The context of his comments was that he was polemicising against his opponents’ Russian exceptionalism. That is to say, Plekhanov was asserting that capitalist development was already underway in Russia, and, furthermore, inexorable. The basic reason for this development was the “productive forces” and not the activity of the different classes, for the basic reason that the former occurs independently of human will. Thus we can see that Plekhanov had an evolutionary/fatalist view of social dynamics from the very beginning and this was a direct result of his mechanical materialist outlook viz. it was the activity of some outside force which impelled humanity forward. Lest it be thought that this was merely poor wording on Plekhanov’s part, especially as this was his first “Marxist work,” this aspect of his philosophy, since it flowed from his crude materialism, was likewise reiterated in all his later works.

¹⁰⁷ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 278.

¹⁰⁸ Plekhanov, “Socialism and the Political Struggle,” 69-70.

¹⁰⁹ As opposed to Bruno Bauer and other Young Hegelians, Engels wrote that: “Once man is recognised as the essence, the basis of all human activity and situations, only ‘*Criticism*’ can invent *new categories* and transform *man* himself into a category and into the principle of a whole series of categories, as it is doing now. It is true that in so doing it takes the only road to salvation that has remained for frightened and persecuted *theological* inhumanity. *History* does *nothing*, it ‘possesses *no* immense wealth’, it ‘wages *no* battles’. It is *man*, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; ‘history’ is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve *its own* aims; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims.” Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism: Against Bruno Bauer, and Company* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1980), 116.

This writing of Plekhanov also provides insight into his understanding of the origins and nature of Marxism. For example, he posed the question “what is scientific socialism?” and he answered that “Under that name we understand the communist teaching which began to take shape at the beginning of the forties out of utopian socialism under the strong influence of Hegelian philosophy on the one side, and of classical economics on the other.”¹¹⁰ This is an obvious reference to *Anti-Dühring*, where Engels divided that work into three main parts: philosophy, political economy, and socialism.¹¹¹ However, that book was written solely to refute the philosopher Eugen Dühring. As Engels reported in his preface to the first edition (1878):

The new socialist theory was presented as the ultimate practical fruit of a new philosophical system. It was therefore necessary to examine it in the context of this system, and in doing so to examine the system itself; it was necessary to follow Herr Dühring into that vast territory in which he dealt with all things under the sun and with some others as well.¹¹²

And he repeated this point in the same preface: “It was not my fault that I had to follow Herr Dühring into realms where at best I can only claim to be a dilettante.”¹¹³ Hence the organisational format of the work was determined by the need to attack Dühring wherever he went and was not an intentional plan to describe the main pillars of Marxism.¹¹⁴ Here Plekhanov took a negative, accidental aspect for the positive essence of the matter. This is important to note because Plekhanov’s loose popular formulation of the origins of Marxism was not taken from any explicit statement made by Engels. Rather it was a result of Plekhanov’s *own personal reading* viz. he projected a meaning upon the text that simply was not there. Indeed, the actual intellectual course of Marx was far more complex and Plekhanov’s claims could only lead to confusion at worst and simplistic platitudes at best.

However, this is related to two more serious matters. The first is that this would not be the last instance of Plekhanov imposing his own understanding of Marxism on the texts of its founders; in fact, as we will discuss later on, he would go so far as to play fast and loose with quotations in order to buttress *his* arguments. Second, a part of this approach included Plekhanov actively ignoring what was explicitly written. As previously mentioned, in his conception Marxism was, contrary to the explicit views of its founders, a philosophical system. Yet, as Engels wrote in the preface cited above “this work cannot in any way aim at presenting another

¹¹⁰ Plekhanov, “Socialism and the Political Struggle,” 76.

¹¹¹ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 5.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹⁴ Plekhanov’s formulation was clearly the source of Lenin’s later 1913 declaration that Marx’s “teaching came as a direct and immediate *continuation* of the teaching of the greatest representatives of philosophy, political economy and socialism...It is the lawful successor to the best that has been created by humanity in the nineteenth century - German philosophy, English political economy and French socialism.” See, V.I. Lenin, “The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism,” in Karl Marx, *Selected Works, Volume 1* (New York: International Publishers, 1933), 54-55.

system as an alternative to Herr Dühring's 'system'.¹¹⁵ These arguments by Engels were repeated in the preface to the second edition of *Anti-Dühring* (1885):

The 'system' of Herr Dühring which is criticised in this book ranges over a very wide theoretical domain; and I was compelled to follow him wherever he went and to oppose my conceptions to his. As a result, my negative criticism became positive, the polemic was transformed into a more or less connected exposition of the dialectical method and of the communist world outlook championed by Marx and myself.¹¹⁶

So, Engels did not oppose to Dühring's "system" another system. Rather, he not only reiterated what he had previously stated, but he also made his argument more specific viz. what he did oppose to Dühring's "system" was the method and outlook of Marx and himself. Engels was even more direct about this question in the text of *Anti-Dühring*:

If we deduce world schematism not from our minds, but only *through* our minds from the real world, if we deduce principles of being from what is, we need no philosophy for this purpose, but positive knowledge of the world and of what happens in it; and what this yields is also not philosophy, but positive science... Further: if no philosophy as such is any longer required, then also there is no more need of any system, not even of any natural system of philosophy.¹¹⁷

Marx and Engels were against building a system because that had always been the heart of Hegel's philosophy.¹¹⁸ It was also a reason why Young Hegelianism could not free itself from the illusions of Hegelianism and hence why it disintegrated.¹¹⁹ In breaking with philosophy, and hence ideology, Marx and Engels discarded the goal of system building which was intrinsic to the former. This was a position which Marx and Engels always held. So, in reviewing Marx's theoretical revolution, Engels stated in his 1859 review of Marx's *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* that the "essential foundation of this German political economy is the

¹¹⁵ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 10.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

¹¹⁸ "On the other hand, where the Idea of philosophy is actually present, there it is the concern of criticism to interpret the way and the degree in which it emerges free and clear, and the range within which it has been elaborated into a scientific system of philosophy." G.W.F. Hegel and Friedrich Schelling, "The Critical Journal of Philosophy: Introduction on The Essence of Philosophical Criticism Generally, and its Relationship to the Present State of Philosophy in Particular," accessed 16 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/cj/introduction.htm>; "Science can become an organic system only by the inherent life of the notion." G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, tran. J.B. Baillie (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), 111; "However, knowledge of the absolutely Absolute – for those sciences are to come to know their special contents equally in their truth, i.e., in their absoluteness – is only possible through knowledge of a totality forming in its stages a system. And those sciences are its stages. Aversion to a system makes one think of a statue of a god who is supposed to have no form. Unsystematic philosophy is accidental, fragmentary thinking, and its direct consequence is a rigid attitude to true content." G.W.F. Hegel, "Hegel to Niethammer," in G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 279; "Unless it is a system, a philosophy is not a scientific production. Unsystematic philosophising can only be expected to give expression to personal peculiarities of mind, and has no principle for the regulation of its contents." G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Logic: Being Part One of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, tran. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 20.

¹¹⁹ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 34-35, 64.

materialist conception of history whose principal features are briefly outlined in the ‘Preface’ to the above-named work.”¹²⁰ And he further underlined the fact that

Marx was and is the only one who could undertake the work of extracting from the Hegelian logic the nucleus containing Hegel’s real discoveries in this field, and of establishing the dialectical method, divested of its idealist wrappings, in the simple form in which it becomes the only correct mode of conceptual evolution. The working out of the method which underlies Marx’s critique of political economy is, we think, a result hardly less significant than the basic materialist conception.¹²¹

This same argument, then, was replicated decades later in *Anti-Dühring* i.e. it was not a proclamation of any new system, but, instead, the highlighting of a new method and outlook.¹²² Although Plekhanov never had access to *The German Ideology*, the aversion of Marx and Engels to constructing a new system could easily be read from their works which were published in their lifetime. That Plekhanov would argue otherwise than Marx and Engels regarding their *own work*, means that either he did not understand what he was reading or choose to disregard it.

After Plekhanov gave his brief definition of scientific socialism, he went on to make a comparison which would be a continual theme for him and which further helps explain his conception of Marxism:

As Darwin enriched biology with his amazingly simple and yet strictly scientific theory of the origin of species, so also the founders of scientific socialism showed us in the development of the productive forces and their struggle against backward ‘social conditions of production’ the great principle of the variation of *species of social organization*.¹²³

Plekhanov’s comparison between the theory of Darwin on the one hand and the theory of Marx and Engels on the other hand, would, in later years, grow into making a full equivalence between Darwinism and Marxism. This shows his evolutionary understanding of Marxism; or, in other words, his reading of Marx and Engels through the lens of Darwin.¹²⁴ The other issue is that there was, yet again, no mention of human activity. Plekhanov argued that the mechanism by which societies are varied i.e. change, is the struggle between the productive forces and the relations of production. Yet, as Marx and Engels argued in the first line of the first chapter of the *Manifesto*: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”¹²⁵ The

¹²⁰ Frederick Engels, “Karl Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy’ Part One, Franz Duncker, Berlin, 1859,” in Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 219-220.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 224-225.

¹²² This proves Lenin’s point, already cited, that “In *Capital*, Marx applied to a single science logic, dialectics and the theory of knowledge of materialism [three words are not needed: it is one and the same thing] which has taken everything valuable in Hegel and developed it further.” Lenin, “Plan of Hegel’s Dialectics (Logic),” 317.

¹²³ Plekhanov, “Socialism and the Political Struggle,” 76.

¹²⁴ It is no mere coincidence that after discussing this comparison, Plekhanov went to quote almost the whole of Marx’s preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, i.e. exactly that piece of Marx’s writing which can most easily be read in an evolutionary manner. See, *ibid.*, 77-78.

¹²⁵ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 12.

distinction I am making here may seem overly subtle, but it is absolutely crucial. First, Marx had written that “the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production.”¹²⁶ To take this statement and then speak of productive forces carrying on a “struggle” against the relations of production is to employ not only personification, but to go further and engage in outright anthropomorphism. When a brick falls off a building and comes into conflict with a person’s skull, it is not thereby participating in a struggle. The only thing struggling is the person to survive the blow they received. To talk of a clash between the forces and relations of production and yet leave out the class struggle means to read Marxism mechanistically. It is to see history as a machine with those two entities fighting each other as the key mechanism and hence to reduce the role of humans to that of a mere cog.

Plekhanov also revealed in this work that he already had a formal grasp of dialectics; however, these were not specifically Marxian as opposed to Hegelian. In analysing the relations between economics and politics he argued that “History is the greatest of dialecticians” and hence if “in the course of its progress, reason, as Mephistopheles says, is changed into irrationality and blessings become a plague, not less often in the historical process does an effect become a cause and a cause prove to be an effect.”¹²⁷ Although there are dialectics of history, history is not a dialectician because, as we know, “History does nothing.” Still, the idea of opposites passing into each other is originally a Hegelian law, not a Marxist one.¹²⁸ Now, in the context of his analysis, it could appear that Plekhanov was applying Marx’s method to society. However, Plekhanov went onto make a determinist argument that the

working class is becoming poorer not only relatively, but absolutely too; its income, far from increasing in the same progression as those of other classes in society, is falling; the real wages of the modern proletariat (the quantity of consumer goods falling to his share) are less than the worker’s pay was five hundred years ago.¹²⁹

For Plekhanov, the course of economic development automatically led to the increasing poverty of the workers. Yet, Marx never held a theory of absolute pauperisation. Nor did he argue that workers’ wages would fall absolutely. In his view, the class struggle was the key component. It was the

continuous struggle between capital and labour, the capitalist constantly tending to reduce wages to their physical minimum, and to extend the working day to its physical

¹²⁶ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique*, 21.

¹²⁷ Plekhanov, “Socialism and the Political Struggle,” 85.

¹²⁸ “Positive and negative are supposed to express an absolute difference. The two however are at bottom the same: the name of either might be transferred to the other. Thus, for example, debts and assets are not two particular, self-subsisting species of property. What is negative to the debtor is positive to the creditor. A way to the east is also a way to the west. Positive and negative are therefore intrinsically conditioned by one another, and are only in relation to each other. The north pole of the magnet cannot be without the south pole, and vice versa. If we cut a magnet in two, we have not a north pole in one piece, and a south pole in the other. Similar, in electricity, the positive and the negative are not two diverse and independent fluids... Instead of speaking by the maxim of Excluded Middle (which is the maxim of abstract understanding) we should rather say: Everything is opposite. Neither in heaven nor in Earth, neither in the world of mind nor of nature, is there anywhere such an abstract ‘either-or’ as the understanding maintains.” Hegel, *Hegel’s Logic*, 173-174.

¹²⁹ Plekhanov, “Socialism and the Political Struggle,” 93.

maximum, while the working man constantly presses in the opposite direction. The question resolves itself into a question of the respective powers of the combatants.¹³⁰

Marx repeated this view two years later in *Capital*. There he pointed out that a rise in productivity would lead to a decrease in the value of labour power; but, whether this would translate into a drop in the price of labour power i.e. wages “depends on the relative weight, which the pressure of capital on the one side, and the resistance of the labourer on the other, throws into the scale.”¹³¹ Just as Hegel’s dialectical method terminated in an undialectical system, so Plekhanov’s “dialectics” led to an undialectical view of social dynamics.

Since Plekhanov conceived of economic changes as an automatic, mechanical motion, this naturally determined his position on the perspectives for socialism in Russia. Therefore, in his opinion, “we must admit that we by no means believe in the early possibility of a socialist government in Russia.”¹³² A reader might immediately deduce from this that Plekhanov was implying that the next revolution was to be a capitalist revolution. In case this be thought too hasty a conclusion, Plekhanov argued in more detail that

The socialist organization of production implies such a character of the economic relations as will make that organisation the logical conclusion of the entire previous development of the country and is therefore distinguished by an extremely significant definiteness. In other words, socialist organization, like any other, requires the appropriate basis. But that basis does not exist in Russia. The old foundations of national life are too narrow, heterogeneous and one-sided, and moreover too shaky, and new ones are as yet only being formed. The objective social conditions of production necessary for socialist organization have not yet matured.¹³³

What is outlined here was the basic contours of a stagist or two-stage conception of revolution. Economic development has a basic inevitable logic which takes a single path, one with different phases which cannot be skipped, leaped, jumped, or telescoped. Socialism and hence socialist revolution, cannot happen because economic developments have not made it a logical necessity. Therefore Plekhanov explicitly argued that

the struggle for political freedom, on the one hand, and the preparation of the working class for its future independent and offensive role, on the other, such, in our opinion, is the only possible ‘setting of party tasks’ at present. To bind together in one two so fundamentally different matters as the overthrow of absolutism and the socialist revolution, to wage revolutionary struggle in the belief that these elements of social development will *coincide* in the history of our country *means to put off the advent of both*.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Karl Marx, *Wage-Labour and Capital & Value, Price and Profit* (New York: International Publishers, 1997), 58.

¹³¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I Book One: The Process of Production of Capital* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1983), 489.

¹³² Plekhanov, “Socialism and the Political Struggle,” 111.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

Despite the fact that Plekhanov recognised that neither Marx nor Engels in their exchanges with Russian revolutionaries argued that capitalism was an inescapable fate, but rather argued that an alternative road of development could be possible under certain conditions, Plekhanov clearly thought that he was correct and they were wrong; or, again, he simply misunderstood them.¹³⁵ Not only did this make Plekhanov the father of stagism, but the stagist argument is literally what he would say twenty two years later during the 1905 revolution and would continue to say in regard to the 1917 revolution. This all resulted from his dialectical materialism viz. his vulgar materialist understanding of Marxist philosophy.¹³⁶ This is very same philosophy and basic conception of revolution that both the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks adopted, the latter until Lenin's break.¹³⁷

Just as Plekhanov's conception of revolution was the result of his basic philosophical position, so his ideas regarding the tasks of revolutionaries, in turn, followed from his understanding of revolution. According to him "Russian revolutionaries must adopt the standpoint of Western Social-Democracy."¹³⁸ Plekhanov, then, in this first Russian "Marxist" work set up the latter as *the* model, and that meant first and foremost the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Whether or not Plekhanov understood that standpoint is a question beyond the scope of this study; more importantly, he was the first to place the SPD in the position of an ideal for the Russian revolutionary movement to attain. That primarily meant organising a party, or in this early period, laying the foundations for such a party. One of the necessary elements for that project was revolutionary theory and so Plekhanov argued that "without revolutionary theory there is no revolutionary movement in the true sense of the word."¹³⁹ This argument was later to be repeated, literally, by Lenin.¹⁴⁰ The party, then, was to be the bearer and promoter of revolutionary theory.

Above I cited Plekhanov's formal adherence to the necessary role of the working class in the revolution i.e. its role as self-emancipator. However, because of his philosophical outlook, Plekhanov consistently treated the working class as an object. Thus, in regard to the questions of

¹³⁵ Ibid., 79-80.

¹³⁶ Plekhanov as this time, it is true, did not yet employ the term "dialectical materialism." That he only did in 1891. Still, the main point is that it was the philosophy he developed at this time and subsequently did not change in its essentials. Ilyenkov spoke of "tendencies toward a dogmatic ossification of Marxist thought which became distinct among the theoreticians of the Second International (particularly among Plekhanov and his disciples)," but that tendency was alive and well in Plekhanov from the very beginning. See, Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics*, 155.

¹³⁷ Thus Lenin argued that "Only the most ignorant people can ignore the bourgeois character of the present democratic revolution" and, in line with Plekhanov's argument that the proletariat must lead the revolution, this perspective and "the concept of the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry...logically follows from the Marxian philosophy and from our programme." Certainly, Lenin was arguing against Menshevik political tactics, but his point was that they had turned their backs on that basic conception and philosophy. See, V.I. Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 19, 85.

¹³⁸ Plekhanov, "Socialism and the Political Struggle," 102.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 103.

¹⁴⁰ I refer here to Lenin's famous quote from *What Is To Be Done?*, "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement." This was not a specifically "Leninist" maxim, but only a student quoting his teacher almost twenty years after the fact. It shows how much modern "Leninists" are utterly ignorant of the Plekhanovian roots of their views when they repeat Lenin *ad nauseam* and ignore who actually wrote what first. See, V.I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?: Burning Questions of Our Movement* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978), 25.

the party and theory, it was the intelligentsia who was put in the role of active subject *vis-à-vis* the working class. Indeed, since, according to Plekhanov, the workers were not yet ready for the struggle, it was up to the intelligentsia to lead the fight:

The present position of bourgeois societies and the influence of international relations on the social development of each civilised country entitle us to hope that the social emancipation of the Russian working class will follow very quickly upon the fall of absolutism. If the German bourgeoisie “*came too late*”, the Russian has come still later, and its domination cannot be a long one. Only the Russian revolutionaries should not, in their turn, begin ‘too late’ the preparation of the working class, a matter which has now become of absolute urgency.¹⁴¹

Consequently, it was not a matter, in line with self-emancipation, of working-class self-preparation, nor of revolutionaries i.e. the radical intelligentsia, aiding workers in their self-preparation, but *they themselves* were to prepare the workers. The tasks of the revolution, then, were the tasks of the intelligentsia:

The strength of the working class – as of any other class – depends, among other things, on the clarity of its political consciousness, its cohesion and its degree of organization. It is these elements of its strength that must be influenced by our socialist intelligentsia. The latter must become the leader of the working class in the impending emancipation movement, explain to it its political and economic interests and also the interdependence of those interests and must prepare it to play an independent role in the social life of Russia. They must exert all their energy so that in the very opening period of the constitutional life of Russia our working class will be able to come forward as a separate party with a definite social and political programme.¹⁴²

In this plan for revolution the intelligentsia was the teacher and the proletariat was the student. If the working class was unprepared then that meant that it was lacking in “clarity of its political consciousness, its cohesion and its degree of organization.” Ergo, it was up to the intelligentsia to clarify the workers’ consciousness, to bring it together and organise it.¹⁴³ Now, the whole purpose of education, and even more so of Marxist pedagogy, is empowerment, self-determination. To be more specific, the goal is to aid the student in developing their agency as conscious, active subjects. The means for this can only be via the practical self-activity of the student, so that the teacher-student relationship is revolutionised.¹⁴⁴ In the words of Paulo Freire,

¹⁴¹ Plekhanov, “Socialism and the Political Struggle,” 119-120.

¹⁴² Ibid., 117-118. Plekhanov was so wedded to western Social Democracy as *the* model to be copied, and hence to stagism, that he did not think the formation of a workers’ party would even be truly possible until the victory of the upcoming bourgeois-democratic revolution: “The industrial workers, who are more developed and have higher requirements and a broader outlook than the peasantry, will join our revolutionary intelligentsia in its struggle against absolutism, and when they have won political freedom they will organize into a workers’ socialist party whose task will be to begin systematic propaganda of socialism among the peasantry.” See, *ibid.*, 121.

¹⁴³ Paulo Freire insightfully described this consistent placing of the student in the role of a receptacle which receives the influence of the higher, guiding authority as “the banking concept of education.” See, Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 72.

¹⁴⁴ “But, after all, serious, materialistic philosophy has for a long time suggested that teaching adopt another, more radical guiding principle. This is the organization of a special form of activity that really requires – and therefore

“Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students.”¹⁴⁵ However, regardless of Plekhanov’s subjective intentions, the logic of his perspectives is that the working class would never become a subject; it would always be in the position of an object under the power of, and set in motion by, a subject not itself: whether that of the intelligentsia, or, ultimately, History and its laws.¹⁴⁶

Although I have so far examined Plekhanov’s philosophy only with reference to his first work, it was in that pamphlet where he presented the germ of his dialectical materialism, and which he would further develop in his later works. He was an extensive and prolific writer, carrying his analysis into different fields and added more details to this early picture. Still, even with the addition of new elements, Plekhanov’s core positions did not change; they remained in essentials. The remainder of this study will explore these key themes as they appeared over the course of Plekhanov’s life. I will turn first to Plekhanov’s understanding of dialectics and then to his view of Marxism as a unitary system. This will then be followed by his basic mechanical materialist philosophy and its implications for how he understood capitalism in Russia and the nature of human thought. I will conclude this investigation with an analysis of Plekhanov’s other determinisms: geographical, biological, and technological.

Hegel, in the preface to his *Phenomenology*, wrote that “the method is nothing else than the structure of the whole in its pure and essential form.”¹⁴⁷ There he was referring to the generative principle which gives life to the system of philosophy. Certainly, it is exactly the method which lies at the heart of any body of thought. This was true as well for Plekhanov. The origin of his outlook, and all that followed from it, resided in his grasp of dialectics. The question that must be answered though is, whose dialectical method was Plekhanov employing? Or, in other words, what was the source of this method? Further, how did he conceive of that method?

In Plekhanov’s second major work, his first “Marxist” book, *Our Differences* (1885), he gave an early explication of dialectics. This occurred in the course of polemics against a Narodnik opponent on the question of the inevitability of capitalism in Russia. Plekhanov first

develops – the special abilities that are more fundamental for the human psyche than speech (language) or the mechanisms of speech that connect the word with the image. Traditional ‘learning’ activity is clearly not of this kind – it reduces to the process of assimilating ready-made knowledge, ready-made information, and ready-made conceptions, i.e. it is realized as the activity of the embodying of ready-made images in language and – inversely – of the ‘visualization’ of verbally formed conceptions. Here, what is needed is activity of a different order – activity oriented directly at the object. Activity that changes the object, rather than an image of it. For only in the course of this activity does the image first arise, i.e. as a visual representation of the object, rather than as a ‘schema’ given a priori by a verbal instruction or ‘rule’.” E.V. Ilyenkov, “Activity and Knowledge,” accessed 15 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ilyenkov/works/activity/index.htm>.

¹⁴⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72.

¹⁴⁶ Compare Plekhanov’s neo-Young Hegelian, bourgeois-democratic idea of the dynamics of revolution to that of Rosa Luxemburg’s Marxist, proletarian idea of the same: “In the earlier bourgeois revolution... the political training and the leadership of the revolutionary masses were undertaken by the bourgeois parties... Today the working class must educate itself, marshal its forces, and direct itself in the course of the revolutionary struggle.” Rosa Luxemburg, “The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions,” in Rosa Luxemburg, *Socialism or Barbarism: Selected Writings* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 118-119.

¹⁴⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 106.

discussed the views of the previous generation of leading Russian revolutionaries on socialism, starting with Alexander Herzen. At the end of his section on the latter, Plekhanov pointed out that,

philosophy in this case indirectly rendered Russian thought the service of acquainting it with the dialectical method and teaching it the truth – so often forgotten later on – that in social life ‘everything flows,’ ‘everything changes,’ and that the phenomena of that life can be understood only in motion, in the process of arising, developing and disappearing.¹⁴⁸

Here Plekhanov mentioned only the “dialectical method” as if there was only one viz. he made neither a formal nor substantive distinction between Marx’s dialectical method and that of Hegel’s. And this is important, because Herzen was a Hegelian.¹⁴⁹ As Lenin, echoing Plekhanov, wrote of Herzen in 1912, “He assimilated Hegel’s dialectics. He realised that it was ‘the algebra of revolution.’ He went further than Hegel, following Feuerbach to materialism... Herzen came right up to dialectical materialism, and halted – before historical materialism.”¹⁵⁰ As a founder of the Russian revolutionary movement and one of the first Russian Hegelians, Herzen served as one of the sources for Plekhanov’s understanding of dialectics. Before he read Hegel and Marx in any great degree, he had studied Herzen.¹⁵¹

Yet Herzen was not the only Russian Hegelian, there was also Nikolai Chernyshevsky.¹⁵² Plekhanov rated the latter even higher than the former. Not unsurprisingly he wrote of him that his “*Criticism of Philosophical Prejudices Against Communal Land Tenure* was and still is the most brilliant attempt made in our literature to apply dialectics to the analysis of social phenomena.”¹⁵³ Again, Plekhanov wrote of “dialectics,” but in only general as if there were not different schools. For him though, there were no real differences. Just like with Herzen, no distinction was made between Marx’s method and the Hegelian method as employed by Chernyshevsky. In fact, ten years later, Plekhanov would quote Chernyshevsky’s 1855

¹⁴⁸ Georgi Plekhanov, “Our Differences,” in G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 1* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1961), 148-149.

¹⁴⁹ “When I had grown used to Hegel’s language and mastered his method, I began to perceive that he was much nearer to our viewpoint than to that of his followers; he was so in his early works, he was so everywhere where his genius had taken the bit between its teeth and had dashed forward oblivious of the Brandenburg Gate. The philosophy of Hegel is the algebra of revolution; it emancipates a man in an unusual way and leave not one stone upon another of the Christian world, of the world of tradition that has outlived itself. But, perhaps with intention, it is badly formulated.” Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts: The memoirs of Alexander Herzen*, tran. Constance Garnett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 236-237; Plekhanov had already argued that “The historical teaching of Marx and Engels is the genuine ‘algebra of the revolution,’ as Herzen once called Hegel’s philosophy.” See, Plekhanov, “Socialism and the Political Struggle,” 78.

¹⁵⁰ V.I. Lenin, “In Memory of Herzen,” in Alexander Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), 5-6.

¹⁵¹ Fomina, “Plekhanov’s role,” 12-13.

¹⁵² “In the first section of Chapter IV we showed in detail that the materialists have been criticising Kant from a standpoint diametrically opposite to that from which Mach and Avenarius criticise him. It would not be superfluous to add here, albeit briefly, an indication of the epistemological position held by the great Russian Hegelian and materialist, N. G. Chernyshevsky.” Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, 372.

¹⁵³ Plekhanov, “Our Differences,” 149.

description of Hegel's dialectical method in order to disprove the charge that the method could be reduced to the triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis.¹⁵⁴

The final Russian Hegelian to have a formative influence on Plekhanov was Mikhail Bakunin. This was not only because of Bakunin's prolific activity as a revolutionist and writer, but also because Plekhanov was a Bakuninist before he was a Marxist.¹⁵⁵ The first organisation he joined was a group of Bakuninist Narodniks. He continued to be a prominent member of this trend when they joined *Zemlya i Volya* (Land and Freedom) and also when that organisation split in 1879 into *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will) and *Chorny Peredel* (Black Redistribution), with Plekhanov serving a leading role in the latter.¹⁵⁶ Plekhanov pointed out that "Bakunin once made a study of German philosophy," and, hence, he "understood that the people must be 'taken' not 'as they are' but *as they are striving to be and are becoming* under the influence of the given historical movement."¹⁵⁷ Yet, Plekhanov hastened to add that Bakunin failed and he provided the reason:

Had he applied the dialectical method in the appropriate manner to explaining the people's life and outlook, had he better mastered 'the indubitable truth proved by Marx and corroborated by all the past and present history of human society, peoples and states, that the economic fact has always preceded and always does precede ... political right,' and consequently the social and political ideals of the 'peoples.'¹⁵⁸

His final judgment of his erstwhile teacher was that "dialectics betrayed Bakunin, or rather he betrayed dialectics."¹⁵⁹ Plekhanov consistently, at this time, made no distinction between dialectical methods. Hence, in his view, Bakunin's error was not that he adhered to Hegel's method and not Marx's. Rather it was that he did not apply the one method, "dialectics," correctly. Plekhanov did eventually argue that there was an important contrast between Marx and Hegel.¹⁶⁰ Still, the point is that in his philosophical education Plekhanov was a student of Russian Hegelianism before Marxism and it was through the lens of the former that he read the latter. Despite Plekhanov becoming more "Marxist" over time, this process was merely formal and he continued to see Marx through Hegelian eyes.

Now that the origins of Plekhanov's dialectics have been clarified, we will be in a better position to understand how exactly he understood the nature of dialectics. A clue to this is in Plekhanov's comment on Herzen quoted above where he stated that "in social life 'everything flows,' 'everything changes,' and that the phenomena of that life can be understood only in motion, in the process of arising, developing and disappearing."¹⁶¹ He will deepen this definition,

¹⁵⁴ Georgi Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View of History* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), 103-104.

¹⁵⁵ Baron, *Plekhanov*, 26, 54, 60, 71.

¹⁵⁶ Fomina, "Plekhanov's role," 11-13; Plekhanov, "Socialism and the Political Struggle," 57.

¹⁵⁷ Plekhanov, "Our Differences," 173.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 173-174.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁶⁰ Plekhanov, "For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel's Death," in G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 1* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1961), 477-478.

¹⁶¹ Plekhanov, "Our Differences," 149.

but at this point there is little to distinguish this from the dialectics of Heraclitus.¹⁶² Indeed, Plekhanov understood this universal flux not as a chaotic mess. To understand the dialectics of real life one must,

deal not with the statics but with the dynamics of our social relationships, to ‘take’ the people not ‘as they are,’ but as they are *becoming*, to consider not the motionless *picture* but the *process* of Russian life taking place according to definite laws.¹⁶³

For Plekhanov, then, change was a lawful process i.e. reality moved according to definite, verifiable laws of motion. Hence change occurred for a reason and moved in a specific direction. He described the form by which this took place as the “historical dialectics through the old social form being replaced by a new one which has grown within the former as a result, apparently, of the very logical development of the principle underlying it.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² “For Heraclitus says: ‘Everything is in a state of flux; nothing subsists nor does it ever remain the same’.” Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 1*, 283.

¹⁶³ Plekhanov, “Our Differences,” 184.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 217; The exact mechanism by which the dialectic moved, to Plekhanov, was the transition of quantity into quality and *vice versa*. For him this was the most important aspect of dialectics. He referred to this more than any other law or category. See, Plekhanov, “A New Champion of Autocracy,” 418; Georgi Plekhanov, “Essays on the History of Materialism,” accessed 15 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1893/essays/index.html>; Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 96-99; Georgi Plekhanov, “A Critique of Our Critics: Part I: Mr P Struve in the Role of Critic of the Marxist Theory of Social Development,” accessed 15 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1899/critic-critic.htm>; Georgi Plekhanov, “Cant Against Kant or Herr Bernstein’s Will and Testament,” accessed 15 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1901/xx/cant.htm>; Georgi Plekhanov, “Preface to the Third Edition of Engels’ *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*,” accessed 15 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1902/preface-utopian.htm>; Georgi Plekhanov, “Translator’s Preface to the Second Edition of Engels’ *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*,” accessed 15 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1905/preface-theses.htm>; George V. Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (New York: International Publishers, 1992), 45, 63. Georgi Plekhanov, “From Idealism to Materialism: Hegel and Left Hegelians — David Friedrich Strauss — The Brothers Bruno and Edgar Bauer — Feuerbach,” accessed 15 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1917/idealism-materialism/>. Knowing the influence of Plekhanov on Bolshevik conceptions of philosophy, it should be no surprise that precisely this law of dialectics was highlighted above other laws. For example, Bukharin in his early textbook stated that “The transformation of quantity into quality is one of the fundamental laws in the motion of matter.” Actually, it was the only dialectical law he discussed in that work. See, Bukharin, *Historical Materialism*, 80. Trotsky made a similar assertion sometime between 1933-1934, but even more categorically: “The law of the transition of quantity into quality is (very likely) *the fundamental law of dialectics*. In this sense dialectics is the logic of Darwinism (in opposition...to Linnaeus...), the logic of Marxism (in opposition to rationalistic, idealistic theories of the historical process), the logic of philosophical materialism (in opposition to Kantianism, etc.)” See, Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky’s Notebooks, 1933-1935: Writings on Lenin, Dialectics, and Evolutionism*, tran. Philip Pomper (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 87. Finally, the schematic presentation of dialectical materialism in the *Short Course* placed the transition of quantity into quality and *vice versa* above the struggle of opposites and dropped all mention of the negation of the negation. See, Commission of the C.C., *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, 106-111. This is, of course, a Hegelian law, and Marx and Engels never denied that. But this is not the point. The issue is that Marx and Engels never gave it the prominence that Plekhanov and some leading Bolsheviks did. For Marx and Engels, one law of dialectics was not the crux of their method. Rather it was the “categories of abstract and concrete and the ascent from the abstract to the concrete,” which constituted “the heart of the dialectic method.” See, Jason Devine, “On the “Philosophy” of “Dialectical Materialism”,” accessed 16 November 2016, <http://links.org.au/node/4667>. Incidentally, the early Soviet philosopher and head of the Marx-Engels Institute, V. Adoratsky, was closer to Lenin when he wrote in 1934, in an early philosophical handbook, that the basic law of materialist dialectics was that “motion is the result of

Since it was the inherent logical principle which provided the law of a phenomenon's inevitable change, Plekhanov saw dialectics as synonymous with the theory of evolution. Therefore he argued that "the idealist German philosophy regarded all phenomena from the point of view of their evolution, and that this is what is meant by regarding them *dialectically*."¹⁶⁵ He reiterated this point later in 1907:

Many people confuse dialectic with the doctrine of development; dialectic is, in fact, such a doctrine. However, it differs substantially from the vulgar 'theory of evolution', which is completely based on the principle that neither Nature nor history proceeds in leaps and that all changes in the world take place by degrees.¹⁶⁶

Plekhanov was not employing a rhetorical strategy of comparing dialectics and evolution. He sincerely believed that the two were the same, and his only disagreement was with a conception of evolution that disregarded qualitative breaks in the process of change; that is why he repeated this argument elsewhere.¹⁶⁷ Thus it was only natural that Plekhanov would go so far as to say that

Logically, the investigation of Marx begins precisely where the investigation of Darwin ends. Animals and vegetables are under the influence of their *physical* environment. The physical environment acts on social man through those social relations which arise on the basis of the productive forces, which at first develop more or less quickly according to the characteristics of the physical environment... That is why one can say that Marxism is Darwinism in its application to social science.¹⁶⁸

In that excerpt, a glimpse can be seen of Plekhanov's geographic determinism. This will be discussed further below. For now, it is clear that underlying that determinism was Plekhanov's evolutionary understanding of Marxism, a perspective that had its basis in his Hegelian understanding of dialectics. This was intimately related to Plekhanov's adoption, despite his claims to the contrary, of the Hegelian teleology and the relation between system and method in Plekhanov's philosophy.

contradiction, the unity and conflict of opposites." This was, however, superseded by the *Short Course*. See, V. Adoratsky, *Dialectical Materialism: The Theoretical Foundation of Marxism-Leninism* (London: Martin Lawrence, Ltd., n.d.), 30.

¹⁶⁵ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 89.

¹⁶⁶ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems*, 45.

¹⁶⁷ Plekhanov, "A New Champion of Autocracy", 413-419.

¹⁶⁸ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 274; Plekhanov was not the only one to equate Marx with Darwin. Besides Trotsky, his position was repeated by the Dutch Marxist Anton Pannekoek in 1912. As he wrote in his work *Marxism and Darwinism*, "If we turn to Marxism we immediately see a great conformity with Darwinism. As with Darwin, the scientific importance of Marx's work consists in this, that he discovered the propelling force, the cause of social development." Like Plekhanov, he understood Marxism in an evolutionary manner: "Thus, both teachings, the teachings of Darwin and of Marx, the one in the domain of the organic world and the other upon the field of human society, raised the theory of evolution to a positive science. In doing this they made the theory of evolution acceptable to the masses as the basic conception of social and biological development." See, Anton Pannekoek, *Marxism and Darwinism* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company Co-operative, 1912), 16, 18-19.

To Plekhanov, capitalism was an inevitable, inexorable logical process in Russia which occurred according to its inner dialectics regardless of human intentions. This cannot be emphasised enough. This development

takes place gradually, but once it has started it will go on to its logical end in just the same way with the relentlessness of astronomic phenomena. In that case the social revolution does not rely on 'possible' success of conspirators but on the certain and insuperable course of social evolution.¹⁶⁹

Here he removed all trace of human agency, of conscious practical activity. His message to the Narodniks was: "It is here and developing, you cannot stop its march!" This was simply the obverse of his message to the Bolsheviks in 1905 and after: "It is not fully here yet, you cannot move beyond it!" True, such a position never led Plekhanov to quietism and he repeatedly stated that it would not lead to that if the matter were properly understood.¹⁷⁰ In fact, he argued that a belief in the inevitability of events could serve as a basis for resolute action.¹⁷¹ However, that is not the heart of the matter. Rather, it was his assertion that the end goal of capitalism, and then of socialism, was rooted in the very logic of history, and was inevitable. Plekhanov could make the formally Marxist point that "All laws of social development which are not understood work with the irresistible force and blind harshness of laws of nature."¹⁷² Yet, from what he said above it is clear that regardless if they were understood or not, such laws work "with the relentlessness of astronomic phenomena." Thus he could argue against his opponents that "*Capitalism is favoured* by the whole dynamics of our social life, all the forces that develop with the movement of the social machine and in their turn determine the direction and speed of that movement."¹⁷³

The reference to the "social machine" was not made by chance, because it encapsulated the basic logic of Plekhanov's mechanical materialism, *his* dialectical materialism. Everything to the contrary was superficial. He could make the excellent point that "the objective economic possibility of the transition to socialism is not enough by itself, the working class must understand and be aware of that possibility."¹⁷⁴ This comment, in light of the above, seemingly shows a tension in Plekhanov's thought; but there was no tension. While this statement by Plekhanov was undoubtedly true in a Marxist sense, it must be regarded as mere lip-service, as only a formal recognition of working-class agency. For shortly after writing this he went on to declare that:

A certain class rises against the reality surrounding it, enters into antagonism with it only in the event of reality being 'divided against itself,' of some contradictions being revealed

¹⁶⁹ Plekhanov, "Our Differences," 275.

¹⁷⁰ George V. Plekhanov, "On the Role of the Individual in History," in George V. Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (New York: International Publishers, 1992), 140; Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 9, 275.

¹⁷¹ Plekhanov, "On the Role of the Individual," 140-141.

¹⁷² Plekhanov, "Our Differences," 310.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 343.

in it. The character, the course and the outcome of the struggle which has started against that reality is determined by the character of these contradictions.¹⁷⁵

As is known, Plekhanov considered these contradictions to be objective i.e. not a matter of subjective choice, will, consciousness, etc. However, he argued that such objective contradictions determine not merely the “character” and “course” of the struggle, that is to say, the conditions of the battle, but also the very “outcome of the struggle.” Yet, this was a far cry from Marx’s point in his *Eighteenth Brumaire*: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”¹⁷⁶ To Marx, historical conditions did not depend on current conscious human activity, but the future “outcome of the struggle” did. In Plekhanovian dialectical materialism, people do not make their own history, rather history makes itself: it is a machine which runs according to its own internal logic i.e. its own laws. In this perspective, humans are only one cog, though an important one at that, but still only a cog in the machine. Human consciousness is raised up only to be consistently reduced to an effect of an objective mechanical process.

All this does not exhaust the nature of Plekhanov’s views on social dynamics. In his opinion, not only did history move in one general direction, viz. progressively, but there was never a possibility of there being any retrogression. Thus Plekhanov made the amazing claim that “No fate is now strong enough to take from us the discoveries of Copernicus, or the discovery of the transformation of energy, or the discovery of the mutability of species, or the discoveries of the genius Marx.”¹⁷⁷ The evolutionary point of view is popularly understood to be that which sees movement as an ascending line, as progress. And yet, altering this viewpoint formally by the introduction of variety, of diversity does not change the basic, popular evolutionary content. To say that history moves forward not in an ascending line, but rather by zigs zags, is still to hold that it moves forward, i.e. to hold a crude evolutionary point of view. A true dialectical, non-teleological point of view, would hold that humanity does not move merely in an ascending line or zig zag, but that it could also move in a variety of *other* directions. Most importantly, humanity’s moving forward is not inevitable and it could also, as history shows, move backwards.¹⁷⁸ In this movement backwards, the conquests of human thought, of human invention, of human activity have in fact been lost.

Again, for Plekhanov, a crude view of evolution is one that denies leaps. So, he never tired of pointing out that “One of Hegel’s greatest merits was that he purged the doctrine of development of similar absurdities.”¹⁷⁹ The first thing to note here is that Plekhanov implied that Hegel and Marx *both* had a doctrine of development. There is, yet again, the same lack of

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 343-344.

¹⁷⁶ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 15.

¹⁷⁷ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 243.

¹⁷⁸ Fascism is an excellent example of this. The destruction caused by the various fascist movements both before and during WWII can, of course, be considered in purely quantitative terms: the number of lives lost, buildings destroyed, books burned, etc. However, in qualitative terms, the losses humanity suffered are incalculable: the varied human experiences and knowledge snuffed out. The possibilities for growth and development that were closed off forever.

¹⁷⁹ Plekhanov, “A New Champion of Autocracy,” 419.

distinction between the two thinkers' methods. More importantly, Marx never had a doctrine of development. The reason is as follows: despite Plekhanov's claim of Hegel improving the "doctrine of development," such a doctrine was still absurd. To be more specific, Hegel had a doctrine of development *precisely* because it was teleological. As Hegel wrote "The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom; a progress whose development according to the necessity of its nature, it is our business to investigate."¹⁸⁰ To Hegel, all of humanity was moving inexorably towards a goal. For Marx and Engels though, there was no inevitable goal towards which humanity was moving. As they stated early on in the *Manifesto*:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.¹⁸¹

To Marx and Engels, working class revolution was absolutely necessary for the future development of humankind, but its success was not a given. Socialism was not inevitable.¹⁸² This non-teleological understanding of history was no chance idea, no passing fancy. As Engels wrote decades later:

In other words, the reason is that both the productive forces created by the modern capitalist mode of production and the system of distribution of goods established by it have come into crying contradiction with that mode of production itself, and in fact to such a degree that, if the whole of modern society is not to perish, a revolution in the

¹⁸⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, tran. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), 19; "The universal spirit exists concretely in art in the form of perception and image, in religion in the form of feeling and pictorial imaginative thinking, and in philosophy in the form of pure free thought. In world-history this concrete existence of spirit is the spiritual actuality in the total range of its internality and externality. It is a court of judgment because in its absolute universality the particular, namely, the Penates, the civic community, and the national spirit in their many-colored reality are all merely ideal. The movement of spirit in this case consists in visibly presenting these spheres as merely ideal. Moreover, world-history is not a court of judgment, whose principle is force, nor is it the abstract and irrational necessity of a blind fate. It is self-caused and self-realized reason, and its actualized existence in spirit is knowledge. Hence, its development issuing solely out of the conception of its freedom is a necessary development of the elements of reason. It is, therefore, an unfolding of the spirit's self-consciousness and freedom. It is the exhibition and actualization of the universal spirit... States, peoples, and individuals are established upon their own particular definite principle, which has systematized reality in their constitutions and in the entire compass of their surroundings. Of this systematized reality they are aware, and in its interests are absorbed. Yet are they the unconscious tools and organs of the world-spirit, through whose inner activity the lower forms pass away. Thus the spirit by its own motion and for its own end makes ready and works out the transition into its next higher stage." G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, tran. S.W. Dyde (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 200-201.

¹⁸¹ Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 12.

¹⁸² "The experience of our generation: that capitalism will not die a natural death." Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 917.

mode of production and distribution must take place, a revolution which will put an end to all class distinctions.¹⁸³

This was not Plekhanov's perspective and that is for the simple fact that his views were taken from Hegel and not Marx. Indeed, his discussions of the relationship between evolution and revolution, of the dialectic between quantity and quality, were merely repeated from Hegel. As Engels had stated, the three laws of dialectics were originally "developed by Hegel."¹⁸⁴ Yet, whereas Marx critically appropriated dialectics from Hegel and in the process dropped teleology, Plekhanov uncritically took his dialectics from Hegel and Russian Hegelians and, therefore, he retained their teleology.

In carrying over Hegel's teleology, Plekhanov replicated other aspects of Hegel's thought. Plekhanov argued that tribal groups, despite having a low level of development, "live in societies possessing a definite structure, with definite customs and institutions."¹⁸⁵ He termed this an "artificial-social-environment" and, in his opinion, it was "an essential condition for all further progress. The degree of its development serves as a measure of the degree of savagery or barbarism of all other tribes."¹⁸⁶ He went on to conclude that "This primary social formation corresponds to what is called *the pre-history* of man. The beginning of historical life presumes an even greater development of the artificial environment and a far greater power of man over nature."¹⁸⁷ Yet again though, this view of history was thoroughly Hegelian and not Marxist. The idea that history begins with the development of a certain level of society beyond what is termed "savagery" and/or "barbarism" is a teleological evolutionary viewpoint. As Hegel had written decades previously:

Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained – for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World – shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself – the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night. Its isolated character originates, not merely in its tropical nature, but essentially in its geographical condition.¹⁸⁸

Concluding his brief discussion of Africa, Hegel went on to re-emphasise its lack of history:

At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it – that is in its northern part – belong to the Asiatic or European World.¹⁸⁹

Those deemed uncivilised were seen as outside the history of "man" i.e. humanity, for the simple reason that they were viewed as being barely removed from an animal state viz. they were still

¹⁸³ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 189.

¹⁸⁴ Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of Nature* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), 62.

¹⁸⁵ George V. Plekhanov, "The Materialist Conception of History" in George V. Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (New York: International Publishers, 1992), 113.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁸⁸ Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 91.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

dependent on the natural environment.¹⁹⁰ Real history begins with real humans. Thus, despite making his comments regarding tribes in the context of an attack on social Darwinism, it is clear that Plekhanov's neo-Young Hegelianism approximated some of its arguments. However, this was never Marx's position. As he wrote in a work which Plekhanov himself quoted on more than one occasion,

The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals' social conditions of existence – but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.¹⁹¹

In Marx's view *all class societies* were inherently inhuman. Hence true history could only come about after the abolition of classes. Plekhanov's conception, then, lent itself to a classification of human societies on a developmental scale, where the advance of productive forces was equated with social progress, and, ergo, they could be measured in terms of their progress towards socialism. The inevitable consequence would be that some societies would be ready for the revolutionary leap and some clearly would not be. Although Marx did make conceptual distinctions between different modes of productions, he did not state that they stood on a developmental ladder; only a crude evolutionary interpretation of his famous preface could lead to that conclusion.

Marx recognised different paths of transition between different modes of production, because his dialectical method necessitated that he have a global perspective of humanity; one which was permeated with attention to the specifics of locality. This was why he argued in 1877 that Russia was not necessarily fated to follow the path of Western Europe.¹⁹² And, conversely, it was because of his undialectical approach that Plekhanov asserted that Russia was not ready for socialism in any way i.e. that it still had to go through capitalist development; and that is why, therefore, he opposed the Bolsheviks in 1905 and 1917.¹⁹³ In spite of all he wrote about dialectics, precisely because his view was grounded in Hegelian dialectics Plekhanov reproduced the Hegelian teleology and landed in a thoroughly undialectical point of view.

I have already mentioned that Plekhanov's view of humanity as, at best, a thinking object, a loyal servant, while history played the role of subject, the real fount of all progress. The

¹⁹⁰ "Without doubt man is an animal connected by ties of affinity to other animals. He has no privileges of origin; his organism is nothing more than a particular case of general physiology. Originally, like all other animals, he was completely under the sway of his natural environment, which was not yet subject to his modifying action; he had to adapt himself to it in his struggle for existence." Plekhanov, "The Materialist Conception of History," 113.

¹⁹¹ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique*, 21-22.

¹⁹² Karl Marx, "A letter to the Editorial Board of *Otechestvennye Kapiski*," in *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and 'the peripheries of capitalism'*, ed. Teodor Shanin (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 135-136.

¹⁹³ "Weitling condemned Marx's opinion that Germany in its historical progress towards communism could not bypass the intermediate phase of bourgeois rule. He wanted Germany to skip over this stage, just as later our Narodniks desired that Russia should skip over it." Georgi Plekhanov, "Utopian Socialism in the Nineteenth Century," accessed 16 November 2016, <http://www.marxistsfr.org/archive/plekhanov/1913/utopian-socialism/index.htm>.

tasks of the revolutionaries were to be dictated wholly by the latter: “The Social-Democrat studies attentively laws and the course of historical development... The Social-Democrat swims with the current of history... The Social-Democrat *derives support* from evolution.”¹⁹⁴ This is not an assertion of working-class agency, of what Marx termed “revolutionary practice.” Instead humans appeared as the willing vessels of History, who is making its course towards a pre-ordained destination. It highly significant that Plekhanov, once again, echoed the passage from Hegel which I have already quoted:

This long procession of spirits is formed by the individual pulses which beat in its life; they are the organism of our substance, an absolutely necessary progression, which expresses nothing less than the nature of spirit itself, and which lives in us all. We have to give ear to its urgency - when the mole that is within forces its way on - and we have to make it a reality. It is my desire that this history of Philosophy should contain for you a summons to grasp the spirit of the time, which is present in us by nature, and - each in his own place - consciously to bring it from its natural condition, i.e. from its lifeless seclusion, into the light of day.¹⁹⁵

In the teleological view of Hegel and Plekhanov, history relentlessly marches towards its goal; hence, humans cannot stop history: they may slow it down, or they may speed it up, either way it will absolutely make its way towards its final destination. As should now be clear, regardless of any talk of an alteration between evolution and revolution, regardless of any talk of dialectics, a teleological view of history is inherently undialectical because it sets down a pre-determined path, one which must inevitably ignore the relative open-endedness of human activity. In this case, as in others, Plekhanov’s dialectics are not that of Marx and Engels, but are derivative of Hegelianism. For Plekhanov, humans are the internal components of history; they are important, even noble cogs, but there is no revolutionary practical activity in his philosophy. One could point out other examples on this theme.¹⁹⁶

Hegel was a masterful dialectician. Yet his system predisposed the movement of his dialectic viz. in the end his method did not determine his system, but, rather, his system determined his method. In the words of Engels:

he was compelled to make a system and, in accordance with traditional requirements, a system of philosophy must conclude with some sort of absolute truth. Therefore, however much Hegel, especially in his Logic, emphasised that this eternal truth is nothing but the

¹⁹⁴ Plekhanov, “A New Champion of Autocracy,” 422.

¹⁹⁵ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 3*, 553.

¹⁹⁶ “We know that at the present time the vehicle of the new principle of world history is not any single people, but a definite social class. But we shall still be faithful to the spirit of Hegel’s philosophy if we say that all other social classes will go into world history in the degree in which they will be able to give support to this class. *The irresistible striving to the great historical goal, a striving which nothing can stop – such is the legacy of the great German idealist philosophy.*” Plekhanov, “For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel’s Death,” 483.

logical, or, the historical, process itself, he nevertheless finds himself compelled to supply this process with an end.¹⁹⁷

For Hegel, though, there was no contradiction between the method and the system. As he himself said, “the method is nothing else than the structure of the whole in its pure and essential form.”¹⁹⁸ However, a system can only be closed and thus must violate the very spirit of the dialectic. This is why Marx spoke of developing a method and not a system.¹⁹⁹ Hence, to take Hegel’s procedure viz. where the system produces the method, but then to reverse it, that is, where the method produces the system, would still not be going beyond Hegelianism. And this is precisely what Plekhanov did: he took Hegel’s dialectical method and produced a system of philosophy called dialectical materialism.²⁰⁰ Thus, he reproduced the essential weakness of Hegel’s ideology, his teleology.

In his 1907 *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, Plekhanov gave his most developed overview of dialectical materialism. There he argued that the system, i.e. “Marxism,” properly understood “is an integral world outlook.”²⁰¹ Further, he asserted that the “philosophical views” of Marx and Engels “In their *final* shape...were quite fully set forth, although in a polemical form, in the first part of Engels’ book *Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science*.”²⁰² Although we can be sure that Plekhanov read the latter work, it is obvious that he choose to disregard what Engels actually wrote. As I already pointed out, Engels did not in any way describe his and Marx’s views as a system or as an “integral world outlook,” but, instead made a distinction between the “dialectical method and of the communist world outlook.”²⁰³ As a result of his desire to present Marxism as a complete system, Plekhanov collapsed method into outlook and this was “integral” to the transformation of Marxism into an ideology i.e. a philosophy.

Here it will not be out of place to bring up a sad fact regarding Plekhanov’s approach to proving his neo-Young Hegelian interpretation of Marxism. Ilyenkov, in his last work, mentioned “the well-known slovenliness which is often encountered in Plekhanov’s writings.”²⁰⁴ Ilyenkov was referring to a certain vagueness that would appear in Plekhanov’s formulations.

¹⁹⁷ Frederick Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 589.

¹⁹⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 106.

¹⁹⁹ As Lukács pointed out in 1919, the core of Marxism is exactly its method: “Let us assume for the sake of argument that recent research had disproved once and for all every one of Marx’s individual theses. Even if this were to be proved, every serious ‘orthodox’ Marxist would still be able to accept all such modern findings without reservation and hence dismiss all of Marx’s theses *in toto* – without having to renounce his orthodoxy for a single moment. Orthodox Marxism, therefore, does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx’s investigations. It is not the ‘belief’ in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a ‘sacred’ book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*.” See, Georg Lukács, “What Is Orthodox Marxism?” in Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, tran. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 1.

²⁰⁰ There is one ‘system’, the system of dialectical materialism, which includes both political economy and the scientific explanation of the historical process and much else besides.” Georgi Plekhanov, “On A. Pannekoek’s Pamphlet,” accessed 16 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1907/pannekoek.htm>.

²⁰¹ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 21.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁰³ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 13.

²⁰⁴ Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics*, 105.

However, I would argue that this slipshod character extended even further to a dishonest treatment of citations. To be more exact, Plekhanov, on multiple occasions put his own words in the mouths of Marx and Engels, including providing false quotations, or quotations taken out of context. For example, he asserted that “in the *Franco-German Annals*, Engels was already speaking of the method as the soul of the new system of views.”²⁰⁵ But, Engels did not say that *anywhere* and Plekhanov gave no citation to prove what he alleged. The two words he did quote in a footnote in this work do appear in one article that Engels wrote for the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, specifically in a phrase which Plekhanov had quoted more than once in his writing, and which he had just quoted in the previous section of that work: “What we need is not so much crude results as studies (das Studium); results are meaningless if they are taken apart from the development that leads up to them.”²⁰⁶ However, the order of the words he gives in his footnote is not the order that they actually appear in Engels. Plekhanov claimed that “Engels was not referring to himself but to all who shared his views. ‘Wir bedürfen...’, he said; there can be no doubt that Marx was one of those who shared his views.”²⁰⁷ What Engels actually wrote though, was

Alle Sozialphilosophie, solange sie noch ein paar Sätze als ihr Endresultat aufstellt, solange sie noch Morrisonsspillen eingibt, ist noch sehr unvollkommen; es sind nicht die nackten Resultate, die wir so sehr bedürfen, als vielmehr das *Studium*; die Resultate sind nichts ohne die Entwicklung, die zu ihnen geführt hat, das wissen wir schon seit Hegel, und die Resultate sind schlimmer als nutzlos, wenn sie für sich fixiert, wenn sie nicht wieder zu Prämissen für die fernere Entwicklung gemacht werden.²⁰⁸

The English translation is as follows:

All social philosophy, as long as it still propounds a few principles as its final conclusion, as long as it continues to administer Morrison's pills, remains very imperfect; it is not the bare conclusions of which we are in such need, but rather study; the conclusions are nothing without the reasoning that has led up to them; this we have known since Hegel; and the conclusions are worse than useless if they are final in themselves, if they are not turned into premises for further deductions.²⁰⁹

Here Engels was making a reference to Hegel's preface to his *Phenomenology* where Hegel was describing his idea that the truth is whole, is concrete. As Hegel argued:

For the real subject-matter is not exhausted in its purpose, but in working the matter out; nor is the mere result attained the concrete whole itself, but the result along with the process of arriving at it. The purpose of itself is a lifeless universal, just as the general

²⁰⁵ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 44.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁰⁷ I cite the Soviet edition on the Marxist Internet Archive because, for some reason, this footnote does not appear in the American edition I have been citing thus far. See, Georgi Plekhanov, “Fundamental Problems of Marxism,” accessed 17 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1907/fundamental-problems.htm>.

²⁰⁸ Friedrich Engels, “Die Lage Englands, »Past and Present« by Thomas Carlyle, London 1843,” accessed 17 November 2016, http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me01/me01_525.htm.

²⁰⁹ Frederick Engels, “A review of *Past and Present*, by Thomas Carlyle, London, 1843,” accessed 17 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/df-jahrbucher/carlyle.htm>.

drift is a mere activity in a certain direction, which is still without its concrete realization; and the naked result is the corpse of the system which has left its guiding tendency behind it.²¹⁰

Thus, the extract from Engels, as is quite clear, in no way proves Plekhanov's assertion that "Engels was already speaking of the method as the soul of the new system of views." In fact, *nowhere* in the article in question does Engels say anything approximating Plekhanov's claim. As his assertion was groundless, this must be considered as a prime example of his improper approach to *citing other people* in order to *prove his arguments*. Before moving on, I will cite a few more examples.

First, a smaller, but no less emblematic example. Later on in his *Fundamental Problems* Plekhanov discussed the role of ideology in society. There he wrote the following:

In this connection, however, the concluding chapter of the *Manifesto* is even more convincing. Its authors tell us that the Communists never cease to instill into the minds of the workers the clearest possible recognition of the hostile antagonism between the interests of the bourgeoisie and of the proletariat. It is easy to understand that one who attaches no importance to the ideological 'factor' has no logical ground for trying to instill any such recognition whatsoever into the minds of any social group.²¹¹

Here, Plekhanov made a loose paraphrase, but one that was in line with his views on education and the proletariat. What the *Manifesto* actually says is "But they never cease, for a single instant, to instill into the working class the clearest possible recognition of the hostile antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat."²¹² The distinction may not be clear, but it is important. Plekhanov added the word "minds" because his views were vulgar materialist. The workers were an empty vessel which needed to be filled up by an external force. This was a far cry from Marx and Engels' emphasis on the self-education of the proletariat.²¹³ Marx and Engels could never have used such a phrase. As Marx argued during the time of the split in the Communist League, "What we say to the workers is: You have 15, 20, 50 years of civil war to go through in order to change society and to train yourselves for the exercise of political power."²¹⁴ This was just a restatement of what Marx and Engels had written in *The German Ideology*:

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a *revolution*; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the *ruling* class cannot be overthrown in any

²¹⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 69.

²¹¹ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 66.

²¹² Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 77.

²¹³ This emphasis flowed from their life-long recognition that "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves." Karl Marx, "Provisional Rules of the Association," in *Documents of the First International, 1864-1866* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1964), 288.

²¹⁴ Hermann Wilhelm Haupt, "Minutes of the Meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist League of September 15, 1850," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Cologne Communist Trial*, tran. Rodney Livingstone (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 251.

other way, but also because the class *overthrowing* it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.²¹⁵

This, in its turn, was no more than an expansion of Marx's third thesis on Feuerbach written a few months before the above:

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. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.²¹⁶

The working class collectively needs no teacher but itself. As it says in the lyrics to the *Internationale*: "There are no supreme saviors, Neither God, nor Caesar nor tribune; Producers, let us save ourselves."²¹⁷ Now this is not to say that knowledge, skills, or even class consciousness is found evenly distributed throughout the working class. But, in that case, it would be a question of the various sectors of the proletariat learning from and teaching each other. The idea of organising a party of revolutionaries to instill consciousness into the minds of workers originates with Plekhanov and this substitutionism was a logical result of his mechanical materialism.

However, none of this should be construed as implying that Marx and Engels held an anti-party stance. They were, in fact, the first to raise the necessity of the workers organizing themselves into a political party to a principle of cardinal importance.²¹⁸ At first glance, it may seem that there is a discrepancy between Marx and Engels' commitment to the self-directed activity of the proletariat and their contention that "working class cannot act, as a class, except

²¹⁵ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 60.

²¹⁶ Marx, "Theses On Feuerbach," 615-616.

²¹⁷ Eugène Pottier, "Internationale," accessed 18 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/sounds/lyrics/international.htm>.

²¹⁸ "Considering, that against this collective power of the propertied classes the working class cannot act, as a class, except by constituting itself into a political party, distinct from, and opposed to, all old parties formed by the propertied classes; That this constitution of the working class into a political party is indispensable in order to ensure the triumph of the social revolution and its ultimate end – the abolition of classes." See, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Resolution of the London Conference on Working-Class Political Action," in Karl Marx, *Political Writings Volume III: The First International and After* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 270. This principle was considered so important that the section which I have quoted from the 1871 resolution was repeated in a new resolution the following year. See, Friedrich Adolph Sorge, "Report to the North American Federation of the International Workingmen's Association Concerning the Delegation to the Fifth General Congress at The Hague, September 2 to 7, 1872," in *The First International: Minutes of the Hague Congress of 1872 with related documents*, tran. Hans Gerth (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1958), 251; "That the producers can only be free when they are in possession of the means of production; That there are only two forms under which the means of production can belong to them 1. The individual form, which was never a universal phenomenon and is being ever more superseded by the progress of industry; 2. The collective form, the material and mental elements for which are created by the very development of capitalist society...collective appropriation can only proceed from a revolutionary action of the class of producers – the proletariat - organized in an independent political party." Karl Marx, "Introduction to the Programme of the French Workers' Party," in Karl Marx, *Political Writings Volume III: The First International and After* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 376.

by constituting itself into a political party,” that such a constitution was “indispensable.” The discrepancy, though, is only apparent. Marx had already written in 1847 that,

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle...this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle.²¹⁹

If the working class exists as a product of circumstances outside its control i.e. it has been united by an external force, then it exists merely as an object, only in itself. But, for the working class to be a subject, to be self-determining, it must consciously combine itself in its own forms. This means trade unions, and more importantly, political parties. From their comments in the *Manifesto*, it is clear that Marx and Engels viewed the party as a tool of and for the working class to educate, and hence organise, *itself* for *self-emancipation*.²²⁰ Not for nothing did Marx and Engels write that they could not “go along with people who openly claim that the workers are too ignorant to emancipate themselves but must first be emancipated from the top down.”²²¹

²¹⁹ Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the “Philosophy of Poverty” by M. Proudhon* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978), 159-160.

²²⁰ “The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole. The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.” See, Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 38.

²²¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Strategy and Tactics of the Class Struggle,” accessed 18 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1879/09/17.htm>; The Marxist historian George Rawick was right to emphasise the importance of the “self-activity of the working class,” however his denial of the importance of the party form was a result of his abstract, one-sided understanding of working-class agency. Instead of approaching the latter as a concrete totality, he maintained a dualist approach with the working class on the one side and the organisations it produces, on the other. The source of this perspective was the result of his uncritical acceptance of C.L.R. James’ neo-Young Hegelian definition of dialectics. See, George Rawick, “Working-Class Self-Activity,” in *Workers’ Struggles, Past and Present: A “Radical America” Reader*, ed. James Green (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 146,149-150. The following was James’ definition of dialectics: “(a) All development takes place as a result of self-movement, **not** organization or direction by external forces. (b) Self-movement springs from and is the overcoming of antagonisms **within** an organism, not the struggle against external foes. (c) It is not the world of nature that confronts man as an alien power to be overcome. It is the alien power that he has himself created. (d) The end toward which mankind is inexorably developing by the constant overcoming of internal antagonisms is **not** the enjoyment, ownership, or use of goods, but self-realization, creativity based upon the incorporation into the individual personality of the whole previous development of humanity. Freedom is creative universality, **not** utility.” The problems with this are immediately apparent. All of James’ points revolve around one principle viz. he places the locus of *all* development, change, movement, etc., even if only within the realm of society, solely on internal forces. However, James thereby absolutised internality and so absolutely denied the specificity of externality and hence took an abstract, one-sided, i.e. undialectical point of view. This is reflected in each of his assertions. For example, human freedom must certainly include “creative universality,” *but also* “utility.” It is impossible to be free, let alone exercise full creativity, when one’s basic material needs are not met. See, Grace

The next example of Plekhanov's style of quoting is far more drastic. It also includes the outright suppression of one of Marx's writings.²²² This concerns his long-running polemic with his erstwhile Narodnik comrades concerning the inevitableness of capitalism in Russia. In 1885 Plekhanov wrote that:

We are convinced that when 'a society has got upon the right track for the discovery of the natural laws of its movement...it can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments the obstacles offered...*But it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs.*' It is precisely this 'shortening and lessening the birth-pangs' that, in our opinion, constitutes one of the most important tasks of socialists who are convinced of the 'historical inevitability of capitalism in Russia.'²²³

Plekhanov believed in the inevitability of capitalism in Russia and, to prove this, he here quoted Marx's preface to the first edition of *Capital* (1867) where Marx argued from an evolutionary point of view.²²⁴ However, in doing this, Plekhanov ignored what was written in the 1872 French edition of *Capital* which amended that point of view and which was cited by Marx himself in his 1881 response to Plekhanov's close comrade and fellow member of the Emancipation of Labour group, Vera Zasulich, to show that *Capital* did *not* prove that capitalism was inevitable in Russia:

In analysing 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*.²²⁵

Marx thus argued the *exact opposite* of Plekhanov. But this, of course, ran counter to what Plekhanov, Zasulich, and others believed to be the *actual* Marxist position. In fact, Marx's letter

C. Lee, Pierre Chaulieu, and J.R. Johnson, *Facing Reality: The New Society...Where to look for it, How to bring it closer, A statement for our time* (Detroit: Correspondence, 1958), 105. While James placed all emphasis on internality to the exclusion of externality, Plekhanov committed the opposite, equally undialectical, error of placing all emphasis on externality: "The great scientific service rendered by Marx lies in this, that he approached the question from the diametrically opposite side, and that he regarded man's nature itself as the eternally changing result of historical progress, the cause of which lies *outside* man." See, Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 153.

²²² As I have previously noted, Bernstein, Kautsky, and others in the leadership of the SPD also engaged in quotation falsification and the suppression of Marx and Engels' writings. See, Jason Devine, "'Dialectical Materialism,' Ideology and Revisionism," accessed 18 November 2016, <http://links.org.au/dialectical-materialism-ideology-revisionism>.

²²³ Plekhanov, "Our Differences," 146.

²²⁴ "Intrinsically, it is not a question of the higher or lower degree of development of the social antagonisms that result from the natural laws of capitalist production. It is a question of these laws themselves, of these tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results. The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future." Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 19.

²²⁵ Karl Marx, "The reply to Zasulich," in *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and 'the peripheries of capitalism'*, ed. Teodor Shanin (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 124.

was written in response to a previous letter in which Zasulich had asked Marx for a clarification of where *Capital* stood on the question of Russia, capitalism, and the peasant commune. She ended her letter with the request that “If time does not allow you to set forth Your ideas in a fairly detailed manner, then at least be so kind as to do this in the form of a letter that you would allow us to translate and publish in Russia.”²²⁶ Despite this expressed desire to publicise Marx’s letter, as Teodor Shanin has noted, it never was actually published by the Emancipation of Labour group.²²⁷

As in the case of Bernstein’s suppression of *The German Ideology*, the testimony of David Riazanov, will help shed light on this matter regarding Marx’s letter to Zasulich. In 1911 Riazanov came across a number of drafts and assumed that they had been preparatory to Marx’s letter. According to his 1924 account of the episode:

I then wrote to Plekhanov, only to be told that no reply to Zasulich’s letter was in existence. Using various third persons, I asked the same question of Zasulich herself, but the result was no more favourable. I am not sure whether I also addressed myself to Axelrod. Probably I did, and probably I received the same negative answer.²²⁸

Riazanov speculated that these “categorically negative answers” were simply a “forgetfulness” of a “very strange quality.”²²⁹ It is understandable that Riazanov would not impute any negative intentions to his teacher and his comrades. However, in light of the fact that Zasulich directly informed Marx that she and others intended to publish his reply and then never did, the assumption that Plekhanov, Zasulich, and Axelrod forgot about a letter from a man they considered their teacher, a letter which, moreover, directly contradicted one of their core beliefs, is implausible. In Shanin’s opinion, the reasons for the alleged “forgetfulness” were “probably simpler and cruder. Already in Marx’s own generation there were marxists who knew better than Marx what marxism is and were prepared to censor him on the sly, for his own sake.”²³⁰ In my view, there is no need for any speculation: it is abundantly clear that Plekhanov and others actively suppressed Marx’s letter because it contradicted their understanding of Marxism.

That this was indeed the case, is shown by the following further facts. In 1877 Marx wrote a letter to the Editorial Board of *Otechestvennye Kapiski*. He never finished it, nor did he ever send it. Engels found it after Marx’s death and, in 1884, he asked the Emancipation of Labour group to publish the letter. Plekhanov and the others, though, took around seven months before they responded with a promise to print the letter. Even then, they never fulfilled their commitment. As a result, Engels set about seeking publication through Narodnik channels. Marx’s short, unfinished letter was finally published in December 1886 in *Vestnik Narodnoi*

²²⁶ Vera Zasulich, “A letter to Marx,” in *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and ‘the peripheries of capitalism’*, ed. Teodor Shanin (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 99.

²²⁷ Teodor Shanin, “Late Marx: gods and craftsmen,” in *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and ‘the peripheries of capitalism’*, ed. Teodor Shanin (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 18.

²²⁸ David Ryzanov, “The discovery of the drafts (1924),” in *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and ‘the peripheries of capitalism’*, ed. Teodor Shanin (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 127.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 128, 129.

²³⁰ Shanin, “Late Marx: gods and craftsmen,” 18.

Voli.²³¹ Undoubtedly, there was something in Marx's letter which repulsed his so-called Russian followers. Surely, it was the same content which Engels held to be of great importance for the Russian revolutionary movement, and which drove him to publish this fragment of his old partner's work. Despite not publishing the letter, it still played a prominent role in Plekhanov's polemics. Before discussing that matter, I will give a brief overview of the letter.

Marx started out by briefly commenting on a Russian article's recent treatment of his *Capital* in its approach to the question of Russia's future development and the position of the peasant commune. In pointing out the Russian author's confusion and trying to clarify his own position, Marx stated that after years of learning Russian and studying "official and other publications relating to the question," he had finally "come to the conclusion that if Russia continues along the path it has followed since 1861, she will lose the finest chance ever offered by history to a nation, in order to undergo all the fatal vicissitudes of the capitalist regime."²³² Marx was referring here to the watershed moment of the emancipation of the serfs and arguing that though capitalist production had been introduced into Russia, it had yet to command the economy.

After this, in the second part to his draft letter, Marx went on to explain what *Capital* actually argued and what could legitimately be derived from the latter:

The chapter on primitive accumulation claims no more than to trace the path by which, in Western Europe, the capitalist order of economy emerged from the womb of the feudal economic order. It therefore presents the historical movement which, by divorcing the producers from their means of production, converted the former into wage-labourers (proletarians in the modern sense of the word) and the owners of the latter into capitalists.²³³

This is the same argument which Marx was to repeat in his 1881 response to Zaslulich i.e. his book located the origin of capitalism by analysing the separation of the producers from the means of production in Western Europe. Unsurprisingly, Marx underlined this fact by citing the French edition of his work: "Only in England has it so far been accomplished in a radical manner...but all the countries of Western Europe are following the same course' etc. (*Capital*, French edition, p. 315)."²³⁴ Marx then turned to how this analysis related to Russia:

Now, what application to Russia can my critic make of this historical sketch? Only this: If Russia is tending to become a capitalist nation like the nations of Western Europe – and in the last few years she has been at great pains to achieve this – she will not succeed without first transforming a large part of her peasants into proletarians; subsequently, once brought into the fold of the capitalist regime, she will pass under its pitiless laws like other profane peoples. That is all. But that is too little for my critic. He absolutely insists on transforming my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western

²³¹ Haruki Wada, "Marx and revolutionary Russia," in *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and 'the peripheries of capitalism'*, ed. Teodor Shanin (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 41.

²³² Marx, "A letter to the Editorial Board of *Otechestvennye Kapiski*," 134-135.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 135.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

Europe into an historico-philosophic theory of the general course fatally imposed on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they find themselves placed, in order to arrive ultimately at this economic formation which assures the greatest expansion of the productive forces of social labour, as well as the most complete development of man. But I beg his pardon. That is to do me both too much honour and too much discredit.²³⁵

There are two matters of import here. First, Marx pointed out that capitalist development had *begun* in Russia, but, repeating what he wrote in the letter, its consummation was a possibility and not an inevitability. In both his 1877 and 1881 letters, he referenced the French edition of *Capital*, which he had already described as having “a scientific value independent of the original and should be consulted even by readers familiar with German.”²³⁶ This was published in installments between 1872 and 1875 and contained significant changes compared to the German edition.²³⁷ Therefore, from 1872 to the time of his death, Marx had restricted the evolutionary understanding of capitalism to Western Europe, and believed, on the basis of extensive research, that Russia had the chance to bypass full capitalist development. Second, Marx expressly denied that he had a “historico-philosophic theory” and he protested against his “historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism” being transformed into one. That sketch, of course, was the result of his empirical studies carried out with the aid of his dialectical method. To emphasise this, Marx referred to the development of the proletariat in both ancient Rome and in modern times:

The Roman proletarians became, not wage-labourers, but an idle mob more abject than those who used to be called ‘poor whites’ in the southern United States; and what opened up alongside them was not a capitalist but a slave mode of production. Thus events of strikingly similarity, taking place in different historical contexts, led to totally disparate results. By studying each of these developments separately, and then comparing them, one may easily discover the key to this phenomenon. But success will never come with the master-key of a general historico-philosophical theory, whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical.²³⁸

Marx’s comments clearly show that the problem with a “historico-philosophical theory” is that it is inherently teleological viz. because it “imposes” an inevitable course on all people by disregarding the concrete conditions of time and place. Yet, he was clearly not denying all inevitability, but only arguing that one cannot discover what is inevitable without actual empirical research. Thus, Marx’s method is open-ended because the results it achieves will depend on the specificity of the data it analyses. Any generalising, then, can only happen after

²³⁵ Ibid., 136.

²³⁶ Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 31.

²³⁷ Derek Sayer, “Marx after *Capital*: a biographical note (1867-1883),” in *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and ‘the peripheries of capitalism’*, ed. Teodor Shanin (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 154; Kevin Anderson, “The ‘Unknown’ Marx’s *Capital*, Volume I: The French Edition of 1872-1875, 100 Years Later,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 15, no. 4 (1983): 71; Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 180.

²³⁸ Marx, “A letter to the Editorial Board of *Otechestvennye Kapiski*,” 136.

that fact. It is the “historico-philosophical theory” which generalises ahead of any actual research, and hence produces pre-determined, inevitable results.

It should now be evident as to why Plekhanov and co. had such an aversion to this letter: it openly contradicted what they understood to be Marxism. Instead of grappling with their own misconceptions, and confirmed in their belief that they were absolutely right as opposed to the Narodniks, they suppressed and even mangled the meaning of the letter. The leader in this was Plekhanov. He first mentioned Marx’s letter in his *Development of the Monist View of History*. There, in criticising the Narodnik Mikhailovsky, he argued that “Mr. Mikhailovsky read (*if he has read*) the preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*, in which the philosophical-historical theory of Marx is set forth” and, further “What could Marx say about the article of Mr. Mikhailovsky? A man had fallen into misfortune, by taking the philosophical-historical theory of Marx to be that which it was not in the least.”²³⁹ So, despite Marx’s explicit statements against holding a “historico-philosophical theory” Plekhanov mockingly attacked Mikhailovsky for not understanding that Marx in fact did have a “philosophical-historical theory.” Notwithstanding all they wrote, Plekhanov consistently ignored Marx and Engels’ repeated disavowals to holding any philosophy. I do not think it is possible to entertain the notion that Plekhanov never really understood what he was reading. Rather, it is that he thought his conception of Marxism was correct.

As a result, it must be considered tragically ironic, or even laughable, when Plekhanov went on to make the bold statement that the “Russian disciples of Marx are faithful to him.”²⁴⁰ Even more so when he later claimed that

The study of that reality in the 70s brought Marx to the *conditional* conclusion: ‘If Russia continues to pursue the path she has followed since the emancipation of the peasantry...she will become a perfect capitalist nation...and after that, once fallen in the bondage of the capitalist regime, she will experience the pitiless laws of capitalism like other profane peoples. That is all.’²⁴¹

However, Plekhanov made a dishonest sleight of hand! There is simply no other way to describe attributing your own words to another i.e. to characterise the act of putting your own words into the mouth of another and handling it as an actual quote. Plekhanov’s Soviet editors treated Plekhanov’s action with near silence, only pointing out that he had misquoted Marx. As was shown above, what Marx actually wrote was

Only this: If Russia is tending to become a capitalist nation like the nations of Western Europe – and in the last few years she has been at great pains to achieve this – she will not succeed without first transforming a large part of her peasants into proletarians; subsequently, once brought into the fold of the capitalist regime, she will pass under its pitiless laws like other profane peoples. That is all.²⁴²

²³⁹ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 296, 297.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 301.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 302.

²⁴² Marx, “A letter to the Editorial Board of *Otechestvennye Kapiski*,” 136.

Plekhanov used the authority of Marx to buttress his view that since the emancipation of the serfs Russia has definitely entered the road of capitalism and was inevitably becoming “a perfect capitalist nation.” However, that was never the viewpoint of Marx or Engels while the former was alive. As they stated as late as 1882,

The *Communist Manifesto* had as its object the proclamation of the inevitably impending dissolution of modern bourgeois property. But in Russia we find, face to face with the rapidly developing capitalist swindle and bourgeois landed property, just beginning to develop, more than half the land owned in common by the peasants. Now the question is: can the Russian *obshchina*, though greatly undermined, yet a form of primeval common ownership of land, pass directly to the higher form of communist common ownership? Or on the contrary, must it first pass through the same process of dissolution such as constitutes the historical evolution of the West?

The only answer to that possible today is this: If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development.²⁴³

This preface was not unknown to Plekhanov as he had cited it in his first “Marxist” work.²⁴⁴ Finally, Engels himself had repeated these positions in 1894 the year before he died:

Whether enough of this commune has been saved so that, if the occasion arises, as Marx and I still hoped in 1882, it could become the point of departure for communist development in harmony with a sudden change of direction in Western Europe, I do not presume to say. But this much is certain: if a remnant of this commune is to be preserved, the first condition is the fall of tsarist despotism – revolution in Russia.²⁴⁵

Plekhanov, in all his writings, showed none of the conditionality of Marx and Engels’ position. His view was that Russia definitively entered onto the capitalist road after the 1861 emancipation and there was no way of leaving the path too early or too soon.²⁴⁶ He was also certain that this

²⁴³ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Preface to Russian Edition of 1882” in *Birth of the Communist Manifesto*, ed. Dirk J. Struik (New York: International Publishers, 1993), 131-132.

²⁴⁴ Plekhanov, “Socialism and the Political Struggle,” 79-80.

²⁴⁵ Frederick Engels, “Afterword to ‘On Social Relations in Russia,’” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works Volume 27, Engels 1890-95* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 433.

²⁴⁶ In a footnote to the 1910 German edition of *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, Plekhanov wrote that “Certain Marxists in our country are known to have thought otherwise in the autumn of 1905. They considered a *socialist* revolution possible in Russia, since, they claimed, the country’s productive forces were sufficiently developed for such a revolution.” See, Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 62. Here Plekhanov was taking aim at Trotsky, and this position he repeated against Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1917. The fact that this perspective held ideological sway in the Second International, is shown, for example by an article written by Antonio Gramsci in 1917. Gramsci wrote that, “The Bolshevik revolution is based more on ideology than actual events... It’s a revolution against Karl Marx’s Capital. In Russia, Marx’s Capital was the book of the bourgeoisie, more than of the proletariat. It was the crucial proof needed to show that, in Russia, there had to be a bourgeoisie, there had to be a capitalist era, there had to be a Western-style of progression, before the proletariat could even think about making a comeback, about their class demands, about revolution. Events overcame ideology. Events have blown out of the water all critical notions which stated Russia would have to develop according to the laws of historical materialism. The Bolsheviks renounce Karl Marx and they assert, through their clear statement of action, through what they have

was the Marxist view and he therefore openly argued that way.²⁴⁷ As he wrote: “Already since the time of the abolition of serfdom Russia has patently entered the path of capitalist development.”²⁴⁸ Thus, he had to correct Marx and Engels in this regard, just as he had to correct them on the question of their method, on the questions of philosophy and ideology, and on the very name for their views i.e. dialectical materialism. Consequently, most Marxists whose philosophical views descend from Soviet Marxism, actually descend from Plekhanov, not Marx or Engels. They are not Marxists, they are Plekhanovians viz. that curious Russian admixture of bits of Hegel, Russian Hegelianism, German Young Hegelianism, and Darwinism with a thin coat of Marxist language plastered on i.e. neo-Young Hegelianism. So, when Plekhanov attacked his opponents, his words applied also to himself, because he and his comrades, likewise, “not having the least conception of his [Marx’s] scientific point of view, were attempting to refashion Marx himself after their own likeness and image” i.e. after the “likeness and image” of the creator of dialectical materialism.²⁴⁹

There is an important element to Plekhanov’s philosophy which I have not yet discussed. To be more specific, this concerns his relationship to Ludwig Feuerbach. After Hegel and Russian Hegelianism, the most important influence on Plekhanov’s understanding of Marx and Engels’ work was German Young Hegelianism in the form of Ludwig Feuerbach. If the first two theoretical trends can be said to have been the basic lens which coloured Plekhanov’s reading of Marx, this third can be described as the framework which held and structured those same lenses. As such, Plekhanov’s mechanical materialism derives not from Marx, but Feuerbach.

Engels, in his discussion of the development and decomposition of German philosophy, argued that the problem of the nature of human cognition was *the* fundamental dividing line:

The great basic question of all philosophy, especially of more recent philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking and being... The answers which the philosophers gave to this question split them into two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature... comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism.²⁵⁰

achieved, that the laws of historical materialism are not as set in stone, as one may think, or one may have thought previously.” But, as I have just shown, this is wrong. Marx did not argue that in Russia “there had to be a capitalist era, there had to be a Western-style of progression, before the proletariat could even think about making a comeback, about their class demands, about revolution.” That was Plekhanov’s invention. Thus the Russian revolution was a ‘Revolution against Plekhanov’s Philosophy of Dialectical Materialism,’ and not against ‘Capital’. See, Antonio Gramsci, “The Revolution against ‘Capital’,” accessed 23 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/1917/12/revolution-against-capital.htm>.

²⁴⁷ It is not a question of whether Marx or Plekhanov was correct: it is that Plekhanov’s position and his arguments flowed from his philosophy and, further, that he and his comrades suppressed and distorted Marx’s writings in defence of that philosophy. Marx himself said that his position on Russia only held temporarily; ergo, Plekhanov’s position regarding the development of capitalism would be true at some point in time as Lenin proved later on. Therefore, Plekhanov became correct because of socio-economic development and not because of his philosophy; thus, when conditions changed, he continued to cling to his philosophy and to reach incorrect conclusions. As I have already argued, Lenin broke with this very philosophy in his *Philosophical Notebooks*.

²⁴⁸ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 303.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 301.

²⁵⁰ Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy,” 593-594.

After providing this general definition of idealism and materialism, Engels went on to discuss the specific differences between some of the various schools of materialism. Now, in his *Development of the Monist View*, Plekhanov gave a definition which clearly showed the inspiration of Engels:

Materialism is the direct opposite of *idealism*. Idealism strives to explain all the phenomena of Nature, all the qualities of matter, by these or those qualities of the *spirit*. Materialism acts in the exactly opposite way. It tries to explain psychic phenomena by these or those qualities of *matter*, by this or that organisation of the human or, in more general terms, of the animal *body*. All those philosophers in the eyes of whom the prime factor is matter belong to the camp of the *materialists*; and all those who consider such a factor to be the *spirit* are *idealists*.²⁵¹

Though Plekhanov correctly described the key distinction between idealists and materialists in positing the primacy of thinking or being, the definition he gave here was not of all materialism in general, but of one particular school viz. mechanical materialism. Though all materialists agree on nature, matter being primary and thought, spirit, being secondary, this does not exhaust all possible interpretations of this basic line. So while crude, mechanical materialism explains thought as a product of the impact of external influences on the physical body, Marx and Engels went beyond this agency-denying simplistic view. Plekhanov, then, in presenting a particular form of materialism as materialism in general, blurred the distinction between the various schools and collapsed the views of Marxism into pre-Marxian materialism.

This was an approach he consistently took. For example, the work I have just cited was ostensibly dedicated to analysing the development of materialism up to Marx himself. There Plekhanov pointed out that the “French materialists were fearless *sensationalists*, consistent throughout, i.e., they considered all the psychic functions of man to be *transformed sensations*.”²⁵² He further explained this position as follows:

the French materialists regarded all the psychic activity of man as transformed *sensations* (sensations transformees). To consider psychic activity from this point of view means to consider all notions, all conceptions and feelings of man to be the result of *the influence of his environment upon him*.²⁵³

In explaining sensationalism, Plekhanov expressly underlined that such a perspective was held by the French materialists i.e. pre-Marxian materialism. But, as I have already stated, Plekhanov was a sensationalist on the question of human cognition. Thus, in his first major attack on Alexander Bogdanov in 1907, he wrote that

We call material objects (bodies) those objects that exist independently of our consciousness and, acting on our senses, arouse in us certain *sensations* which in turn

²⁵¹ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 13-14.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 16.

underlie our notions of the external world, that is, of those same material objects as well as of their relationships.²⁵⁴

External reality acts upon the human body. The human body, above all the brain, undergoes changes, which result in the formation of thought. Here the human is pictured as a simple passive recipient. And this was not an accidental formulation made in the heat of polemics. As Plekhanov wrote the previous year, “As opposed to ‘*spirit*’, we call ‘*matter*’ that which, by *affecting our sense organs, gives rise to some sensation in us.*”²⁵⁵ More than once he reiterated this argument.²⁵⁶ This raises the question: where did Plekhanov derive this view from?

One authority who Plekhanov cited as a support on the question of the relation of thinking to being was the famous Russian physiologist, Ivan Sechenov. Plekhanov wrote:

Sechenov adds: ‘*Whatever the external objects may be in themselves, independently of our consciousness – even if it be granted that our impressions of them are only conventional signs – the fact remains that the similarity or difference of the signs we perceive corresponds with a real similarity or difference*’ ... we must note that Mr. Sechenov does not express himself quite precisely. When he admits that our impressions may be only conventional signs of things in themselves he seems to acknowledge that things in themselves have some kind of ‘appearance’ that we do not know of and which is inaccessible to our consciousness. But ‘*appearance*’ is precisely only the result of the action upon us of the things in themselves: *outside this action they have no ‘appearance’ whatsoever.*²⁵⁷

²⁵⁴ Georgi Plekhanov, “Materialismus Militans: Reply to Mr Bogdanov,” accessed 23 November, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1907/materialismus-militans.htm>.

²⁵⁵ Georgi Plekhanov, “Materialism Yet Again,” accessed 23 November, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1906/materialism-yet-again.htm>.

²⁵⁶ “And if we prefer to be materialists, with a little reflection we must come to the conviction that if we, thanks to the action upon us of things in themselves, *know some properties of these things*, then, contrary to Holbach’s opinion, *their nature is also known to us to a certain extent for the nature of a thing is manifest in its properties.*” Georgi Plekhanov, “Notes to Engels’ Book *Ludwig Feuerbach...*,” in G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume I* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1961), 513; “Those changes in the state of the body which are produced by contact with ice are accompanied by a *sensation of cold*. The capacity of ice to arouse this sensation is again called its property. To Petzoldt, all properties of all bodies are ‘reducible’ to sensations. He thinks so because, as we know already, he takes the standpoint of idealism, although he is afraid to admit it either to himself or to others. In fact, sensation is but the subjective side of the process which begins when a given body — shall we say, ice — starts to influence another body organised in a certain way, for example, the human body... What does it mean to know a given thing? It means that one must have a correct idea of its properties. This idea of its properties is always based on the sensations we experience when subjected to its influence. Knowledge, like sensation, is always subjective, because the process of cognition is nothing more than the process of forming certain ideas in the subject... The question is: can knowledge be true? To put it another way: can the ideas of the properties of a thing formed in the subject correspond to, that is, not contradict, its real properties? This question presents little difficulty when we remember that our ideas of a thing are created on the basis of the sensations we experience when we come into contact with it in some way or other.” Georgi Plekhanov, “Cowardly Idealism,” accessed 23 November, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1910/cowardly-idealism.htm>.

²⁵⁷ Plekhanov, “Notes to Engels’ Book *Ludwig Feuerbach...*,” 514-515.

Plekhanov also brought up Sechenov in polemical attacks on his adversaries.²⁵⁸ Yet the former clearly understood the latter in a one-sided, abstract way, viz. a mechanical materialist manner. This is shown by the following fact. The Soviet psychologist and founder of Activity Theory, A.N. Leontyev, once noted that,

At the present time, there are (as we know) two points of view on the general mechanism of sensory processes. One, the older, is that sensation is the result of transmission of excitation arising in a receptor organ to sensory zones. With the other, opposite point of view, substantiated in the nineteenth century by the eminent Russian physiologist Sechenov, the structure of sensory processes must also include motor acts with their proprioceptive signalling.²⁵⁹

The “older” point of view to which Leontyev alluded was precisely that of sensationalism. So his point was that, according to Sechenov, human sensation should not be seen as only a passive process. Action on the part of the subject is also an essential factor. Thought does not simply arise on the basis of human sensations, but the latter is still an important aspect in cognition. It does not matter from which angle we look at the problem: humans are not mere objects and any proper understanding of the development of consciousness must include activity.²⁶⁰ Aside from the fact that Plekhanov read into Sechenov what was not there, it must be concluded that his perspective on cognition was already formed beforehand.

The real source of Plekhanov’s epistemology was Feuerbach, whose philosophy he uncritically digested. For him, the latter’s importance lay exactly in *his* founding of modern materialism. According to Plekhanov,

He pointed out that there is no – there can be no – *thinking independent of man*, i.e., of an actual and material creature. Thinking is activity of the brain. To quote Feuerbach: ‘But

²⁵⁸ Georgi Plekhanov, “A Few Words to Our Opponents,” in Georgi Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View of History* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), 369-370; Plekhanov, “Materialismus Militans: Reply to Mr Bogdanov,” accessed 23 November, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1907/materialismus-militans.htm>.

²⁵⁹ A.N. Leontyev, *Problems of the Development of the Mind* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981), 140.

²⁶⁰ “In examining this problem the first point we have to consider is the question of the significance of the category of activity in any interpretation of how human consciousness is determined. There are two approaches to this major question. One of them postulates the direct dependence of the phenomena of consciousness on the various influences exerted upon man’s receptive systems. This approach was expressed with classical clarity in the 19th-century psycho-physics and physiology of the sense organs. The main task of research in those days was to establish the quantitative dependence of sensations, regarded as elements of consciousness, on the physical parameters of the stimuli affecting the sense organs. These researches were thus based on the ‘stimulus-response’ pattern. The limitations of this approach lay in the fact that it assumed, on the one hand, things and objects and, on the other, a passive subject influenced by them. In other words, this approach ignores the significant element of the actual relations of the subject with the objective world; it ignores his activity. Such abstraction is, of course, admissible, but only within the bounds of an experiment intended to discover certain properties of elementary structures and functions contributing to the realisation of certain mental processes. The moment one goes beyond these narrow limits, however, one realises the inadequacy of this approach, and it was this that compelled the early psychologists to explain psychological facts on the basis of special forces, such as that of active apperception, inner intention or will, etc., that is to say, to appeal to the active nature of the subject, but only in an idealistically interpreted, mystified form.” A.N. Leontyev, “Activity and Consciousness,” in *Philosophy in the USSR: Problems of Dialectical Materialism*, tran. Robert Darglish (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 180.

the brain is the organ of thinking only as long as it is connected with the human head and body.²⁶¹

Here there is finally a mention of activity, but this is only the activity of the physical organ, i.e. the brain, which has been induced by previous external activity. It is, so to speak, unthinking thought. This is not to imply that the brain can be dispensed with. As Engels wrote, “we simply cannot get away from the fact that everything that sets men acting must find its way through their brains.”²⁶² But this statement is only the basic postulate of all materialism and in no way represents a specifically Marxist position. This was expressed by Engels elsewhere when he wrote that “it is precisely *the alteration of nature* by men, not solely nature as such, which is most essential and immediate basis of human thought.”²⁶³ This is true not only for the development of society, but also for the very origin of our species.²⁶⁴ Thinking only occurs in and through activity and that is why humans do not and cannot learn by passively receiving information from the outside. To assume the opposite would be to consider humans as mere automatons, to obliterate their agency, will, etc. But this is exactly what distinguishes humans from all other animals.²⁶⁵ The human brain is essential, but without activity, it explains very little.²⁶⁶

To repeat: Plekhanov was a sensationalist and this was a result of his mechanical materialism. But he only reproduced these views from Feuerbach. Thus, he wrote that “According to Feuerbach, before thinking of an object, man experiences its action on himself

²⁶¹ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 39.

²⁶² Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy,” 600.

²⁶³ Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, 231.

²⁶⁴ “Labour is the source of all wealth, the political economists assert. And it really is the source – next to nature, which supplies it with the material that it converts into wealth. But it is even infinitely more than this. It is the prime basic condition for all human existence, and this to such an extent that, in a sense, we have to say that labour created man himself.” Ibid., 170.

²⁶⁵ “A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will.” Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 174.

²⁶⁶ “Of course, it is inadmissible and absurd to speak of any ‘ideal’ without man, with his human ‘head’, not only from the perspective of Marx’s materialism, but from any materialism that accounts for the words it is using. But this in no way means that it is to be ‘found in the head’, deep in the bulk of the cerebral cortex, although it does not exist without the brain and the head, and theorists who do not understand this difference must be reminded of this indisputable fact, that not only the ‘ideal’, but the totality [совокупность] of *material relations of production* cannot exist without man with his human head, and even the very forces of production. Following from the above, we can see with how much accuracy and acuity V.I. Lenin formulated the dialectical-materialist understanding of the relationship between thought and the brain. *Man thinks with aid of the brain* – that is the Leninist formula. Not the ‘brain’ itself, as the physiologists and cyberneticists who think one-sidedly on this issue claim and believe. And this is a principal difference. Yes, the thing is that it is not the brain that thinks, but an individual with the aid of the brain – an individual who is entwined in a net of social relations, always mediated by material objects, created by man for man. The brain is but the material, anatomical-physiological organ of this labour, mental labour, that is to say, intellectual labour. The product of this special labour is precisely the ideal. And not the material changes within the brain itself.” Evald Ilyenkov, “Dialectics of the Ideal” in *Dialectics of the Ideal: Evald Ilyenkov and Creative Soviet Marxism*, eds. Alex Levant and Vesa Oittinen (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 40-41; “man thinks with the help of the brain.” Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, 88.

contemplates and senses it.”²⁶⁷ Plekhanov argued that Marx had that proposition in mind when he criticised Feuerbach’s materialism as being “contemplative.”²⁶⁸ And yet, Plekhanov proceeded to defend Feuerbach *vis-à-vis* Marx:

It may of course be objected, in defense of Feuerbach, that in the process of our acting upon objects, we cognize their properties only in the measure in which they, on their part, act upon us. In both cases *sensation* precedes *thinking*; in both cases we first *sense* their properties, and only then *think* of them. But that is something that Marx did not deny. For him the gist of the matter was not the indisputable fact that sensation precedes thinking, but the fact that man is induced to think chiefly by the sensations he experiences in the process of his acting upon the outer world.²⁶⁹

Here we have an obvious sensationalist understanding of cognition, derived from Feuerbach, but now hoisted on to Marx! To Plekhanov, thought is always only a product of external factors: these induce various sensations in the human body and which, in turn, induce thinking. This cannot be stressed enough viz. there was no actual tension in Plekhanov between his neo-Young Hegelianism and Marx’s method. Rather, any references he made to human action and activity, was only a formal adherence to Marxism proper. In essence, Plekhanov understood something complete contrary to what Marx and Engels actually argued for in their numerous writings.

Since Plekhanov’s dialectical materialism was not a positive development of Marxism, but a replication of Feuerbach’s philosophy, he consequently repeated Feuerbach’s weaknesses which Marx had already criticised in his famous theses. For example, on the question of truth Plekhanov wrote that:

The criterion of truth lies not in me, but in the relations which exist outside me. Those views are *true* which correctly present those relations; those views are *mistaken* which distort them. That theory of natural science is *true* which correctly grasps the mutual relations between the phenomena of nature; that historical description is *true* which correctly depicts the social relations existing in the epoch described.²⁷⁰

However, all that Plekhanov wrote here were mere tautologies, because to assert that that which is true, is that which is correct, is to say nothing at all. Further, his argument was abstract as it contained no mention of human practical activity.²⁷¹ He spoke only of theory correctly reflecting reality, but not how that reflection was to be judged. Yet as Marx had already stated in his second theses on Feuerbach:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth i.e. the reality and power,

²⁶⁷ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 32.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁷⁰ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 245-246.

²⁷¹ “What then were the weaknesses of Feuerbach’s position? In general, and on the whole, they were the same as those of all pre-Marxian materialism, and primarily incomprehension of the role of practical activity as activity altering nature.” E.V. Ilyenkov, *Dialectical Logic: Essays on Its History and Theory* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 224.

the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.²⁷²

For Marx, then, the criterion of truth does not lie, as with Plekhanov, simply “outside” of humans, but rather in the dialectical interface between humanity and nature viz. precisely in human activity. Therefore, Plekhanov’s argument was “purely scholastic” and resolved itself into mere formal platitudes. Or, in other words, his approach to the question of truth was “contemplative” i.e. Feuerbachian.

Since Plekhanov reproduced the contemplative character of Feuerbach’s philosophy, it should be no surprise that he would claim that “Marx considered the explanation of human ‘self-consciousness’ to be the most important task of social science.”²⁷³ However, here he once again ignored Marx. The latter stated in his eleventh thesis that “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.”²⁷⁴ Plekhanov therefore conceived the task of social science in a Feuerbachian manner i.e. that of “contemplation.” However, Marx clearly understood the task of social science to be to aid humanity in taking control of and revolutionising its conditions of existence. Time after time Plekhanov ignored the factor of practical activity. Hence, it is fully ironic, and underlines his misunderstanding of Marx, that to prove his point that “Marx considered the explanation of human ‘self-consciousness’ to be the most important task of social science” Plekhanov cited Marx’s first thesis on Feuerbach:

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing (Gegenstand), reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object* (Objekt) or of *contemplation* (Anschauung), but not as *human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively*. Hence it happened that the *active side*, in contradistinction to materialism, was developed by idealism – but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such.²⁷⁵

But here he cited only the *first half* of this thesis. This is exactly because he interpreted it one-sidedly.²⁷⁶ Plekhanov argued that the French materialists of the eighteenth century only saw humanity as a member of the animal kingdom and thus only as objects, and hence only by looking at “social ‘practice,’ concrete human activity” can we see humanity as subject, only then can we see “how the *subjective side of history* comes about.”²⁷⁷ Here Plekhanov missed the whole point, or consciously disregarded it, because he employed only a half quote. The whole point of Marx’s first thesis is that human activity is not merely subjective but *also objective*. As he wrote

Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from conceptual objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity. In *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, he therefore regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while

²⁷² Marx, “Theses On Feuerbach,” 615.

²⁷³ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 247.

²⁷⁴ Marx, “Theses On Feuerbach,” 617.

²⁷⁵ Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” as cited in Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 248.

²⁷⁶ It could also be because of his practice of playing with quotations.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 248, 249.

practice is conceived and defined only in its dirty-Jewish form of appearance. Hence he does not grasp the significance of ‘revolutionary’, of ‘practical-critical’, activity.²⁷⁸

Yet, in Plekhanov’s view, only the social relations, the environment are objective, while humans are subjective. According to him

From the point of view of Marx it is impossible to counterpose the ‘*subjective*’ views of the individual to the views of ‘the mob,’ ‘the majority,’ etc., as to something *objective*. The mob consists of men, and the views of men are always ‘*subjective*,’ since views of one kind or another are one of the qualities of the *subject*. What are objective are not the views of the ‘mob’ but the *relations*, in nature or in society, *which are expressed in those views*.²⁷⁹

Plekhanov argued that these views were Marx’s and yet the crux of the latter’s dialectics was that humanity is the subject-object: in working on its environment, humanity works on itself. In Plekhanov’s view, however, humanity is subject and object: it is an object of larger forces and when it acts is it subject. The distinction may seem abstruse, but it is a crucial and subtle one: Marx’s stance was truly dialectical and Plekhanov’s was actually dualist which, of course, flowed from his uncritical adoption of Feuerbach. And, as always, he attributed his own position to Marx.

In collapsing Marx into Feuerbach, Plekhanov erased the distinction between the two. Therefore it is no surprise that he openly argued that “Feuerbach, who was Marx’s immediate precursor in the field of philosophy and who in considerable measure worked out the philosophical foundation of what can be called the world-outlook of Marx and Engels.”²⁸⁰ When Plekhanov made that assertion he did not simply mean that Feuerbach had been a formative influence on Marx and Engels, but that a core chunk of their thinking was provided by Feuerbach viz. that they were Feuerbachians. This is shown by Plekhanov’s comments on the role of the brain:

The above quotation from Feuerbach regarding the ‘human head’ shows that when he wrote these words the problem of ‘the kind of matter the brain is made up of’ was solved by him in a ‘purely’ materialistic sense. This solution was also accepted by Marx and Engels. It provided the foundation of their own philosophy, as can be seen with the utmost clarity from Engels’ works, so often quoted here – *Ludwig Feuerbach and Anti-Dühring*. That is why we must make a closer study of this solution; in doing so, we shall at the same time be studying the philosophical aspect of Marxism.²⁸¹

In writing these lines Plekhanov totally ignored Marx’s critique of Feuerbach and so reduced Marxism to a variety of Feuerbachianism. Further, he utterly ignored the writings of Engels which he “so often quoted” because there Engels repeatedly stated that philosophy was no longer

²⁷⁸ Marx, “Theses On Feuerbach,” 615.

²⁷⁹ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 245.

²⁸⁰ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 25.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

necessary and had been replaced by science.²⁸² Since Plekhanov considered Marxism a philosophy it would have been supremely easy for him to see little distinction between Marx and his intellectual forerunner. However, in asserting that Marxism was only an extension of Feuerbach he thereby denied the qualitative break with Feuerbach and obliterated the significance of Marxism viz. its scientific character.

To Plekhanov, the fundamental importance of Feuerbach was his solution to the problem of the relationship between thinking and being:

In an article entitled ‘Provisional Theses for the Reform of Philosophy,, which came out in 1842 and, judging by the facts, had a strong influence on Marx, Feuerbach said that ‘the real relation of thinking to being is only as follows: being is the *subject*; thinking, the *predicate*. Thinking is conditioned by being, and not being by thinking. Being is conditioned by itself...has its foundation in itself.’ This view on the relation of being to thinking, which Marx and Engels made the foundation of the materialistic explanation of history, is a most important outcome of the criticism of Hegel’s idealism already completed in its main features by Feuerbach.²⁸³

As I have noted in a previous essay, in 1844 Marx wrote a letter to Feuerbach where he stated that the latter’s works were the theoretical basis of communism; but, Marx had written this when he was still a Young Hegelian. Thus, after 1845, after the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, after the “Theses on Feuerbach,” and, finally, after *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels had utterly broken with Young Hegelianism and so Feuerbach could not be the basis for their views. As I have previously written,

So while the Feuerbachian dialectic represented an advance over the Hegelian dialectic in positing the material basis for human ideas, especially that of religion, it represented a retrogression in that it removed the importance of human subjectivity viz. the transformative power of human practice. As a result of this, Feuerbach left humanity out of history, outside of a ‘particular form of society’ and hence Feuerbach’s dialectic was still an abstraction like Hegelian, even though more concrete. This critique was then developed to its greatest extent in Marx and Engel’s *The German Ideology*. There Marx most explicitly re-emphasised the importance of human practice and historicised the Feuerbachian dialectic by critiquing it.²⁸⁴

This is precisely the reason why Marx and Engels did not and could not adopt Feuerbach’s “reformatory critique:” it was ahistorical. Yet the process of human cognition can *only ever* be understood historically, as a temporal process. Whether we consider the origin of humanity, its phylogenesis, or the life-span of a single individual, its ontogenesis, the rise of consciousness is

²⁸² Jason Devine, “On the “Philosophy” of “Dialectical Materialism”,” accessed 25 November 2016, <http://links.org.au/node/4667>.

²⁸³ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 28.

²⁸⁴ Devine, “On the “Philosophy” of “Dialectical Materialism”,” accessed 25 November 2016, <http://links.org.au/node/4667>.

the social development of activity.²⁸⁵ To consider human cognition in an ahistorical manner, as an inborn quality, is to lapse back into idealism. Thus, as Marx and Engels wrote in *The German Ideology*: “As far as Feuerbach is a materialist he does not deal with history, and as far as he considers history he is not a materialist. With him materialism and history diverge completely.”²⁸⁶ Clearly Plekhanov did not, or rather choose not to see the qualitative break here. And while he never had access to *The German Ideology*, this point could still have been gleaned from Marx’s theses and Plekhanov’s favourite works of Engels. If Feuerbach was an idealist in history, then there is no possible way that his philosophy could be the “foundation of the materialistic explanation of history” as developed and expounded by Marx and Engels.

Since Plekhanov removed any clear distinction between Feuerbach’s and Marx’s materialism, he consequently dropped Marx’s solution of the problem of the nature of human cognition. As Feuerbach wrote in his “Provisional Theses:” “The true relation of thinking and being is simply this. *Being* is *subject* and *thinking* a *predicate* but a predicate such as contains the *essence* of its subject. Thinking comes from being but being does not come from thinking. Being comes from itself and through itself.”²⁸⁷ Here Feuerbach spoke of “being” in general. This was the foundation for his mechanical materialism because he reduced the human, the subject, to a mere object, which is acted upon by nature, by reality. As opposed to this though, Marx wrote that “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”²⁸⁸ Here Marx spoke of “social existence.” This is the foundation of Marx’s method because in referring to “social existence” he was consciously referring to humanity determining itself by its productive activity; for Marx, the subject acts on itself as object.²⁸⁹ Hence his point that Feuerbach “does not grasp the significance of “revolutionary”, of “practical-critical”, activity” and further

²⁸⁵ “The method of scientific analysis of the origin and function of human consciousness, both social and individual, was discovered, in the first place, by Marx... It is evident that an explanation of the nature of consciousness lies in the same features of human activity as those that make consciousness inevitable: in its objective–subjective productive character... Research on the formation in children of concepts and logical (mental) operations contributed significantly to science. It was shown that concepts are by no means formed in the head of a child in the same way that sensory generic images are formed, but that they represent the result of a process of appropriating ‘ready,’ historically developed meaning, and that this process takes place in the activity of the child under conditions of communication with people around him.” A.N. Leont’ev, “Activity, Consciousness, and Personality,” accessed 26 November, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/leontev/works/1978/index.htm>; “Humanity is not a product of nature. On the contrary, it is a result of the system of social relations engendered by the development of material production. Humanity creates itself through history... The transformation of the infant from a biological organism into a human individual – a conscious, self-directed personality – is accomplished neither smoothly nor quickly. Ontogenesis, the confrontation of the child with history, is characterized by a series of complex restructurings which occur at several levels and in several contexts.” David Lethbridge, *Mind in the World: The Marxist Psychology of Self-Actualization* (Minneapolis: MEP Publications, 1992), 40, 96.

²⁸⁶ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 47.

²⁸⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach, “Provisional Theses for the Reformation of Philosophy,” in *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence S. Stepelevich (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 167.

²⁸⁸ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique*, 21.

²⁸⁹ “Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their material life... This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a

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. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.²⁹⁰

Hence, Feuerbach was a mechanical materialist insofar as he ignored the agency of the subject. This viewpoint was taken over *in toto* by Plekhanov and that is how he understood Marxism.²⁹¹ Therefore, I was wrong when I wrote previously that

when Marx refers to ‘My dialectic method,’ he does not and cannot mean that it is his in the sense of creating it. Rather he means in the sense of that method which he uses. For the conception that the ‘ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought,’ that ‘It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness,’ was not Marx’s insight but that of Feuerbach.²⁹²

Here I overstated the case, falling into the same error as Plekhanov and, in fact, ignored what I was actually arguing at that time and continue to argue viz. that Marx made a qualitative rupture with Feuerbach and Hegel because he broke with philosophy and developed a new science.²⁹³ This is the reason why Plekhanov’s dialectical materialism must be considered neither an application nor a development of Marxism, but a retrogression to pre-Marxian materialism.

definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce. Hence what individuals are depends on the material conditions of their production.” Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 37.

²⁹⁰ Marx, “Theses On Feuerbach,” 615-616.

²⁹¹ “It would be difficult to give a more striking illustration of the proposition that it is not being that is determined by thinking, but thinking that is determined by being.” Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 62; “It is not consciousness that determines being, but being that determines consciousness. When applied to the development of mankind, this means that it is not the social man’s ‘psyche’ that determines his way of life, but his way of life that determines his ‘psyche’.” Georgi Plekhanov, “On Franz Lütgenau’s Book,” accessed 25 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1908/lutgenau.htm>; “We shall see how these attempts themselves confirm by their very existence the correctness of the fundamental proposition of historical materialism: it is not being that is determined by consciousness, but consciousness that is determined by being.” Georgi Plekhanov, “On the So-Called Religious Seekings in Russia,” accessed 25 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1909/religion/index.htm>; “the basic proposition of materialism: that it is not thinking which determines being, but being which determines thinking. Georgi Plekhanov, “On Mr Windelband’s Book,” accessed 25 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1910/windelband.htm>; “Being is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by being.” Georgi Plekhanov, “Scepticism in Philosophy,” accessed 25 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1911/scepticism.htm>.

²⁹² Devine, “On the “Philosophy” of “Dialectical Materialism”,” accessed 25 November 2016, <http://links.org.au/node/4667>.

²⁹³ “Marx and Engels denied that a new philosophy had been created, and in fact argued that philosophy was an ideology, a form of false consciousness, and that Marx had developed a science of understanding human history.” Ibid; “Karl Marx, the man who was the first to give socialism, and thereby the whole labour movement of our day, a scientific foundation.” Frederick Engels, “Karl Marx,” in Karl Marx, *Selected Works: Volume 1* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Limited, 1943), 3.

At the risk of belabouring the point, Marx's relationship to Feuerbach was concisely detailed in his theses, fully developed in *The German Ideology*, and popularly described by Engels in his short book *Ludwig Feuerbach*. Although Plekhanov had no access to the second of these writings, he had studied and commented repeatedly on the other two. Yet Plekhanov wrote that "when criticizing Feuerbach in his Theses, Marx often develops and augments the former's ideas."²⁹⁴ The transition between Feuerbach and Marx is here presented as a simple quantitative progression i.e. in an undialectical manner. Therefore, Plekhanov openly stated that it must be "admitted that Marx's epistemology stems directly from that of Feuerbach, or, if you will, it is, properly speaking, the epistemology of Feuerbach, only rendered more profound by the masterly correction brought into it by Marx."²⁹⁵ Plekhanov studied and commented on the "Theses on Feuerbach" and other works by Marx and Engels, but their content did not actually exist for him. Although having consciously, openly, and directly broken with Feuerbach it turns out, according to Plekhanov, that Marx and Engels were really just repeating what Feuerbach had said i.e. there had been no break at all.²⁹⁶ In totally removing the radical character of the Marx' theses Plekhanov clearly felt that he understood Marx and Engels better than they themselves.

However, knowing that Plekhanov was not always scrupulous when it came to citing others, and seeing that he went to some lengths to read into Marx's theses a meaning they did not contain, it is extremely doubtful that Plekhanov was not unaware of what he was doing. In fact, his reduction of Marx's theoretical significance was, in part, achieved by not using full quotations:

Already in his Third Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx tackled the most difficult of all the problems he was to resolve in the sphere of social man's historical 'practice,' with the aid of the correct concept of the unity of subject and object, which Feuerbach had developed. The Thesis reads: 'The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing...forgets that circumstances are changed precisely by men, and that the educator must himself be educated.'²⁹⁷

Here Plekhanov left out the second part of this thesis: "The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*."²⁹⁸ If Plekhanov ever mentioned action carried out by humans it was always as the product of a previous inducement by some external force. Hence, the end to

²⁹⁴ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 31.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁹⁶ "When people say that, for a certain period, Marx and Engels were followers of Feuerbach, it is often inferred that, when that period ended, the world outlook of Marx and Engels changed considerably, and became quite different from Feuerbach's... This is a tremendous mistake. When they ceased from being followers of Feuerbach, Marx and Engels did not at all cease from sharing a very considerable part of his philosophical views. The best proof of this is the Theses which Marx wrote in criticism of Feuerbach. The Theses in no way eliminate the fundamental propositions in Feuerbach's philosophy, but only correct them, and – what is most important – call for an application more consistent (than Feuerbach's) in explaining the reality that surrounds man, and in particular his own activity. It is not thinking that determines being, but being that determines thinking. That is the fundamental thought in all of Feuerbach's philosophy. Marx and Engels made that thought the foundation of the materialist explanation of history." *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁹⁸ Marx, "Theses On Feuerbach," 616.

which human action tended was seen as pre-determined because its logic was pre-existent in the force that set it in motion. In this teleological perspective humans are only reactive. The open-ended character of human activity does not exist in Plekhanov's "Marxism." But this "Marxism" was constructed by dubious means. By selectively quoting the Marx's theses, Plekhanov endeavoured to justify equating the philosophy of Feuerbach with the scientific work of Marx and Engels.

To conclude the discussion of Plekhanov's debt to Feuerbach: the basis of Plekhanov's attacks on the Bolsheviks in 1905 and 1917 were the result of his mechanical materialism and this basis was taken from Feuerbach. It should be stressed that Plekhanov formally recognised that when it came to history, Feuerbach, "like the French 18th-century materialists with he had so much in common – he remained an *idealist*."²⁹⁹ Still, as shown above, he uncritically reproduced Feuerbach's ahistorical viewpoint and then presented it as the "philosophy" of Marx and Engels. On a personal level, this was because of Plekhanov's approach to quotations, and also possibly his own willful ignorance. At a deeper theoretical level, it was because Plekhanov consciously ignored both Marx's and Engels' repeated references to practical human activity i.e. humanity making history. The course of history is not determined by either the social relations or the forces of production, but by practical activity. As Marx said,

The very moment civilisation begins, production begins to be founded on the antagonism of orders, estates, classes, and finally on the antagonism of accumulated labor and immediate labor. No antagonism, no progress. This is the law that civilisation has followed up to our days. Till now the productive forces have been developed by virtue of this system of class antagonisms.³⁰⁰

Or as Marx and Engels wrote the following year "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."³⁰¹ This is because the conflict between the relations of production and forces of production *is* the class struggle. Trotsky, therefore, was quite correct when wrote the following about Plekhanov in 1909:

In all his writings of the revolutionary period you will look in vain for the thing that matters most: the immanent mechanism of class relationships, the inner logic of the revolutionary development of the masses. Instead, Plekhanov indulges in endless variations on the theme of that empty syllogism whose chief premise is that *our revolution is a bourgeois revolution*, and whose conclusion is that *we must show tact in our dealings with the Kadets*.³⁰²

Hence Trotsky was wrong where, in the same place, he argued that Plekhanov "for twenty-five years, tirelessly defended materialist dialectics against all forms of dogmatist reasoning and rationalist utopianism," and "that he preached the purest Marxism for twenty-five years."³⁰³

²⁹⁹ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 41.

³⁰⁰ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 59.

³⁰¹ Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 12.

³⁰² Leon Trotsky, *1905* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 306.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 306.

Plekhanov did not understand Marxism i.e. Marx's dialectical method and the communist world outlook, and what he actually defended was his own conceptions.³⁰⁴

The final dimension of Plekhanov's thought that I will consider is his various specific determinisms i.e. geographic, biological, and technological. At the basis of Plekhanov's ideology was his mechanical materialism; this was the real foundation upon which arose the superstructure of his derivative determinisms. Each one is a collapsing of the concrete specificity of human phenomena into a simpler force. His basic method was, therefore, consistent reductionism. His geographic determinism was taken from Hegel i.e. those points in which Hegel was at his most materialist, or in other words where he prefigures Feuerbach. In Plekhanov's article commemorating Hegel, he extensively discussed the role of geography in Hegel's philosophy of history. Since his focus was reviewing the importance of Hegel he did not present his own views on the question in great detail, but he did make the following statement:

Much was written both *before* and *after* Hegel about the significance of the geographical environment in man's historical development. But after him, as well as before him, scientists often made the mistake of bearing in mind only the *psychological* or even the *physiological* influence of surrounding nature on man, completely forgetting its influence on the condition of the social *productive forces and through them* on all the social relations between people in general...Hegel avoided this enormous error, if not in details at least in the *general setting of the question*.³⁰⁵

These lines contain the core of Plekhanov's understanding of this question. First, Hegel was the founder of the geographic approach to history, and hence he laid the basis for the Marxist view of the matter. Second, that the basis of the productive forces and social relations is not human activity, in the first place the class struggle, but rather the natural environment. Both these points are true only insofar as Plekhanov's views are understood to be synonymous with those of Marx and Engels. To clarify this question, we must look deeper into Plekhanov's writings on this matter.

As already pointed out, Plekhanov argued that the basis of historical materialism was largely founded by Feuerbach. However, since it was Hegel who initially pointed out the importance of geography, then it was the latter who developed what in Plekhanov's mind was one of the basic postulates of Marxism. Therefore he wrote that:

we see in Feuerbach the embryo of a materialist understanding of history. In this respect, however, he does not go further than Hegel...and even lags behind him. Together with

³⁰⁴ From all of Trotsky's remarks which I have quoted, it definite that he, like Lenin, considered Plekhanov his mentor. However, unlike Lenin, he never undertook a critical study of Hegel's dialectic, nor broke with Plehanov philosophically. As another example of Trotsky's theoretical debt to Plekhanov compare his statement in his well-known and oft-quoted comments on dialectics: "The dialectic and formal logic bear a relationship similar to that between higher and lower mathematics," with what Plekhanov wrote decades earlier: "Without undertaking a more detailed characterization of materialist dialectics (its relation to what, by a parallel with elementary mathematics, may be called elementary logic – see my preface to my translation of *Ludwig Feuerbach*)." See, Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1981), 49, and Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 46.

³⁰⁵ Plekhanov, "For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel's Death," 469-470.

Hegel, he stresses the significance of what the great German idealist called the geographic basis of world history.³⁰⁶

In this view, the development of historical materialism did not occur through Marx's critical appropriation of the insights of Hegel, Feuerbach, and others. Rather it was originally posited by Hegel and through a process of quantitative addition came to full flowering under Marx's influence:

In his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel already speaks of the important role of 'the geographical foundation of world history.' But since, in his view, the Idea is the ultimate cause of all development, and since it was only *en passant* and in instances of secondary importance... that he had recourse to a materialist explanation of phenomena, the thoroughly sound view he expressed regarding the historic significance of geographical environment could not lead him to all the fruitful conclusions that follow therefrom. It was only by the materialist Marx that these conclusions were drawn in their fullness.³⁰⁷

To achieve a concrete appraisal of the intellectual development of any thinker, their antecedents must be analysed. Yet, such an investigation must be attuned to both continuities and breaks because to emphasise either over the other, or in other words, to collapse one into the other, would be to miss the historical specificity of each individual. Since Plekhanov had a teleological view of history, he understood Marx to be inherent in his immediate predecessors, viz. by reading Marx via Hegel and Feuerbach he reduced Marx's ideas to those same thinkers. This Marx, however, was wholly of Plekhanov's creation.

Plekhanov believed that Marx's outlook on history was technological determinism, which itself was determined by the natural environment

Marx's reply thus reduces the whole question of the development of the economy to that of the causes determining the development of the productive forces at the disposal of society. In this, its final form, it is solved first and foremost by the reference to the nature of the geographic environment.³⁰⁸

Since, for Plekhanov, being in general preceded consciousness, and the former determined the latter mechanically, he held that the very origin of humanity was geographically determined. In his view "*only thanks to certain particular qualities of the geographical environment could our anthropomorphic ancestors rise to that height of intellectual development which was necessary to transform them into tool-making animals.*"³⁰⁹ Here, his mechanical materialism extended to geographical determinism, which in turn extended to biological determinism. Once again, humanity figured not as subject, but as object: an external influence, in this case geography,

³⁰⁶ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 41-42.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 49; Also, "It was Hegel who said that any philosophy may be reduced to *empty formalism*, if one confines oneself to the simple repetition of its fundamental principles. But Marx is not guilty of that sin either. He did not confine himself to repeating that the development of the productive forces lies at the basis of the entire historical progress of mankind... The development of the productive forces is itself determined by the qualities of the geographical environment surrounding man." Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 250, 271-272.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

worked upon on the human body and lead to the creation of tools. This is the exact same understanding of cognition: some external stimulus on the brain leads to consciousness, will, thought, etc. So in discussing the development of human hands Plekhanov suggested that

Probably they were formed in virtue of certain peculiarities of the *geographical environment* which made useful a physiological division of labour between the front and rear limbs. The successes of ‘intellect’ appeared as the *remote consequence* of this division and – again in favourable external circumstances – became in their turn the *immediate reason* for the appearance of man’s artificial organs, the use of tools.³¹⁰

As I have shown above though, in Marx and Engels’ view humanity was the creation of itself. Plekhanov’s dualist, abstract understanding of humanity always put the source of its activity outside itself, thereby denying the specific uniqueness of the human species.

Plekhanov therefore completely missed the essence of the matter when he asserted that the nature of humanity, what set it apart from all other animals, was its capacity for producing tools: “Franklin called man ‘a tool-making animal.’ The use and production of tools in fact does constitute the distinguishing feature of man.”³¹¹ Plekhanov’s first point is true and, in fact, Marx had already noted and commented on Franklin’s definition. However, his second point is utterly incorrect because in the same place where Marx referred to Franklin he demarcated his own perspective. Thus, Marx wrote that the “use and fabrication of instruments of labour, although existing in the germ among certain species of animals, is specifically characteristic of the human labour-process, and Franklin therefore defines man as a tool-making animal.”³¹² Marx noted that the production of tools already exists in a germ form among other animals. Therefore, he did not consider it *the* “distinguishing feature of” humanity, but only “specifically characteristic” of the latter. Further, as he stated later in the same work, “Aristotle’s definition is that man is by nature a town-citizen. This is quite as characteristic of ancient classical society as Franklin’s definition of man, as a tool-making animal, is characteristic of Yankeedom.”³¹³ Marx, then, in no way, uncritically endorsed Franklin’s definition of humanity, let alone adopted it as his own. Nor could he, since his definition of humanity was of the subject-object: the creature that produced its own existence and thus altered both itself and its environment.³¹⁴ The production of tools is only one aspect to this process: what matters is the self-production of humanity over time.³¹⁵

³¹⁰ Ibid., 158.

³¹¹ Ibid., 154.

³¹² Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 175.

³¹³ Ibid., 309.

³¹⁴ “The essential difference between human and animal society consists in the fact that animals at most *collect* while men produce.” Frederick Engels, “Engels to P.L. Lavrov, November 12-17, 1875,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 303.

³¹⁵ “Nature as such creates absolutely nothing ‘human’. Man with all his specifically human features is from beginning to end the result and product of his own labour. Even walking straight, which appears at first sight man’s natural, anatomically innate trait, is in actual fact a result of educating the child within an established society...Of course, it is mother nature that provides the anatomic and physiological prerequisites. However, the specifically human form which they ultimately assume is the product of labour, and it can only be comprehended or deduced from labour...An individual awaking to human life activity, that is, a natural biological being becoming a social one, is compelled to assimilate all forms of this activity through education. None of them are inherited biologically. What

The reason why Plekhanov got this so wrong is fully understandable, because, notwithstanding his tendency to ignore what Marx and Engels actually wrote, it resulted from his Feuerbachian understanding. Indeed, he argued that,

In the historical process of the development of productive forces, the capacity of man for ‘tool-making’ must be regarded first of all as a *constant magnitude*, while the surrounding external conditions for the use of this capacity in practice have to be regarded as a *constantly varying magnitude*.³¹⁶

Such an assertion must be considered utterly ahistorical and undialectical. First, it posited “tool-making” as the timeless essence of humanity, when actually the capability to make tools has varied over the historical course of our species and also varies over the life of a single individual. Second, it ignored the fact that since the advent of class society, the key factor in changing the natural environment has been the activity of humans; by definition, there is no way to understand the history of the former without recourse to the latter.³¹⁷ In this regard as well then, any talk of the influence of geography on society without reference to activity must be considered abstract. Indeed, to hold to geographical determinism by definition implies a denial of human agency.³¹⁸

is inherited is the physiological potential for assimilating them. At first they confront him as something existing outside and independently from him, as something entirely objective, as an object for assimilation and imitation. Through education, these forms of social human activity are transformed into a personal, individual, subjective possession and are even consolidated physiologically: an adult person is no longer able to walk on all fours, even if he wants to do so, and that is not at all because he would be ridiculed; raw meat makes him sick. In other words, all those features the sum of which makes up the much talked-of essence of man, are results and products (ultimate ones, of course) of socio-human labour activity. Man does not owe them to nature as such, still less to a supernatural force, whether it be called God or by some other name (e.g., idea). He owes them only to himself and the labour of previous generations.” E.V. Ilyenkov, *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx’s Capital* (Moscow: Progress Publishers: 1982), 71-72.

³¹⁶ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 161-162.

³¹⁷ Although the *Short Course* rightly rejected geographical determinism, its response was equally unhistorical in attaching a near-timeless character to the physical environment. This was a result of its mechanical materialism and, hence, its ignorance of activity; both products of its Plekhanovian heritage: “Geographical environment is unquestionably one of the constant and indispensable conditions of development of society and, of course, influences the development of society, accelerates or retards its development. But its influence is not the *determining* influence, inasmuch as the changes and development of society proceed at an incomparably faster rate than the changes and development of geographical environment. In the space of three thousand years three different social systems have been successively superseded in Europe: the primitive communal system, the slave system and the feudal system. In the eastern part of Europe, in the U.S.S.R., even four social systems have been superseded. Yet during this period geographical conditions in Europe have either not changed at all, or have changed so slightly that geography takes no note of them. And that is quite natural. Changes in geographical environment of any importance require millions of years, whereas a few hundred or a couple of thousand years are enough for even very important changes in the system of human society.” See, Commission of the C.C., *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, 118. However, as Gramsci rightly argued, “human history should be conceived also as the history of nature.” See, Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers: 1999), 448.

³¹⁸ “The kind of environment that surrounds him determines the character of his productive activities, his *means of production*. But the means of production just as inevitably determine the mutual relations among men in the process of production, as an army’s weapons determine all its organisation and all the mutual relations of the individuals it is made up of. But then the relations between people in the social process of production determine the entire structure of society. Consequently, the influence exerted on that structure by the natural environment is indisputable: *the character of the natural environment determines the character of the social environment*.” Georgi Plekhanov,

Plekhanov's geographical determinism was intimately connected with his biological determinism. He wrote that "difference in results (*the stages of cultural development*) achieved by various human societies is explained precisely by the fact that environment did not permit the various human tribes to make practical use to an equal extent of their capacity to 'invent.'"³¹⁹ Plekhanov then wrote that there was "a school of anthropologists who trace the origin of the difference in results mentioned in the different qualities of *the races of man*. But the view of this school does not hold water."³²⁰ He was correct to polemicise against racist perspectives, and as an internationalist Marxist, he stood against racism and for the solidarity of the world working class. Yet, his own view opened the door to racist ideas.

For example, in discussing how the natural environment shapes society he made a reference to Hegel's assertion that "that mountains divide men, while seas and rivers bring them together" but then he went on to note that

it must be observed about the sea that it does not always bring men together, Ratzel (*Anthropo-Geographie*, Stuttgart, 1882, p. 92) justly remarks that at a certain low stage of development the sea is an *absolute* frontier, i.e., it renders impossible any relations whatsoever between the peoples it divides. For their part, relations which are made possible originally only by the characteristics of geographical environment leave their impression on the physiognomy of primitive tribes. Islanders are markedly distinguished from those dwelling on continents.

"Die Bevölkerungen der Inseln sind in einigen Fällen völlig andere als die des nächst gelegenen Festlandes oder der nächsten grösseren Insel; aber auch wo sie ursprünglich derselben Rasse oder Völkergruppe angehören, sind sie immer weit von der selben verschieden; and zwar, kann man hinzusetzen, in der Regel weiter als die entsprechenden festländischen Abzweigungen dieser Rasse oder Gruppe untereinander" (Ratzel, *loc. cit.*, p. 96). ("The inhabitants of islands are in some cases totally different from those of the nearest mainland or the nearest larger island; but even where they originally belonged to the same race or group of peoples, they are always widely different from the latter; and indeed one can add, as a rule, that they differ more widely than do the corresponding branches of this race or group on the mainland among themselves." p. 96. – *Ed.*) Here is repeated the same law as in the formation of the species and varieties of animals.³²¹

To support his arguments, Plekhanov had cited the racist theories of Friedrich Ratzel. The latter argued that races developed under different environmental conditions and he was also an important intellectual source for the Nazis. This was in part because it was he who first developed the term and concept of *Lebensraum* viz. the state is "an *organism*... which requires living space (*Lebensraum*) that is commensurate with the vitality of the race existing within its

"Essays on the History of Materialism," accessed 27 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1893/essays/index.html>.

³¹⁹ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 163.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 159-160.

borders. Thus successful races require more Lebensraum...³²² Of course, Plekhanov died before the rise of Nazism, but that Ratzel's theories were inherently poisonous, unscientific and, hence, completely antithetical to Marxism, would have been clear to anyone who bothered to read what he wrote. As Smith points out:

In the 1880s and 1890s, Ratzel developed a series of theories about the relationship between biological species and their physical environments that, despite serious flaws, became highly influential. The theories culminated in Ratzel's concept of *Lebensraum*. Briefly, Ratzel argued that human (and nonhuman) social phenomena are the results of complex adaptations over time to a physical environment and that Darwinian natural selection takes place within an overwhelmingly important spatial context. In human society, both the state and culture (the sum of beliefs, languages, social practices, and material equipment common to an identifiable people) are primarily adaptations to geographic circumstances.³²³

This is the man whose racist views Plekhanov uncritically reproduced because he cited him as an authority in support of Marxism. Still, there would have been no contradiction in Plekhanov's mind since, besides his crude geographic determinism, he also equated Marxism and Darwinism.

However, this was not the only time that Plekhanov referred to Ratzel in support of his views. In 1907 he quoted Marx's *Capital* to explain the importance of the natural environment:

Marx writes: 'It is not the mere fertility of the soil, but the differentiation of the soil, the variety of its natural products, the changes of the seasons, which form the physical bases for the social division of labour, and which, by changes in the natural surroundings, spur man on to the multiplication of his wants, his capabilities, his means and modes of labour.' Using almost the same terms as Marx, Ratzel says: 'The main thing is, not that there is the greatest ease in procuring food, but that certain inclinations, habits and finally wants are aroused in man.'³²⁴

Marx was alluding only to the influence of the environment on humanity, which is quite a different thing from taking about the environment *determining* humanity. Further, Plekhanov ignored the crucial dialectical distinction made by Marx, because he utterly misread the quote and read into it things that did not exist. More specifically, Marx described the environment as the "physical bases for the social division of labour." But he then added that "changes in the natural surroundings, spur man on to the multiplication of his wants, his capabilities, his means and modes of labour." Yet, as already noted above, it is precisely humanity that changes their natural surroundings. Thus it is not nature which gives rise to "his wants, his capabilities, his means and modes of labour" but rather humanity itself through its own activity altering its environment. Plekhanov, then, was utterly wrong to equate the racist views of Ratzel with Marx

³²² John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 155, 159; "Ratzel himself was an advocate of what we shall call *Lebensraum* imperialism." Woodruff D. Smith, *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 83.

³²³ Ibid., 147.

³²⁴ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 50-51.

and it was only by ignoring Marx's reference to human activity that he could do so. For Plekhanov, Ratzel was an important scientific authority.³²⁵

Before continuing with the question of race, it is important to stress that Plekhanov's understanding of the nature of human needs and wants must be characterised as pre-Marxian. According to him, the "properties of the geographic environment determine the character both of the natural products that serve to satisfy man's wants, and of those objects *he himself produces* with the same purpose."³²⁶ Again, since Plekhanov did not conceive of human history as self-development, he did not see that there are absolutely no such "natural products" that satisfy any human want: both wants and the products that satisfy them are socially mediated. As Marx wrote in the *Grundrisse*:

Firstly, the object is not an object in general, but a specific object which must be consumed in a specific manner, to be mediated in its turn by production itself. Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth. Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively. Production thus creates the consumer... Production not only supplies a material for the need, but it also supplies a need for the material.³²⁷

Marx was only repeating, in a more refined sense, in a scientific form i.e. non-Young Hegelian manner, what he had written in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*:

Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of *subjective* human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form – in short, senses capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being. For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, *human* sense, the human nature of the senses, comes to be by virtue of *its* object, by virtue of *humanised* nature. The *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present. The *sense* caught up in crude practical need has only a restricted sense.> For the starving man, it is not the human form of food that exists, but only its abstract existence as food. It could just as well be there in its crudest form, and it would be impossible to say wherein this feeding activity differs from that of *animals*. The care-burdened, poverty-stricken man has no *sense* for the finest play; the dealer in minerals sees only the commercial value but not the beauty and the specific character of the mineral: he has no mineralogical sense.³²⁸

³²⁵ Ibid. 53, 55, 56, 58, 87; George V. Plekhanov, "Historical Materialism and the Arts," accessed 28 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1899/arts.htm>; Plekhanov, "Notes to Engels' Book Ludwig Feuerbach..." 531.

³²⁶ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 49.

³²⁷ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, tran. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 92.

³²⁸ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 96.

Plekhanov's position, then, was a relapse into pre-Marxist views. Humanity can only appear in the course of its making and remaking of itself and nature viz. humanising both. Therefore, there are no natural products when we speak of humanity, only when we speak of animals; because every part of nature which enters into the human sphere is altered and gains a signification that does not and cannot exist outside humanity. So, when a group of humans hunt animals or harvest crops and then eat the results, they are engaging in a process which is and has been mediated by language, social relations, education, culture, etc. Marx and Engels made this very same point in regard to Feuerbach in *The German Ideology*:

He does not see how the sensuous world around him is, not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state of society; and, indeed, [a product] in the sense that it is an historical product, the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations, each standing on the shoulders of the preceding one, developing its industry and its intercourse, modifying its social system according to the changed needs.³²⁹

Now, certainly Plekhanov had no access to the three works which I have just quoted from. However, the argument they contain is to be found in works which Plekhanov did study. So there could not be a mitigating factor for Plekhanov being unaware whatsoever.

Plekhanov's vulgar materialism led him to endorse the most virulent Eurocentrism and racism.³³⁰ He went so far as to argue that groups at lower stages of development i.e. according to his understanding, those less civilised, were more prone to violence. Thus he wrote that,

Hunting tribes cannot form large political organization precisely because the low level of their productive forces compels them to scatter in small social groups, in search of means of subsistence. But the more these social groups are scattered, the more inevitable it is that even such disputes that, in a civilized society, could easily be settled in a magistrate's court, are settled by means of more or less sanguinary combats.³³¹

In arguing this un-Marxist position, Plekhanov reproduced similar noxious views of others:

Eyre says that when several Australian tribes join forces for certain purposes in a particular place such contacts are never lengthy; even before a shortage of food or the need to hunt game has obliged the Australians to part company, hostile clashes flare up among them, which very soon lead, as is well known, to pitched battles... In much the same way Burton says: 'All African wars... are for one of two objects, cattle-lifting or kidnapping.' Ratzel considers it probable that in New Zealand wars among the natives were frequently caused simply by the desire to enjoy human flesh. The natives'

³²⁹ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 45.

³³⁰ "The American Indian tribes do not, of course, belong to the same race as the tribes which in pre-historic times inhabited the Greek archipelago or the Baltic coast. It is beyond question that in these different localities primitive man experienced the influences of the natural environment in very different ways." Plekhanov, "The Materialist Conception of History," 118.

³³¹ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 53.

inclination towards cannibalism is itself to be explained by the paucity of the New Zealand fauna.³³²

All these remarks were made in context of Plekhanov explaining, defending, and indeed, proving his conception of Marxism, his dialectical materialism. It is beyond dispute then, that he not only saw no contradiction between Marx and the authorities he quoted, but that he found them compatible and even went so far as to equate them. Still, that there should be no confusion on this question, it must be emphasised that neither Plekhanov, nor the Bolsheviks consciously advocated racism. The point is though, that the racist views that Plekhanov expressed were the result of his philosophy: they were some of the many inevitable weaknesses of consistent vulgar materialism. Thus, when one reads the following from Plekhanov “as soon as a given level of civilization has been reached, it indubitably influences the bodily and mental qualities of the ‘race’,”³³³ one can only exclaim: If this be Marxism, then we must say with Marx “I am not a Marxist.”³³⁴

Plekhanov’s biological determinism led him to assert social-Darwinist themes and further to prefigure the unscientific positions of evolutionary psychology. Early in his career he argued, based on his reading of Darwin that “social feelings can be transmitted from generation to generation and strengthened by natural selection,” and he asserted that this was true for societies, classes, and animal species.³³⁵ By the vague phrase “social feelings” Plekhanov had in mind temperament:

The temperament of every nation preserves certain peculiarities, induced by the influence of the natural environment, which are to a certain extent modified, but never completely destroyed, by adaptation to the social environment. These peculiarities of national temperament constitute what is known as *race*. Race exercises an undoubted influence on the history of some ideologies – art, for example; and this still further complicates the already far from easy task of explaining it scientifically.³³⁶

The underlying logic of Plekhanov’s position was that there are numerous races with different qualities, behaviours, etc. and who, therefore, have different levels of intelligence. As I stated before, Plekhanov stood against racism, but his understanding of reality left the door open to racist views. If there is very little role for human activity, and, hence, if consciousness is seen as a process of passive transmission, and not as a process of self-development, then it is clear why Plekhanov’s views were a crude form of Darwinism and not Marxist. When attention is given to the non-Marxist sources from which Plekhanov actually derived his ideas, it then becomes clear that there is no way that his views can be classified as Marxist in any meaningful sense.³³⁷

³³² Ibid., 53.

³³³ Ibid., 56.

³³⁴ This quote was given by Engels in a letter to a comrade. See, Frederick Engels, “Engels to C. Schmidt, August 5, 1890,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 415.

³³⁵ Plekhanov, “Notes to Engels’ Book *Ludwig Feuerbach...*,” 528.

³³⁶ Plekhanov, “The Materialist Conception of History,” 117.

³³⁷ “The ‘materialist’ is not exempt from a study of our spiritual organisation. Of course not! But to study that organisation, the ‘materialist’ addresses himself to experimental psychology, which deals only with phenomena and

Plekhanov wrote extensively on art and therefore he had other occasions to mention the connection between art and race. For example, in 1897 he argued that,

in the depictions of human beings, the influence of racial features was bound to affect the ‘ideals of beauty’ peculiar to the primitive artists. We know that every race, especially in its early stages of social development, considers itself the most beautiful, and rates very highly the features that distinguish it from other races.³³⁸

As seen above, according to Plekhanov, the natural environment exercised a direct influence on the early stages of the life of humanity. While he further argued that the development of society altered that influence, he was quick to point out that it was never removed, that it persisted and, therefore, it retained its primary status *vis-à-vis* social factors. One can never get away from biology. Thus he wrote as late as 1912:

The ideal of beauty prevailing at any time in any society or class of society is rooted partly in the biological conditions of mankind’s development – which, incidentally, also produce distinctive racial features – and partly in the historical conditions in which the given society or class arose and exists. It therefore always has a very rich content that is not absolute, not unconditional, but quite specific. He who worships ‘pure beauty’ does not thereby become independent of the biological and historical social conditions which determine his aesthetic taste; he only more or less consciously closes his eyes to these conditions.³³⁹

Plekhanov, in explaining the nature of art, apportioned equal status to “biological and historical social conditions.” However, such an approach essentially equates both factors and has nothing in common with Hegel’s dialectic, let alone that of Marx. No, this was a replay of the dialectic of Fichte where the thesis and antithesis are combined in the synthesis.³⁴⁰ Now, one could say that this dialectic’s strength is also its weakness, viz. it gives the appearance of explaining everything, but in essence it explains nothing; this is because this dialectic is merely formal, i.e. only dialectical in an abstract sense. Yet, in this matter, to argue that in order to truly arrive at a concrete explanation we need to move beyond broad generalisations and get to exact details, would be to still miss the mark. First, to posit “biological and historical social conditions” as two, equal, independent factors is to take a dualist, and hence, abstract stance.³⁴¹ Second, it

makes use of methods borrowed from biology. That is the more reliable path.” Georgi Plekhanov, “Conrad Schmidt Versus Karl Marx and Frederick Engels,” accessed 30 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1898/conrad-schmidt.htm>.

³³⁸ Plekhanov, “The Materialist Conception of History,” 119.

³³⁹ G. V. Plekhanov, “Art and Social Life,” accessed 30 November 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1912/art/index.htm>.

³⁴⁰ “The act of seeking in things equated the respect in which they are *opposed*, is called the *antithetic* procedure; commonly described as the *analytical*. . . For the synthetic procedure consists in discovering in opposites the respect in which they are alike. . . Both of them—not subject and object as such, but the subjective and objective posited through thesis and antithesis—are mutually determinable by each other, and. . . can be brought together and fixed and held fast by that power of the self. . . which is active in the synthesis.” J.G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge, with the First and Second Introductions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 111, 186.

³⁴¹ “‘Consciousness’ – let us take this term as Lenin did – is the most general concept which can only be defined by clearly contrasting it with the most general concept of ‘matter’, moreover as something secondary, produced and

ignores the actual history of humanity, viz. our very biology is historically determined.³⁴² The Soviet philosopher Mikhail Lifshitz was absolutely correct to point out that

The senses have their own history. Neither the object of art nor the subject capable of aesthetic experience comes of itself—these arise out of the process of man’s creative activity... The aesthetic impulse is not something biologically inherent, something preceding social development. It is a historical product, the result of a long series of material and intellectual production.³⁴³

Since Plekhanov consistently relied on biology to explain the nature of humanity and, ergo, human society, it was inevitable that he would rely on it to explain such a higher-order phenomenon as art. And this was the inevitable result, as I have continually underlined, of his view of humanity as primarily an object and not a subject.

The final aspect of Plekhanov’s philosophy which I shall review is his technological determinism. Since, however, this question has been alluded to in the course of this study, this analysis will be smaller than previous sections. In his evolutionary reading of Marx, Plekhanov expressed the crudest technological determinism. In his opinion, he was totally faithful to Marx. As he wrote: “the principal cause of the social historical process is the development of the productive forces, we say word for word with Marx.”³⁴⁴ Of course, Marx did not say any such thing “word for word.” What Marx said has already been quoted, but is too important not to be repeated:

The very moment civilisation begins, production begins to be founded on the antagonism of orders, estates, classes, and finally on the antagonism of accumulated labor and immediate labor. No antagonism, no progress. This is the law that civilisation has followed up to our days. Till now the productive forces have been developed by virtue of this system of class antagonisms.³⁴⁵

derived. Dialectics consists in not being able to define matter as such; it can only be defined through its opposite, and only if one of the opposites is fixed as primary, and the other arises from it.” Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics*, 27-28.

³⁴² “Where does one’s personality come from? How is it assembled? When people would deceitfully pop the question to Ilyenkov as to what percentage a person is social and what percentage biological, the Soviet philosopher would reply ‘101% social’. Consequently a person is born several years after his physical appearance in the world and usually dies a little before his physical death.” Alexei Tsvetkov, “The Last Soviet Marxist,” tran. Giuliano Vivaldi, accessed 30 November 2016, <https://afoniya.wordpress.com/2013/10/21/the-last-soviet-marxist-translation-of-an-article-by-alexei-tsvetkov-on-edvard-ilyenkov/>; “So, one is not born a personality, one becomes a personality by socialisation and enculturation, by acquiring the habits, skills, and methods of handling tools. Personality is a product of social activity and its traits can be explained only in these terms. Such a personality trait as aggressiveness offers a classic example. It is, of course, manifested differently in a choleric person than in a phlegmatic one, but attributing aggressiveness to the qualities of temperament is no more scientific than attributing the causes of wars to people’s propensity to fight.” Alexei Leontiev, “One Is Not Born a Personality,” in K. Levitin, *One Is Not Born a Personality: Profiles of Soviet Education Psychologists*, tran. Yevgeni Filippov (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1982), 123.

³⁴³ Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx* (Great Britain: Pluto Press, 1973), 78-79.

³⁴⁴ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 210.

³⁴⁵ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 59.

To Marx, production was absolutely fundamental, an inescapable fact of existence.³⁴⁶ Yet, underlying this was human activity, which in class society takes the form of *class struggle*. Therefore, for Marx, the most important productive force is labour and under capitalism that means the working class. It may be presumed that when Plekhanov wrote about “productive forces” he has that meaning in mind. However, he did not. For him, that phrase meant technology, tools. In his words, the “artificial organs, the implements of labour, thus turn out to be organs not so much of individual as of *social man*. That is why every essential change in them brings about changes in the social structure.”³⁴⁷ Certainly, the means of production inherently structure production because of how they must be used i.e. the division of labour. But, the fact is that technology develops primarily as a result of the class struggle.

Since Plekhanov interpreted the forces of production narrowly i.e. he understood the latter as essentially tools and not humans, so he posited a direct connection between improvements in the latter and changes in society:

The whole existence of the Australian savage depends on his boomerang, just as the whole existence of modern Britain depends on her machines. Take away from the Australian his boomerang, make him a tiller of the soil, and he of necessity will change all his mode of life, all his habits, all his manner of thinking, all his ‘nature.’³⁴⁸

When Plekhanov wrote the above, he undoubtedly had in mind the famous comment by Marx: “The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist.”³⁴⁹ At face value it appears that Marx believed in technological determinism and, hence, that Plekhanov was merely echoing him; but, the former’s short statement was directly preceded by these lines:

Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change all their social relations.³⁵⁰

Marx was stating what he would repeat in his famous preface; more specifically, he was giving a generalised summary of his viewpoint. It was, therefore, especially prone to an evolutionary, determinist reading. Still, Marx’s general points were made in the very same work where he pointed out that class struggle was at the basis of the development of the productive forces. Only

³⁴⁶ “Every child knows a nation which ceased to work, I will not say for a year, but for a few weeks, would die. Every child knows, too, that the mass of products corresponding to the different needs require different and quantitatively determined masses of the total labour of society. That this necessity of distributing of social labour in definite proportions cannot be done away with by the *particular form* of social production, but can only change the *form it assumes*, is self evident. No natural laws can be done away with. What can change, in changing historical circumstances, is the *form* in which these laws operate. And the form in which this proportional distribution of labour operates, in the state of society where the interconnection of social labour is manifested in the *private exchange* of the individual products of labour, is precisely the *exchange value* of these products.” Karl Marx, *Letters to Dr. Kugelmann* (London: Martin Lawrence, n.d.), 73-74.

³⁴⁷ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 156.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

³⁴⁹ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 102.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

by ignoring human activity was it possible for Plekhanov to interpret what Marx wrote in crude mechanistic manner.

To Plekhanov, the forces of production determine every single aspect of society. According to him, the “characteristics of *social* man are determined at every given time by the degree of development of the productive forces, because on the degree of the development of those forces depends the entire structure of the social union.”³⁵¹ Plekhanov was not simply saying that in general, in the last instance, or even ultimately, the forces of production determine society, but rather he was asserting that the determination was *direct*.³⁵² Thus he wrote that the “*psychology of society is always expedient in relation to its economy, always corresponds to it, is always determined by it.*”³⁵³ Besides this unscientific view of psychology, there is a further aspect to consider. Since, according to Plekhanov, economic developments make socialism inevitable, they also, just as inevitably, produce the necessary psychological changes:

The *psychology* of society adapts itself to its *economy*. . . The adaptation of psychology to economy, as you see, continues, but slow psychological evolution *precedes* economic revolution. . . In essence this is the very psychological process which the proletariat of Europe is now going through: its psychology is already adapting itself to the new, future relations of production.”³⁵⁴

Plekhanov drew a direct causal connection between economic growth and the expansion of the international working-class movement. Improvements in the means of production lead automatically not only to a growth of the working class, but also to class consciousness as well. In this way, subjectivity was reduced to objectivity. The workers may be revolutionary, but they are still portrayed as automatons at the whim of an outside force.³⁵⁵ Plekhanov’s teleology, then, extended even into this sphere.

If my presentation and critique of Plekhanov’s philosophy has seemed schematic, it is because that philosophy actually is schematic. It is, therefore, highly ironic that he once criticised

³⁵¹ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 272.

³⁵² Plekhanov’s view was the direct opposite of Marx and Engels. As Engels wrote in 1890: “According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Other than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted.” Engels’ phrase “production and reproduction of real life” clearly includes more than simply the “degree of development of the productive forces.” See, Frederick Engels, “Engels to J. Bloch, September 21-22, 1890,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 417.

³⁵³ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 206.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 211.

³⁵⁵ Walter Benjamin’s first theses on the philosophy of history directly applies to Plekhanov’s “Marxism;” only where Benjamin wrote “historical materialism” it should read “dialectical materialism:” “The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called “historical materialism” is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.” See, Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, tran. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 253.

schematism in other thinkers and even went so far as to make the excellent point that, “Only Marxism can save all of them from falling into schematism.”³⁵⁶ This was undoubtedly true. However, precisely because he was not a Marxist, but a neo-Young Hegelian, Plekhanov was always “falling into schematism.” In fact, right after writing the above quote, he proceeded to give a summary of the relations between “base” and “superstructure,” which can only be described as purely schematic:

(1) the state of the productive forces; (2) the economic relations these forces condition; (3) the socio-political system that has developed on the given economic ‘basis’; (4) the mentality of men living in society, a mentality which is determined in part directly by the economic conditions obtaining, and in part by the entire socio-political system that has arisen on that foundation; (5) the various ideologies that reflect the properties of that mentality.³⁵⁷

Here Plekhanov provided the essentials of his understanding of the mechanics of history; the heart of his neo-Young Hegelianism. This is his blueprint to the machine of history. Development starts at the bottom and ascends by acting on each successive level and when it reach the top, the changes descend by reacting back on each successive level. In this conception humans are merely the cogs, the pieces, i.e. they are not the source of motion. For this reason, Plekhanov did not write about the self-development of humanity, but about the self-development of modes of production:

Indeed, the logic of the economic development of the feudal mode of production led to a social revolution that marked the triumph of capitalism. But the logic of the economic development of China or ancient Egypt, for example, did not at all lead to the appearance of the antique mode of production. In the former instance we are speaking of two phases of development, one of which follows the other, and is engendered by it.³⁵⁸

This is why, despite removing the agency of humanity from the heart of Marxism, Plekhanov could still believe that he had not done so. A machine cannot run without its components and so, for Plekhanov, humans are absolutely indispensable. However, though some sort of vessel is necessary for me to boil water, that vessel is still not the reason for the water boiling, nor for me using the water. It has no agency. To assert the self-development of modes of production and leave human activity by the side is to essentially replicate the Hegelian conception of history as the self-development of the Absolute Mind.

As a consistent neo-Young Hegelian, Plekhanov was only ever formally a Marxist. As shown above, a number of his formulations had a Marxist covering. Yet, on one occasion, he defined dialectical materialism in a manner that ostensibly echoed Marx’s historical focus on practical activity:

Dialectical materialism says, like Goethe’s Faust: *Im Anfang war die Tat!* Action (the activity of men in conformity to law in the social process of production) explains to the

³⁵⁶ Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, 80.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

dialectical materialist the historical development of the reason of social man. It is to action also that is reduced all his *practical philosophy*. *Dialectical materialism is the philosophy of action*...Dialectical materialism points out the methods with the help of which all that boundless field can be transformed into the flourishing *garden of the ideal*. It only adds that the means for this transformation are buried *in the heart of that same field, that one only must discover them and be able to use them*. Unlike subjectivism, dialectical materialism does not limit the rights of human reason. It knows that the rights of reason are as boundless and unlimited as its powers. It says that all that is reasonable in the human head, i.e., all that represents not an illusion but the true knowledge of reality, will unquestionably pass into that reality, and will unquestionably bring into it its own share of reason.³⁵⁹

At first glance, this quote would seem to disprove what I have been arguing. Indeed, Plekhanov was certainly close to Marx's focus on activity; but this, yet again, was only a formal reference. First, this statement was only made near the end of his *Monist View of History*, only in passing, and was not made a guiding principle, consistently developed and employed throughout Plekhanov's work. This is true of the rest of his writings and, consequently, of his entire philosophy. Secondly, there is Plekhanov's inevitable teleology. When he asserted that "all that is reasonable in the human head...will unquestionably pass into that reality," this cannot be considered a simple rhetorical flourish. Finally, despite the formal Marxian language, the content of the quote is Young Hegelian. Indeed, while the system of dialectical materialism was the creation of Plekhanov, the above perspective on action was that of the Young Hegelian Moses Hess, who spelt out his views in an 1843 essay entitled "The Philosophy of the Act." As Hess argued,

The explication of a particular idea or act of the spirit, the working out of a particular stage of the self-consciousness, or of life, of humanity, one might say, is its transformation into reality, its individualization. The individual is the particular idea become other than itself, through which this idea becomes realized, establishes its identity...The aim of socialism is nothing other than that of idealism which is this: to allow nothing to remain of the old activity of plunder...In this way does the free act distinguish itself from unfree work; for, in the condition of slavery, the very act of creation enchains what is created, whereas, in the condition of freedom, every limitation of which the spirit divests itself is not turned into determined nature, but is overcome, and thus turned into self-determination...The true history of the spirit first begins at the point where all natural determination comes to an end, where the spirit develops, self-consciousness calls out and the act of the spirit is clearly perceived. With this perception the reign of freedom begins, and we are standing at its portals and knocking upon them now.³⁶⁰

Both Marx and Engels had read Hess and been influenced by him in the direction of communism. However, they eventually broke with him. Still, Hess' "Philosophy of the Act" had

³⁵⁹ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 276-277.

³⁶⁰ Hess, "The Philosophy of the Act," 253, 264, 271.

a formative influence on Marx.³⁶¹ There were a number of formulations that Marx took from Hess, but his real debt to the latter, as shown in his “Theses on Feuerbach,” was his focus on activity.³⁶² Hess had his finger on the essential weakness of Young Hegelianism; however, unlike Marx and Engels, he could not bring his insights into a definitive rupture with that philosophy. I do not know if Plekhanov read this specific work by Hess. However, it is a fact that he read and cited other of his works.³⁶³ Still, since Plekhanov was a neo-Young Hegelian with a Marxist cover, it is not surprising that far from reproducing Marx, Plekhanov here mirrored Hess and replicated the basic logic of Young Hegelianism.

There is one final issue here and it regards Plekhanov’s quoting of Goethe. The other reason why his position must be considered only formally Marxist is because his reference here was only a reversal of the statement in the Bible viz. “In the beginning was the Word,” and hence was not truly dialectical.³⁶⁴ As the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky noted

We cannot dwell, as should be sufficiently obvious from the preceding passages, on either the evangelical or Goethean formula, no matter which word we accentuate... Each speaks about what occurred at the beginning. But what happened later? The beginning is only a beginning, i.e. the starting point of movement. The process of development *per se*, however, must by necessity include a denial of this starting point and movement toward higher forms of action lying not at the beginning but at the end of the whole process. How does this process occur?³⁶⁵

The point here, is that for all of Plekhanov’s talk about change and dialectics, his position was still one-sided, abstract. Even when on one occasion Plekhanov extolled human activity, the fact remains that he *always* placed the impetus to action *outside* humanity. This is not to say that humans always show initiative, nor to deny that they react to things beyond them. Rather this is to deny absolutising any external force working on or through humans. Humanity’s existence on this planet is the product of generations upon generations of collective labour and precisely there must be sought the explanation for our reality.³⁶⁶

³⁶¹ Marx referred to this and two other essays written by Hess as the “only original German works” in the science of political economy beside those of Wilhelm Weitling and Engels. See, Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 14.

³⁶² “Activity is, in a word, self-creation.” Hess, “The Philosophy of the Act,” 251.

³⁶³ Plekhanov, “Notes to Engels’ Book Ludwig Feuerbach...,” 506; Plekhanov, “Essays on the History of Materialism,” accessed 1 December 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1893/essays/index.html> Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View*, 80, 315.

³⁶⁴ This is the result of his uncritical acceptance of Feuerbach’s reformatory critique, i.e. the basic inversion of opposites.

³⁶⁵ Lev Vygotsky, “Tool and Symbol in Child Development,” accessed 2 December 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/1934/tool-symbol.htm>.

³⁶⁶ “It is superfluous to add that men are not free to choose *their productive forces*—which are the basis of all their history—for every productive force is an acquired force, the product of former activity. The productive forces are therefore the result of practically applied human energy; but this energy is itself conditioned by the circumstances in which men find themselves, by the productive forces already acquired, by the social form which exists before they exist, which they do not create, which is the product of the preceding generation. Because of the simple fact that every succeeding generation finds itself in possession of the productive forces acquired by the previous generation, and that they serve it as the raw material for new production, a coherence arises in human history, a history of

Conclusion

Modern dialectical philosophy was initiated by Kant, developed by Fichte and Schelling, and brought to its highest point by Hegel. Out of the chaos of the startling insights and false starts of the Young Hegelian movement, Marx, jointly with Engels, founded modern dialectical social science. Yet the temporal progression of Marxism coincided with its theoretical retrogression. It took two steps forward, but one step back. Some of Marx's insights were popularised and mass working-class parties multiplied; yet, what permeated the latter were pre-Marxian theories. The first stage in the popularised degeneration was initiated by Joseph Dietzgen, who first coined the term dialectical materialism. The second and qualitatively higher stage was due to Georgi Plekhanov. It was he who shaped dialectical materialism into a systematic philosophy *à la* Hegel, and brought it to a mass audience that Dietzgen never had. This system became the guiding ideology of Russian Social Democracy and, through it, of the Second International.

The theoretical roots of the collapse of the Second International are generally traced to Eduard Bernstein and the growth of Revisionism. But, this leaves unexplained the extended political collapse of Plekhanov, Kautsky, and others which predated 1914. In spite of the battle between the Orthodox on one side and the Revisionists on the other, the fact is that the views of the Orthodox were not orthodox Marxism, but a form of neo-Young Hegelianism. This included mechanical materialism, teleology, and subsidiary determinisms. This "orthodoxy" provided the space for Revisionism to develop and grow. Hence, the fight against the latter was compromised from the beginning. The idea that Revisionism was a deviant tendency from Marxism, obscured the truth that it was, in actuality, the legitimate offspring of the Second International's orthodox "Marxism." Therefore, because of their common theoretical basis, it was inevitable that Plekhanov and Kautsky's fight would and could not be carried through to the end, and why those two fell into revisionism.

The break with the ideology of the Second International, with dialectical materialism, the project of the recovery of the actual method and outlook of Marx and Engels, and, consequently, the founding of the modern international communist movement, was begun by V.I. Lenin. In the realms of methodology, economics, politics (state, war, revolution, etc.), and many others, Lenin refounded Marxism on its original basis, both theoretically and practically. This makes Lenin the father of Marxism in Russia. However, because of the succeeding exigencies of the 1917 revolution, the new Soviet state, and the Communist International, combined with his failing health and untimely death, Lenin was unable to bring to a completion the break with Plekhanov's dialectical materialism. With the late publishing and mass production of Lenin's notebooks on Hegel, the international communist movement was left with his incomplete legacy.

This partial split, combined with other factors which I have detailed above, led to a partial recoupage of Plekhanov's dialectical materialism. This dual heritage, the amalgamation of Lenin and Plekhanov, led to the development of two tendencies in Soviet Philosophy. Those who followed the line of Plekhanov, dialectical materialism (diamat) were the mainstream,

humanity takes shape which becomes all the more a history of humanity the more the productive forces of men and therefore the social relations develop." Karl Marx, "Marx to P.V. Annikov," in Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the "Philosophy of Poverty" by M. Proudhon* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978), 167.

dominant trend, the *Diamatchiki*. The smaller, lesser trend was that which followed the line of Lenin.³⁶⁷ It was dialectical materialism which was propagated throughout the international communist movement via the Third International. All groups, parties, and tendencies which developed out of the latter were built, to a greater or lesser extent, on the heritage of dialectical materialism. This notwithstanding that it occurred under the banner of Marxism-Leninism.

As adherents of a revolutionary historical science, it is absolutely incumbent on Marxists to attend to the study of the history of their movement. This must be accomplished with an approach which is both utterly non-teleological and is aware of periods of progression and retrogression, and the times when they intersect. Key to this task, and the more important one of revolution, is breaking with the philosophical system of dialectical materialism and returning to the dialectical method and communist outlook of Marx and Engels. A critical attitude to the problematic legacy of Soviet philosophy is inherent in this. As Marx declared long ago, we need a “*ruthless criticism of all that exists.*”³⁶⁸ In this perspective, nothing is hallowed, least of all the dead past. The choice posed, then, is that between science and ideology: a dialectical-empirical approach to reality, or a utopian one. To aid in the self-liberation of the working class, Marxists must drop their preconceived notion and face the world “with sober senses.”³⁶⁹

³⁶⁷ Levant, “E.V. Ilyenkov and Creative Soviet Marxism,” 13.

³⁶⁸ Karl Marx, “Letters from the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works Volume 3, Marx and Engels: 1843-44* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 142.

³⁶⁹ Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 17.