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THE PALGRAVE HANDBOOK OF LENINIST POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Edited by
Tom Rockmore and Norman Levine



The Palgrave Handbook of Leninist Political Philosophy

Tom Rockmore · Norman Levine
Editors

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1

Introduction

Tom Rockmore

Everyone knows that after—and as a result of—the Second World War, Germany was divided into two parts that were later reunified in 1990. The film *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003) is a German tragicomedy about the ambivalent attitude of East Germans to the political *coup d'état* that overtook their country, its hopes and dreams for socialism of a different kind, and even its past, which began to disappear following reunification with, and absorption into, the Federal Republic of Germany. The destruction and then removal of the statue of Lenin in Berlin in 1992 symbolize the passing of Lenin's heritage in this part of the Soviet empire he did so much to create. The film suggests that nothing has really changed despite so much apparently having changed. It points to the continuing influence of Lenin, who, as much as if not more than Marx, contributed in practice to realizing a version of Marx's theoretical vision of a possible future.

Lenin, who was a many-sided figure, larger than life, a world-historical individual in the Hegelian sense of the term, made contributions of the most varied kinds. This book—the joint work of many hands—offers an encyclopedic grasp of Lenin's political philosophy understood in the widest possible sense of the term. It is difficult to define and even more difficult to quantify the amorphous concept of influence. Yet suffice it to say that Lenin

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is by any measure one of the twentieth century's most influential figures. Despite this, there has been surprisingly little philosophical effort to grasp Lenin's political philosophy, especially in recent decades. Lenin was arguably the single most important figure in the Bolshevik Revolution that led to the creation of the Soviet Union, including Russia and its associated satellite countries. And though, for reasons that still have not been successfully clarified, the Soviet Union has now ceased to exist, at the time of writing Lenin remains singularly important in his continuing impact on Marxism–Leninism, which is still the official ideology of a number of countries, above all the People's Republic of China.

The relationship of Marx to Marxism is one of the complex issues that we must face if we are to understand either the man or the movement, even in a broad, non-specific way. Marx's entire opus constitutes an effort to offer an alternative to traditional theory, however understood. Marx—who eschewed traditional philosophical theory, which he believed changed nothing in simply leaving everything in place—formulated what he believed was an intrinsically practical theory, or a theory focused on changing practice. Marxism in all its many forms has always sought and still seeks, wherever it has the opportunity, to realize itself in practice.

Marx has not always been well served by his followers. Many things done under his assumed patronage are, at most, only distantly related to his position, however interpreted. There are often important differences between Marx's position and the positions of those who have so often spoken and continue to speak in his name, invoking his prestige for practices that are sometimes consistent with, but often inconsistent with, the letter and even the spirit of his view. Marxism, which was mainly invented by Marx's colleague and friend Friedrich Engels, was inspired by Marx's own position; however, it was politically not identical (though certainly very similar) to that position, and was largely different from it philosophically. During its existence, under the aegis of Bolshevism in power, the Soviet empire was based on the political hegemony of a form of Marxism that Lenin mainly derived through his study of Engels' writings. The tardy appearance of several crucial Marxian texts, above all the so-called *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, also called the *Paris Manuscripts* or the *Manuscripts of 1844*, fostered a rich, philosophically interesting debate on Marxian humanism. The even more tardy appearance of Marx's *Grundrisse* and *Theories of Surplus Value* raises a series of questions about Marx's position, which looks very different now from how it appeared in the late 1880s. This is compounded by the controversy surrounding the precise status of *German Ideology*; we now know that Marx and Engels did not write this, but it is routinely taken as a basic exposition of their single joint view,

more plausibly based on the political premise than on philosophical grounds. After Marx's death, Engels, in seeking to unite a disparate political movement that later came to be known as the First International, created Marxism.

At least since Plato, many observers have suggested that politics and philosophy are interrelated. Many examples could be cited. It is, for instance, sometimes noted that Hegel's left-wing and right-wing followers met on the field of battle at Stalingrad. Marx's relationship to Marxist politics is at the very least unclear. The Marxian contribution to various forms of Marxist dictatorship is counterbalanced by his concern, above all in the *Paris Manuscripts*, with what—when this seminal text appeared—quickly became known as “humanism,” and sometimes “Marxian humanism,” but more often “Marxist humanism.”

The term “Marxist humanism” is arguably inconsistent. Dictatorship and social freedom are obviously incompatible. Either one is interested in Marxism, which, since Lenin, is dictatorial, or one is interested in humanism, which presupposes freedom, hence rejects dictatorship. Marxist humanists and Marxist anti-humanists both tend to see Marx's position as turning from an early interest in alienation toward a later interest in the structure of modern capitalism. Those interested in so-called Marxist humanism tend to emphasize the Marxian theory of alienation, while those who reject Marxist humanism emphasize his later works, which are thought to be more concerned with the structure of modern industrial capitalism.

The difference in perspective between those who insist above all on the theoretical goal of social freedom and those who think social freedom can be achieved only through dictatorial means rapidly led to opposition. This antagonism often descended into open polemics between Marxism in power—which inevitably assumed a dictatorial form—and intellectual criticism, which, because of obvious restrictions within Russia and its allies, mainly arose in intellectual debate outside the Soviet bloc. The opposition between left-wing Marxist humanism in the West and Soviet-style dictatorship in the East paradoxically lasted only as long as the Marxist political reality it opposed, and which was its reason for being. When the Soviet dictatorship collapsed through the sudden, largely unexpected but irrevocable foundering of the Soviet Union late in the last century, it simultaneously swept away the Western debate on Marxist humanism—which, for various reasons, was never an important theme in the Russian debate—as well as Western interest in the main Marxist figures and doctrines.

Marxism is, in theory, based on the continuing Marxist reception of Marx's writings. Put simply, we can say that on the theoretical level Marxism is a nineteenth-century phenomenon that only achieved political reality in the

twentieth century. Hegel passed from the scene at the height of his powers in 1831. Marx, who was active from the 1840s to the 1880s, is a mid-nineteenth-century thinker; he entered the German university system soon after Hegel's passing, and emerged a decade later in 1841, at a moment when Hegel was still the central thinker of the period, with a PhD in philosophy. He only later turned to political economy in the process of formulating a non-standard theory of modern industrial society, through which he sought to transform capitalism into communism. Marxism, to which Marx did not subscribe—to which he literally could not have subscribed, since it did not exist in his lifetime—was created, shortly after Marx died, almost single-handedly by Engels, Marx's close colleague over many years, initially in his pamphlet on Feuerbach. Engels, through this short but powerful text, strongly influenced those who, in his wake, became Marxists, or, in principle, followers of Marx, whose theory they, like Engels and Marx, sought to realize in practice.

Marxism in power is a twentieth-century phenomenon that has lasted into the early part of the twenty-first century. Neither Marx nor Engels lived to see Marxism in power, something that was largely brought about by Lenin and his followers as the result of the Bolshevik Revolution. Since that time, there has been a widespread intellectual tendency to treat Lenin and those influenced by him as if they would somehow slink away without leaving a trace, disappearing into the recesses of history, though this is clearly far from the truth. We ignore Lenin and his heirs at our peril. Lenin was clearly, to utilize a Hegelian term, a world-historical individual—someone, according to Hegel, whose purpose lies in realizing history, though perhaps not, depending on the perspective, what that individual had in mind. Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Genghis Khan were such figures. At the Battle of Jena, when he saw Napoleon, Hegel famously remarked that he had encountered world history on a horse. In the twentieth century, Mikhail Gorbachev is another such figure—someone who, according to all accounts, unwittingly as well as astonishingly brought the Soviet empire, which had emerged through violent revolution, to an end, even if this was not his intention, without a shot being fired.

As a world-historical figure, Lenin is worthy of careful study both for what he did and what he failed to do in his effort to bring about revolutionary change in Russia, leading eventually through the Soviet Union to the emergence of Putin's post-Soviet Russia. By virtue of Lenin's enormous and continuing influence, above all indirectly in the People's Republic of China as it exists today, it is important to grasp the warp and woof of Lenin's ideas. Though Lenin and a number of figures influenced by him have been studied

in the past, in proportion to his importance little attention has been paid to him in recent years. The single most important recent work we are aware of does not aim to examine Lenin's legacy; rather, through rallying the troops, as it were, its intention is to create political interest in Leninism, which is understood as a potentially viable approach, a task which seems exceedingly unlikely to succeed at present. The present volume is intended to play a somewhat different, clearly more academic, role in the debate. We are aware of no single effort to explore the length and breadth of Lenin's political philosophy in a single, comprehensive volume. And what there is in the debate is often only satisfactory at best from a revolutionary political standpoint, but far from satisfactory—indeed, unsatisfactory—from an academic one. Indeed, more often than not, when Lenin is not simply ignored, his view is misrepresented in the debate by both right-wing and left-wing observers, in both cases essentially for political reasons.

The Handbook of Leninist Political Philosophy in Context

The sudden, unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 not only witnessed the end of the Stalinist empire, but also the simultaneous decline of interest in Lenin. During the Stalinist era, Lenin was equated with Stalin; thus the collapse of Soviet communism was entangled with Lenin and he also faded into obscurity. The Cold War witnessed the ideological marriage, before, during and certainly after the Chinese revolution, of Lenin–Stalin–Mao. This political co-habitation was seen as a dictatorial triumvirate. The unforeseen collapse, break-up and disappearance of the Soviet Union, which inevitably discredited Stalinist Russia, also occasioned the discrediting of Lenin. As the KGB collapsed, so also did his reputation and influence.

The period of Lenin's "invisibility" lasted from 1991 until 2008, at which time interest in Marxism (and, arguably, its central figure, Lenin) was rekindled as a result of the global financial crisis, the spread of inequality, the recognition of the impact of global capitalism and the continuation of national liberation movements. Though capitalism did not fall to its knees, it certainly tottered during this period. The near-collapse of Wall Street and the worldwide economic crisis that ensued, which, at the time of writing, has still not been overcome, had two immediate consequences: the rebirth of interest in Marx, Lenin and other associated figures in the Marxist galaxy, and the modest beginnings of a new monographic literature.

In fact, the rehabilitation of Lenin began soon after his death in 1924, with Lukács' *Lenin: A Study of The Unity of His Thought*. This essay, in which Lukács unreservedly lauded Lenin's practical genius, called attention to the relationship of his thought to concrete practice. 1995 saw the publication of Kevin Anderson's *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study*, which presented a renewed approach to Lenin's thought.

Other works soon followed. Between 2005 and 2007 two monographs and a collection appeared emphasizing the positive or "emancipatory" aspects of Lenin's thought. Lars T. Lih published *Lenin Rediscovered*, a specialized study that addressed the origins of Lenin's essay *What Is To Be Done?* (1902). Paul Le Blanc's *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience* is primarily a narrative of political revolutionary movements. Since both of these books focus on particular aspects of Lenin's thought, neither can be seen as comparable in scope to this handbook. The third entrant, *Lenin Reloaded: Towards A Politics of Truth*, contains essays intended to provide a philosophical reassessment of Lenin by leading Marxist intellectuals who are specifically committed to Leninist revolutionary politics. The authors of these essays, from their individual and collective points of view, supposedly offer a viable alternative to contemporary capitalism at this point in time. By contrast, our aim in the present volume is to provide a scholarly and objective presentation of the main aspects of Lenin's political thinking, without any political bias for or against his view.

Organizational Structure

The essays in the present volume, which address different aspects of his thought, attempt to encompass the immense scope and scale of Lenin's contribution. Though no single publication can be expected to address all the many themes in detail, we aim for comprehensiveness in order to make this handbook the very best possible work on the theme of Lenin's political philosophy.

The contributors to this handbook address a number of key themes in Lenin's political thinking in order to foster a much-needed reassessment. Since, in the period leading up to and then away from the Bolshevik Revolution, Lenin subordinated absolutely everything else to bringing about a successful revolution and changing the course of history, there is no shortage of topics to be explored. The organizational structure is dictated by our

joint conception of the main themes that must be covered in any comprehensive treatment of Lenin's political philosophy.

After an extensive introduction, the book is divided into three parts, running from the abstract to the concrete, as Hegel suggested. It begins with some remarks on Lenin as a philosopher, including his specifically philosophical efforts, his interaction with specific philosophers, and his controversial view of the relationship of philosophy to society as a whole.

Lenin and Philosophy

There is a deep difference between Lenin's continuing influence on philosophy through the political approach widely known as Marxism–Leninism, or through specific philosophical ideas such as the subordination of philosophy to political considerations, otherwise known as “partyiness” (*partiinost*), through Lenin's specific philosophical analyses, on the one hand, and, on the other, the view of Lenin himself as a philosopher. There is no doubt that Lenin's view of Marx and Marxism quickly achieved and later maintained canonical status in the Soviet Union and in selected countries outside it in what quickly became known as Marxism–Leninism. It is unquestionably the case that, after the Bolshevik Revolution, it was not practically possible to contradict or even to question any basic view attributable to Lenin and his heirs, in particular Stalin.

Lenin, who strongly influenced philosophy in the Soviet Union during his lifetime, has become even more influential since his death, above all through Marxism–Leninism. The latter is generally understood as a political philosophy, or, since the difference between philosophy and worldview is no longer maintained, as a worldview founded on ideas drawn from Marxism and Leninism, or Lenin's understanding of Marx and Marxism, especially the latter. The difference between a philosophy and a worldview, which Marxism–Leninism tends to blur, is a later reformulation of an ancient Greek distinction. Plato draws attention to this point in his defense of philosophy, which seeks truth as opposed to employing rhetoric that merely seeks to persuade by making the weaker argument appear to be the stronger. Philosophy in general, hence political philosophy, traditionally makes a claim for truth, whereas a so-called worldview (*Weltanschauung*) makes an ideological claim that Marxism is linked to officially recognized forms of Marxism–Leninism. Lenin, who

was unconcerned by the traditional philosophical concern with truth, regarded philosophy as a tool. In his thesis of partyness, Lenin, who suggests that philosophy must not be independent of, but rather politically subservient to, the aims of the revolutionary party, was less interested in uncovering the truth or in formulating a true philosophical theory than in defending Marxism against any and all forms of anti-Marxist criticism.

Leninism, also called Marxism–Leninism, emerged as the ruling ideology of the Soviet Union after the successful Russian Revolution. Leninism, or Lenin's understanding of Marx and Marxism as filtered mainly through his reading of Engels, went through a series of early stages. A crucial step lies in Lenin's theory of the party as the vanguard of the revolution, which led to the Bolshevik Revolution, and then was applied by Lenin from 1917 until his death; after his passing, his form of Marxism gained official status in the period from 1925 to 1929, when Stalin established Leninism as the official state ideology of the Soviet Union.

At the time of writing, Marxism–Leninism functions as the official ideology of the ruling communist parties of China, Cuba, Laos, Vietnam and North Korea. Prior to this, it was the official ideology of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the other ruling political parties that belonged to the so-called Eastern bloc. Furthermore, Marxism–Leninism is strongly influential in other countries such as Bolivia and Venezuela.

Marxism–Leninism takes related but different forms depending on the understanding of Marxism and Leninism, as well as the prevailing local conditions. Marx was throughout concerned with the transition from capitalism to communism. He formulated two main solutions to this problem, including a view of the revolutionary proletariat and a further view of an unavoidable and unmanageable economic decline leading to a crisis that would destroy capitalism. Marxist–Leninists follow Lenin in substituting a view of the party as the vanguard of the revolution for Marx's later conception of the supposed self-destruction of modern industrial capitalism. In addition, Marxism–Leninism tends to favor such ideas as proletarian dictatorship, a one-party state, state dominance over the economy, opposition to so-called bourgeois democracy, and opposition to private ownership of the means of production or capitalism. After his early interest in the revolutionary proletariat, Marx worked out a theory of the transition from capitalism to communism through the economic collapse of capitalism, as has been noted. The Leninist view of the party as the vanguard of the revolution follows Marx's later

view of the economic self-destruction of capitalism in favoring a political rather than an economic solution. Marxism–Leninism prefers proletarian dictatorship, which usually takes the form of a one-party state, leading to a dictatorship of the party over the proletariat, and, as Luxemburg foresaw, often of one man over the party. Marxism–Leninism opposes so-called bourgeois democracy and, even in contemporary China, all Western ideas except Marxism. Marxism–Leninism claims to oppose capitalism in all its forms while practicing a form of state capitalism, as in the Chinese case.

Part I, ‘Lenin and Political Philosophy,’ contains a trio of texts written by three careful observers of Lenin and Leninism: Vesa Oittinen, Daniela Steila and Marina Bykova. In their own ways, each of these observers argues that Lenin, who was interested in philosophy for political reasons only, responded to controversies arising in the process of making a revolution by reducing philosophy, or, if there is a difference, Western philosophy, which historically raises a claim to truth, to its political dimension only.

In his detailed study titled ‘Which Kind of Dialectician was Lenin?’, Oittinen examines Lenin’s conception of dialectic in relation both to Hegel, as expressed in the *Philosophical Notebooks*, and to his Russian contemporaries, above all Bogdanov, the main target of Leninist polemics in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. “Dialectic” takes on different basic meanings in a long history beginning at least as early as Plato’s *Republic*, where it refers to the conceptual process through which one directly intuits or cognizes the basic principles of science and mathematics, hence all cognition. Kant employs “dialectic” to refer to the series of difficulties that arise in extending cognitive claims beyond their permissible limits. Hegel utilizes the same term to designate the complex development of the cognitive process. In the Second Afterword to *Capital*, Marx famously but certainly obscurely claims to “invert” Hegelian dialectic. Oittinen argues that Lenin’s simplistic conception of dialectic is more or less identical with a “concrete analysis of a concrete situation.” He attempts to show that Lenin’s interest in Hegel is dictated by two requirements: first, by the need to avoid the determinism inherent in the interpretation of Marxism favored by the Second International; and, second, by the requirement to ward off the influence of Kantianism (or more precisely Neo-Kantianism) on the workers’ movement.

There is a difference between Lenin’s influence on Marxism–Leninism, especially Marxist–Leninist philosophy, and Lenin’s own specific philo-

sophical role. The Western view of Lenin as a philosopher, as already noted, has attracted attention recently. Oittinen, who critically examines Kevin Anderson's version of this view, goes on to call attention to the widespread Marxist–Leninist view of Lenin as a philosopher and as a politician, committed not to truth but to realizing a certain vision of society before returning to an earlier, more subtle version of this thesis as articulated by the Russian philosopher Deborin. The latter was an important disciple of Plekhanov, who, after the Russian Revolution, participated in the debate between the “dialecticians,” which he headed, and the so-called “mechanists,” headed by Aksel'rod. The debate was ended in 1931 when Stalin identified dialectical materialism, also known as “diamat,” as central to Marxism–Leninism.

Oittinen focuses on Lenin's conflation of philosophy and politics. According to Oittinen, it is not possible to understand Lenin's conception of dialectic without grasping the primacy of politics in his thought. In reviewing the disputes between the Narodniks, or Russophiles, and the Zapadniks, or Westernizers, Oittinen argues that Russian stress on the so-called “subjective factor,” i.e., of a conscious elite leading the masses in order to reshape society, explains the specific role of politics in Lenin's thought. In his detailed critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and later writings, Marx famously excoriates Hegel for supposedly going from the abstract to the concrete and not from the concrete to the abstract. Oittinen, who compares Lenin's conception of concreteness with Hegel's, points to their differences. Hegel was concerned with epistemic totality, whereas Lenin, who focused on so-called fissures in concrete totality, was instead interested in the concrete possibility of social change. Oittinen goes on to point out that Lenin's interest in concreteness is in no way a novel contribution. It stems neither from Hegel nor Marx, but rather comes through Plekhanov, and ultimately from the Narodniks—specifically Chernyshevsky's interpretation of Hegel in an essay published in the mid-nineteenth century. Plekhanov, the first Russian Marxist philosopher and a strong critic of Lenin from a Menshevik perspective, was the author of the *The Development of the Monist View of History* (1895). Plekhanov, who is correctly recognized as the father of Russian Marxism, exerted an influence on Lenin at least until the outbreak of the First World War. In the *Monist View of History*, he stressed the contribution of Hegel and Feuerbach to Marx's position, which he, following Joseph Dietzgen and others, described as dialectical materialism. He further supported a dialectical account of economic determinism. Chernyshevsky was a mid-nineteenth century Russian philosopher, the author of the novel *What*

Is To Be Done?, whose title Lenin later appropriated, and was also an influence on Lenin and others.

Oittinen goes on to raise the question of whether Lenin later changed his mind about dialectic, claiming that he turned to Hegel, and specifically the *Science of Logic*, in order to counter Kantian influence. In this context, Oittinen disputes Anderson's view that, in his comments on Hegel's *Science of Logic* (also known as *Greater Logic*), Lenin either turned from materialism to idealism or in any way modified his earlier views. According to Oittinen, in the famous conspectus on Hegel, Lenin treated dialectic as a method of concrete analysis or as a theory of concreteness. The aim once again was practical, since, in analyzing Hegel's conception of dialectic, Lenin was seeking weapons to turn against Neo-Kantianism, which was popular at the time in Austro-Marxism. Oittinen supports, at least implicitly, what he describes as Lenin's effort to turn Hegel against Kant in claiming that the *Science of Logic* is the result of Hegel's concerted effort to overcome Kantian dualism.

Oittinen rounds out his analysis of Lenin's view of dialectic in remarks about Lenin's critical reading of Bukharin's supposed scholasticism in 1920. We should note here that Bukharin was an important Bolshevik and rival of Stalin who was executed in 1938 following the first wave of Moscow show trials. He is famously described in Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. Oittinen suggests that in his commentary on *Science of Logic* Lenin lists *in nuce* the faults in Bukharin's theoretical approach: a lack of concreteness and an uncritical attitude to concepts rooted in an idealist philosophy (that is, in positivism and Bogdanov's theories). Bogdanov, a many-sided intellectual figure, was a co-founder of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) and an opponent of Lenin, and was influenced by Mach's theory of empiriocriticism, which Lenin strongly criticized in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909). Oittinen, who stresses the continuity over time in the development of Lenin's viewpoint, claims that Lenin's critical notes on the vestiges of "Bogdanovism" in Bukharin reveal that, after his lecture on Hegel's *Logic* in 1914–1915, his interpretation of Marxist philosophy did not change from the view he had expressed earlier in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, despite what is sometimes claimed.

The contributions by Steila and Oittinen are complementary. Oittinen focuses on a series of themes concerning Lenin's conception of dialectic by concentrating on Lenin's theoretical background. Steila, in contrast, pays special attention to what might be called a thick description of the intellectual context in which Lenin lived and worked—culminating

in his main philosophical contribution, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*—and is more interested in reconstructing the complex philosophical background against which Lenin worked out his ideas. In ‘[Lenin’s Philosophy in Intellectual Context](#),’ Steila directly addresses the Bolshevik leader’s relation to this comparatively more general domain. She begins by rejecting two widespread attitudes concerning Lenin’s stance toward theoretical issues: the Soviet view, originating with Stalin, that Lenin’s conception of Marxism should be taken as the cornerstone of Marxist philosophy, and the Western view, that Lenin is mainly a mere philosophical opportunist.

According to Steila, Lenin was interested in philosophy throughout his life. This suggests an interest that is not linked to specific concrete problems. She points out, for instance, that as part of the process of arriving at his own view of historical materialism, Lenin was already interested in 1894–1895 in the debate between Marxists and Populists on the theme of historical determinism. She further notes Lenin’s concern to master the writings of Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, as well as his desire, which he shared with the thinkers of the Second International, to develop his philosophical competence. She also points to Lenin’s study of Bogdanov’s writings as well as the rapid emergence of basic philosophical differences between them.

Steila also usefully points out that the Machists, who differed among themselves, shared a common rejection of absolutes of all kinds. Lyubov Aksel’rod was a Russian revolutionary, and, after Plekhanov, the most important Russian Marxist philosopher. Her pseudonym was “Orthodox” (*Ortodox*). She criticized Lenin, whose ideas she branded as non-Marxist. Lunacharsky was a Russian Marxist revolutionary and later the first Soviet Commissar of Education. Steila notes that, before Lenin’s work on empirio-criticism, the Menshevik view that Bolshevism and Machism were the same was represented by the Menshevik conviction that, as Aksel’rod put it, they were both expressions of the same subjective arbitrary will and vulgar empiricism. This view was no sooner formulated than it attracted critics. Orthodox Bolsheviks, who began to intervene against their Menshevik comrades, emphasized that Bogdanov and Lunacharsky did not represent the philosophy of the faction. For instance, in 1908, as Steila points out, Bogdanov gave a lecture in Geneva as a reaction against Plekhanov and his school; this was later published with the title *The Adventures of a Philosophical School*. During this period, Lenin was engaged in philosophical study intended to broaden and deepen his grasp of specifically philosophi-

cal themes, including issues pertaining not only to Menshivism, but also to Kant and Hegel. Lenin, who took part in these discussions about Machism, thought that Plekhanov, for instance, did not go far enough in reacting against Bogdanov, hence against Machism. As such, Lenin's study of philosophical themes eventually led to his sharp criticism of empiriocriticism.

Steila points out that Lenin's disagreement with Bogdanov was especially serious with regard to epistemology. Lenin advocated the independent existence of social being, whereas Bogdanov deemed that collective consciousness "builds" social being as its own object, a position that Lenin considered to be wholly idealistic. Together with Plekhanov, he equated Berkeley's immaterialism with Hume's agnosticism. From Lenin's perspective, what was at stake was the possibility of basing a sound political project on what he regarded as a subjective conception of knowledge. Lenin, who obviously linked politics to philosophy, like Plato seemed to think that a correct conception of knowledge underlies and makes possible a correct political approach. Steila cites with approval Robert Service's remark that *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* provides the philosophical underpinning for Lenin's political program advanced in *What Is To Be Done?*

Yet it is never clear to what extent Lenin's philosophical interest is limited to or surpasses his philosophical concern. Steila, who holds a high opinion of Lenin's philosophical capacities, regards the latter's philosophical study as turning on the insight that, as she argues, it is only if reality is knowable and known that there can be a true theory leading with certainty to specific political goals. She contends that, in this context, "true" means to grasp the mind-independent world as it is beyond appearance. This theme, which was not invented by Lenin, dates back to Parmenides: for instance, Plato, under Parmenides' influence, defends metaphysical realism. Steila points out that the alternative, which Lenin rejected, consists in denying ontological realism, which in turn means denying the political consequences of historical materialism. In other words, Steila argues that Lenin's political stance was based on his earlier philosophical stance, more precisely, on his version of the Marxist approach to cognition, or the reflection theory of knowledge. Steila argues convincingly that Lenin's insistence on the "theory of reflection" is not arbitrary but is intended to guarantee objective knowledge of mind-independent reality, thereby confirming the necessary link between materialism and Marxism.

Lenin's book, as Steila points out, is not a philosophical work in the usual sense, since it is clearly rooted in the disputes concerning Marx and Marxism in the period prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, and in that sense

it is obviously dated. Yet despite its obvious limits, Lenin's study served as the unquestioned centerpiece of Soviet Marxism for decades and now remains influential in Chinese Marxism. Yet in the West, Lenin's later dialectical conspectus on Hegel (1914) is often counterposed to the apparently more mechanical view he worked out in his slightly earlier study of empiriocriticism (1909).

As part of her focus on contextualizing Lenin's philosophical interests, Steila helpfully notes that the reaction to Lenin's philosophical work on empiriocriticism is extremely varied. The Soviet Marxist reaction, as she points out, arguably culminates in Ilyenkov's study of Leninist dialectic and positivism. She further notes that Althusser's study is weakened by his own basic anti-Hegelianism, which is perhaps consistent with Engels' view, as well as with a certain form of classical Marxism, but which, by inference, Lenin does not share. Žižek, on the other hand, interestingly contends that the Leninist reliance on the theory of reflection leads to a kind of idealism. According to Aksel'rod, Lenin was unable to overcome quasi-Kantian dualism. Bazarov, a Russian Marxist revolutionary, who is now remembered for his contribution to economic planning in Russia, undertook to defend Lenin's viewpoint. Bogdanov rejected what he regarded as a kind of fideism. Yet Lenin himself never criticized the book, nor did he reject it later, and after his death and Stalin's rise to power, it became, as Steila suggests, the cornerstone of a newly emerging Stalinist orthodoxy. In summary, Steila provides a detailed survey of the different reactions to Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, the most interesting of which took up the theory of reflection. On this crucial point, the views are very varied.

Bykova's careful, detailed discussion in '[Lenin and Philosophy: On the Philosophical Significance of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*](#)' focuses, as the title suggests, on the philosophical import of Lenin's controversial study that is more often cited than read, more often defended than analyzed, more often rejected than examined. According to Bykova, after Lenin died and Stalinism emerged, important ideological support for the highly authoritarian Soviet state was found in Leninism. During this period, Stalin and others created the myth of the so-called Leninist stage in Soviet philosophy. A turning point was provided in an article in *Pravda* in 1930, written by M. B. Mitin, V. Ra'tsevich, and P. Yudin. According to the authors, Lenin provided the most developed understanding of Marxist dialectic. This and related claims were less important philosophically than as a kind of intellectual camouflage for Stalin. Bykova's focus is on revisiting Lenin's single most important philosophical work and in revising our views of its author. She notes the considerable effort Lenin repeatedly devoted to philosophy, including in this book as well as in his *Philosophical Notebooks*.

Bykova, who concedes that Lenin was not a trained philosopher, thinks his interest in philosophy is significant but needs to be understood in its wider context. Her concern is therefore not Lenin's philosophy, but rather Lenin *on* philosophy. She claims that Lenin's philosophical legacy needs to be understood in the specific circumstances of Russia in the first two decades of the twentieth century. His aim, she thinks, was to link Marxist theory and revolutionary practice, in which, in his opinion, philosophy played a central role. It is therefore incorrect, though often asserted, that Lenin reduces Marxism either to class ideology or to party ideology.

Bykova sees as particularly useful Lenin's sharp differentiation between philosophical materialism and his defense of materialist dialectic, both in materialism and empiriocriticism. She seeks to avoid either dismissing in principle or overly stressing Lenin's work in according it a sympathetic hearing. She suggests that the book should be read sympathetically as a concerted effort to set out the basic elements of dialectical materialism.

In her rereading of the book, Bykova places it in the context of the so-called Machist controversy; she reviews this in detail by examining its main adherents, including Mach, Avenarius, and, in Russia, Bogdanov. In his book, Lenin sharply counters Bogdanov's empiriomonism and empiriocriticism in following Plekhanov. Bykova, who thinks Lenin is concerned with establishing a true Marxist philosophical view, points out that in his study Lenin seeks to expose the errors of Bogdanov and Machism. Throughout this period, according to Bykova, Lenin understands Marxism as dialectical materialism. More specifically, Lenin criticizes empiriocriticism and vulgar materialism in simultaneously arguing for dialectical materialism.

In the third and last part of her essay, Bykova focuses on Lenin's understanding of materialism. She sees Lenin as following Engels in refuting idealism and defending materialism as a form of ontology. Yet she concedes that Lenin's arguments are not decisive. She goes on to point out that, according to Lenin, sense perception yields a knowledge of reality. In other words, Lenin thinks human beings can reflect reality by opting for the infamous reflection theory of knowledge.

Lenin and Individual Figures

Lenin was intensely practical, and strongly—even obsessively—focused on bringing about and later on consolidating what came to be known as the Bolshevik Revolution. In the process of carrying out this self-assigned task, he interacted either directly or indirectly with a number of other individuals

who were centrally important in the international Marxist movement. The second part of this volume provides studies of five such individuals in chronological order: Engels, the founder of Marxism, to whom Lenin remained committed throughout his career; Luxemburg, his single most important critic before the Bolshevik Revolution; Trotsky, a co-participant in the October Revolution who was later forced into exile and subsequently assassinated on the orders of Stalin; Stalin, who, after Lenin's untimely death, became his undesignated successor; and finally Lukács, who, after his turn to Marxism, arguably became the single most impressive Marxist philosopher and, depending on one's interpretation, perhaps a central Leninist thinker.

Each of these chapters raises significant conceptual themes. There are different ways of understanding the relationship between Marx and Engels. Engels, and later most Marxists, always understood them to be two authors of a single theory; this is something that Marx never asserted (on the contrary, he denied), and that, on closer study of Marx's writings, scholars of Marx and Marxism increasingly tend to deny. Norman Levine belongs to the group of specialists who see the differences between Marx and Engels as crucial to understanding Marx's theories.

Marx famously distinguishes between initial, or crude, communism, a phase in which each person will receive back what they contribute, and its later, higher stage, in which each person will supposedly receive what they need. Levine's study, titled '[Engels' Co-option Of Lenin](#)', focuses primarily on what he understands as the clear and highly significant discontinuity between Marx's and Lenin's respective definitions of the second or "higher phase of communist society," in short, the *terminus ad quem* of Marx's entire theoretical effort, his aim in striving to bring about the transformation of modern industrial society from capitalism to communism. Levine develops his account as a series of four related subthemes, including Lenin's ignorance of Marx's *Paris Manuscripts* and other writings from the same early period; Lenin's lack of knowledge concerning the distinction between distributive justice and civic humanism, including its origins in Greek political thought; the absence of the concept of civil society in Lenin's thinking; and finally his manifest failure to appreciate the difference between materialism and naturalism. Levine's main theme is that not only did Lenin rely heavily on Engels for his view of Marx, not least since a series of important Marxian texts had not been published when Lenin was active, but he further misinterpreted in important ways those Marxian texts that had appeared when he was active and with which he was familiar.

Marx's *Paris Manuscripts* appeared for the first time in the Soviet Union in 1929 and three years later in the West. Levine points out that Lenin,

who died before it appeared, based his vision of the higher phase of a future communist society on Engels' understanding of scientific socialism. From the Marxist perspective, for obvious political reasons, Marx and Engels are routinely treated as an indivisible unit. Levine, however, argues three main points: first, there are important differences between their views; second, in the absence of Marxian texts that only appeared later, Lenin did not and could not have known many aspects of Marx's views; and third, for these reasons, Lenin could only have based his view of Marx and Marxism mainly on Engels. With this in mind, Levine's contribution focuses on what he describes as the contradictions between Marx's and Lenin's basically different views of the higher phase of communism through a series of remarks on Feuerbach and Hegel.

The precise contribution of Feuerbach to the formulation of Marx's position remains unclear. Some observers, for instance Lukács, think that the Marxist understanding of Feuerbach's importance is exaggerated. Engels, who was not trained in philosophy, had no hesitation in designating Feuerbach as the only contemporary philosophical genius when Marx began to write. Though critical of Engels, Levine, following many other writers, thinks that Marx's view is constructed on the basis of Feuerbachian anthropology or even on anthropological humanism. Levine is more critical of Lenin. Though Lenin was aware of Marxian writings that had already appeared when he was active, Levine thinks he was not always able to grasp them correctly or even to identify central topics. According to Levine, Lenin's ignorance or misinterpretations of Marx's texts from the early 1844–1845 period, which he read but did not understand, resulted in his later ignorance of Marx's understanding of the philosophical foundations of mature communism. For instance, although Lenin was an egalitarian, Marx, according to Levine, was an inegalitarian: that is, someone who believes that the inequality of talent is the basis for the satisfaction of needs.

Levine provides many examples in a series of references to a number of crucial Marxian texts. Here a single example must suffice. Thus Levine insightfully points out that, though he read *The Holy Family*, after 1895, Lenin never uses the term "civil society," and therefore he never grasps either Marx's consistent rejection of egalitarianism, which is especially obvious in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, or its significance for his position on the conception of civil society. Levine's point is that though Leninism is the basis of Marxism–Leninism, or supposedly a single theoretical commitment for which, over generations, so many Russians, Chinese and others have fought and died, Marx and Lenin, and perhaps many Marxists, have basically different ends in view. If Levine is correct, then anyone committed

to the political realization of the Marxian theory needs to take that point seriously.

Levine thinks that the discontinuities between Marx and Lenin, which inevitably concern the “higher phase of communist society,” hence the realization of Marx’s vision of communism, are especially important in Lenin’s alleged misinterpretations of Marx’s *The Civil War in France* and the *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Unlike Marx, who never ceased to acknowledge the reality of scarcity, Levine thinks that Lenin relies on a world in which superabundance is a prerequisite to realize communism as well as a so-called technological utopia, in which the distinction between mental and physical labor, which Sohn-Rethel, for instance, explores, has simply been erased, and in which the division of labor has been overcome.

Unlike Marxism, which bases political considerations on the supposition of theoretical unity, Levine analyzes the disparity between Marx’s, Engels’ and Lenin’s three significantly different visions of a fully realized communist society. Here, as elsewhere, his point remains that either Lenin was ignorant of Marx’s view or when Marx and Engels took different positions, for whatever reason, he turned from the former to the latter. Levine, for instance, points out that Lenin’s vision of the realization of communism is akin to a view of future society as a single giant factory, which has Engels’ conception of scientific socialism in the background, and which basically conflicts with Marx’s theoretical view. For example, in *The Civil War in France*, in which Marx analyzes the tension between the state, which Engels thought would later wither away, and civil society, Marx, who did not share that view, argues for decentralization and, according to Levine, for the idea that, in principle, civil society can and must take precedence over the state. It follows that for Marx the so-called “higher phase of communist society” was understood by the government as the self-determination of civil society, which governed itself.

It has already been noted several times that, after his early account of the revolutionary proletariat, Marx turned to working out an account of the economic self-destruction of modern industrial society on the basis of his alternative, non-orthodox theory of capitalism. Throughout this period, beginning as early as the *Paris Manuscripts* and continuing to the end of his life, Marx continued to rely on a sparsely sketched, never-developed conception of the ripening of economic contradictions supposedly intrinsic to capitalism, above all on the level of the alleged decline in the rate of profit. Marx’s reliance on the self-destruction of capitalism through such contradictions, hence on an economic account of the transition from capitalism to communism, is countered by Lenin’s non-economic view of the party

as vanguard of the revolution. Lenin's basically non-economic political approach attracted strong opposition, above all from Luxemburg, arguably the most formidable adversary Lenin faced in the period starting around the time of *What Is To Be Done?* (1904) and ending with her assassination in 1919. Lenin and Luxemburg held sharply opposing views about a series of fundamental Marxist ideas, including the role of the party, democracy, the importance of economics to the transition from capitalism to communism, revolutionary spontaneity, and so on. It is therefore no accident if, in *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács, arguably the most important Marxist philosopher, hesitates in deciding whose position to defend.

Luxemburg and Lenin are often simplistically contrasted: the former pointing toward freedom in the form of a spontaneous transition to communism, and the latter representing an earlier, darker authoritarianism. In his balanced account, 'Luxemburg and Lenin,' Peter Hudis argues in detail that the failure to understand the points of agreement of these two figures contributes to concealing the more important elements that drive them apart.

Hudis, who knows Luxemburg well, works to relativize the obvious differences between them. In Hudis's opinion, Luxemburg and Lenin share a common Marxist tradition, as well as many political assumptions, and agree on many issues, though finally their legacies point, as he plausibly claims, in different directions. He develops his analysis in considering four main points, including Luxemburg's prescient, singularly important critique ("Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy" (1904)) of Lenin's organizational conceptions; her writings on the 1905–1906 Russian Revolution; her work within the Polish Social Democratic movement from 1908 to 1914 and its relation to debates with Lenin on the so-called "national question"; and finally her 1918 criticism (as well as defense) of the Bolshevik Revolution in her booklet *The Russian Revolution*.

Hudis points out that Luxemburg and Lenin were both born in the Russian empire and that both emerged as political figures within the Second International. Their limited degree of convergence is subtended by important differences, for instance with respect to the relation of revolutionary Marxism. Lenin, who early on was committed to democracy, later turns to proletarian dictatorship or, in reality, the dictatorship of the party over the proletariat. Hudis distances himself from the conviction that Luxemburg's 1904 critique of Lenin in *Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy* differs in important ways from Lenin's concept of organization. He points out that Luxemburg does not object to Lenin's conception of a single party as the vanguard of the revolution, which was parenthetically a

staple of the Second International from its formation. Rather, she objects to the imposition of bureaucratic control at the expense of democratic deliberation, or, more precisely, the failure to develop and maintain a deeper conception of democracy, an understanding of this political approach consistent with the very idea of proletarian revolution. Hudis, who concedes that Lenin was not an original thinker as concerns organizational centralism, since he merely followed Kautsky and Lassalle on this point, nonetheless affirms the contemporary importance of Luxemburg's insistence that revolutionary organizations must avoid ultra-centralism in remaining open to spontaneous impulses from below.

Another problem lies in whether, as Marx thought, Russia needed to go through a period of capitalism before reaching socialism or would rather be able to elide one or more stages, much as Mao later sought, through the so-called Great Leap Forward, to hasten the advent of socialism. Luxemburg was close to Lenin with respect to the 1905 Revolution, which implied a *direct* transition to socialism by a working class that had only just begun to experience capitalist industrialization, and therefore had not yet experienced an extended period of capitalist development. According to Hudis, she shared with Lenin the view that the *form* of the revolution was bourgeois while its *content* was proletarian, but she differed in her view that political parties do not make revolutions, which arise spontaneously. This agrees with Dunayevskaya's view that unlike Lenin, who took organization as central, for Luxemburg revolution was even more important than organization.

The fourth point concerns Luxemburg's *The Russian Revolution* (1918). Hudis suggests that she and Lenin were driven together by the Second International's infamous capitulation to the First World War. We come back to that point below. Though in *The Russian Revolution* she strongly supports the Bolshevik seizure of power, Hudis points out that she does not expect the revolution to accomplish the impossible. She recognized the deep contradiction between the expressed Leninist view of "all power to the soviets," a goal that was never realized except in theory, and the fact that power was in practice concentrated in the hands of the Bolshevik Party. Luxemburg, who distinguished between the Marxian theory of proletarian dictatorship, or merely temporary rule by the majority, and the reality of interminable Bolshevik dictatorship, sharply and famously opposed the latter. In short, she rejected, as Hudis notes, the Leninist preference both in theory and in practice for dictatorship instead of democracy. Hudis goes on to claim that Luxemburg's most important critique of the Russian Revolution lies in her insistence on democracy—democracy come what may, democracy even for those with whom one disagrees—as a necessary element of realizing revolu-

tion. Hudis goes on to question this view on the grounds that it is not clear how to make democracy integral to the revolutionary process if, as was the case in Russia, in reality the overwhelming majority of peasants are simply incapable of playing a relevant political role.

Democracy has always been a central issue in both Marx and Marxism. Engels thinks that, after the coming revolution, the state, like the bronze axe, will be found only in the museum. Yet democracy requires a democratic state as its practical basis. Hudis, who concedes that the relations between Luxemburg and Lenin are complex, concludes in suggesting that the differences between them on the organizational question, though important, are less so than the even more fundamental question of the relation of democracy to revolution. For that reason, he thinks that in a basic sense Luxemburg's work can be described as humanist, and hence specifically relevant to problems we now face.

Trotsky's relation to Lenin, Stalin and other Bolshevik revolutionaries is complex. It is well known that Trotsky went from being an integral part of the Bolshevik Revolution, arguably second in importance only to Lenin, to a revolutionary pariah after he lost the struggle for power when Lenin passed from the scene, eventually leading to his assassination. The complicated series of relations between the two men is analyzed by Löwy and Le Blanc in '[Lenin and Trotsky](#)'. They are depicted as fierce adversaries in the Russian socialist movement, who arrived at a mutual understanding in 1917 that enabled them to function as co-leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution. They further depict Trotsky as faithful to Leninism after his exile from Russia in the period lasting until his assassination.

Trotsky's views evolved greatly over time. After the 1903 Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) held in London, Trotsky sided with the Mensheviks in objecting, as did Luxemburg, to Lenin's stress on Jacobin centralism. In his pamphlet "Our Political Tasks" (1904), he criticized what he saw as a radical incompatibility between revolutionary democracy and Leninist Jacobinism. Very much like Luxemburg, he also objected to the party organization "substituting" itself for the Party, the Central Committee substituting itself for the party organization, and finally the dictator, later Lenin, substituting himself for the Central Committee. Trotsky, who at the time insisted on democratic pluralism, hence rejected a non- or anti-competitive form of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Löwy and Le Blanc further point out that Trotsky and Lenin differed in their attitudes with respect to the Russian Revolution of 1905. All or nearly all Marxist observers before the Russian Revolution thought it would

be bourgeois-democratic. Lenin, as *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* (1905) shows, was then caught up in the tension between revolutionary realism and the nature of orthodox Marxism in the Second International. At the time, and unlike Engels, Lenin further rejected the Paris Commune as an appropriate model, though he later returned to it in April 1917.

Trotsky, in contrast, relied on the model of the Paris Commune in formulating his conception of permanent revolution, which was first systematically expounded in *Results and Prospects* (1906). Löwy and Le Blanc go on to suggest that Trotsky's breakthrough with this concept, which they describe as one of the most astonishing Marxist insights of the twentieth century, made it possible to understand the future Russian Revolution as a continuous process encompassing the initial democratic phase and a later proletarian/socialist phase. They go on to claim that this insight successfully predicted future events in China, Indochina, Cuba, and elsewhere.

Löwy and Le Blanc further credit Trotsky with what they describe as a broad and original conception of the world-historical movement, appropriately divided into different phases, leading to the view that the dictatorship of the proletariat must be supported by the peasantry since it could not be justified by so-called mechanistic "economism." This raises the interesting question of why, if Marx aims at social freedom, which requires a democratic state, and if Trotsky himself once supported democracy from the Menshevik perspective against Leninist Bolshevism, he then changed his mind, and further why it is in the interest of the peasantry to support a dictatorship of the party over the people.

Trotsky and Lenin also differed on the social nature of the Russian Revolution. He agreed with Lenin that it required an alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry; unlike Lenin, he believed that it privileged the proletariat. Löwy and Le Blanc suggest that the most important aspect of Trotsky's view of permanent revolution lies in what they refer to as its understanding of historical tasks, for instance the proletarian rejection of so-called economic enslavement. They see this idea as following from an understanding of class struggle in a revolutionary process.

The authors claim that Lenin's and Trotsky's views converged as a result of the First World War. For this reason, Lenin and Trotsky were often regarded as a single conceptual entity both within and outside Russia in the early days after the Revolution.

Yet the large measure of agreement between Lenin and Trotsky immediately prior to the Revolution was tested after it. Marxism in power, as Löwy and Le Blanc point out, was forced to make political compromises that some-