Chapter Three

Class-Conflict, Political Competition and Social Transformation: Critical Perspectives on the Social History of the Russian Revolution

Introduction

What determined the victory of the Bolsheviks in 1917? In the past two decades, social historians of the labour-movement in late-Imperial Russia have given a novel answer, and have transformed the field. Speaking in the broadest of terms, the practitioners of the latest trend in scholarship have shown in rich, descriptive detail how workers participated in the Revolution to satisfy pressing material needs and interests rooted in their practical everyday-lives. According to these historians, the ‘logic’ of this multifaceted economic struggle, which took place in the context of acute economic crisis, detonated a variegated process of political organisation and developing political consciousness among workers that culminated in a majority of the latter arriving at Bolshevik positions and supporting the Bolshevik-led seizure of power.¹ This explanatory motif has now emerged as the standard approach to the great social transformation of 1917. Indeed, by exhaustively recording how workers were able to develop their politics and build their organisations ‘from within’, through their self-movement around wages, hours and working conditions, social historians have self-consciously challenged and overturned the

¹ Suny 1983, pp. 31–52.
previously dominant ‘political’ view that unorganised and politically undeveloped workers achieved organisation and revolutionary ideas chiefly through the activity of radical intellectuals autonomously organised in a party, and acting ‘from the outside’. Nevertheless, while the previous party-political-centred interpretation has been deservedly dethroned, the new orthodoxy does not offer an analytically superior alternative to it.

Fundamentally at issue is the failure of social historians to properly pose the problem of a specific political outcome to the workers’ struggles to secure their material well-being. In their view, the self-developing dynamic of the labour-movement in 1917 automatically generated the appropriate political response to the emerging opportunity, within the context of deep economic crisis, for revolutionary social transformation. In contrast, I shall argue that, while it is true the working class developed its consciousness and its organisation in struggle, there was always, as an integral part of that struggle, a competitive party-political moment that was autonomous. Party-political competition functioned as the selection-mechanism by means of which workers chose from among rival political solutions, advanced by competing political parties, to economic crisis, and responded to the associated potential for the transition from one type of society to another, i.e. from capitalism to socialism. Indeed, the actual evolution and outcome of the workers’ movement in 1917 is incomprehensible without the autonomous political conflicts that were an irreducible aspect of the Revolution. But social historians reduce the logic of political struggle to the logic of the economic struggle determined by economic crisis and social dislocation. Owing to this reduction, the social interpretation of the Russian Revolution suffers from certain disabling weaknesses. Above all, social historians conjure away the political alternatives available to workers, along with the difficult political choices they had to make. In consequence, the issue of outcome arises in two respects.

First, the outcome of the workers’ continental-wide drive in 1917–21 to secure their material well-being in times of economic calamity differed in different countries. In Russia, a revolutionary transformation took place and a workers’ state was founded. But, in the West, no comparable revolutionary transition to socialism and Soviet power occurred during the German Revolution of 1918–19 and the Italian Biennio Rosso of 1919–20: contexts in which war-induced political-economic crisis drove workers (particularly those in the metallurgical industries) to organise mass-strikes and to participate in huge street-demonstrations; to occupy factories and set up factory-committees, and