It is clear that the pursuit of proletarian hegemony was closely bound up with the pursuit of political freedom. However, the nature of that freedom was inevitably problematic, since the achievement of bourgeois representative democracy was not conceived as the ideal towards which revolutionaries were striving. Pre-revolutionary Marxists viewed bourgeois democracy as a stage on the way to a higher form of democracy that would only be possible by transcending capitalism. In a society still subject to autocratic rule, basic freedoms of expression and of assembly were important interim goals, and a constitutional regime was undoubtedly perceived as a significant step forward. In one of his polemics from 1911, Lenin argued that if one compares the political systems in Britain and France, on the one hand, and Prussia on the other, the former were undoubtedly more democratic than the latter and 'much more favourable for the struggle of the working class, and have to a much greater degree eliminated the medieval institutions which distract the attention of the working class from its principal and real adversary'.\(^1\) This meant that the Party must support attempts to remodel the political system in Russia along the lines of the former, rather than the latter. However, the reason why the former developed more democratic systems than the latter was that, as the two former systems were being formed, the urban lower classes constituted a powerful pole of attraction for the peasantry and so were in a position to prevent the bourgeoisie making compromises in its struggle with absolutism. The political rights associated with bourgeois democracy were not, therefore, the result of the bourgeoisie achieving hegemony by articulating the interests of the ‘subaltern classes’ as part of a general struggle against feudalism, but were concessions to those classes in the face of their mass mobilisation. Where that mobilisation was weakest, so the political freedoms were more restricted. A general lesson could be drawn from this:

Every capitalist country passes through an era of bourgeois revolutions which produces a definite degree of democracy, a definite constitutional or parliamentary regime, a definite degree of independence, love of liberty, and initiative among the ‘lower classes’ in general and the proletariat in particular, a definite tradition permeating the entire political and

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\(^1\) Lenin 1974a [1911], p. 212.
social life of the country. The particular degree of democracy, or the particular tradition, depends on whether, in the decisive moments, the hegemony belongs to the bourgeoisie or to those at the other end of the scale; it depends on whether it is the former or the latter which (again in those decisive moments) constitutes the ‘centre of attraction for the democratic peasantry’ and, in general, for all intermediary democratic groups and sections.²

Thus, for Lenin, the European capitalist class embraced no ‘universalising tendency’ expressed in it striving for the liberalisation of politics and culture of the type supposed by legal Marxists or, indeed, by the proponents of ‘subaltern studies’ today. The portrait of the progressive bourgeoisie drawn in works such as Ranajit Guha’s landmark 1997 book, Dominance without Hegemony, from which the post-colonial bourgeoisie allegedly diverged, bears a striking resemblance to that held by the Russian liberals.³ As we have seen, capitalist support for Russian liberalism was very limited, and the entire project of proletarian hegemony had been forged precisely because the bourgeoisie was increasingly incapable of challenging European absolutisms in any fundamental sense. In all cases, political rights needed to be wrested from the bourgeoisie through mass struggle, which could only be successful through the achievement of proletarian hegemony over the peasantry.

In winning such hegemony, leadership was understood as a process by which the relationship between economic interests and political forms is to be revealed. This was the dialectic of agitation and propaganda first delineated by Plekhanov in On the Tasks of Socialists in the Struggle with Hunger in Russia (Letters to young Comrades) of 1892, but subsequently developed by Arkadi Kremer and Julius Martov in the 1896 pamphlet On Agitation [ob agitatsii], and by Lenin in What is to be Done? (1902).⁴ For Plekhanov, the shift to agitation marks a revolutionary organisation’s shift from a sect to a party.⁵ The classic distinction Plekhanov draws between propaganda and agitation is that ‘the propagandist conveys many ideas to one person or to a few people, whereas the agitator conveys only one or only a few ideas, but he conveys them to

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² Lenin 1974a [1911], p. 215.
³ Guha 1997, which developed an argument initially put forward in articles published in 1989 and 1992. A sustained and convincing critique of Guha’s argument is offered in Chibber 2013, but without reference to how the issue had been discussed by Russian Marxists.
⁵ Plekhanov 1923 [1892], p. 396.