In ‘Revision and Retreat in the Historiography of 1917: Social History and Its Critics’ (*Russian Review*, April 1994), Ronald G. Suny adamantly defends the still-dominant ‘social’ interpretation of the Russian Revolution against a resurgent ‘political’ interpretation of it, advanced by Richard Pipes most notably. At the same time, and in a spirit of reconciliation, Suny invites both political and social historians to acknowledge and overcome their respective weaknesses and to work together toward a superior ‘postmodern’ synthesis of the rival historiographic trends. Only on this basis, Suny avers, can scholars move forward to a truer understanding of the Russian Revolution.

Richard Pipes and the political historians argue now, as they did over a generation ago, that political action and decision-making by parties decided the outcome of the Russian Revolution. Above all, they contend that the Bolsheviks alone were responsible for the October Revolution. The socio-historical response, developed over the last quarter-century and summarised here by Suny, amounts to saying that the reason the Bolshevik Party was able to lead the Soviet seizure of power was that the masses supported this historic action. The social historians have been able to show, beyond all reasonable doubt, how the free and democratic election of Bolshevik majorities to the Soviets of urban Russia in the fall of 1917 reflected the convergence of working-class
interests with the Bolshevik programme of ‘All Power to the Soviets’. Because most political historians either blithely ignored this convergence or tortuously interpreted it out of existence, the social historians were able to score impressive victories for their approach and, in this way, to progressively lay bare the fundamental weakness of their historiographical rivals. But these were highly qualified successes, in a central respect, because the social historians achieved them at the cost of their failure to really come to grips with and really examine closely the activist-role of the Bolshevik Party.

The problem is fairly and squarely posed: how do you move from the militancy and interests of the working class, well delineated by the social historians, to political action, well emphasised by the political historians, when no connection between the two spheres is made by either historiographical trend, as Suny apparently recognises? How does Suny propose to bridge the two?

Suny agrees that there is simply no way to move directly from the militancy and support of the masses to the October Revolution. There is a mediation between the two: the realm of politics, which the social historians need to explore. To downplay this sphere would be reductionist. Crucially, the social historians must acknowledge the validity of the political historians’ basic insight that the self-representation of workers as socialists and revolutionaries cannot be immediately ‘deduced from their material conditions: it must be referred to the larger competitive discursive universes in which these workers found themselves’.1 ‘“Objective” economic and social realities’ cannot determine, by themselves, ‘the course of politics’2 and, therefore, the outcome of the Russian Revolution. Having pointed out, then, against the social historians, that ‘deepening economic crisis’ or ‘social polarization’ alone cannot explain the Bolshevik seizure of power, Suny turns to Pipes and the political historians, where this point is made.

Unfortunately, Suny’s discussion of Pipes and of the historiographical trend he represents is deficient because it does not adequately treat this very point. While Suny recognises that politics must be brought back in to fill in the blank-spots of social history, he never investigates closely whether Pipes and the political historians are right or wrong to argue that the Bolsheviks bore sole responsibility for the October Revolution. A definite yes or no must be given to this question because the answer unequivocally divides the two historiographical trends. But Suny skirts this divide and muddies the waters. Certainly, Suny cannot accept Pipes’s as well as the liberals’ assessment of Bolshevik activity in 1917. Indeed, Suny devotes much of his essay to attacking