'What is to be done?' Indeed, this question resonates with us today more than ever, as the world sits gripped in a crisis now some thirty years old, a crisis which has finally, over the last decade, given rise to a renewal of communist theory and hope, grounded in the anticapitalist movements from Chiapas to Brazil to Seattle to Genoa. This book argues that the new movements against globalisation must, in fact, not be lulled back into the quagmire of Leninism, in whatever form, and that it must project a new anticapitalism, but one grounded not in hopes of state power and vanguard parties, but in the self-activity, the emancipatory and revolutionary self-activity of the proletariat.

The book operates on three interrelated levels: a critique of Leninism/Bolshevism in relation to its historical practice under Lenin, a critique of Lenin’s theoretical underpinnings, and a projection of a different understanding of ‘what is to be done’.

The strength of the work lies in the moments where the focus is on the critique of Lenin’s theorisation of the fundamental problems of struggle and revolution, and on the projection of a different notion of class, struggle, revolution and communism. The book founders, however, in those essays which take up the historical practice of the Bolsheviks, too often presenting a caricature of Lenin’s ideas and his relationship to the revolutionaries of the turn of the twentieth century.

Section One focuses on the historical practice of Lenin’s ideas in and through the Bolshevik Party and counterposes the practices of the Left within Social Democracy to Lenin and the Bolsheviks. This more or less fails to satisfy, as it never grapples with either Lenin’s ideas nor with the Bolsheviks’ practice from January 1904 to February 1917. This does, however, make it easier to pose an already-existing anti-Leninist Left within Social Democracy, since taking up the actual history would require explaining how Lenin and the Bolsheviks were themselves an essential component.
Section Two is more focused on a fundamental critique of Lenin’s notions of revolution, struggle, capital, and of Marx’s own project. This criticises Lenin’s ideas as not merely inapplicable to today, but as pointing to a wholly different, bourgeois, conception of revolution and crisis. On the one side, they posit Lenin’s ideas: the state as an instrument to be smashed, seized, wielded; crisis as flowing from the competition between capitals; the Party as Subject of the revolution, as the real agent of historical forces; and revolution as a question of ‘who controls what’. To this, they counterpose the state as a moment of the capital-labour relation, as a mode of existence of capital, not as an instrument; crisis as flowing from class struggle; the proletariat as subject of the revolution; and revolution as the transformation of all human social relations, not as a delayed effect achieved years after seizing state power, but as the very content of revolution itself.

Section Three is focused more on problems of organisation and how we understand our own activity. The essays criticise the notion of ‘using the state’, of ‘going through the institutions’. They also criticise the idea that revolution is a conflict between two equivalent subjects, two armies. A different activity is posed, one which is about anti-power, an anti-politics, rather than a politics of conquest.

All of the authors share a broadly class-struggle-centric analysis and the possibility of a communist anti-politics which sees itself as the moving negation of the existing social relations, rather than as moving through the institutions of capital. This involves a fundamentally anti-sociological and anti-instrumental approach to class, state and crisis.

In the beginning
The ‘Introduction’ by the two editors, Sergio Tischler and Werner Bonefeld, takes us to the current crisis, the anti-globalisation movement and the notion of freedom, but there is one point in particular that underpins the rest of the book:

What, then, is to be done? The idea of the revolutionary party as the organizational form of revolution has to be abandoned. The form of the party contradicts the content of revolution, and that is, human emancipation – the emancipation of the dependent masses can only be achieved by the dependent masses themselves. The notion of the form of the state as an instrument of revolution has to go. The idea of the seizure of power on behalf of the dependent masses has to be exposed for what it is: the denial of the society of the free and equal. Moaning about the ‘excesses’ of capital has to stop. A lamenting critique merely seeks to create a fairer capitalism,