

## **Introduction**

The book review we are reprinting from the archives of the International Committee was written by Tom Kemp in 1964, shortly after the appearance of what is still the only biography of Plekhanov. Kemp was a leading intellectual of what was then the Socialist Labour League, the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. His sharp criticism of Plekhanov's objectivism demonstrates that when we raise the issue of the objectivism that currently guides the International Committee we are working well within the framework of how "objectivism" has always been understood within the IC. It is North and not us who has departed from that understanding.

Frank Brenner

Alex Steiner

**PLEKHANOV*****‘ORTHODOX MARXIST’***

Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism

By Samuel H. Baron. Routledge 1963, 55/-

PLEKHANOV was the key figure in the development of Russian Marxism, its 'father' according to the sub-title of Baron's biography. As a young man he was caught up, despite his gentry background, in the revolutionary fervour of the intelligentsia of Russia in the 1870s. In the passionate debates among the young students and intellectuals who made up the revolutionary milieu he made his mark initially as an advocate of Bakuninism. Doubtless he was drawn to this position by what seemed to be its resolute character. Bakunin's followers, however, placed their main hopes upon what they believed to be the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. In this they shared the illusions of many populist revolutionaries who 'went to the people', with discouragingly little success, in this period. From these failures sprang the terrorist acts of the late seventies carried out by members of the Zemlya i Volya organisation. Plekhanov, however, stood by the principle of a mass revolution and had already had, by this time, some experience of work among industrial workers as well as peasants. When the parent organisation split into two factions, one devoted to individual terrorism, the other carrying on agitation for a mass revolution, he became one of the leading figures in the latter trend and, in view of the danger of arrest, went into exile.

It was as an exile that the orthodox young Narodnik became the leading and most influential critic of Narodnik ideas from the standpoint of Marxism. At the same time, the shift from active participation in a clandestine revolutionary movement to the life of a materially well-provided-for exile had a profound effect on his personality. It emphasised his tendency to see revolution in Russia as an intellectual problem, rather than as an organisational or practical one. His break from Populism was not free from a negative side. Once drawn into West European society, moreover, he gradually accepted, along with Marxism, some of the ways of thought of the European socialists of the Second International which weakened his feel for Russian problems. When he returned to Russia after 37 years, when Czarism had at last fallen, he was completely out of touch with

the needs and problems of the Revolution.

It was, however, in the first 20 years of his exile that Plekhanov accomplished his best work. From his studies of Marxism and Russian economic development he worked out a full - scale and penetrating criticism of populism which broke many of the intelligentsia away from populism and brought them into the social democratic movement which grew rapidly in the 1900s. The Populists had stressed what they believed to be the unique features of Russian development. They were confident that the peasant commune provided the basis for some form of socialism and that Russia could not, or need not, undergo a period of capitalist development. Such ideas, which even found some support in suggestions made by Marx in correspondence with Russians, died hard. By the 1880s, however, the Russian economy was going through a process of rapid economic development on capitalist lines: modern industries were being established, a proletariat was in process of recruitment from the villages, and the commune was progressively undermined. Plekhanov accepted these facts as inevitable and found in Marx's historical method and economic teaching an explanation and a reason for assuming that Russian development would not be essentially different from that of the more advanced West European countries. On this basis he wrote a series of scholarly and polemical articles and books which established Marxism as an influential trend in Russian social thought even before a labour movement of any size was established.

Baron assumes that Plekhanov was an 'orthodox' Marxist and even uses his theories as a yardstick by which to judge other trends. No doubt he sought to be 'orthodox' and, in his writings and attitude, took up what was frequently a doctrinaire position which prevented him from understanding the richness of Marxist method or developing theory in line with the complexities of real life. His writings, for the most part, are intellectual struggles with erring members of the intelligentsia or pedagogic works for the uninstructed; it is in these important, but still limited, ways that they conserve their value today. However, there can be little doubt that he missed important areas of Russian experience and took his own 'orthodoxy' as sacrosanct, instead of making a continuous and fresh study of Russian experience. Because he thought of theory as part of a debate he was seldom able to penetrate the secret of his opponent's position: why did they hold the views that they did and tenaciously maintain them when the truth had been revealed? From argument Plekhanov is apt to shift to abuse rather than to an examination of the social roots of the opposing viewpoint. This lack is found, for example, in his treatment of Populism itself.

As for Plekhanov's 'orthodoxy', it finds its clearest expression in the rigidity with which he maintained the view that Russia would have to go through a period of capitalist development which, though it would be shorter than in the West-from which borrowings could rapidly be made-would nonetheless involve a completed bourgeois revolution and a more or less prolonged period of bourgeois rule. Only after the bourgeois revolution, after Russia had become a fully - fledged capitalist country, would the pre-conditions exist for a socialist revolution. In one form or another this 'two-stage' theory was adopted by the Mensheviks, by Stalin and by the Khrushchevite revisionists today. If, as Baron says, 'his was the first attempt to devise a Marxist socialist programme for an under-developed country', it was based on a faulty analysis and has had baneful consequences for socialism. Rejecting the Narodnik view, based on Russian 'exceptionalism', that the existence of the peasant commune enabled Russia to skip the historical stage of capitalism, he overlooked the possibility that Russia's particular relationship to the whole capitalist world might mean that every stage traversed by the advanced capitalist countries need not be followed by Russia.

Immersed in West European history and caught up in the environment of bourgeois democracy, he failed to see that there were crucial peculiarities about Russian history-just as there had been in French, German or English history. Despite what the Populists maintained, Russia was developing on capitalist lines, and would continue to do so. At the same time, the belated nature of this capitalist growth, the weakness and timidity of the bourgeoisie, the role of foreign capital, the concentration of the proletariat in large-scale plants, the impoverishment of large sections of the peasantry and the failure of the autocracy to master its problems, opened the way for a revolutionary upheaval which need not bring the bourgeoisie to power and enabled the proletariat to stake out its own claim to rule. Plekhanov's views, which had some justification when he first turned against Populism in the eighties, were progressively outmoded by the changes which took place in the early years of the 20th century. His complete rejection of Populism prevented him from considering some of the problems it had raised, in particular it led him to write off the peasantry as a revolutionary factor. It looked like impeccable orthodoxy to proclaim that socialist revolution was out of the question until the proletariat and rural proletariat or poor peasants had become a majority. In fact, Russia was not so very special; in Marx's day Plekhanov's prerequisites for socialist revolution, apart from the existence of a bourgeois state, were met nowhere on the Continent.

Plekhanov's manner of presenting the problem of the coming Russian revolution was thus a mechanical one. It depended upon the maturing of objective conditions in the economic sphere and upon the destruction of the autocracy in the political sphere. The task of socialists in the immediate period was first and foremost to hasten the downfall of Czardom. Beyond that, as capitalism developed and the proletariat grew, the conditions would be prepared for the socialist revolution. This emphasis on objectivism conditioned Plekhanov's political responses to the developments of the last phase of his life, notably the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. It made him see the tasks of socialists as essentially propaganda in character: to enunciate principles rather than programmes of action. Caught up in the discussions which took place inside the Russian Social Democratic Party over the party organisation and policy, his positions seem to lack consistency until it is seen that he was trying to maintain his own 'orthodoxy' which, in the end, won but a handful of adherents.

Plekhanov was one of the first to take a firm theoretical stand against Bernstein's revisionism and was equally strong in his opposition to the 'economist' trend in the Russian labour movement. Again, his counter-attack was made from the standpoint of 'orthodoxy', concentrating on argument and personal attack, rather than upon explaining why such tendencies had arisen. In any case, as Baron points out, there was less soil upon which they could grow in Russia than in Western Europe. He adds, rightly enough, that since Plekhanov anticipated a period of bourgeois development in Russia, 'under his aegis the Russian party would have emulated the German example of revolutionary orthodoxy in words and evolutionary revisionism in deeds'. The rise of an independent working-class movement in Russia already, by the end of the nineties, displayed these problems in embryo with the 'economist' trend. This was a policy of immediate economic gains to be attained by struggles of a trade union type. It issued from the ranks of the more skilled, self-taught workers who were appearing in the more advanced industrial centres. Many of the intelligentsia capitulated to this trend and showed themselves willing to put aside the political struggles. Plekhanov took up the cudgels against it, but rather from the angle of denying that the workers would fail to see that their partial struggles were part of a general class struggle against capital as a whole. The economists had to be resisted because they blocked the growth of such consciousness and failed to exploit opportunities to show the importance of the political struggle.

This leads on to a discussion of Plekhanov's conception of the role of

the intelligentsia, and also to his relationship with Leninism, which Baron makes a central part of his study. His mechanical acceptance of Marxism led him to believe that proletarian self-consciousness would develop automatically; his Populist background left him with a belief in the mission of the intelligentsia, its role being now to raise class consciousness. When members of the socialist intelligentsia accepted Bernsteinism or took the workers as they were, with their existing level of consciousness, they committed a kind of treason. He was not able to understand the dialectics of this process in its full complexity. Baron maintains that Plekhanov came round to over-emphasising the role of 'Leadership' - and thus opened the way for the arch-villain himself, Lenin. On the question of the intelligentsia and its relationship to the working-class movement and to working-class consciousness, Lenin gave a more fully-rounded picture than Plekhanov, one which made no concessions either to the working class or to the intelligentsia.

Both had to be understood in the social context of capitalism and, in Russia, absolutism. For Lenin theory was not a rigid orthodoxy. In fact, of course, it was this orthodox representation of Marxism to be found in party documents and vulgarisations which was most open to the attacks of the Revisionists. Marxists had a task to develop a method and a theory which could arm the working class by raising its consciousness in the class struggle. This consciousness would not rise naturally to the level demanded by the political tasks of the class, nor was it the prerogative of the intelligentsia, as a stratum, to introduce this consciousness from outside. Members of the intelligentsia would be found in the service of absolutism, of the bourgeoisie and of all trends in the labour movement. Neither workers nor intellectuals, as such, could develop theory and prepare the revolution. This was the responsibility of the party; it was its *raison d'être*. Thus there was bound to be a difference between the party member and the non-party worker or intellectual. The party had to embody the highest level of consciousness of the proletariat as a class, to develop the theoretical weapon against all alien classes as well as the alien class tendencies which found their expression in the working-class movement itself. Hence Lenin's emphasis on 'demarcation', to which Baron so deprecatingly refers.

As is to be expected from an American academic enquirer, Baron misunderstands and distorts Lenin's organisational intentions. He claims that Lenin's view of the party was 'alien to the conception of Marx and to the practice of Marxian parties of Europe'. In fact, Lenin took over his organisational scheme from the existing structure of the Social Democratic

parties, though insisting that there was, of necessity, a sharp distinction between the party member and the ordinary worker, even when he had achieved some class consciousness. In the conditions of Russia it was necessary, in any case, to move onwards from the kind of circle discussions and activity, to which the left-wing intelligentsia were so prone, and to form a disciplined party able to carry on illegal activity imposed by the conditions of Czarist autocracy. Baron is obviously wrong in seeing Lenin's intentions in the light of the practice of Stalinism. Of course, Lenin wanted the party to be an instrument of revolution: a notion which in itself Baron must find distasteful. As for Plekhanov, it was not until after the famous Second Congress, which led to the split between Bolsheviki and Mensheviki, that he began to attack Lenin's view of the party, although already relations between the two men had become troubled, notably on the question of land nationalization, which Plekhanov opposed

No doubt Baron is right in seeing the source of the coming estrangement in Lenin's unwillingness to be bound by Plekhanov's 'two stage scheme' for the Russian revolution. By 1904 the latter turned to attack Lenin's 'What Is To Be Done?' on the grounds that he had underestimated the instinctive opposition of the workers to the capitalist system as a whole and had 'proclaimed the socialist intelligentsia the demiurge of the socialist revolution'. As Baron puts it: 'In reaction to Revisionism, Plekhanov had placed a heavier emphasis than ever on the intelligentsia; in reaction to Leninism, he went to the other extreme, denying completely its indispensability.' (p. 251) Though he did not wish the intelligentsia to retire from the scene, his orthodox faith in the ability of objective forces to generate a revolution led him to assert that it was inevitable even without the intervention of the socialist intelligentsia. What that amounted to, of course, was a denial of the need for conscious leadership; a denial which Plekhanov couched in terms of the strictest orthodoxy: the inevitability of the revolution brought about by objective forces. Far from his being an impeccable Marxist, as Baron asserts, Plekhanov's thought had become entirely mechanical: an unmistakeable departure from the method of Marx, as well as from his teachings.

Through this new phase of controversy Plekhanov saw things more and more as a scholar who was, at the same time, the custodian of the orthodox word. He was caught unprepared by the three major events of his time: the two Russian revolutions and the war of 1914, and, as Trotsky pointed out, 'this profound and brilliant theoretician oriented himself in the events of the revolution by means of empiric, essentially rule-of-thumb appraisals; he felt unsure of

himself, whenever possible preserved silence, evaded definite answers, begged the question with algebraic formulas or witty anecdotes, for which he had a great fondness'. The tragedy of Plekhanov was that he spent virtually the whole span of his productive life in exile, as an observer, not as a participant in practical struggles. He developed the characteristics and outlook of the scholar-philosopher looking at great events as an observer from afar, as the custodian of orthodox truth.

From 1905 he sometimes had sound positions; more often he wandered into opportunism and to reconciliation with the Kantianism he had once so vigorously opposed, and to compromise with the revisionists. His policy turned on the axiom that the coming revolution would be a bourgeois revolution. The Russian bourgeoisie was so weak and timorous that any independent action by the proletariat was likely to throw it back for safety into the arms of the autocracy. His confidence that the proletariat would eventually make a socialist revolution was thus opposed by his real fear that if it struck out on an independent path too soon it would only delay the necessary bourgeois stage in Russian development. He was, as Baron puts it, haunted by the 'fear that proletarian class consciousness ... was over-reaching the desired mark, or rather was assuming distorted forms, thus paralysing the bourgeoisie and creating the frightening possibility that the proletariat might attempt a premature seizure of power'. (p. 269) Although he disagrees with them, Baron sees that both Lenin and Trotsky were nearer than Plekhanov to an understanding of Russian reality in what were, in fact, Marxist terms.

In the last 20 years of his life he failed to make any real contribution to Marxist theory. Like Kautsky, he was able to use some of the instruments of Marxism to produce scholarly works in various fields; even his efforts to defend Marxism take on a quasi-religious air. It is as the defender of the faith, not as a revolutionary practitioner, that he approaches the problems of the age. As Baron puts it, he 'had become a doctrinaire, a man so blinded by doctrinal allegiances to the true nature of his world that he was incapable of adapting to it'. From different angles Bernstein and Lenin provided ways of approaching reality which made more sense to participants in the labour movement. However, it would be wrong to assume, with Baron, that Plekhanov was the Marxist, as opposed to these deviants. Plekhanov had abandoned Marx's method, perhaps never understood it. His thinking became increasingly bound up with literary sources rather than with life. It was his inability to think dialectically which made him see Russian development in fixed categories. He thus ignored the revolutionary potentialities of the peasantry and was forced, by his 'two-stage'



system, to conciliate with the liberals. His failure to break from a form of determinism made him underestimate the role of consciousness in revolution. Buffeted by the storms of the post-1905 period we find him moving from one position to another in increasing isolation, even from the Mensheviks with whom he had most in common. The logic of his position leads, inevitably, even to the abandonment of so-called 'orthodox' Marxist canons, and he takes stands which could not be reconciled at all with his former views. Immersed in scholarly pursuits he not only finds a way towards reconciliation with some aspects of Kant's philosophy but emerges, in 1914, as an open supporter of defencism.

The last act of Plekhanov's life is played out as a tragedy, made worse by the indifference or hostility of his former comrades. The man who had demonstratively shaken hands with Katayama Sen during the Russo-Japanese war called on socialists to fight for Czarism against German militarism, and did so while proclaiming that he was the true Marxist internationalist. Even on the eve of the first 1917 revolution he had written that a working-class struggle against the war would be criminal. Clearly he had been left behind by events. When he returned to Russia it was as a declared enemy of Lenin and Bolshevism, declaring them to be anarchists and demagogues. Events had delivered his theory 'a final crushing blow'. In fact, he had failed to base his policy on a full analysis of Russia's social backwardness and its relation to the whole capitalist world economy. It was illusory to suppose that the feeble Russian bourgeoisie could accept, and retain, the alliance of the working class in the overthrow of absolutism and then go on to consolidate its rule and carry out the tasks of the bourgeois revolution. Plekhanov assumed that the Russian bourgeoisie would have to rule, if not for a whole epoch, at least for some years or even decades (the time-span was not clearly specified) before Russia could become ripe for socialism. The shortcomings in this stand are clear enough and are pointed out at some length by Baron. Revolutionary working-class activity would decrease the readiness of the bourgeoisie to move against absolutism; workers who had made gains in revolutionary struggle would not willingly cooperate in the consolidation of bourgeois power. Misunderstanding even the French Revolution of 1789, Plekhanov had not absorbed the lessons of 1848. Baron is right in discerning that Plekhanov went some way in sensing the 'law of uneven development' but failed completely to perceive its corollary, 'the law of combined development'. Plekhanov's view of Russian development should be contrasted with that of Trotsky as found in *The Permanent Revolution* and *The History of the Russian Revolution*. Much can be learned from the comparison between creative Marxism, which uses the richness of the method to enrich the

old formulas, and the grey orthodoxy which seeks mainly readymade recipes.

There are many false assumptions and questionable assessments in Baron's book. Despite the sympathy which he shows, at times, to his subject, Baron is not a Marxist, even of the Plekhanovite kind. The book, however, despite its often pedestrian style, does cast light on an important figure whose role is often neglected and who lacks another biography in English. Unfortunately, from his particular standpoint, it is impossible to measure the whole tragedy of Plekhanov, which was not the degeneration of one individual but was symptomatic of a whole trend within the Marxist movement of his time. Further, many so-called Marxists have adopted Plekhanov's methods and schema. His two-stage theory, for example, finds expression in the Stalinist policy for the national revolution in the underdeveloped countries which is pursued to this day by his successors, with tragic results for the revolutionary movement. T.K. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The author of the review was Tom Kemp.