

Leninism or Marxism - Rosa Luxemburg



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Rosa Luxemburg's critique of Lenin's concept of revolutionary organisation, show the disagreements within the Marxist movements in Europe in the years preceding 1917; her comparisons with Blanquism and chillingly accurate predictions of the consequences of such organisation in a successful revolution are incredibly important to an understanding of the differing interpretations of Marx at that time in relation to the State.

Part I

Rosa Luxemburg

Leninism or Marxism?

I

An unprecedented task in the history of the socialist movement has fallen to the lot of the Russian Social Democracy. It is the task of deciding on what is the best socialist tactical policy in a country where absolute monarchy is still dominant. It is a mistake to draw a rigid parallel between the present Russian situation and that which existed in Germany during the years 1879-90, when Bismarck's antisocialist laws were in force. The two have one thing in common -- police rule. Otherwise they are in no way comparable.

The obstacles offered to the socialist movement by the absence of democratic liberties are of relatively secondary importance. Even in Russia, the people's movement has succeeded in overcoming the barriers set up by the state. The people have found themselves a "constitution" (though a rather precarious one) in street disorders. Persevering in this course, the Russian people will in time attain complete victory over the autocracy.

The principal difficulty faced by socialist activity in Russia results from the fact that in that country the domination of the bourgeoisie is veiled by absolutist force. This gives socialist propaganda an abstract character, while immediate political agitation takes on a democratic-revolutionary guise.

Bismarck's antisocialist laws put our movement out of constitutional bounds in a highly developed bourgeois society, where class antagonisms had already reached their full bloom in parliamentary contests. (Here, by the way, lay the absurdity of Bismarck's scheme). The situation is quite different in Russia. The problem there is how to create a Social Democratic movement at a time when the state is not yet in the hands of the bourgeoisie.

The circumstance has an influence on agitation, on the manner of transplanting socialist doctrine to Russian soil. It also bears in a peculiar and direct way on the question of party organization.

Under ordinary conditions -- that is, where the political domination of the bourgeoisie has preceded the socialist movement -- the bourgeoisie itself instills in the working class the rudiments of political solidarity. At this stage, declares the Communist Manifesto, the unification of the workers is not yet the result of their own aspiration to unity but comes as a result of the activity of the bourgeoisie, "which, in order to attain its own political ends, is compelled to set the proletariat in motion..."

In Russia, however, the Social Democracy must make up by its own efforts an entire historic period. It must lead the Russian proletarians from their present "atomized" condition, which prolongs the autocratic regime, to a class organization that would help them to become aware of their historic objectives and prepare them to struggle to achieve those objectives.

The Russian socialists are obliged to undertake the building of such an organization without the benefit of such an organization without the benefit of the formal guarantees commonly found under a bourgeois-democratic setup. They do not dispose of the political raw material that in other countries is supplied by bourgeois society itself. Like God Almighty they must have this organization arise out of the void, so to speak.

How to effect a transition from the type of organization characteristic of the preparatory stage of the socialist movement -- usually featured by disconnected local groups and clubs, with propaganda as a principal activity -- to the unity of a large, national body, suitable for concerted political action over the entire vast territory ruled by the Russian state? That is the specific problem which the Russian Social Democracy has mulled over for some time.

Autonomy and isolation are the most pronounced characteristics of the old organizational type. It is, therefore, understandable why the slogan of persons who want to see an inclusive national organization should be "Centralism!"

At the Party Congress, it became evident that the term "centralism" does not completely cover the question of organization for the Russian Social Democracy. Once again we have learned that no rigid formula can furnish the solution of any problem in the social movement.

One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward, written by Lenin, an outstanding member of the Iskra group, is a methodical exposition of the ideas of the ultra-centralist tendency in the Russian movement. The viewpoint presented with incomparable vigor and logic in this book, is that of pitiless centralism. Laid down as principles are: 1. The necessity of selecting, and constituting as a separate corps, all the active revolutionists, as distinguished from the unorganized, though revolutionary, mass surrounding this elite.

Lenin's thesis is that the party Central Committee should have the privilege of naming all the local committees of the party. It should have the right to appoint the effective organs of all local bodies from Geneva to Liege, from Tomsk to Irkutsk. It should also have the right to impose on all of them its own ready-made rules of party conduct. It should have the right to rule without appeal on such questions as the dissolution and reconstitution of local organizations. This way, the Central Committee could determine, to suit itself, the composition of the highest party organs. The Central Committee would be the only thinking element in the party. All other groupings would be its executive limbs.

Lenin reasons that the combination of the socialist mass movement with such a rigorously centralized type of organization is a specific principle of revolutionary Marxism. To support this thesis, he advances a series of arguments, with which we shall deal below.

Generally speaking it is undeniable that a strong tendency toward centralization is inherent in the Social Democratic movement. This tendency springs from the economic makeup of capitalism which is essentially a centralizing factor. The Social Democratic movement carries on its activity inside the large bourgeois city. Its mission is to represent, within the boundaries of the national state, the class interests of the proletariat, and to oppose those common interests to all local and group interests.

Therefore, the Social Democracy is, as a rule, hostile to any manifestation of localism or federalism. It strives to unite all workers and all worker organizations in a single party, no matter what national, religious, or occupational differences may exist among them. The Social Democracy abandons this principle and gives way to federalism only under exceptional conditions, as in the case of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

It is clear that the Russian Social Democracy should not organize itself as a federative conglomerate of many national groups. It must rather become a single party for the entire empire. However, that is not really the question considered here. What we are considering is the degree of centralization necessary inside the unified, single Russian party in view of the peculiar conditions under which it has to function.

Looking at the matter from the angle of the formal tasks of the Social Democracy, in its capacity as a party of class struggle, it appears at first that the power and energy of the party are directly dependent on the possibility of centralizing the party. However, these formal tasks apply to all active parties. In the case of the Social Democracy, they are less important than is the influence of historic conditions.

The Social Democratic movement is the first in the history of class societies which reckons, in all its phases and through its entire course, on the organization and the direct, independent action of the masses.

Because of this, the Social Democracy creates an organizational type that is entirely different from those common to earlier revolutionary movements, such as those of the Jacobins and the adherents of Blanqui.

Lenin seems to slight this fact when he presents in his book (page 140) the opinion that the revolutionary Social Democrat is nothing else than a "Jacobin indissolubly joined to the organization of the proletariat, which has become conscious of its class interests."

For Lenin, the difference between the Social Democracy and Blanquism is reduced to the observation that in place of a handful of conspirators we have a class-conscious proletariat. He forgets that this difference implies a complete revision of our ideas on organization and, therefore, an entirely different conception of centralism and the relations existing between the party and the struggle itself.

Blanquism did not count on the direct action of the working class. It, therefore, did not need to organize the people for the revolution. The people were expected to play their part only at the moment of revolution. Preparation for the revolution concerned only the little group of revolutionists armed for the coup. Indeed, to assure the success of the revolutionary conspiracy, it was considered wiser to keep the mass at some distance from the conspirators. Such a relationship could be conceived by the Blanquists only because there was no close contact between the conspiratorial activity of their organization and the daily struggle of the popular masses.

The tactics and concrete tasks of the Blanquist revolutionists had little connection with the elementary class struggle. They were freely improvised. They could, therefore, be decided on in advance and took the form of a ready-made plan. In consequence of this, ordinary members of the organization became simple executive organs, carrying out the orders of a will fixed beforehand, and outside of their particular sphere of activity. They became the instruments of a Central Committee. Here we have the second peculiarity of conspiratorial centralism -- the absolute and blind submission of the party sections to the will of the center, and the extension of this authority to all parts of the organization.

However, Social Democratic activity is carried on under radically different conditions. It arises historically out of the elementary class struggle. It spreads and develops in accordance with the following dialectical contradiction. The proletarian army is recruited and becomes aware of its objectives in the course of the struggle itself. The activity of the party organization, the growth of the proletarians' awareness of the objectives of the struggle and the struggle itself, are not different things separated chronologically and mechanically. They are only different aspects of the same struggle, there do not exist for the Social Democracy detailed sets of tactics which a Central Committee can teach the party membership in the same way as troops are instructed in their training camps. Furthermore, the range of influence of the socialist party is constantly fluctuating with the ups and downs of the struggle in the course of which the organization is created and grows.

For this reason Social Democratic centralism cannot be based on the mechanical subordination and blind obedience of the party membership to the leading party center. For this reason, the Social Democratic movement cannot allow the erection of an air-tight partition between the class-conscious nucleus of the proletariat already in the party and its immediate popular environment, the nonparty sections of the proletariat.

Now the two principles on which Lenin's centralism rests are precisely these:

1. The blind subordination, in the smallest detail, of all party organs to the party center which alone thinks, guides, and decides for all.
2. The rigorous separation of the organized nucleus of revolutionaries from its social-revolutionary surroundings.

Such centralism is a mechanical transposition of the organizational principles of Blanquism into the mass movement of the socialist working class.

In accordance with this view, Lenin defines his "revolutionary Social Democrat" as a "Jacobin joined to the organization of the proletariat, which has become conscious of its class interests."

The fact is that the Social Democracy is not joined to the organization of the proletariat. It is itself the proletariat. And because of this, Social Democratic centralism is essentially different from Blanquist centralism. It can only be the concentrated will of the individuals and groups representative of the

working class. It is, so to speak, the "self-centralism" of the advanced sectors of the proletariat. It is the rule of the majority within its own party.

The indispensable conditions for the realization of Social Democratic centralism are:

1. The existence of a large contingent of workers educated in the class struggle.
2. The possibility for the workers to develop their own political activity through direct influence on public life, in a party press, and public congresses, etc.

These conditions are not yet fully formed in Russia. The first -- a proletarian vanguard, conscious of its class interests and capable of self-direction in political activity -- is only now emerging in Russia. All efforts of socialist agitation and organization should aim to hasten the formation of such a vanguard. The second condition can be had only under a regime of political liberty.

With these conclusions, Lenin disagrees violently. He is convinced that all the conditions necessary for the formation of a powerful and centralized party already exist in Russia. He declares that, "it is no longer the proletarians but certain intellectuals in our party who need to be educated in the matters of organization and discipline," (page 145). He glorifies the educative influence of the factory, which, he says, accustoms the proletariat to "discipline and organization," (page 147).

Saying all this, Lenin seems to demonstrate again that his conception of socialist organization is quite mechanistic. The discipline Lenin has in mind is being implanted in the working class not only by the factory but also by the military and the existing state bureaucracy -- by the entire mechanism of the centralized bourgeois state.

We misuse words and we practice self-deception when we apply the same term -- discipline -- to such dissimilar notions as: 1, the absence of thought and will in a body with a thousand automatically moving hands and legs, and 2, the spontaneous coordination of the conscious, political acts of a body of men. What is there in common between the regulated docility of an oppressed class and the self-discipline and organization of a class struggling for its emancipation?

The self-discipline of the Social Democracy is not merely the replacement of the authority of bourgeois rulers with the authority of a socialist central committee. The working class will acquire the sense of the new discipline, the freely assumed self-discipline of the Social Democracy, not as a result of the discipline imposed on it by the capitalist state, but by extirpating, to the last root, its old habits of obedience and servility.

Centralism in the socialist sense is not an absolute thing applicable to any phase whatsoever of the labor movement. It is a tendency, which becomes real in proportion to the development and political training acquired by the working masses in the course of their struggle.

No doubt, the absence of the conditions necessary for the complete realization of this kind of centralism in the Russian movement presents a formidable obstacle.

It is a mistake to believe that it is possible to substitute "provisionally" the absolute power of a Central Committee (acting somehow by "tacit delegation") for the yet unrealizable rule of the majority of conscious workers in the party, and in this way replace the open control of the working masses over the party organs with the reverse control by the Central Committee over the revolutionary proletariat.

The history of the Russian labor movement suggests the doubtful value of such centralism. An all-powerful center, invested, as Lenin would have it, with the unlimited right to control and intervene, would be an absurdity if its authority applied only to technical questions, such as the administration of funds, the distribution of tasks among propagandists and agitators, the transportation and circulation of printed matter. The political purpose of an organ having such great powers only if those powers apply to the elaboration of a uniform plan of action, if the central organ assumes the initiative of a vast revolutionary act.

But what has been the experience of the Russian socialist movement up to now? The most important and fruitful changes in its tactical policy during the last ten years have not been the inventions of several leaders and even less so of any central organizational organs. They have always been the spontaneous product of the movement in ferment. This was true during the first stage of the proletarian movement in Russia, which began with the spontaneous general strike of St. Petersburg in 1896, an event that marks the inception of an epoch of economic struggle by the Russian working people. It was no less true during the following period, introduced by the spontaneous street demonstrations of St. Petersburg students in March, 1901. The general strike of Rostov-on-Don, in 1903, marking the next great tactical turn in the Russian proletarian movement, was also a spontaneous act. "All by itself," the strike expanded into political demonstrations, street agitation, great outdoor meetings, which the most optimistic revolutionist would not have dreamed of several years before.

Our cause made great gains in these events. However, the initiative and conscious leadership of the Social Democratic organizations played an insignificant role in this development. It is true that these organizations were not specifically prepared for such happenings. However, the unimportant part played by the revolutionists cannot be explained by this fact. Neither can it be attributed to the absence of an all-powerful central party apparatus similar to what is asked for by Lenin. The existence of such a guiding center would have probably increased the disorder of the local committees by emphasizing the difference between the eager attack of the mass and the prudent position of the Social Democracy. The same phenomenon -- the insignificant part played by the initiative of central party organs in the elaboration of actual tactical policy -- can be observed today in Germany and other countries. In general, the tactical policy of the Social Democracy is not something that may be "invented." It is the product of a series of great creative acts of the often spontaneous class struggle seeking its way forward.

The unconscious comes before the conscious. The logic of the historic process comes before the subjective logic of the human beings who participate in the historic process. The tendency is for the directing organs of the socialist party to play a conservative role. Experience shows that every time the labor movement wins new terrain those organs work it to the utmost. They transform it at the same time into a kind of bastion, which holds up advance on a wider scale.

The present tactical policy of the German Social Democracy has won universal esteem because it is supple as well as firm. This is a sign of the fine adaptation of the party, in the smallest detail of its everyday activity, to the conditions of a parliamentary regime. The party has made a methodical study of all the resources of this terrain. It knows how to utilize them without modifying its principles.

However, the very perfection of this adaptation is already closing vaster horizons to our party. There is a tendency in the party to regard parliamentary tactics as the immutable and specific tactics of socialist activity. People refuse, for example, to consider the possibility (posed by Parvus) of changing our tactical policy in case general suffrage is abolished in Germany, an eventuality not considered entirely improbable by the German Social Democracy.

Such inertia is due, in a large degree, to the fact that it is very inconvenient to define, within the vacuum of abstract hypotheses, the lines and forms of still nonexistent political situations. Evidently, the important

thing for the Social Democracy is not the preparation of a set of directives all ready for future policy. It is important: 1, to encourage a correct historic appreciation of the forms of struggle corresponding to the given situations, and 2, to maintain an understanding of the relativity of the current phase and the inevitable increase of revolutionary tension as the final goal of class struggle is approached.

Granting, as Lenin wants, such absolute powers of a negative character to the top organ of the party, we strengthen, to a dangerous extent, the conservatism inherent in such an organ. If the tactics of the socialist party are not to be the creation of a Central Committee but of the whole party, or, still better, of the whole labor movement, then it is clear that the party sections and federations need the liberty of action which alone will permit them to develop their revolutionary initiative and to utilize all the resources of the situation. The ultra-centralism asked by Lenin is full of the sterile spirit of the overseer. It is not a positive and creative spirit. Lenin's concern is not so much to make the activity of the party more fruitful as to control the party -- to narrow the movement rather than to develop it, to bind rather than to unify it.

In the present situation, such an experiment would be doubly dangerous to the Russian Social Democracy. It stands on the eve of decisive battles against tsarism. It is about to enter, or has already entered, on a period of intensified creative activity, during which it will broaden (as is usual in a revolutionary period) its sphere of influence and will advance spontaneously by leaps and bounds. To attempt to bind the initiative of the party at this moment, to surround it with a network of barbed wire, is to render it incapable of accomplishing the tremendous task of the hour.

The general ideas we have presented on the question of socialist centralism are not by themselves sufficient for the formulation of a constitutional plan suiting the Russian party. In the final instance, a statute of this kind can only be determined by the conditions under which the activity of the organization takes place in a given epoch. The question of the moment in Russia is how to set in motion a large proletarian organization. No constitutional project can claim infallibility. It must prove itself in fire.

But from our general conception of the nature of Social Democratic organization, we feel justified in deducing that its spirit requires -- especially at the inception of the mass party -- the co-ordination and unification of the movement and not its rigid submission to a set of regulations. If the party possesses the gift of political mobility, complemented by unflinching loyalty to principles and concern for unity, we can rest assured that any defects in the party constitution will be corrected in practice. For us, it is not the letter, but the living spirit carried into the organization by the membership that decides the value of this or that organizational form.

Part II

Rosa Luxemburg

Leninism or Marxism?

II

So far we have examined the problem of centralism from the viewpoint of the general principles of the Social Democracy, and to some extent, in the light of conditions peculiar to Russia. However, the military ultra-centralism cried up by Lenin and his friends is not the product of accidental differences of opinion. It is said to be related to a campaign against opportunism which Lenin has carried to the smallest organizational detail.

"It is important," says Lenin (page 52), "to forge a more or less effective weapon against opportunism." He believes that opportunism springs specifically from the characteristic leaning of intellectuals to decentralization and disorganization, from their aversion for strict discipline and "bureaucracy," which is, however, necessary for the functioning of the party.

Lenin says that intellectuals remain individualists and tend to anarchism even after they have joined the socialist movement. According to him, it is only among intellectuals that we can note a repugnance for the absolute authority of a Central Committee. The authentic proletarian, Lenin suggests, finds by reason of his class instinct a kind of voluptuous pleasure in abandoning himself to the clutch of firm leadership and pitiless discipline. "To oppose bureaucracy to democracy," writes Lenin, "is to contrast the organizational principle of revolutionary Social Democracy to the methods of opportunistic organization," (page 151).

He declares that a similar conflict between centralizing and autonomist tendencies is taking place in all countries where reformism and revolutionary socialism meet face to face. He points in particular to the recent controversy in the German Social Democracy on the question of the degree of freedom of action to be allowed by the Party to socialist representatives in legislative assemblies.

Let us examine the parallels drawn by Lenin.

First, it is important to point out that the glorification of the supposed genius of proletarians in the matter of socialist organization and a general distrust of intellectuals as such are not necessarily signs of "revolutionary Marxist" mentality. It is very easy to demonstrate that such arguments are themselves an expression of opportunism.

Antagonism between purely proletarian elements and the nonproletarian intellectuals in the labor movement is raised as an ideological issue by the following trends: the semianarchism of the French syndicalists, whose watchword is "Beware of the politician!"; English trade-unionism, full of mistrust of the "socialist visionaries"; and, if our information is correct, the "pure economism," represented a short while ago within the Russian Social Democracy by Rabochaya Mysl ("Labor Thought"), which was printed secretly in St. Petersburg.

In most socialist parties in Western Europe there is undoubtedly a connection between opportunism and the "intellectuals," as well as between opportunism and decentralizing tendencies within the labor movement.

But nothing is more contrary to the historic-dialectic method of Marxist thought than to separate social phenomena from their historic soil and to present these phenomena as abstract formulas having an absolute, general application.

Reasoning abstractly, we may say that the "intellectual," a social element which has emerged out of the bourgeoisie and is therefore alien to the proletariat, enters the socialist movement not because of his natural class inclinations but in spite of them. For this reason, he is more liable to opportunist aberrations than the proletarian. The latter, we say, can be expected to find a definite revolutionary point of support in his class interests as long as he does not leave his original environment, the laboring mass. But the concrete form assumed by this inclination of the intellectual toward opportunism and, above all, the manner in which this tendency expresses itself in organizational questions depend every time on his given social milieu.

Bourgeois parliamentarism is the definite social base of the phenomenon observed by Lenin in the German, French, and Italian socialist movements. This parliamentarism is the breeding place of all opportunist tendencies now existing in Western Social Democracy.

The kind of parliamentarism we now have in France, Italy, and Germany provides the soil for such illusions of current opportunism as overvaluation of social reforms, class and party collaboration, the hope of pacific development towards socialism etc. It does so by placing intellectuals, acting in the capacity of parliamentarians, above the proletariat and by separating intellectuals from proletarians inside the socialist movement itself. With the growth of the labor movement, parliamentarism becomes a springboard for political careerists. That is why so many ambitious failures from the bourgeoisie flock to the banners of socialist parties. Another source of contemporary opportunism is the considerable material means and influence of the large Social Democratic organizations.

The party acts as a bulwark protecting the class movement against digressions in the direction of more bourgeois parliamentarism. To triumph, these tendencies must destroy the bulwark. They must dissolve the active, class-conscious sector of the proletariat in the amorphous mass of an "electorate."

That is how the "autonomist" and decentralizing tendencies arise in our Social Democratic parties. We notice that these tendencies suit definite political ends. They cannot be explained, as Lenin attempts, by referring to the intellectual's psychology, to his supposedly innate instability of character. They can only be explained by considering the needs of the bourgeois parliamentary politician, that is, by opportunist politics.

The situation is quite different in tsarist Russia. Opportunism in the Russian labor movement is, generally speaking, not the by-product of Social Democratic strength or of the decomposition of the bourgeoisie. It is the product of the backward political condition of Russian society.

The milieu where intellectuals are recruited for socialism in Russia is much more declassed and by far less bourgeois than in Western Europe. Added to the immaturity of the Russian proletarian movement, this circumstance is an influence for wide theoretic wandering, which ranges from the complete negation of the political aspect of the labor movement to the unqualified belief in the effectiveness of isolated terrorist acts, or even total political indifference sought in the swamps of liberalism and Kantian idealism.

However, the intellectual within the Russian Social Democratic movement can only be attracted to an act of disorganization. It is contrary to the general outlook of the Russian intellectual's milieu. There is no bourgeois parliament in Russia to favor this tendency.

The Western intellectual who professes at this moment the "cult of the ego" and colors even his socialist yearnings with an aristocratic morale, is not the representative of the bourgeois intelligentsia "in general." He represents only a certain phase of social development. He is the product of bourgeois decadence.

The Narodniki ("Populists") of 1875 called on the Russian intelligentsia to lose themselves in the peasant mass. The ultra-civilized followers of Tolstoi speak today of escape to the life of the "simple folk." Similarly, the partisans of "pure economism" in the Russian Social Democracy want us to bow down before the "calloused hand" of labor.

If instead of mechanically applying to Russia formulae elaborated in Western Europe, we approach the problem of organization from the angle of conditions specific to Russia, we arrive at conclusions that are diametrically opposed to Lenin's.

To attribute to opportunism an invariable preference for a definite form of organization, that is, decentralization, is to miss the essence of opportunism.

On the question of organization, or any other question, opportunism knows only one principle: the absence of principle. Opportunism chooses its means of action with the aim of suiting the given circumstances at hand, provided these means appear to lead toward the ends in view.

If, like Lenin, we define opportunism as the tendency that paralyzes the independent revolutionary movement of the working class and transforms it into an instrument of ambitious bourgeois intellectuals, we must also recognize that in the initial stage of a labor movement this end is more easily attained as a result of rigorous centralization rather than by decentralization. It is by extreme centralization that a young, uneducated proletarian movement can be most completely handed over to the intellectual leaders staffing a Central Committee.

Also in Germany, at the start of the Social Democratic movement, and before the emergence of a solid nucleus of conscious proletarians and a tactical policy based on experience, partisans of the two opposite types of organization faced each other in argument. The "General Association of German Workers," founded by Lasalle, stood for extreme centralization. [Allgemeine Deutsche Arbeiterverein, organized on May 23, 1863 -- Ed] The principle of autonomism was supported by the party which was organized at the Eisenach Congress with the collaboration of W. Liebknecht and A. Bebel.

The tactical policy of the "Eisenachers" was quite confused. Yet they contributed vastly more to the awakening of class-consciousness of the German masses than the Lassalleans. Very early the workers played a preponderant role in that party (as was demonstrated by the number of worker publications in the provinces), and there was a rapid extension of the range of the movement. At the same time, the Lassalleans, in spite of all their experiments with "dictators," led their faithful from one misadventure to another.

In general, it is rigorous, despotic centralism that is preferred by opportunist intellectuals at a time when the revolutionary elements among the workers still lack cohesion and the movement is groping its way, as is the case now in Russia. In a later phase, under a parliamentary regime and in connection with a strong labor party, the opportunist tendencies of the intellectuals express themselves in an inclination toward "decentralization."

If we assume the viewpoint claimed as his own by Lenin and we fear the influence of intellectuals in the proletarian movement, we can conceive of no greater danger to the Russian party than Lenin's plan of organization. Nothing will more surely enslave a young labor movement to an intellectual elite hungry for power than this bureaucratic straightjacket, which will immobilize the movement and turn it into an automaton manipulated by a Central Committee. On the other hand there is no more effective guarantee against opportunist intrigue and personal ambition than the independent revolutionary action of the proletariat, as a result of which the workers acquire the sense of political responsibility and self-reliance.

What is today only a phantom haunting Lenin's imagination may become reality tomorrow.

Let us not forget that the revolution soon to break out in Russia will be a bourgeois and not a proletarian revolution. This modifies radically all the conditions of socialist struggle. The Russian intellectuals, too, will rapidly become imbued with bourgeois ideology. The Social Democracy is at present the only guide of the Russian proletariat. But on the day after the revolution, we shall see the bourgeoisie and above all the bourgeois masses as a steppingstone to their domination.

The game of bourgeois demagogues will be made easier if at the present stage, the spontaneous action, initiative, and political sense of the advanced sections of the working class are hindered in their development and restricted by the protectorate of an authoritarian Central Committee.

More important is the fundamental falseness of the idea underlying the plan of unqualified centralism -- the idea that the road to opportunism can be barred by means of clauses in the party constitution.

Impressed by recent happenings in the socialist parties of France, Italy, and Germany, the Russian Social Democrats tend to regard opportunism as an alien ingredient, brought into the labor movement by representatives of bourgeois democracy. If that were so, no penalties provided by a party constitution could stop this intrusion. This afflux of nonproletarian recruits to the party of the proletariat is the effect of profound social causes, such as the economic collapse of the petty bourgeoisie, the bankruptcy of bourgeois liberalism, and the degeneration of bourgeois democracy. It is naïve to hope to stop this current by means of a formula written down in a constitution.

A manual of regulations may master the life of a small sect or a private circle. An historic current, however, will pass through the mesh of the most subtly worded paragraph. It is furthermore untrue that to repel the elements pushed toward the socialist movement by the decomposition of bourgeois society means to defend the interests of the working class. The Social Democracy has always contended that it represents not only the class interests of the proletariat but also the progressive aspirations of the whole of contemporary society. It represents the interests of all who are oppressed by bourgeois domination. This must not be understood merely in the sense that all these interests are ideally contained in the socialist program. Historic evolution translates the given proposition into reality. In its capacity as a political party, the Social Democracy becomes the haven of all discontented elements in our society and thus of the entire people, as contrasted to the tiny minority of capitalist masters.

But socialists must always know how to subordinate the anguish, rancor, and hope of this motley aggregation to the supreme goal of the working class. The Social Democracy must enclose the tumult of the nonproletarian protestants against existing society within bounds of the revolutionary action of the proletariat. It must assimilate the elements that come to it.

This is only possible if the Social Democracy already contains a strong, politically educated proletarian nucleus class conscious enough to be able, as up to now in Germany, to pull along in its tow the declassed and petty bourgeois elements that join the party. In that case, greater strictness in the application of the principle of centralization and more severe discipline, specifically formulated in party bylaws, may be an effective safeguard against the opportunist danger. That is how the revolutionary socialist movement in France defended itself against the Jauresist confusion. A modification of the constitution at the German Social Democracy in that direction would be a very timely measure.

But even here we should not think of the party constitution as a weapon that is, somehow, self-sufficient. It can be at most a coercive instrument enforcing the will of the proletarian majority in the party. If this majority is lacking, then the most dire sanctions on paper will be of no avail.

However, the influx of bourgeois elements into the party is far from being the only cause of the opportunist trends that are now raising their heads in the Social Democracy. Another cause is the very nature of socialist activity and the contradictions inherent in it.

The international movement of the proletariat toward its complete emancipation is a process peculiar in the following respect. For the first time in the history of civilization, the people are expressing their will consciously and in opposition to all ruling classes. But this will can only be satisfied beyond the limits of the existing system.

Now the mass can only acquire and strengthen this will in the course of day-to-day struggle against the existing social order -- that is, within the limits of capitalist society.

On the one hand, we have the mass; on the other, its historic goal, located outside of existing society. On one hand, we have the day-to-day struggle; on the other, the social revolution. Such are the terms of the dialectic contradiction through which the socialist movement makes its way.

It follows that this movement can best advance by tacking betwixt and between the two dangers by which it is constantly being threatened. One is the loss of its mass character; the other, the abandonment of its goal. One is the danger of sinking back to the condition of a sect; the other, the danger of becoming a movement of bourgeois social reform.

That is why it is illusory, and contrary to historic experience, to hope to fix, once and for always, the direction of the revolutionary socialist struggle with the aid of formal means, which are expected to secure the labor movement against all possibilities of opportunist digression.

Marxist theory offers us a reliable instrument enabling us to recognize and combat typical manifestations of opportunism. But the socialist movement is a mass movement. Its perils are not the product of the insidious machinations of individuals and groups. They arise out of unavoidable social conditions. We cannot secure ourselves in advance against all possibilities of opportunist deviation. Such dangers can be overcome only by the movement itself -- certainly with the aid of Marxist theory, but only after the dangers in question have taken tangible form in practice.

Looked at from this angle, opportunism appears to be a product and an inevitable phase of the historic development of the labor movement.

The Russian Social Democracy arose a short while ago. The political conditions under which the proletarian movement is developing in Russia are quite abnormal. In that country, opportunism is to a large extent a by-product of the groping and experimentation of socialist activity seeking to advance over a terrain that resembles no other in Europe.

In view of this, we find most astonishing the claim that it is possible to avoid any possibility of opportunism in the Russian movement by writing down certain words, instead of others, in the party constitution. Such an attempt to exercise opportunism by means of a scrap of paper may turn out to be extremely harmful -- not to opportunism but to the socialist movement.

Stop the natural pulsation of a living organism, and you weaken it, and you diminish its resistance and combative spirit -- in this instance, not only against opportunism but also (and that is certainly of great importance) against the existing social order. The proposed means turn against the end they are supposed to serve.

In Lenin's overanxious desire to establish the guardianship of an omniscient and omnipotent Central Committee in order to protect so promising and vigorous a labor movement against any misstep, we recognize the symptoms of the same subjectivism that has already played more than one trick on socialist thinking in Russia.

It is amusing to note the strange somersaults that the respectable human "ego" has had to perform in recent Russian history. Knocked to the ground, almost reduced to dust, by Russian absolutism, the "ego" takes revenge by turning to revolutionary activity. In the shape of a committee of conspirators, in the name of a nonexistent Will of the People, it seats itself on a kind of throne and proclaims it is all-powerful. [The reference is to the conspiratorial circle which attacked tsarism from 1879 to 1883 by means of terrorist acts and finally assassinated Alexander II. -- Ed] But the "object" proves to be the stronger. The knout is triumphant, for tsarist might seems to be the "legitimate" expression of history.

In time we see appear on the scene and even more "legitimate" child of history -- the Russian labor movement. For the first time, bases for the formation of a real "people's will" are laid in Russian soil.

But here is the "ego" of the Russian revolutionary again! Pirouetting on its head, it once more proclaims itself to be the all-powerful director of history -- this time with the title of His Excellency the Central Committee of the Social Democratic Party of Russia.

The nimble acrobat fails to perceive that the only "subject" which merits today the role of director is the collective "ego" of the working class. The working class demands the right to make its mistakes and learn the dialectic of history.

Let us speak plainly. Historically, the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee.