APPENDIX 3

Lenin as a Reader of What Is to Be Done?

The claim that the thesis of consciousness from without, as formulated by Lenin in What Is to Be Done?, announces a significant theoretical innovation has been criticised on the grounds that he did not repeat it in his later writings, that he would soon repudiate it and that he would, in any case, disavow any theoretical intention in having put it forward. Robert Mayer lays out the basis for this kind of criticism by reading Lenin's thesis in terms of a definition of socialist consciousness derived from David Riazanov, a minor figure among Lenin's adversaries: ‘consciousness of the necessity to struggle for a socialist alternative to capitalism’.1 Here socialist consciousness is understood as a belief in a certain aim or goal, socialism, together with the conviction on the part of the worker that this goal must be pursued through struggle, a 'historical mission'. Mayer then goes on to attribute this understanding of socialist consciousness, which contains no reference to the shifting alignments, strategies and tactics of various class forces, social strata and political institutions, to Lenin. He thereby puts himself in a position to claim that, by denying that socialist consciousness arises spontaneously in the working-class movement, Lenin is in effect asserting that 'the proletariat is... incapacitated [from emancipating itself] in a way that no other class is'. The thesis of consciousness from without is thus to be understood as nothing more than a theoretical rationalisation of the self-proclaimed authority of Marxist intellectuals within the working-class movement. When it is understood in this way, however, Mayer is quite right to claim that it does not appear in Lenin's later writings and right to note that Lenin repudiated it at the Second Congress of the RSDLP in 1903. Lenin was right to do so because, understood in this way, neither did it appear in What Is to Be Done?

Mayer seeks further evidence of Lenin's repudiation of the thesis of consciousness from without in his prefatory note to the 1907 republication of What Is to Be Done? There Lenin explains his failure to reply to the criticism Plekhanov levelled at his account of spontaneity and political consciousness (after the latter had aligned himself with the Mensheviks in 1904), finding the criticism 'obviously mere cavilling, based on phrases torn out of context, on particular expressions which I had not quite adroitly or precisely formulated. Moreover, he ignored the general spirit and the whole content of my pamphlet'.2 Seconded by E. Haberkern,3 Mayer somehow claims to find in this a shame-faced retraction. Since Lenin's discussion of spontaneity and consciousness

2 Lenin 1907c, p. 107.
occupies a full chapter – the second of five – in a 180-page pamphlet and spills over significantly into some of the others, one wonders just which particular expressions Lenin thinks were maladroitly or imprecisely formulated. He doesn’t tell us – Plekhanov’s article not having been reprinted in the latest Menshevik collection, he would not deal with its arguments at that time.⁴ We find, however, that Plekhanov’s polemical firepower particularly targeted the phrase, ‘in Russia the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose altogether independently of the spontaneous working-class movement’, the old Marxist affecting absurdly to find in the expression ‘altogether independently’ evidence that Lenin thought Marxist theory had arisen in the absence of a working class.⁵ That Plekhanov’s article was not reprinted is perhaps understandable; ‘mere cavilling’ seems an apt characterisation. In any case, although the second edition of What Is to Be Done? was somewhat abridged, the discussion of spontaneity and consciousness appeared intact. This fact and the gist of the so-called retraction cited above together suggest that the reader of What Is to Be Done? is being counselled (and, make no mistake, we are being counselled to read it) to pay careful attention to the historical and political context in which it was written and to assess the bearing of particular claims and the adequacy of particular expressions in light of the argument and the aim of the work as a whole.

A measure of the weight of this evidence is provided by a brief comment that appeared in the Bolshevik Proletarii in October 1905, more than two years after the Second Congress. The comment, written by Lenin, summarised an article by the young Joseph Stalin in the journal of the RSDLP Caucasian League, a lengthy exposition and defence of the What Is to Be Done? account of spontaneity and consciousness against one of the many Menshevik critiques that followed in the wake of the Plekhanov piece.⁶ Lenin praised the ‘splendid’ way the article posed the problem of ‘the introduction of consciousness from without’ and qualified as ‘ridiculous’ the Menshevik denial of its thesis.⁷

There is, then, no evidence at all to support the claim that Lenin repudiated, however shamefacedly, the thesis of consciousness from without; what evidence there is

⁴ Lenin 1907c, p. 108.
⁵ See Baron 1963, pp. 248–51.
⁶ In view of the elaborate use made of the conventional wisdom about the thesis of consciousness from without in constructing a theoretical connection between Lenin and Stalinist authoritarianism, the virtual absence from the voluminous literature on Lenin’s thesis of any reference to this article (1905b), or to another (1905a) by Stalin on the same subject, may be qualified, parenthetically, as a remarkable commentary upon the worth of scholarship in this area. To my knowledge, there is no reference to either of these texts in the English-language literature prior to Shandro 2001; the sole reference I have come across is in a footnote to the French-language translation of Lenin 1905r appended to Garaudy 1968, pp. 80–1.
⁷ Lenin 1905r, p. 388.