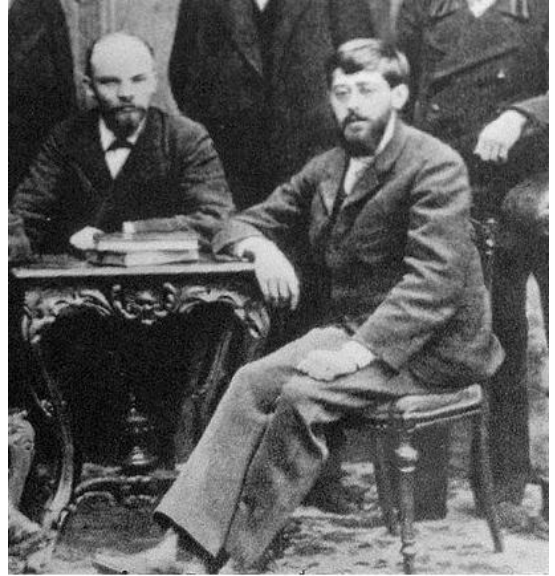


# Bolshevism, Real and Imagined: A Reply to Mitchell Cohen



The greatest flaw of Mitchell Cohen's "[What Lenin's Critics Got Right](#)" in the most recent *Dissent* is that it repeats what Lars T. Lih, independent researcher and author of *Lenin Rediscovered: 'What Is To Be Done' In Context* (Haymarket, 2008) and a biography of Lenin (Reaktion Books, 2011), calls the "standard textbook interpretation" of Lenin's thought and, by extension, Bolshevism as a movement.

Cohen reprises the usual claim that via the publication of *What Is To Be Done?* (hereafter *WITBD?*) in 1902 and the 1904 split in the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) Lenin and his "Bolsheviks" (the 1904 majority faction) created a "party of a new type"— a despotically centralized "vanguard" party of "professional revolutionaries" (supposedly ex-student intellectuals, not "real workers") dominated by an all-powerful central committee. Cohen contrasts this "Leninist" vision of the Marxist party to that of a democratic Marxist party to which the Bolsheviks' rivals in the Menshevik (minority) faction of the RSDLP, like Julius Martov,

purportedly held. Lih calls this the “worry about the workers” reading, based on Lenin’s supposed view that workers, through their daily political struggles, would never achieve “revolutionary consciousness.”

I’m afraid that Cohen just isn’t “up” on the latest research on Lenin and Bolshevism; for that matter he doesn’t consult older sources that might contradict, say, Orlando Figes. At least since Marcel Liebman’s *Leninism Under Lenin* (1975) it’s been evident that the 1904 Bolshevik-Menshevik split did *not* create two separate parties, *only* public factions of the RSDLP; hence, the authoritarian “vanguard party” allegedly outlined in *WITBD?* didn’t, and in fact couldn’t, exist in real life before White Terror and the Russian Civil War led to what would best be called “panic” on the part of Bolshevik leadership. And considering that Lenin himself became uninterested in defending *WITBD?*, claiming in 1907 that “The basic mistake made by people who polemicise with *What is to be Done?*...is that they tear this production completely out of specific historical context, out of a specific and by now long-past period in the development of [the RSDLP],” one is left wondering what to make of this ostensibly important pamphlet that “gave birth” to “Leninism.”

In *Lenin Rediscovered* Lih offers the first logical explanation for the “peculiarity” of *WITBD?*: it is the victim of mistranslation of key Russian terms. All that Lenin was actually arguing for, Lih clarifies, was a Marxist working-class party modeled after the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Lih calls Lenin’s political orientation “Erfurtian,” after the Erfurt Program adopted by the SPD in 1891. Lenin may have used the phrase “vanguard party,” but as Lih explains, this term merely described “the common understanding of what Social Democracy was all about.[...] *WITBD* did not advocate hyper-centralism or an elite, conspiratorial party restricted to professional revolutionaries from the intelligentsia. The positions advanced in *WITBD* were not the cause of the [RSDLP]

split in 1904. *The centrality of political freedom* [emphasis added] in Lenin's platform makes it impossible to draw a direct link between *WITBD* and Stalinism," as Cohen does.

Yes, Russian Marxists faced conditions of illegality and police persecution. Hence, building a revolutionary party involved a significant activist cadre becoming *professional'nyi revoliutsioneri*. Normally translated as "professional revolutionaries," it really means "revolutionaries by trade." In the late 19th and early 20th century *professii* or *professional'nyi* were words applied in Russian to skilled workers "in an efficient organization." There's nothing innately elitist about such terms. Following the SPD model, these underground activists "will rise from worker ranks." Such revolutionaries must become expert in the skills of *konspiratsiia*. This term doesn't actually mean an elitist "conspiracy," merely "the techniques of illegal political work." If for the underground as a whole, Lih elucidates, the "professional revolutionary" gains authority because he's "tough enough to be arrested and escape," for Lenin "the revolutionary by trade gains authority because he is smart enough not to get arrested in the first place."

But what about the dismissal of "trade unionism" and "spontaneity" in *WITBD*? Doesn't Lenin say that mere "spontaneous" trade unionism reinforces bourgeois dominance? No. *Tred-iunionizm* doesn't mean "trade unionism" in the general sense of supporting or creating trade unions, but the specific politics of the right wing of the British labor movement, which—when *WITBD*? was written—opposed forming a labor party and lacked a class-struggle orientation to politics. Today we might call such an orientation "business unionist." It's this *particular type* of trade unionism that Lenin considers "bourgeois" and ultimately apolitical, not *all* trade unionism. Moreover, he believes that Russian Marxists can effectively challenge *tred-iunionizm* precisely because, in Lih's words, he has "*more confidence* in the [Russian] workers

than his opponents [in the Russian revolutionary movement].”

As for “spontaneity,” the original Russian term is *stikhiinost*. Lih explains that *stikhiinost* refers to elemental forces: “*stikhiinost* connotes the self's lack of control over the world, while spontaneity connotes the world's lack of control over the self.” Russian Marxists used *stikhiinyi* and *stikhiinost* prior to *WITBD?* in two ways: negatively, in reference to “elemental,” purposeless eruptions of mass anger which didn't represent working-class self-organization; and positively, in reference to the rise of the “worker masses that are straining at the bit...toward socialism and political struggle.” Lenin was actually arguing *for* the notion that Social Democrats must catch up with those workers whose “spontaneous” struggle was progressing briskly and might leave the RSDLP behind.

What about the “democratic centralist” party, which—even before the Civil War—supposedly involved quasi-military discipline, gave extraordinary powers to its central committee, and—if it allowed internal dissent at all—didn't allow dissidents to express their views publicly? At this point Rosa Luxemburg's criticism of Lenin's “ultra-centralism” is usually quoted (Cohen cites the Luxemburg of 1918, not 1904, but his aim is the same). Apparently Cohen doesn't know that *the Mensheviks* were the first Russian socialists to invoke “democratic centralism.” Lenin merely adopted the idea for the Bolsheviks. Before the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920, when it was redefined, for both RSDLP factions “democratic centralism” merely meant that *democratically-elected party congresses* had the power to make binding decisions on all party committees and members. This isn't authoritarian. Moreover, Alexander Rabinowitch's *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* (1976) already made it clear that the Bolsheviks had public debates. Why does Cohen repeat what's been long discredited? Why doesn't he question the incongruity between Lenin's initial objective of political freedom in

Russia and the “vanguardist” strategy he *supposedly* favored as a way to reach that goal? Was Lenin stupid? He was certainly never stupid enough to advocate “socialism in one country” a la Stalin, as Cohen implies. (And can we please finally admit that Luxemburg was misinformed about “Leninism” in 1904?) The evidence is clear: for most of his life Lenin was merely an “Erfurtian,” a “Kautskyist,” no more authoritarian than Karl Kautsky himself (Lenin would never have called Kautsky a “renegade” from Marxism had he not loved Kautsky’s writings for so long). *He was not an original political theorist.*

Space in this blog doesn’t permit an interrogation of Lenin’s *The State and Revolution* and its flaws (its naïveté, for one) or other writings, most of which are of no contemporary relevance. But let’s state some facts. The soviets of 1917 through mid-1918 consisted of *legal* rival parties. In November 1917 Lenin also promoted the idea that workers’ and peasants’ organizations should be entitled to free press resources. (Cohen should also investigate how the Bolsheviks treated General Krasnov and his soldiers, who attempted armed overthrow of the Soviet government on October 31. It was very “soft.”) I won’t justify *every* action the Bolsheviks took during the Civil War. And of course the October Revolution was a “gamble” on Western European proletarian revolution. That failed. But Martov’s alternative—a Menshevik-Socialist Revolutionary government based on the Constituent Assembly—was impossible. The actual alternative was either many policies the Bolsheviks implemented, *including* coercion of the peasantry to provide food, Red Terror (partly designed to control and restrain terror “from below” by peasants), etc., or the rule of White generals and White Terror. The main “tragedy” isn’t the Bolsheviks’ actions; it’s the ad-hoc *justifications* of these actions as *norms* in Comintern resolutions, adopted by “Leninist” organizations. Those, of course, must be thoroughly rejected if we’re to have a democratic radical left.

Cohen will surely disagree, but Lenin was simply never a sufficiently innovative theorist to merit his own “ism.” But for those of us who are sure that humanity’s ultimate choice really is socialism or barbarism and that if the global working class (now larger than ever before) doesn’t take political power we are condemned to continued economic and ecological crises, studying the *history* of Bolshevism—for both negative *and positive* lessons—is a must.

*Jason Schulman is co-editor of [New Politics](#) and the editor of Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). He is the author of Neoliberal Labour Governments and the Union Response: The Politics of the End of Labourism (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).*