Appendix 2

Text and Context in the Argument of Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?*

For those interested in the revaluation and reworking of the theory and practice of the classical Marxist tradition, Lars Lih’s ‘rediscovery’ of the political context of Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?* is a work of considerable importance. Lenin’s text has been a key point of reference, perhaps the key point of reference, in debates around the political function of a Marxist vanguard and the logic of political action and hence around the relation of theory and practice. According to the ‘textbook interpretation’, as Lih terms it, a reading that has passed into a broader conventional wisdom to the extent that it has gained the status of common sense, Lenin’s scepticism as to the capacity of the working class to generate socialist consciousness spontaneously led him to assign revolutionary agency to a vanguard party of professional revolutionaries rather than to the working-class movement. The subordination of the workers to the Leninist vanguard party prescribed by Lenin thus prefigures, and thereby serves to provide the veneer of an explanation for, the authoritarian upshot of the revolutionary process. The plausibility of attributing such a blatant departure from the canons of historical materialism to a professed Marxist depends upon situating Lenin’s thought in the context of the political elitism and messianic voluntarism of the pre-Marxist tradition of Russian populism. This depends in turn upon reading Marxism (or at least the Marxism with which Lenin was familiar) not as a guide to action, but, as the populist adversaries of Russian Marxism did, as a conceptual straitjacket that precluded the theorisation of effective revolutionary political action. And if this reading is to have any plausibility, it must rely upon contemporary criticism of Lenin from a few minor figures on the margins of the Russian Social Democratic movement, from the retrospective criticism of Lenin’s Menshevik adversaries and from the later Leninist characterisation of Kautsky and the Mensheviks as mechanical Marxists. The textbook interpretation serves not only to sustain the legend of Lenin’s populism but also to constrain debate over the logic of revolutionary political action within the narrow confines of an abstract opposition between agency and structure.

The textbook interpretation has been subjected to serious scholarly criticism before, notably in the first volume of Neil Harding’s *Lenin’s Political Thought*, but Lih

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1 Originally published in 2010 in *Historical Materialism* 18, 3, pp. 75–89.
2 See Harding 1977, chapters 6 and 7.
here lays out a much more relentlessly detailed – I am tempted to say exhaustive – refutation. The theoretical and evidentiary issues Lih addresses are complex and he combines evidence drawn from historical, literary and linguistic sources into a powerful, multifaceted argument that resists brief summary. His interpretation turns upon the meticulously argued claim that the historical narrative of the fusion of socialism and the workers’ movement epitomised in Kautsky’s commentary upon the German Social Democratic Party (SPD)’s Erfurt Programme and the attempt by Russian Marxists to situate their political aims and practice in the terms of this narrative constitute the context without which Lenin’s text cannot be understood. The ‘Erfurtian’ narrative is shot through with biblical overtones – it is the ‘mission’ of the Social Democrats to bring to the workers the ‘good news’ of the world-historical ‘mission’ of the working-class movement to seize power and establish socialism – and so the political project of Social Democracy is not premised simply upon a dryly mechanical theory of history but resonates with activist evangelism. ‘Socialist consciousness’ is thus to be understood essentially in terms of the task of spreading this ‘good news’; an evangelical and democratic confidence in the capacity of the workers to receive it and act upon it was essential to the Social Democratic project. This portrait of the political orientation of Kautsky’s orthodox Marxism, in which confidence in the inevitable unfolding of the historical laws of capitalism, rather than excusing a political posture of passive expectation, sustains a durable will to revolutionary activism, is a crucial building block in Lih’s argumentative strategy, for it is only by contrast with a fatalistic caricature of orthodox Marxism that Lenin’s advocacy of the organisation of a revolutionary vanguard could appear heterodox. Once the caricature is exposed as such – and it is one of the signal contributions of this work to have done so – it is possible and necessary to measure What Is to Be Done? against the standard set by Kautsky’s Marxism and the political project of the SPD.

How, then, does What Is to Be Done? measure up? The strategic perspective fashioned by Plekhanov, Lenin and their Iskra colleagues, the hegemony of the proletariat in the Russian bourgeois-democratic revolution, is construed by Lih in terms of the Erfurtian narrative; he accumulates a mass of evidence to demonstrate the fidelity not only of Lenin and Iskra, but also of the most prominent of their polemical adversaries, to its narrative structure. Indeed, he suggests that the Russians added little besides the term ‘hegemony’, and perhaps not even that, to the political orientation of the SPD. If anything distinguished Lenin in Russian Marxist circles, in the company both of his Iskra colleagues and of his polemical adversaries, it was his more unyielding attachment to the theme and the logic of the Erfurtian narrative and his correspondingly greater confidence in the political capacity of the workers to meet the demands of revolutionary political struggle: if Kautsky’s rectitude in matters of Marxist theory made him, according to a witticism of the time, ‘the pope of Social-Democratic