A UNITY OF OPPOSITES: THE IRONIC EMERGENCE OF AN ACTIVIST AESTHETIC FROM THE "VULGAR" MARXISM OF GEORGI PLEKHANOV

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ABSTRACT

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Although Georgi Plekhanov is widely recognized as the "Father of Russian Marxism" for his role in founding the first Russian Marxist organization, his thinking has consistently been dismissed as exemplifying the rigidly deterministic "vulgar" Marxism supposedly prevalent during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This work contests this portrayal by examining Plekhanov's pioneering work in applying Marxism to aesthetic theory. I argue that, contrary to claims that Plekhanov viewed economics as the sole casual force of social phenomena, his writings on aesthetics repeatedly extolled the political influence art could exert and even called for artworks that would disseminate Marxist ideas to their audience. I further argue that this activist aesthetic was the product of Plekhanov's involvement in the Revisionist Debate of the late nineteenth century, precipitated by Eduard Bernstein's claims that Marxism required revising and subsequent formulation of a theory of socialism dispensing with many orthodox tenets including the goal of revolutionary upheaval. In his polemics against Bernstein, Plekhanov aimed to discredit the Kantian philosophy he believed Bernstein was drawing upon to formulate his ideas, including Immanual Kant's claims of the disinterested appreciation of beauty. The resulting normalization of instrumental art within Plekhanov's thinking intersected with his growing concerns that, as evidenced by the popularity of Revisionism, the

working class was not an innately revolutionary force in society. Part of his remedy for this was to leverage his new ideas about art and call for works that would serve the didactic function of instilling revolutionary ideas within the working class. In doing so, Plekhanov formulated an activist aesthetic that ironically departed from the orthodoxy he had hoped to defend.

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Introduction: Calumny Fetishism

Histories of Marxism have long tended towards contrasts. Whether juxtaposing the "young" Marx with the "mature," Lenin with Luxemburg, or Lukács with Brecht, historians have repeatedly produced balkanized narratives that stress ruptures over commonalities. Sometimes such delineations are valid and illuminating; other times, they obscure telling patterns. Among the most prominent examples of the latter is the purported cleavage between Marxists associated with the Second International, the multinational federation of Marxist political parties that existed between 1889 and 1914, and their postwar successors. This divide was first announced by Lenin in his *State and Revolution* (1917) as part of a polemic responding to the lack of support for his revolutionary agenda among prominent contemporary Marxists. These figures, he claimed, along with the "overwhelming majority of…the Second International," espoused a "complete vulgarization…[and] distortion of Marxism" that reduced its philosophical core of dialectics to an "empty, fashionable phrase" in favor of an economic determinism that "emphasi[zed] the idea of the gradual development [of socialism]."[1] Thus denouncing his erstwhile colleagues for their supposed misunderstanding of Marx and effectively demarcating his own ideas as distinct and correct, Lenin erased any connection between himself and these purportedly "vulgar Marxists." This demonization and differentiation, despite its polemical genesis and unnuanced homogenizing, has achieved spectacular currency and come to be voiced within both seminal theoretical

[1] Vladimir Lenin, "Gosudarstvo i revoli͡u͡tsiia: Uchenie Marksizma O Gosudarstve I Zadachakh Proletariata V Revoli͡u͡tsii," in *Sochineniia*, tom. XXI, (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoye Izdatel'stvo, 1926), 454, 441, 401, and 394.

texts and scholarly studies.[2] Consequently, our understanding of Marxism's full history remains incomplete, as the ideas of Second International Marxists, including their content, patrimony, and legacy, are obscured behind a distorted stereotype.

A particularly prominent example of this can be found in Perry Anderson's famous analysis of twentieth-century "Western Marxism." Anderson argues that Western Marxism "constituted an entirely new intellectual configuration within the development of [Marxism]" by virtue of the fact that, in its focus on elements of society's "superstructures," such as art, culture, and philosophy, "the characteristic themes and concerns of the whole ensemble of theorists who came to political maturity before the First World War were drastically displaced."[3] This novelty was "a product of *defeat*," Anderson continues, writing that from the oppressive authoritarianism of communist states such as the USSR to the stability of capitalism and lack of revolutionary upheavals in the West, Western Marxists were confronted with events "confounding classical [Marxist] predictions" and isolating them from any kind of mass movement.[4] These

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[2] As will be discussed, important works by Leon Trotsky, George Luckás, and Karl Korsch all portray Marxists associated with the Second International as uniformly "vulgar." Scholarly works describing the Marxism of the Second International as, or as in line with, the noted characteristics of "vulgar Marxism" include: Kevin Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1979); Richard Hudelson, *Marxism and Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: A Defense of Vulgar Marxism* (New York: Praeger, 1990); Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, trans. P.S. Falla, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005); George Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974); Albert S. Lindemann, *A History of European Socialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); David McLellan, *Marxism After Marx* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979); David Renton, *Classical Marxism: Socialist Theory and the Second International* (Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 2002); Robert Service *Comrades!: A History of World Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); David Priestland, *The Red Flag: A History of Communism* (New York: Grove Press, 2009); Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013); and Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[3] Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 25, 49, 75-6.

[4] Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 42, 24-48, 46.

conditions directly led to the ostensibly distinctive character of Western Marxism, Anderson concludes, as the absence of working-class involvement led to the predominance of intellectuals who considered the philosophical aspects of Marxist theory to be its most viable and pointed to the influence of cultural phenomena as explanation for the lack of mass support for revolutionary politics.[5] In his claim that it was these circumstances and foci that distinguish Western Marxism from Second Internationalists, and with its implication that the latter subscribed to a reductive materialism that denied any degree of influence to culture and enjoyed a confidence in working-class radicalism and capitalism's predestined obsolescence, Anderson effectively maintains Lenin's portrayal of fin-de-siecle Marxists.

As I will argue, complicating this portrait and the narratives of dissimilarity drawn from it is Georgi Plekhanov (1856-1918) and his development of an activist aesthetic championing politically instrumental art at the dawn of the twentieth century. Paralleling Anderson's description of Western Marxists turning to the idea of culture as a vector of socio-political influence in the wake the "defeat" of Marxist assumptions, Plekhanov embraced this idea of art as an influential agent partly in response to the challenges his own assumptions experienced during what is known as the Revisionist Debate. Described by Eric Hobsbawm as the first "crisis in Marxism,"[6] the Revisionist Debate was a dispute within the Marxist movement roughly spanning 1898-1903 that was sparked by Eduard Bernstein's (1850-1932) claim that Marxist theory needed to be

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[5] Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 78-94.

[6] Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism* (London: Little, Brown, 2011), 215.

revised. Drawing upon contemporary efforts to construct a theory of "ethical socialism" based on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Bernstein argued that many of Marxism's core tenets, including its foundational philosophy of materialism and belief in revolutionary social change through class conflict, were incorrect and needed to be abandoned.

Plekhanov responded to Bernstein's Revisionism in two different ways, the intersection of which led to his embrace of the idea that art could and should actively influence society towards revolutionary transformation. On the one hand, Plekhanov emerged as one of Bernstein's most ardent opponents, composing numerous polemics in which he both defended the aspects of Marxism Bernstein had critiqued and launched counter-critiques at Kantian philosophy. Employing various artworks as evidence in support of his claims in these polemics, Plekhanov argued that Marxism's materialism and belief in inevitable class conflict were proven, and the Kantian notion of the disinterested appreciation of beauty was disproven, by the politically instrumental function art has played throughout history. On the other hand, the popularity of Bernstein's ideas shook Plekhanov's confidence in the working class's innate revolutionism. As historian Lars Lih explains, it was a common among Marxists of the Second International to optimistically assume that "there is a force that comes about automatically from within the worker[s]…the spirit of resistance [to capitalism]" and that this innate resistance means that the proletariat would "sooner or later adopt a socialist programme" and lend its support to the Marxist movement.[7] The emergence and spread of Revisionism, with its stark departure from Marxism's revolutionary goals, undermined

[7] Lars Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered:* What Is to Be Done? *in Context*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006), 80.

Plekhanov's belief in these assumptions, leading him to doubt that the proletariat was a naturally rebellious force in society. This loss of confidence in the proletariat led him to expand and place greater importance on the didactic role of intellectuals, effectively portraying this as necessary for guiding the working class to revolutionary action. Resultingly, Plekhanov mobilized his claims regarding art's political utility and called for artworks that would serve as a vehicle for disseminating Marxist ideas and therefore assist this pedagogic project.

With its sensitivity to philosophical issues, attention to the importance of non-economic phenomena, and privileging of the role human actions plays in precipitating revolutionary social change, Plekhanov's development of an activist aesthetic clearly contrasts with the received image of Second International Marxism and therefore prompts a reassessment the histories that have been built upon it. In their place new narratives emerge, which recognize commonalities and possibly offer a greater understanding of the history of Marxism. Specifically, a history of Marxist intellectuals responding to "defeats" of unfulfilled Marxist assumptions can be recovered by unearthing Plekhanov's development of an activist aesthetic and comparing it to the circumstances and ideas of Western Marxism as described by Anderson. This in turn allows us to revisit Anderson's key claim that the focus on culture among Western Marxists was part of the wider retreat from active engagement with the working class that he sees as characterizing the movement. Plekhanov's writings on art clearly show that he rejected any such retreat. This was achieved this, however, with a worrisomely paternalistic attitude towards the working class and with calls for artists to subordinate their creative freedom to political exigencies, all of which point towards the elitism and overbearing control that would

come to characterize so many of the attempts to realize the Marxist vision of communism in the twentieth century. The possible questions that arise from recognizing these similarities are numerous. To begin to even pose them, however, the heretofore hidden thinking of Second International Marxists such as Plekhanov must be rediscovered.

Before the Calumny: The Life of Georgi Plekhanov

Although condemned by Lenin in 1917 as a "renegade from Marxism … half doctrinaire and half philistine, following politically in the wake of the bourgeoisie,"[8] Plekhanov was a figure of seminal importance for not only Lenin but also the Marxist movement in Russia as a whole. Famously described as the "Father of Russian Marxism," Plekhanov was among the founders of Emancipation of Labor (Освобождение труда), the first Russian Marxist organization, was the first theoretician to apply Marxism to Russian conditions, and served, either directly or through his writings, as the mentor for an entire cohort of early Russian Marxists, including Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Joseph Stalin.[9] The man that would father Russian Marxism was born

[8] Lenin, "Gosudarstvo i revoli͡utsii͡a: Uchenie Marksizma O Gosudarstve I Zadachakh Proletariata V Revoli͡utsii," in *Sochineni͡a*, tom. XXI, 393 and 441.

[9] Historian Samuel Baron subtitled his influential biography of Plekhanov, which remains the only such work in English, "the father of Russian Marxism," and Plekhanov's importance to the Russian Marxist movement and influence on subsequent Marxists such as Lenin and Trotsky comprises one of its main themes. See, Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism,* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1963). Baron's claims of Plekhanov's importance, influence, and even sometimes the appellation he bestowed upon him, is repeated by numerous other works. See, for example, Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 28 and 32; David Priestland, *The Red Flag: A History of Communism*, (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 72; Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought: Theory and Practice in the Democratic and Socialist Revolutions,* (London: Macmillan, 1983); Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, (New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2008), 639; and George Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study*, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 265.

the son of minor nobility on December 11,[10] 1856 in the province of Tambov in western Russia. Plekhanov's father was a member of the gentry, coming from a family with a long tradition of military service, a tradition that Plekhanov was initially expected to maintain as he was sent to the Voronezh Military Academy in 1866. Upon graduating in 1873, he enrolled in the Konstantinovskoe Military School in St. Petersburg. A combination of his own interest in science and his father's belief that a career in the civil service now promised greater stability than the military, however, led to Plekhanov's withdrawal and enrollment in the Mining Institute of St. Petersburg, a technical college, in 1874.[11]

With his relocation to St. Petersburg, the largest city in Russian and long its cultural center, Plekhanov was entering the epicenter of an unprecedented national ferment. By the 1870s, the most progressive elements of Russian society, particularly university students, had grown disaffected and frustrated over the fact that the spate of reforms enacted in the 1860s, including the 1861 emancipation of the serfs, had left the country's absolute monarchy and much of its feudal structure untouched. Agitating for further changes, these progressives were met with hostility by those, particularly the entrenched noble classes occupying positions of power throughout the government, who felt the reforms had already gone too far. The attempts to silence progressive dissent,

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[10] Plekhanov's birthday is sometimes listed in accordance with the Old-Style Julian calendar then still in use in Russia. According to this calendar, he was born on November 29.

[11] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 1-11; M. Iovchuk, and I. Kurbatova, *Plekhanov* (Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 1977), 8-12; G. S. Zhuikov, *Peterburgskiye Marksisty I Gruppa "Osvobozhdeniye Truda"* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1975), 15-17. As will be discussed, Soviet and subsequently many Russian studies of Plekhanov have been deeply influenced by political and propagandistic interests, rendering their discussion of his thinking less than objective. They can, however, be generally relied on to convey the basic events of his biography, which they are being used for here.

however, only served to radicalize it, leading to the growing popularity of more extreme political ideas.[12] Plekhanov was quickly drawn into this maelstrom and became associated with the Narodnik movement and its advocacy of anti-monarchical agrarian socialism,[13] giving more and more of his time to this cause until he was expelled from the Mining Institute in 1876 for failing to attend his classes. Thereafter, Plekhanov devoted himself entirely to revolutionary politics and quickly become a leading figure among the Narodniki. Resultingly, Plekhanov faced intense persecution from the tsarist authorities and was forced to flee abroad twice in order to avoid arrest: the first time for nearly six months from 1876 to 1877 and then again in 1880, only returning thirty-seven years later following the February Revolution of 1917.[14]

By the time Plekhanov left Russia in 1880, Narodism had experienced numerous setbacks; not only was it subject to governmental repression, it had also largely been met by popular apathy.[15] This led Plekhanov, once he had settled in Geneva, to rethink his commitment to it, though not his dedication to radical socio-political change. By 1882 Plekhanov had fully embraced Marxism, then growing in popularity in Western Europe. As Plekhanov himself would explain it, this conversion was partly prompted by his belief

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[12] Excellent discussions of Russia's social, political, intellectual, and cultural ferment in the late nineteenth century can be found in: Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (New York: Viking Press, 1978); Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: A History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1996) and *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002); and Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth-Century Russia,* Francis Haskell, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960)

[13] "Narodism" (народничество), the noun and adjectival form of which is "Narodnik" (народник) and the plural is "Narodniki" (народники), stems from the root *narod* (народ) meaning "people," and is sometimes translated at "populism." Full details of this movement's beliefs and Plekhanov's involvement with it will be provided in Chapter 2.

[14] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 12-30; Iovchuk and Kurbatova, *Plekhanov*, 37-52.

[15] These setbacks and their impact on Narodism will be discussed in Chapter 2.

that his own experience as an activist confirmed Marxism's claims that the urban working class was the real revolutionary element in society. He had consistently observed that members of this class had been most receptive to his earlier agitational work.[16] Subsequently, Plekhanov, along with three other expatriates, Vera Zasulich, Lev Deutsch, and Pavel Axelrod, founded the Emancipation of Labor in 1883.[17] Serving as this group's chief theoretician, Plekhanov authored its 1884 programme while also producing some of his most famous writings, including *Our Differences* (1885) and *The Development of the Monist View of History* (1895). In these texts, Plekhanov pioneered the application of Marxist theory to Russia, something previously thought impossible due to the theory's focus on an industrialized, capitalist economy and Russia's feudal underdevelopment. A central feature of his application was the idea that Russia would invariably recapitulate the same path of socio-economic development as Western Europe and eventually become a developed, capitalist nation. Alongside this, Plekhanov believed that the instructions Marx and Engels had laid out for German communists in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) could be applied to Russians. In the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels had instructed communists living in the then underdeveloped and feudal German states to align themselves with non-communist and non-proletarian progressive elements in their efforts to overthrow the reigning monarchies and revolutionize society.[18] While this would initially result in the political domination of the bourgeoisie, the experience and organization it would afford communists would allow them to

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[16] See, Baron, *Plekhanov*, 74-5.

[17] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 78; Iovchuk and Kurbatova, *Plekhanov*, 75; Zhuikov, *Peterburgskiye Marksisty I Gruppa "Osvobozhdeniye Truda,"* 101.

[18] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 257-8.

immediately begin fighting for a proletarian revolution. Arguing that this plan of action could now be adopted by Russians, Plekhanov formulated a theoretically orthodox application of Marxism to Russia.[19]

Plekhanov's efforts, and the Emancipation of Labor group as a whole, were initially not well received either in Russia or in Western Europe. Other Russian revolutionists viewed it as a capitulation to the bourgeoise and an abandonment of efforts to achieve socialism in Russia in the foreseeable future. Many Marxists in the West, including Marx and Engels themselves, at first also looked askance at the Emancipation of Labor for what they considered its desertion of Narodism, as they believed that this movement, theretofore the most popular and successful in Russia, had the best chance of overthrowing reactionary tsardom.[20] While Emancipation of Labor would come to be accepted among other Marxist parties in the West, with Plekhanov representing it at the founding conference of the Second International in 1889,[21] it would be over a decade after its founding before Marxism gained any notable following within Russia.

In 1895, Plekhanov was visited in Geneva by a young man representing the largest group of these newly formed Marxists within Russia, the referentially-titled The St. Petersburg League of Struggle for the Emancipation of Labor. This young man was Lenin, and he proposed an alliance between the two Emancipation groups, offering

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[19] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 59-116. This two-stage revolutionary process is first laid out by Plekhanov in "Socialism and the Political Struggle" (1883) and will be discussed in Chapter 2.

[20] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 117-138; Iovchuk and Kurbatova, *Plekhanov*, 106-114; Zhuikov, *Peterburgskiye Marksisty I Gruppa "Osvobozhdeniye Truda,"* 64-82.

[21] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 160; Iovchuk and Kurbatova, *Plekhanov*, 112

Plekhanov the first opportunity to regain contact with domestic radicals in fifteen years.[22] Accepting this, Plekhanov forged a close working relationship between his group and Lenin's, with the former facilitating the smuggling of funds and publications into Russia and the latter giving Plekhanov insight to and a say in domestic events. It was therefore with Plekhanov's blessing that Lenin participated in the founding of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) in 1898, creating a political party attempting to unite all of the various Marxists groups in Russia.[23] Moreover, when *Iskra*, the main organ of this Party, was established in 1900 its editorial board consisted of three members of the Genevan Emancipation of Labor – Plekhanov, Zasulich, and Axelrod – along with Lenin and two other domestic leaders – Julius Martov and Aleksandr Potresov.[24]

Plekhanov's close relationship with Lenin lasted up through the infamous Second Congress of the RSDLP in 1903, at which the Party split into opposing Bolshevik and Menshevik factions. Among the most discussed events in the history of Russian Marxism, the causes of the 1903 split are increasingly the matter of debate in scholarship. Long-dominant and still repeated is the narrative that the rupture was essentially over Lenin's promulgation of a novel Party structure emphasizing centralization and hierarchy, with the issues immediately prompting the split – a disagreement over the definition of Party membership and the shrinking of *Iskra*'s editorial board to Plekhanov, Lenin, and Martov – symbolizing his intentions.[25] Challenging this, however, is more

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[22] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 154; Iovchuk and Kurbatova, *Plekhanov*, 143-5; Zhuikov, *Peterburgskiye Marksisty I Gruppa "Osvobozhdeniye Truda*,*"* 247-262.

[23] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 155-166.

[24] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 208; Iovchuk and Kurbatova, *Plekhanov*,167.

[25] The number of texts positing this narrative is vast and essentially span the entire history of scholarship concerning Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Some prominent examples include, Adam B. Ulam, *The Bolsheviks:*

recent research that disputes the very idea that Lenin was positing anything new and argues that the division was due to personal rivalries and the actual issues debated without any deeper significance.[26] For present purposes, however, it is enough to note that Plekhanov initially aligned himself with the Bolsheviks before reversing himself and siding with the Mensheviks, at least partly due to the fact that the entirety of his colleagues in Geneva had already done so.[27]

If such inconstancy caused any damage to Plekhanov's prestige, it would have paled in comparison to that caused by his response to the 1905 Revolution in Russia. Holding fast to his belief that Russia needed to pass through a bourgeois revolution before any attempts at a working-class uprising could be made, he reacted to the independent initiatives displayed by the workers in 1905, including the first appearance of soviets, by urging restraint. This isolated him from virtually every Marxist both in Russia and abroad, as the working-class participation in the Revolution was widely celebrated.[28] This isolation, to varying degrees, effectively persisted for the remainder of Plekhanov's life as he was increasingly sidelined by a younger generation of Marxists, eventually reaching its nadir with the outbreak of World War I. Adopting a "defencist" position, Plekhanov wholly endorsed Russia's war efforts from the start, placing him on

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The Intellectual, Personal, and Political History of the Triumph of Communism in Russia (New York: Collier Books, 1965); Leonard Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990); and Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

[26] The incredibly valuable studies positing such ideas include: Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought: Theory and Practice in the Democratic and Socialist Revolutions* (London: Macmillan, 1983); and Lars Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered:* What Is to Be Done? i*n Context*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006).

[27] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 231-253; Iovchuk and Kurbatova, *Plekhanov*, 206-209.

[28] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 254-278.

the far-right of the spectrum of Marxist responses to the conflict.[29] Finally able to return to Russia following the February Revolution, Plekhanov firmly supported the Provisional Government, seeing it as inaugurating the period of bourgeois rule he believed Russia required. Opposing the idea of further revolutionary action, Plekhanov positioned himself squarely against Lenin's Bolsheviks, ensuring that Lenin would include him in his 1917 attacks.[30] Believing the October Revolution to be a premature seizure of power, Plekhanov left Russia shortly after its success. He settled in Finland where he passed away on May 30, 1918.[31]

The ignominies Plekhanov had suffered during the last year of his life pale in comparison to those awaiting him after his death, as his thinking, both in the USSR and abroad, would come to be flattened into the "vulgar Marxist" stereotype crystallizing around the Second International. Immediately following his death, however, Plekhanov's reputation initially experienced a significant revitalization within Soviet Russia and he was afforded a remarkable level of prestige for one who openly opposed the country's formation. This was ironically due to Lenin, who paid Plekhanov a great deal of respect posthumously, publicly recognizing his important role in the history of Russian Marxism and praising his theoretical and philosophical writings.[32] This patronage resulted in fame for Plekhanov and, as historian Robert Tucker relates, "it was not uncommon [in the

[29] For a detailed discussion of the various responses to World War I among Second International Marxists, see, James Joll, *The Second International, 1889-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 158-183.

[30] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 317-330.

[31] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 331-337; Iovchuk and Kurbatova, *Plekhanov*, 326-334.

[32] See, Baron, *Plekhanov*, 1 and Iovchuk and Kurbatova, *Plekhanov*, 2-3.

USSR] in the 1920s to place [Lenin] below Plekhanov as a Marxist Philosopher."[33] However, Plekhanov's standing suffered a complete reversal in late 1930, Tucker relates, going on to explain that this was the result of conscious efforts on Stalin's part to construct his own cult of personality. Stalin "employed an indirect strategy of cult-building…via the assertion of Lenin's infallibility" Tucker argues, "by making the Party's previous *vozhd* [leader, i.e. Lenin] an iconographic figure, beyond limitation and beyond criticism, Stalin…implicitly nominated the successor-*vozhd* [i.e. Stalin himself] for similar treatment."[34] This elevation of Lenin required the "retrospective denigration of many others,"[35] Tucker explains, most notably Plekhanov. Accordingly, Stalin directed Soviet philosophers "to expose the erroneous philosophical positions of Plekhanov…[and] clarify all aspects of [Lenin's] innovative role [in philosophy]."[36] Plekhanov was thus dutifully denounced along the lines Lenin had sketched out in 1917, with particular stress placed on the determinism inherent in his "atomistic" materialism in contrast to Lenin's properly "dialectical" materialism,[37] creating a characterization that would remain entrenched within the USSR. G.S. Zhuikov's 1975 study of Plekhanov and the Emancipation of Labor, for example, foregrounds "many of the contradictions and

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[33] Robert C. Tucker, "The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 84, No. 2 (4/1/19), 349.

[34] Tucker, "The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult," 351 and 356.

[35] Tucker, "The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult," 357.

[36] Tucker, "The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult," 351.

[37] Tucker, "The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult," 351. Historian Rufus Mathewson provides additional valuable information of this denunciation, relating that Stalin asserted that Lenin had championed a "conscious political partisanship" and contrasted this with "Plekhanov's emphasis on man as the creature and passive beneficiary of the historical process" resulting from his adherence to an interpretation of Marxism emphasizing "a passive determinism." See, Rufus W. Mathewson, *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature*, Second Ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 117, 215-17.

errors of Plekhanov the Marxist," including his overly deterministic "one-sided approach to…the historical process"[38] while M. Iovchuk's I. Kurbatova's 1977 biography opens with a reminder of his "social-chauvinist position during the First World War, which led him to an alliance with the bourgeoisie" and pursues the stated aim of examining "the contradictory fate" leading him "to depart from revolutionary Marxism."[39] Lastly, the final edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* condemns Plekhanov for "embarking on the path of tactical opportunism and opposing Lenin" and dismisses his thinking as being "under the burden of the traditions of the parties of the Second International."[40]

The Calumny Grows: Early Claims of the "Vulgar" Marxism of the Second International

Plekhanov's disappearance in the USSR beneath wider claims regarding the Second International matches his treatment in Western historiography. As noted, there has long been a tendency among historians to flatten Plekhanov and his contemporaries into uniform adherents of a "vulgar" Marxism. There are several remarkable aspects of this, the most immediate being the implausible degree of homogeneity it assumes among numerous individuals over a period of nearly three decades. This is compounded by the fact that the character of the "vulgar" Marxism this cohort supposedly subscribed to – a fatalistic, non-revolutionary, and philosophically-empty scientism – is so removed from many of Marx's ideas that any widespread and long-term acceptance of it again seems

[38] Zhuikov, *Peterburgskiye Marksisty I Gruppa "Osvobozhdeniye Truda*," 6.

[39] Iovchuk and Kurbatova, *Plekhanov*, 6-7.

[40] *Bolshaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya,* 3rd ed., s.v. "Plekhanov Georgiy Valentinovich," accessed June 15th, 2024, *http*://bse.sci-lib.com/article089841.html

implausible. These were, however, the exact claims made by Lenin and several other of the earliest discussions of the Second International. In Leon Trotsky's *Terrorism and Communism* (1920), Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1922), and Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923), Lenin's initial characterizations were built upon until an image of a pervasive "vulgar" Marxism during the time of the Second International matching that repeated in scholarship was constructed, suggesting that these are its sources. That they would be relied upon as such is perhaps attributable to the fact that their proximity in time to the era of the Second International and, in Lenin's and Trotsky's case, first-hand experience with their subject, suggests authentic knowledge. Moreover, Lenin, Trotsky, and Lukács's and Korsch's texts are all closely associated with divergent and opposing movements in twentieth-century Marxism – Soviet orthodoxy, Trotskyite opposition, and Western Marxism, respectively – making their shared condemnations of the Second International's "vulgar" Marxism a rare point of agreement between them, seemingly granting it further legitimacy. However, the biased and politically-influenced nature of Lenin's claims have already been discussed, and this ultimately applies to those of Trotsky, Lukács, and Korsch, as each were also the product of external influences and should also not be viewed as objective assessments. While all three were, at the time they wrote their texts, strong supporters of Lenin and therefore likely inclined to repeat his assertions, they each had more immediate concerns compelling them to elaborate their claims regarding the "vulgarity" of Second International Marxists. The continued presence of their collective portrait of this cohort in scholarship should therefore be questioned.

Trotsky authored *Terrorism and Communism* with two interlinked purposes. The first was to respond to Karl Kautsky, a German Marxist who had been one of the leading figures within the Second International, and the criticisms he had made of the October Revolution and subsequent Soviet government in his *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (1918).[41] Secondly, Trotsky aimed to justify Soviet attempts to dominate the global socialist movement through the Third International, created in 1919 under Soviet auspices as a replacement for the Second International. He timed the publication of *Terrorism and Communism* to coincide with the second Congress of the Third International, at which it adopted a series of twenty-one "conditions of adherence" that bound its membership to a specific ideological and practical programme. Including injunctions to break with "socialist reformists and centrists," these conditions effectively purged members of the Third International not committed to a militant, "Bolshevik" endorsement of revolutionary action.[42] Moreover, this congress occurred against a backdrop of increasingly heated criticisms directed by the leaders of the Third International against individuals attempting to establish a more pluralistic organization open to moderate leftists in the form of a revived Second International. Attacking these individuals as traitors to the working class and openly calling for the defeat of the resurrected Second International, the Soviet leadership of the Third International aimed to

[41] Among Kautsky's sharpest criticisms were that that October "did away with the democratic institutions conquered by the Russian people in the March Revolution," entailed the forced "silencing of all opposition and criticism," and established "dictatorship as a permanent form of government in Russia." See, Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*. Trans., H.J. Stenning, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1964), 74, 69, and 84.

[42] For details on the twenty-one conditions and their consequences, see, Milorad M. Drahkovitch and Branko Lazitch, "The Third International," in *The Revolutionary Internationals, 1864-1943*, ed. Milorad M. Drachkovitch (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 166-7.

ensure that they alone determined the agenda of socialist politics.[43] In *Terrorism and Communism*, Trotsky combined an attempt to justify these efforts with his counterattacks on Kautsky. He renders this especially clear when he conflates his targets – Kautsky and opponents of the Third International's sectarian policies – under the neologism "Kautskian," writing, for example, that the Third International is calling upon "real Communists … [to] split with the open and disguised Kautskians."[44] With this conflation, Trotsky is effectively able to tar critics of the Third International with the claims he makes in counterattacking Kautsky.

Trotsky begins by first attempting to discredit Kautsky's condemnation of October's undemocratic proceedings, writing that these are based on the belief that "the conditions of democracy guarantee…a painless transition to [socialism]," a belief Trotsky contends "vulgariz[es]" those of Marx, who "first and foremost wanted a revolutionary victory" to establish socialism.[45] Effectively echoing Lenin's 1917 claims here, Trotsky asserts that this vulgarization of Marxism into a non-revolutionary gradualism was apparent in the widespread support for "parliamentarism … [among] the majority of statesmen in the Second International."[46] This portrayal of Second International Marxists as a largely uniform, non-revolutionary bloc persists as Trotsky argues that the Marxism of Kautsky and his fellow Second Internationalists is foremost a theory of "passivity,"

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[43] See, Drahkovitch and Lazitch, "The Third International," in *The Revolutionary Internationals,*171-2.

[44] Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), 190-1.

[45] Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 26-7, 177, and 92.

[46] Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 16.

leading them to effectively serve as a "buttress of the capitalist state."[47] It also makes them partly responsible for the devastation of World War I, Trotsky further claims, arguing that Second International Marxists' adherence to gradualist parliamentarism resulted in them "not tak[ing] power into their hands at the most critical moment…which led the proletariat along the road of mutual destruction in the interests of imperialism."[48]

Writing of the current "struggle with Kautskianism … [with] the prejudices of parliamentarism...poisoning the atmosphere in [socialist] parties,"[49] Trotsky again identifies the Third International's opponents with Kautsky. What is now clear, however, is that Kautsky has himself been identified with a non-revolutionary interpretation of Marxism, the ostensibly disastrous consequences of which Trotsky is implicitly leveraging to justify the current purge of reformists. Moreover, by associating these consequences with the Second International, Trotsky clearly aims to undercut contemporary efforts to revive it. It was therefore a polemical agenda motivated by immediate political interests that drove Trotsky to elaborate upon Lenin's 1917 claims and portray Second International Marxists as adhering to a "vulgar" gradualist Marxism, cementing a crucial part of the image that persists to this day.

The role that political context and personal agendas had in shaping the earliest descriptions of the Second International's "vulgar" Marxism remains visible in those put forward by Lukács and Korsch. Most immediately, both Lukács and Korsch wholly subscribed to the notion put forward by Lenin and Trotsky that Second International

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[47] Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 177.

[48] Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 177 and 16-17.

[49] Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 10.

Marxists espoused a non-revolutionary, gradualist interpretation of Marxism. However, as indicated by the fulsome praise for Lenin and the October Revolution peppered throughout *History and Class Consciousness* and *Marxism and Philosophy*, Lukács and Korsch were operating in a context wherein the success of the October Revolution and the subsequent survival of Soviet Russia had granted its leaders acclaim and prestige among many European Marxists.[50] The repetition of Lenin's and Trotsky's claims by Lukács and Korsch are therefore more likely a product of this than an objective assessment of the numerous figures associated with the Second International. Moreover, both Lukács and Korsch repeat Trotsky's tack of citing the supposedly non-revolutionary nature of "vulgar" Marxism and its consequences to support their immediate agendas of demonstrating the significance of their interpretations of Marxist theory. Respectively stressing interpretations centered on reification and the importance of ideological phenomena, Lukács and Korsch both cited "vulgar" Marxism as a cautionary object lesson, which illustrated the consequences of neglecting these ideas. In doing so, both expanded upon Lenin's and Trotsky's portrait of Second International thought, marrying its claims of non-revolutionary gradualism to assertions of fatalism and scientism.

Praising Lenin for having "inaugurated the theoretical rebirth of Marxism,"[51] Lukács indicates the prestige afforded to the recognized Soviet leader in the early 1920s. The most notable aspect of this claim, however, is its implication that Marxism was in a state of morbidity prior to Lenin, suggesting that Lukács accepted the claims being made

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[50] For a discussion of such acclaim and its influence, see, Andrew Arato and Paul Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

[51] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 35.

Lenin and Trotsky regarding Second International Marxists. Lukács repeats their assertions throughout his text, labelling Second Internationalists as "vulgar Marxists" and arguing that they "reject the notion of violence in the name of 'organic evolution'" as the path towards socialism and effectively act as "apolog[ists] for bourgeois society."[52] Even more striking is his description of the above-noted polemics involving Kautsky as a debate "between genuine and vulgar Marxists,"[53] signaling his allegiance to Lenin and Trotsky by uncritically repeating the epithet they used to discredit their rival.

The idea that the previous generation of Marxists espoused a "vulgar" gradualism comes to serve an important function in Lukács text. He utilizes it to demonstrate the concept of "reification," one of the central ideas he puts forward within *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács bases this concept on Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, the idea that the production and exchange of commodities in capitalist society was seen in ways similar to that of a religious fetish, that its appearance as a process determined by independent forces, such as supply and demand, concealed its true source of human activity.[54] Lukács argued that this obscuration, in which "a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity,'" has "stamped its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man,"[55] resulting in a reified worldview that "envelop[es] all phenomena…[in] fetishistic illusions" and thus "conceal[s] reality."[56] The

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[52] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 11, 238-9 and 245.

[53] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 247.

[54] Marx adumbrates his theory of commodity fetishism in his work *Capital* (1867).

[55] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 83 and 100.

[56] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 14.

main feature of this worldview, Lukács argues, is that it presents individuals with a world emptied of human agency and thus beyond their control, writing that in it humankind never appears to itself as "the authentic master" of the world but apprehends the processes that "it is itself instigating … [as] something external … [as] objective laws which [humankind] can only experience passively."[57]

It is in "vulgar" Marxism's supposed gradualism that Lukács finds the most prominent example of reification and its insidious effects. Repeating that "vulgar" Marxists reject revolutionary action and believe that socialism can be achieved "without having recourse to brute force," Lukacs argues that this is based upon a belief in "'natural laws' of … development which are to bring about [the advent of socialism] by their own impetus."[58] The implicit claim here that "vulgar" gradualism is the product of a reified worldview and its emptying of human agency from phenomena eventually becomes explicit as Lukács elaborates that "vulgar" Marxists arrived at a belief in these "natural laws of development" due to their focus on the supposed "'facts'" of economics and society.[59] He asserts that these Marxists failed to perceive that the "facts" they grasped were "essentially historical … they are caught up in a process of continuous transformation," and instead considered them as "given" and in "abstract isolation."[60] This ahistorical view, Lukács continues, led to "vulgar" Marxists "explaining [these facts] only in terms of abstract laws" that therefore appear "timeless … fatalistic and

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[57] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 89 and 63.

[58] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 239.

[59] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 1.

[60] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 6-9.

immutable," resulting in gradualist assumptions.[61] Concluding that the ultimate cause of this process is the "fetishistic … reification of all human relations … [which] transform the phenomena of society and with them the way in which they are perceived … [into] isolated facts,"[62] Lukács identifies reification as the ultimate source of the "vulgar" Marxist renunciation of revolution. In doing so, he presents these figures as a cautionary tale concerning the consequences of a reified worldview, effectively employing them to underscore the importance of his insights. More broadly, however, Lukács has expanded upon Lenin's and Trotsky's claims regarding Second International Marxists, adding a deep-seated fatalism to the claims about their non-revolutionary beliefs and therefore establishing a key element in the increasingly entrenched stereotype of this cohort.

As in Lukács's text, Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* testifies to the prestige that Lenin enjoyed following October. Describing him as "a faithful disciple of Marx,"[63] Korsch declares Lenin's orthodoxy and proceeds to treat him as a source of theoretical acumen and historical truths. This is especially evident when Korsch presents Lenin's polemical assertions in *State and Revolution* as objective history, describing the debate between him and Kautsky as that of a "crisis erupt[ing] within the Marxist camp at the outbreak of the World War" between advocates of a "neo-reformism" and "representatives of a … revolutionary proletarian party … under the battle-cry of restoring pure or revolutionary Marxism."[64] Moreover, as his claim of their "neo-

[61] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 9 and 4.

[62] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 6.

[63] Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred Halliday, (New York, Verso, 2012), 55.

[64] Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 54.

reformism" suggests, Korsch fully accepted Lenin's characterization of Second International Marxists as non-revolutionary gradualists, explicitly writing that the "vulgar-Marxism of the Second International" believed in the "necessity [i.e. inevitability] of socialism" and therefore "ceased to be a theory of social revolution."[65]

Lenin's conception of "vulgar" Marxism occupies the center of Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* as he employs it as evidence in support of his thesis regarding the importance of philosophy in the revolutionary movement. Like Lukács, Korsch ultimately approaches the notion of vulgar Marxism he inherited as evidence of a deeper phenomenon, arguing that "the loss of the practical, revolutionary character [in vulgar Marxism]" was due to an abandonment of the "principles of dialectical materialism."[66] Elaborating upon this, Korsch begins by relating that dialectical materialism reveals individual phenomena to be part of a "totality … in the way that a specific, particularly defined part of a whole is related to the other parts of this whole."[67] By abandoning dialectical materialism, Korsch argues, "vulgar" Marxists blinded themselves to this holistic perspective, resulting in a "dualistic metaphysical conception of the relationship of consciousness to reality" that "considers thought independent of being."[68] This separation of thought and reality, contrary to the dialectical-materialist view that "intellectual life should be conceived in union with social and political life," Korsch continues, led "vulgar" Marxists to isolate Marxist theory from revolutionary activity, "to

[65] Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 54, 60-1, 66, and 71.

[66] Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 68.

[67] Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 96.

[68] Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 88 and 95.

regard [Marxism] more and more as a set of purely scientific observations … [as] a purely theoretical critique that no longer leads to practical revolutionary action."[69] By isolating thought from reality, Korsch contends, vulgar Marxists failed to recognize the practical, concrete, revolutionary effect Marxist ideas could have upon the world. Instead, they considered Marxism to be akin to the sciences, merely one of the various "branches of knowledge"[70] and ultimately unrelated to revolutionary praxis, leading directly to a neglect of Marxism's revolutionary aims.

Therefore, in the process of rendering their thinking a demonstration of the dangers of abandoning philosophy, Korsch claims that Second Internationalists conceived of Marxism as merely a science for analyzing society rather than transforming it. With this, he grafts additional features onto the characterization of "vulgar" Marxism first made by Lenin. Together with the additions made by Trotsky and Lukács, a cohesive and powerful portrait of a non-revolutionary, fatalistic, and positivist Marxism dominating the Second International emerges. However, none of these additions, nor Lenin's initial claims, should be viewed as wholly objective, unbiased assessments, as each was made in specific contexts and with particular political or intellectual aims.

The Calumny Entrenched: Historiography

Despite the clear issues involved in its genesis, the portrait of the "vulgar" Marxism of the Second International established by the early 1920s has been a fixture within scholarship for decades. In his classic 1955 study of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, for

[69] Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 81, 60 and 64.

[70] Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 60.

example, Leopold Haimson writes of the "transformation of Marxism into a deterministic economic science" during the era of the Second International, resulting in "the emasculation of [Marxism's] revolutionary content…[into] a gradualist theory of social change."[71] Echoing this is George Lichtheim's 1964 description of the "orthodox school" of the Second International that "transform[ed] [Marxism] into a doctrine of a causally determined process analogous to the scheme of Darwinian evolution."[72] Similarly, Leszek Kolakowski asserted in 1979 that an "evolutionist, determinist, and scientistic form of Marxism…became universally adopted" within the Second International,[73] a claim soon repeated in 1982 by Eugene Lunn who wrote that "the version of Marxism disseminated by the Second International…represented a caricature of Marx's thought as a set of predetermined scientific laws, mechanical economic explanations of history, [and] a theory of steady and ineluctable historical advance."[74] More recently, Isaiah Berlin wrote in 1996 that during "the Second International…Marxism itself tended to be reduced to a kind of crudely materialistic positivism, a mere theory of history…draw[ing] [Marxists] into the path of peaceful reform,"[75] and in 2009 David Priestland argued that the Second International's "attempt

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[71] Leopold Haimson, *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 54, 111-112.

[72] Lichtheim, *Marxism*, 235-7.

[73] Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 379.

[74] Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1982), 65.

[75] Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 166 and 157.

to recast Marxism as a science … led to gradualist conclusions."[76] That the Second International was beholden to this "vulgar" Marxism is in fact a central claim in Gareth Stedman Jones's 2017 biography of Marx, as his core aim is to overturn what he writes were the "posthumous elaborations of his character and achievements," specifically arguing that "from the 1890s…what came to be called 'Marxism' [was] built upon an unambiguously selective view of what was to count as theory."[77] Expanding upon this, he writes of an "intellectual gulf between Karl's [i.e. Marx's] generation and that which came to dominate the Marxist socialist movement in the 1880s and 1890s," resulting in "the invention" of Marxism as a "science" and the "widespread assumption among Second International socialists … that capitalism would come to an end not so much as a consequence of working-class revolt and an 'epoch of revolution,' but rather as a result of systemic economic failure."[78]

The portrait of "vulgar" Marxism has, however, been increasingly challenged by recent research. Scholars such as Neil Harding, Moira Donald, and others[79] have undermined the notion that Second Internationalists adhered to a fatalistic, non-revolutionary version of Marxism by returning to the ultimate source of this

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[76] Priestland, *The Red Flag*, 40.

[77] Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*, 4-5.

[78] Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*, 565-6.

[79] See, Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought: Theory and Practice in the Democratic and Socialist Revolutions* (London: Macmillan, 1983) and Moira Donald, *Marxism and Revolution: Karl Kautsky and the Russian Marxists, 1900-1924* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). Additional works challenging the narrative of the Second International's "vulgar" Marxism include Jukka Gronow, *On the Formation of Marxism: Karl Kautsky's Theory of Capitalism, the Marxism of the Second International, and Karl Marx's Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017); H. Kendall Rogers, *Before the Revisionist Controversy: Kautsky, Bernstein, and the Meaning of Marxism, 1895-1898* (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Gary P. Steenson, *Karl Kautsky, 1854-1938: Marxism in the Classical Years* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991).

characterization: Lenin's 1917 claims of a fundamental divide between his own ideas and those of the majority of the Second International. The result of these studies, contrary to the widespread claims that Lenin's notion of a voluntaristic "vanguard" party that would catalyze the revolution sharply broke with the supposed fatalism of his "vulgar" contemporaries,[80] has been the identification of vanguardist ideas within the Second International. Most prominent among these revisionist scholars is Lars Lih, whose *Lenin Rediscovered* (2005) ably overturns the stereotype of "vulgar" fatalism among Second International Marxists by demonstrating that Vladimir Lenin's alleged dissent can be better seen as recapitulation. Lih shows that the aspect of Lenin's thought that is conventionally identified as advocating an unorthodox voluntarism – the idea that a "vanguard" political party could affect history and catalyze revolution by instilling a "socialist consciousness" into the proletariat – was actually "the common understanding of what Social Democracy [i.e. the contemporary Marxist political movement] was all about."[81] Furthermore, Lih stresses Lenin's intellectual reliance on Kautsky, revealing both a continuity of ideas and the polemically-contingent nature of the assertions of his "vulgarity" made by Lenin and subsequently Trotsky. Surveying Kautsky's writings, Lih finds a raft of concepts, including revolutionary strategies, short-term political goals, and the aforementioned notion of the "vanguard" party inculcating a socialist consciousness,

[80] Illustrating the claim that Lenin developed a voluntaristic interpretation of Marxism at odds with the supposed "vulgar" understanding dominant within the Second International, present within nearly every previously cited work on the subject, is Haimson's argument that Lenin broke with his contemporaries by emphasizing "the role of the individual's will…[in] forc[ing] the course of history," and, by doing so, justified "the active supervisory role that [his Party] would exercise in Russia's transformation," and Priestland's assertion, over sixty years later, that Lenin embraced the heterodox idea that "a conspiratorial elite…would 'accelerate' history towards socialism." See, Haimson, *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism*, 112-113 and 213; and Priestland, *The Red Flag*, 76 and 87.

[81] Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered,* 20.

which he argues Lenin merely "echoed" in his own theorizing.[82] Concluding from this that "Kautsky's role went beyond influence…[he] *defined* Social Democracy" for Lenin,[83] Lih identifies a uniformity of ideas that critically undermines the narrative of breakage and its attendant claim that Second International Marxists espoused a singularly "vulgar" variant of Marxism.

While important work has therefore already begun in regards to establishing a less fragmented and more holistic history of Marxism by breaking down the stereotype concerning the Second International, this has yet to affect Plekhanov. Almost uniformly throughout scholarship, Plekhanov is portrayed as the archetypical "vulgar" Marxist. Andrzej Walicki, for example, writes that "although the belief in 'historical necessity' [i.e. fatalism] was the cornerstone of the entire edifice of 'orthodox' Marxism of the Second International … its intensity was variable…the most inflexible necessitarian [i.e. adherent to fatalistic beliefs] was…the Russian theorist Georgi Plekhanov," going on to claim that "Plekhanov flatly rejected any possibility of choice, claiming that his political programme was based on an understanding of the 'objective laws of development.'"[84] Similarly, Frederick Copleston writes that "Plekhanov clung to Marx's historical determinism … [and] interpreted Marxism as an expansion of Darwinism … [leading him] to oppose attempts to hurry history or to interfere with its course,"[85] while Kevin Anderson describes Plekhanov as "combining [a] schematic economism with the notion

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[82] Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 74-102.

[83] Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 74. Italics in original.

[84] Andrzej Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedo: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 228 and 233

[85] Frederick Copleston, *Russian Philosophy*, vol. III (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), 354

that ideas are a mere reflection of the material world … [to] construct a dialectical materialism in which the human subject almost disappears."[86] Most strikingly, Stedman Jones brings Plekhanov forward "in order to highlight" the changes he argues were made to Marx's ideas during the Second International and underscore the claim that "a generation brought up on evolutionary biology [i.e. Second International Marxists] could not inhabit the dreams of a generation brought up upon classical literature, ancient mythology, and radical idealist philosophy [i.e. Marx's generation]." Arguing that Plekhanov's Marxism exemplifies this intellectual chasm, Stedman writes that within it "the crucial variable was not human activity but the external environment,"[87] wholly reducing Plekhanov's thought to the stereotype of a deterministic, "vulgar" Marxism.

The tendency to view Plekhanov as merely an example of "vulgarity" is further apparent in studies examining his pioneering role in applying Marxist ideas to aesthetic philosophy and art criticism. Although Plekhanov is generally recognized as the first figure to systematically pursue analyses and criticisms of art on the basis of Marxist theory,[88] his contributions are consistently described in accordance with the wider assumptions regarding Second Internationalists' thought. Throughout the scholarship, a consensus exists that Plekhanov viewed art solely through the lens of a "vulgar" material determinism, resulting in purely descriptive, sociological analyses and occluding any

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[86] Kevin Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 17.

[87] Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*, 594.

[88] See, for example, Terry Eagleton, "Introduction I," in Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne, eds., *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Malden: Blackwell, 1996), 7; Baron, *Plekhanov,* 307; Lee Baxandall, "Marxism and Aesthetics: A Critique of the Contribution of George [sic] Plekhanov," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Spring, 1967), 267; and Burton Rubin, "Plekhanov and Soviet Literary Criticism," *American Slavic and East European Review*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Dec.1956), 527.

possibility of art acting as an agent of influence within society. Exemplifying this is Terry Eagleton's explicit association of Plekhanov's approach to art with the "vulgar Marxism" of the Second International,[89] the "fundamentalist materialism" of which resulted in "a contemplative, largely academic" emphasis on art's determined nature,[90] leading Plekhanov to "reject propagandist demands of art" and refuse to "put literature at the service of party politics."[91] Peter Demetz puts forward a similar description of Plekhanov's approach to art, arguing that Plekhanov espoused a "dogmatic" materialism emphasizing art's derivation from society's economic structure, excluding the possibility that art, ideas, or culture could affect society and inclining him towards having "little sympathy for utilitarian demands on art" and "defen[ding] the principle of *l'art pour l'art*."[92] Similarly, Maynard Solomon asserts that Plekhanov's ostensibly rigid views on determinism, which neglected the idea that "consciousness itself becomes a motive force" in society, resulted in the belief that any ideas transmitted by art or culture would be incapable of effecting social change, leading him to abjure a political function for art.[93] Henri Arvon also connects the determinism inherent in Plekhanov's "uncompromisingly sociological approach" towards art with a refusal to consider it as a "technology of indoctrination and propaganda…used to control and shape political attitudes," a

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[89] Terry Eagleton. *Marxism and Literary Criticism,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 14-17.

[90] Terry Eagleton, "Introduction Part I," in Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne, eds. *Marxist Literary Theory*. (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 8-9.

[91] Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, 44.

[92] Peter Demetz, *Marx, Engels, and the Poets: Origins of Marxist Literary Criticism*, Jeffery L. Sammons, trans., (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967), 190, 196-7.

[93] Maynord Solomon, *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary*, (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1979), 122.

perspective he favorably contrasts with the opposite attitude that prevailed in the Soviet Union.[94]

The Calumny Contested: Project Overview

With this work, I hope to contribute to the efforts already made at gaining a fuller understanding of Marxist ideas during the era of the Second International, and thus allow for a more complete understanding of the history of Marxism, by recovering Plekhanov's thinking from behind the stereotype of "vulgar" Marxism. Specifically, I aim to highlight the distance between Plekhanov's actually thought from the received image of it by examining his development of an activist aesthetic endorsing the political instrumentalization of art at the close of the nineteenth century. As with all intellectual developments, however, Plekhanov's activist aesthetic did not emerge *ex nihilo*, and this work traces its emergence as essentially a byproduct of Plekhanov's involvement in the Revisionist Controversy. I argue that the intersection of Plekhanov's two main responses to Bernstein's Revisionism, an explicit counterattack against the Kantian philosophy informing Revisionism and an implicit loss of confidence in Marxist assumptions regarding the inherent radicalism of the working class, led him to embrace the idea that art could be used to inculcate revolutionary ideas within the proletariat.

My first chapter examines the ideas that formed the basis of Plekhanov's Marxism in the form of Karl Marx's and Frederick Engels's writings from 1848 to 1886. Within these, I focus on Marx's and Engels's oscillation between two opposing themes: a voluntaristic stress on human action as catalyzing revolution and a deterministic

[94] Henri Arvon *Marxist Esthetics,* Helen Lane, trans., (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 14.

worldview posting the decisive role of economic structures in shaping human activities. Chapter two examines Plekhanov's Marxist thought up to the outbreak of the Revisionist Controversy in 1898, and examines how he effectively combined the two themes apparent in Marx's and Engels's writings into a cohesive theory wherein revolution was the predetermined outcome of economically generated working class radicalism but its advent could be hastened by the free actions of intellectuals disseminating Marxist ideas to an inherently receptive working class. I argue that this early, pre-Revisionist period of Plekhanov's thinking is characterized by a fundamental confidence in this scenario of advanceable predestination, particularly in its assumption of the natural radicalism of the proletariat. The chief evidence of this confidence, I argue, can be found in the writings on art Plekhanov composed during this period. In three articles examining contemporary Russian authors, Plekhanov wholly eschewed the tradition of utilizing art criticism as a vehicle for disseminating political ideas that dominated the Russian radical movement in the nineteenth century. Alongside this, Plekhanov excoriates the bending of art to political purposes in these articles. This rejection of the idea of art as propaganda and of the practice of art criticism as propaganda testifies to the confidence Plekhanov enjoyed in his early Marxist thinking, as he believed that such measures were unnecessary in light of the proletariat's natural radicalism and predisposition to Marxist ideas. My third chapter examines Bernstein's Revisionism and its roots in Kantian philosophy. I argue that Bernstein's ideas can easily be seen as drawing upon the contemporary neo-Kantian movement, particularly its use of Kant's epistemological and ethical ideas to critique key aspects of Marxist theory. I therefore trace Kant's idea regarding the subjective nature of cognition and assertions of humankind's free will through the writings of prominent neo-

Kantian Friedrich Albert Lange and into Bernstein's critique of Marxism's claims of material determinism and inevitable class conflict. Chapter four examines Plekhanov's responses to Bernstein's ideas and argues that this took two forms. On the one hand, Plekhanov was among Bernstein's most ardent critics, composing numerous articles that both defended the aspects of Marxism he had critiqued and attempting to undermine these critiques by attacking the Kantian philosophy that informed them. However, Plekhanov's writings both during and after the Revisionist Debate reveal that, alongside his defense of the Marxist beliefs he had long held, Plekhanov himself ironically revised some of those beliefs. I posit that the popularity Revisionism enjoyed shook Plekhanov's confidence in the innate radicalism of the working class and revealed that they were more susceptible to conservative influence than he had previously assumed. This resulted in Plekhanov placing greater importance on the pedagogic role of intellectuals. No longer conceiving of them as simply delivering Marxist ideas to a receptive proletariat, Plekhanov now saw intellectuals as essential to the proletariat's radicalization and protection from reactionary influences. My fifth chapter shows how Plekhanov's responses to Revisionism immediately and decisively impacted his views on art, leading him to embrace the political instrumentation he had previously rejected. Examining the writings on art Plekhanov produced during and after the Revisionist debate reveals that he first and foremost began to treat art as proof supporting his contemporary attempts to defend the Marxist ideas Bernstein had critiqued. This manifested in assertions that art was ultimately the product of economic influences and displayed, whether in form or content, evidence of the persistent presence of class conflict in society. Alongside this, however, Plekhanov also utilized art to support his attempts to discredit Kantian

philosophy. This took the form of assertions that, while Kant claimed aesthetic appreciation is disinterested and devoid of external, non-artistic considerations, celebrated art has – due to its determined nature – always been deeply informed by such phenomena, proving Kant wrong. The idea that art was and is bound up in the class struggle and often valued for its political uses therefore emerges out the defensive aspects of Plekhanov's response to Revisionism. This combined with the concerns he had also developed and effectively acted as a rationalization for him to begin endorsing politically instrumental art as an additional means for intellectuals to perform their important functions. Plekhanov's mature aesthetic therefore culminated in calls for art that would inculcate Marxist ideas within its audience.

Chapter I

Young and Old, Revolutionary and Scientific, Marx and Engels: The Divisions and Antinomies of Marxism

The scholarly tendency to divide the intellectual history of Marxism into discrete periods extends even to the writings of the theory's founders: Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). Their body of work, ranging from their earliest individual and collaborative writings in the 1840s to their last texts in the 1870s and 1880s, has been subject to a variety of divisions and categorizations. In terms of understanding Plekhanov's interpretation of Marxism, however, the division that first must be grasped is not one imposed by the scholarship; rather, it is the basic divide between writings that were published and available at the close of the nineteenth century and those that were not. While many of the texts composed by Marx and Engels would have been available at this time and accessible to the French, German, and Russian-speaking Plekhanov in Geneva,[1] there were notable exceptions. Several writings remained unpublished by the late 1890s and largely unknown to Plekhanov and his contemporaries, works that had been "abandoned…to the gnawing criticism of the mice,"[2] as Marx himself described the

[1] In his examination of the history of the publication of Marx's and Engel's works, Eric Hobsbawm writes that the following texts, given with their first publication date, would have been "available for the international Marxist movement at the end of the nineteenth century": *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), *The Holy Family* (1845), *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), *Wage Labor and Capital* (1847), *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), *The German Peasant War* (1850), *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), *Capital* vols. I-III(1867, 1885, 1894), *Inaugural Address of the International Working Man's Association* (1864), *The Civil War in France* (1871), *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science* (1878), *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1888), and *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1891). See, Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism. 1840-2011* (London: Little, Brown, 2011), 177-180.

[2] Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, S.W. Ryazanskaya, trans. (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 22.

fate of one of these texts, *The German Ideology* (1846). Alongside this work, what have come to be known as *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1844) and *The Grundrisse* (1858) were only published in the decades after Plekhanov's death. Discovered through research conducted by the Marx-Engels Institute of Moscow following the October Revolution, *The German Ideology* and the *Manuscripts of 1844* were published in 1932 and *The Grundrisse* in 1953.[3]

Despite comprising only a fraction of Marx's and Engels's output, the significance of these late-published texts is considerable, with Eric Hobsbawm noting that "a great deal of Marxist discussion since 1945 turns on the interpretation of these early writings."[4] Essentially, these texts form the basis for one of the most prominent scholarly divisions of Marx's thought: that of "young" and "mature" periods. As historian Paul Thomas explains, these works, particularly the *Manuscripts of 1844*, have been "viewed as evidence of a newfound early Marx whose thought was…heterodox with respect to…the mature, later Marx."[5] Specifically, the thinking of the "young" Marx contained in the late-published texts has been seen as positing a more philosophically-informed "humanistic" Marxism centered upon "the theme of alienation and its attendant preoccupation with a normative theory of human nature," all of which can be viewed as contrasting with the "purportedly more scientific, more determinist … later Marx."[6]

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[3] See, Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 183-6.

[4] Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 186.

[5] Paul Thomas, "Critical Reception: Marx Then and Now," in *The Cambridge Companion to Marx*, Terrel Carver, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 29-30.

[6] Richard Hudelson, *Marxism and Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: A Defense of Vulgar Marxism* (New York: Praeger, 1990), XII and Thomas, "Critical Reception: Marx Then and Now," in *The Cambridge Companion to Marx*, 30.

Moreover, the "young" Marx's writings can be seen as articulating a unique interpretation of materialism wherein human agency is foregrounded. This is hinted at in Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach," one of the few texts of this period that Plekhanov would have had access to. In his fourth thesis, Marx writes that "the materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed precisely by men."[7] The unearthing of this young Marx significantly impacted both Marxist movements and scholarship. Most immediately, the ideas of the young Marx provided additional momentum to the emergence of Western Marxism, not only by their accord with the ideas of its effective founders, Georg Lukacs and Karl Korsch, but also by directly influencing subsequent figures such as members of the Frankfurt School.[8] More broadly, the question of the relationship between the young and mature Marx, particularly of whether there is continuity or breakage between their ideas, has come to be a central question in scholarship. Some have argued that a fundamental, epistemic break separates the ideas of the mature from the young Marx. This position was most famously championed by Louis Althusser who claimed that the thinking of the young Marx was "enslaved" by idealist philosophy and only after he had "tore off the veils of illusion behind which [he] had been living" did the "free thought" of the mature Marx emerge.[9] Others, however, have argued the opposite, including Leszek Kolakowski who

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[7] Karl Marx, "Theses on Feurbach," in Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1941), 83.

[8] See, Anderson, *Consideration On Western Marxism*, 50-2; and Hudelson, *Marxism and Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, XII-XIII.

[9] Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, Ben Brewster, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 83-85. Other works that argue for a break between the "young" and "mature" Marx include Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx*,

writes that although there are visible differences between the young and mature Marx, fundamentally "there is no discontinuity in [his] thought," with concepts supposedly unique to the mature Marx, such as his "theory of value and of money … combin[ing] harmoniously with the [young Marx's] concept of alienation."[10]

Beyond preventing them from participating in this important debate regarding the history of Marxism, Plekhanov's and his contemporaries' ignorance of Marx's unpublished works also had a significant impact on their thinking. Some scholars have claimed that it is directly responsible for the supposed "vulgarity" of their Marxism. Such is the case with Isaiah Berlin, who argues that "ignorance [of Marx's unpublished writings] … led to an exclusive emphasis on the historical and economic aspects, and defective understanding of the sociological and philosophical content, of his ideas. This fact is responsible for the clear, half-positivist, half-Darwinian interpretation of Marx's thought, which we owe mainly to Kautsky [and] Plekhanov."[11] However, with the notion of Second International Marxism's "vulgarity" itself in question, an alternative consequence put forward by Hobsbawm is less debatable. He notes that familiarity with Marx's early writings has led to a current consensus among historians that there is no "definitive and final set of texts expounding *the* Marxist theory," but rather a series of

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(New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); and Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, David E. Green, trans. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

[10] Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism,* P.S. Falla, trans. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 216 and 219. Other works that reject the idea of a break between the "young" and "mature" Marx include David McLellan, *Karl Marx: A Biography* 4th ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Isaiah Berlin *Karl Marx* 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013); and Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[11] Berlin, *Karl Marx*, 90.

writings depicting "a *process* of developing thought." This, he continues, stands in contrast to the time of the Second International when it was believed that there was a "corpus of 'finished' theoretical writings" expounding a cohesive, completed system.[12] What Hobsbawm first highlights here is that knowledge of Marx's early writings has fostered a view that the concepts and claims of Marxism have undergone various iterations and developments. While most vividly seen in the arguments that a break occurred between the young and mature Marx, claims of continuity between the two, such as Kolakowski's, also recognize that Marx's thought developed and changed over time.[13] Hobsbawm's second point, however, is that this recognition of change and difference would have been alien to Plekhanov and his colleagues who essentially believed that a fundamentally uniform theory was expounded across texts ranging from 1848's *Communist Manifesto* to 1886's *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*.

This belief shaped the Marxism of Plekhanov and his contemporaries in that it led them to attempt to reconcile the two conflicting positions that Marx and Engels oscillated between in their mature works: calls for radically voluntaristic revolutionary activity and scientistic claims that economic forces determined human behavior. Although one can

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[12] Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 189 and 180.

[13] Gareth Stedman Jones, for example, while arguing that Marx's "basic assumptions [put forward in 1844] remained [in his mature writings]," also makes numerous claims that Marx thereafter repeatedly revised his ideas, including "backing away from…[*Captial*'s theory of] primitive accumulation" and coming to "believe that…primitive communal structures left to themselves were resilient enough to survive in the modern world." Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*, 198, 570, 582. Similarly, George Lichtheim, who argues that "the philosophy underlying [Marx's mature thought] is spelled out in the [*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*]," also claims that "by the 1870's" Marx had come to the "realization…that the revolutionary model [put forward in *The Communist Manifesto*] was clearly out of date. It was not formally repudiated, merely allowed to drop out of site." Lichtheim, *Marxism,* 126-7.

find instances of both positions being expressed together, Marx and Engels generally shifted between emphasizing one over the other and it is these shifts that form the basis of additional periodizations scholars have made to the intellectual history of Marxism. David Priestland exemplifies this when he argues that there are effectively two different Marxs apparent in his mature writings, a "Radical Marx" who believed that "[the proletariat's] heroism and self-sacrifice would lead it to stage a Communist revolution in the very near future" and a "Modernist Marx" who believed that "the revolution would only arrive when economic conditions were ripe." Thus personifying the opposing positions of voluntarism and determinism in Marx's and Engels's writings, Priestland argues that "the tension between the two created a fault-line within Marxism,"[14] echoing the claims made by numerous other scholars that these constitute an antinomy at the core of Marxist theory.[15]

Priestland voices another widely-held view in scholarship when he argues that Marx's and Engels's movement between the two poles of their thought was in response to the changes in contemporary circumstances, writing that "after 1848 … [Marx and

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[14] Priestland, *The Red Flag*, 31.

[15] Kolakowski, for instance, describes what considers to be two key motifs in Marx's mature thinking: "the Faustian-Promethean motif" comprising a revolutionary and voluntaristic "faith in man's unlimited powers as self-creator, contempt for tradition and worship of the past…[that man] is capable of achieving absolute command over the world he lives in" and the "motif…of the rationalist, determinist Enlightenment…[a] scientistic approach…[which] speaks of the laws of social life, operating in the same way as the laws of nature…they impose themselves on human individuals with the same inexorable necessity as an avalanche or a typhoon." The "tensions" between these two motifs, Kolakowski concludes, meant that Marx ultimately remained ambivalent on "whether the revolutionary movement must wait for capitalism to mature economically or whether it should seize power as soon as the political situation permitted." Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 337-341. For additional discussions of the voluntaristic-deterministic opposition within Marxism, see, Andrzej Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 19-21; Sperber, *Karl Marx,* 391-417 ; and George Lichtheim, *Marxism*, 36-40.

Engels] tilted towards Radicalism or Modernism depending on the particular situation."[16] Jonathan Sperber expands upon this and posits that it was the vicissitudes of the 1848 revolutions in Europe that prompted Marx to shift from advocating a radical voluntarism to an economic determinism. In the lead up to and outbreak of the revolutions, Sperber writes, Marx was "an insurgent revolutionary" advocating "a workers' seizure of power."[17] The definitive defeat of the various revolutions by 1849, however, prompted Marx to alter his thinking, Sperber continues, writing that "[in]the early 1850s … belief in an imminent revolutionary upheaval … was increasingly difficult to maintain given the ever greater strength of political reaction … it was then that Marx developed the idea that revolution would occur in the wake of a cyclical capitalist crisis."[18] A second fact that, alongside these political circumstances,[19] is widely recognized as prompting Marx to alter his thinking is the changing intellectual climate of the latter nineteenth century, specifically the emergence of positivism and the vogue of scientism. Gareth Stedman Jones, for instance, argues that the emphasis on determinism in the texts Marx and Engels composed after 1850 was an attempt to "appeal to a new, post-1848 generation of … positivist radicals" specifically by framing their ideas as a "'scientific' conception of the

[16] Priestland, *The Red Flag*, 31.

[17] Sperber, *Karl Marx,* 195.

[18] Sperber, *Karl Marx,* 273-4.

[19] For other discussions positing that the outbreak and defeat of the 1848 revolutions altered Marx's thinking, see Stedman Jones, *Greatness and Illusion*, 285-299; Lichtheim, *Marxism*, 126-9; Priestland, *The Red Flag*, 38-40; and Tristram Hunt, *Marx's General: The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 176-193.

world … a great scientific discovery … a new and unprecedented 'materialist conception of history.'"[20]

While among those in agreement with the notion that Marx's shift to emphasizing determinism was at least partly due to the contemporary trend of scientism,[21] David McLellan notes that "even more [than Marx] … Engels was marked by the nineteenth-century enthusiasm for positivism and science."[22] This distinction is important as it points to the wider issue of the difference between Marx and Engels and the impact this had. With their co-authorship of various works, most famously *The Communist Manifesto*,[23] and decades-spanning friendship,[24] it was long believed that "Marx and Engels are substantially indistinguishable" in terms of their thought.[25] This view, however, has increasingly come to be challenged by scholars, with McLellan voicing the current consensus that the Engels's more scientistic orientation led him to adopt an even more "determinist approach" than Marx in his writings by drawing upon "the model of the natural sciences" and presenting "Marxism as a philosophical worldview consisting

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[20] Gareth Stedman Jones, "Introduction," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 20-1.

[21] He writes, for example, that in his later works "Marx moved nearer the positivism then so fashionable among intellectual circles." McLellan, *Karl Marx*, 397. For additional claims of Marx being influenced by positivism and/or the wider trend of scientism, see, Priestland, *The Red Flag*, 39-40; Lichtheim, *Marxism,* 36-39; and Sperber, *Karl Marx*, 389-392.

The trend of scientism in the nineteenth century will be discussed fully in Chapter 3.

[22] McLellan, *Karl Marx*, 434.

[23] Marx and Engels additionally co-wrote *The Holy Family* (1845) and *The German Ideology* (1846).

[24] First meeting in Paris in 1844, Marx and Engels remained close friends until the former's death. While every study of Marx and Marxism discusses this friendship, a notably thorough examination is contained in Hunt, *Marx's General*.

[25] Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 189.

of objective laws."[26] This is especially significant for understanding Plekhanov's Marxism as it was largely through Engels's mediation that he and his contemporaries became familiar with the theory. On the one hand, Engels's later writings, wherein he expounds his interpretation of Marxism, including *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science* (1877) and *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), were extremely influential, becoming "the most popular source for the understanding of 'Marxism' for the following twenty years [i.e. the era of the Second International]."[27] On the other hand, as the literary executor of Marx's estate, Engels not only decided which of his friend's works were republished after his death but also edited them. As Hobsbawm points out, this means that "[Marx's monograph] *Capital* has come down to us not as Marx intended it, but as Engels thought he would have intended it," with its "last three volumes…put together by Engels from Marx's incomplete drafts."[28] Therefore, not only were the texts authored by Marx that Plekhanov had access to filtered by Engels, but, at least in some instances, the content of these texts were also subject to Engels's oversight. While there is a debate as to whether this resulted in a distortion of Marx's ideas,[29] what

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[26] McLellan, *Karl Marx*, 397. For other claims that Engels's deterministic and scientistic thinking diverged from Marx's, see, Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 328-35; Lichtheim, *Marxism*, 244-258; and Sperber, *Karl Marx*,415-18. Moreover, Stedman Jones focuses heavily on this divergence and discusses it throughout his biography of Marx. See, Stedman Jones, *Greatness and Illusion*.

[27] Stedman Jones, *Greatness and Illusion*, 560. For additional claims of the significant influence of Engels's later writings on Second International Marxists, see, Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 212; Sperber, *Karl Marx*, 549-50, Hunt, *Marx's General*, 291; and Lichtheim, *Marxism*, 241.

[28] Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 180.

[29] Gareth Stedman Jones, for example, forcefully argues that Engels definitely, if not maliciously, distorted Marx's ideas, writing that "what came to be called 'Marxism' [in the late-nineteenth century] had been built upon an unambiguously selective view of what was to count as theory…[and was] in large part the creation of Engels." Stedman Jones, *Greatness and Illusion*, 2-4. Tristram Hunt, however, argues the opposite position, stressing that Marx remained aware of Engels's later works and interpretations of his ideas and that "there is no evidence that Marx was ashamed of or concerned about the nature of Engles's popularization of Marxism. Indeed, he was the prime mover behind *Anti-Dühring*, had the entire

is beyond debate is that in Engels's later writings and those of Marx's which he oversaw the movement away from voluntarism and towards determinism that had begun mid-century continued.

Therefore, the texts that Plekhanov based his Marxism upon were heterogenous in important ways. While thematically cohesive in their attention to class conflict and championing of a working-class revolution, Marx and Engels shifted between presenting these as the result of human agency or the product of economic forces. Broadly speaking, this shift occurred linearly over time and in response to contemporary events, with early texts composed during the revolutionary upsurge of 1848 containing the most pronounced portrayals of people as actively shaping or capable of shaping events, most notably in regards to the decisive influence communist intellectuals could exert in galvanizing the revolutionary process. Texts composed following the failures of 1848, however, foregrounded the influence of economics, variously claiming that society's economic forces limited, directed, or otherwise shaped human activity. This culminated in Engels's last writings, wherein he constructed a totalizing worldview subjecting the entirety of human history to economic causation. This shifting between privileging human action or economic influence is responsible for the unique synthesis apparent in Plekhanov's Marxism, wherein class conflict and the socialist revolution are presented as both inevitable and the outcome of conscious direction. Examining some of the major writings of Marx and Engels is therefore necessary for understanding Plekhanov's ideas.

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manuscript read to him…and recommended the book in 1878 as 'very important for a true appreciation of German Socialism.'" Hunt, *Marx's General*, 296.

The Revolutionary Writings of 1848-1850

Undoubtedly Marx's and Engels's most famous work, *The Communist Manifesto* is also their most idiosyncratic. Intended to serve as the programme for the Communist League, the radical political organization with which Marx and Engels were then associated,[30] the *Manifesto* was written in late 1847 and published in February, 1848. Composed in the ferment preceding the Europe-wide revolutions of 1848,[31] the *Manifesto* reflects this atmosphere of revolutionary elan in its foregrounding of volition and will. Each of the three groups it focuses on – the bourgeoisie, proletariat, and communists – are prominently presented as capable of or as already having affected society through their actions. While therefore primarily an expression of Marx's and Engels's stress on the efficacy of human activity, the *Manifesto* also contains contrary assertions of the influence of economic forces in social transformation, effectively rendering it a unique microcosm of the wider shifts in emphasis apparent across Marxism's founding texts.

In its opening discussion of the bourgeoisie, the *Manifesto* provides some indication of its wider pivoting between emphases. Initially stating that the "bourgeoisie is itself the product of a long course of development, of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and exchange,"[32] Marx and Engels literally present this class as a result of economic growth. Tracing their origins to "the chartered burghers of the earliest

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[30] For an especially detailed history of the *Manifesto*'s composition, see, McLellan, *Marx*, 161-170.

[31] For thorough histories of the numerous European revolutions that erupted in 1848, see, Priscilla Robertson, *Revolutions of 1848: A Social History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952); Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions, 1848-1851*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Mike Rapport, *1848: Year of Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

[32] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 221.

towns," Marx and Engels argue that as the European economy grew so did the bourgeoisie, that "in proportion as industry, commerce, navigation, railways extended, in the same proportion the bourgeoisie developed."[33] This stress on economic determinism is limited, however, as Marx and Engels also discuss the bourgeoisie as a producer of change, foregrounding the impact their activities had. "The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part,"[34] Marx and Engels write, and proceed to detail the changes this class has wrought upon society, consistently presenting them as the active subject in each instance. "The bourgeoisie … has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations," they write, continuing on to relate that "the bourgeoisie has … given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every nation … has subjected the country to the rule of the towns … has torn away from the family its sentimental veil … has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals."[35]

This rapid shifting between economic causation and human agency in regards to the bourgeoisie persists as Marx and Engels discuss the end of the feudal economy in Europe and its replacement by capitalism. Initially, they present this in broad, structural terms and as the work of impersonal economic processes, writing that "at a certain state in the development of [the] means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged…the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many

[33] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 220-221.

[34] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 222.

[35] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 222-224.

fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder."[36] Immediately following this, however, Marx and Engels begin to reframe this narrative and present feudalism's collapse as the bourgeoisie's work. They write of, for instance, "the weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground" and describe this class as having been "in a constant battle … in order to attain its own political ends … with the aristocracy … [and] the remnants of absolute monarchy."[37] This retelling again positions people, not economics, as the agents of social change, altering society through their own actions.

There is, however, no greater example of the *Manifesto*'s bifurcated presentation of human activity as both consequence and cause than in its discussion of the proletariat. Marx and Engels, for instance, extend their earlier argument regarding the bourgeoise's economic genesis to include that of the proletariat, writing that "in proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e. capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed."[38] Even as they position this class as a vehicle of revolutionary change – as the "gravediggers" of the bourgeoisie and capitalism[39] – Marx and Engels at least partly attribute this to economic causation. They argue that it is first and foremost the expansion of industry that unites and strengthens the proletariat, that while workers initially "form an incoherent mass scattered over the whole country, and broken up by their mutual competition … with the development of industry, the proletariat not only increases in number, it becomes concentrated in greater masses, it

[36] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 225.

[37] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 226, 229, 230.

[38] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 226-7.

[39] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 233.

strength grows … the advance of industry … replaces the isolation of the laborers … with their revolutionary combination."[40]

However, with their famous concluding call of "working men of all countries, unite!"[41] Marx and Engels speak directly to the proletariat and enjoin them to complete the uniting begun by economics, clearly indicating that this class's revolutionary status is also a result of voluntary action. This is further reflected in the *Manifesto*'s tracing of the proletariat's conflict with the bourgeoisie, starting with its first manifestations "carried on by individual laborers, then by the workpeople of a factory, then by the operatives of one trade" and eventually even "break[ing] out into riots."[42] These acts of resistance and self-assertion on the part of the working class are most immediately notable because they are not attributed to any economic causes. In fact, these actions stand in direct contrast to the degrading and dehumanizing effects Marx and Engels ascribe to modern industry which portray the proletariat as increasingly voided of agency and self-regard. They write, for example, that under industrial capitalism the worker is rendered "an appendage of the machine" and reduced to the level of a mere "commodity … who sell themselves piece-meal."[43] In spite of this influence, however, the proletariat "ever rises up again, stronger, firmer, mightier,"[44] Marx and Engels conclude, ascribing to the proletariat a free will and

[40] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 228-9 and 233.

[41] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 258.

[42] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 228-9.

[43] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 227.

[44] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 230.

capacity to self-radicalize that at least partly transcends the deadening effects attributed to economics.

There is one group, though, that the *Manifesto* depicts as wholly detached from economic influence: the Communists. Their origins, for example, are attributed entirely to independent choice, with Marx and Engels describing them as "bourgeois ideologists who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole … [and] cuts itself adrift from [the bourgeois class] … and goes over to the proletariat."[45] Continuing on to describe the Communists as "the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others … [that] represent[s] and take[s] care of the future of the movement,"[46] Marx and Engels not only persist in declining to attribute this group's actions to economic influence, they also effectively portray them as an independent source of influence. This is especially clear when Marx and Engels claim that the Communists "instill into the working class the clearest possible recognition of the hostile antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat" because they "have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement."[47] The Communists, their efforts and ideas, are thus treated by Marx and Engels as a discrete influence upon the proletariat and affecting them no less than economic forces. In its discussions of the

[45] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 231.

[46] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 234 and 257.

[47] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 258 and 234.

Communists, therefore, the *Manifesto*'s deterministic elements drastically recede, with the importance of economic causation displaced by that of voluntaristic actions.

This waning is complete in Marx's and Engels's next notable work, their "Address of the Central Committee of the Communist League" of March, 1850. While historians now see the suppression of the Hungarian revolt in October of the previous year as marking the conclusion of the 1848 revolutions and the onset of a period of sustained political reaction,[48] Marx and Engels composed this text with very different expectations. Claiming that "a new revolution is impending,"[49] Marx and Engels were among those at the time who, as Stedman Jones describes, "remained ebullient" in their expectations that a new wave of uprisings would soon emerge. Therefore, even more so than the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels drafted the Address in a state of confident anticipation, resulting in their complete abandonment within it of any notion that economic forces influence events and total embrace of human action as the determinative factor in a revolution.

The most striking element of the Address, and the most vivid indication of the voluntaristic nature of its ideas, is the central importance it places on Communist direction of the proletariat. Marx and Engels open, for example, by arguing that a lack of control from the Communist League resulted in the domination of the revolutionary movement by the petty bourgeoisie, writing that from 1848 to 1849 the "firm organization of the [Communist] League was considerably slackened…individual circles

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[48] See, for instance, Rapport, *1848*, 376-380.

[49] Karl Marx and Friedrick Engels, "Address of the Central Authority of the Communist League," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works*, vol. 10 (New York: International Publishers, 1978), 278.

and communities allowed their connections with the Central Committee to become loose and generally dormant … [and] remained organized at the most in separate localities for local purposes … consequently … the general movement thus came completely under the domination and leadership of the petty-bourgeois democrats."[50] The *Manifesto*'s idea of the important influence that Communists can exert over the proletariat is therefore carried over directly into the Address. While the decay of this influence via loss of connection to the League's leadership is identified as a cause for revolutionary failure, its reestablishment is portrayed as necessary for success, with Marx and Engels describing it as "extremely important…at this moment when a new revolution is impending, when the workers must act in the most organized [and] most unanimous … fashion possible." Specifically, Marx and Engels claim that Communist leadership is necessary in order to prevent the workers from being "exploited and taken in tow again by the bourgeoisie."[51] As they explain it, the proletariat had been betrayed by the bourgeoisie in 1848, that, although initially "allies in the struggle [i.e. the 1848 uprisings in the German states]," the bourgeoisie "forced [the workers] back into their former oppressed position" after their victory.[52] With their repeated claims that the petty bourgeoisie currently want to "dupe the proletariat," "bribe the proletariat," and "seduce" them,[53] Marx and Engels

[50] Marx and Engels, "Address of the Central Authority of the Communist League," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works*, vol. 10, 277.

[51] Marx and Engels, "Address of the Central Authority of the Communist League," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works*, vol. 10, 278.

[52] Marx and Engels, "Address of the Central Authority of the Communist League," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works*, vol. 10, 278.

[53] Marx and Engels, "Address of the Central Authority of the Communist League," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works*, vol. 10, 284, 280, and 286.

clearly consider the repetition of such an alliance and betrayal as a real danger. By asserting that this can be prevented through reestablishing Communist influence over the proletariat, Marx and Engels have made this group's actions pivotally important to the revolutionary process.

Marx's Turn to Economics, 1850-1867

It would take Marx several more months following the Address to recognize that the second wave of uprisings he envisioned were not forthcoming and that, as he would write in his next major work, *Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850* (1850), what had really transpired was the "defeat of the revolution."[54] This defeat would leave a lasting impact upon the writings of Marx and Engels, most visibly in the fact that they would never co-author a work together again. Engels, resigning himself to the revolutions' failure, took up full-time employment in his father's company in late 1850, leaving him without the time to write until his retirement decades later.[55] Marx, however, with Engels's financial support,[56] continued to write, and within these writings the impact of 1848's failure manifested in an increased emphasis on the influence of economic forces. This is apparent in the two works he devoted to explaining the course the 1848 revolution in France: the aforementioned *Class Struggles* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). In these texts, Marx effectively argues that the revolution's failure

[54] Karl Marx, *Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850* (New York: Progress Publishers, 1964), 33.

[55] See, Hunt, *Marx's General*, 183.

[56] See, Hunt, *Marx's General*, 190-192.

was economically determined, respectively portraying economics as placing limits on the efficacy of human activity and as the ultimate source of human behavior.

When *Class Struggles* was republished in 1895, Engels appended an introduction to it that essentially acknowledged it as marking a new stage in Marx's thinking. Engels clearly recognized that the degree of economic determinism espoused in *Class Struggles* was novel and describes it as "Marx's first attempt … to trace political events back to the effects of what are, in the last resort, economic causes."[57] This is clearly exemplified by Marx's claims regarding the genesis of the 1848 revolution in France and its failure to become the working-class inauguration of socialism as he had predicted. While noting that there was "general discontent" among the French population of the eve of the revolution due to the "corruption … cheating … [and] unbridled display of unhealthy and dissolute appetites" within the government, Marx argues that the "sentiment of revolt was ripened by two economic world-events,"[58] directly attributing the outbreak of the revolution to economics. He first writes that the "potato blight and poor harvests of 1845 and 1846 … the high cost of living of 1847 … the struggle of the people for the first necessities of life … increased the general ferment among the people," and continues on to explain that "the second great economic event that hastened the outbreak of the revolution was a general commercial and industrial crisis … hence the innumerable bankruptcies of the Paris bourgeoisie and hence their revolutionary action in February [1848]."[59] While explicitly connecting economic downturn to revolutionary upheaval

[57] Frederick Engels, "Introduction," in Marx, *Class Struggles in France*, 9.

[58] Marx, *Class Struggles in France*, 36-7.

[59] Marx, *Class Struggles in France*, 38.

here, Marx seemingly also leaves room for human agency in its claims that economic phenomena merely served to produce or exacerbate revolutionary feelings among the people, suggesting that the revolution was then a product of chosen actions. Marx proceeds to portray the efficacy of such actions as subordinate to and strictly limited by economics, however, as he explains that the reason the working class was unable to use this revolution to emancipate itself and usher in a socialist transformation of society was the insufficient economic development of France. He writes that, prior to 1848,

> the industrial bourgeoisie did not rule France. The industrial bourgeoisie can only rule where modern industry shapes all property relations in conformity with itself … [and] the development of the industrial proletariat is, in general, conditioned by the development of the bourgeoisie. Only under its rule the proletariat wins the extensive national existence, which can raise its revolution to a national one, and creates the modern means of production, which become just so many means of its revolutionary emancipation. Only bourgeois rule tears up the roots of feudal society and levels the ground on which a proletarian revolution is alone possible …The French working class had not attained this standpoint [in 1848]; it was still incapable of accomplishing its own revolution.[60]

Arguing that before 1848 France was not a fully developed capitalist nation, Marx claims that this underdevelopment rendered a working-class revolution there impossible as the necessary socio-economic prerequisites were not present. He therefore departs from his previous treatment of human volition, whether the will of the proletariat or the direction of communist intellectuals, as central to the revolutionary process and crucial to its success. Instead, Marx now portrays human action as effectively bounded by limits put in place by economic forces.

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[60] Marx, *Class Struggles in France*, 43.

The greater importance Marx attributed to the influence of economics after 1848 remains visible in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, which examines how Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, was able to gain absolute power in France in a coup d'état on December 2, 1851. This importance, however, is manifested differently as *The Eighteenth Brumaire* departs from the *Class Struggles*'s core depiction of economics as limiting human actions and instead presents economics as guiding these actions. This is initially obscured, however, by Marx's opening explanation of its central thesis. Writing that he aims to "demonstrate how the class struggle in France created the circumstances and relationships that made it possible [for Louis Napoleon Bonaparte to come to power],"[61] Marx makes no mention of economic causation and seems to be portraying human action as the central cause of events. However, as he elaborates his argument, the crucial role Marx assigns to economics becomes apparent when he positions it as the formative influence shaping the social classes and class conflict that allowed Bonaparte's rise. Groups of people come to "form a class," Marx explains, when they "live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from [those of other people] and put them in hostile opposition to the latter."[62] With this claim that economics determines a class and compels it into adversarial relationships with other classes, Marx establishes as multi-tiered causal process to explain Bonaparte's ascendency. Class conflict now appears as merely the

[61] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (New York: Progress Publishers, 1963), 8.

[62] Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, 124.

proximate cause of Bonaparte's ascendency, with the ultimate cause being economic forces and their influence over human actions.

As he proceeds to detail the events leading up to Bonaparte's coup d'état, Marx repeatedly reiterates the claim that they were essentially the product of economic influence. Arguing that while the 1848 revolution in France was the work of an alliance of the bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, and proletariat, and that all initially "found a place in the February government [i.e. the government established immediately following the revolution],"[63] Marx relates that these classes immediately fell into conflict with each other. Although this manifested in terms of differing political ideologies and parties, Marx claims that it was truly a matter of economics, writing that "if one looks at the situation and parties more closely, however, this superficial appearance which veils the class struggle … disappears," revealing that what kept the various "factions apart … was not any so-called principles, it was their material conditions of existence … different kinds of property."[64] This class conflict resulted in the bourgeoisie controlling the government after purging the other classes from it,[65] Marx relates, and then expands his claims regarding the economic determination of political events with the argument that the bourgeoisie abdicated this control to Bonaparte due to the threat it posed to their material interests. First writing that "as long as the rule of the bourgeois class had not been organized completely, had not acquired its pure political expression, the antagonism of the other classes, likewise, could not appear in its pure form, and where it did appear

[63] Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, 21.

[64] Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, 46-7.

[65] See, Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, 58.

could not take the dangerous turn that transforms every struggle against state power into a struggle against capital,"[66] Marx effectively argues that the bourgeoisie's political domination had exacerbated and expanded the class struggle, rendering any opposition to the state simultaneously opposition to this class. This greater threat, Marx continues, led the bourgeoisie to conclude "that in order to save its purse, it must forfeit the crown … that [they] can continue to exploit the other classes and to enjoy undisturbed property … only on the condition that their class be condemned along with the other classes to like political nullity."[67] This compulsion to abandon their political power to ensure their economic interests, Marx concludes, led the bourgeoisie offer no resistance to Bonaparte, to "applaud with servile bravos the coup d'etat of December 2, the annihilation of parliament, the downfall of its own rule."[68]

In the wake of the 1848 revolutions, therefore, Marx pivoted to stressing the importance of various forms of economic influence, portraying economic forces as both limiting and guiding human actions. Holding fast to this viewpoint in the following years, Marx largely focused his writing on economic analyses wherein discussions of activities independent of economic forces effectively vanishes, exemplified by his works *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and *Capital* (1867). While *Capital* is duly famous as Marx's magnum opus and expands upon many of the ideas found in *A Contribution to a Critique*, the latter text has special significance due to its famous Preface, wherein Marx both systematizes his deterministic ideas and radically

[66] Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, 65.

[67] Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, 67.

[68] Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, 115.

expands their scope to claim that human politics, culture, and social transformations are fundamentally economic products. It is in this Preface that Marx puts forward the notion of society as consisting of an economic "base" that shapes its socio-political "superstructure," writing that "in the social production of their life [i.e. in the economic acts of production and consumption], men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will … the sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real base on which rises a legal and political superstructure."[69] However, the determinism Marx espouses in the Preface does not stop at this claim that a society's economic structure is the producer of its political organization; he also argues that it, not popular will nor elite direction, generates revolutionary political change. He writes that "at a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production…then begins the epoch of … revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed."[70]

In both its broad claim that political revolution is the product of economic change and the specific terminology it uses – the forces and relations of production – the Preface repeats *The Manifesto*'s most deterministic claims. In *The Manifesto*, however, this impersonal process was surrounded by contrasting narratives emphasizing human agency, of the bourgeoisie overturning feudalism and of the proletariat overturning capitalism.

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[69] Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, S.W. Ryazanskaya, trans. (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 20.

[70] Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 21.

Such narratives are shorn away in the Preface and people remain present within it only under the broad concept of "the material productive forces of society."[71] This rhetorical shift and resulting near total erasure of a human presence in the revolutionary process is illustrative of Marx's wider turn towards a focus on the influence of economics following 1848. This focus reaches its peak within the Preface when Marx extends his claims of economic causality to include the mind, arguing that "the mode of production of material life [i.e. the economic structure of society] conditions the social, political, and intellectual."[72] Further elaborating that this conditioning includes "religious, aesthetic, [and] philosophic" concepts, Marx essentially reduces all of human culture to the epiphenomena of economics. Famously concluding that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness,"[73] Marx caps his deterministic claims by positioning human consciousness as a social product, the product of a society whose politics, ideas, culture, and even transformations are the result of economic forces.

If the human subject is diminished in *A Contribution to a Critique*, it effectively disappears in *Capital*. Marx himself is forthright about this, writing in the Preface to the first German edition of this text that in it "individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are personification of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests." Adding that "my standpoint … can less than any other make the

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[71] Although Marx never provides a clear definition for this term, from its use here in the Preface and particularly in the first section of *The Communist Manifesto*, it can be gathered that it entails both the tools and people that produce economic goods. See, Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 225-227.

[72] Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 20-21.

[73] Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 20-21.

individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains," [74] Marx makes it clear that this text largely presents human action as fundamentally the result of economic forces. This subordination of mankind to economic processes is most visible in its discussion of the end of capitalism and establishment of socialism, which Marx, abandoning the language of revolution, now describes this as "the expropriation of a few usurpers [i.e. the bourgeoisie] by the mass of the people."[75] The foregrounding of popular action in this description, however, proves to be misleading as Marx continues on and locates this event's causal force within economics, writing that "this expropriation is accomplished by the action of the immanent laws of capitalistic production itself … capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of nature, its own negation."[76] With this, Marx effectively renders human action the execution of a economically-generated fait accompli and therefore continues the emphasis on economic influence at the expense of free human action that characterized his thought since the failures of 1848.

This emphasis is particularly salient in his examination of the "laws" he claims are both inherent within and inimical to the survival of capitalism, as these posit increases in economic concentration, productivity, and poverty as inevitable processes both afflicting mankind and beyond its control. "The laws of the centralization of capitals" entails the concentration of business ownership, the "transformation of many small into few large capitals," which Marx argues is a result of "the battle of competition" between

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[74] Karl Marx, "Capital," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 35 (New York: Progress Publishers, 1996), 10.

[75] Marx "Capital," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 35, 751.

[76] Marx "Capital," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 35, 750-1.

businesses and "always ends in the ruin of many small capitalists…the larger capitals beat the smaller…whose capitals partly pass into the hands of their conquerors."[77] This centralization is directly related to additional inescapable features of capitalism, Marx claims, most immediately that of "the law by which a constantly increasing quantity of means of production, thanks to the advance of the productiveness of social labor, may be set in movement by a progressively diminishing expenditure of human power."[78] Connecting this increase in productivity and decrease in required labor with competition-wrought centralization, Marx writes that "competition [between businesses] is fought by cheapening of commodities [and] the cheapness of commodities depends…on the productiveness of labor,"[79] further explaining that this is accomplished primarily through the use of new technology, that "machinery is intended to cheapen commodities…[by] increasing the productiveness of labor."[80] This increasing use of machines, which "perform with its tools the same operations that were formerly done by the workman,"[81] results in a decrease in employed workers, Marx argues, writing that it creates "a relatively redundant population of laborers, i.e. a population of greater extent than suffices for the average needs of the self-expansion of capital [i.e. profit and business growth.]"[82] These mass of unemployed not only suffer themselves but also unwittingly

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[77] Marx "Capital," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 35, 621.

[78] Marx "Capital," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 35, 639.

[79] Marx "Capital," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 35, 621.

[80] Marx "Capital," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 35, 374.

[81] Marx "Capital," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 35, 377.

[82] Marx "Capital," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 35, 624.

cause suffering among the employed, Marx claims, writing that because this "surplus population is…the pivot upon which the law of demand and supply of labor works" it is used by employers to threaten their employees with replacement unless they "submit to overwork and to subjugation."[83] Marx describes this "accumulation of misery" and "pauperism" within the working class as "the absolute general law" of capitalism,[84] placing it alongside the other features of capitalism he presents as reigning over mankind and determining their lives, as one of the "natural laws of capitalist production…working with iron necessity towards inevitable results."[85]

The Systemization of Marx: Engels's Later Writings, 1877-1886

A clear trajectory is therefore apparent in Marx's thought. Initially privileging the role of human activities in shaping society and particularly in transforming it, he progressively abandoned this view in favor of one positioning economic structures and processes as the forces that truly shaped society. This trend was continued by Engels, who was able to return to writing in the 1870s and continued to produce work up through the 1880s. In the major texts he produced during this period, *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science* (1877), *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886), Engels both repeated Marx's most deterministic claims and systematized them into a

[83] Marx "Capital," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 35, 630.

[84] Marx "Capital," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 35, 640 and 638.

[85] Marx "Capital," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 35, 9.

totalizing worldview positing that the entirety of human history has been determined by economics and which he claimed rendered traditional philosophy obsolete. This is particularly apparent in his *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, popularly referred to as *Anti-Dühring*, which Engels wrote as a polemic against the contemporary German academic Eugen Dühring (1833-1921), a critic of Marx's ideas who had put forward his own socialist programme.[86] Asked by leaders of the newly formed Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) to critique Dühring's ideas, which they feared would fracture the party if they spread,[87] Engels duly composed *Anti-Dühring* to expose "the ignorant arrogance of Herr Dühring."[88] Polemics, however, constituted only a portion of this text, with an equal amount of space within it devoted to explaining and ultimately expanding upon Marx's ideas. In these portions, Engels not only reiterates the most deterministic ideas Marx had put forward but also begins constructing a wider theoretical system out of them.

Engels's echoing of Marx in *Anti-Dühring* is most apparent in his discussion of the decisive influence economic forces have over a society and its transformations. He repeats, for example, Marx's claims regarding the causal relationship between society's economic "base" and its political "superstructure" and culture, writing that "the economic structure of society always forms the real basis from which, in the last analysis, is to be

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[86] Dühring had criticized Marxism's economic determinism and advocacy of centralization, arguing instead that force was the real determinative influence in society and that socialism would be realized in autonomous communes. Moreover, he accompanied many of these critiques with ad hominem attacks against Marx and Engels, describing the latter, for instance as "rich in capital but poor in insight about that capital." See, Hunt, *Marx's General,* 290-291.

[87] See, Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, Emile Burns, trans. (New York: International Publishers, 1939), 9-12.

[88] Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 12.

explained the whole superstructure of legal and political institutions as well as [its] religious, philosophical, and other conceptions."[89] Engels reiterates this this claim throughout *Anti-Dühring*,[90] affirming the most thoroughgoing determinism posited by Marx, and continues to do so as he restates the non-voluntaristic conception of revolution Marx had come to embrace following 1848. He asserts that "inevitability of [capitalism's] downfall"[91] and is clear that this is because of processes inherent in capitalism and not human will, arguing "this mode of production, through its own development, drives towards the point at which it makes itself impossible."[92] Engels explains that this is the result of the various laws within capitalism that Marx had identified in *Capital*, that capitalism has made

> a compulsory commandment for the individual capitalist constantly to improve his machinery, constantly to increase its productive power…but the perfecting of machinery means rendering human labor superfluous…means the displacement of larger and larger number of workers…tear[ing] the means of subsistence out of the hands of the laborer…[and] restricting their consumption to a starvation minimum.[93]

This working out of the competition inherent in the "law" of the centralization of capitals and the resulting "law" of the pauperization of the working class, Engels argues, "restricts consumption" and acts as a "counteracting pressure" on production, leading to "crises of superabundance" wherein "the whole mechanism of the capitalist mode of production

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[89] Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 32.

[90] See, Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 104, 178, 191, 199, 239.

[91] Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 33.

[92] Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 167.

[93] Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 300-302.

breaks down."[94] These crises, he claims, are "the necessary means towards the revolutionizing of society" because they will eventually lead to "a violent explosion."[95] With his conclusion that it is "this tangible, material fact … not on the conceptions of justice or injustice … that modern socialism's confidence of victory is founded,"[96] Engels follows Marx in presenting the revolutionary process as driven by economic forces and not human volition.

While Engels mostly hews to repetitions of Marx's ideas in *Anti-Dühring*, there are important indications within it of how he will come to expand them into a deterministic worldview in his subsequent works. He takes, for example, Marx's claims regarding the causal relationship between the economy and wider society, which had focused almost exclusively on the capitalist present and near past of feudalism, and applies it to the entirety of human history, writing of a "materialist conception of history" which explains that "production and with production the exchange of its products, is the basis of *every* social order" and that "the ultimate causes of *all* social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in the minds of men…but in changes in the mode of production and exchange."[97] Engels fully elaborates upon this in his following work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. In this text, Engels draws upon anthropological and historical studies, particularly the work of American

[94] Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 300-302.

[95] Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 314 and 302.

[96] Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 174-5.

[97] Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 292. Emphasis added.

anthropologist Lewis Morgan (1818-1881),[98] to illustrate the "materialist conception of history discovered by Marx."[99] This conception is verified, Engels claims, by the history of both contemporary underdeveloped peoples, such as the Iroquois tribes of North America, and of ancient civilizations, such as the Greeks and Romans. These societies respectively represent the "three main epochs" of early human history, Engels asserts, relating, in terminology common for the time, that these are "savagery, barbarism, and civilization."[100] Engels further explains that these periodizations are "drawn directly from the production processes" dominant in each,[101] before proceeding to argue that their distinguishing characteristics, and societies' movement from one to the next, is due to changes in these economic processes.

The structure of both "savage" and "barbarian" societies "presupposed [their] undeveloped mode of production," with "savage" hunters only "making some beginnings towards settlement in villages" and "barbarian" farmers living in larger federations of autonomous kinship clans referred to as "gens,"[102] Engels argues, adhering to the claim that economic organization determines socio-political organization. The advent of "civilization" was similarly a product of economics, Engels continues, relating that continued expansion and diversification of production resulted in "social division of labor

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[98] Specifically, Lewis's *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization* (1877).

[99] Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Alec West, trans. (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 71.

[100] Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 87.

[101] Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 93.

[102] Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 160, 89, 147.

… commodity production … [and the] cleavage of society into classes."[103] It is from these developments that the defining feature of "civilization," the political state apparatus, emerges, Engels argues, writing that the state "springs directly out of class oppositions … [and] is an organization for the protection of the possessing classes against the non-possessing classes."[104] This constituted a "revolutioniz[ation]"[105] of society, Engels concludes, effectively reading Marx's claims that societies are both determined and transformed by economics back into every stage of human history.

In his last work, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Engels completes his elaboration of Marx's economic determinism into an all-encompassing worldview by portraying it as the "end" of philosophy in a double sense. Firstly, he portrays Marx as adopting and adapting the best concepts of previous systems, positioning it as the culmination of previous philosophical developments. Secondly, he argues that Marx's ideas have achieved the fundamental aim of philosophical inquiries by providing a complete understanding of the world, effectively ending the need for further speculation. Engels begins his argument that Marx's determinism constituted the concluding apex of philosophy by claiming that all philosophical thought is "split … into two great camps," the first being "idealism … [which] asserts the primacy of spirit to nature … [and that] what we perceive in the real world is thought content," and the second being "materialism," which posits that "the material, sensuously perceptible world

[103] Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 222-3

[104] Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 228, 231.

[105] Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 233.

… is the only reality … [that] matter is not a product of the mind, but mind the highest product of matter."[106]

While dismissing idealism as asserting "preconceived fancies" and making "fantastic connections,"[107] Engels singles out for praise the idealist Hegel for what he terms his "dialectical method," which entailed viewing "the world … as a complex of processes … [as] an uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away." This was a definitive advancement in philosophical thinking, Engels argues, relating that prior philosophers had viewed the world "as a complex of ready-made things … as fixed and stable."[108] It was an adherence to this static view of the world, Engels continues, that undermined the next significant philosopher following Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872). Though praising Feuerbach for rejecting Hegel's idealism, for "plac[ing] materialism on the throne … [and] proclaiming that nothing exists outside of nature and man,"[109] Engels also criticizes him for simultaneously abandoning Hegel's dialectical method and consequently treating man and nature as fixed, unchanging categories. "With Feuerbach," Engels writes, "'man' always remains the same abstract man … [who] does not live in a real world historically created…[therefore Feuerbach is] incapable of telling us anything about either real nature or real men."[110]

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[106] Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy,* 21-22, and 25.

[107] Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, 43.

[108] Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, 44-5.

[109] Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, 18.

[110] Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, 36, 40-1.

Marx was the one to overcome the flaws apparent in Hegel and Feuerbach by combining their best features, marrying Hegel's dialectical method to Feuerbach's materialist outlook and therefore recognizing the movement and changes of the real world, Engels argues. With Marx, he writes, "Hegelian philosophy was again taken up and at the same time freed from its idealist trammels … [Marx] returned to the materialist standpoint…[and] comprehended the dialectical motion of the real world."[111] This effectively ends the need for further philosophy as Marx's combination allows for factual, scientific answers to the questions philosophers aimed to answer, Engels argues, proceeding to place Marx's thought within what he claims is a wider process of scientific knowledge supplanting traditional philosophy. He writes, for example, that it is now possible to obtain in a "systematic form a comprehensive view of the interconnections in nature by means of the facts provided by empirical natural science," something that was "formally the task of so-called natural philosophy … [which] today … is finally disposed of." Marx's innovation, Engels continues, means that this supplanting can now be achieved in other areas of philosophy, in "all … which occupy themselves with things human … the philosophies of history, of law, of religion, etc."[112] These philosophies focused on "investigating the driving forces which – consciously or unconsciously … lie behind the motives of men in their historical actions and which constitute the real ultimate driving forces of history," Engels explains, arguing that such investigations can be completed by Marx's combination of materialist focus and dialectical method, which grasps "the history of the development of society … [and] the actual interconnections

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[111] Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, 43-44.

[112] Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, 47.

demonstrated in events."[113] This reveals that history is economically determined, Engels writes, arguing that "in history … all political struggles are class struggles, and all class struggles … turn ultimately on the question of economic emancipation. Therefore … the realm of economic relations is the decisive element … [and] the key to understanding the whole history of society lies in the historical development of labor."[114] Describing this as "the Marxist conception of history" and claiming that its "proof [is] found in history itself,"[115] Engels portrays Marx's claims regarding the determining influence of economic production as an essentially scientific replacement for philosophical explanations of history, concluding that "this conception…puts an end to philosophy in the realm of history."[116]

The key themes present in *The Communist Manifesto* – class conflict and revolution – remain prominent in Engels's last works but their context and treatment are radically different. No longer the programme of a radical political group, they are scientific facts of human history discernable through a philosophically grounded worldview. Most importantly, they are no longer the results of human will, but the products of economic processes. A shift from portraying social phenomena and particularly socio-political change as the outcome of human action to one portraying these as the results of economic influence is therefore apparent in Marx's and Engels's writings from 1848 to 1886, effectively resulting in two different theories regarding the

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[113] Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, 48

[114] Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, 52, 61.

[115] Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, 50, 59, 60-1.

[116] Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, 59.

advent of socialism. This difference, however, never acknowledged by Marx nor Engels and arguably less visible than the continuities in their thinking, was not recognized by Plekhanov and his contemporaries. Believing that Marx and Engels expounded a single, cohesive theory in their writings, Marxists of the Second International combined the disparate emphases on human agency and material causation into a single system. It is this system, wherein the inevitable effects of economic development described by the later Marx and Engels can be expedited by the elite activism described in their earlier works, that Plekhanov would first embrace, then defend, and finally revise over the course of his life.

Chapter II

Plekhanov's Early Marxist Writings, 1883-1897: Material Determinism, Elite Voluntarism, and Conventional Aesthetics

It seems as if one sometimes finds discussions of two different Georgi Plekhanovs in the scholarship. As already noted, a vast majority of studies discuss a supposedly "vulgar" Plekhanov who espoused a fatalistic Marxism informed by Marx's and Engel's most reductive articulations of material determinism. Occasionally, however, a strikingly voluntaristic Plekhanov is encountered, one with seemingly little confidence in the influence of material forces on society and instead placing great faith in the efficacy of elite individuals and groups. Historian Neil Harding, for example, writes of a Plekhanov for which "there was no necessary determinism at work which ineluctably propelled the working class towards socialism" and thus advocated for the "intervention of the Social-Democratic intelligentsia" in order to ensure "the infusion of socialism into the working class."[1] A "vanguardist" Plekhanov, embodying the most radical assertions of personal agency found in Marx's and Engels's writings, thus stands alongside the "vulgar" in scholarship in apparent contradiction, forcing the question as to which is the "real" Plekhanov.

The answer, quite simply, quite paradoxically, is that both are. The ideas of material determinism and revolutionary voluntarism, the ideas that define the two

[1] Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought: Theory and Practice in the Democratic and Socialist Revolutions* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 172. Other studies presenting Plekhanov as espousing a striking voluntarism include Hal Draper, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat from Marx to Lenin* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987); and Jonathan Frankel, "Voluntarism, Maximalism, and the Group for the Emancipation of Labor (1883-1892)" in *Revolution and Politics in Russia*, A. & J. Rabinowitch, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972).

Plekhanovs found in scholarship and, as previously seen, constitute a striking antinomy in Marx's and Engels's writings, were both espoused by Plekhanov, effectively fused together into a single system. Plekhanov, along with many other members of the Second International, subscribed to what historian Lars Lih has termed the "good news" interpretation of Marxism combining beliefs in both the materially-determined inevitability of socialism and the important role that intellectuals could play in hastening its advent. As Lih writes, many Second Internationalists believed that the dissemination of Marxist ideas by intellectuals "is *needed* and w[ould] be *heeded* [by the proletariat]. It is not needed to achieve socialism, since that will come about regardless. It is needed to avoid the human tragedy that would be caused by socialism coming 'later' rather than 'sooner.'"[2] Lih explains that it was widely held by Plekhanov's Marxist contemporaries that material conditions rendered it "inevitable that the workers will resist capitalist exploitation" and that, even absent any exposure to Marxist theory, "they will discover after much trial and error [that] socialism is the only way to protect their essential interests." Intellectuals, however, could help them to avoid this slow and haphazard path by spreading Marxist ideas among them, as workers "would hear, mark, and inwardly digest the Social-Democratic message as soon as it is in a position to receive it" because the conditions of capitalist exploitation rendered them "receptive to the good new brought by Social Democracy."[3]

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[2] Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 82.

[3] Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 78, 80-2.

The appearance of "two Plekhanovs" in scholarship is thus partly explained by the fact that the ideas each embodied are both contained in Plekhanov's thinking. Combining the deterministic and voluntaristic elements of Marxism, Plekhanov expressed both in his writings and thus left abundant statements that could support either "vulgar" or "vanguard" interpretations. That these separate interpretations have persisted and the "good news" synthesis that actually characterized Plekhanov's thinking has largely remained unrecognized can largely attributed to context, both of Plekhanov's writings and of the scholarship examining him. In regards to the latter, the circumstances fostering the stereotype of Second International Marxists as "vulgar" material determinists, such as efforts to valorize or vilify Lenin, have already been discussed. The occasional portrayals of Plekhanov as an extreme voluntarist also occur in the context of a focus on Lenin, in what historian Robert Mayer describes as the "'blame Plekhanov' interpretation," due to the fact that it "argue[s] that Lenin derived many of his antidemocratic ideas from … Plekhanov."[4] Rather than presenting Plekhanov as an example of the "vulgar" orthodoxy Lenin broke with, therefore, these studies read Lenin's supposed innovations in Marxist theory back into him. Hal Draper's exemplifies this with his claims that Plekhanov invested such importance in the leading role of the Party that he "confer[red] an antidemocratic content on the [Marxist notion of] the 'dictatorship of the proletariat," which he effectively reinterpreted as the "dictatorship of the Party," an interpretation that was subsequently adopted by Lenin.[5]

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[4] Robert Mayer, "The Dictatorship of the Proletariat from Plekhanov to Lenin," in *Studies in East European Thought,* Vol. 45, no. 4 (1993), 256.

[5] Draper, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat from Marx to Lenin*, 71, 93.

Alongside the context of the arguments scholars have attempted to insert him into, the fact that either the deterministic or voluntaristic elements of Plekhanov's thinking consistently receive exclusive attention is also attributable to the context in which Plekhanov originally put forward his ideas. Specifically, the circumstances surrounding Plekhanov's early Marxist writings, most particularly the ideas that served as his main polemical targets until Bernstein's Revisionism in the late 1890s, resulted in him repeatedly shifting between emphasizing either the "vulgar" or the "vanguard" aspects of his thinking, resulting in statements that often obscure the synthesis of the two that actually characterized his thought. Plekhanov's earliest and most famous writings as a Marxist, such as the pamphlet "Socialism and the Political Struggle" (1883), and the books *Our Differences* (1885) and *The Development of the Monist View of History* (1895) were all intended to serve as interventions in the contemporary Russian socialist movement, a movement Plekhanov had been involved in since 1875.[6] Despite relocating to Geneva in 1880 and being unable to return to Russia until 1917 due to the threat of arrest,[7] Plekhanov remained deeply invested in and hopeful for the success of the socialist movement in his home country. Upon embracing Marxism by 1882,[8] Plekhanov became convinced that this success could only be achieved by adhering to the tenets and tactics of Marxist theory.[9] His earliest writings, therefore, were aimed at demonstrating the

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[6] Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), 15. Baron's work remains the most comprehensive account of Plekhanov's life and thought.

[7] See, Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, 55-59.

[8] Baron writes that Plekhanov came to embrace Marxism over a "period from 1880 to 1882." See, Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), 59.

[9] See, Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, 73-77.

veracity of Marxism and its superiority over the overlapping socialist theories that predominated among the Russian radicals at that time. These included Narodism, an agrarian populist socialism; anarchism inspired by another Russian expatriate, Mikhail Bakunin; and lastly the Blanquism espoused by Pyotr Tkachev.[10]

With his co-founding of the Emancipation of Labor in 1883, Plekhanov, though only twenty-seven, became involved in his third radical socialist association. Previously, he had been a member of the group Zemlya i Volya (Земля и воля, "Land and Liberty") from 1875-79 and subsequently formed his own organization, Chornyi Peredel (Чёрный передел, "General Redivision"), in 1879.[11] Both of these groups adhered to Narodism, though with different inflections. Emerging in the 1850s and 1860s,[12] Narodism was centered on the belief that Russia was uniquely suited for socialism due to the traditions of communal land ownership among the peasantry, known as the *obshchina* (община, "commune"). Agricultural land was considered common property by its residents and they would periodically redistribute it among themselves,[13] forming, according to Narodism, "the cornerstone on which … a federation of socialized, self-governing units

[10] Tkachev, due to the similarities perceived between his advocacy of revolution via elite seizure of power and Lenin's supposed advocacy of a revolutionary vanguard party, was famously referred to as the "first Bolshevik" by Albert Weeks in the first English-language biography of him. Despite this appellation, Tkachev was not associated with the Bolsheviks nor was he an influence on their ideology. See, Albert Weeks, *The First Bolshevik: A Political Biography of Peter Tkachev* (New York: New York University Press, 1968).

[11] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 15 and 44.

[12] Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly, eds. (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), 210. While Berlin remains an excellent source for the history and varieties of Narodism, a more recent examination can be found in Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 220-228. Lastly, Baron remains an invaluable resource for both information about Narodism and especially about Plekhanov's relationship with it, see Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, 12-78.

[13] See, Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, 258 and Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 211.

… could be erected," completely avoiding the capitalism of western Europe.[14] Cognizant that such a transformation could not be accomplished under tsarist absolutism but also convinced by the events in the west showed that "constitutional government and political liberty were merely a deception intended to mask the political supremacy of the exploiters of the people,"[15] the Narodniki rejected the idea of political reform and even political participation; instead, they "envisaged a great peasant upheaval against the existing social and political order."[16]

It is on the question of how this desired peasant revolution would come about that the different varieties of Narodism diverge. Beginning in the early 1870s, theorist Petr Lavrov's claim that "a preliminary period of propaganda among the peasantry to ensure and solidify their support for the … revolution"[17] was necessary dominated the movement. This idea lay behind the famously ill-fated "going to the people" events of 1874, in which hundreds of urban Narodniki traveled to the countryside with the expectation of enlisting peasant support for their plans.[18] The peasantry's indifference and even hostility to the Narodnik programme led to a decline in support for Lavrov's ideas and an increasing turn to those of Bakunin, who believed that more overt agitational activities, including terrorism against the government, could "galvanize the peasants into

[14] Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 211-212.

[15] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 13.

[16] Baron, *Plekhanov*, 13.

[17] Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, 14.

[18] For information on the Narodnik-inspired "going to the people events, see, Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, 220-222; Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, 14; and Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 216.

action."[19] It was this Bakunin-influenced Narodism that Plekhanov first embraced as a member of Zemlya i Volya, though he grew increasingly disillusioned with it as the expansion of terrorist activity in the late 1870s failed to spur the peasantry into action. This prompted him to return to the ideas of Lavrov and form Chornyi Peredel, which focused on propaganda as the means of gaining peasant support.[20] Other Narodniki, however, moved in the opposite direction and embraced the ideas of Tkachov who "had little faith in the revolutionary propensities of the peasants, and, accordingly, laid responsibility for making the revolution exclusively upon the intelligentsia … [believing that] they must conspire to seize state power and afterwards use it in support of the social revolution."[21]

Therefore, upon his conversion to Marxism following the 1880 collapse of Chornyi Peredel in the wake of police raids,[22] Plekhanov was faced with a range of ideas in the Russian revolutionary movement that had been entrenched for some time and commanded substantial loyalty. Compounding this was the widespread perception that Marxism, with its assumptions of industrial capitalism and focus on the urban working class, was inapplicable to underdeveloped Russia.[23] Plekhanov thus composed his early Marxist writings with these issues in mind and aimed to affirm Marxism's veracity and polemicize against the varieties of Russian socialism, resulting in passages and even

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[19] Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, 15.

[20] See, Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, 30-47.

[21] Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, 14.

[22] Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, 47.

[23] See, Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, 59-77; and Leszek Kolakowski, *The Main Currents of Marxism*, P.S. Falla, trans. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 620-625.

whole works shaped by specific demands and often emphasizing one aspect of his thinking. His first Marxist text, for example, "Socialism and the Political Struggle," was aimed directly against the Narodnik dismissal of liberal politics and argued that socialism will not come about "except under the immediate influence of a strong and well-organized workers' socialist party" and urged the intelligentsia "to work out the elements for the establishment of such a party,"[24] thus stressing the voluntarist dimension of his Marxism. Conversely, *Our Differences* featured more of the deterministic side of his thought, arguing that revolutionary success required certain material conditions and mocking the anarchists' and Tkachov-ists' "unjustified confidence in the omnipotence of conspiratorial political scheming … and in the social wonder-working of our intelligentsia's revolutionary organizations."[25]

While none of Plekhanov's works omit the entirety of his Marxism, their various foci can provide fodder for misreading and the perpetuation of the appearance of the "two Plekhanovs" in scholarship. More comprehensive readings, however, reveal the actual character of Plekhanov's early Marxism to have been a blend of the deterministic and voluntaristic ideas articulated by Marx and Engels, resulting in a theory that is notable for its confidence and even optimism. Socialism was to be the product of the voluntary actions of the proletariat, Plekhanov asserted, but these actions, the proletariat itself, and their ultimate success, were themselves the determined product of the development of industrial capitalism and the tensions inherent within it. The certainty which

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[24] Georgi Plekhanov, "Sotsializm I Politicheskaia Bor'ba," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1923), 27.

[25] Plekhanov, *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 102.

characterized Plekhanov's early thinking is particularly visible in his claims that the intelligentsia could assist in hastening the outbreak of revolution by introducing the proletariat to Marxist theory and thus providing them with clarity and tactics. The proletariat's embrace of Marxism was another guaranteed product of material determinism, Plekhanov believed, as material forces had predisposed them towards recognizing its tenets as truth.

A particularly notable indicator of the confidence underlying Plekhanov's Marxism was his break with the Russian tradition of politicized literature and literary criticism. As Isaiah Berlin explains, in nineteenth-century Russia "the only channels that censorship had not completely shut off [were] literature and the arts. Hence the notorious fact that in Russia, social and political thinkers turned into poets and novelists, while creative writers often became publicists."[26] Literature and literary criticism were thus vehicles for the public discussion and propagation of oppositional ideas within Russia, with novels by Ivan Turgenev, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, and Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin and critical essays by Vissarion Belinsky and Dmitri Pisarev all aiming to disseminate particular socio-political viewpoints.[27] Plekhanov, however, was an outlier in regards to this tradition as the several essays he wrote about literature prior to the Revisionist Debate all eschewed politicization and instead exhibited what could be considered

[26] Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 265.

[27] For the tradition of politicized literature and criticism in Russia, see, in addition to Berlin, Charles A. Moser, *Esthetics as Nightmare: Russian Literary Theory, 1855-1870* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Victor Terras, *Belinskij and Russian Literary Criticism: The Heritage of Organic Aesthetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974); Rufus Mathewson, jr. *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature* 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975); and Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

conventional aesthetic standards. Analyzing the works of the contemporary authors Gleb Uspensky, Nikolai Karonin-Petropavlovsky (under the pen name S. Karonin), and Nikolai Naumov, Plekhanov's essays focused on matters of artistic form and content, not political ideology, and even went so far as to censure the idea of prioritizing political ideas within art. This dismissal of opportunities for Marxist ideas to be expressed in censorship-escaping forms, whether in his own essays or in artworks generally, is illustrative of the confidence characterizing Plekhanov's early Marxism. So certain of the materially-determined success of revolutionary activities, and particularly of the proletariat's readiness to absorb the Marxist ideas disseminated by intelligentsia, Plekhanov apparently saw no need to utilize works of art and literature as additional means of spreading these ideas.

Plekhanov's Early Marxism: Material Determinism

Perhaps the most pressing issue confronting the newly-Marxist Plekhanov was, as historian Ronald Grigor Suny relates, the fact that "to many, [Marxism] seemed inappropriate for a largely peasant, primarily agricultural country with an insignificantly small proletariat." The socio-economic prerequisites for socialism as outlined by Marx and Engels, particularly the existence of an industrialized capitalist economy and a large proletarian population, simply did not exist in Russia, making it "the least likely candidate in Europe to create a society modeled on Marx's ideas."[28] Moreover, Marxism

[28] Ronal Girgor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xix and 26.

explicitly assumed that in a society ripe for socialism "the bourgeoisie has … exclusive political sway" after having "put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations."[29] In Russia, these relations still held, with an autocratic monarchical system and a "landed nobility that was … the dominant class,"[30] further distancing Marxism from any apparent relevance there. Plekhanov was acutely aware of this view, noting in *Socialism and the Political Struggle* that "it is often said in our country that the theories of scientific socialism are inapplicable to Russia," and a consistent theme of his early writings was to counter this "absurd conclusion."[31]

Marxism is applicable to Russia because "since the time of the abolition of serfdom [i.e. 1861] Russia has patently entered the path of capitalist development," Plekhanov argues, portraying Russia as shedding its feudal character and firmly approaching the economic prerequisites Marx and Engels outlined. A "study of the actual situation of the country [and] analysis of its present-day life"[32] confirms this portrayal, he claims, turning to various data for evidence. Plekhanov draws upon "the latest official Ministry of Finance statistics" to argue that "manufacture production from 1877 and 1882 … shows a tremendous increase…it has doubled in many enterprises" while "capitalist accumulation," measured by comparing bank deposits in the years 1864 and 1877, "increased … by 220 percent."[33] These figures, Plekhanov concludes, along

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[29] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 221-222.

[30] Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 16.

[31] Plekhanov, "Sotsializm I Politicheskaia Bor'ba," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 46.

[32] Plekhanov, "O Razvitii Monisticheskogo Vzgliada Na Istoriiu," in *Sochineniia,* tom. VII, 267.

[33] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 228-229.

with statistics regarding the growth of the number of workers employed in factories, the rise in rural income from handicraft trade, and the expansion of domestic markets,[34] all demonstrate that "not only the immediate future but the present of [Russia], too, belongs to capitalism."[35]

The aspect of capitalism's development in Russia that Plekhanov devotes the most space to discussing, however, is the decay of the *obshchina*. "The development of money economy and commodity production undermines the *obshchina* little by little … its downfall is prepared by degrees,"[36] Plekhanov writes, arguing the natural economy that existed in rural Russia has been affected by the broader national development of capitalism. He explains that "the development of industry around or inside [rural areas] opens up new means of earning and at the same time new sources of inequality," relating that as some peasant households are able to avail themselves of these new sources of income and others are not, "the members of the *obshchina*, who were once equal as far as property, rights, and obligations went, are divided … into two sections."[37] The households that are able benefit from the new sources of income and grow relatively wealthy constitute a new "class of exploiters," Plekhanov argues, claiming that they form "among themselves a defensive and offensive alliance against the poor … [and] maintain their hold on the well-cultivated strips of the *obshchina*…[by] lengthening of the time

[34] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 199-231.

[35] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 230.

[36] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 238 and 236.

[37] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 253 and 238.

between reallotments [of land]."[38] This monopolization, he continues, means that the poorest peasants "are gradually losing all possibility of engaging in agriculture … [and] are compelled to go elsewhere with their families in order to earn," resulting in their "neighbors … taking [their] land," leading to "an accentuation of inequality further undermining of the *obshchina*."[39] Concluding that the *obshchina*'s "primitive agrarian communism is preparing to give way to individual or household ownership,"[40] Plekhanov completes his portrait of Russia as possessing an extant and growing capitalist economy.

In line with the polemical intent of his writing, Plekhanov is quick to point out that the development of capitalism in Russia means the bankruptcy of Narodism and its belief that the *obshchina* would allow Russia to build socialism while bypassing capitalism. "Russian socialists … who are accustomed to thinking that our country has some charter of exceptionalism granted to it by history," he writes, "waste their energy building castles in the air."[41] What is the death knell for Narodism, however, is a vindication for Marxism and its applicability to Russia, Plekhanov contends, arguing that, having recognized "the historical inevitability of Russian capitalism," its programme offers the only way "to get the Russian [revolutionary] movement out of its present stagnation."[42] It is Plekhanov's elaboration this programme, wherein the process by

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[38] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 238 and 254.

[39] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 247 and 244.

[40] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 267.

[41] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 271.

[42] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 105 and 272.

which economic development causes socio-political conflict can be expedited by elite intervention, that illustrates the confident certainty which characterized his early thinking.

Valuable insight into the nature of Plekhanov's Marxism can be gained by considering the Marxist writings he made the most use of. Although, as noted previously, he lacked access to and even awareness of some texts, such as *The German Ideology*, that would not be published until the twentieth century, Plekhanov did have at his disposal a range of works that reflected both the deterministic and voluntaristic aspects of Marxist theory. It is consistently upon the former which Plekhanov draws most, with what is among Marx's most reductive writing, his Preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, being one of the most cited texts.[43] Resultingly, a thoroughgoing and all-encompassing material determinism is a foundational feature of Plekhanov's Marxism, often articulated via long quotations from Marx's Preface. In *Socialism and the Political Struggle*, for example, Plekhanov gives almost an entire page over to quoting the Preface, beginning with the economic determinism expressed in its description of the base and superstructure of society: "the sum-total of [the] relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which rises and legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general."[44] Proceeding to quote the Preface's

[43] In his *Development of the Monist View of History,* which contains the most complete overview of his Marxist beliefs, Plekhanov references Marx's Preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (1859) more than any other text. See, see Plekhanov, "O Razvitii Monisticheskogo Vzgli͡ada Na Istoriiu͡," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. VII, 187, 211, 232, 251, 262, and 263.

[44] Plekhanov, "Sotsi͡alizm I Politicheskai͡a Bor'ba," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. II, 45-6.

claims that "legal relations as well as forms of state are to be grasped neither from themselves nor from the so-called general development of the human mind, but rather have their roots in the material conditions of life…in political economy," along with its famous claim that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness,"[45] Plekhanov clearly subscribes to the Preface's claims that economic activity is the determining influence within society.

Even when not directly quoting from Marx's Preface, Plekhanov relies heavily on its ideas. A polemic with German philosopher Paul Barth, for example, sees him summarizing several of its key points. In 1890, Barth claimed that in *Das Kapital* Marx contradicts his own materialist ideas by "citing facts that the English aristocracy used political power to achieve its own ends in the sphere of land ownership" and thus recognizing that "political relations … influence economics."[46] Towards defending material determinism, and particularly the idea that "political relations are rooted in economic relations," Plekhanov summarizes several of the Preface's claims, even relaying them in the order first presented by Marx. Plekhanov writes that

> [political institutions] either facilitate [economic] development or impede it. The first case is in no way surprising from the point of view of Marx, because the given political system has been created for the very purpose of promoting the further development of the productive forces…The second case does not in any way contradict Marx's point of view, because historical experience shows that once a given political system ceases to correspond to the state of the productive forces once it is transformed into

[45] Plekhanov, "Sot͡sializm I Politicheskai͡a Bor'ba," in *Sochineniĭa͡,* tom. II, 45. For other instances of Plekhanov quoting long passages from Marx's Preface, see, Plekhanov, "O Razvitii Monisticheskogo Vzgli͡ada Na Istoriiu͡," in *Sochineniĭa͡,* tom. VII, 161-2 and 188.

[46] Plekhanov, "O Razvitii Monisticheskogo Vzgli͡ada Na Istoriiu͡," in *Sochineniĭa͡,* tom. VII, 196-7.

> an obstacle to their further development, it begins to decline and finally is eliminated. Far from contradicting [economic materialism], this case confirms [it] in the best possible way, because it is this case that shows in what sense economics dominates politics.[47]

Echoing the Preface, Plekhanov posits the determinist claims that the political superstructure of society is conditioned by particular economic conditions and, as Marx originally wrote, works to assist the "development of the productive forces" of these conditions. With changed economic conditions, however, the superstructure "turns into their fetters … lead[ing] sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure,"[48] and this political transformation, according to the Preface and Plekhanov, demonstrates the decisive influence of economics.

Plekhanov's most novel assertions of economic materialism occur in the context of his attacks upon the various contemporary Russian revolutionary movements. Although the particulars of each differs, animating all his criticisms is the conviction that, although capitalism is developing in Russia, it is still not developed enough to provide the material basis socialism requires. "The objective social conditions of production necessary for socialist organization have not yet matured [in Russia]," he writes, "in other words, socialist organization, like any other, requires the appropriate basis, but this basis does not exist in Russia."[49] For Plekhanov, therefore, the various programmes of the Russian movements, whether Narodnik, anarchist, or Tkachov-ist, are all flawed by their

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[47] Plekhanov, "O Razvitii Monisticheskogo Vzglя̑da Na Istoriiu̯," in *Sochineniя̑,* tom. VII, 197.

[48] Karl Marx, *A Contribution to A Critique of Political Economy*, S.W. Ryazanskaya, trans. (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 21.

[49] Plekhanov, "Sotsi̯alizm I Politicheskaя̑ Bor'ba," in *Sochineniя̑,* tom. II, 79.

belief in the "fiction"[50] that Russia can soon achieve socialism and their ignorance of economic determinism. He ridicules the Lavrov-ist Narodniki for their assumption that the only requirement for socialism in Russia was propagandizing the peasantry, writing that they "believe too much in the omnipotent influence of their propaganda to seek support for [socialism] in the objective conditions of social life … they believe … that once social and political ideas have been thought of no more is needed … even if they are not supported by the objective logic of social relationships."[51] He similarly targets the anarchists for ignoring the importance of material forces, writing that their confidence in the "communist instincts of the Russian peasantry" overlooks the fact that the peasantry have been "imbued with these [communist instincts] … because they live under conditions of collective ownership of the land [i.e. the *obshchina*]." Recognizing this determinism, Plekhanov continues, would allow the anarchists to understand that "the disintegration of the *obshchina*" due to the development of capitalism has led to "the rise and gradual growth of individualism in [peasant] communities."[52] Lastly, Plekhanov criticizes the Tkachov-ists' plan to use political power to "carry out an economic revolution" establishing socialism for assuming that politics determines economics, writing that "you cannot create by decrees conditions which are alien to the very character of existing economic relations."[53]

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[50] Plekhanov, "Sotsializm I Politicheskaia Bor'ba," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 80.

[51] Plekhanov, "Sotsializm I Politicheskaia Bor'ba" and "Nashi Razlichiia" in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 39 and 133.

[52] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 148-9.

[53] Plekhanov, "Sotsializm I Politicheskaia Bor'ba," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 79.

Clearly, the explicative power of Marxism's deterministic aspect, its promise to explain both current socio-political phenomena and the obstacles confronting Russian revolutionists, provided Plekhanov's thought with a definite certainty and confidence. It was, however, the predictive power of this determinism that informs the most striking instances of the absolute assurance in his thinking. Much like Engels, Plekhanov takes the claim that economic forces have caused and would continue to cause specific socio-political phenomena and transforms it into a universal rule, writing that "once the actual relations of men in the process of production are given, there fatally follow from these relations certain consequences. In this sense social movement conforms to law."[54] Plekhanov demonstrates his absolute conviction in the prophetic power of this "law" of economic determinism when he writes "what does the future hold for Russia?...It holds the triumph of the bourgeoisie and the beginning of the political and economic emancipation of the working class."[55] Because Russia had begun to develop a capitalist economy, Plekhanov believed that it would essentially recapitulate the political history of other capitalist countries as delineated by Marxism. Firstly, this meant that, as it had in capitalist Western Europe according to texts such as *The Communist Manifesto*, Russia's feudal, absolutist government would be overthrown by some form of bourgeois rule.[56]

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[54] Plekhanov, "O Razvitii Monisticheskogo Vzglя͡da Na Istoriiu͡," in *Sochineniя͡,* tom. VII, 265.

[55] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia͡," in *Sochineniя͡,* tom. II, 273.

[56] As has been discussed within scholarship, Plekhanov, in his belief that Russia would essentially repeat the development of western Europe, differed from the conclusions eventually articulated by Marx. In the 1882 Preface to the Russian edition of the *The Communist Manifesto* and also in a letter the previous year to Vera Zasulich, one of the co-founders of the Emancipation of Labor Group, Marx effectively arrived at the Narodnik viewpoint that the *obshchina* could form the basis of a socialist system, only qualifying this by stating that a wider socialist revolution outside Russia was also necessary. Gareth Stedman Jones has cited this as evidence that Marx had largely repudiated the deterministic aspects of his theory and that the "vulgar" interpretations of Marxism posited by Plekhanov were a distortion. In contrast, Samuel Baron has argued that Marx's statements were largely borne out of a desire to lend support to the then-largest Russian revolutionary movement due to his hatred of the reactionary tsarist regime. Whatever Marx's reasoning,

Secondly, Plekhanov also believed that Russia would then follow the West into its, again as claimed by Marx and Engels, current, economically-determined movement towards the establishment of socialism.

As Plekhanov explains it, the victory of socialism is guaranteed by the very nature of capitalist economics. In some instances, he expresses this in terms echoing the Preface's discussion of society's economic foundation outgrowing its legal-political superstructure, such as when he writes that, under capitalism "the mode of production slowly and gradually assumes a social character … exclud[ing] the capitalists from any active role in the economic life of society and…paving the way for the conversion of [their] instruments and products into common property."[57] Other times, however, Plekhanov draws upon Engels's contentions regarding the tensions inherent within capitalism to assert the inevitability of its demise, arguing that its social mode of production is "in flagrant contradiction" with its "individual appropriation," wherein "the products of social labor of the workers become the private property of the employers."[58] Plekhanov explains that this contradiction fatally undermines capitalism as it depresses consumption by progressively impoverishing the working class while also increasing its numbers by driving all but the most successful bourgeoisie into its ranks.[59] This expanded working class will eventually "remove the contradiction" between capitalism's

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Plekhanov did not share his conclusions. See, Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 196; Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, 594-5; and Baron, *Plekhanov*, 66-8.

[57] Plekhanov, "Sotsializm I Politicheskaia Bor'ba," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 66.

[58] Plekhanov, "Novyĭ Zashchitnik Samoderzhaviia, Ili Gore G-Na L. Tikhomirova," in *Sochineniia,* tom. III, 53-4.

[59] Plekhanov, "O Razvitii Monisticheskogo Vzgliada Na Istoriiu," in *Sochineniia,* tom. VII, 277-8.

social production and private ownership by eliminating private property after "winning political power now in the hands of the bourgeoisie," Plekhanov argues. Concluding that "economic evolution leads as surely as fate to political revolution,"[60] Plekhanov sums up both this process and the fact that, by subscribing to Marxism's economic determinism, he had complete certainty regarding the resulting "laws of social development which … work with the irresistible force and blind harshness of laws of nature."[61]

As his narrative of capitalism's collapse indicates, class conflict was for Plekhanov, as for Marx and Engels, the mechanism through which economics effects political change. Still hewing to the more deterministic aspects of Marxism, Plekhanov presents such conflict as a fixed feature of history, writing that "whenever and wherever the process of economic development gave rise to a splitting of society into classes, the contradictions between the interests of those classes invariably led them to struggle for political domination."[62] He contends that this was the process which occurred in Western Europe, wherein "the bourgeoisie … arising from the economic relations of its time … waged a hard, uninterrupted struggle against feudalism … [causing] the decline of the aristocracy … and finally, by a series of continuous gains, brought to it complete domination."[63] This conflict was "identical everywhere" capitalism emerged,[64] Plekhanov argues, just as is the one currently occurring "in all the advanced states of the

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[60] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia͡," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. II, 419-20.

[61] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia͡," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. II, 271.

[62] Plekhanov, "Sotsi͡alizm I Politicheskai͡a Bor'ba," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. II, 51.

[63] Plekhanov, "Sotsi͡alizm I Politicheskai͡a Bor'ba," *Sochineniia͡,* tom. II, 51-2.

[64] Plekhanov, "Sotsi͡alizm I Politicheskai͡a Bor'ba," *Sochineniia͡,* tom. II, 52.

civilized world … [where] the working class is entering the arena … [and] waging a political struggle against the bourgeoisie."[65]

It is in regards to this conflict between the proletarian and bourgeois classes that the most important manifestations of the determinism-inspired confidence characterizing Plekhanov's early writings can be seen. Repeated throughout these texts is the conviction that the working class will naturally and inevitably come into a revolutionary struggle for socialism with the bourgeoisie. In keeping with his certainty that class conflict is the inevitable product of economic development, Plekhanov presents this struggle as rooted in the economic fact that the "interests of labor are diametrically opposed to the interests of the exploiters."[66] This opposition, Plekhanov believes, on the one hand drives the bourgeoisie to become a consciously repressive force in the societies it controls. "Having achieved [political] domination," he writes, the bourgeoisie uses political power as "weapon of reaction … [to] gain new conquests in the economic field…[and] safeguard its interests … [and] own welfare," resulting in the "exploitation and subjugation" of the proletariat.[67] The members of the latter are thus forced into a "wretched condition" and compelled "to wage a hard struggle for their daily subsistence" while also entering into "struggle[s] against…particularly intensive exploiters." These initial clashes, Plekhanov asserts, are merely economic in character and isolated in scope, however, with the proletariat initially "hav[ing] no class consciousness … [and] no understanding of the springs and motive forces of the social mechanism as a whole" and therefore seeks

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[65] Plekhanov, "Sotsializm I Politicheskaia Bor'ba," *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 53.

[66] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 401.

[67] Plekhanov, "Sotsializm I Politicheskaia Bor'ba," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 51 and 56.

merely the "curbing of its exploiters." This narrowness changes with time, Plekhanov argues, as "little by little, a generalizing process takes effect, and the oppressed begin to be conscious of themselves as a class … [and] that the state is a fortress serving as the bulwark and defense of its oppressors."[68] The struggle between the proletariat and bourgeoisie then properly becomes a political class struggle over the establishment of socialism, Plekhanov asserts, writing that the working class "then fights for political domination in order to help themselves by changing the existing social relations and adapting the social system … [so that] the very possibility of exploitation of man by man is removed."[69] Concluding that "the very logic of things will bring [the working class] out on the road of political struggle and seizure of state power"[70] Plekhanov underscores his conviction that class conflict and the revolutionary establishment of socialism are economically-determined inevitabilities.

With such guarantees regarding the future, Plekhanov notes that some may question whether Marxism leaves any space for an activist political programme, whether it "disposes its supporters to impassivity, to quietism."[71] In one sense, Plekhanov does little to allay such concerns as he consistently stresses that it was the proletariat alone whom Marxism recognized as revolutionary agents, apparently leaving intellectuals with no other choice but to fatalistically wait for history to unfold. He opens his first writing as a Marxist, for example, with the proclamation that "the emancipation of the working

[68] Plekhanov, "Sotsializm I Politicheskaia Bor'ba," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 56-7.

[69] Plekhanov, "Sotsializm I Politicheskaia Bor'ba," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 57-8.

[70] Plekhanov, "Sotsializm I Politicheskaia Bor'ba," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 56.

[71] Plekhanov, "Sotsializm I Politicheskaia Bor'ba," in *Sochineniia,* tom. VII, 63.

classes must be won by the working classes themselves," a sentiment that he and the fellow members of the Emancipation of Labor Group later enshrined in their 1888 Party programme, writing that "the emancipation of the workers must be the matter of the workers themselves."[72] Moreover, one of Plekhanov's chief critiques of Tkachov-ist Narodism was its conception of the revolution as an act of purely elitist voluntarism in the form of a Blanquist seizure of power, writing that "like a true follower of Blanqui … Tkachov … tries to substitute his own will for historical development, to replace the initiative of a class by that of a committee, and to change the business of the whole working population of the country into the business of a secret organization."[73] Plekhanov derides such Blanquism as "a farce" and "tragic-comical" for its disregard for the historical process,[74] making clear his condemnation of any attempt to substitute elite activity for that which he predicted for the working class.

Plekhanov's Early Marxism: Elite Voluntarism

Plekhanov's abiding confidence in the "laws" of economically-determined social development therefore did lead him to circumscribe the revolutionary role of any group aside from the working class. It also, however, provided the rationale for the unique voluntarism he saw as the province of Marxist intellectuals and Party members. For Plekhanov, the fact that Marxism provided knowledge of the revolutionary process

[72] Plekhanov, "Sotsializm I Politicheskaia Bor'ba" and "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 27 and 401.

[73] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 279.

[74] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 331.

allowed those with this knowledge to expedite, ease, and generally facilitate the progression towards revolution. Plekhanov expresses as much when he quotes from *Das Kapital* that "the discovery of the natural laws of [social] movement" means that it is possible to "shorten and lessen the birth-pangs" of social transformations.[75] Explaining this in practical terms, he writes that the revolution will only occur "once the proletariat has understood the conditions of its emancipation and is mature to emancipate itself … until the working class is sufficiently developed to be able to fulfil its great historical task, the duty of its supporters is to accelerate the process of its development."[76] This acceleration is the task of the "socialist intelligentsia," Plekhanov writes, who will "bring consciousness into the working class" and "give [its conflict with the bourgeoisie] a class character" by "conduct[ing] … socialist propaganda among the workers."[77] The characteristics that the proletariat will inevitably gain through the process of economic determinism and that are necessary prerequisites for the socialist revolution can be imparted to them early via the propagation of Marxist theory among them, Plekhanov argues. Concluding that "the more or less early victory of the working class depends, among other things, on the influence that those who understand the meaning of historical development have on that class,"[78] he summarizes this claim and underscores the fact that this strikingly voluntaristic element of his thinking was contingent upon the broader fatalism of his thought.

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[75] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia͡," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. II, 113.

[76] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia͡," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. II, 77-8.

[77] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia͡," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. II, 334-6.

[78] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia͡," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. II, 338.

The working class thus appears in Plekhanov's thinking as both a subject and object, as the revolutionary protagonist of history and as the tutees of the intelligentsia. Although contrasting, both views illustrate the confident certainty that colored Plekhanov's early Marxism. This is most visible in his belief that, even absent any outside intervention, the proletariat was economically determined to revolutionize society. Plekhanov's idea that this determined process could be accelerated by exposing the proletariat to Marxist theory, however, rests on the belief that the proletariat was predisposed towards embracing Marxism due to the influence of material conditions. "The worker will only be following the directions of his practical experience" when subscribing to Marxism, Plekhanov argues, explaining that "the principles of modern scientific socialism…are the summing up of those phenomena of daily life … the explanation of the very laws which determine participation in the production, exchange, and distribution of produces." That Marxism speaks directly of the lived experience of the working class means that they "not only understand perfectly its theoretical principles, they can sometimes even teach the theoreticians themselves."[79] Marxism is therefore intuitively understood by the working class, Plekhanov claims, making their adoption of it a near certainty in his view. One his major lines of attack against the Lavrov-ist Narodniki relies on this confident assumption, for example, as he argues that their focus on propagandizing the peasantry is futile because "living in backward social conditions … it has difficulty mastering socialist teachings." In contrast, Plekhanov argues, "the industrial workers" who live in conditions "which gave birth to [socialist] teachings" will naturally "sympathize with socialists … [and be] attracted to the

[79] Plekhanov, "Sotsializm I Politicheskaia Bor'ba," in *Sochineniia,* tom. II, 64-5.

[socialist] movement."[80] Therefore, whether directed by economic developments or by the Marxist theory that their material conditions inclined them towards, Plekhanov's early Marxism was supremely confident that the proletariat would arrive at a revolutionary, socialist worldview.

Plekhanov's Early Aesthetic Thought, 1888-1897.

One measure of the confidence Plekhanov's early thought had in the inevitable revolutionary character of the working class is the fact that he dispensed with some of the means of bringing it about. While his many theoretical writings prior to the Revisionist Debate are clear attempts to fulfill what he saw as the intelligentsia's role of propagating Marxist ideas, his writings on the arts from this period are just as clearly not intended to serve this purpose. This is particularly remarkable in light of the fact that the use of aesthetic discourse for propagandistic purposes was a well-established tradition among Russian radicals. While echoing Isaiah Berlin's explanation that this tradition originated as a means of circumventing the "rigors of censorship" in tsarist Russia, literature scholar Charles Moser stresses that this encompasses both "literature and literary criticism," explaining that "if a novel … depicted Russian reality, then it could at least implicitly point to the reforms needed for the improvement of that reality; and literary critics, while purporting to discuss those same literary works, could deal with such reforms or changes directly."[81] Criticism, therefore, was itself considered an important means of

[80] Plekhanov, "Nashi Razlichiia͡," *Sochineniia͡,* tom. II, 87.

[81] Moser, *Esthetics as Nightmare*, xiii.

disseminating ideas within this tradition; moreover, critics were not bound to follow the intentions or address only the ideas and topics of the authors they examined. Moser cites as an example the critic and political radical Nikolai Dobrolyubov who "merely use[d] literature as an excuse to discuss the existing social order" and famously responded to the novel *Oblovmov* (1859) by the conservative Ivan Goncharav with "a detailed critique of [Russian] society" that intimated the need for radical, even revolutionary, transformation.[82] Therefore, Plekhanov's use of literary criticism to expound his Marxist beliefs would not at all have been unusual. Additionally, in light of his stress on the benefits of propagandizing the proletariat, one could expect him to avail himself of the opportunity and articulate in his critical articles some of the main points of his Marxism. However, an examination of Plekhanov's writings on art prior to the Revisionist Debate, consisting of three long articles written between 1888 and 1897 examining contemporary works of fiction by authors sympathetic to Narodism, reveals that he largely avoided expressing any Marxist ideas within them. Instead, these articles privilege conventional aesthetic criteria such as characterization and description and decry the impact propagandistic intentions have upon such features, effectively condemning the idea of utilizing art as a means for publicizing political ideas. This condemnation, along with his decision not to turn his own criticism towards the goal of propagating Marxism, attests to the confidence Plekhanov had prior to the Revisionist Debate that events would unfold as he expected them to. Because the proletariat was materially determined to either establish socialism unaided or to quickly embrace Marxist theory upon being exposed to

[82] Moser, *Esthetics as Nightmare*, 26-7.

it through conventional propaganda, he apparently considered the need to disseminate Marxist ideas through art and art criticism unnecessary.

It is the infrequency with which Plekhanov wrote on art prior to the Revisionist Debate that is the first indication that he did not consider the topic a valuable means of disseminating Marxism. While in the twenty years between the Revisionist Debate and his death Plekhanov would produce over a dozen writings on art, in the sixteen years from his conversion to Marxism to the Debate he composed only three. Consisting of three articles published in 1888, 1890, and 1897, these texts all examined contemporary fiction writers aligned with Narodism and were published in Russian-language Marxist periodicals.[83] While Plekhanov gives no explanation for his decision to write these articles, their subject matter and intended audience suggest that he viewed them as a component of his wider polemics against Narodism. This is borne out by the fact that the articles' largely negative opinion regarding the quality of the works they examine echoes Plekhanov's view of Narodnik ideology. By supplementing his claims of Narodism's theoretical failings with these articles' condemnation of its influence on literature, Plekhanov was likely aiming to demonstrate what he saw as the total bankruptcy of Narodism. While this approach to writing about art as a part of a wider polemical agenda is shared by Plekhanov's pre- and post-Revisionist Debate critical writings, their methodology is starkly opposed. Plekhanov's later critical writings effectively utilize art as evidence of the veracity of Marxist tenets, directly mirroring his theoretical arguments and aims and thus present themselves as additional means of disseminating Marxist

[83] Named after the author they focus on, these articles are "Gl.I. Uspensky" (1888); "S. Karonin" (1890); and "N.I. Naumov" (1897). The first two were published in the Emancipation of Labor Groups *Sotsial-Demokrat* and the latter in the "legal Marxist" *Novoye Slovo*.

theory. His early critical writings, however, pursue ideas wholly different from his theoretical arguments, aiming merely to complement his critiques of Narodnik ideology with claims of its detrimental impact on artistic quality.

In regards to the content of the articles themselves, the near absence of the idea of economic causality within them immediately reveals Plekhanov's decision not to utilize these texts as a means of propagating Marxism. While the idea that economic forces determine most aspects of civilization was central to his contemporary theoretical works, it is absent in these articles. As demonstrated by the scholarly consensus regarding the centrality of determinism in Plekhanov's "vulgar" aesthetic, however, this lacuna can be obscured by the fact that Plekhanov does posit a form of determinism within these articles, but one that is far broader and more muted than that found in his theoretical texts. Arguing that "the writer is not only the spokesman of the social environment from which he comes, but also its product … he brings with him into literature its likes and dislikes, its world outlook, customs, ideas, and even language,"[84] Plekhanov is clearly drawing upon ideas of determinism, but only positing a general social conditioning rather tracing out a linear economic causation that clearly positions phenomena as the products of economic forces. This is especially surprising given the fact that Plekhanov's favored Marxist text, Marx's Preface, explicitly cites art as one of the elements of the superstructure determined by economics and would therefore seem to offer a convenient point of departure for Plekhanov to craft critical articles that paralleled his theoretical writings' aim of demonstrating the economic roots of contemporary culture.[85] While

[84] Plekhanov, "G. Uspenskiĭ," in *Sochineniia͡*, tom. X, 10.

[85] "The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the

such demonstrations will be one of the major goals in his writings on art following the Revisionist Debate, Plekhanov never pursues it in his earlier articles. Instead, he consistently hews to claims of broad, social influence, stating that literary works "are influenced by the qualities of their milieu,"[86] and that "in … fiction it is easy to find all the merits and defects characteristic of … [the] conditions" in which the authors "were brought up."[87]

While Plekhanov's claims of the broad conditioning of literature certainly depart from the more specific arguments of economic determinism in his theoretical texts, they are fundamentally congruent with Marxism. This changes, however, when Plekhanov argues that these Narodnik-sympathizing writers "seek a practical solution and strive to alter social relations" due to the "tragedy of [their] position."[88] This tragic situation, Plekhanov explains, is the result of "the disgraceful political system," in Russia, i.e. the tsarist autocracy, whose reactionary oppressiveness "arouses a spirit of opposition" within these authors.[89] Failing to expand this assertion into an analysis of economic causality and class conflict, Plekhanov gives the impression that politics alone is the determinative factor, directly contrasting with his efforts to demonstrate the contrary in his theoretical works.

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material transformation of the economic conditions of production…and the legal, political, religious, artistic, or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious." Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,* 21.

[86] Plekhanov, "G. Uspenskiĭ," in *Sochineniia͡*, tom. X, 34.

[87] Plekhanov, "G. Uspenskiĭ," in *Sochineniia͡*, tom. X, 13.

[88] Plekhanov, "G. Uspenskiĭ," in *Sochineniia͡*, tom. X, 12.

[89] Plekhanov, "G. Uspenskiĭ," in *Sochineniia͡*, tom. X, 12.

That Marxism, even in an attenuated form, was the main influence on Plekhanov's early critical articles therefore seems increasingly implausible. His claims of the broad social conditioning of literature, however, do suggest an alternative intellectual source. As historian J.W. Burrow notes, by the last decades of the nineteenth century one of the most prominent schools of cultural criticism was that of French critic Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893), whose "specialty was the scientific explanation of literature and art in their national and historical manifestations."[90] This effectively amounted to a "sociological analysis" of the arts, literary scholar Catherine LeGouis explains, relating that Taine and his followers aimed to "situate [art and artists] in relation to the social whole of which they are a part."[91] This certainly matches Plekhanov's procedure in his early articles and although he does not cite Taine within them, he does elsewhere in his writings from the same time period, demonstrating a familiarity with and expressing a general, if qualified, approval of his ideas. In a discussion of bourgeois figures that came close to Marxist materialism, Plekhanov cites Taine as "a materialist in the field of the philosophy of art" for his recognition "of the close link between any art and the social milieu that brings forth the artist." He quickly criticizes him, however, as "an idealist in his understanding of history" for believing that "the social milieu he is constantly appealing to is a product of the human spirit" rather than economic forces.[92] In his critical articles, therefore, Plekhanov can be seen as adopting Taine's "materialist" aspects while avoiding his

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[90] J.W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 83-4.

[91] Catherine LeGouis, *Positivism and Imagination: Scientism and Its Limits in Emile Hennequin, Wilhelm Scherer, and Dmitrii Pisarev* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1997), 166 and 61.

[92] Plekhanov, "Marks," in *Sochineniia*, tom. VIII, 161-2.

"idealist" flaws, suggesting that Plekhanov was utilizing Taine's then-prominent ideas to compose critical analyses that he considered to be compatible with Marxism. Not yet compelled to craft an original critical method oriented towards propagating Marxism, Plekhanov was simply adopting what he considered to be the ideas on art most in accordance with it.

Ultimately, the most definitive indication that Plekhanov did not intend his literary criticism to serve as a vehicle for the dissemination of Marxist ideas is the wholly negative assessment of such politically utilitarian, propagandistic literature he puts forward within them. "Where does the weakness of Narodnik fiction come from? It emerged precisely because of the prevalence of social interests over literary interests in Narodnik writers,"[93] he writes, explaining his central contention that these authors' participation in the tradition of politicized art negatively impacted their work. Even though he recognizes that the "tragic position" of these writers has conditioned this approach towards literature, Plekhanov nonetheless excoriates it for subordinating artistic values for political ones, revealing that central to his early critical writings was a rejection of utilitarian art and a favoring of purely aesthetic criteria as the basis of his evaluations. This is particularly apparent in the sharp distinction he draws between the role of an artist and that of a propagandistic "publicist." Plekhanov writes that what makes Uspensky, Karonin, and Naumov "take up [their] pen is not so much the need for artistic creation as the desire to explain to himself and others this or that aspect of our social relations. Therefore … artistic portrayal is accompanied by reasoning, and the

[93] Plekhanov, "G. Uspenskiĭ," in *Sochineniia͡*, tom. X, 13.

author is frequently less of an artist than a publicist."[94] With this opposing artists to publicists and artistic portrayals to exposition, Plekhanov clearly considers the notion that artworks should serve as a vehicle for the dissemination of ideas as foreign to the proper role of art. Plekhanov particularly singles out Naumov for censure on this account, writing that his fiction is actuated upon his desire to "attack the terrible condition of the Russian peasants" by means of exposing these conditions in his works. This instrumentalist intention, Plekhanov concludes, led Naumov to allot the "publicistic element … a very important place" in his works to such a degree that "it dominates the artistic element completely…in the vast majority of cases it would be strange to speak of an artistic element in Naumov's works at all: it is almost always completely absent in them."[95] That Plekhanov considers this subordination of art to socio-political aims a deleterious trait is explicit in his discussion of Uspensky, whom he contrasts with the novelist Ivan Turgenev. "Turgenev approaches phenomena as an artist," he argues, "event when his is writing about the most topical subjects he is more interested in aesthetics than 'questions' … with few exceptions, [he] has given us literary characters and only characters." Uspensky lacks this fidelity to aesthetics, Plekhanov asserts, writing that "in portraying characters, [he] accompanies them with his own interpretations…approaches them as a publicist…herein lies, of course, the weak point of Uspensky … [his] portrayals are accompanied by reasoning, and [he] is frequently far less an artist than a publicist."[96]

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[94] Plekhanov, "G. Uspenskiĭ," in *Sochineniia͡*, tom. X, 13-14.

[95] Plekhanov, "N.I. Naumov," in *Sochineniia͡*, tom. X, 110.

[96] Plekhanov, "G. Uspenskiĭ," in *Sochineniia͡*, tom. X, 13.

Plekhanov's preference for art that does not attempt to pursue didactic or political aims is as pronounced in the praise he bestows as in his criticism. He lauds, for example, Karonin for his "strongly developed artistic instinct" and for "heed[ing] … the requirements of artistic truth," traits which led him to dispense with utilitarian objectives and "everything he would have defended if he were a publicist." That Plekhanov considers this absence of non-artistic, propagandistic elements to be a merit is especially clear in his survey of Uspensky's oeuvre, where he argues that in his early works, Uspensky "described … without trying to explain … [and] without taking any interest in any particular social theory." These works, Plekhanov concludes, are "artistically … without doubt, [Uspensky's] finest works."[97]

In both their praise and criticism, therefore, Plekhanov's early articles clearly privilege conventional conceptions of artistic quality over any socio-political function. This is nowhere more apparent than in his sweeping assessment of the three writers he examines as a whole, whom he contends

> show us not individual characters and not the emotions of individuals … [they] look … not for man in general, with his passions and emotions, but for the representatives of certain social classes, the bearers of certain social ideals. The mental eye of [these writers] do not see vivid artistic images, but prosaic, albeit topical, questions.[98]

It is not for art to pursue pertinent questions or to engage in social analyses, Plekhanov contends, art should focus on the purely aesthetic matters that comprise customary

[97] Plekhanov, "G. Uspenskiĭ," in *Sochineniia͡*, tom. X, 16-17.

[98] Plekhanov, "G. Uspenskiĭ," in *Sochineniia͡*, tom. X, 14.

notions of good art, in this instance the depiction of individuated characters with unique passions. This privileging of aesthetic qualities over utility is central in Plekhanov's early critical articles, rendering him a staunch critic of art intended to convey political ideas.

Plekhanov therefore adopts a surprising tack in his first writings on the arts. Not only does he decline to utilize them to as vehicles for disseminating Marxism, he uses them to unmistakenly condemn art that is used for such propagandistic purposes. In doing so, he was not only breaking with a discursive trend among his fellow Russian revolutionaries, he was also neglecting a potential means of fulfilling the important role of exposing the proletariat to Marxism that he saw intellectuals such as himself playing. From the articles themselves, the reason for this appears to be Plekhanov's dim view of the artistic quality of such politically utilitarian fiction, a sentiment shared by many, including, as has been shown, by Marx and Engels themselves. However, viewing these articles and their dismissal of propagandistic art in the wider context of Plekhanov's Marxist thought suggests an additional, underlying explanation. Plekhanov's assertions in his theoretical texts regarding the economically-determined inevitability of a socialist revolution demonstrates a confidence, even optimism, in his early thinking. This optimism is also apparent in his belief that the proletariat would embrace Marxism once exposed to it, expediting the revolutionary process. Plekhanov's disdain for artworks bent towards propagandistic purposes can be seen as another manifestation of this optimism. Plekhanov was so confident in the proletariat's innate revolutionary character and affinity for Marxism that he considered utilizing artworks to spread Marxist ideas unnecessary. For Plekhanov, such artworks would be artistically inferior and redundant as he apparently had no doubts regarding the proletariat's responsiveness to conventional

means of Marxist propaganda and agitation. Plekhanov's confidence would eventually be shaken, however, by the emergence of a new trend within Marxism that enjoyed a significant degree of popular support, leading him to doubt just how attracted to orthodox Marxism the working class really was. This doubt, plus a new polemical target whose thinking prominently included a defense of non-utilitarian art, would lead Plekhanov to dramatically revise his aesthetic views, resulting in a striking advocacy of politically oriented art meant to convey radical ideas.

Chapter III

"Back to Kant": Kantian Philosophy, the Neo-Kantians, and Bernstein's Revisionism

Plekhanov has prominently been described as a "guardian of the orthodoxy" and "defender of the faith" in regards to late-nineteenth century Marxism,[1] reflecting both a fundamental truth and a widely held stereotype about his thinking. On the one hand, appellations such as these accurately capture the fact that much of Plekhanov's writing was polemical in nature and focused on groups and individuals he considered to be opposed to or a rival of Marxism. As has been seen, the main vehicles by which Plekhanov elaborated the blend of determinism and voluntarism he considered to be orthodox Marxism by the late 1890s had been attacks on a variety of groups and individuals, whether populists, anarchists, or Blanquists. On the other hand, embedded in scholarly descriptions of Plekhanov as a pugilistic champion of Marxism is the assumption that the ideas he was polemicizing in service of remained static and unchanging, that he wrote solely "as an adept defending an established doctrine."[2] While it is certain that as the nineteenth century came to a close polemical writing remained a constant in Plekhanov's oeuvre, it is not the case that his ideas remained unaltered.

During the late-1890s, Plekhanov acquired a new target for his attacks: a trend within the contemporary Marxist movement known as Revisionism that aimed to

[1] See, respectively, Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 31; and Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1963), 164.

[2] Leszek Kolakowski, *The Main Currents of Marxism*, (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2005), 632.

fundamentally revise Marxist theory and had been initiated by one of the leading Marxists of the day, Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932). As will be shown, despite the fact that Plekhanov launched his polemics against Bernstein with the avowed intention of disputing the notion that Marxism needed revising, Plekhanov's own thinking, in the process of these attacks, ironically underwent a revision. Moreover, it will also become apparent that a contributing cause for this shift in Plekhanov's thought was his near-total focus in these polemics on what he considered to be the foundation of Bernstein's thinking: Kantian philosophy. Therefore, prior to examining Plekhanov's writings against Revisionism and the changes they disclose, Bernstein's own ideas must be examined, particularly their relationship to the ideas developed by the philosopher Immanual Kant (1724-1804).

Although Plekhanov considered Kant to be the primary causal influence on Revisionism, the genesis of Bernstein's ideas remains a topic of ongoing debate. As noted by Peter Gay in his classic study of Bernstein's thinking, the majority of Plekhanov's contemporaries believed that Revisionism was the product of Bernstein's time spent living in England and exposure to the Fabian Society,[3] the non-Marxist, reform-oriented socialists then prominent in the British labor movement.[4] Gay himself

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[3] Born and raised in Prussia, Bernstein left Germany upon the promulgation of the Anti-Socialist Laws of 1878, eventually settling in London in 1887 where he remained until 1901. For comprehensive biographies of Bernstein, see, Peter Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism* (New York: Collier Books, 1962) and Manfred Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[4] Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, 104-8. Other works expounding the idea that the Fabians formed the determinative influence upon Bernstein's Revisionism include: H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopg, 1961); Leszek Kolakowski, *The Main Currents of Marxism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005); George Lichtheim, *Marxism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961); David Priestland, *The Red Flag* (New York: Grove Press, 2009); James Joll *The Second International* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); and David McLellan, *Marxism After Marx* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

endorses this view, arguing that any "denial that [Bernstein] learned a great deal from the Fabians … will not stand up" and that "the Fabian philosophy … was a major influence that acted on [Bernstein] during his English years."[5] Manfred Steger, however, in his more recent reexamination of Bernstein's thought, contests this narrative and argues that Revisionism was deeply informed by Kantian philosophy, describing it as "a Kantian-inspired 'critique of socialist reason'" that specifically drew upon the contemporary neo-Kantian movement.[6] As Steger explains, this movement refers to a range of late-nineteenth century intellectuals who, disillusioned by the perceived overreach of the dominant philosophies of their time, went "back to Kant"[7] and embraced his epistemological caution as a corrective.[8] It is in this cautious attitude towards knowledge that Steger locates the neo-Kantian influence on Bernstein, writing that Bernstein "joined in [the neo-Kantian] rallying cry of 'back to Kant' … to evoke the epistemological skepticism of Kant's critical philosophy" and reassess the "rigid dogmatism" he felt Marxist theory had ossified into.[9]

Ultimately, though, one need not join Plekhanov in seeing Revisionism as an innately Kantian project to understand how he discerned the presence of Kantian ideas in

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[5] Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism,* 109.

[6] Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism,* 78-9.

[7] As Thomas Willey relates, "back to Kant" was widely embraced by the neo-Kantians as an unofficial slogan. See, Thomas E. Willey, *Back to Kant* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), 37, 40, and 80.

[8] Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism*, 78 and 115-6.

[9] Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism*, 116. Other works positing that Kantianism and the neo-Kantian movement formed the determinative influence upon Bernstein's Revisionism include: Jukka Gronow, *On the Formation of Marxism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016); Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World* (London: Little, Brown, 2011); Willey, *Back to Kant*; and H. Tudor and J.M. Tudor, *Marxism and Social Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Bernstein's thought. While much of Bernstein's critiques of Marxism focused on the failures of Marx's economic predictions, such as the progressive consolidation of ownership and impoverishment of the working class, certain portions were dedicated to attacking the philosophical elements and fundamental assumptions of Marxist. Bernstein argued that Marxism's core beliefs of the determining influence of material phenomena and the necessity of revolutionary class conflict must be jettisoned in favor of the idea that socialism could be peacefully established by individuals of any background motivated by the proper ideals. One can follow Steger and trace the patrimony of these claims back to the neo-Kantians, but not simply to their ethos of skepticism; rather, the ideas Bernstein put forward largely replicated a cluster of ideas central to a cohort of neo-Kantians advocating alternative conceptions of socialism and first developed by Friedrich Albert Lange (1828-1875), a German academic[10] whom Bernstein pays tribute to in his key Revisionist work *The Preconditions of Socialism*.[11] As examining Lange's writing will show, he utilized Kantian philosophy to reject both materialism and revolution and claim that ethical motivation was the key to achieving social transformation, thus anticipating the core tenets of Revisionism. This identity and Bernstein's own statements suggest a strong neo-Kantian influence upon him, explaining how Plekhanov could have seen a Kantian basis in Revisionism and why he was so driven to counter this aspect of it. Believing that Revisionism drew upon the neo-Kantian movement and its alternative

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[10] For concise biographies of Lange, see the introduction to his texts in, Sebastian Luft, ed. *The Neo-Kantian Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 63-4 and Klaus Christian Köhnke, *The Rise of Neo Kantianism: German Academic Philosophy between Idealism and Positivism,* trans., R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 151-8.

[11] See, Eduard Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, Henry Tudor, trans. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 210.

socialist ideology, Plekhanov would likely have viewed his attacks on Bernstein's ideas as a not only a blow to the philosophical core of Revisionism, but also, by extension, a strike against yet another group positing ideas opposed to Marxism.

Back to the Start: The Philosophy of Immanuel Kant

While the concepts that Plekhanov would come to focus on in his anti-Revisionist polemics can plausibly be traced from Bernstein to Lange and the neo-Kantians, they would have had their fundamental basis in the writings of Immanuel Kant himself over a century prior. That Kant's ideas retained such a degree of currency after this extended period of time is remarkable but hardly surprising considering his stature and influence in the field of philosophy. As the Kant scholar Allen Wood recently described, "Kant redefined the philosophical agenda of the early modern period, determining the problems faced by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries…movements as diverse as speculative idealism, logical positivism, phenomenology, and pragmatism all have their foundations in the 'Copernican revolution' of Kant's critical philosophy."[12] This singular impact is not accidental, as Kant reassessed traditional philosophical assumptions and avowedly aimed to renovate the discipline as a whole. Writing that because "metaphysics … has up to now not been so favored by fate as to have been able to enter upon the secure course of a science," his intention was to "transform the accepted procedure of metaphysics, undertaking an entire revolution" so that philosophers could enjoy the same credibility as "natural scientists."[13] While this project ultimately proved epoch-making, its more

[12] Allen W. Wood, *Kant* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 1.

[13] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 109 and 113.

immediate importance for us is that it led Kant to formulate the epistemological and ethical ideas that would eventually be mobilized by the neo-Kantians and attacked by Plekhanov for their perceived influence upon Bernstein. Specifically, Kant, in his most famous work, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), begins his project by attempting to establish what human reason, and thus philosophy itself, can and cannot know, resulting in his radical assertion that the human mind grasps reality by projecting preestablished categories of perception upon it, leaving the world's qualities absent these projections unknowable. While striking in its sharp restriction on the possibilities of knowledge, Kant's distinction between the subjectively perceived and the objectively unknown also serves as a justification his concept of free will. He argues that in much the same way that objects are not, as we perceive them to be, necessarily bounded by space and time, mankind's capacity for free will is never truly hindered by the causes and effects of physical factors. This, in turn, constitutes the foundation of Kant's ethical philosophy, principally put forward in *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), that champions humanitarian ideals and the pursuit of moral improvement.

As his above-quoted aim of "transforming the procedure" indicates, it was not simply with any particular philosophical ideas or concepts that Kant took issue with; rather, he found fault within the methodology of philosophy as a whole, going on to describe it as "a mere groping."[14] As Kant explains, philosophy cannot rely, like the sciences, on experience and observation, writing that traditional philosophical debates such as the "nature of the soul or the necessity of a first beginning of the world … extend human cognition beyond all bounds of possible experience." Instead, he continues,

[14] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 110.

philosophy relies solely upon "reason itself and its pure thinking."[15] The fault that Kant finds in this is that "up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects" of the senses,[16] that an ultimately sensationalist conception of the human mind as an objective recorder of sensory data has reigned,[17] effectively tethering thinking to experience even as philosophy demands "pure reason," that reason "strive independently of all experience."[18] This is the fundamental and hitherto unrecognized problem with philosophy, Kant writes, explaining that if thinking "has to conform to the constitution of objects, then I do not see how we can know anything of them *a priori*," and that this inability to know what we have not experienced raises serious questions about "the possibility or impossibility of a metaphysics in general."[19]

To the serious epistemic issues he had raised, Kant offered a solution of such innovation that it has been described as single-handedly "chang[ing] philosophy."[20] Kant introduces this with a starting reference to his previous identification of the main obstacle to philosophy, writing, "let us … try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the object must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an *a priori* cognition of them, which is to

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[15] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 102.

[16] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 110.

[17] Kant specifically rejects the idea that this view of the mind, made famous by John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), is compatible with philosophical speculation when he writes of "a certain physiology of the human understanding (by the famous Locke)" and that its claim to "trace to the rabble of common experience…the birth of philosophy" would have "rendered suspicious" the "pretensions" of philosophical inquiry. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 100.

[18] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 101.

[19] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 110 and 101.

[20] Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 241.

establish something about objects before they are given to us."[21] Kant thus suggests effectively reversing the idea that the mind functions by recording objects perceived by the senses. Elaborating upon what this entails, Kant asserts that "our experiential cognition is a composite of that which we receive through [sense] impressions and that which our own cognitive faculty … provides out of itself … the matter of all appearance is only given to us *a posteriori*, but its form must all lie ready for it in the mind *a priori*."[22] Kant thus shifts the role of the mind from one of mere passive recording to one in which it also actively structures perceptions, with experience therefore being the result of received sensory data *and* innate characteristics of the mind. This shift, he concludes, would obviate the epistemological issue he had diagnosed as undermining philosophy, writing that "after this alteration in our way of thinking we can very well explain the possibility of a cognition *a priori* … which [was] impossible according to the earlier way [of conceptualizing thinking as wholly sensationalist]."[23] To consider the mind to be an active shaper of perception even before specific sense impressions are received is to recognize the very thing that Kant considers fundamentally necessary for philosophy: the ability to think of and even know things that have not yet been experienced.

The possibility of philosophy is the wider claim that Kant arrives at based on his novel epistemological theory, but it is only one of many ideas in *The Critique of Pure Reason* that would, as previously noted, cement his position as transformative thinker. For the purposes of understanding the later ideas of the neo-Kantians and Bernstein,

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[21] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 110.

[22] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 136 and 173.

[23] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 111.

however, only a handful of these need to be examined. Of particular significance is what Kant himself describes as the "negative"[24] implications of his assertion about the workings of the mind and the sharp limits these can be seen as placing on our understanding of the world. This can begin to be seen in Kant's explanation as to how the mind plays an active, *a priori* role in shaping experience, wherein he argues that there are certain aspects of sensed experience that "belong to pure intuition, which occurs *a priori*, even without an actual object of the senses or sensation, as a mere form of sensibility in the mind."[25] Portions of what we perceive are thus pre-determined by the mind, Kant claims, and are not objective characteristics of what is being experienced but rather the products of "the subjective constitution of our mind."[26] Chief among these are space and time, with Kant writing that the former "is not an empirical concept that has been drawn from outer experiences. For in order for certain sensations to be related to something outside of me (i.e. to something in another place in space from that in which if find myself)…the representation of space must already be their ground … a necessary representation *a priori*."[27] He similarly argues that time "is not an empirical concept … for simultaneity or succession would not themselves come into perception if the representation of time did not ground them *a priori*."[28] Thus, according to Kant, fundamental portions of our experience are not a result of pure sensory input, but are

[24] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 114.

[25] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 173.

[26] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 174.

[27] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 175.

[28] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 178.

thoroughly structured by innate categories of perception that preemptively shape sensations along spatial and temporal lines. With this, Kant fully arrives at the negative implications of his novel epistemology, writing that because "space is not a form that is proper to anything in itself … [and] time is merely a subjective condition of our human intuition … they apply to objects only so far as they are considered as appearances, but do not represent things in themselves … objects in themselves are not known to us at all."[29] Because space and time are both the fundamental bases of our perceptions *and* the products of our mind, our perceptions cannot be considered as capturing the actual, objective nature of the things we experience, Kant argues, placing strict limits on what we can truly know. Capping these claims, Kant terms the things we perceive and experience "*phenomena*," and contrasts this with these same things' "*noumena*," their true but unknown qualities.[30]

While this assertion that the true nature of the world is unknowable absent the mind's subjective structuring is the negative implication of his epistemological theory, it also serves a strikingly positive function as the rationalization for Kant's theory of free will and thus the foundation of his ethical philosophy. Kant begins this process by reiterating his epistemic claims that objects must be considered in a "twofold sense" before adding that "the principle of causality applies only to things taken in the first sense [i.e. *phenomena*] as they are objects of experience, while things in the second meaning [i.e. *noumena*] are not subject to it."[31] Processes of cause and effect, as they are grounded

[29] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 178, 181, and 183.

[30] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 360.

[31] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 116.

in conceptions of space and time, can only be considered to affect objects as we subjectively experience them, Kant contends, and not as objects objectively are. This distinction, Kant argues, is of particular importance because without it "I would not be able to say of … the human soul, that its will is free and yet that it is simultaneously subject to natural necessity, i.e., that it is not free, without falling into an obvious contradiction"[32] What is a limiting concept in epistemology thus becomes a liberating concept in regards to the human will, as the notion that objects can be understood as both *phenomena* bounded by processes of time and space and as unbounded *noumena* can be applied to human beings and support the concept of that human beings' will is free of external determination. Kant renders this explicit when he contends that a person "has two standpoints from which he can regard himself and cognize laws for the use of his power and consequently for all his actions; first…under laws of nature (heteronomy); second, as … being independent of nature … independent from the determining causes of the world of sense."[33]

Concluding that "morality presupposes freedom as a property of our will" and that any possibility of a "doctrine of morality would not have occurred if criticism had not first taught us of our unavoidable ignorance in respect for the things in themselves [i.e. of *noumena*],"[34] Kant completes the link between his epistemology to his ethics. Subsequently building an ethical philosophy upon these claims of freedom, Kant creates a multifaceted doctrine, of which, much like his epistemology, only aspects will later

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[32] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 115.

[33] Immanuel Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," in *Practical Philosophy*, Mary J. Gregor, trans. (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 103.

[34] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 116.

come into use by the neo-Kantians and Bernstein and be discussed here. Foremost among these are the humane, egalitarian ideals Kant employs to define moral behavior and the practical impact he hoped these ideals would have on society.

"Empirical principles are not at all fit to be the ground of moral laws,"[35] Kant asserts, indicating why he considered demonstrating the human will's freedom from external influence to be of such importance. Actions motivated by conditional circumstances or goals cannot be considered truly moral, he argues, claiming that "an absolutely good will consists just in the principle of action being free from all influences on contingent grounds."[36] Instead, morality can only be based on man's rational faculties, Kant claims, writing that "all moral concepts have their seat and origin completely a priori in reason" and that "the moral law is given, as it were, as a fact of pure reason."[37] Therefore, the freedom of will that Kant had argued was integral to morality is thus the freedom to follow the precepts of reason without interference, to adhere to "the principle of morality by which reason determines the will … above all conditions of the sensible world."[38] This bequeaths a unique value upon mankind, Kant contends, writing that because a person possess the "capacity to determine himself to act in accordance with [reason] … their existence … has an absolute worth," which in turn means that "the human being and in general every rational being exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means to be

[35] Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," in *Practical Philosophy*, 90.

[36] Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," in *Practical Philosophy*, 77.

[37] Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," in *Practical Philosophy*, 65; and Kant, "The Critique of Practical Reason," in *Practical Philosophy*, 177.

[38] Kant, "The Critique of Practical Reason," in *Practical Philosophy*, 173 and 180.

used."[39] This leads Kant to establish "the supreme limiting condition of the freedom of action of every human being" and fundamental guideline for ethical conduct: "so act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."[40] Thus championing the intrinsic worth and autonomy of every individual, Kant's prescribes respect for this, going on to explain that this prohibits such actions as "assault[ing] … the freedom and property of others" while enjoining "a meritorious duty" of "trying, as far as [they] can, to further the ends of others … the natural end that all human beings have … their own happiness."[41] Beneficent and altruistic behavior, rooted in the recognition of the innate equal value of each individual, is thus a key tenet of Kant's moral doctrine, placing humane egalitarianism at the core of his ethical philosophy.

In contrast to the rarefied goal he directed his epistemological writings towards, that of a theoretical intervention in philosophical traditions, Kant seemed to hope that his writings on ethics would have a practical, real-world impact. Manfred Kuehn, in his biography of Kant, argues as much, writing that Kant was concerned that the skepticism of thinkers such as David Hume in addition to the growth of the "empiricist approach to science" were leading to "naturalistic" and "relativistic" thinking which was threatening to undermine the foundations and influence of moral philosophies. Kant's ideas thus constitute an attempt to "save morality," Kuehn concludes, by asserting that moral precepts, being rooted in human reason, have "a claim on us that is absolute and

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[39] Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," in *Practical Philosophy*, 78-9.

[40] Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," in *Practical Philosophy*, 80.

[41] Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," in *Practical Philosophy*, 80-1.

incontrovertible."[42] Allen Wood also argues that Kant aimed to effect change with his ideas, writing that it is necessary to view his ethics in the context of his philosophy of history, which is grounded in the "assumption that human history is guided by a natural teleology,"; this contextualization, Wood argues, reveals that Kant's ethical philosophy was meant to contribute to the telos of "the moral perfection of the human character" by formulating tenets "oppos[ing] our unsociable propensity to self-conceit."[43] Kant, however, did not expect his ideas to produce this perfection instantly, but rather to generate gradual improvement towards this goal. "Complete conformity of the will with moral law is…holiness, a perfection of which no rational being of the sensible world is capable," he writes, instead positing that "it is necessary to assume … *progress* toward that complete conformity … as the real object of our will."[44] Ultimately, though, whether he considered it immediately applicable or merely aspirational, Kant's hope that his ethical philosophy would lead to practical changes in the world is apparent in his writings. He argues, for example, that because "morally practical reason pronounces in us its irresistible veto: there is to be no war … we must work towards establishing perpetual peace."[45] He also writes of "a kingdom of ends…a systematic union of various rational beings … as ends in themselves and of the ends that each may set himself," which Wood describes as "an ideal community of all rational beings … [wherein] all their ends harmonize into an interconnected system, united and mutually supporting one

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[42] Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography*, 264-5.

[43] Wood, *Kant*, 115, 134, and 139.

[44] Kant, "The Critique of Practical Reason," in *Practical Philosophy*, 238.

[45] Kant, "The Metaphysics of Morals," in *Practical Philosophy*, 491.

another."[46] Such a "kingdom", Kant concludes, "is possible in accordance with the above principles [i.e. his moral doctrine]."[47]

"Materialism, With its Main Belief in the Sensible World, is Done For"[48] – The Neo-Kantians and Lange

Kant's impact was immediate and profound, with the succeeding generation of philosophers, including Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, all taking his emphasis on the active role of the mind as their point of departure and ushering in the intellectual movement known as idealism.[49] This, along with the broader Romantic movement, dominated European thinking for approximately the first half of the nineteenth century until a broad shift towards what is known as "scientism," described as the "cult of science" believing that "science … provide[s] the only reliable knowledge…[and] the attempt … to answer all questions scientifically, to turn everything possible into a science."[50] In the short term, this led to

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[46] Wood, *Kant*, 142.

[47] Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," in *Practical Philosophy*, 83.

[48] Frederick Albert Lange, *History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Present Importance*, Vol. 3, Ernest Chester Thomas, trans., (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., 1881), 204.

[49] Kuehn's work contains some incisive observations regarding Kant's influence on the noted philosophers, particularly their departures from his ideas and, in Fichte's case, Kant's low opinion of their efforts. See, Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography*, in particular 1 and 276. For other works discussing Kant's influence on nineteenth century idealism, see: George di Giovanni and H. S. Harris, eds. *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000); Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy, 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Roland N. Stromberg, *European Intellectual History Since 1789* 6th edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1994); and Franklin L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1977).

[50] Baumer, *Modern European Thought*, 305-6.

the obsolescence of Kant and his idealist progeny and fears that this was the fate for all speculative, non-empirical philosophies as a whole as reductively materialist, "scientific" explanations for esoteric issues were gaining prominence. In the longer term, however, the dominance of scientism led directly to the revival of Kantian philosophy as a major force in European thinking by the last decades of the nineteenth century in the form of the neo-Kantian movement. For many intellectuals, Kantian epistemology was the means of meeting the challenges to traditional philosophy posed by scientism and of countering the rigid materialism associated with it. Leveraging Kant's conception of the twofold nature of objects, the emerging neo-Kantians argued that the unknown, *noumenal*, qualities of matter not only rendered positive knowledge of any determining influence exerted by material forces impossible, it also meant that a need for non-empirical, philosophical speculation still existed. The drive to counter the effects of scientism was thus central to the emerging neo-Kantians and, for some, this extended even into the realm of politics. Although technically apolitical, the materialism associated with scientism had become closely associated with radical, revolutionary politics by the last quarter of the century, exemplified, but not exclusively, by Marxism. A prominent number of neo-Kantians attempted to provide an alternative to this political agenda because, despite being broadly sympathetic to progressive, even socialist, political goals, they rejected the prospect of violent revolution. They instead drew upon Kant's ethics to posit that significant social change, even socialism, could result from peaceful, reformist efforts based on moral values. Friedrich Albert Lange exemplifies this and the other features of the neo-Kantian movement in his *History of Materialism and a Critique of Its Present Importance* (1866),

one of the earliest and most influential neo-Kantian texts.[51] So great was his influence that, over twenty after his death, Bernstein would be citing Lange as an intellectual model.

Born in 1828, Lange would have just been coming of age as the intellectual culture of Europe underwent a dramatic change. While thought during the first decades of the century had been dominated by the idealist philosophies that emerged in Kant's wake, "in the second half of the nineteenth century," historian Frederick Beiser writes, this "'age of idealism' … [was] succeeded by an 'age of realism,' which was more concerned with empirical science and technical progress."[52] Prompted by several factors,[53] this shift away from idealism and towards scientism quickly reached a peak in the 1850s and brought with it a raft of consequences. Foremost among these was the embrace of materialism among intellectuals, a connection so widely perceived that Lange writes that "the influence of the modern sciences upon the special development of materialism, and particularly upon its spread and wider propagation, need not be said."[54]

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[51] For Lange's, and *The History of Materialism*'s, pioneering role in the neo-Kantian movement, see, Frederick Beiser, *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism, 1796-1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2 and 47; Klaus Köhnke, *The Rise of Neo Kantianism,* xii; and Thomas E. Willey, *Back to Kant: The Revival of Kantianism in German Social and Historical Thought, 1860-1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), 90.

[52] Frederick C. Beiser, *After Hegel: German Philosophy, 1840-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 2.

[53] Most prominent among these were the disillusionment following the failed revolutions of 1848, of which followers of the idealist Hegel were prominent participants in, and the contemporary formulation of several scientific theories promising to explain theretofore inexplicable natural phenomena, such as geographical uniformitarianism and the law of the conservation of energy. For an overview of the factors contributing to the decline of idealism and the rise of scientism, see, Frederick Gregory, *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth Century Germany* (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1977), 1-10; Baumer, *Modern European Thought*, 302-314; and Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason*, 32-39

[54] Frederick Albert Lange, *History of Materialism and Criticism of its Present Importance*, vol. 2, Ernest Chester Thomas, trans. (Boston: Houghton, Osgood, & Company, 1880), 241.

Believing that materialism, with its focus on matter and material causality, was the philosophical viewpoint most consonant with science,[55] mid-century thinkers consistently used it as the foundation for elaborate systems and theories. When Lange writes that these materialist theorizers claimed that "the whole world may easily be … explained out of the functions of matter,"[56] he is hardly exaggerating the explanatory potential ascribed to materialism, and particularly material determinism, at that time. Among the most infamous examples of this is Carl Vogt (1817-1895), whose 1854 work, *Physiologische Briefe*, posited that "thought is to the brain as urine is to the kidneys" as an attempt to "extend the mechanical [i.e. materialist] paradigm of explanation to life and the mind."[57] Moreover, materialists often coupled this confidence with denigrations of alternative worldviews and especially of idealist philosophies. This can be seen in the case of Ludwig Büchner (1824-1899), whose 1855 work *Kraft und Stoff* has been described as "the Bible of materialism" that "made explicit all the implications of the materialist tendency."[58] Büchner argues that the "failure" of "older" philosophical systems lay in their refusal to recognize the world as merely "a complex of things and facts," ultimately concluding that "the empirical-philosophical [i.e. materialist] view of nature has come to results that decisively ban every kind of supranaturalism and idealism from the

[55] See, Beiser, *After Hegel*, 53-5; Gregory, *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth Century Germany*, xv; and Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason*, 36.

[56] Lange, *History of Materialism,* vol. 2, 313.

[57] Quoted in Beiser, *After Hegel*, 59 and 55.

[58] Gregory, *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth Century Germany*, 105.

explanation of natural events. Their explanations must be conceived completely independently of the assistance of any external power outside things."[59]

The prominence that materialists had gained in the wake of scientism, the comprehensiveness of their attempts to apply material determinism to all phenomena, and their attacks on alternative systems of thought had a significant impact on views regarding the relevance of traditional philosophy. "By mid-century it had become commonplace to speak of speculation as the mistake of a former era which had been replaced by a realistic emphasis on facts,"[60] historian Frederick Gregory writes, while philosopher Klaus Christian Köhnke bluntly relates in his study of neo-Kantianism that philosophy in the 1850s "was engaged in a fight for survival" as materialism claimed to provide ostensibly scientific explanations for topics once solely the province of philosophical speculation.[61] It was this threat of irrelevance that prompted a revival of Kantianism in the 1860s as some intellectuals, collectively now termed neo-Kantians, embraced Kant's ideas as the most effective means of preserving philosophical inquiry against the asphyxiating effect of materialism. As Beiser explains, the beginning of this shift back to Kant began with claims "re-affrim[ing] the Kantian limitations upon knowledge, the inescapability of the dualisms between form and content, essence and existence [i.e. between *phenomena* and *noumena*]." This, he continues, was due to the fact that "it was a central and defining thesis of neo-Kantians in the 1860s that philosophy could resurrect itself…as epistemology…as the examination of the methods,

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[59] Quoted in Gregory, *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth Century Germany*, 106.

[60] Gregory, *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth Century Germany*, 106.

[61] Köhnke, *The Rise of Neo-Kantianism*, 88.

standards, and presuppositions of the empirical sciences."[62] Of no less importance, however, was the fact that a reorientation towards epistemology, specifically to Kant's epistemology and its negative implications, allowed for a "counter-attack against materialism."[63] By emphasizing the subjective character of perception and the resulting limits on our understanding of the true nature of matter, neo-Kantians were able to argue that materialists "were naïve and dogmatic, simply assuming the reality of matter, as if it were a pure given, completely ignoring the physiological and intellectuals conditions of knowledge of the world."[64] Therefore, prompted by the exigencies emerging from the rise of scientism in the 1850s, the return to Kant among the neo-Kantians beginning in 1860s not only aimed to broadly recuperate philosophy by installing it as an arbiter of science, but, with arguments that would later appear in Bernstein's thinking, also sought to undermine the materialism that had come to monopolize theoretical thought.

It is this weaponization of Kantianism against materialism that animates much of Lange's *History of Materialism*. While a comprehensive survey of the history of materialist thought from ancient Greece to the present, Lange's text also, as indicated by its subtitle – *and Criticism of its Present Importance* – has a definite agenda. Describing Kant as in "opposition" to materialism and even considering it "dangerous,"[65] Lange recruits him into this agenda and devotes much space to explaining how "we may regard

[62] Beiser, *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism,* 6.

[63] Beiser, *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism,* 7.

[64] Beiser, *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism,* 7.

[65] Frederick Albert Lange, *History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Present Importance*, Vol. 2, Ernest Chester Thomas, trans., (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., 1880), 162 and 163.

Kant's whole system as a splendid attempt to abolish materialism forever."[66] Towards supporting this claim, he writes that

> Kant … overturns our collective experience … by the simple assumption that our notions do not regulate themselves according to things, but things according to our notions. It follows immediately from this that the objects of experience are only *our* objects; that the whole objective world is, in a word, not absolute objectivity, but only objectivity for man and any similarly organized beings, while behind the phenomenal world, the absolute nature of things, the 'thing-in-itself,' is veiled in impenetrable darkness.[67]

Thus drawing directly upon Kant's epistemological theory, Lange emphasizes that its claims of the subjective, a priori conditioning of perception means that the true nature of the world remains unknown to us. He proceeds to leverage this against materialism, he writes that "it builds its theories upon the axiom of the intelligibility of the world and overlooks that this axiom is at bottom only the principle of order in phenomena."[68] The limits of knowledge that Kant's epistemology posit reveal a fundamental flaw in materialism, Lange claims, that materialist theories are based upon the assumption that the material world is known, but what is known is not the true, *noumenal* world, but only subjectively-conditioned *phenomena*. Lange reiterates this use of Kant to undermine materialism more plainly when he writes that materialism "trusts the senses" to provide it with knowledge of the world and thus "the whole materialistic theory of the world is brought about through the senses"; however, he continues, Kant's ideas have "shattered the primitive naivete of that belief in the senses which underlies materialism."[69]

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[66] Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 2, 284.

[67] Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 2, 156.

[68] Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 2, 166.

[69] Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 2, 338, 204.

Concluding that "the critical standpoint of the theory of knowledge [i.e. Kantian epistemology] … destroys materialism,"[70] Lange renders the implication of his argument clear: with its assumption that the world as it is perceived and the world as it truly is are identical, materialism has based itself upon a grave mistake, a mistake that is starkly revealed by Kant and effectively invalidates it as a viable philosophical position.

As Lange demonstrates, the major thrust of the neo-Kantian counter-attack against scientistic materialism was directed at its very foundation and aimed to delegitimize it as a whole. Often accompanying this, however, were more directed strikes against its deterministic claims. As previously noted, the scientistic materialists of the 1850s posited material causes for virtually all objects and events, portraying the world, as described by historian J.W. Burrow, as an "unbroken chain of causality" beginning with the "purely physical."[71] This view, Burrow argues, was a result of their infatuation with the sciences and attempt to provide "a comprehensive, unified scientific understanding of the universe…on the basis of Newtonian mechanics."[72] Franklin Baumer also considers the materialists' embrace of linear causation to be the result of their scientism, writing that they considered it to be the logical conclusion of the natural sciences' observations of "the reign of law in nature, as opposed to chance; [of] effects following regularly from determinate conditions; hence nature's predictability given sufficient knowledge."[73] Regardless of its exact source, mid-century materialists

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[70] Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 2, 337.

[71] Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason*, 59 and 40.

[72] Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason*, 58-9.

[73] Baumer, *Modern European Thought,* 313 and 312.

typically advocated a strict determinism that made "all activity a property of matter" and made all phenomena "a product of matter."[74] As already seen in the cases of Büchner and Vogt, this material determinism could make far-reaching and reductive claims, including that "life and consciousness were forms which arose by transformations of matter" and that "there is no free will."[75]

It was against such ideas that the neo-Kantians directed some of their more targeted attacks against materialism, utilizing Kant's ideas to "establish human autonomy against the claims of determinism."[76] This is apparent in Lange's *History of Materialism*, where he roundly condemns materialism's determinist claims, most prominently those involving the human mind. Relating the materialist view that "material conditions influence intellectual life … that even the activities of the soul in man and animals are thoroughly explained out of the functions of matter," Lange asserts that "in this is involved a serious misunderstanding" that would not have occurred if materialists "understood the relation of consciousness to the way in which we conceive objects,"[77] thus referencing Kant's epistemological theory regarding the role of the mind in shaping perception. Towards explaining how this theory contradicts the notion of material determinism, Lange begins by writing that "our knowledge of nature is, in truth, no knowledge at all" because it is "from the subject that we interpret and give life to forms" and that "representations of sensible things … [are] by virtue of the *a priori* elements,"

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[74] Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason*, 58-9 and Baumer, *Modern European Thought,* 313, respectively.

[75] Gregory, *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth Century Germany*, xvii and Beiser, *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism,* 59, respectively.

[76] Willey, *Back to Kant*, 23.

[77] Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 2, 311, 313, and 319.

therefore, he concludes, "the idea that something external, absolutely independent of our subject corresponds to this image may be very natural, but it is not absolutely necessary and conclusive."[78] Again drawing directly upon Kant, Lange argues that because the mind actively shapes perception through it's a *priori* categories, we lack any real knowledge of the conditions, forces, and objects that materialists believe determine us. Without this knowledge there can be "no idea at all how consciousness arises from material forces," he continues, ultimately concluding that this "limit of knowledge" regarding matter renders the notion of material determinism untenable, writing that the "mechanical [i.e. material-determinist] theory of the world … carries within itself a limit which it will never be able to escape."[79]

With its rejection of scientistic materialism and determinism, neo-Kantianism is often considered to be part of the wider intellectual and cultural trend within Europe during the last decades of the nineteenth century referred to as the "revolt against positivism."[80] Encompassing movements and thinkers as diverse as Symbolism, Henri Bergson, Friedrich Nietzsche, and the Decadents, this "revolt" was "a reaction against … the world picture projected by science, which, it was believed, denigrated life and mind … [and against] the idea of determinism, which, it was thought, impeded freedom."[81] While neo-Kantianism clearly participated in the critical nature of this "revolt," it can

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[78] Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 2, 309, 321, 326, and 327.

[79] Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 2, 322, 309, and 320.

[80] H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1961), 29. In addition to Hughes, works that include neo-Kantianism in this "revolt" include, Willey, *Back to Kant*, 9; Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason*, 59; Baumer, *Modern European Thought,* 373.

[81] Baumer, *Modern European Thought,* 372.

also be seen as participating in its more constructive aspect. Although the particulars varied for each, all of the anti-positivist movements generally made what has been described as a "turn towards the subjective" – such as psychology, irrationalism, intuition, or emotions – in an attempt to identify alternative motivations for human behavior in place of the material determinism they had disavowed.[82] The neo-Kantians contributed to this with their championing of Kant's ethical philosophy, which they considered "counter to any kind of fatalistic determinism … [as] it fostered a notion of social life as a field for the exercise of the disinterested, rational moral will" and the belief that "all human beings were ends in themselves and their own rational autonomy as moral beings the highest good they could attain."[83] This advocacy of Kant's moral tenets marks a significant and unique dimension of the neo-Kantian movement, one described as its establishment of "an ethical programma … a new metaphysic of values" that "transformed it from a 'critical' philosophy … one whose tendency was always oppositional, to a *positive* philosophy which again laid claim to its own systems."[84] While much of the neo-Kantian project was focused on critique, on using Kant's ideas to oppose the totalizing worldviews of scientism and materialism, their advocacy of Kant's moral doctrine effectively moved them towards establishing their own worldview.

Lange, again, serves to illustrate this use of Kant's ethical ideas to formulate a wider theory attempting to explain fundamental truths. In his *History of Materialism*, following his rejection of material determinism, Lange considers alternative explanations

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[82] Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, 34.

[83] Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason*, 126.

[84] Köhnke, *The Rise of Neo-Kantianism*, 279-280.

of the forces shaping human history and society, discussing the recently published *History of Civilization in England* (1857) by Henry Thomas Buckle. Writing that Buckle "has employed an inaccurate point of view in that the progress of civilization rests essentially upon *intellectual* development," Lange argues that such progress "is to be ascribed to essentially *moral* grounds," claiming that history moves as "moral ideals progress, according to which man shapes the world about him."[85] Lange thus pairs criticism of attempts to explain the causes of historical progress with his own attempt at such an explanation, formulating an alternative worldview predicated on moral causation, radically expanding Kant's hopes that moral changes would have a practical impact. Specifically, Lange puts forward a system in which disregard for Kant's egalitarian and humanitarian dictums adversely affects society while adhering to these values drives social progress. Writing, for example that contemporary society is characterized by "exploitation [and] the antithesis of master and man," Lange argues that these social ills are caused by the moral failings of "egoism … [and the] pursuit of selfish desires" before concluding that "further development of individualism would mean only the decay of our civilization … the true current of progress will lie in the direction of the feeling of community … [in] the supplanting of egoism by joy in the harmony and common interests of mankind."[86] Thus rejecting the reduction of people to mere means and championing the idea of interpersonal support, Lange articulates the humanistic values at the core of Kant's ethical philosophy and argues that the adoption of these in the place of

[85] Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 3, 246-247.

[86] Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 3, 262, 241, and 252.

self-interested egoism will be the fillip of progress and "advance humanity another stage."[87]

While the theory of morally-driven social change constitutes the neo-Kantian alternative to materialism's deterministic beliefs, it also comprises their attempts to provide an alternative to the political programme of revolution materialism was associated with. From at least the eighteenth century, materialism had been associated with revolutionary politics, largely due to the fact that its rejection of religious explanation directly undermined justifications for the political status quo. As Burrow explains, subscribing to materialism was effectively a "form of opposition [when] … the concept of the divine, hereditary right of kings still underwrote the claims of autocracy [and] religious belief and the authority of the churches were the mainstay of absolutism."[88] This association was partly responsible for materialism's popularity in the 1850s, he continues, as "materialist discourse … constituted an outlet, in the years of reaction after 1848, for a radicalism which had found in that year, but not for years afterward, a direct political expression."[89] That the two most prominent materialists of the time, the aforementioned Büchner and Vogt, had been supporters of revolutionary politics during the 1840s,[90] illustrates this claim, with Vogt even utilizing scientistic

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[87] Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 3, 360.

[88] Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason*, 38. See also, Baumer, *Modern European Thought,* 210-212.

[89] Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason*, 38.

[90] While support for the events of 1848 in Germany constituted the extent of Büchner's radicalism, Vogt had associated with anarchists groups throughout the 1840s and was elected to the Frankfurt Parliament, the democratic parliament attempting to unify the German states in 1848, after which he was forced into exile. For a thorough survey of Vogt's and Büchner's biographies, see, Gregory, *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth Century Germany*, 52-79 and 100-121, respectively.

materialism to justify revolutionary upheaval by creating an analogy with the geological theory of catastrophism.[91] Therefore, even before the later prominence of Marxism would further the connection between the two, revolution had long been associated with materialism by mid-century. While this association alone would have possibly been enough to disincline the neo-Kantians towards a revolutionary agenda, there were certainly additional social and intellectual reasons. "Revolution … was abhorrent to [the neo-Kantians]" because they were "bourgeois humanists … loyal to the state," historian Thomas Willey writes, explaining that the leading neo-Kantians were all members of the middle and upper-classes hoping to find employment in state-run universities and also saw in Kant's ethics an injunction against violence.[92] Therefore, providing a non-violent substitute for revolution that would not wholly raze existing society was an important aim for many neo-Kantians. Lange himself is explicit about this goal, writing that he is proposing an "alternative of revolution … [of] saving our civilization and transforming the path that leads through desolating revolution into a path of beneficent reforms."[93] Arguing that such a transformation will only occur "under the banner of a great idea which sweeps away egoism and sets human perfection in human fellowship as a new aim,"[94] he makes it clear that his theory of moral development effecting social change was his attempt to formulate an alternative to revolutionary upheaval.

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[91] See, Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason*, 37.

[92] Willey, *Back to Kant*, 103 and 21, 102-105.

[93] Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 3, 333-334

[94] Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 3, 361.

Despite clearly opposing revolution, Lange was also clearly in favor of social change. A liberal in his youth, he moved steadily leftward and had embraced socialism by 1863.[95] Though not directly addressed in *History of Materialism*, published three years later, Lange's socialist sympathies can be variously discerned in that text, beyond his already noted condemnations of egoism and exploitation and his celebration of community. He laments, for instance, that because there has been "little effort to reduce the distribution of wealth to correct principles … [the] greed of acquisition in the propertied classes … results in a continuous increase in the production of wealth…without the laboring masses being brought a single step nearer the goal of obtaining what is most necessary for an existence worthy of man."[96] Socialism was therefore the goal of the non-revolutionary, morally-predicated reformist programme Lange advocated,[97] positioning him not only as a pioneer of the neo-Kantian movement as a whole, but also of the attempts within this movement to formulate a socialism inspired by Kantianism.

In his study *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, philosopher Harry van der Linden relates that beginning in the 1880s, a cohort of neo-Kantians, referred to as the "Marburg school" due to their origins in the University of Marburg in Germany, began to draw upon Lange's ideas to elaborate a theory for what was termed an "ethical socialism."[98]

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[95] See, Beiser, *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism,* 367 and Köhnke, *The Rise of Neo-Kantianism*, 154-155.

[96] Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 3, 240-241.

[97] Specifically, Lange did not advocate the outright abolition of private property but envisioned incremental reforms leading to the legalization of large-scale workers' cooperatives that would eventually replace individually-owned businesses. See, Willey, *Back to Kant*, 94; and Harry van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988), 295.

[98] van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, vii.

Writing that Lange was "the forefather of Marburg socialism,"[99] van der Linden argues that the Marburgers were "indebted … programmatically" to his ideas, explaining that they placed his "rejection of metaphysical materialism" and "gradualist" advocacy for reform over revolution at the center of their theories while also adopting his belief that "morality in its corrective, directive, and motivational functions is indispensable for socialist theory and praxis."[100] Agreeing with van der Linden regarding Lange's influence on the Marburg school,[101] Willey further relates how these neo-Kantian socialists were frequent critics of Marxism and presented their ideas as "an alternative to … the revolutionary dialectics of Marx" that could "build bridges between social classes."[102] This belief that socialism could be an inter-class project and specifically that "cooperation with progressive liberals was the right tactic" for socialist activists[103] was a prominent aspect of neo-Kantian socialism that, despite only being suggested by some of Lange's comments,[104] was grounded in his belief that moral convictions were the means to social change. As Willey describes, the neo-Kantian socialists, like Lange, emphasized the "efficacy of the human will in striving for ethical goals" and the

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[99] van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, 293. Thomas Willey and Sebastian Luft make similar claims regarding Lange's influence. See, Willey, *Back to Kant*, 102; and Luft, "Introduction," in Luft, ed. *The Neo-Kantian Reader,* 64.

[100] van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, 294-5 and 302.

[101] Willey describes Lange as "imparting his social Kantianism to the Marburg philosophers…[who] retained Lange's democratic, evolutionary socialism." Willey, *Back to Kant*, 100 and 102.

[102] Willey, *Back to Kant*, 126 and 21.

[103] van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, 302.

[104] Lange writes, for instance, that his non-revolutionary path towards social change will include "the healing of the breach in our popular life produced by the separation of the educated from the people." Lange, *History of Materialism*, Vol. 3, 334.

"regulative ideas necessary in the purposive development of humanity," specifically believing that through the motivating "idea of socialism … the discrepancy between social reality and the existence of men as ends in themselves be overcome."[105] They felt, moreover, that the inspiring force of the socialist ideal was "universally valid for any man … [and] recognized no class lines" and could, Willey concludes, serve as a "touchstone for pragmatic cooperation [between classes].[106] Therefore, drawing upon Lange's ideas, neo-Kantians during the last two decades of the nineteenth century elaborated a theory of socialism rooted in Kantian philosophy that rejected materialism and revolution in favor of ethically-motivated, gradual reform achieved via class collaboration – the very ideas that would animate Bernstein's Revisionism.

Back to Lange: Bernstein's Revisionism

In 1898, at the annual party conference of the German Social Democrats (SPD) in Stuttgart, a twenty-seven year old Rosa Luxemburg, in what would begin her career as a fiery orator and representative of the far left of the Marxist movement, took to the floor and denounced Eduard Bernstein, referring to his "decadent" philosophical position as amounting to "compromising with [the party's enemies]," and called for his expulsion from the SPD.[107] This was a shocking turn of events as Bernstein, then forty-eight, had been engaged in Marxist politics for over half his life, having joined the Social

[105] Willey, *Back to Kant*, 113 and 117.

[106] Willey, *Back to Kant*, 126 and 128.

[107] Rosa Luxemburg, "The Party Conference at Stuttgart," in H. Tudor and J.M. Tudor, eds. *Marxism and Social Democracy*, 283 and 281. See, also, Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, 75-79; and Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism*, 83-5.

Democratic Workers' Party of Germany, commonly referred to as the "Eisenachers," in 1872 and subsequently becoming a founding member the SPD in 1875.[108] Moreover, during this time, Bernstein had demonstrated unswerving dedication to the Marxist cause and achieved no small degree of prominence. With Bismark's 1878 banning of the SPD and shuttering of its associated publications, Bernstein relocated to Switzerland in order to oversee the publication of several newspapers that were to be smuggled back into Germany, a decision that led to a warrant being issued for his arrest that would prevent him from returning to his home country for over twenty years.[109] In 1880, Bernstein's hard work was rewarded with an appointment as editor of *Der Sozialdemokrat*, the SPD's main organ while banned, after receiving the personal blessing of both Marx and Engels following a meeting that year in London. Eventually moving to London himself in 1888, Bernstein developed a close relationship with Engels; so close, in fact, that Engels offered Bernstein editorship of Marx's unfinished writings and worked with him on drafting the new SPD Party Program that would be adopted in 1891 following its re-legalization.[110] By 1898, therefore, Bernstein had decades of work testifying to his commitment along with prestigious associations and publications to his name. Luxemburg's excoriation, however, demonstrates the controversy he was then engulfed in, what has since come to be termed the Revisionist Debate, due to a series of articles he had begun writing in 1896 wherein he criticized the core Marxist beliefs of material

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[108] Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism*, 36-38. In addition to Steger, a thorough biography of Bernstein can be found in Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism.*

[109] Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism*, 41-45.

[110] Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism*, 47-66.

determinism and revolutionary class conflict and called for their revision.[111] Deeply shocking to his colleagues, these articles anathematized Bernstein in the eyes of many contemporary Marxists, leading directly to Luxemburg's condemnation.

Despite Luxemburg's calls, Bernstein was not expelled from the SPD; he would, in fact, remain a member until 1917 when he was a founding member of the anti-war Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany.[112] Rather, the main result of the Stuttgart Conference was that the Party's chief theoretician Karl Kautsky became convinced that Bernstein needed to fully elaborate his views in the form of a book so as to ensure that they were available to and correctly understood by all interested Party members. Thus encouraged, Bernstein published *The Preconditions of Socialism*, what would become his most famous Revisionist text, the following year.[113] While he largely devoted *Preconditions of Socialism* to expanding upon many of the views that had caused such scandal, Bernstein had one last bombshell to lob in its pages, declaring that "Social Democracy needs a Kant to judge the received judgment and subject it to the most trenchant criticism, to show where its apparent materialism is the highest and therefore most misleading ideology, and to show that contempt for the ideal and the magnifying of material factors until they become omnipotent forces of evolution is self-deception."[114] Although not the first time Bernstein had cited Kant in his Revisionist writings, his invocation here while reiterating some of his key points is particularly illuminating as it

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[111] Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism*, 79-85.

[112] Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, 287.

[113] Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism*, 83-4.

[114] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 209.

underscores the commonalities that existed between his thinking and the neo-Kantian movement. Like the neo-Kantians, Bernstein in his Revisionist articles and *Preconditions of Socialism* rejected materialism and utilized Kantian epistemology to do so. Additionally, Bernstein, as his criticism of Marxists' "contempt for the ideal" alludes to, shared the neo-Kantian embrace of ethical causation in the place of material determinism. Lastly, though it is unmentioned here, Bernstein's conviction that the transition to socialism could be accomplished via peaceful reform and class cooperation rather than divisive revolutionary upheaval directly mirrors the ideas of neo-Kantian socialism. While all this does not prove Plekhanov correct in his belief that Kantian philosophy and the neo-Kantian movement constituted the foundation and inspiration of Revisionism, that he arrived at such a conclusion is understandable. Bernstein even seemed to invite such ideas. At the conclusion of *Preconditions of Socialism*, Bernstein eulogizes Lange, writing of his "sincere and intrepid championship of the working-class struggle for emancipation … [and] scientific impartiality" and asserts that "I would translate 'back to Kant' as 'back to Lange."[115] Thus capping his praise, Bernstein reworks the slogan of the neo-Kantian movement into the suggestion that he is returning to its earliest innovator, which, considering the numerous parallels between their anti-materialist and reform-actuated ethical socialism, many, including Plekhanov, likely believed to be true.

Among the most striking commonalities between Bernstein's Revisionism and Lange is the rejection of materialism and the use of Kant's epistemology in doing do so. In one of his articles preceding *Preconditions of Socialism*, Bernstein disparages

[115] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 210.

materialists who "think [they] are realists," claiming instead that "materialism is just as spiritualistic as pure or absolute idealism,"[116] identifying the supposedly scientific materialism with the idealist philosophies that it had aimed to displace. Towards explaining this, Bernstein writes that "materialism is ultimately restricted" and simply "more or less plausibly conjecture[s] a reality without being able to prove it," citing as evidence "Kant … [and] the concept of the 'thing in itself' lying beyond our perceptions,"[117] thus composing a capsule repetition of the neo-Kantian use of Kant's epistemology to discredit materialism. Continuing on, Bernstein removes any doubt that he is in fact reproducing the argument that the Kantian notion that we are unable to truly know matter renders a materialist worldview untenable by writing that

> the great advances achieved in chemistry and physics since Kant's time have only deferred the problem of matter, leaving its actual solution outside the realm of practical experience. Physicists and chemists know more nowadays about the 'atom' but…its corporality is assumed because it offers the most satisfactory explanation of known physical and chemical processes…its existence is an assumption physicists make on the basis of the law of causality – a law of logic whose objective validity is no more demonstrable than the objective validity of space and time.[118]

As Lange had before him, Bernstein leverages Kant's epistemology to charge materialists with naivete, arguing that matter as we know it, even its most fundamental component, is objectively unknown. With his conclusion that "materialism … simply posit[s] the

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[116] Bernstein, "The Realistic and the Ideological Moments in Socialism," in *Marxism and Social Democracy*, 230.

[117] Bernstein, "The Realistic and the Ideological Moments in Socialism," in *Marxism and Social Democracy*, 230.

[118] Bernstein, "The Realistic and the Ideological Moments in Socialism," in *Marxism and Social Democracy*, 230.

identity of thought and being,"[119] Bernstein marshals this argument to dismiss materialism as based on a fundamental confusion of perceptions subjectively conditioned by the mind with matter as it objectively is.

Berstein continues to echo Lange by pairing this rejection of materialism with a denial of material determinism. In contrast to Lange, though, Bernstein's denials are not visibly connected to his Kantian-based rejection of materialism itself; rather, he attempts to refute material determinism with claims of its impracticality and demonstrable absence in society. This is particularly apparent in *Preconditions of Socialism*, where Bernstein describes materialists as "Calvinist[s] without a God," explaining that although they "do not believe in a predestination ordained by a divinity," they do assert that there is "no event without a material cause" and because "matter moves of necessity in accordance with certain laws … [a materialist] must believe that that from any particular point in time all subsequent events are … determined beforehand."[120] With this formulation, Bernstein attempts to show the implausible implications of material determinism, continuing this effort when he writes that within its worldview, "the consciousness and will of human beings appear as factors decidedly subordinate to the material movement…whose work they carry out against their knowledge and will."[121] Also noting that many Marxists identify the "forces of production and the relations of production as the determining factors" in society,[122] Bernstein argues that this is

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[119] Bernstein, "The Realistic and the Ideological Moments in Socialism," in *Marxism and Social Democracy*, 230.

[120] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 12-13.

[121] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 14.

[122] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 13.

empirically contradicted by the modern world, writing that that advancements in knowledge have provided man with "a growing ability to *direct* economic development."[123] This greater control has resulted in "economic forces … ceas[ing] to be the master of mankind and [have] become its servant. Society is…more free of economic causation than ever before … modern society is much richer than earlier societies in ideologies which are not determined by economics. The sciences, the arts, and a wide range of social relations are nowadays much less dependent on economics."[124] Although neglecting specifics, Bernstein's argument and his intentions with it are clear. Claiming that, contrary to some of the more deterministic declarations found in Marxist theory, the elements of the superstructure of society are variously, and even wholly, independent of the economic base, he aims to complement his assertions of material determinism's absurdity with more grounded claims of it being inoperative in the real world.

Bernstein's contempt for the idea of material determinism and the Marxists he considered to adhere to it is vividly illustrated by his references to Plekhanov in *Preconditions of Socialism.* By the time this text was being written, Plekhanov had already positioned himself as one of Bernstein's most fervent critics and made his strident opposition to Revisionism, particularly it's dismissal of materialism, publicly known,[125] something Bernstein mockingly alludes to when he refers to Plekhanov's *Development of the Monist View of History*, and suggests that "monist" be replaced by

[123] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 18-19.

[124] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 18-19.

[125] Plekhanov's first anti-Revisionist writing was published in July of 1898.

"simplistic" in its title.[126] Bernstein claims that it is clearly a "synthesis of material and ideological forces" that shape society and argues that to "build a 'monistic' interpretation … to derive everything from one thing … [is] a most retrograde step,"[127] at once demonstrating his disdain for rigid material determinism, his enmity for Plekhanov, and, most importantly that he, like Lange, stressed the role that ideologies, including ethical convictions, had in shaping events. Arguing that "non-economic factors exercise an influence on the course of history…[and] especially ethical factors [have a] great scope for independent activity,"[128] Bernstein makes this parallel clear. He furthers it when he writes that Marxists must abandon the idea that "the victory of socialism depend[s] on immanent economic necessity" and instead "give [socialism] an idealist basis."[129] Therefore, Bernstein, like Lange and the neo-Kantian socialists as a whole, embraces the belief that ethics and moral ideas are forces leading to socialism. After noting that there are "sharply conflicting claims as to the importance of moral consciousness in the struggle for social democracy,"[130] Bernstein decisively affirms its importance, writing that "no action on the part of the masses can have a lasting effect without a moral impetus" and that "justice is a powerful motivating force in the socialist movement … what draws [people] to socialism is the aspiration towards a more … equitable social

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[126] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 16.

[127] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 16, 20, and 18.

[128] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 15, 19-20.

[129] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 19-20, 200.

[130] Bernstein, "The Realistic and the Ideological Moments in Socialism," in *Marxism and Social Democracy*, 238.

order."[131] Ultimately, Bernstein posits socialism itself as an inspiring, moral ideal, writing that "I cannot subscribe to the proposition: 'the working class has no ideals to actualize,' rather … [it] needs a healthy morality … inspired by a definite principle which expresses a higher level of economic and social life as a whole."[132]

With each elaboration of his thinking, from rejecting materialism and material determinism to embracing ethical causality, Bernstein heightens the commonalities between his Revisionism and the neo-Kantian socialism pioneered by Lange. This only continues as Bernstein writes that "there can be no question of a universal, instantaneous, and violent expropriation" of capitalist property and describes the belief in "an abrupt leap from capitalist society to socialist society" as "utopian,"[133] effectively disavowing revolution. Moreover, writing that "democracy is both a means and an end … it is a weapon in the struggle of socialism, and it is the form in which socialism will be realized," Bernstein espouses a peaceful, reformist path to socialism, explaining that "modern democracy rooted in the working class has a growing influence…as this influence becomes stronger, the principles of industrial management will be modified along democratic lines, and the interests of the privileged minority will be increasingly subordinated to the interest of the community."[134] Bernstein therefore concludes that "what Social Democracy should be doing … is organize the working class politically,

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[131] Bernstein, "The Realistic and the Ideological Moments in Socialism," in *Marxism and Social Democracy*, 240

[132] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 209.

[133] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 158 and Eduard Bernstein, "General Observations on Utopianism and Eclecticism," in *Marxism and Social Democracy*, 74.

[134] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 142 and Bernstein, "General Observations on Utopianism and Eclecticism," in *Marxism and Social Democracy*, 76.

train it for democracy and fight for any and all reforms in the state which are designed to raise the working class and make the state more democratic."[135]

A reorientation towards gradualist reformism, Bernstein contends, would be especially beneficial as it would allow the Marxist movement and the working class to gain allies among the bourgeoisie. Noting that the contemporary bourgeoisie currently "constitutes a uniformly reactionary mass" opposed to socialism, Bernstein argues this is not because of any essential aspect of their class consciousness or materially determined convictions. He claims that the bourgeoisie have adopted this stance because it "feels threatened by Social Democracy," specifically by its "militancy of language" that adheres to a belief in class conflict and espouses "an enthusiasm for violent revolution."[136] The "general fear" among the bourgeoisie that these sentiments engender, Bernstein continues, "will no longer be necessary" if Marxists begin viewing socialism as a moral ideal that can be realized through democratic reform.[137] By cooperating with the bourgeoisie on the basis of a shared ideal, the Marxist movement could achieve far more than if it maintains its position of unremitting hostility, Bernstein contends, citing the success the labor movement in Britain has had in winning valuable legislative concessions. Bernstein argues that this began "not when the Chartist movement was at its most revolutionary, but when [it] abandoned revolutionary slogans and forged an alliance with the bourgeoisie for the achievement of reforms."[138] Such an alliance

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[135] Eduard Bernstein, "The Struggle for Social Democracy and the Social Revolution: 2. The Theory of Collapse and Colonial Policy," in *Marxism and Social Democracy*, 169.

[136] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 157-8.

[137] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 158.

[138] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 188.

between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is possible in other countries as well, because "many elements of the bourgeoisie experience oppression … and would rather make common cause against these oppressors … than against the workers; they would rather align themselves with the latter than the former."[139] Furthermore, Bernstein believes that complementing this willingness of the bourgeoisie to work with the proletariat towards reforms are the desires of the proletariat themselves, whom he considers to be largely non-revolutionary, with "only a very small number … hav[ing] a serious inclination for … aspirations which go beyond the mere improvement of their conditions."[140]

As his endorsement of interclass collaboration reveals, Bernstein clearly did not consider class antagonisms to be an inevitable or permanent aspect of society, yet another example of his Revisionism's accord with neo-Kantian ethical socialism and break with conventional Marxist theory. Rejecting materialism, material determinism, and the necessity of revolution in favor of a morally-motivated reformist programme embracing multiple classes, Bernstein articulated a body of thought that distinctively echoed the ideas Lange and other neo-Kantians had developed out of Kantian philosophy. For Plekhanov, this echoing, along with Bernstein's specific citations of both Lange and Kant, convinced him that Kantianism formed the foundation of Revisionism. Therefore, when Plekhanov, alarmed by Revisionism's growing popularity among both Party elites and rank-and-file members, decided that it needed to be fought, he focused his efforts on attacking Kant's philosophy as a means of discrediting the ideology Bernstein had built upon it.

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[139] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 158.

[140] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, 107.

Chapter IV

Defense, Counterattack, and Self-Revision: Plekhanov's Responses to Revisionism

"The matter can be worded as follows: who is to bury whom, either Bernstein will bury Social Democracy or Social Democracy will bury Bernstein,"[1] Plekhanov wrote in late 1898, bluntly expressing what he considered to be at stake in the incipient debate over Revisionism. Although Bernstein's ideas, as has been shown, likely drew upon wider, long-established intellectual trends, they resonated with and effectively exacerbated contemporary issues within the European Social-Democratic movement. This led some to receive them with hostility, Plekhanov clearly included. Emerging in the context of wider controversies concerning the tactics and even fundamental character of Marxism, Revisionism appeared to Marxists such as Plekhanov as providing theoretical justification for those who had been agitating for the practical abandonment of revolutionary opposition in favor of conciliatory collaboration with the status quo. Moreover, the popular support Revisionism received threatened to make this a real possibility, with both leading party members and common workers embracing Revisionism and endorsing its ideas. To prevent this, defenders of the orthodox position, Plekhanov among them, launched a range of attacks against and critiques of Revisionism, hoping to discredit it and arrest its influence. They, in turn, were answered by Bernstein and his allies, beginning what is known as the Revisionist Debate.

[1] Georgi Plekhanov, "Za Chto Nam Yego Blagodarit'?" in *Sochineniía,* tom. XI, (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1923), 35.

Much of the hostility and support Revisionism garnered was arguably the result of how deeply it spoke to ongoing and deep-seated issues within the Marxist movement, many of which can be traced to the political practice prevalent within it. Most of the parties associated with the Second International, particularly the largest and most influential of these, the SPD,[2] adhered to a political position termed "revolutionary waiting," summarized as the conviction that "the revolution would only take place when economic conditions were right, and until then the Social Democrats had to wait."[3] Therefore, despite continuing to voice Marxism's advocacy of revolutionary upheaval, these Marxist parties instead operated as conventional political parties, participating, where possible, in electoral politics, and with some even "ha[ving] deputies in parliaments" and pursuing "reforms to help the working class."[4] Although Bernstein, along with numerous historians since, have pointed out the disjunction, if not outright contradiction, between the revolutionary rhetoric these parties espoused and their reformist participation in contemporary governance,[5] Marxist leaders at the time

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[2] James Joll, in addition to providing a comprehensive history of the Second International, discusses the outsized influence the SPD and German Marxists in general exerted within it. See, James Joll, *The Second International: 1889-1914*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) particularly 2-3 and 94-100.

[3] David Priestland, *The Red Flag: A History of Communism* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 54.

[4] Priestland, *The Red Flag,* 46, 54.

[5] Bernstein, in the context of advocating for collaboration between Marxists and liberal bourgeois parties, writes that "all practical activity of Social Democracy is aimed at creating the circumstances and conditions which will enable and ensure the transition from the modern social order to a higher one – without convulsive upheavals…however, its literary advocates have often offended against this…[revolutionary] phrases which were coined at a time when the privilege of property reigned unchecked all over Europe, and which were understandable and even to some extent justified under these circumstances, but which are nowadays only a dead weight, are treated with as much reverence as though the progress of the movement depended on them." Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism,* 145. Virtually every scholar discussing the Second International broaches the topic of the contrast between revolutionary rhetoric and reformist practice. For some of the most in-depth discussions of this, see, Joll, *The Second International*; G.D.H. Cole *The Second International, 1889-1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1956); H. Kendall Rogers, *Before the Revisionist Controversy: Kautsky, Bernstein, and the Meaning of Marxism, 1895-1898* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Gary P. Steenson, *"Not One Man! Not One Penny!": German Social Democracy,*

attempted to reconcile this divide by arguing for the revolutionary worth of democratic participation and reforms. Plekhanov himself explains, for example, that the processes involved in conventional politics were believed to have an edifying effect on the proletariat, writing that "the socialist parties in Western Europe… saw electoral campaigns as a powerful means of educating and organizing the working masses," especially of providing them "with political experience" in preparation for their revolutionary role.[6] The pursuit of reforms was seen in similar terms, historian H. Kendall Rogers relates, writing that Social Democratic parties "favored labor legislation for a variety of reasons. It could help provide the workers with… more leisure time for education… at the very least, the government's refusal to grant reforms would convince the workers that proletarian rule was necessary."[7]

There were, however, forces militating against this liminal position of espousing a theory of revolution while participating in conventional politics, pushing some Second International Marxists, prior to and separate from Revisionism, away from orthodox calls for revolutionary class war and towards wholly embracing peaceful reform and inter-class work. Foremost among these forces were trade unions. The last decades of the

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1863-1914 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981); - *After Marx, Before Lenin: Marxism and Working-Class Parties in Europe, 1884-1914* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991); - *Karly Kautsky, 1854-1938: Marxism in the Classical Years* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991); Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution,* Jon Rothschild, trans. (London: NLB, 1979); Jukka Gronow *On the Formation of Marxism: Karl Kautsky's Theory of Capitalism, the Marxism of the Second International, and Karl Marx's Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016); Peter Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, and Gerhart Niemeyer, "The Second International: 1889-1914" and Carl Landauer, "Social Democracy," in Milorad M. Drachkovitch, ed. *The Revolutionary Internationals, 1864-1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966).

[6] Plekhanov, "Sot͡sializm I Politicheskai͡a Bor'ba," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. II, 68-9.

[7] H. Kendall Rogers, *Before the Revisionist Controversy,* 46.

nineteenth century saw the legalization of unions throughout Western Europe, most notably in France in 1884 and Germany in 1890, and the formation of close ties between them and the Marxist parties in their respective countries.[8] While rooted in their shared focus on the working class and its welfare, these alliances between unions and parties were also based on the tangible benefits each brought to the other, historian Gary Steenson explains, writing that "[unions] tended to see the party as a source of political support and clout… [and the party] got… the political support of trade-union members – their votes, their contributions, and the participation of many of them in party affairs." Moreover, most socialists anticipated that unions would serve as "schools for socialism," Steenson continues, that "through their activities in the trade unions, workers would learn that their limited measures in the economic realm were insufficient to improve their lot in the long run and would turn to political socialism for a permanent solution to their problems."[9] However, rather than radicalizing workers, unions exerted a de-radicalizing pressure on Marxist parties, Steenson concludes, citing the case of Germany and writing that "nothing so restrained the SPD from assuming a more vigorous oppositional posture than… the party's relationship with the trade unions."[10] Historian Peter Gay provides valuable insight into how this transpired, arguing that unions' successes in extracting

[8] For a history of labor unions in Europe, see, Ad Knotter, *Transformations of Trade Unionism: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives on Workers Organizing in Europe and the United States, Eighteenth to Twenty-First Centuries* (Amsterdam : Amsterdam University Press, 2018); Harvey Mitchell and Peter N. Stearns, *Workers & Protest: the European Labor Movement, the Working Classes and the Origins of Social Democracy, 1890-1914* (Itasca: F.A. Peacock Publishers, 1971); Marc Linder, *European Labor Aristocracies: Trade Unionism, the Hierarchy of Skill, and the Stratification of the Manual Working Class Before the First World War* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1985).

[9] Gary P. Steenson, *"Not One Man! Not One Penny!",* 85.

[10] Steenson, *"Not One Man! Not One Penny!"*, 78.

concessions from employers and the state contributed to them increasingly being "bound" to the status quo and less amenable to rhetoric calling for its overthrow.[11] Moreover, even as they were turning more conservative, unions were increasing the size of their membership and coffers, rendering their support even more valuable and leading party leaders to believe in "the indispensability" of maintaining it even if it meant curbing their own radicalism.[12] All of this, Gay relates, meant that "by the turn of the century, the union movement was evolving into a nonrevolutionary force which served as a counterweight to the revolutionary assertions [of Marxist theory]."[13] This is illustrated by what Gay describes as the "*marriage de convenance*" between unions and Revisionism, in which the former, though indifferent to its theoretical claims, "felt a deep affinity for the gradualist tactics of Revisionism" and effectively functioned as "the ally of Revisionism."[14] This could entail some dramatic displays of support, such as when the governing body of German unions, the General Commission, declared in 1899 that the "official position of the German free trade unions [was] the support of…'a peaceful evolution of society to a higher stage,'"[15] asserting, at the height of the Debate, an alignment with Bernstein's fundamental position.

The unions, despite their close ties with and ultimately influence over contemporary Social-Democratic parties, were an external force pushing Marxists

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[11] See, Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, 132-140.

[12] Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, 136-7.

[13] Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, 135.

[14] Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, 138 and 140.

[15] Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism*, 185.

towards jettisoning their orthodoxy. An equally acute pressure, however, arose from within the parties themselves in the last decade of the nineteenth century, largely as a consequence of their involvement in electoral politics. Chief among these was the fact that these parties' focus on the industrial proletariat often failed to attract votes from agricultural workers and led members from more rural parts of Europe to agitate for a revised platform that would win the support of this demographic. A particularly notable example of this is found in the person of Georg von Vollmar (1850-1922), a leading member of the Bavarian section of the SPD. Beginning in 1891, Vollmar consistently "advocated for a more pragmatic and flexible" Party programme that would appeal to the local peasantry, arguing that "if you wanted to win support of the Bavarian peasant, it was no good going and telling him that he was doomed to expropriation by the inevitable laws of history."[16] At the SPD's Frankfurt Party Congress in 1894, Vollmar, supported by the Bavarian delegation, proposed an agrarian platform for the Party that promised "peasant protection," which meant "helping preserve peasant ownership [of land] under the present government."[17] Designed to win peasant votes, Vollmar's programme was nonetheless greeted with hostility by more orthodox Party members, such as Karly Kautsky and August Bebel, who recognized that by promising to "artificially maintain peasant agriculture," it directly contravened Marxism's predictions of the "demise of small-scale production" at the hands of "large capitalist enterprise."[18] Largely because of this, Vollmar's ideas were not incorporated into the SPD's platform; nonetheless, his

[16] Joll, *The Second International,* 91.

[17] Rogers, *Before the Revisionist Controversy*, 71.

[18] Rogers, *Before the Revisionist Controversy*, 71 and 80.

efforts clearly show that the exigencies of electoral politics were pushing some Party members towards abandoning aspects of Marxist theory and embracing a reformist agenda.

The most famous example of participation in conventional politics confronting Marxists with a choice between tactics, goals, and even beliefs, however, were the events involving Alexandre Millerand (1859-1943), a member of the French Independent Socialist Party, in the closing years of the century. Elections in France in 1898 had brought to power Réné Waldeck-Rousseau as Prime Minister who, eager to cultivate leftist support, offered Millerand the cabinet position of Minister of Commerce. Millerand's acceptance of this offer sparked significant controversy among Marxists throughout Europe, with supporters for his decision arguing that it could "result in important reform legislation… ameliorating the condition of France's workers" and his detractors believing that he was betraying the principles of class conflict and entering into "a fundamental compromise with the forces of the bourgeoisie."[19] The election thus presented Marxists with a choice between practical achievement or fidelity to orthodoxy; the Millerand affair was the most vivid illustration of the tensions within the Marxist movement during the time of the Second International.

Revisionism thus emerged in the context of significant debates concerning Marxism and crystallized many of the issues involved. What was especially significant about it, however, was that Bernstein, with his critiques of Marxist theory, provided a justification for abandoning the ideas of revolution and class conflict which some had

[19] Albert S. Lindemann, *A History of European Socialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 155.

come to see as an impediment to practical success. Additionally, with his elaboration of an "ethical" socialism, Bernstein offered an alternative theoretical system to these disaffected Marxists. These were what many orthodox Marxists perceived as especially pernicious about Revisionism and animated their hostility towards it, as seen in Rosa Luxemburg's anti-Revisionist tract *Reform or Revolution* when she writes that "Bernstein's book [*The Preconditions of Socialism*]… is the first attempt to give a theoretical basis to the opportunist elements in social democracy."[20]

However, what undoubtedly rendered Revisionism an especially acute danger in the eyes of the orthodox was its popularity. A number of high-profile SPD leaders, including the theorist Konrad Schmidt and Reichstag representative Heinrich Peus, came out in support of Bernstein, championing his ideas and defending him against detractors.[21] Even more troubling, though, was the support Revisionism could be seen as receiving from the party rank and file and the proletariat itself. Priestland argues that "[Revisionism] also proved attractive to many ordinary socialist supporters" and was "popular amongst ordinary workers"[22] because they preferred its aims of concrete reforms in the near future to orthodox promises of a far-off utopia. "There will always be rich and poor, we want a better and just organization at the factory,"[23] he quotes one as saying, displaying both a skepticism for the radical transformations predicted by orthodox Marxism and a preference for the type of incremental change reforms could bring. As

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[20] Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*, Integer, trans. (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 58.

[21] Steger, *The Quest For Evolutionary Socialism*, 83.

[22] Priestland, *The Red Flag*, 56-7.

[23] Priestland, *The Red Flag*, 57.

has been noted, however, Revisionism encompassed more than simply reformism,[24] and Priestland arguably errs in his view that support for latter was equivalent to support for the former. However, his slippage points to the fact that "Revisionism as a social phenomenon… [had] fluid boundaries"[25] and came to serve as a rallying point for those who were only interested in pursuing a reformist agenda. As Peter Gay relates, the "distinction [between Revisionism and reformism] became ever more difficult to maintain… reformists, whose interest in an unremitting drive towards socialism was questionable, began to ally themselves with the Revisionist movement. They blurred the sharpness of outline [between Revisionism and reformism]… and reduced Revisionism to a reformist interest group."[26] It is in this sense – that of denoting support for non-revolutionary reformism – that "Revisionism" enjoyed the working-class support Priestland refers to and which is widely noted in scholarship. Gay himself relates that "most of the proletarian members of the [SPD] were not favorably inclined towards revolutionary action," explaining that "the material gains which [reforms] had achieved" were largely responsible for this as these provided both a "feeling of contentment… in the present" and "the hope for further improvements… in the future."[27] More recently, Dick Geary, in his study of the German labor movement prior to World War I, echoes

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[24] As Peter Gay explains, "Revisionism…may be separated from general reformism through its emphasis on intellectual criticism of Marxism and its attempt to establish an ethical Social Democratic worldview." Therefore, not all supporters of reformism were necessarily supporters of Revisionism. See, Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, 157.

[25] Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, P.S. Falla, trans. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 445 and 433.

[26] Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, 157.

[27] Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, 120 and 129.

this when he questions "what the official Marxism of the party meant to the ordinary member" in light of the evidence that "the majority of SPD members joined the party simply to improve their living conditions."[28]

With Revisionism – both narrowly as a critique of Marxist orthodoxy and broadly as a cipher for reformist support – speaking directly to current concerns and gaining followers in every level of the Marxist movement, it is understandable why Plekhanov described it as an existential danger. This conviction animated much of the writing he composed at the turn of the century as he hoped to counter Bernstein's critiques and "bury" Revisionism. Towards this aim, Plekhanov pursued two fundamental strategies: one of attacking the Kantian philosophy he saw as the ideological foundation of Bernstein's ideas and one of defending the tenets of Marxism which Bernstein had criticized. Launching a campaign aimed at discrediting Kantianism, Plekhanov claimed that it contained crippling inner contradictions regarding the concept of causality and was therefore logically untenable. To this he contrasted the materialist philosophy informing Marxism and, arguing that it was free of such contractions, effectively proclaimed both the superiority of Marxism over Kantianism and the validity of one of its aspects which Bernstein and the neo-Kantians had criticized. A similar motivation lay behind Plekhanov's argument that Kantianism was purposefully promoted by the contemporary bourgeoisie as a means of buttressing theistic beliefs and thus of pacifying and dominating the working class. This weaponization of Kantianism by the bourgeoisie, he claimed, showed that, contrary to Bernstein's assertions, the class struggle was not a

[28] Dick Geary, "Socialism and the Labor Movement before 1914," in *Labour and Socialist Movements in Europe Before 1914*, Dick Geary, ed. (Providence: Berg Publishers, 1989), 129-130.

result of socialist parties alienating an otherwise progressive social class; rather, the bourgeoisie, wholly reactionary and intent on safeguarding its own interests, was actively engaged in this struggle. Moreover, Plekhanov explicitly attributed the bourgeoisie's hostility and utilization of Kant's ideas to the influence of economic forces, arguing that this class's socio-economic position compelled it towards conflict with the proletariat. With this claim, Plekhanov rendered the bourgeoisie's use of Kant's ideas as an object lesson in the practical workings of the Marxist concept Bernstein had most forcefully criticized: that of material determinism.

While Plekhanov's responses to Revisionism affirmed many of the tenets present in his earlier writings and therefore clearly show a definite continuity in his thought, they also reveal new elements in his thinking. Belying his vigorous affirmations of material determinism, Plekhanov's writings during the Revisionist Debate betray a definite loss of confidence in it. As previously discussed, Plekhanov's thinking prior to the Revisionist Debate was characterized by the optimistic certainty that not only would material forces ineluctably lead the proletariat towards the revolutionary establishment of socialism, but also that these forces allowed this process to be expedited by predisposing the proletariat towards embracing Marxist theory. The popularity Revisionism enjoyed, however, apparently forced Plekhanov to effectively revise this position. Though continuing to affirm the proletariat's materially-determined revolutionary character and affinity for orthodox Marxism, Plekhanov's writings from the time of the Revisionist Debate onward also demonstrate concerns that the proletariat's resistance to capitalism and predisposition towards Marxist theory were not assured, concerns displayed in claims such as those regarding the pacifying effect that Kantianism's encouragement of theism

would have and in the similar effects Revisionism was already having upon the working class. Thus no longer possessing the confident certainty that characterized his earlier thinking, Plekhanov effectively began to treat proletarian class consciousness as untethered from the impact of material forces and capable of being influenced by either revolutionary or counter-revolutionary ideas.

In response to his novel concerns regarding the proletariat, Plekhanov's thinking concerning the role of intellectuals underwent a shift that was fundamentally subtle but ultimately deeply consequential in regards to the development of his mature aesthetic. While the pedagogical role he had assigned intellectuals in his early writings remained, Plekhanov now began to place greater importance upon this role and to expand what it entailed to ensure that the proletariat developed a revolutionary worldview. No longer conceiving of these groups as just providing Marxist ideas to a receptive working class and thereby accelerating their inevitable embrace of socialism, Plekhanov now placed greater responsibility on Marxist intellectuals for the very development of an anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois consciousness in the working class through rigorous efforts in both educating them in Marxist theory and disabusing them of counter-revolutionary ideas. Plekhanov's participation in the Revisionist Debate and efforts to discredit Bernstein can ultimately be seen as motivated by these revised beliefs. With intellectuals the only reliable guarantors of the proletariat acquiring a revolutionary class consciousness, Plekhanov aimed to ensure that they were prepared for their role by showing them in his anti-Revisionist writings the flaws in the Kantian foundation of Bernstein's ideas and the viability of orthodox Marxism.

Responding to Revisionism: Affirmations of Orthodoxy

Although only one of the many members of the Second International who would eventually attempt to deflect, disprove, or otherwise denounce Bernstein, Plekhanov was unique in that he paid particular attention to the philosophical dimension of the Revisionist critiques of Marxism.[29] This is clear from the very opening of his first statements on Revisionism, made in remarks he prepared for a speech he would give to local Social-Democratic Party meetings in his residence-in-exile of Geneva in the spring and summer of 1898. Effectively laying out the fundamental argument for the entirety of his anti-Revisionist polemics, Plekhanov emphasized that Bernstein's heterodoxy lay in his departure from the fundamental materialism of Marxist thought. Plekhanov writes that "the founder of modern socialism [i.e. Marx] was a firm supporter of materialism…materialism was the foundation of all his doctrine" and juxtaposes this with Bernstein, who "call[s] materialism into question… see[s] it as an erroneous theory."[30] Plekhanov alludes to Bernstein's arguments that ethical beliefs and convictions, rather

[29] This distinctiveness is especially apparent when Plekhanov's responses to Bernstein are compared to those concurrently produced by Alexander Parvus and Rosa Luxemburg, both members of the German Social Democratic Party who, along with Plekhanov, constitute the earliest critics of Revisionism - Parvus initiated his series of articles responding to Bernstein in January 1898, Plekhanov began his articles in July of that year, and Luxemburg started hers, later reworked into the monograph *Reform or Revolution*, that September. For thorough study of the early phases of the Revisionist Debate, see, H. Tudor and J.M. Tudor, *Marxism and Social Democracy: The Revisionist Debate 1896-1898* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Both Parvus and Luxemburg focused on refuting the socio-economic data that he had cited as supporting his critiques of Marxist theory and effectively portrayed Revisionism as the product of flawed quantitative analyses, with Parvus arguing that statistics proved that Marx's predictions of the concentration of capital were accurate and Luxemburg arguing that economic data demonstrated that capitalism was rent by internal contradictions that would lead to its collapse. See, Alexander Parvus, "Bernstein's Overthrow of Socialism: Parvus's Intervention," in *Marxism and Social Democracy*, 174-196; and Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*.

[30] Georgi Plekhanov, "O Mnimom Krizise Marksizma," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. II, (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1956), 336.

than material forces, could construct socialism as evidence of this. He explains that, in contrast to a materialist, who believes in the causal role of matter, that "extension and thought are merely attributes [of matter],"[31] Bernstein "retreat[s]" to the philosophical position of "idealism," by espousing the conviction that "human thought is the source… of all social and political organization… [and] the development of that organization is determined by human thought."[32]

While clearly seeing Bernstein's heterodox, "idealist" beliefs themselves as an issue, what truly exercised Plekhanov was his conviction that these beliefs were being used by Bernstein to "attack present-day socialism [i.e. Marxist theory and the Marxist movement],"[33] referencing Bernstein's critiques of Marxism's orthodox materialism. Proclaiming that "socialist theory will remain what it is: an impregnable fortress all hostile forces hurl themselves against in vain,"[34] Plekhanov, still in his initial speech, effectively announces his agenda of defending Marxism against Revisionism's "attacks." Plekhanov's subsequent defense of Marxism and attacks on Revisionism, carried out in a series of articles composed between 1898 and 1899 for the German Social-Democratic journal *Die Neue Zeit*,[35] were animated by this aim.

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[31] Plekhanov, "O Mnimom Krizise Marksizma," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. II, 339.

[32] Plekhanov, "O Mnimom Krizise Marksizma," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. II, 342 and 345.

[33] Plekhanov, "O Mnimom Krizise Marksizma," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. II, 336.

[34] Plekhanov, "O Mnimom Krizise Marksizma," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. II, 336.

[35] Information on *Die Neue Zeit* and the significance of Plekhanov's decision to publish in it will be discussed subsequently.

Towards his goal of discrediting Bernstein, Plekhanov pursued a series of critiques against Kantian philosophy across his articles. Believing that Revisionism drew upon Kantian concepts, Plekhanov intended to undermine Bernstein by attacking these concepts, portraying them as illogical and unsound. Plekhanov effectively outlines this process when he writes that "the paucity of the 'critical' thinking of those gentlemen who would criticize Marx reveals itself… [when] they contrast what they term the materialists' dogmatism to the threadbare dogma of the Kantians regarding the unknowability of the external world."[36] As his reference to "unknowability" indicates, Plekhanov's chief target of attack were the concepts comprising the epistemological system Kant put forward in *The Critique of Pure Reason* and subsequently employed by Bernstein and contemporary Neo-Kantians in their rejection of materialist philosophy.

In a certain sense echoing the claims of Bernstein and the neo-Kantians, Plekhanov considers Kant's epistemological ideas to be the most fundamental "difference between materialism… and Kantianism." He writes that "according to Kant… the nature of things, regarded in themselves and independently of our own faculty of perception, is wholly unknown to us. Of such things, we know only the manner on which we perceive them: consequently, things belong to the area of the unknowable," summarizing the central claim of *The Critique of Pure Reason* before concluding that "in this, the materialists are far from agreement with Kant."[37] However, in direct contrast to Bernstein and the neo-Kantians use of Kant's epistemology to contest the viability of

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[36] Plekhanov, "Pervye Fazy Ucheniia͡ O Klassovoĭ Bor'be (Predislovie k Kommunisticheskomu Manifestu)," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XI, 277.

[37] Plekhanov, "O Knige Kroche," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XI, 340.

materialist philosophy, Plekhanov pursued the opposite objective of defending materialism by attempting to refute Kantianism's claims of unknowability. At the center of this process is Plekhanov's stress on the fact that Kant's conception of *phenomena* partly entails a cognitive response to an external, material reality, that a *phenomenon* is "a condition of our consciousness evoked by the effect on us of things-in-themselves."[38] Proceeding to argue that "we can anticipate certain *phenomena*… anticipate the effect exerted on us by things-in-themselves," Plekhanov, drawing upon Engels's arguments in his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*,[39] marshals as evidence of this "science and technology" and their reliance on the expectations that the *phenomena* involved will consistently behave in a predictable manner, writing that with them "we put to an infallible test the correctness or otherwise of… our estimate of the use to which an object can be turned."[40] Therefore, Plekhanov argues, "if we can anticipate the effect exerted on us by things-in-themselves, then that means that we are aware of some of their properties. So, if we are aware of some properties of things-in-themselves, we have no right to call those things unknowable. This sophistry of Kant's falls to the ground."[41] By concluding that "when Bernstein calls us back to Kant and when he criticizes present-day materialism… he is thereby proving nothing but his own

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[38] Plekhanov, "K. Shmidt Protiv K. Marksa I F. Ėngel'sa," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XI, 97.

[39] In his discussion of philosophers "who question the possibility of any cognition…of the world," which includes Kant and David Hume, Engels argues that "the most telling refutation of this…is practice, *viz.* experiment and industry. If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions and using for our own purposes into the bargain, then there is an end of the Kantian incomprehensible 'thing-in-itself.'" Friedrick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1941), 22-3.

[40] Plekhanov, "K. Shmidt Protiv K. Marksa I F. Ėngel'sa," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XI, 97.

[41] Plekhanov, "K. Shmidt Protiv K. Marksa I F. Ėngel'sa," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XI, 97.

ignorance,"[42] Plekhanov makes it clear that his attacks on Kant are wholly in the service of refuting Bernstein's Revisionism.

While especially noteworthy for how directly it responded to Bernstein and the neo-Kantians, Plekhanov's refutation of the notion of the unknowability of the thing-in-itself was merely the first step in a larger process culminating in a claim of Kantianism's inferiority to Marxist materialism. Plekhanov begins this by reiterating that "things-in-themselves affect our external senses and evoke certain sensations in us, that is what Kant says… that things[-in-themselves] cause sensations in us," and then launches his major strike against Kantianism with the claim that "the selfsame Kant says that the category of causality, like all other categories, cannot be applied to things-in-themselves. In this, he is manifestly contradicting himself."[43] Plekhanov therefore argues that a serious paradox regarding the concept of causality exists in the philosopher's system, that Kantianism is rent by an "internal contradiction."[44] He proceeds to leverage this allegation into a wider critique, writing that "a contradiction cannot serve as a foundation; it is indicative only of groundlessness."[45] To illustrate this, Plekhanov interrogates the thinking of the then-prominent neo-Kantian Kurd Lasswitz contained in his monograph *Kant's Teaching of the Ideality of Space and Time* (1883). After relating that Lasswitz disavowed the notion of the thing-in-itself and instead claimed that "there is no being that exists outside consciousness," Plekhanov argues that this dramatic step was the result of Lasswitz

[42] Plekhanov, "K. Shmidt Protiv K. Marksa I F. Ėngel'sa," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XI, 98.

[43] Plekhanov, "K. Shmidt Protiv K. Marksa I F. Ėngel'sa," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XI, 100.

[44] Plekhanov, "K. Shmidt Protiv K. Marksa I F. Ėngel'sa," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XI, 103.

[45] Plekhanov, "K. Shmidt Protiv K. Marksa I F. Ėngel'sa," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XI, 122.

attempting to resolve the supposed inconsistencies in Kant's thought. Lasswitz "noticed [the] contradiction" regarding causality in Kantianism, Plekhanov writes, "and tried to remove it" by claiming that perceptions are wholly subjective and not the result of any causal dynamic.[46] Kantianism is thus so fundamentally unsound, Plekhanov argues, that even sympathetic adherents are compelled to drastically alter it in order "to eliminate its internal contradiction… to save it."[47] As he had before, however, Plekhanov is quick to remind his readers of the implications of his arguments, concluding that "what a maze of absurdities anyone will inevitably find himself in, who takes that theory [i.e. Kantianism] in earnest,"[48] effectively tying his offensive against Kant's ideas back to his goal of undermining Revisionism. By discrediting Kantianism, by arguing that the entire philosophy was unsustainable due to its paradoxical positions regarding causality, Plekhanov aimed to disarm the entire system he believed Bernstein had based upon it.

Despite clearly intending his critiques of Kantianism to function independently as attacks on Revisionism's intellectual foundation, Plekhanov also utilized them to demonstrate Marxism's freedom from the various flaws he had identified. He concludes his above discussion of the supposed contradictions inherent in Kant's thought, for example, by writing that "materialism…does not fall into contradiction with itself."[49] Plekhanov begins to expand this more defensive strategy by writing that Kant "regard[ed] the material world as one of *phenomena*… to attribute to such matter, and therefore to the

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[46] Plekhanov, "K. Shmidt Protiv K. Marksa I F. Ėngel'sa," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XI, 103.

[47] Plekhanov, "K. Shmidt Protiv K. Marksa I F. Ėngel'sa," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XI, 103.

[48] Plekhanov, "Yeshche Raz Materializm," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XI, 128.

[49] Plekhanov, "Yeshche Raz Materializm," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XI, 127.

material world created by it, an existence independent of our consciousness would, from Kant's point of view, mean committing a blunder unforgivable in a thinker."[50] Revisiting the concept of the *phenomena*, Plekhanov claims that Kant's belief that they were only known via the *a priori* categories of a person's consciousness, effectively precluded any real acknowledgement of an independent material reality. With his conclusion that "the Kantian theory of existence is ultimately quite subjective in character, and in no way differs from Fichte's idealist theory… [wherein] any being… is merely a certain modification of consciousness,"[51] Plekhanov utilizes his claims regarding the concept of *phenomena* to portray Kantianism as a philosophy of solipsism. More than that, he also demonstrates that his return to the elements of Kant's theory of epistemology had actually been a means of discussing metaphysics, that he had used the Kantian concept of *phenomena* to make claims about a Kantian theory of being. In his above revisiting of the thing-in-itself and *phenomena* concepts, Plekhanov is not, as he was in his previous dealings with them, concerned with their epistemic viability or logical consistency; rather, he is interested in what can be inferred from them about Kant's worldview and ideas about existence.

Although the soundness of Plekhanov's extrapolation of a subjective-idealist metaphysics from Kant's epistemology is debatable, he relied upon it in order to craft an intentionally damning portrait of Kantianism that he would contrast with Marxism. The features of this portrait begin to take shape when Plekhanov writes that, due to Kant's de

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[50] Plekhanov, "K. Shmidt Protiv K. Marksa I F. Ėngel'sa," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XI, 106.

[51] Plekhanov, "Yeshche Raz Materializm," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XI, 128 and 123. Plekhanov is referring to the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814).

facto denial of physical reality, Kantian philosophy must posit that the "laws of nature are the laws of our mind." Supporting this assertion by quoting Kant's statement that "'the mind does not draw its laws a priori from nature; on the contrary, it dictates its own laws to nature,'" Plekhanov argues that "consequently, these laws [of nature] have no objective significance… they are applicable only to *phenomena*, not things-in-themselves… [and] *phenomena* exist only in us," before concluding that that Kant's idealist conception of being must "den[y] the existence of things outside of us and their effect on our external senses."[52] While Plekhanov here references the fundamentals of his argument regarding the contradiction in Kantian philosophy – that Kant considers the notion of causality to be one of the a priori categories of the human mind and only applicable to *phenomena* despite himself applying it to things-in-themselves – his shift towards a focus on metaphysics allows him to radically deepen his criticism. Plekhanov argues that Kantian philosophy, perforce its supposed denial of physical reality, must disclaim not only the objective existence of things-in-themselves but also the objective functioning of the "natural laws," such as that of cause and effect, under which these things-in-themselves would operate. A causal process between things-in-themselves and *phenomena*, despite its centrality in Kant's system, is thus doubly an impossibility according to that same system, argues Plekhanov, completing his portrait of Kantianism as an untenably self-contradictory philosophy in denial of any reality beyond that of human consciousness.

[52] Plekhanov, "Yeshche Raz Materializm," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XI, 128 and 123.

With the claim that a "materialist firmly holds the view that the material world has an objective existence,"[53] Plekhanov begins to assert Marxism's superiority to Kantianism by implicitly juxtaposing its materialist philosophy to the solipsism he attributed to Kantianism. He elaborates on the supposed contrasts between the two systems, writing that materialists "are obliged to recognize that the laws of nature have not only a subjective but also an objective significance, i.e. that the mutual relations of ideas in the subject correspond – whenever one is not in error – to the mutual relations between things outside of one. "[54] This claim of materialism's acceptance of natural laws, however, ultimately serves the same function as his discussion of Kantianism's supposed rejection of these processes: as a vehicle for addressing the philosophy's views on causality. By asserting that materialism, in contrast to his claims regarding Kantian philosophy, did acknowledge the existence of natural laws, Plekhanov was indicating that materialism, again in contrast to his portrayal of Kantianism, fully recognized the operation of causality in the world. Plekhanov renders this explicit when he closes his discussion of materialism's recognition of natural laws by writing that this entails an appreciation of not simply the existence of "an object's effect[s]" in the material world, but also of the fact that "to every change in the object there corresponds a change in its effects."[55] Thus describing both the ability of an object to affect and how alterations in the object cause the effects it produces to change, Plekhanov repeatedly affirms materialism's recognition of causality.

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[53] Plekhanov, "K. Shmidt Protiv K. Marksa I F. Ėngel'sa," in *Sochineniĭa,* tom. XI, 107.

[54] Plekhanov, "Yeshche Raz Materializm," in *Sochineniĭa,* tom. XI, 128.

[55] Plekhanov, "Yeshche Raz Materializm," in *Sochineniĭa,* tom. XI, 129.

Therefore, having first argued that Kant's idealism necessarily disavowed the existence of the physical world and the possibility of causal processes within it, Plekhanov then proceeded to portray Marxism's underlying philosophy of materialism as embracing diametrically opposite positions. By doing so, Plekhanov was consciously equipping Marxist materialism with the means to ensure that it could avoid the self-contradictions he had identified in Kantian philosophy. This becomes apparent when, as he had when arguing against the notion of the unknowability of things-in-themselves, Plekhanov embraces this subject-object dynamic and incorporates it into materialism, writing that materialists "call 'matter' that which, by affecting our sense organs, gives rise to some sensation in us. But what is it that affects our sense organs? To that I reply, together with Kant: things-in-themselves."[56] Plekhanov therefore contends that materialists share the same basic position as that he attributed to Kantianism: that an individual's apprehension of the physical world is caused by the effect of things-in-themselves on that individual. Plekhanov is quick to argue, however, that "the materialist's conclusions are in accord with his premises," explaining that a materialist "thinks that the material world, which exists outside of his consciousness, acts upon his cognitive faculty," before contrasting this with those who "tak[e] up the stand of subjective idealism,"[57] pointing directly to the view he attributed to Kantianism. Having previously elaborated on the inability of Kantian philosophy's metaphysical premises to support its assumption that things-in-themselves caused perceived *phenomena*, Plekhanov explicitly claims that materialism does not suffer from this issue, establishing

[56] Plekhanov, "Yeshche Raz Materializm," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XI, 137.

[57] Plekhanov, "K. Shmidt Protiv K. Marksa I F. Ėngel'sa," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XI, 107-8.

Marxist materialism as a logically consistent philosophical system free from the flaws he claimed were inherent in Kantianism.

In his initial criticisms concerning the contradictions within Kantian epistemology, Plekhanov had pursued the purely aggressive line of a counterassault, attacking Kantianism as a means of undermining Bernstein's critiques of Marxism's materialist philosophy. Upon expanding his criticisms to the supposed idealist metaphysics of Kant's system, however, Plekhanov simultaneously expanded his agenda to include concerted efforts at defense. No longer simply deflecting criticisms of materialism, he was now defending the validity of its most fundamental principles by demonstrating that they allowed Marxism to avoid the issues afflicting Kantianism. Essentially arguing that materialism's privileging of the material over the ideal aspects of reality was the source of Marxism's freedom from the paradoxes that plagued Kantianism, Plekhanov was directly responding to contemporary claims, most prominently those put forward by the neo-Kantians and Revisionism, that it was precisely this privileging that made materialism obsolete. His focus on the issues of causality in Kantian philosophy, therefore, was not simply a continuation of his efforts to discredit Revisionism's philosophical source; rather, Plekhanov's criticisms of Kantianism on this issue were also intended to serve as a means of introducing a defense of critiqued aspects of Marxist theory.

Plekhanov would repeat this procedure of leveraging attacks against Kantianism towards affirming the tenets of Marxism that Bernstein had criticized with an argument concerning the theistic implications of Kant's ideas. Plekhanov argues that Kant had "desire[d] to defend his traditional [religious] beliefs at all cost" and did so by ensuring

that his philosophy "le[ft] room for religious superstition."[58] Plekhanov points to Kant's epistemological concepts as evidence of this, writing that "Kant's 'unknowable' leaves the door wide open to mysticism… this 'unknowable' is nothing else but God."[59] Here, Plekhanov again returns to Kant's concept of the unknowable thing-in-itself, but now identifies it as a vehicle for the smuggling of theistic ideas. To support this, Plekhanov cites Kant's famous claim from the *Critique of Pure Reason* that "I cannot even make the assumption of God, freedom, and immortality, as the practical interests of my mind require, if I do not deprive speculative reason of its presentations to transcendent insight… I must, therefore, deny knowledge to make room for belief."[60] Plekhanov embraces a literal interpretation of Kant's stated aim here and connects this with Kant's denial of knowability regarding things-in-themselves. It is from this connection that Plekhanov concludes that Kant had designed his epistemology, with its central contention that direct knowledge of the world of things-in-themselves was an impossibility, as a means of maintaining religious concepts such as God and the immortal soul.

Plekhanov explains that because "atheism…encourages revolutionary sentiments in the toiling masses… the bourgeoisie are interested in resurrecting Kant's philosophy because they hope that it will help them to lull the proletariat into quietude,"[61] effectively folding his claims regarding Kantianism's theistic implications into a discussion of the

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[58] Plekhanov, "Pervye Fazy Ucheniia͡ O Klassovoĭ Bor'be (Predislovie k Kommunisticheskomu Manifestu)," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XI, 317.

[59] Plekhanov, "O Mnimom Krizise Marksizma," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia͡,* tom. II, 341.

[60] Plekhanov, "Materializm Ili Kantianizm," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XI, 132.

[61] Plekhanov, "Cant Protiv Kanta, Ili Dukhovnoe Zaveshchanie G. Bernshteĭna" and "Materializm Ili Kantianizm," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XI, 52 and 130.

class struggle. More specifically, Plekhanov mobilizes his criticisms of Kantianism to serve as evidence of the bourgeoisie's participation in the class struggle in response to Bernstein's claims to the contrary. Against Bernstein's dismissal of Marxism's belief that class conflict was inevitable and his portrayal of the bourgeoisie as a progressive class only reluctantly responding to aggressive Social-Democratic rhetoric, Plekhanov marshals claims that the bourgeoisie were consciously promoting Kantianism to serve as a bulwark against atheism in order to defend their own interests at the expense of the proletariat. Plekhanov writes that, for the bourgeoisie, "the social consequences of atheism are horrifying. If there is neither God, life beyond the grave, nor eternity; if the soul ceases to exist together with the advent of death, then any calamity, any poverty suffered by part of mankind, which suffers while another enjoys surfeit, becomes two and three hundred times as unjust."[62] This has led the bourgeoisie to be "interested in 'edifying' the proletariat and countering atheism… [with] Kantianism… considered a weapon most suited to that purpose,"[63] Plekhanov argues. Concluding that "in Kant's doctrine the bourgeoisie see a powerful 'spiritual weapon' in the struggle against the ultimate aspirations of the working class,"[64] Plekhanov accuses the bourgeoisie of weaponizing the subterranean piety of Kantian philosophy in order to pacify the proletariat, stifle revolutionary ferment, and maintain its dominant social position.

Plekhanov points directly to the purpose of his claims regarding the bourgeoisie's self-serving use of Kantianism when he writes, "how should one understand those

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[62] Plekhanov, "Cant Protiv Kanta, Ili Dukhovnoe Zaveshchanie G. Bernshteĭna" in *Sochineniĭa,* tom. XI, 52.

[63] Plekhanov, "Materializm Ili Kantianizm," in *Sochineniĭa,* tom. XI, 130

[64] Plekhanov, "K. Shmidt Protiv K. Marksa I F. Ėngel'sa," in *Sochineniĭa,* tom. XI, 113.

socialists who, behind a cover of criticism of Marxism, would play down the significance of the class struggle and…declare that the workers should not be set against the bourgeoisie? Let us leave that to the reader's judgment."[65] With this reference to Bernstein's call for Marxists to jettison their belief that class conflict was inevitable and to attempt reconciliation with the bourgeoisie, Plekhanov clearly believes that his claims regarding the theistic nature and bourgeois utilization of Kant's ideas unmasks this call as a blatant capitulation to bourgeois interests. These claims, therefore, were meant by Plekhanov to function not simply as a critique of Kantian philosophy, but also as a defense, as evidence of the continued existence of the class struggle and of the bourgeoisie's aggressive participation in it.

Plekhanov's utilization of his criticisms regarding Kantianism's religiosity duplicates the process he had employed with his earlier criticisms regarding the issues surrounding causality in Kant's system. In both instances, Plekhanov put forward critiques of Kantian philosophy and then repurposed them towards defending a Marxist principle that Revisionism had called into dispute. Plekhanov maintains this pattern here, arguing for "the economic causes of that negative attitude towards [atheism] and that spread of Kantianism which are to be seen among the educated bourgeoisie of today."[66] With this, Plekhanov renders the bourgeoisie's behavior he had previously described as evidence of the Marxist concept of economic determinism, making it one of the most salient efforts in his anti-Revisionist polemics to demonstrate the validity of this concept

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[65] Plekhanov, "Pervye Fazy Ucheniia͡ O Klassovoĭ Bor'be (Predislovie k Kommunisticheskomu Manifestu)," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XI, 296.

[66] Plekhanov, "Cant Protiv Kanta, Ili Dukhovnoe Zaveshchanie G. Bernshteĭna" in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XI, 52.

in response to Bernstein's criticisms. The importance Plekhanov attached to defending material determinism can be seen by his foregrounding it in his very first speech against Revisionism wherein he contrasts Marxism's "materialist understanding of history," its conception of historical development as being driven by material forces, with a conception of historical development informed by an idealist philosophy, such as he claimed Kantianism to be. "An understanding of history that is completely idealistic," Plekhanov argues, believes the "development of… society… is caused by the development of human thought." Such an understanding contains a "weak point," Plekhanov continues, as many idealists are unable to identify the source of the "mores and ideas" that they believe have such important effects, at best making the claim that "thought is the product of social environment." This circular reasoning wherein the supposed product of thought is positioned as it source is clearly a "contradiction," Plekhanov argues, revealing the "antinomy" in the idealist worldview.[67] He claims that "Marx's understanding of history solves this" by positing that "it is not psychology but political economy that accounts for the evolution of society *and* human thought," leading Plekhanov to conclude that "the materialist understanding of history is…the only scientific explanation of history."[68] The presentation of the bourgeoisie's weaponization of Kant as an economically-determined process was therefore part of Plekhanov's ongoing efforts to affirm Marxism's deterministic tenets. Viewed alongside his defense of philosophic materialism and attempts to reveal contemporary class conflict, it is clear

[67] Plekhanov, "Bernshteĭn I Materializm" in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedenii͡a,* tom. II, 343.

[68] Plekhanov, "Bernshteĭn I Materializm" in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedenii͡a,* tom. II, 343. Emphasis added.

that while part of Plekhanov's response to Bernstein focused on counterattacks against Revisionist ideas, defending the validity of his own orthodox Marxist beliefs were an equally important component of them.

Responding to Revisionism: Self-Revision

By variously defending or confirming Marxist principles, Plekhanov was not simply rejecting Bernstein's critiques of these tenets, he was also proclaiming his continued adherence to these ideas and therefore maintaining a definite continuity with his pre-Revisionist Debate thought. This continuity, however, had definite limits. While Plekhanov defended the central beliefs of his early Marxist writings and would continue to espouse them following the Revisionist Debate, the confidence that underlay these beliefs and characterized his early Marxist thinking in general was fundamentally lost. The popularity Revisionism enjoyed apparently forced Plekhanov to revise his certainty that material forces had conditioned the proletariat to not only be predisposed to orthodox Marxism, but also that it would inevitably develop an oppositional, revolutionary mindset. This loss of confidence in the materially-guaranteed revolutionary character of the proletariat can be seen, for example, in Plekhanov's above discussion regarding the effect that Kantianism's religiosity would have on the working class. Explicit in his belief that the proletariat *could* embrace religion and that this *would* render them quiescent, Plekhanov displayed a level of concern starkly at odds with his confident early writings, wherein the only question was how quickly the proletariat would acquire a fully class-conscious worldview.

Belying his continued affirmations of material determinism, therefore, Plekhanov's Revisionist Debate polemics betray a shift in his thinking towards ascribing a greater significance to the ideas the proletariat were exposed to. Although in his pre-Revisionist Debate writings Plekhanov had recognized the influence ideas could exert upon the proletariat, he had confidently seen this only in terms of Marxist theory accentuating and accelerating their inevitable, materially-determined historical movement towards revolution. With his loss of confidence in this, Plekhanov's writings from his anti-Revisionist polemics onward demonstrate a persistent concern regarding the influence counter-revolutionary ideas could exert upon the proletariat. As illustrated by his claims about the consequences of Kantian religiosity, Plekhanov had come to fear that conservative ideas could fundamentally impact the proletariat's worldview and impede its role in establishing socialism. This concern was in fact a fundamental motivation for his anti-Revisionist polemics, as evidenced by his statements regarding the threat Revisionism posed. As already noted, Plekhanov described Bernstein as posing an existential threat to the Marxist movement, that, if left unopposed, his Revisionist ideas would "bury" it. Plekhanov explains what he means by this at various points throughout his polemics, arguing that Bernstein's Revisionism was "clouding the class consciousness of the workers" and "serves as a weapon in the 'spiritual struggle' against… the class-conscious proletariat" with the aim "to weaken a certain practical trend – the revolutionary trend of the class-conscious proletariat."[69] The development of the proletariat into a revolutionary force through the clarification of its class consciousness,

[69] Plekhanov, "Cant Protiv Kanta, Ili Dukhovnoe Zaveshchanie G. Bernshteĭna" and "Pervye Fazy Ucheniiа͡ O Klassovoĭ Bor'be (Predislovie k Kommunisticheskomu Manifestu),," in *Sochineniiа͡,* tom. XI, 57, and 252.

something Plekhanov had only presented as a forward-moving and materially-guaranteed process in his early writings, is here presented as capable of being obstructed and even reversed by Revisionism. Plekhanov's belief that Bernstein's ideas posed a threat was therefore rooted in deeper, novel concerns about the working class's development and susceptibility to conservative ideologies.

Plekhanov's anxieties regarding the effect counter-revolutionary ideas could exert upon the proletariat, even as he continued to espouse a belief in material determinism and its revolutionary outcome,[70] would persist in Plekhanov's thinking following the Revisionist Debate. In 1908, for example, he argues that the class struggle has "convinced the…bourgeoisie more than ever of the need to preserve religion as a curb on the people…[as] theological blinders by which they wish to benight the proletariat and impede its spiritual growth." This is particularly dangerous, Plekhanov continues, because it is possible that "[the bourgeoisie] may infect [the proletariat] with mystical infatuations," explaining that there are proletarians "who are only partly conscious of their class position and [others] who are completely unconscious of it. In the course of development of these sections of the working class, religious preaching can have a strong

[70] In his 1902 Preface to an edition of Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, for example, Plekhanov unequivocally expresses a belief in economic determinism and inevitable revolution. He writes that "men's thinking is conditioned by their being, in the historical process, the course of the development of ideas is determined in the final analysis by the course of development of economic relations. It is plain that the formation of new economic relations must necessarily bring with it the appearance of new ideas corresponding to the changed conditions of life…the whole course of social development, all social evolution – with its various aspects and revolutionary trends – is perceived from the point of view of necessity [by Marxists]…the proletariat finds itself in an economic position inevitably pushing it into revolutionary struggle against the prevailing social order. Here, too, as everywhere, the scientific socialist are not content to view the activity of social mans as the cause of social phenomena; they look more deeply and perceive this cause itself as the consequence of development." Plekhanov, "Predislovie K Perevodu 'Razvitie Nauchnogo Sot͡sializma' F. Ėngel'sa," in *Sochineniĭa,* tom. XI, 45-7.

negative effect."[71] A decade removed from his polemics against Bernstein, therefore, and Plekhanov is still expressing fear that religious ideas could obstruct the formation of a revolutionary class consciousness withing the proletariat, preventing something he had previously seen as essentially guaranteed by material forces. Similarly, in an article also from 1908 commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Marx's death, Plekhanov effectively laments that his concerns about the effect Revisionism would have upon the working class been proven correct. Writing that "Marx's theory is known to have been the object of numerous attacks by the so-called critics of Marx [i.e. Bernstein and his allies]," Plekhanov notes that "these attacks were not lacking in effect. In the ranks of the militant proletariat of the whole civilized world there are not a few who firmly believe that Marxism as a theory has already outlived its time and must now give way to new views."[72] Not only did Plekhanov, in the aftermath of the Revisionist Debate, no longer have confidence in the proletariat's inevitable development of a revolutionary consciousness, he was also no longer assured that they were predisposed towards embracing Marxism. Instead, he believed they could be easily misled by alternative theories.

Plekhanov was not alone in harboring concerns about the proletariat nor in responding to these by effectively revising his beliefs in material determinism. As historian Stanley Pierson relates, many of his contemporary Marxists were struck by what they saw as a "decline in revolutionary zeal" within the working class in the form of their

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[71] Plekhanov, "G-n P. Struve V Roli Kritika Marksovoĭ Teorii Obshchestv Razvitiia͡," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XI, 206-207, 196.

[72] Plekhanov, "G-n P. Struve V Roli Kritika Marksovoĭ Teorii Obshchestv Razvitiia͡," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XI, 184.

support for reformism and the popularity of trade unions, and similarly began to question how the proletariat was to "advance… to a genuinely socialist mentality."[73] Their attempt to address these anxieties led to what Pierson describes as an "idealistic turn" in their thought: a belief that greater attention to the influence of ideas would ensure the development of a revolutionary, socialist consciousness among the proletariat.[74] This belief motivated various leading figures, such as Franz Mehring and Rosa Luxemburg, towards "concerted effort[s] to instruct the rank and file in Marxist ideas," most famously in the 1906 founding of a SPD "party school" in Berlin for workers, and a "determination to protect its members against dangerous influences."[75]

Plekhanov very much followed this tack of responding to concerns about the proletariat by emphasizing pedagogy and protection. Demonstrating this is the increased importance and broadened scope of activities he assigned to intellectuals in relation to the proletariat during and after the Revisionist Debate. The pedagogical function he had assigned to intellectuals in his early writings remained fundamentally unaltered but was now presented more as a necessity than an expedient and as involving more concerted and specific efforts than it had before. No longer tasked with simply providing clarity to

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[73] Stanley Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany, 1887-1912* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 186 and 197.

[74] Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany,* 203.

[75] Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany*, 193-204. In his classic study of the socialist movement in Imperial Germany, Vernon Lidtke discusses these schools and the motivation behind their founding in much the same way. He writes that "a few years after the turn of the century Social Democrats showed a new and intensified commitment to creating programs for education and cultivation," leading to the 1906 founding of the Part school, which "was to server workers' emancipation…and that could only be achieved…by instilling workers with the principles and theories of the socialist movement." See, Vernon Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 165.

a receptive proletariat by presenting it with Marxist ideas and accelerating their preexisting revolutionary ascent, Plekhanov now treated intellectuals as uniquely responsible for convincing the proletariat of the correctness of Marxism and the incorrectness of counter-revolutionary theories. It was therefore of vital importance that intellectuals themselves possessed correct ideas and were convinced of the incorrectness of theories such as Revisionism. Plekhanov's participation in the Revisionist Debate – his defense of Marxism and attacks on Bernstein's ideas – can thus be seen as oriented towards this goal. That Plekhanov wrote his anti-Revisionist articles exclusively for the journal *Die Neue Zeit* supports this idea. *Die Neue Zeit* was, as historian Gary Steenson explains, intended to be the "official theoretical journal" of the German Social Democrats, and thus particularly suited to reach Plekhanov's target audience of intellectuals. Moreover, Pierson notes that while *Die Neue Zeit* was founded in 1883 to serve as a vehicle for "the clarification and dissemination of Marxist theory… [towards]the enlightenment of the masses… it was clear by the early nineties that the *Neue Zeit* was not reaching the party rank and file…[its] subscribers were mostly members of… the party cadre."[76] By writing in *Die Neue Zeit*, therefore, Plekhanov was consciously speaking directly to the intellectuals and elite members of the Party, the very individuals he now saw as bearing greater responsibility for whether the proletariat acquired a revolutionary worldview.

Writing in response to questions regarding Party tactics posed by the French newspaper *La Petite République Socialiste* in 1899, the height of the Revisionist Debate,

[76] Stanley Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany: 1887-1912* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 68, 61, and 67.

Plekhanov gives a clear idea as to the greater importance and expanded functions he now attached to Marxist intellectuals. He argues that

> for the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat to become ever more active and resolute, it is necessary for the proletariat to become more and more imbued with the consciousness of the opposition of its interests to those of its exploiters. The proletariat's consciousness is that awesome dynamite of the socialists that will explode modern society. Everything that promotes the development of that consciousness should be considered a revolutionary means, and therefore acceptable to socialists; everything that blunts that consciousness is anti-revolutionary, and should therefore be condemned and rejected by us. That is the main principle all our tactics should be based on.[77]

As in his early writings, Plekhanov presents the proletariat's conscious engagement in the class struggle as the key prerequisite for socialism. Unlike his early writings, however, Plekhanov gives no indication that this revolutionary consciousness is a guaranteed product of material forces; rather, he positions it as subject to a range of influences that can either assist or, in what is a crucial departure from his early thinking, obstruct its formation. It is this mutability that determined the increased importance Plekhanov ascribed to intellectuals and the tactics he prescribes to them of effectively assessing potential influences and utilizing those that promote the growth of a revolutionary consciousness in the proletariat and proscribing those that thwart this growth.

In much the way that Plekhanov's lack of confidence regarding the proletariat persisted after the Revisionist Debate, the greater significance he attributed to intellectuals' propagandistic activity also remained a feature in his thought. For example, in his introduction to the second Russian edition of *The Communist Manifesto*, written in

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[77] Plekhanov, "Filosofskie I Sot͡sial'nye Vozzreniĭa K. Marksa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniĭa,* tom. II, 449.

1900, Plekhanov argues that one of the "conditions" enabling what he describes as the "bourgeois dictatorship" in France is "the insufficient class consciousness of producers, most of whom are still under the influence of the exploiters. Therefore, one of the most important practical tasks of the Party consists in educating the uneducated, prodding the backward…and create[ing] the spiritual conditions for the possibility of the future proletarian dictatorship."[78] Not only demonstrating his belief that the working class can be rendered docile by counter-revolutionary influences, Plekhanov also shows here that he believes that the Party, not material forces, are the solution to this. Gone here is the language of accelerating the proletariat's economically-directed development that dominated his early writings, replaced by a singular focus on the impact Party intellectuals would have, revealing that, despite his continued affirmations of material determinism, Plekhanov now assigned greater importance to the influence of the ideas the working class was exposed to. Similarly, in 1903, Plekhanov portrays the development of a revolutionary consciousness in the proletariat as solely the product of exposure to Marxist theory, writing that "if politically conscious proletarians are now fully aware that a social revolution is necessary for the complete emancipation of the working class. And…if they are now uncompromising and indefatigable enemies of the bourgeois order, that stems from the influence of scientific socialism [i.e. Marxism]."[79] Again, the contrast between this and the claims in his early writing, where Marxism is presented as an expedient or complement to the influence of economic conditions, is striking. While,

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[78] Plekhanov, "Pervye Fazy Ucheniia͡ O Klassovoĭ Bor'be (Predislovie k Kommunisticheskomu Manifestu)," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XI, 318

[79] Plekhanov, "Karl Marks," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia͡,* tom. II, 717.

as noted, Plekhanov would continue to affirm material determinism in his post-Debate texts, the repeated appearance of statements such as these betray a loss of confidence in it and a corresponding increased emphasis on the didactic functions of intellectuals.

Vividly illustrating the fact that this greater importance Plekhanov attached to intellectuals, and thus the necessity of ensuring that they recognized what ideas fostered and what ideas obstructed a revolutionary consciousness within the proletariat, was the major impetus for his participation in the Revisionist Debate can be seen in his proposed solution to it. In an open letter to Karl Kautsky written immediately following the Stuttgart Congress, Plekhanov applauds the SPD's decision there to officially condemn Revisionism but argues that it "should have passed even severer judgement." Specifically, Plekhanov asserts that Bernstein and his allies "cannot go unpunished… [and] should leave [the socialist movement's] ranks," effectively proposing a Party purge. Moreover, Plekhanov "insists" that it be "plainly explain[ed] to our readers [i.e. the Party elite readers of *Die Neue Zeit*]" that Bernstein "has dealt a savage blow at socialist theory and… is out to bury that theory."[80] Aiming to wholly neutralize Revisionism within the Party, Plekhanov not only advocated for the ejection of Party members aligned with Revisionism, he also called for Party leaders to publicly explain the counter-revolutionary nature of Bernstein's ideas. Effectively calling for them to join him in his anti-Revisionist polemics, Plekhanov clearly hoped that this would inoculate other Party members against Revisionism's influence. Thus tacitly animating his proposals, as it has with his polemics, was the belief in that Party intellectuals, due to the importance of their

[80] Plekhanov, "Za Chto Nam Yego Blagodarit'?" in *Sochineniia,* tom. XI, 34-5.

tutelary role in relation to the proletariat, must clearly understand what constituted a counter-revolutionary influence.

There is a remarkable irony at the core of Plekhanov's anti-Revisionist polemics. While devoting his articles against Bernstein to affirming core tenets of Marxist theory, these articles were fundamentally motivated by a loss of confidence in some of these tenets. The popularity of Revisionism had apparently led Plekhanov to doubt the idea that economic forces both predisposed the proletariat to orthodox Marxism and would inevitably lead them to develop a revolutionary worldview. Consequently placing greater importance on the role intellectuals played in influencing the working class, Plekhanov's articles against Bernstein, including their defense of economic determinism and attacks against Kantianism, were therefore aimed at ensuring that these figures were equipped to educate the proletariat in order to compensate for the unreliable influence of material forces. This defense of orthodox tenets in response to skepticism about them can be seen elsewhere in Plekhanov's writing from this time, showing the extent to which his rejection of Revisionism ironically lead him to revise his own thinking. Specifically, Plekhanov's approach to art and aesthetics underwent a dramatic change concurrent with, and directly caused by, his polemics with Bernstein. Driven by the intersection of his new assumptions regarding the importance of educating the proletariat with his aim of discrediting Kantian philosophy, Plekhanov would revise his rejection of using art and art criticism as propaganda and embrace such instrumentalism as means of disseminating Marxist ideas.

Chapter V

The Aesthetic Front: Revisionist Debate Polemics as the Foundation of Plekhanov's Mature Aesthetic Thought

Towards the conclusion of his initial condemnation of Revisionism in 1898, Plekhanov pursues what appears to be an odd tangent. Having theretofore devoted himself to attacks on Bernstein's ideas and Kantian philosophy, Plekhanov abruptly begins to discuss French painters, specifically the Rococo François Boucher and the Neoclassicist Jacques-Louis David. Though initially unclear, the significance of this digression begins to become apparent when Plekhanov, after noting Boucher's and David's distinctive styles and describing them as representing "two completely different stages in the history of French painting," suddenly addresses Bernstein, demanding that he "explain to me the transition from Boucher's paintings to David's." Concluding that Bernstein would be unable to do so, Plekhanov explains that this is due to his having abandoned Marxist materialism, which would have allowed him to recognize that it is "political economy that accounts for the evolution" of artistic trends represented by the works of Boucher and David.[1] With this, Plekhanov renders the reasoning behind his detour into the arts clear. By arguing that economics determined the course of art history, Plekhanov was mobilizing artistic works to illustrate the concept of material determinism, effectively weaponizing art in service of the strategy of defending tenets of Marxism which he was to pursue throughout the anti-Revisionist polemics. Less apparent,

[1] Georgi Plekhanov, "O Mnimom Krizise Marksizma," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. II, (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1956), 344.

however, was the fact that this was not to remain an isolated instance; rather, it heralded a definitive shift in Plekhanov's ideas regarding the arts and aesthetics.

Beginning with his involvement in the Revisionist Debate, Plekhanov permanently abandoned the approach to art displayed in his earlier writings. In the place of the purely aesthetic evaluations and negative attitude towards politically instrumental art he displayed in his articles on Uspensky, Karonin, and Naumov, Plekhanov formulated a critical method deeply informed by the strategies and concerns he had developed in response to Revisionism. One way in which this is apparent is in Plekhanov's novel use of art in the service of defending the very same Marxist tenets he was concurrently striving to defend in his anti-Revisionist articles. This not only entailed treating art, whether individual works or whole movements, as evidence of material determinism, as seen above, but also as evidence of the class struggle. Arguing that the class consciousness of an artist was the prime mediating force between the influence of material forces and a work of art, Plekhanov claimed that the form and content of art bore the imprint of class interests. This allowed Plekhanov to mine the history of art for evidence of class conflict and read anti-proletarian attitudes into contemporary bourgeois art, effectively mirroring his polemics' rejection of Bernstein's claims that class conflict was not an inevitable feature of society.

But, in addition to reproducing the defensive strategy apparent in his polemics against Revisionism, Plekhanov's mature approach to art pursued the counterattacks against Kantianism that comprised the second strategy of his polemics. Focusing on the aesthetic theory Kant put forward in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), Plekhanov aimed to discredit Kant's claim that judgments of beauty are disinterested and

do not involve considerations of the usefulness of the object judged. He argued that art, determined by economic forces and informed by class interests, is fundamentally shaped by and ultimately valued due to its usefulness and that this proved Kant's notion of disinterestedness to be impossible. Here again, Plekhanov draws on art as evidence in service of one of the strategies he deployed in his articles against Bernstein, demonstrating how deeply shaped his mature aesthetic was by his contemporary attempts to defend Marxist tenets and undermine Kantian philosophy.

The fact that Plekhanov retained this approach to art for the remaining decades of his life, however, reveals that it was not simply immediate polemical concerns that animated its genesis. Instead, Plekhanov's mature aesthetic was ultimately motivated and maintained by the novel concerns about the proletariat's revolutionary character that also underlay his campaign against Revisionism. In much the way that his polemics against Bernstein were an attempt to ensure that intellectuals were properly equipped to fulfil their role of ensuring that the proletariat developed a revolutionary class consciousness, Plekhanov's late embrace of the tradition of propagandistic criticism with his use of art to validate Marxist tenets and discredit supposedly counter-revolutionary philosophies was designed for the same goal. Therefore, just as his concerns regarding the proletariat and belief in the increased importance of intellectuals persisted after their emergence in the wake of Revisionism, so did his politically instrumental criticism.

Ultimately, though, there is no greater evidence of the changes Plekhanov's thinking about art underwent at the time of the Revisionist Debate and no clearer suggestion that these changes were prompted by concerns regarding the proletariat at that time than his explicit endorsement of politically instrumental art. By drawing upon the

conclusions he arrived at from his defense of Marxist theory – that artworks reflected class interests – and his attacks on Kant's aesthetic – that art invariably had some utility – Plekhanov justified art created to propagate political ideas in his mature aesthetic and even came to base his evaluations of individual artworks on the ideas he perceived them as conveying. This stark reversal of his previous condemnation of politically committed art reached its peak, however, with his call for the creation of art that would convey revolutionary ideas to the working class. With this, Plekhanov combined his normalization of political art with his concerns about the proletariat to effectively advocate for propaganda. His mature aesthetic did not simply, as it has typically been portrayed in scholarship, consider art as a determined product; it also treated it as an influential agent.

The Economic Determination of Art

A series of articles examining art that Plekhanov composed in the midst of the Revisionist Debate reveal the immediate and decisive impact that his campaign against Bernstein's ideas had upon his aesthetic thought. Collectively referred to as the "Unaddressed Letters" due to their shared conceit of being epistles written to an unnamed recipient, these articles were written between 1899 and 1900, published in the Russian journal *Nauchnoye Obozreniye* (Scientific Review),[2] and wholly reproduce the polemical

[2] While the Russian publication situates these articles away from the German locus of the Revisionist Debate, the increasingly international nature of Revisionism, the ideological affiliations of *Nauchnoye Obozreniye*, and developments within the Russian Marxist movement suggest that Plekhanov would nonetheless have had his anti-Revisionist ideas and strategies foremost on his mind. *Nauchnoye Obozreniye*, historian Samuel Baron notes, was associated with "legal Marxism" in Russia, a trend that, by the close of the century, had emerged as something of a distinct movement within Russian Marxism characterized by its "readiness to revise Marxist theory," including "playing down the idea of revolution," introducing "ideas from Neo-Kantian epistemology," and the belief that "Marxism…was unable to offer any ethical guidance, and needed a dose of Kantian ethics." Clearly, a remarkable degree of consonance

strategies Plekhanov was then deploying against Bernstein. The attempts to affirm the validity of Marxist theory and to discredit the ideas put forward by or informing Revisionism that characterized Plekhanov's polemics are mirrored in his "Unaddressed Letters," the only difference being that he utilizes art in latter to demonstrate his main points. This can be seen early in the first article as Plekhanov reiterates the contrast between the worldviews he argued in his polemics fundamentally separate Kantian-inspired Revisionism and Marxism. He writes of the "idealist" view, "[which] consists of the belief that the development of thought and knowledge is the final and the ultimate cause of the movement of human history" and of his own view based on "economic materialism," which entails the belief that "historical development … [is] determined … by the development of productive forces."[3] Plekhanov continues on to explain that these articles are intended to determine which worldview is correct, and that art and its history will function as his evidence. He writes that

> this inquiry on the particular question of art's history will at the same time be a test of my general view of history. Indeed, if this general view is erroneous, we shall not, by taking it as our starting point, get very far in

existed between Bernstein's Revisionism and the legal Marxists in Russia, a consonance that had become open coalition in 1899 when some of the most prominent legal Marxists, such as Petr Struve and Nikolai Berdyaev, "openly aligned themselves with Revisionism." Moreover, compounding this embrace of Revisionism among the legal Marxists, the close of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of the "Economist" trend within Russian Marxism. With its eschewal of political action in favor of focusing on trade union activity and achieving labor benefits, Economism bore enough similarities to Revisionism for Plekhanov to view it as "a device for channeling Bernstein's heretical doctrines into the Russian movement." Publishing in *Nauchnoye Obozreniye*, therefore, far from indicating that Plekhanov would have had reason to cease pursuing his efforts to respond to Revisionism in his "Unaddressed Letters," suggests he would have had multiple reasons to persist in his anti-Revisionist strategies of defending Marxism and attacking Bernstein's ideas: the former against the overlapping critiques of the Revisionist-aligned legal Marxists and the latter in an effort to stymie the spread Revisionism via the vehicle of Economism. See, Baron, *Plekhanov*, 147, 195, 186, and Frederick C. Copleston*, Philosophy in Russia: From Herzen to Lenin and Berdyaev* (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1986), 246-7.

[3] Georgi Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XIV, (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1923), 3-4.

> explaining the evolution of art. But if we find that this view explains this evolution better than other views, we shall have a new and powerful argument in its favor.[4]

Paralleling his anti-Revisionist articles, Plekhanov's foremost concern in his "Unaddressed Letters" is to demonstrate the veracity of the tenets of Marxist theory Bernstein had criticized, specifically that of material determinism. While Plekhanov's intention of incorporating art into the first of his anti-Revisionist polemical strategies is clear here, the shift in his view of art this entails is unstated but noteworthy. By employing art as evidence of determinism, Plekhanov would be replacing his early portrayal of art as the product of a broad conditioning with one emphatically positioning art as the product of the productive, economic processes of society.

Remarkably broad in scope, Plekhanov's "Unaddressed Letters" utilizes a range of artworks spanning media, peoples, and epochs, to demonstrate the veracity of Marxism's deterministic tenets, to show, as he himself puts it, "how easily the art of primitive peoples … can be explained from the standpoint of the materialist conception of history."[5] This is apparent when Plekhanov draws upon contemporary anthropological and ethnographic studies, including works by notable figures such as Karl Büchner and Franz Boas,[6] to discusses the art produced by peoples "whose productive forces are the least developed … the so-called hunting tribes, which subsist by fishing, hunting, and

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[4] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Sochineniía,* tom. XIV, 4.

[5] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniía,* tom. V, 357.

[6] Specifically, Plekhanov utilizes Büchner's *Arbeit und Rhythmus* (1896) and Boas's *The Central Eskimo* (1888).

gathering."[7] Hereafter referring to these hunter-gatherer peoples as "primitive," Plekhanov proceeds to examine various forms of art they have produced and locate their origins in economic processes. He writes that "with primitive tribes, each kind of work has its own chant … and in all cases, the rhythm of the song is strictly determined by the rhythm of the production process … [the tribes'] musical productions were elaborated from the sounds resulting from the impact of the instruments of labor on their object."[8] He similarly connects the genesis of aboriginal Australians' and New Zealanders' dances to labor, describing them as "simple representation[s] of production processes" and arguing that they directly mimic the work of "div[ing] for shells … dig[ging] nourishing roots out of the ground … [and] making a canoe."[9] Concluding that "primitive" music and dances are "examples of the close connection between primitive artistic activity and production activity,"[10] Plekhanov positions these artforms as the determined products of economic activity.

Even as he turns away from its "primitive" forms in his "Unaddressed Letters," Plekhanov continues to emphasize art's determined nature and therefore to utilize it as evidence for his Marxist tenets. While noting that in any culture beyond the most underdeveloped, "the direct dependence of art on technology and the mode of production disappears,"[11] Plekhanov articulates a multi-tiered conception of determinism to assert

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[7] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia͡,* tom. V, 358.

[8] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia͡,* tom. V, 309.

[9] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia͡,* tom. V, 360.

[10] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia͡,* tom. V, 360.

[11] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia͡,* tom. V, 310-1.

that economic forces remained the ultimate, if unseen, influence upon artistic works in more developed civilizations. He writes that such art "is determined by [the artist's] mentality; their mentality is a product of their environment, and their environment is determined in the final analysis by the state of its productive forces and its relations of production."[12] To illustrate this mediated economic determinism, and therefore to also illustrate the validity of Marxist determinism, Plekhanov discusses war dances performed by tribes of equatorial Africa. Beginning with a description of the material basis of these tribes' society, the "conditions of their hunting mode of life," Plekhanov writes that "the subsistence provided by [their] hunting is very meagre and insecure." This leads to competition and "frequently recurring clashes [between tribes]" which in turn "arouse feelings of mutual hatred and unsatisfied vengeance," he contends, connecting the material base to a particular mentality. This mentality, Plekhanov continues, is then expressed in their war dances, which depict "terrible defeats, looting and murder … the groaning of the wounded … widows and orphans weeping."[13] In his conclusion, Plekhanov summarizes his argument, emphasizing how it connects the artworks in question to economic forces. "The war dances," he writes "are artistic productions which express emotions and ideals that must have developed necessarily and naturally in the conditions of their specific mode of life. And as their mode of life was entirely determined by the state of productive forces, we have to admit that, in the final analysis, the state of productive forces determined the character of their war dances."[14]

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[12] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. V, 318.

[13] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. V, 361.

[14] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. V, 361.

By tracing their origins back to material, economic conditions, Plekhanov renders African war dances, as he had with Australian aboriginal music, as evidence affirming the Marxist tenet of material determinism. He repeats this in a less explicit but no less recognizable manner in a discussion of landscape paintings. First noting its shifts in popularity throughout history, Plekhanov writes that "Michelangelo and his contemporaries ignored [landscape painting] … nor did it have an independent significance for the French artists of the seventeenth and even the eighteenth centuries. [This dismissal] changed abruptly in the nineteenth century, when landscape began to be valued for its own sake and young artists – [Camille] Flers, [Louis-Nicolas] Cabat, Théodore Rosseau – sought in the lap of nature … inspiration."[15] Plekhanov argues this change is due to the differing mentalities during differing periods of Europe's development, that "in different periods of social development man received different impressions from nature because he looks at it from different viewpoints."[16] Specifically, Plekhanov writes that people in previous centuries were indifferent to nature because "they were tired of barbarism" and images of nature "evoked in them many unpleasant ideas … [ideas] of hunger, of long journeys on horseback in rain and snow, of inferior black bread mixed with chaff, of vermin-ridden hostelries." In direct contrast to this, he continues, people of the nineteenth century are enthusiastic about nature because they "are tired of civilization" and landscape painting therefore "pleases us because of its contrast to the urban scenes of which we are tired…[they] give us respite from our

[15] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. V, 304.

[16] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. V, 304.

sidewalks, our offices, and our shops."[17] Effectively repeating the multi-tiered process of determinism he had employed in his analysis of African war dances, Plekhanov ultimately ties the changing fortunes of landscape painting to economic forces. He argues that different mentalities generated by different levels of material development and attendant phenomena in society that react to depictions of nature in particular ways, resulting in the past disdain for and contemporary popularity of paintings depicting nature. This, he concludes, demonstrates that "there is a causal – thought not always a direct – connection between the development of art and the development of productive forces."[18]

Plekhanov's reproduction of the defensive strategy from his anti-Revisionist polemics in "Unaddressed Letters" was not, however, limited to using art as evidence of Marxism's tenet of determinism. He also used art to illustrate the continuous presence of class conflict in society and therefore support the claims he made in his articles against Bernstein's dismissal of intractable social strife. He achieves this by refining his prior assertions that the majority of non-"primitive" artworks are not subjected to the influence of economics directly, but rather through the mediating factors of social environment and cultural mentalities, to specify that these factors include class divisions. He writes, for example, that in "the art of civilized people, the division of society into classes and the resulting class antagonisms obscure technological and economic influences,"[19] explicitly

[17] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. V, 302.

[18] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. V, 371.

[19] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. V, 358.

including social class and class conflict among the factors mediating the influence of economics upon art

It is from the dramatic arts that Plekhanov most clearly adduces evidence of class conflict in his "Unaddressed Letters," specifically from the English theater of the seventeenth century, a century which he describes as "a century of very acute struggle between the nobility and the bourgeoisie."[20] English Civil War, the Commonwealth, and the Restoration, he argues, was as an extended conflict between social classes, and this "strongly affected aesthetic ideas,"[21] unequivocally incorporating the class struggle into the series of influences affecting the arts. Plekhanov claims that the seventeenth-century British nobility's conflict with the bourgeoisie had engendered within it a particular mentality, writing that they had come to harbor a "hatred of the class whose triumph would signify the complete abolition of the privileges of the aristocracy … the most extreme representatives of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, the Puritans … [this hatred] evinced [in the nobility] a very strong inclination for habits and tastes that were the very opposite of the Puritan rules of life. The strict morals of the Puritans gave way to the most incredible licentiousness."[22] This "laxity of aristocratic morals," Plekhanov continues, was "reflected on the English stage … nearly all the comedies written between 1660 and 1690 [i.e. the period of the Restoration when the nobility were again ascendent] were almost without exception…pornographic."[23] Referring to the infamous genre of the

[20] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. V, 295.

[21] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. V, 300.

[22] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. V, 300 and 295-7.

[23] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. V, 300, 295-7, and 301.

Restoration comedy, Plekhanov, as he had in his discussion of landscape painting identifies as its proximate cause a particular mindset, the nobility's "reaction to Puritanism." This, however, was itself "a result of the aforementioned class struggle"[24] between the nobility and bourgeoisie. Plekhanov thus uses the works of the English theater as evidence of the second major Marxist tenet he had affirmed in his articles against Bernstein.

Contra Kant: Against Disinterestedness

In service of his polemical agenda of defending Marxism, therefore, Plekhanov replaced the broad and ill-defined "social conditioning" of art described in his early writings with rigorous claims of its material determination and reflection of class conflict. In doing so, Plekhanov was presenting art as a passive product of determinants, apparently confirming the widespread view that his aesthetic reflected a "vulgar" emphasis on reductive materialism. An emphasis on linear determinism does not represent the entirety of Plekhanov's mature aesthetic, however. Alongside this reflection of his defensive polemical strategy, his writings on art during and following the Revisionist debate also recapitulated his tactic of criticizing Kantian philosophy, resulting in his mature aesthetic also containing claims that art was a producer of influence and could be utilized towards political ends. While in his anti-Revisionist articles Plekhanov had attacked the epistemological theory contained in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in his

[24] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedenii͡a,* tom. V, 297.

"Unaddressed Letters" Plekhanov attempted to discredit the aesthetic theory Kant put forward in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790).

A characteristically complex work involving analyses of both aesthetic and teleological judgments, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* has been described as the "first work that gives a sense of the content and shape of modern aesthetics."[25] As Donald Crawford explains in his study of this text, its importance lies in the fact that in it Kant shifted discussions of aesthetics away from the "straightforward empirical issue[s]" that had theretofore dominated discussions on the topic, such as "what qualities of objects occasion that particular pleasure or satisfaction we refer to as beauty." Crawford relates that Kant instead concentrated on the "[cognitive] principles that lie at the basis of judgments,"[26] radically reorienting focus to the organization of the human mind. This, Crawford concludes, effectively "found[ed] modern philosophical aesthetics."[27] This was arguably not far from the impact Kant intended *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* to have, as he saw it as part of his wider project of renovating philosophy begun in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. As Kant explains in the Introduction to *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*,

> if such a system, under the general name of metaphysics, is ever to come into being … then the critique [of our faculties of cognition] must previously have probed the ground for this structure down to the depth of the first foundations of the faculty of principles independent of experience … [and this] would be incomplete if the power of judgment, which also

[25] Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer, "Introduction" in Cohen and Guyer, eds. *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1.

[26] Donald W. Crawford, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), 4.

[27] Donald W. Crawford, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), 4.

> claims to be a faculty of cognition, were not dealt with as a special part of it.[28]

Implied in Kant's explanation is the idea that the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* was a planned component of his wider critical project, something that is debated in scholarship. Crawford, for example, supports the idea, arguing that Kant's letters to colleagues attest to the fact that from the earliest stages of writing the *Critique of Pure Reason* he fully intended to eventually examine "the nature of the theory of taste [i.e. of aesthetic judgment]."[29] Others, however, have claimed differently, such as Allen Wood, who argues that Kant was prompted to compose the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* by criticisms he had received concerning his prior two critical texts. As Wood explains, "almost immediately upon the reception of Kant's critical philosophy … Kant [was] charged by some with establishing a set of false and unhealthy 'dualisms' – between appearances and things in themselves, nature and morality … the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is Kant's own acknowledgment of these criticisms, and his attempt to answer them."[30] That Kant was attempting to surmount any appearance of a strict duality in his system does seem to find support in the text itself, wherein he describes judgment as essentially bridging the foci of his previous critical works, writing that "the power of judgment, which in the order of our faculties of cognition constitutes the intermediary

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[28] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, trans. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 56.

[29] Donald W. Crawford, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), 9.

[30] Wood, *Kant*, 152.

between understanding [i.e. the focus of the *Critique of Pure Reason*] and reason [i.e. the focus of the *Critique of Practical Reason*].[31]

With its connections to Kant's previous ideas and seeming concession to criticisms of them, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* would appear to offer Plekhanov a valuable means of revisiting and developing his critiques of Kantian epistemology. Instead of this, however, Plekhanov focused solely on one idea unique to the text and unconnected to any he had previously criticized: Kant's theory of the disinterested appreciation of beauty. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant defines the beautiful as something that "pleases in the mere judging … not by means of sensation … nor in accordance with a concept … it must please without any interest … to say that [an object] is beautiful … what matters is what I make of this representation in myself, not how I depend on the existence of the object … [or] whether there is anything that is or could be at stake, for us or someone else, in the [object]."[32] It is this claim that judgments of beauty are not based on any non-aesthetic interests that Plekhanov disputes in his "Unaddressed Letters," bluntly stating as much when he writes that "the Kantian definition – the beautiful is that which pleases irrespective of benefit – is wrong."[33] To demonstrate the incorrectness of Kantian disinterestedness, Plekhanov aimed to prove the exact opposite, specifically that "the enjoyment of artistic productions is the enjoyment of that which, be it objects, phenomena, or states of mind, is beneficial … irrespective of

[31] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 56.

[32] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 150 and 90-1.

[33] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedenii͡a,* tom. V, 365

any conscious considerations of benefit."[34] Much of Plekhanov's post-Revisionist Debate writing on art was devoted to proving this claim that judgments of artistic beauty, and thus acclaim for particular works or the popularity of artistic movements, are fundamentally, if not always consciously, based upon extra-aesthetic interests. Art in Plekhanov's mature aesthetic therefore continued to serve as evidence supporting his polemical strategies, now towards that of discrediting Kantian philosophy. As a consequence of this, it came to be portrayed as a source of benefit and utility, specifically as a vehicle for disseminating socio-political ideas. An explicitly instrumental conception of art therefore came to exist in Plekhanov's mature aesthetic alongside claims, reflecting his defensive strategy of affirming Marxism, that it was also a product of material determinism.

Although the two conceptions of art that Plekhanov would come to posit would seem to be directly at odds with each other, it was surprisingly his claims of art's determined nature that he used to dispute the Kantian notion of aesthetic disinterestedness. He argues in "Unaddressed Letters," for example, that because "the production of useful things and economic activity … preceded the beginnings of artistic activity and laid a very strong impression upon it … man first looked upon objects and phenomena from a utilitarian standpoint, and only later did he begin to regard them from an aesthetic standpoint."[35] This means that it was the utility of particular phenomena "that first appealed to primitive man, only later did they appear beautiful," Plekhanov

[34] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. V, 365.

[35] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniia,* tom. V, 355.

concludes, asserting that "use-value is anterior to aesthetic value."[36] Plekhanov therefore leverages his argument that the earliest forms of art emerged out of useful, economic activities to assert that conceptions of aesthetic pleasure emerged out of recognitions of usefulness. To support this, Plekhanov returns to the subject of "primitive" art, drawing upon ethnographic studies including Karl von den Steinen's *Among the Primitive Peoples of Central Brazil* (1894), and *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times* (1724) by Joseph-François Lafitau. From these, he cites various examples, beginning with the tattooing traditions of various Native American tribes. Plekhanov "reject[s] the idea that the original purpose of tattooing was ornamentation," claiming instead that tattooing's origins lay in a variety of uses including serving as indicators of familial affiliations, records of biographical achievements, and even as the cicatrizing of wounds.[37] This, he asserts, demonstrates that tattooing was originally done "because it was practically useful and even essential in primitive society," leading him to conclude that "everything we know about tattooing confirms the principle I have formulated, namely, that the approach to objects from the utilitarian standpoint was anterior to the approach to them from the aesthetic standpoint."[38] Plekhanov further supports this point with a survey of "primitive" jewelry, with the declaration that bracelets originated with the "practical purpose of protecting the naked limbs from thorny plants" and that the use of animal teeth, feathers, claws, and the like as decorations began as "proof and token[s] of [hunters'] strength, courage, or skill." Therefore, "it may be

[36] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedenii͡a,* tom. V, 380.

[37] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedenii͡a,* tom. V, 370-1.

[38] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedenii͡a,* tom. V, 373.

said quite confidently that the objects which serve primitive peoples as ornaments were first considered useful or were a sign that their owner possessed qualities useful to the tribe,"[39] Plekhanov finishes, again affirming his argument that judgements of the usefulness of an object precede and effectively serve as a prerequisite for their designation as an object of beauty.

Even as he moves from examinations of "primitive" art to more recent works, Plekhanov continues his efforts to discredit the Kantian notion of aesthetic disinterestedness, now with the argument that artworks possess a social utility. This can first be seen in his discussion of the English Restoration comedies, where he writes "what was useful to the British nobility was not [the comedies'] inclination for vices … but rather the emotion that prompted this inclination, namely, hatred of [the bourgeois] class."[40] While Plekhanov fails to elaborate on precisely how this hatred, and thus the Restoration comedies themselves, were useful, the fact that he viewed the comedies as the product of class conflict between the nobility and bourgeoisie suggests that he believed their evocation or perpetuation of hatred aided the nobility in this conflict. That Plekhanov was in fact focused on how these works were used to aid the class struggle is supported by his discussion of the bourgeoise's answer to the Restoration comedies, the eighteenth-century theatrical genre of the "tearful comedy," and how they served to advance this class's social position. Writing that the tearful comedies were "produced by the intellectual representatives of the English bourgeoisie," Plekhanov claims that the

[39] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedenii͡a,* tom. V, 380.

[40] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedenii͡a,* tom. V, 300.

"prime purpose" of these comedies was to "depict and extol middle-class purity of morals and domestic virtues," explaining that "such virtues as industriousness, patience, sobriety, thrift … were very useful to the British bourgeoisie when it was seeking to win a more exalted position in society."[41] The tearful comedies were thus vehicles for promoting values that benefited the English bourgeoisie, Plekhanov argues, rendering them and the Restoration comedies of the nobility as weapons in the class struggle. By doing so, he is demonstrating the social utility of these artworks in order to disprove Kantian aesthetic theory.

As with the defensive tack of affirming Marxist tenets he was taking in response to Bernstein, Plekhanov's polemical efforts to discredit Kantianism had an immediate impact upon his thinking about art. While most visible in his efforts to use art as evidence against the notion of disinterestedness, this usage reveals even more fundamental changes. Throughout his arguments in "Unaddressed Letters" that utility formed the basis for judgments of beauty and that social interests were present in art, Plekhanov never expresses any disapproval or disdain for these ideas or the art he illustrates them with. This is a definite reversal from his early aesthetic writings, wherein he thoroughly condemned the idea of art inspired by or performing socio-political functions and heavily criticized what he believed to be examples of this in the writing of the Narodnik-sympathizing authors. This lack of censure points to the normalization of the concept of instrumental art in Plekhanov's mature aesthetic, a normalization emerging from the interaction of his attacks on Kantianism, his defense of Marxism, and the

[41] Plekhanov, "Pis'ma Bez Adresa," in *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedenii͡a,* tom. V, 300-1.

increased importance he attributed to edifying the proletariat following Revisionism. In his efforts to disprove Kantian disinterestedness, Plekhanov drew upon his claims that artworks were the product of economic determination to argue that extra-aesthetic interests were intrinsic to beauty and art. Combining this with his goal of verifying the existence of the class struggle, Plekhanov further argued that such extra-aesthetic interests became sharply political and focused on promoting the interests of one particular class during periods of acute social conflict. Such arguments not only foreclosed any possibility that Plekhanov could maintain his earlier condemnations, but also allowed him to now embrace the concept of instrumental art as one more means by which the proletariat could be taught. While this embrace initially emerged in the absence of censure seen above, in subsequent texts it eventually came to include both the explicit defense of politically instrumental art and calls for art that propagated Marxist ideas. While a striking departure from his early aesthetic, such calls ultimately comport with the basic purpose of Plekhanov's mature aesthetic. As his "Unaddressed Letters" demonstrates, Plekhanov responded to the concerns and priorities he developed in reaction to Revisionism by effectively adopting the tradition of politicized art criticism. While his pre-Revisionist Debate confidence in the inevitability and ease of the proletariat acquiring a revolutionary worldview had led him to dispense with using criticism as a vehicle for disseminating ideas, Plekhanov's post-Revisionist concerns about the proletariat and the increased importance he attached to the pedagogic function of intellectuals pushed him to revise this stance. The mirroring of his polemical strategies in his "Unaddressed Letters" is a clear indication that Plekhanov now felt the need to utilize additional means of ensuring that intellectuals, and through them the

proletariat, were convinced of the validity of Marxism and the falsity of opposing ideas. The persistence of the concerns and priorities he had developed in the course of the Revisionist Debate in the years that followed explains why Plekhanov would maintain this politicized critical method for the remainder of his life. This persistence also ensured that Plekhanov would come to capitalize on the normalization of political art his attacks on Kantian disinterestedness provided and endorse works of art that, like his criticism, aimed to propagate revolutionary ideas.

Demonstrating this continuity and escalation of ideas is 1905's "French Drama and French Painting of the Eighteenth Century from the Sociological Viewpoint." The first text on art Plekhanov composed after his "Unaddressed Letters," "French Drama and French Painting" sees him reiterate and expand upon many of the ideas from his earlier articles. He begins, for instance, by immediately referencing both the intention to approach art as a means of confirming Marxist materialism that animated his "Unaddressed Letters" and some of the key evidence he had employed therein to do so, writing that the art of "primitive" peoples "provides the best possible confirmation of the basic proposition of historical materialism, which states that people's consciousness is determined by their being."[42] Moreover, Plekhanov soon discloses that his current focus on the high culture of eighteenth-century France is a direct continuation of these prior attempts at confirmation, writing that he will utilize this topic to answer the question of whether "at more advanced stages of social development [than that of "primitive" societies] one can detect a causal connection between being and consciousness, between

[42] Plekhanov, "Frant͡sŭzskai͡a Dramaticheskai͡a Literatura I Frant͡sŭzskai͡a Zhivopis' XVIII Veka S Tochki Zreniia͡ Sot͡sĭologii," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XIV, 95.

a society's technology and economy, on the one hand, and its art on the other."[43] Lastly, and again exactly as he had before, Plekhanov relies upon a multi-tiered interpretation of Marxist determinism to achieve his ongoing goal of verifying material determinism, writing that between the economy of eighteenth-century France and its arts "there are several intermediate stages" that make it "more difficult to detect the undoubted causal connection between being and consciousness, between the social relations that arise on the basis of work and art."[44] The claims of a definite, though often mediated, determination of art by economic forces that Plekhanov had articulated in his "Unaddressed Letters" clearly remains central within "French Drama and French Painting," pointing to the fundamental continuity of employing art to verify Marxist theory that existed in Plekhanov's mature aesthetic.

Similarly, Plekhanov continues to display in his "French Drama and Painting" the hostility to Kantianism and resulting normalization of instrumental art apparent in his "Unaddressed Letters," writing that although "Kant says that the enjoyment which determines judgements of taste is free from all interest…[mankind] will find beautiful only that which is useful to him."[45] Plekhanov illustrates this with the Neoclassical paintings and dramas he considers related to the revolutionary ferment in eighteenth-century France. Arguing for a close connection between Neoclassicism and revolutionary

[43] Plekhanov, "Frant͡suzskai͡a Dramaticheskai͡a Literatura I Frant͡suzskai͡a Zhivopis' XVIII Veka S Tochki Zreniia͡ Sot͡siologii," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XIV, 95.

[44] Plekhanov, "Frant͡suzskai͡a Dramaticheskai͡a Literatura I Frant͡suzskai͡a Zhivopis' XVIII Veka S Tochki Zreniia͡ Sot͡siologii," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XIV, 97.

[45] Plekhanov, "Frant͡suzskai͡a Dramaticheskai͡a Literatura I Frant͡suzskai͡a Zhivopis' XVIII Veka S Tochki Zreniia͡ Sot͡siologii," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XIV, 118.

politics, Plekhanov returns to his claims that class conflict and class consciousness are significant influences upon art and writes that "as the revolutionary mood seized the third estate … [this] change in the mood of the progressive people of that time led to a change in their aesthetic needs … and genre painting of the [Jean-Baptiste] Greuze type … was eclipsed by the revolutionary paintings of [Neoclassical artist Jacques-Louis] David and his school."[46] Specifically, Plekhanov contends that Neoclassical artworks such as David's grew in popularity with the revolutionary classes due to the inspirational utility of their Classical subject matter, writing that "the opponents of the *ancien régime* felt the need for heroism, recognized the need for the development of civic virtue in the third estate. Where were examples of this virtue to be found at this time? … in the ancient world."[47] It was therefore Neoclassicism's potential for revolutionary edification, its ability to influence its audience, that led the French revolutionists to favor it, Plekhanov argues, highlighting his conception of this artistic school as a political tool. Further illustrating this, Plekhanov discusses David's famous *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* (1789), writing that "in David's opinion, art should serve the people … he painted the very heroes that the public took as its models; in admiring his pictures it was strengthening its own admiration of these heroes … you can see that for [the painting's Brutus] the good of the republic is the supreme law … his virtue is the political virtue of the revolutionary."[48] Plekhanov seconds this claim of Neoclassicism as a

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[46] Plekhanov, "Frant͡suzskai͡a Dramaticheskai͡a Literatura I Frant͡suzskai͡a Zhivopis' XVIII Veka S Tochki Zreniia͡ Sot͡siologii," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XIV, 111.

[47] Plekhanov, "Frant͡suzskai͡a Dramaticheskai͡a Literatura I Frant͡suzskai͡a Zhivopis' XVIII Veka S Tochki Zreniia͡ Sot͡siologii," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XIV, 105.

[48] Plekhanov, "Frant͡suzskai͡a Dramaticheskai͡a Literatura I Frant͡suzskai͡a Zhivopis' XVIII Veka S Tochki Zreniia͡ Sot͡siologii," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XIV, 111-2.

purposeful source of politically utilitarian ideological influence as he turns to the theater and writes that Neoclassical dramas "served the third estate as a spiritual weapon in its struggle against the old regime … [by] inspiring citizens with revulsion for superstition, a hatred of tyranny, and a love of freedom," citing as evidence Bernard-Joseph Saurin's *Spartacus* (1760), which "portray[ed] not characters, but social positions and particularly revolutionary social aspirations."[49]

By depicting Neoclassical painting and theater as sources of political influence purposefully intended for use in the class struggle, Plekhanov echoes his prior analyses of the seventeenth-century British comedies. He does, however, expand upon the mere tolerance he previous displayed and mounts a concerted defense of politically-committed art, arguing that during the Revolutionary era in France "art did not die and did not cease to be art, but simply became infused with a completely new spirit … [it became] primarily political art…and it cannot be said that such art must be fruitless. That is wrong. The inimitable art of the ancient Greeks was to a very large extent political art … which did not prevent it from flowering magnificently."[50] This noteworthy escalation demonstrates how the greater importance he attached to disseminating revolutionary ideas following the Revisionist Debate interacted with his attacks on Kantianism and defense of Marxism to allow for the endorsement of politicized art that would facilitate the spread of such ideas. This only becomes more apparent in Plekhanov's subsequent writings on art, which deal with works and movements closer to his own time and

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[49] Plekhanov, "Frant͡suzskai͡a Dramaticheskai͡a Literatura I Frant͡suzskai͡a Zhivopis' XVIII Veka S Tochki Zreni͡a Sot͡siologii," in *Sochineni͡a,* tom. XIV, 115-6, 106.

[50] Plekhanov, "Frant͡suzskai͡a Dramaticheskai͡a Literatura I Frant͡suzskai͡a Zhivopis' XVIII Veka S Tochki Zreni͡a Sot͡siologii," in *Sochineni͡a,* tom. XIV, 117.

immediate political concerns. In the numerous subsequent texts that constitute the remaining works Plekhanov devoted to art, he deploys the entirety of his mature aesthetic, pursuing readings of contemporary art that affirm the tenets of Marxism while also explicitly calling for works that would radicalize the working class.

Art's status as evidence of the concept of material determinism remained central to Plekhanov's discussions of contemporary art. As he had in examinations of earlier works, Plekhanov portrayed recent art as not only illustrating the influence economics exerted upon society, but also, by virtue of this determined status, as evidence of other Marxist tenets such as the class struggle. A sense of this can be gained from Plekhanov's claim regarding the majority of recent bourgeois art: that because "the ideology of a ruling class loses its inherent value as that class ripens for doom, the art engendered by its emotional experience falls into decay."[51] Broadly denouncing the art of the contemporary bourgeoisie, Plekhanov explains this by implicitly redeploying the multi-tiered process of economic determinism that he had consistently utilized to explain all but the most "primitive" of art and which posited that art was the product of a mindset that was itself the product of economic influences. By doing so, Plekhanov was essentially using contemporary art as evidence of a whole host of Marxist claims. In asserting that the bourgeoisie faced imminent doom, Plekhanov was voicing the Marxist contention that because the "development of modern industry … cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products" this class's "existence is no longer compatible with society … [its] fall and the victory of the

[51] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennai͡a Zhizn'," *Sochineniĭa,* tom. XIV, 150.

proletariat are equally inevitable."[52] Moreover, in his assertion that this economically-predicated process engendered a decay in bourgeois ideology, Plekhanov was echoing Marxism's claim that because "[the bourgeoisie's] ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of … bourgeois production and bourgeois property … the dissolution of [these] old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of [these] old conditions of existence."[53] It is this intellectual deterioration, caused by a more fundamental socio-economic obsolescence, that Plekhanov argues is responsible for the "decay" apparent in contemporary art, continuing his mature agenda of rendering art concrete demonstrations of Marxism's veracity.

The range of artworks that Plekhanov criticized as decadent, and by doing so effectively presented as evidence of the bourgeois senescence predicted by Marxism, is matched only by the variety of ways he considered this decadence to manifest. The most prominent and arguably most consequential of Plekhanov's attacks on contemporary art focused on the emerging modernist movement in the visual arts. Single-handedly initiating the long-standing debate over how the Marxist movement should view modern art,[54] Plekhanov treated the formalist innovations of modernism with unrelieved hostility, considering them devoid of socially significant content and as clear signs of bourgeois

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[52] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Samuel Moore, trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 233.

[53] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 242.

[54] This debate, essentially between those who believed, like Plekhanov, that non-figurative modern art was irredeemably the product of bourgeois decadence and those who believed it possessed a more revolutionary character, is thoroughly examined in Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) in addition to being discussed in Arvon, *Marxist Esthetics*; and Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1976). Many of the most famous exchanges in this debate, along with enlightening commentary, are collected in Theodor Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 1980).

decline. This is clear from the very first time he addressed modern art, in a review of the Sixth Venice Biennale in 1905. There he discusses the work of Art Nouveau painter Hermen Anglada Camarasa. Plekhanov argues that Camarasa

> is content to disfigure his pictures … [with] strong and paradoxical light effects. When an artist concentrates all his attention on light effects, when these effects become the be-all and end-all of his work, it is difficult to expect first-class artistic works from him – his art necessarily dwells on the surface of phenomena. And when he succumbs to the temptation of impressing the viewer with paradoxical effects, it must be recognized that he has embarked on the path of the ugly and the ridiculous.[55]

Equating formal experimentation with superficiality, Plekhanov condemns Camarasa's work. As he continues his analysis, however, Plekhanov reveals that he considers this "superficiality" to be merely a symptom of a far deeper issue, writing that

> [traditional figurative] painting was indeed not void of effects; but it had a rich inner content, it had a whole world of ideas which gave it a living soul. These ideas have had their day … they no longer correspond to the position of the social classes for which modern art exists. But these social classes have nothing to put in their place; they themselves are preparing to retire from the historical arena and therefore evince little concern for ideology. This is why modern painters such as Anglada have nothing but a striving for effects … they want to say something new, but they have nothing to say; therefore, they resort to artistic paradoxes.[56]

The "superficial" attention to form for which Plekhanov had criticized Camarasa is here turned into additional evidence of the economically-determined decline of the bourgeoisie, and thus of the accuracy of Marxism. The multi-tiered sequence Plekhanov

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[55]Plekhanov, "Proletarskoye Dvizheniye I Burzhuaznoye Iskusstv," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XIV, 77-9.

[56] Plekhanov, "Proletarskoye Dvizheniye I Burzhuaznoye Iskusstv," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XIV, 79.

consistently used since his "Unaddressed Letters" to position material forces as the ultimate influence of art remains extant here, with the unstated economic determination of the bourgeoisie's decay as the starting point and the resultingly barren mentality of the bourgeoisie as art's proximate influence. Plekhanov's assertions of modernism's decadence, therefore, although inaugurating a debate that has persisted for over a century, were deeply rooted in the defensive strategy of affirming Marxist which he adopted during the Revisionist Debate.

That its formalism was a reaction to the intellectual poverty of the modern bourgeoisie remained Plekhanov's general opinion regarding most modern art, repeating it in critiques of Impressionism, Symbolism, and Decadent literature.[57] He did, however, pursue additional analyses of modernist works that, though departing from this key thesis, maintained its indebtedness to his Revisionist Debate strategies and concerns. Such is the case with his discussion of Cubist painting, which he acerbically dismisses as "nonsense cubed"[58] and attributes their departure from realist depictions of natural forms to the issues with Kantian epistemology that he first articulated in his responses to Bernstein. Commenting on Albert Gleizes's and Jean Metzinger's artistic manifesto *Du Cubisme* (1912), Plekhanov summarizes their theoretical explanation for Cubist abstraction in

[57]"Impressionism's lack of ideology is its original sin, as a consequence of which it verges on caricature"; "Symbolism…is an involuntary protest by artists against lack of ideology. But it is a protest that arises on unideological ground, that lacks all definite content and is therefore lost in the mists of abstraction"; "[Decadent author Joris-Karl] Huysman's case again shows that…when artists become blind to the major social trends of their time, the inherent value of the ideas they express in their works is seriously impaired." See, Plekhanov, "Proletarskoye Dvizheniye I Burzhuaznoye Iskusstv" and "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennai͡a Zhizn'," in *Sochineniĭa,* tom. XIV, 79-80, 77, and 147.

[58] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennai͡a Zhizn'," and *Sochineniĭa,* tom. XIV, 171

terms he avowedly likens to Kant's idealism,[59] writing that "[Cubists] conclude that we do not know what forms objects have in themselves. And since these forms are unknown, they consider that they are entitled to portray them at their own will and pleasure … this means that, for [Cubists], there is nothing real except their ego."[60] The charge of solipsism he had levelled against Kantianism and based upon the notion of unknowable thing-in-itself in his anti-Revisionist articles returns here,[61] now as the explanation for the "nonsense" of Cubism. More fundamentally, though, it returns as an illustration of bourgeois decay, with Plekhanov concluding that the Kantian ideas of the Cubists are a manifestation of "the extreme individualism of the era of bourgeois decay…[which] condemns [artists] to sterile preoccupations with personal emotional experiences that are without significance and with the fantasies of a morbid imagination."[62] As with the other modernist movements he examined, Plekhanov's denunciation of Cubism is ultimately bent towards affirming Marxism, as he traces this movement's informing ideology back to a complete egocentrism that joins intellectual vacuity as one of the characteristics illustrating bourgeois decadence.

Though attacks on the formal experimentation of early modernism are prominent in his mature criticism, they do not exhaust Plekhanov's use of contemporary art as

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[59] Plekhanov writes that "In [the cubists'] arguments…we meet, first of all, the already well-known idea that our ego is the 'only reality'…the transcendental idealism of Kant." See, Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennai͡a Zhizn'," in *Sochineniĭa͡,* tom. XIV, 172.

[60] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennai͡a Zhizn'," in *Sochineniĭa͡,* tom. XIV, 171.

[61] It is worth noting that Plekhanov's counterargument against Kantian claims of unknowability returns unchanged also, as he argues that it "cannot be said that the outer world is unknowable…images of objects arise in us because the latter act upon our external senses…we obtain knowledge of [the outer world] because of this action." Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennai͡a Zhizn'," in *Sochineniĭa͡,* tom. XIV, 171.

[62] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennai͡a Zhizn'," in *Sochineniĭa͡,* tom. XIV, 173.

evidence verifying Marxism. He also adduced naturalistic works to demonstrate the accuracy of Marxism's claims regarding the bourgeoisie, specifically their hostility to the proletariat and participation in class conflict. He argues, for instance, that Norwegian author Knut Hamsun's *At the Gates of the Kingdom* (1895) expresses a fundamentally "anti-proletarian bias,"[63] while Frenchmen Paul Bourget's play *The Barricade* (1910) acts as an "appeal … to the bourgeoisie urging all members of this class to unite against the proletariat."[64] Even works lacking the open aggression he claims these works exhibit are used by Plekhanov to illustrate how the art of the contemporary bourgeoisie confirms their depiction by Marxism. In his discussion of François de Curel's *Le Repas du Lion* (1898), for instance, Plekhanov asserts that by depicting an employer compassionate towards his employees, this work "unreservedly takes the side of the [bourgeoisie] and gives an absolutely false picture of their real attitude towards those whom they exploit." This leads Plekhanov to argue that with this work de Curel is acting as an "ideologist of the bourgeois system,"[65] effectively portraying the absence of hostility in *Le Repas Du Lion* as an insidious maneuver to maintain bourgeois dominance by cultivating support through a sympathetic portrayal. Concluding that "bourgeois art is becoming militant" and aims to "defend capitalism," Plekhanov summarizes his analyses of the works by Hamsun, Bourget, and de Curel. Further arguing that these figures display in their art "eager[ness] for strife and do not shun the agitation that goes with it," and that "what they

[63] Plekhanov, "Syn Doktora Stokmana," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XIV, 253.

[64] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennaia Zhizn'," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XIV, 155-6.

[65] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennaia Zhizn'," in *Sochineniia,* tom. XIV, 155.

are eager to engage in strife for is the self-interest of a whole class,"[66] Plekhanov renders clear his intention of using these works to confirm Marxism's portrayal of the bourgeoisie as a wholly-self-interested class aggressively engaged in class warfare in order to maintain their position in society.

Beyond his use of them as evidence, Plekhanov's analyses of the naturalistic writers is notable for what it reveals about the normalization of instrumental art in his mature aesthetic. With his argument that Hamsun, Bourget, and de Curel have created "militant art" aiming to cause "strife" and "agitation" in order to "defend capitalism," Plekhanov clearly sees them as having embraced the concept of instrumental art in service of the class struggle. He does not, however, level any criticisms at these writers or their works for this political engagement *per se*;[67] instead, Plekhanov draws upon Marxist theory to craft an explanation for it. He begins this by first examining the early-nineteenth century Romantic poet Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) and Realist author Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880), noting that these artists rejected the notion of instrumental art and instead subscribed to the idea of "art for art's sake," believing that "art is an aim in itself; to convert it into a means of achieving an extraneous aim … is to lower the dignity of creative production."[68] Plekhanov points out that "the attitude of Knut Hamsun or François de Curel to the utilitarian principle in art is, plainly speaking, the

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[66] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennaia͡ Zhizn'," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XIV,156.

[67] Plekhanov does criticize these works, but solely due to the bourgeois-orientation of their political engagement, not due to this engagement itself. In regards to Bourget's *The Barricade*, for example, he argues that it being "inspired by a wrong idea [i.e. hostility to the proletariat]…spoils the production," while de Curel's *Le Repas Du Lion* suffers because of its falsely positive portrayal of the bourgeoisie which "imparts to it inherent contradictions that inevitably detract from its aesthetic merit." See, Plekhanov, "Syn Doktora Stokmana," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XIV, 245-6 and 250-1.

[68] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennaia͡ Zhizn'," in *Sochineniia͡,* tom. XIV, 142-4 and 120.

very opposite of that of Théophile Gautier or Gustave Flaubert," and remarks that this contrast is surprising because the latter were also members of the bourgeois class and therefore "also not devoid of conservative prejudices."[69] He continues on, however, to explain the change in attitude regarding instrumental art among the bourgeoisie, arguing that "since the time of Gautier and Flaubert, these [conservative] prejudices, owing to the greater acuteness of social contradictions, have become so strongly developed in artists who hold to the bourgeois standpoint that it is now incomparably more difficult for them to adhere consistently to the theory of arts for art's sake."[70] Implicitly redeploying the multi-tiered process of material determinism here, Plekhanov argues that socio-economic changes over the course of the nineteenth century are responsible for the bourgeois embrace of instrumental art. Drawing upon the Marxist narrative that the class struggle will grow as capitalism expands,[71] he contends that in the decades separating the Romantics and Realists from contemporary artists a sharpening of social conflict has occurred that has in turn affected the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie, causing its various reactionary views to grow to such a degree that bourgeois artists now feel compelled to devote their art to disseminating them.

Therefore, as he had had in his discussions of the comedies of the era of the English Civil War and the Neoclassicism of the French Revolution, Plekhanov portrays

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[69] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennai͡a Zhizn'," in *Sochinenii͡a,* tom. XIV, 157.

[70] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennai͡a Zhizn'," in *Sochinenii͡a,* tom. XIV, 157.

[71] As Marx and Engels describe: "but with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number, it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more…the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collisions between two classes…here and there the contest breaks into riots…[a] more or less veiled civil war raging within society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open revolution." Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto,* 229 and 232.

the political orientation of contemporary bourgeois writers as a natural feature of a society rent by class conflict. Moreover, as he continues his discussion of these writers, Plekhanov again demonstrates that instrumental art was not simply normalized in his mature aesthetic but was positively embraced. Commenting on the instrumental nature of Hamsun's, de Curel's, and Bourget's works, and directly referencing the title of Bourget's play, *The Barricade*, Plekhanov argues that

> a man with a thinking mind and a responsive heart cannot remain an indifferent observer of the civil war going on in modern society [i.e. the class struggle]. If his field of vision is narrowed by bourgeois prejudices, he will be on one side of 'the barricade'; if he is not infected with these prejudices, he will be on the other … but not all the children of the bourgeoisie – or of any other class, of course – possess thinking minds. And those who do think do not always have responsive hearts. For them, it is easy to remain consistent believers in the theory of art for art's sake. It eminently accords with indifference to social – and even narrow class – interests.[72]

In striking, near-moralistic language claiming that adhering to the position of art for art's in contemporary society is the result of a heartless indifference to social issues, Plekhanov effectively portrays politically instrumental art as the obligatory stance for current artists. This is further apparent when Plekhanov turns to discussing artists sympathetic to the socialist movement and directs them to "absorb the great emancipatory ideas of our time … these ideas must become part of [their] flesh and blood and [they] must express them precisely as an artist."[73]

Contained within the consistent embrace of instrumental art in his mature aesthetic was Plekhanov's conviction that, in all but the most underdeveloped societies,

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[72] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennai͡a Zhizn'," in *Sochineniĭa,* tom. XIV, 161.

[73] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennai͡a Zhizn'," in *Sochineniĭa,* tom. XIV, 179-80.

such art was bent towards assisting a particular class during times of class conflict. This continues in Plekhanov's discussion of artists who follow his injunction to express radical ideas in their work. What is especially notable about this discussion, however, is that Plekhanov is clear that he sees their art as assisting the proletariat by performing a didactic function and promoting a revolutionary worldview. Plekhanov describes these radical artists as "bourgeois ideologists who go over to the proletariat," citing as a means of explanation the section of the *Communist Manifesto* asserting that "in times when the class struggle nears the decisive hour … a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in particular, a portion of bourgeois ideologists who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole."[74] The significance of this quote is that it comes from the *Manifesto*'s discussion of how the bourgeoisie provides the proletariat with a "political and general education, in other words, [how the bourgeoisie] furnishes the proletariat with weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie."[75] Plekhanov's description thus directly equates radical artists with members of the bourgeoisie who foster the development of a revolutionary consciousness within the proletariat by providing knowledge of Marxist theory. The art that Plekhanov essentially considers it incumbent upon socialist-sympathizing artists to create will therefore serve as a means of educating the proletariat, of serving, as he describes the

[74] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennai͡a Zhizn'," in *Sochinenii͡a,* tom. XIV, 179. See, also, Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 230-1.

[75] Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 230.

function of instrumental art as a whole, to "assist the development of man's consciousness."[76]

Plekhanov's call for art that would promote a Marxist worldview within the working class crystallizes the tremendous impact the polemical strategies and novel priorities he developed in response to Revisionism had upon his mature aesthetic. On the one hand, being based upon the ideas that extra-aesthetic interests invariably informed art and that these interests often reflected economically determined class interests, this call drew directly from the aims of disproving Kantianism and verifying Marxism that were central to his anti-Revisionist polemics. On the other hand, it also directly reflected the greater importance he had come to ascribe to pedagogical action in relation to the proletariat. Prompted by the popularity of Revisionism to doubt that the working class was guaranteed to adopt a revolutionary worldview, Plekhanov had come to believe that additional effort and means should be directed towards edifying them. The instrumental Marxist art that he essentially prescribed to all socialist-aligned contemporary artists was one such means. One can, in fact, view the entirety of his mature aesthetic as such a means. Abandoning the conventional, aesthetic evaluations of his early writings, Plekhanov's mature aesthetic not only prescribed instrumental art but also used art to verify Marxist theory and disprove competing and ostensibly conservative philosophical systems. In doing so, Plekhanov was utilizing a previously neglected method of attempting to ensure that intellectuals were equipped to perform the didactic role he now considered especially important.

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[76] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennai͡a Zhizn'," in *Sochineniĭa,* tom. XIV, 120.

Conclusion:
Retreat, Reengagement, or Repression?

Towards the close of his last text devoted to art, the 1912 article "Art and Social Life," Plekhanov provides a striking example of just how completely his thinking on the subject had changed from his earliest discussions of it. Predicting that "in a socialist society, the pursuit of art for art's sake will be a logical impossibility [because] … with the abolition of classes … egotism will also disappear,"[1] Plekhanov claims that in the utopian future he was fighting for, art not made for extra-aesthetic purposes will be impossible, meaning that *all* art would be instrumental art. While striking in itself, this claim is even more remarkable as Plekhanov had initially been a firm critic of instrumental art and champion of art for art's sake. Clearly, a drastic change had occurred in his thinking. As we have seen, the reasons for this radical transformation are complex, but the moralistic language of his prediction, itself likely more a part of his attempts to persuade artists to cooperate with his ideas than a blueprint for socialist society, points to an important component. Equating art for art's sake with selfish egotism, Plekhanov implicitly equates instrumental art with selfless altruism, with the idea that such art would not be made simply for profit or personal enjoyment but for other people. A key motive behind Plekhanov's embrace of instrumental art was the idea that it would be made for the working class by artist-intellectuals in order to educate the former in radical ideas. This was the most prominent manifestation of a deeper shift in Plekhanov's thinking around the turn of the century, as the confidence, even optimism, that characterized his early Marxism was lost. While he had once believed that this class

[1] Plekhanov, "Iskusstvo I Obshchestvennai͡a Zhizn'," in *Sochineniĭa,* tom. XIV, 176.

was ineluctably drawn towards revolutionary ideas and revolutionary action, the popularity of the Bernstein's reformist Revisionism had led him to doubt this. Instrumental art made for the working class, aiming to disseminate such ideas and encourage such actions, was part of his response to this doubt.

The other factors leading to Plekhanov's stark change in views about art were also prompted by Revisionism, emerging as a result of his polemics against it. Plekhanov answered Bernstein's critiques of Marxism in two ways: by defending its concepts of material determinism and inevitable class conflict and by attempting to discredit the Kantian philosophy that informed Bernstein's thinking. In all of these efforts, Plekhanov utilized art as evidence to support his ideas, resulting in a conception of art that Plekhanov could then mobilize in service of his simultaneously emerging concerns about the proletariat. The defensive tack he adopted in his polemics led him to conceive of artworks as the product of socio-economic influences and as embedded within class conflicts, while his attacks on Kantianism led him to argue that aesthetic appreciation was fundamentally based on extra-aesthetic utility. The combination of these views – that artworks had long been valued for their usefulness in class conflict – effectively acted as permission for Plekhanov embrace instrumental art and call for its use in the conflict he believed must occur between the working class and bourgeoisie.

Going behind the stereotype of the "vulgar" Marxism of the Second International, therefore, reveals a set of ideas strikingly at odds with this received image. With his attention to art, culture, and philosophy; recognition of the importance of non-material influences; and belief that voluntaristic action could affect society, Plekhanov's thinking is far removed from the fatalistic, scientistic determinism it is almost always portrayed as.

While recovering the actual content of Plekhanov's thought is worthwhile in and of itself, this recovery holds particular value in that it allows us to return to and reassess some of the extant narratives of Marxism's history, not only making them more complete but also possibly gaining new insights. Anderson's claims regarding Western Marxism are ripe for this sort of revision. While his assertion that this cohort's attention to society's superstructures was a novelty at odds with the entirety of Second International Marxists should be reconsidered, his claims regarding the causes of this attention can perhaps be retained, while also being expanded further back in time. The idea that Western Marxists turned to focus on art, culture, and philosophy in response to various "defeats," to challenges to Marxist assumptions in the fields of theory, practice, and popular support, finds a definite anticipation in Plekhanov's fin-de-siecle experiences. Anderson's "defeat" thesis can therefore perhaps be extended further into the past, creating a longer history of Marxist intellectuals grappling with a disjunction between theoretical expectations and practical reality.

Such a history would allow us to rethink and rework another of Anderson's claims. Writing that the foci and ideas of Western Marxists represented a "scission of socialist theory and working class practice,"[2] Anderson essentially argues that Western Marxists responded to the "defeats" of Marxist assumptions with a retreat, with a withdrawal from engagement with the working class. Plekhanov, however, shows that attention to art, culture, and philosophy in response to the proletariat's failure to conform to Marxist expectations can in fact be concerted efforts to reengage them, to draw them back into the revolutionary fold. Removing assumptions of retreat from readings of

[2] Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 92.

Western Marxists may reveal more concrete and more creative efforts to connect with the working class than previously recognized. Breaking down the "vulgar" Marxist stereotype may therefore allow us to reconsider the stereotype of another group of Marxists. Rather than viewing the ideas of Lukács, Korsch, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse as components of purely academic discussions isolated from any notions of practical application, revisiting them with the idea that they were intended as usable strategies and concepts for reengaging the working class may prove fruitful.

However, any temptation to praise Plekhanov for his steadfast dedication to engaging the working class should be tempered by a recognition of what his ideas entailed. Plekhanov clearly believed that the proletariat should conform to the image laid out in Marxist theory and that any deviations from this needed to be corrected. His disregard for the actual desires of individuals is echoed in his assertions that it was incumbent upon artists sympathetic to Marxism to bend their art to political goals, that their creative freedom should be subordinated to the ends he had decided upon. While Plekhanov's ideas remained purely in the realm of theory and he did not nor could not make any efforts to realize them, we do have an idea of what such attempts would look like in the form of the history of the Soviet Union, specifically in its official artistic method of Socialist Realism.[3] Obligatory for all Soviet artists from the early 1930s onward and aiming to use art with the stated goal of "the ideological remolding and education of the working people in the spirit of socialism … under the leadership of the

[3] For more on Socialist Realism, see, Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Mathewson, *The positive Hero in Russian Literature*, and Herman Ermolaev, *Soviet Literaty Theories, 1917-1934* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).

Party and with the thoughtful and daily guidance of the Central Committee,"[4] Socialist Realism bears a striking resemblance to Plekhanov's ideas and shows us what could happen if the hierarchical elitism inherent in his ideas was put into practice.

While it would be overly generous to describe repressive Soviet policies such as Socialist Realism as attempts to reengage a disaffected proletariat, completely dismissing this idea seems equally misguided. Rather, it could be argued that a common thread linking Plekhanov, Soviet Leninism, and Western Marxism were concerns or disappointment with the working class. With the recent rise of support for right-wing populism among this class in both Europe and the United States, reflecting on this more complete history of Marxist thought, gained by recovering the ideas of Second Internationalists, may be worthwhile. Even if the result is a dismaying recognition that the modern working class has rarely been the champion of progressive internationalism Marx envisioned them to be, and that neither elite theorizing nor oppressive policies have changed this, it is at least better to face reality than blindly accept received stereotypes.

[4] Andrei Zhdanov, "Sovetskai͡a Literatura - Samai͡a Ideĭnai͡a, Samai͡a Peredovai͡a Literatura V Mire," in *Vsesoi͡uznyĭ S"ezd Sovetskikh Pisateleĭ* (Moscow: Russia, 1934), 21, 18.

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