



# Rethinking, rediscovering, and reconstructing Lenin

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Books reviewed:

Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? in Context*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008 [1st edition 2005].

Lars T. Lih, *Lenin*, London: Reaktion Books, 2011.

Alan Shandro, *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony: Political Practice and Theory in the Class Struggle*, Leiden: Brill, 2014.

Tamás Krausz, *Reconstructing Lenin: An Intellectual Biography*, translated by Bálint Bethlenfalvy with Mario Fenyo, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015.

Recent decades have witnessed an impressive increase in studies on Lenin. This is interesting since there were already many sources about the great revolutionary. During the last century, countless researchers had studied Lenin's personality,

politics, theories, and views. Everything possible to say about the subject seemed to have been said. Yet in the 21st century, thick books with the title “Lenin” are still being written!

This return to Lenin is the result of an objective necessity. Capitalism does not have much to offer to humanity today, and capitalist economies cannot provide wealth and good life to most citizens. Under such conditions, mass discontent triggers revolutionary quests, which inevitably lead the way to Lenin. Thus, at each political crossroad, Lenin comes back on the agenda.

But there is another factor giving new breath to Lenin studies. In the post-Soviet era, the Russian state opened archives related to the early years of the USSR. Hence some previously unknown letters, correspondence, secret telegrams, instructions, etc. came to daylight after the 1990s. To be sure, the additional information obtained from these archives does not paint a brand new portrait of Lenin but clarifies some details and fills some gaps. That’s all. Lenin is still Lenin, but we know him better now.

The four books briefly reviewed here are among the most important and original contributions to the new studies on Lenin.<sup>1</sup> Three of them deal with Lenin’s life, thought, and politics as a whole. The other one (Lars Lih’s *Lenin Rediscovered*) focuses on the *What Is to be Done?* period, approximately the years 1899-1904. This book is limited in content compared with the others, but its size is much larger (close to 900 pages).

### Lih’s Lenin

In his shorter book, Lih proposes to divide the three decades of Lenin’s political life (from 1894 to his death in 1924) into three ten-year periods. These periods roughly correspond to the phases of Lenin’s vision expressed in the last sentence of his *Friends of the People*. Lih (2011, p. 46) quotes the sentence:

When the advanced representatives of this class assimilate the ideas of scientific socialism and the idea of the historical role of the Russian worker - when these ideas receive a broad dissemination - when durable organisations are created among the workers that transform the present uncoordinated economic war of the workers into a purposive class struggle, - then the Russian worker, elevated to the head of all democratic elements, will overthrow absolutism and lead the Russian proletariat (side by side with the proletariat of all countries) by the *direct road of open political struggle to* the victorious communist revolution.

According to Lih, the first phase, the creation of Russian social-democracy, corresponds to 1894-1904. The bourgeois-democratic revolution and the acquisition

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<sup>1</sup> Lih’s and Krausz’s books were published in Turkish in 2017 and 2018, and I had reviewed them in *Devrimci Marksizm* (no 41-42, Winter-Spring 2020; and no 44, Autumn 2020). This review is a combination and revision of those earlier pieces, with the addition of Shandro’s book, published in Turkish in 2021 (all references will be given in parenthesis).

of political rights make up the second phase covering 1904-1914. Finally, in the third phase, between 1914 and 1924, the focus is on the world socialist revolution.

It seems that Lih has reorganised the facts with pedagogical and aesthetic concerns to create a neat scheme, and for that reason, he has not marked the two great revolution years, 1905 and 1917, as turning points. While his sketch has the advantage of being easy to remember, we must not forget that there are overlaps between the periods (for example, Bolshevism was formed, mostly, not in the first but the second period).

In both books, Lih's polemical target is what he calls the "textbook interpretation", the widespread view on Lenin in Western academia. This interpretation depends on the idea that Lenin did not trust the workers (their political skills and organisational capacity). Thus leaving aside the International slogan that "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves", he set up a conspiratorial organisation of intellectual revolutionaries. And *What Is to be Done?* reflects this imperious vision, which does not care about political freedoms or democracy. In this regard, it is a "textbook" itself, the work that best summarizes Bolshevism's essence and the project to which Lenin devoted his entire life. Lih (2011, p. 16) sums up the textbook interpretation as follows:

The central theme of the textbook interpretation is Lenin's alleged "worry about workers". According to this account Lenin was pessimistic about the workers' lack of revolutionary inclinations and was therefore inclined to give up on a genuine mass movement. He therefore aimed instead at an elite, conspiratorial underground party staffed mainly with revolutionaries from the intelligentsia. Following from this, the textbook interpretation sees fundamental contrasts between Lenin and the rest of European Social Democracy. They were optimistic, he was pessimistic. They were fatalist, he was voluntarist. They were democratic, he was elitist. They were committed to a mass movement, he was conspiratorial.

Lih thinks that this interpretation is wrong in every aspect. First, the claim that Lenin did not trust the workers is plainly wrong. On the contrary, Lenin was perhaps too optimistic about the capabilities of the workers. Unlike his "economist" opponents, he had great confidence in the working class and the revolutionary leaders to emerge from it. By the turn of the century, Lenin thought that workers had made significant progress within a short time and began to become an organised and disciplined force. However, the socialists had failed to lead this spontaneous movement effectively. He attributes this inadequacy to amateurish methods, to the inability to understand the requirements of a central organisation, and to the continuation of old-style study circle habits. In other words, Lenin finds socialists inadequate, not workers. That is the reason for writing *What Is to be Done?*: The workers' movement and socialism need to be merged, and here the weak link is the socialists (2011, p. 79).

Another problem associated with this in the "textbook" interpretation is the belief that the Leninist revolutionary organisation consists of intellectuals. According to this dogma, a group of radical intellectuals (of bourgeois or petty-bourgeois origins)

will bring consciousness to the working class. Since the working class cannot develop class consciousness on its own, this will come from sections of the bourgeoisie. However, the thesis that consciousness comes to the working class from outside does not have such a meaning. The revolutionary organisation does not impose a non-existent consciousness on the workers. According to Lenin, the revolutionary organisation, depending on the theory of socialism that Marx and Engels put on a scientific basis, will inspire the working class to lead the people. Thus it is more of a matter of leadership. Since the working class is inevitably heterogeneous, segments of this class with a more “advanced” level of consciousness than the others take the lead. For Lenin, the revolutionary organisation consists of advanced workers and intellectuals who have become professional revolutionaries. Lih reminds us that “The idea that Lenin restricted the status of ‘revolutionary by trade’ to intellectuals has no factual basis and is incompatible with his entire outlook” (2011, p. 71). Intellectuals of bourgeois or petty-bourgeois origin do not have the majority nor any privileges in such an organisation. On the contrary, from the point of organisational discipline, they are rather seen as less reliable members.

The “conspiratorial” character attributed to the Leninist revolutionary organisation is another falsification. Lih explains at length that the Russian *Konspiratsiya* did not mean “conspiracy” then and had nothing to do with the Blanquist fine art of “coup d’état”. *Konspiratsiya* rather meant techniques to escape from the political police. Failure in this was leading to a police raid and the collapse of the organisation. *Konspiratsiya* practices were the product of the Tsarist regime which did not recognize even the basic bourgeois-democratic freedoms. Indeed, Lenin and many Russian revolutionaries were trying to model their party on the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Even the idea to publish an underground party newspaper to form the backbone of the organisation was inspired by the success of the *Sozialdemokrat* which, because of Bismarck’s anti-socialist laws between 1878 and 1890, was secretly published abroad and then distributed all over Germany by the SPD (2008, p. 65). In contrast with the really “conspiratorial” methods of the previous Narodnik generation, the principal purpose of the Leninist organisation was political propaganda to spread the socialist message among the working masses and the people.

In *Lenin Rediscovered*, Lih tries to recreate the context of *What Is to be Done?*, and in practice, this becomes a study of the debates, factions, publications, and terminology within the Russian revolutionary movement at the turn of the 20th century. Such an approach provides a tremendous advantage for the reader. We enter the world of the text (and its author) and get to know Lenin’s polemical opponents of those years, *Rabochaia Mysl*, *Rabochee Delo*, and others more closely. We learn the different meanings and etymologies of the key terms used. Moreover, we better understand Lenin’s problematic. These are the strengths of Lih’s laborious commentary.

On the other hand, becoming embedded in the context creates a disadvantage, since the events that take place outside of this context fall outside our field of vision.

For example, the immediate reason for Lenin's break with the Second International was the attitude of the social-democratic parties of Europe when the First World War broke out. Yet we can see the clues for this break in the *What Is to be Done?* period, even earlier. But we can see these clues only if we look for them. Since such clues are not pursued in Lih's approach, Lenin's originality is also lost, and he turns out to be a devoted Russian "Erfurtian". That means, as a young man, he was shaped with the Marxism of the Second International, and it took a long time for him to detach himself from that outlook. Lih thinks Lenin maintained this orientation until as late as 1917 (2008, p. 114). But the determinist Marxism of the Second International and Lenin's understanding which was more open to contingencies actually differed before the world war. For example, Kautsky thought that with the development of capitalism, the labour movement would spontaneously grow, and its merger with socialism depended on various factors (2008, p. 635). He believed that the road was pre-determined, but the distance covered would be determined by actual struggle. However, according to Lenin, there was more than one way forward, more than one development possibility. For example, if the social-democrats failed to lead the workers' movement effectively, the workers' movement would fall under the influence of the bourgeoisie. Thus, as Lih also emphasises, effective leadership (and hegemony) was central to Lenin's thought and practice. Although some of its formulations are still insufficient, *What Is to be Done?* can also be read as a text in which Lenin began to move away from "Erfurtism". This, it must be noted, is the approach Alan Shandro adopts in his *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony* (2014, p. 271).

Lih does not attach much importance to the "economism" debate in *What Is to be Done?* According to him, Lenin's main issue was not to criticise economism but to batter *Rabochee Delo* by using the accusation of economism. According to this account, economism was not a real danger in Lenin's eyes, but only an artificial allegation directed to his adversaries (2008, p. 11). However, Lih very well knows (and Shandro again reminds us), Lenin made a similar critique ("imperialist economism") of some Bolsheviks such as Bukharin and Pyatakov within the framework of the imperialism debate in later years. Contra Lih, one can say that Lenin saw economism as a real threat and struggled with it all his life.

Economism does not reject politics but refuses to face the problem of political power. We can see traces of such a mechanical understanding in Bukharin's conception of imperialism or Rosa Luxemburg's dismissal to recognize the right of nations to self-determination. In such cases, problems that belong to the political level are resolved by referring them to another (economic) level.

The economist understanding is not simply a matter of comprehension but stems from capitalist relations. Historically, during the feudal period, the bourgeoisie first gained power in the relations of production and then transferred this power to the political domain. By contrast, the working class cannot achieve economic power in capitalism. To create a new society, it has to seize state power first and then rearrange the relations of production. Thus the key question for the proletariat is the conquest

of political power. But for this, the working class has to go beyond the problems that concern only itself (economic problems in a narrow sense) and lead other oppressed social segments. The proletariat has to prove that it can govern society. However, because of its position within the relations of production, it is quite difficult for the working class, or rather the vast majority of it, to realize this. Broad sections of the working class who are less developed in terms of the level of class consciousness tend more or less spontaneously to an “economist” conception. On the other hand, it is a rational attitude for the bourgeoisie to try to direct the struggle of the workers to the economic domain as much as possible and to build insurmountable walls between economy and politics. Thus the workers’ movement, a product of capitalist development, can “spontaneously” advance only to economism or trade-unionism.

In this context, it is hard to understand why Lih, who discusses everything thoroughly, puts this claim of Lenin into a footnote: “Class political awareness can be brought to the worker *only from without*, that is to say from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of the relations of workers to owners” (2008, p. 646, fn 68). Lenin speaks of a consciousness that can be achieved only through the struggle for political power. He argues that a working class that does not engage in general political struggle cannot develop “class political awareness”.

This issue is of great importance. According to the conventional wisdom, workers become a class by struggling for their rights. However, Lenin says this will not be enough. He thinks that those who only fight for workers’ rights cannot go beyond economism (or trade-unionism) and that such positions have a place in bourgeois democracy. He argues that capitalist society can absorb a labor movement restricted to economic demands and supports this claim by comparing the British and German labor movements in *What Is to be Done?* (2008, p. 404). According to Lenin, those who try to confine the labor movement within trade union boundaries actually represent the influence of bourgeois ideology in the labor movement. I think the last hundred years have justified his concerns.

## Krausz’s Lenin

While Lih’s *Lenin Rediscovered* focuses on the world of *What Is to be Done?*, Krausz’s *Reconstructing Lenin* employs a holistic approach. Krausz argues that Lenin’s theoretical works of various periods are not simply studies caused by the then political developments but there is a “line of intellectual development” that encompasses all of Lenin’s works and actions (2015, p. 10). He tries to show this line, but he does not do this by stripping Lenin of all contradictions and presenting him as a mythological hero who is never wrong. Krausz’s Lenin is a historical personality who struggles with political problems and tries to find creative solutions to these; an always “learning” individual who sometimes makes mistakes but knows to change track when he sees that he has made mistakes.

The main thesis of Krausz’s biography is expressed in the sentence “to the degree that history confirmed Lenin’s Marxism where the Russian Revolution was

concerned, it did not confirm his idea and aspirations for developments *after the revolution*” (2015, p. 367). Thus his account has two basic periods, before and after the October Revolution.

According to Krausz, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* which proved that Russia had entered the capitalist path was of decisive importance in the evolution of Lenin’s thought. In Russia the agrarian question was of great importance. This dual emphasis on Russia’s capitalist development and the agrarian question brought a break with both the Narodnik tradition (that preceded Russian Marxism) and liberalism (apparently the symmetric opposite of Narodism, but in reality implicitly attached to it). During this early period, Lenin had already seen that the Russian revolution would trigger a world revolution (2015, p. 91). The agent that could lead the revolution was not the weak and non-autonomous bourgeoisie, but the nascent proletariat. According to Krausz, the 1905 revolution would make the situation even more clear.

After the 1905 revolution, Stolypin’s reforms aimed to establish large land ownership in agriculture and speed up capitalist development. However, the enormous mass of peasants was in favour of the division of the lands and had become a revolutionary actor. The formulation of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry” under the leadership of the proletariat got shape within this context (2015, p. 98). As the bourgeoisie tried to hinder the revolution, the bourgeois-democratic and socialist stages of the revolution were intertwined. According to Krausz, this continuity became more pronounced in Lenin’s thought over time (2015, p. 200).

In the period of reaction after the 1905 revolution, we see Lenin struggling with both the “right” (Menshevik) and the “left” (the Bogdanov group) factions within Russian Social Democracy. Krausz deals extensively with Lenin’s conflict with Bogdanov. In general, their debate has turned over sending deputies to the Duma (Lenin believed the boycott tactic could only be valid in times of the rise of the revolutionary wave), but there were serious theoretical and philosophical differences in the background. In this context, Krausz points out (with Lenin) that revisionist movements almost as a rule turn their backs on dialectics (2015, pp. 126-130), and he emphasises the importance of Lenin’s Hegel studies during the world war (2015, pp. 145-151). He reminds us that Lenin approached dialectics “as the philosophical-theoretical and practical instrument or method, in social and historical terms, for overtaking the capitalist system” (2015, p. 147). He states that the practical-tactical flexibility Lenin achieved by means of such an approach was evident in “the famous arguments that he took up with Luxemburg, Bukharin and Pyatakov, mainly on the national question, the revolutionary strategy, and the social-democratic politics of alliance” (2015, p. 151).

Krausz attaches great importance to *The State and Revolution*, which Lenin wrote just before the October Revolution and laid out the philosophy of the revolution. According to Krausz, in this book, Lenin struggled with anarchist utopian movements on the one hand and revisionist parliamentarism on the other

(2015, p. 194). Rather than the dictatorship of one party, he envisioned a socialism in which the state would disappear. According to Krausz, “Lenin spoke not only about the direct forms of workers’ rule, as opposed to the bourgeois republic, but also distanced himself from the tradition of *state socialism*, that is, the ‘introduction of socialism’ by means of state power” (2015, p. 201). Contrary to the claims of liberal critics, Lenin did not rely on a “statist” conception. However, with the start of the civil war, practical needs for the defense of the revolution came to the fore. As the role of the party increased, that of the “self-governments” of the working class decreased (2015, p. 207).

Krausz argues that after the October Revolution Lenin faced a certain difficulty in theorising developments. The difficulty emerged on two interconnected axes. We can call the first one the axis of the world revolution. Lenin saw the success of the Russian revolution in connection with the European (especially German) revolution. However, as seen in the Brest-Litovsk example, until the European revolution began, the most important position would be to protect the achievements of the Russian revolution. Recently, new documents have emerged showing that Lenin was deeply concerned about the separation of Russian socialism from the European ground (2015, pp. 285-294). The delay in the awaited European revolution gradually led to a “great power policy” on the part of the Soviet Union, and in the later Stalinist period this became the rule. According to Krausz, in the 1920s “Lenin’s motivations indicate that he acted within the scope of the world revolution’s ideal, but brought his day-to-day decisions under the primary influence of the realpolitik of a dominant power” (2015, p. 299). The immediate practical problems of the world war, the revolution, the civil war, the ensuing famine of 1921-22, the rebellions within the country inevitably preceded theoretical analysis. Krausz claims that Lenin could not make a concrete analysis of the concrete situation in the all-important question of world revolution. He had analysed the development of capitalism in Russia, but he could not adequately analyse the economic-class development of Western countries (2015, p. 362). For example, in the context of the theory of imperialism, he had not clarified how the Western working class could resist opportunist ideological-political influences. Despite establishing a link between democratic demands and socialism in the age of imperialism, he could not provide clarity on how to decide about the different (heterogeneous) interests in a democratic context (2015, pp. 161, 170-172). He could not properly analyse the ideological-political formation of the Western workers and the general “ripeness” level of the conditions in Europe for the revolution, and could not develop a clear view on how to expand the revolution (2015, pp. 300-303).

The second one can be called the Russian axis. Here, the socialism that Lenin envisioned in *The State and Revolution* gradually faded in the face of practical problems. In this context, the conditions of the civil war from 1918 on forced the transition from the market to war communism under state control. In the later period, with the transition to the NEP, the role of the state increased, and the party (not the proletariat) came to exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat (2015, pp. 320-321, 329). According to Krausz, the emerging Soviet state can be defined as

“a bureaucratic state with proletarian offshoots” (2015, p. 331). As a matter of fact, despite his health problems, in the last years of his life Lenin struggled with the emerging bureaucratic tendencies. But he was unsuccessful. The self-defense tools of the working class, workers’ democracy, and mechanisms to ensure the proletarian character of the dictatorship could not be developed. Krausz goes so far as to say that Lenin “betrayed” dialectics (2015, p. 334).

I think it is not a realistic approach to attribute the problems of a revolution to a single individual, even if this is a world-historical person. Lenin made mistakes, of course, but a thorough and dialectical analysis is expected to account for the “objectively subjective” limits of a revolution in a relatively backward country in the middle of a world war. Failures, trial and errors, corrections, and “stick bending” are essential components of this process. The turn towards great power policy, the withering away of working-class organisations, the rise of bureaucracy, and the betrayal to dialectics characterize not the Lenin period but the post-Lenin Soviet Union.

Krausz writes that in the “state capitalism” (NEP) phase of the transition period, Lenin outlined four potential courses of development. The first is the “Ustralov scenario” introduced by Bukharin after Lenin’s death. This basically means “capitalism without the bourgeoisie” or the dictatorial restoration of capitalism. Apart from this, the three alternatives toward socialism are, in Krausz’s terms, as follows: (i) “market socialism”, attributed to Bukharin, meaning the expansion and deepening of the NEP; (ii) “state socialism”, attributed to Stalin, which showed no flexibility in converting state property to common property and gradually evolved to market socialism; and (iii) Lenin’s way of thinking, “The conception of socialism founded on autodynamic-self-generating and needs-based production, direct democracy, cooperative ventures, and the ‘cooperative system’ of producer and consumer collectives” (2015, p. 351). Krausz states that in the post-Lenin period “state socialism” prevailed, which later gave way to market socialism and ultimately capitalism. Although his account is insightful, I think the concept of “state socialism”, which Krausz uses so much when describing the Soviet experience, just like “market socialism”, contains a contradiction between terms and has no place in Marxist theory (in fact Lenin does not use either term). Krausz may object by saying that the contradiction takes place not in the concept but in reality, but when used in this way, it sounds as if both “market socialism” and “state socialism” are legitimate, valid forms of socialism. The occasional use of such descriptive terms is not a grave problem in itself, but for theoretical-conceptual consistency, the Soviet experience can be described as an ultimately failed attempt at “socialist construction” and the USSR as a “bureaucratic workers’ state”. Although Krausz seems to point in a similar direction by saying that “In place of realizing a communal society, the path of authentic socialism led to the *bureaucratic* system of *state governed* community” (2015, p. 367), his account remains somewhat confusing.

One of the original and valuable aspects of Krausz’s work is his long polemics in various contexts with the widespread liberal understanding that holds the

Bolsheviks responsible for the violent environment that emerged after the October Revolution. He rightly emphasises that neither Lenin nor the Bolsheviks were fond of violence at all and that the actual source of modern violence was world war and imperialism. The red terror arose against the white terror of the bourgeoisie and was fundamentally a defensive response.

We learn that in January 1919, in a (recently found) letter sent via Gorky, the Menshevik historian Nikolay Rozhkov suggested Lenin to establish a personal dictatorship against white terrorism and Lenin strongly refused (2015, pp. 227-230). Also in the same year, Lenin and the Bolsheviks opposed the forced collectivization of the peasantry (2015, p. 240). In the case of the Constituent Assembly that was dispersed after the October Revolution, Krausz rightly emphasises that the crucial question is not why the Bolsheviks dispersed it, but how and with what power they could do that. He reminds us that the Constituent Assembly had turned into an apparatus of the bourgeois power hostile to the Soviet regime (2015, pp. 212-216). He also points out that although the Bolsheviks were seeking compromise until the last moment, they had to take drastic measures because of the insurgency of the counter-revolutionary forces.

An unknown aspect of the wave of violence that culminated with the civil war after the October Revolution is the systematic pogroms against the Jews (2015, p. 255 ff). Krausz reminds us of these massacres, not mentioned much in the literature, massacres in which around 200,000 Jews in total were killed. He emphasises that the deep-rooted anti-Semitism in Russian soil was seen even in the Red Army ranks, especially during the retreat after the Polish defeat. Lenin took the harshest measures against this white (and sometimes red) pogromist terror. According to Krausz, Lenin was the first to notice the link between anti-Semitism and anti-communism (2015, p. 278).

In short, Lenin and the Bolsheviks are perhaps the last to be blamed on the issues of “revolutionary violence” and “terror” highlighted in the liberal accounts. The primary sources of violence and terror were the imperialist policies, the white terror supported by these, and the reactionary fascist organisations trying to block all liberation efforts. It was like that a hundred years ago, and it is still the same today.

## Shandro's Lenin

Of the four books reviewed here, Alan Shandro's *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony* is theoretically the most intense one. Shandro performs a close reading of Lenin's primary texts to trace the emergence of the logic of hegemony in his theory and practice. While Lih asserts the “Erfurtian” orientation of the young Lenin, Shandro portrays him as an outlier who does not exactly fit into the Marxism of the Second International. Indeed, Lenin's theoretical and political interventions represent the most serious attempt to “situate Marxism in Russia”, and across these interventions, one can discern “the emergence of a logic of political analysis”, that is, the logic of hegemony (2014, p. 24).

According to Shandro, orthodox Marxism had a unilinear conception of history. When applied to the Russian context this was creating certain tensions since the weak Russian bourgeoisie could not lead the impending revolution which was supposed to have a bourgeois-democratic character. The logic of hegemony emerged as an answer to these tensions, as an attempt at resolving the problems of revolution in Russia. To be sure, the term “hegemony” was not Lenin’s invention. At the turn of the century, many Russian Marxists (and the newly formed RSDLP) had accepted the “proletarian hegemony in the bourgeois-democratic revolution”. But this formula was also testing the limits of the orthodox Marxism of the Second International “whose basic assumptions – that the growth of the productive forces determines the direction of history, that the material and the intellectual conditions of socialism develop in parallel, and that Marxist theory and the working-class movement fuse harmoniously – Plekhanov and Kautsky shared” (2014, p. 99).

The logic of hegemony did not assume an automatic or pre-determined connection between Marxism and the workers’ movement. The “fusing” was something to be built. Shandro reminds us that Lenin conceived Marxist theory basically as a guide to action rather than an academic exercise to explain the world better. For Lenin, Marxism needed to learn from mass movements and the changing political conjunctures. In this sense, Marxist theory was not a completed whole to be followed dogmatically; rather, it had to be developed continuously, taking into account the innovations made especially by the masses (such as the Soviets in the Russian revolutions). This was a conception analogous to Engels’ contention that materialism “has to change its form with each epoch-making discovery”.

A consistent historical materialist approach to politics requires the “concrete analysis of the concrete situation”. This is not a simple task, and very different conceptions can emerge from the same premises. A famous example is the split within the RSDLP in the Second Congress in 1903. Shandro analyses this split extensively and shows that while both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks accepted the perspective of “proletarian hegemony in the bourgeois-democratic revolution”, they had opposing approaches to hegemony. Their differences were not clearly visible during the Congress but got shape over time. Having written *What Is to be Done?* just a year ago, Lenin had “oriented himself toward the Congress and the party organisation that was to emerge from it as a prolongation of the struggle against Economism” (2014, p. 165). However, the future Mensheviks were not ready to accept his proposals, and their different stance towards political agency soon found its expression in various critiques directed to the Bolsheviks. Shandro (2014, p. 166) summarizes the basic differences between these two approaches to hegemony as follows:

The Mensheviks would come to emphasise the expressive aspect of proletarian political agency; for them, the self-emancipation of the proletariat consisted essentially of forms of political activity in which workers asserted their class character in practical confrontation with bourgeois political actors. Thus expressing their independence in practical forms, the workers would grow in self-

confidence and political self-consciousness ... The sense of agency at work in Lenin's interventions was, by contrast, essentially strategic, centred on the struggle over state power in accordance with the politico-strategic logic of the struggle for hegemony that subtended the thesis of consciousness from without in *What Is to Be Done?* Framed in these terms, proletarian agency is appropriately assessed through its effect upon the strategic context and proletarian independence figures as organised (hence essentially collective) class struggle in this strategic context.

In the Menshevik approach to hegemony, proletarian emancipation would be achieved through self-education and self-activity of the workers. That sounded like the logical extension of the principle, "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves". However, in fact, it was basically a pedagogic approach that exclusively focused on the education process of the working class, and neglected the strategic dimension necessary for proper class hegemony and revolution. For the Mensheviks, Lenin's insistence on the struggle for hegemony and state power was something meaningless or, at best, premature.

Lenin's break with the determinist logic of orthodox Marxism rested on the recognition of the open-ended character of the struggle, and this changed everything. In Shandro's terms, the party could no longer be conceived as the "resolution of the essential contradictions of the historical process. It would have to be seen, instead, as a guide to action, organising the independent political intervention of the working class within a complex and shifting web of interrelated contradictions" (2014, p. 197). This was a more dynamic style of political analysis and a more realistic approach to theory and practice.

The 1905 revolution became an important moment in the development of this novel approach. Impressed by the peasant movement and the spontaneous emergence of the new forms of self-government (the Soviets), Lenin reconceptualised the struggle for hegemony by refining the idea of two paths (the Prussian and the American paths) of capitalist development in the countryside. According to Shandro (2014, pp. 217-220), by connecting the logic of hegemony with the socio-economic structure, Lenin finally managed to base this new logic on historical materialist premises. This resulted in his reformulation of the agrarian programme by incorporating the nationalisation of land and the clarification of the formula "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry". From then on, the peasantry figured more significantly in his political calculations.

The proletarian-led alliance between the peasantry and the proletariat inevitably adds a socialist element, a permanent revolution perspective, to the revolution. In Shandro's view, compared with the logic of hegemony, political "relations between classes, in particular the relation between proletariat and peasantry, are cast in Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution in more rigid terms" (2014, p. 229). That means the ability to take into account the moves of opponents or other actors is more limited in the permanent revolution approach. This may be true or not, but Shandro's evaluation is rather cursory on this subject, and I think this is because he is more concerned with emphasising the originality of Lenin.

After briefly reviewing the alternatives to Lenin's conception, Shandro concludes that "the distinctiveness of Lenin's position consisted not in the recognition of proletarian revolutionary agency alone but of the enduring potential of a class-antagonistic bourgeois political project as well" (2014, p. 232). It seems that only was Lenin able to fully understand the implications of class war, of the antagonism between the proletariat and the whole of bourgeois society. Since a permanent reconciliation was impossible between these two main antagonistic classes, the proletariat and its vanguard had to be ready to carry the struggle to the end. The Mensheviks, on the other hand, were viewing the Soviets as the "revolutionary self-government", but, in fact, they had no strategic preparation to confront the inevitable counter-revolutionary repression and to organise a revolutionary insurrection (2014, p. 243).

During the First World War, Lenin once again undertook a reformulation of his strategic logic of hegemony, this time through his analysis of imperialism and his studies on Hegel's *Logic*. The war proved that the international socialist movement was decisively split into opportunist and revolutionary sides. Opportunists gave full support to imperialist policies, and according to Lenin the social base of opportunism was provided by the labour aristocracy. A privileged stratum within the working class, the labour aristocracy was not a static group, but the expression of the hierarchical fragmentation of the working-class across various dimensions:

The lines around which hierarchies form (skilled versus unskilled, national versus immigrant, white versus black, and so on), as well as the advantages accruing to the better positioned (higher wages, better conditions, greater security, social respectability, political rights, and so on), are subject to endless variation because they are not the simple product of a series of deals but the outcome of social struggles (2014, p. 265).

Thus the unity of the working-class was threatened not only by petty-bourgeois influences and the backward sections of the class but also by the "stratum of workers-turned-bourgeois" (2014, p. 266). Yet the solution, according to Lenin, was not to exclude this privileged stratum. Rather, its struggles had to be integrated with the general course of the proletarian struggle for hegemony, and this was only possible through a struggle against opportunism.

As is well known, Lenin conceived imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism, as the transition phase to socialism. Imperialism enlarges and intensifies the contradictions of capitalism, and this creates a favourable environment for revolution. However, as capitalism develops, social differentiation also increases on both the national and the international levels, which results in a very complex and ever-changing web of relations between social forces. Under such conditions, quite different and seemingly unrelated struggles (democratic opposition to imperialism, national liberation struggles, etc.) can be a part of the revolutionary process "when situated in the context of the class struggle between proletariat and imperialist bourgeoisie" (2014, p. 268). This amplifies the need for conscious revolutionary agency since otherwise, all these particular struggles will "melt into the air" without

providing permanent gains for the masses.

Shandro rightfully insists on the pertinence of Lenin's logic of hegemony for today's world. However, apart from one or two passing remarks, he does not provide concrete examples to inform the reader on this point. In the last chapter of the book, in a few pages, he briefly criticises Hardt and Negri because of their opposition to Lenin's vanguardism, then continues with Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli's *Prince*. I think this chapter does not add much to the main argument of the book, and certainly does not compensate for the lack of practical examples to flesh out the story.

### Complementary perspectives

Lenin was a great historical figure who struggled with thousands of problems in the middle of a magnificent revolution. He tried to provide solutions to these by using Marxism as a guide, which he conceived as a theory that requires constant updating. Such a conception accepts in advance that, especially during turbulent times, it is difficult for the vanguard agent to devise a strategy that has prospects of success, to consider all the important social forces, and even to decide on the meanings of particular events. Since there is no transcendent guarantee in history, one has to take responsibility and act accordingly.

By any measure, Lenin was probably the greatest revolutionary in history. It's no surprise that scores of new books and papers about him appear every year. The four books reviewed here are original and valuable contributions to the recently growing literature on Lenin. They are not alternatives to each other but complementary works that collectively provide a more nuanced portrait of him. In this sense, they are all worth reading, but apart from Lih's brief biography, these books are not introductory-level material. Instead, they demand from the reader some familiarity with the subject.

All three authors display a certain sympathy for Lenin, yet this does not mean an uncritical attitude on their part. In my opinion, they provide a more balanced and nuanced portrait of Lenin than the Western "textbook interpretation" of him.