The fundamental theme of Plekhanov’s reply to Ryazanov is stated near the end of this essay: ‘The real question is how to achieve the triumph of a democratic republic.’ Whereas Ryazanov anticipated movement beyond a bourgeois revolution, Plekhanov believed Russia was about to win a constitutional order that would finally eliminate remnants of serfdom and establish a law-governed régime of private property and civil liberties. In Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism, Samuel H. Baron summarised Plekhanov’s thinking this way:

In keeping with his long-held strategy, Plekhanov was most preoccupied during the revolutionary crisis of 1904–6 with the question of the relations between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In his estimation, the developing upheaval could only be a bourgeois revolution, and, inevitably, the bourgeoisie would have a prominent part in it; but the proletariat was destined to strike the decisive blows. Provided each played its prescribed role, absolutism would be overturned, the bourgeoisie would become the governing power in a democratic regime, and

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the proletariat would be in possession of the rights which would enable it to prepare for its economic emancipation later on.²

Plekhanov’s position, adds Baron, was ‘a logical consequence of an unshakable attachment to Marx’s theory of an economically determined sequence of historical stages. In that context, Russia’s upheaval could be only a “bourgeois” revolution’³ (with, of course, all the reservations already pointed out in our introduction to Ryazanov’s criticism of the Iskra programme).

The background to Plekhanov’s expectations can be traced through his successive drafts of a Social-Democratic programme for Russia. Although he believed the Russian empire was subject to general laws of history, in the Programme of the Social-Democratic Emancipation of Labour Group⁴ (1883) Plekhanov had written that all socialist parties must take into account the specific circumstances of their respective countries. In Russia, where ‘rising capitalism’ coexisted with ‘obsolescent patriarchal economy’, this meant socialists must simultaneously

organise the workers for the struggle against the bourgeoisie and wage war against the survivals of old pre-bourgeois social relationships, which are harmful both to the development of the working class and to the welfare of the whole people.⁵

With a proper constitutional order, all the bourgeois freedoms would be established (including democratic elections and freedom of conscience, speech, the press, assembly and association). At the same time, Plekhanov wrote, a ‘radical revision of our agrarian relations’ would put an end to the peasants’ redemption payments for land acquired in 1861, thereby facilitating the extension of private agricultural property in place of traditional communal organisation.

Just four years later, in the Second Draft Programme of the Russian Social-Democrats (1887), Plekhanov used similar language but elaborated his comments on agriculture. Capitalism was still ‘striving to become dominant’ in the country as a whole, but the village commune remained a means of ‘enslaving the peasant population to the state’ and hindering ‘their intellectual

² Baron 1963, p. 263.
³ Baron 1963, p. 265.
⁴ The Osvobozhdenie Truda group.
⁵ Plekhanov 1883b.