Party struggles lend a party strength and vitality; the greatest proof of a party’s weakness is its diffuseness and the blurring of clear demarcations; a party becomes stronger by purging itself.

— Ferdinand Lassalle

Reviewing the brief history of the Russian working-class movement in What Is to Be Done?, Lenin saluted ‘the spontaneous awakening of the working masses’ but cautioned that ‘the workers were not, and could not be, conscious of the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social system, i.e., theirs was not yet Social-Democratic consciousness’. This consciousness was the product of theoretical work by intellectuals and ‘would have to be brought to [the workers] from without’. Indeed, he would generalise, ‘the spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology’. It was incumbent upon Social Democrats, therefore, ‘to combat spontaneity, to divert the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social-Democracy’.

---

1 An earlier and somewhat abbreviated version of the argument of this chapter was published in 1995 as “Consciousness from Without”: Marxism, Lenin and the Proletariat, Science & Society, 59, 3: 268–97.
2 Epigraph to Lenin 1902, p. 347.
3 Lenin 1902, p. 375.
Conventional Wisdom

Ever since *What Is to Be Done?* was published in 1902, Lenin’s critics have counterposed its account of the development of working-class consciousness to one of Marx’s central tenets, the thesis that ‘the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves’.\(^5\) This thesis involves two claims: first, that the working class, unlike previous exploited classes, is capable of autonomous revolutionary activity – autonomous in the sense that its struggles need not be subordinated to the ends of others. It need not serve as mere cannon fodder in the battles of rival exploiters. Its own class struggle will eventuate not in the domination of a new exploiting class, but in the transcendence of classes and exploitation. Second, that not only does the working class come, in the course of its struggle, to realise that its emancipation entails the supersession of capitalism and the construction of a socialist society, but that this end can be accomplished only through the independent activity of the working class, through proletarian class struggle. It cannot be accomplished by reformers enacting philanthropic schemes on behalf of the working class. These two claims, which together constitute the idea of proletarian self-emancipation, are at the core of Marx’s revolutionary thought. From this perspective it may well seem that, in setting up an opposition between the spontaneous movement of the workers and the socialist theory of the intellectuals, Lenin had abandoned Marxist historical materialism, the method of seeking the groundwork of ideas in the social relations of production, and had fashioned in its stead a theoretical rationale for the ascendancy of revolutionary intellectuals over the proletariat. The notion that socialist consciousness must be imported into the working-class movement from without would thus be subject to the same criticism that Marx had levelled at Ludwig Feuerbach:

> The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.

> The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.\(^6\)

The mechanistic Enlightenment account of human action that Marx criticises here involves two claims: first, that an observer can, in principle, know

\(^6\) Marx 1845, p. 4.