

Editor's Preface

This work saw the light of day in the heat of a decisive battle for the international proletariat.

What Is to Be Done? constituted the essential weapon with which to fight *revisionism*. This, even in its Russian form, denied the scientific nature of Marxist analysis, i.e. it excluded for the proletariat even the possibility of equipping itself with a strategy.

What Is to Be Done? is the precious magnifying glass that allows us to reread the chapters of the history of our class from a Leninist point of view.

In order to do this, we can follow the Russian script.

Between 1884 and 1894, Marxist theory gathered strength, but the Marxists, among the currents of avant-garde thought, only had very few disciples. Between 1894 and 1898, the labour movement revealed its political awakening in the struggle via strikes. 1898-1902 was a period of dispersion, of theoretical and organisational eclecticism; it was the artisanal phase of the political struggle fought by the vanguard of the Russian proletariat. *What Is to Be Done?* was published as the theoretical guidebook allowing that phase to be left behind.

Lenin focused on the Russian *precursors* of revolutionary Marxism. The latter had the merit of being considered the *world vanguard* of the revolutionary democratic movement. Lenin hoped that the nascent social-democratic movement would be able to be nurtured with the «same devoted determination and vigour».

Eighteen years later, in “*Left-Wing*” *Communism: an Infantile Disorder*, he picked up this concept again and underlined it:

«For about half a century – approximately from the forties to the nineties of the last century – progressive thought in

Russia, oppressed by a most brutal and reactionary tsarism, sought eagerly for a correct revolutionary theory, and followed with the utmost diligence and thoroughness each and every “last word” in this sphere in Europe and America.»

Russia, continued Lenin, arrived at revolutionary Marxism through «half a century of unparalleled torment and sacrifice, of unparalleled revolutionary heroism».

The *precursors* were the great democratic revolutionaries of the time when democracy and socialism were considered to be «indissolubly bound up».

«[Their] *spiritual drama* was a product and reflection of that epoch in world history when the revolutionary character of the bourgeois democrats was already passing away (in Europe), while the revolutionary character of the socialist proletariat had not yet matured.»

The *Decembrists*, a group of officers in the tsarist army and descendants of the Russian landowning aristocracy, had known Europe thanks to the Napoleonic wars. They would leave their indelible mark on future generations of Russian revolutionaries. They were *noblemen*, ready to “sacrifice” themselves for the people; their central idea, which made them great, was the *liberation of the peasants*.

No other *democratic* movement in Europe, after the great French Revolution, stressed so strongly the tie existing between the struggle against the feudal classes and the emancipation of the peasants.

Pavel I. Pestel, one of the conspirators who was hanged by the tsarist reaction on July 13th 1826, wrote:

«Almighty God created human beings on Earth and entrusted it to them so that they could feed themselves. Hence, the land is common property of the human race and not of private persons. [...] Ancient Rome’s famous agrarian law which established the frequent sharing of the land among all of its citizens was founded on this basis.»

The seed of Narodism was sown in Mother Russia.

Aleksandr Ivanovich Herzen was the fruit of that springtime.

He founded "Russian" Socialism – as Lenin defined it – i.e. Narodism, the expression of the peasants' revolutionary democracy at a time when Socialism was beginning to impose itself as the political expression of social progress. In 1912, at the time of the one hundredth anniversary of Herzen's birth, Lenin recalled the main characteristics of these revolutionary figures:

«the great importance of revolutionary theory [...], selfless devotion to the revolution and revolutionary propaganda among the people are not wasted even if long decades divide the sowing from the harvest».

The modern proletariat would inherit that concept – which would remain obscure for the maximalist tradition – as a point of fundamental strength for its revolutionary struggle.

Herzen was born in 1812 and died in 1870. Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky was born in 1828 and died in 1889. He went one step farther than Herzen. Using the political formulas that Lenin would use thirty years later, we can say that Chernyshevsky saw the need for a resolute struggle against the "Prussian way" and, without being aware of it, fought for the "American way" of the development of capitalism in Russia. One of his fundamental strong points lies in his struggle against the illusion that the Russian autocracy could emancipate the peasants against the interests of the feudal lords.

The young Lenin, in *What the "Friends of the People" Are*, summed up the revolutionary essence of Chernyshevsky's thought. The Russian autocracy was only capable

«of something "vile," of a miserable compromise between the interests of the liberals (redemption is nothing but purchase) and of the landlords [...]». «Do not be taken in by empty words about progress,» – wrote Chernyshevsky – «no, our situation is horrible, unbearable, and only the peasants' axes can save us. Nothing apart from these axes is of any use.»

The *agrarian law* according to the Jacobin model and the polemic against the *conciliators*, «weathercocks that turn one

way or another at the whim of circumstances» – these were the themes of Chernyshevsky's political thought.

His weapon was the magazine *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary), which under his direction became the organ of the Russian Jacobin democracy and achieved a circulation of six thousand copies, a very big number for that time. In 1848, Chernyshevsky summed up his political credo as follows:

«Clear admiration for the West, convinced as we are that we Russians are nothing in comparison. They are adults and we are children. Our history has developed according to other principles; we have not yet had class struggle; it is just beginning.»

Chernyshevsky created the formula «From a spark a flame will flare up,» which would inspire Lenin for the title of the first Marxist newspaper for Russia, *Iskra* (The Spark).

Chernyshevsky looked in the direction of Italy and, in *Sovremennik*, he wrote prophetically:

«You Italians who desire reforms and freedom, know that you will only overcome reaction and obscurantism by interpreting the trends of your poor, obscure, peasant compatriots and the simple urban population. Either you will put agrarian changes in your programmes or – know it now – you are destined to perish at the hands of the reaction.»

In the summer of 1862 *Sovremennik* was suppressed by the tsarist police and Chernyshevsky was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg. During his two years of imprisonment, before setting off for “perpetual exile” in Siberia, he wrote *What Is to Be Done?*, his most famous novel.

«We drew from that novel – wrote Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov in 1870 – moral strength, trust in a better future and great faith in selfless work.»

In 1904, Lenin would say that the novel

«had a decisive influence on hundreds of revolutionaries [...]. As for me, it ploughed me up more profoundly than anything else».

In his political novel, Chernyshevsky described the *New Men*, the revolutionary youth of the 1860s in Russia. Among them, he presented the figure of the professional revolutionary, entirely consecrated to the cause and aware of working for the future.

«Great is the number of good and honest people, rare are the Rakhmetovs. They are like the bouquet in fine wine, its strength and its aroma. They are the best among the best, they are the movers of the movers, they are the salt of the salt of the earth.»

The distinction between the *New Men* and Rakhmetov, «the mover of the movers» of the literary work would be transformed by Lenin into the scientific link between the cadre party and the revolutionary class.

In 1864, Chernyshevsky, sentenced as a “state criminal”, was exiled to Siberia. He could return to his hometown only in June 1889 and he died there four months later, on October 29th.

Lenin saw in the professional revolutionary, completely devoted to the cause, continuity with Chernyshevsky’s revolutionary generation... a continuity that is found again in the title Lenin gave his scientific work, *What Is to Be Done?*. This was the greatest homage the Marxist scientist could pay to his great *precursor*.

In 1883, Georgi Plekhanov, the father of Marxism in Russia, founded the “Emancipation of Labour Group” with Vera Zasulich and Pavel Axelrod. In his *History of Russian Social Democracy*, Julius Martov, one of the fathers of Menshevism, said the revolutionaries of the 1880s did not provide, as might have been expected, cadres for Marxism. He wrote that «old articles of faith,» especially when they are tied to a *heroic* period, are not easily abandoned.

Lenin was 17 years old in 1887, the year when his brother Aleksandr was sentenced to death as a member of a Narodist fraction that planned to assassinate the Tsar. The young Lenin entered politics in the circle of Kazan university students. In 1892, he wrote notes for the reports that would become *What the “Friends of the People” Are and*

How They Fight the Social-Democrats. The essay was published in the spring of 1894.

He continued his revolutionary education in theoretical and political struggle in St. Petersburg, in a phase he himself defined as the «honeymoon of legal Marxism». Everyone was becoming Marxist; it was an “original phenomenon”. Lenin explained that the break with the *legal Marxists* was not dictated by the question of alliances. Alliances with democratic currents were “natural” in the struggle against the tsarist autocracy. The break derived from the intransigent struggle against the attempt to use these alliances in order to make revolutionary Social Democracy an *appendix to the liberal movement*.

In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, published in 1847, Marx reflected on the “utopian theorists” of Socialism and wrote:

«But in the measure that history moves forward, and with it the struggle of the proletariat assumes clearer outlines, they no longer need to seek science in their minds; they only have to take note of what is happening before their eyes and to become its mouthpiece. [...] From this moment, science, which is a product of the historical movement, has associated itself consciously with it, has ceased to be doctrinaire and has become revolutionary.»

The *doctrinaire phase* corresponded to the *rebellious childhood* of Socialism.

Chartism in England, the highest expression of the *spontaneity* of the modern proletariat, moved beyond this phase and revealed the great potentiality of the new revolutionary class. The proletariat arrived spontaneously at democracy, i.e. at the struggle for the greatest conditions of freedom for selling, defending and protecting the labour force organised into coalitions. Chartism demonstrated that the international nature of our class naturally led to solidarity among the exploited persons of the whole world.

The qualitative leap of the proletariat organised autonomously as a *power among the powers* imposed consciousness from without. Engels clarified the main task of the

historical phase of moving beyond *rebellious childhood*. In his letter of November 29th, 1886 to Friedrich A. Sorge he wrote:

«The first great step of importance for every country newly entering into the movement is always the organisation of the workers in an independent political party, no matter how, so long as it is a distinct workers' party.»

Marx and Engels' party did not find cadres for its entrenchment in the men of the doctrinaire and rebellious phase of Socialism; the exceptions were few. Nevertheless, a series of fixed points was established from which the generation that would work in the political cycle characterised by the extension of the struggle via strikes would be able to set off again.

One of these fixed points is extremely significant: it regards the connection between the party and strategy. As we know, scientific socialism established itself in Germany. In 1913, Lenin, commenting on the death of August Bebel, wrote:

«The period of preparation and the mustering of working-class forces is in all countries a necessary stage in the development of the world emancipation struggle of the proletariat, and nobody can compare with August Bebel as a brilliant personification of the peculiarities and tasks of that period.»

With 1895 the years of the acceleration of the struggle via strikes began in Russia. The political consequence was the birth of the *Economist current*; all the Russian Social Democrats «were enthusiastic about economism». The capital of this political phenomenon was St. Petersburg. The Economists argued that all the energies should be thrown into the working class's economic struggles. They saw a scission between this struggle and the *democratic* struggle against the tsarist autocracy. *What Is to Be Done?* explains the class nature of the Economist ideology. To claim economic struggle for the workers and to refer political

struggle to the intellectuals meant subordinating the revolutionary class to petty-bourgeois democracy.

We wish to emphasise one aspect of this battle. Many joined the Socialist movement «thanks to its practical importance and its practical progress». This attitude could overshadow the need for theoretical struggle. Lenin's statement that «without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement» is linked precisely to this consideration.

Lenin saw that it was necessary to resume the theoretical struggle that had begun in the phase of *legal Marxism*. It was precisely the particularity of the party *being formed* that imposed particular attention to its theoretical tasks. There were two reasons for this: in its childhood, the party could not yet have *settled accounts* with the past; it still had to assimilate avant-garde thought to the point of being able to *apply it to itself*; furthermore, the Russian proletariat was faced with national tasks of unprecedented dimensions.

A reflection of Lenin's brings us to a milestone in party theory:

«“A committee of students is of no use; it is not stable.” Quite true. But the conclusion to be drawn from this is that we must have a committee of professional *revolutionaries*, and it is immaterial whether a student or a worker is capable of becoming a professional revolutionary.»

Lenin's conception of the party is clear:

«The character of any organisation is naturally and inevitably determined by the content of its activity.»

The party is the organisation of the activity of professional revolutionaries. This activity is the struggle to strengthen and spread the organisation of the vanguard of the revolutionary class against the attempts to «degrade the programme and tactics». As Arrigo Cervetto recalled, *tactics* in the language of Lenin's time was the synonym of *strategy*. *Programme* and *tactics* are the consciousness from without.

Martov was one of the most prestigious exponents of Menshevism. He believed Lenin's thesis about

consciousness from without, which he understood as a generalisation of the specific circumstances of the development of Russian Social Democracy, was *non-Marxist*. He reckoned that the *cult* of professional revolutionaries was an anti-historical legacy of Chernyshevsky's political phase. Martov did not grasp the dialectical strategy-organisation connection. As Arrigo Cervetto wrote, he was a forerunner of the policy that attacked «the organisational concept in order to disarm the working class in the face of revisionist policy».

Only Lenin's strategic vision could arrive at the need for a party that has

«a strategic plan and that in order to implement this strategic plan has to plan the development of the necessary organisational tool with this end in sight».

Marx discovered the scientific method for the analysis of social relations and the struggles among classes and states. He discovered the possibility of a political science. In the field of natural sciences, the search for regularity and reproducibility allowed the discovery of the laws that govern nature and, consequently, the development of «tools». Engels explained that capitalist industry, the apogee of the concentration of the «tools», demonstrated that knowledge of the laws of nature, their «reflection» in our brains, is so real that it can use nature and «place it at the service of our plans».

The knowledge the human race has of nature has a typical characteristic in relation to the knowledge of other living beings, insofar as it is a «technical knowledge».

From scientific discovery to practical activity, the relationship of the human race with nature takes place through *tools*.

With Marx and Engels, the modern revolutionary class brought the method of scientific research from the field of nature to that of social relations. The bourgeoisie has no interest in making this method emerge from the field of nature; in the social field, the bourgeoisie limits itself to the defence of its class interests, in defence of the society

over which it rules and which it defends by propagating huge illusions.

The revolutionary class is the only class that has an interest in discovering the laws governing the movement of bourgeois society. It must use them to «its own ends», for the revolutionary overtaking of a class-divided society. And, in order to tie theory to action, it needs *tools*.

From science to strategy and to the party-tool: this, in short, is the meaning Arrigo Cervetto gave to the concept of the science-party. From Marx's *Capital* to Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?*, the logic of Marxism is rigorous. The false consciousness of the time in which we live ceaselessly recycles old solutions; it thinks the revolutionary way is no longer relevant. It considers that the contradictions of our time are always compatible and that they can be reabsorbed because they are only the result of a «bad policy». Parliamentary cretinism has brought this sophistry to the scale of imperialist parasitism.

Today, Marx's scientific method allows us to understand the dialectic of the real movement: the unity of the world market brings its own contradiction with it, i.e. the scission born of the confrontation between continent-sized imperialist powers. This is the salient feature of our epoch, which will characterise it even more in the years to come. Lenin had already demonstrated that the development of imperialism determined the emergence of new powers and hence the inevitable breakdown of the world order. In the dynamic of its *historical and natural evolution*, the biology of imperialism harbours the phase of political catastrophes, world wars and proletarian revolutions. This can be denied only by having recourse to sophisms, to the opium of appearances. Surrounding himself with this fog, the bourgeois wants to deny himself, wants to persuade himself that the evolutionary process will make him a peaceful, benevolent monkey.