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What is to be Done? Leninism, anti-Leninist Marxism and the question of revolution today.  
Werner Bonefeld and Sergio Tischler (eds)  
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Reviewed by David Harvie

*What is to be Done?*, Lenin's (in)famous instruction manual for professional revolutionaries, was published in 1902. This collection marks its centenary by reassessing the Bolshevik leader and his legacy and by confronting questions raised by the pamphlet, in particular that of anti-capitalism and revolution. The editors, upfront about their own position, suggest that 'Leninism has fallen on hard times—and rightly so. It leaves a bitter taste of a revolution whose heroic struggle turned into a nightmare'. Nevertheless, Lenin's pamphlet may still have something to offer, if only negatively; the question itself remains as important as ever, although it 'has to mean "what is to be learned?", "what is to be avoided?", and "what has to be done differently?"'.

My initial response is to question the worth of such an exercise. Leninism *has* fallen on hard times and, further agreeing with the editors, this can only be a good thing for those who desire a world, or worlds, which transcend(s) capital. But is there really anything we can learn from Lenin's legacy? Few of those whose actions against- and beyond-capital constitute the current global anti-capitalist movement appear at all concerned with Lenin and Leninism. Why bring up the subject at all? But... take, for example, the European Social Forum, an enormous gathering of activists, campaigners, intellectuals, etc., which has now met twice under the slogan 'another world is possible', first in Florence in November 2002, and a year later in Paris.<sup>1</sup> The main *organisations* involved in these events are: two descendants of the Italian Communist Party (the Democratic Left and Communist Foundation); the French group ATTAC, which is close to that country's Socialist Party; and, the British Socialist Workers' Party. Leninism alive and kicking! Less obvious and closer to (my own ideological) home, there's been an extensive and ongoing debate in part of 'the movement' over 'activism' and the relationship between 'activists' and 'non-activists'. (See Andrew X. 1999). In many ways, the 'activist', vociferously anti-Leninist (and even anti-Marxist), plays out a role very similar to that of Lenin's 'professional revolutionary'!

Three themes or threads run through this collection.

The first concerns Leninism/anti-Leninism in historical context. This issue is important because there is perhaps a tendency today which accepts that Lenin's ideas may need to be rethought for the twenty-first century, but nevertheless, argues that this is because 'times have changed', that Lenin was, in fact, correct when he was writing and organising, and perhaps remained correct right up into the 1960s, 70s or 80s. As late as the mid-1990s I have listened to a conference delegate wistfully wonder what Lenin lead would have offered had he still been around to do so. Other examples include: C.L.R. James, who, despite his fallings-out with Trotsky, remained a staunch admirer of Lenin (see, in particular, James 1980); David

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<sup>1</sup> The ESF is an offshoot (for want of a better word) of the World Social Forum, an even larger global gathering, which has met twice at Porto Alegre in Brazil and once in Mumbai, India. I have no direct experience of the WSF so prefer to comment on the ESF, which I am personally familiar with.

Harvey, who in the introduction to the new edition of his *The Limits to Capital* (1999), reports that '[i]n the early 1970s ... [w]e needed Lenin to get us from Marx to an understanding of the imperialist war in Vietnam' (p. xiv); and Toni Negri, whose relationship with Leninism has frequently appeared rather ambiguous.

Thus, Simon Clarke in his chapter ('Was Lenin a Marxist?', reprinted from the journal *Historical Materialism*) suggests that 'Lenin's original theoretical contributions to the development of Marxism were very limited' and that Marxism-Leninism in fact has populist roots. Clarke relates Lenin's work to that of earlier thinkers and, in particular, of Georgi Plekhanov, 'the founder of Russian Marxism'. He suggests that 'Plekhanov's "dialectical materialism" is nothing less than the philosophical materialism of the populist followers of Feuerbach, which was precisely the philosophy against which Marx and Engels directed their most devastating criticism'. Although Lenin criticised Plekhanov, broke with him politically and 'transform[ed] his "dialectical and historical materialism" into the ideology of Bolshevism', this 'transformation ... was not in the direction of Marxism, but rather assimilated Plekhanov's Marxism back into the populist traditions from which Lenin had emerged'. In fact, Lenin goes 'even further than Plekhanov in reducing Marxism to a vulgar materialism, a literal inversion of Hegelian idealism, and a simplistic identification with Feuerbachian materialism'; further, '[t]he privileged status of the intelligentsia, which was established by Plekhanov's philosophy, is realized in the Leninist conception of the Party'.

Diethard Behrens explores contemporary critiques of Lenin and the 'Development of anti-Leninist Conceptions of Socialist Politics'. Tracing the history of Lenin's position within Russian revolutionary and Marxist movements, he first considers Rosa Luxemburg, who argued against 'Lenin's insistence on Bolshevik autonomy vis-à-vis the other factions of Russian and Polish Social Democracy' and his 'ultracentralism'. He then discusses other components of the 'left opposition', active in the late nineteenth century and up to the 1917 Revolution: anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists (the so-called 'Young Ones'), syndicalists, 'Radical Intellectuals' and the 'Bremen Radicals', who included Anton Pannekoek, the early Council Communist. Behrens goes on to discuss critiques of Bolshevism following the Russian Revolution and the dilemmas faced by many of those critical of Leninism in the 1920s. Much of the material in this chapter is extremely interesting but, no doubt for reasons of space, it is disappointingly sketchy. Behrens also focuses exclusively on thinkers and movements on mainland Europe. (For those interested in the development of anti-Leninist politics in Britain between the Russian Revolution and the Second World War see Mark Shipway's (1988) excellent history.)

Cajo Brendel — in the text of a speech delivered in 1971 — discusses a single concrete event in the history of anti-Bolshevism, the Kronstadt Rebellion of 1921. Brendel argues that this proletarian uprising against the Bolsheviks 'destroyed a social myth: the myth that in the Bolshevik state, power lay in the hands of the workers', that it was 'the dramatic high-point of a revolution whose social content must in shorthand be defined as *bourgeois*. The Rebellion was the *proletarian spin-off* of this *bourgeois* revolution'. Brendel continues by suggesting that, following the defeat of the workers, in Kronstadt and elsewhere, 'Marxism in Russia [became] a mere *ideology*', that 'Bolshevik political rule developed not into an instrument of emancipation, but into an instrument of repression' and that '[t]he Russian workers ... remained producers of surplus value'.

The book's second theme is an explicit evaluation of Lenin's political theory, in general, and his *What is to be Done?*, in particular. Mike Rooke, for example, argues that the orthodoxy of the Third International, to which Lenin contributed, 'was a Marxism without a dialectics of

labour'. In consequence, 'the unity of subject and object (which for Marx were distinct but also in unity), of consciousness and being, and therefore of theory and practice, was sundered, allowing the [subject-object] dualism to re-emerge'. With the reintroduction of the 'idea of theory as something separate from its object', 'Marxism becomes a scientific theory of inevitable social evolution, which can exist quite independently of the proletariat and its struggle. Theory is applied to the proletariat, rather than deriving from its struggle'. This 'substitutionist' relation of class to theory also 'holds between class and party and [between] class and state'. For Rooke then, 'Lenin's theory of knowledge ... militates against the unity of theory and practice we find in Marx. His conception of theory is one in which it stands in a contemplative relation to the object, to which it is applied from the outside, practise being the result of this application. This is illustrated in Lenin's ... *What is to be Done?* The thesis of that book is an elaboration of Plekhanov's view that theory ("social democratic consciousness") is brought to the workers from the "outside" by Marxist intellectuals. ... Here is the germ of the later substitutionism of the Bolshevik party in power!'

Werner Bonefeld, in his chapter on 'State, Revolution, and Self-Determination', suggests that 'Marx's conception of communism as a classless society is turned upside down in Leninism: society consists of only one class: the working class': 'Communism is not the transformation of society into a single office and a single factory where everybody becomes a labourer, as Lenin proposed in his *State and Revolution*. Does the proletariat need what Lenin extolled: factory discipline?' Further, Lenin's prediction of the 'withering away of the state' actually has as prerequisite the 'internalization ... of [this] capitalist factory discipline as a social habit'. Bonefeld argues that 'communism is not the creator of class consciousness; rather communism grows out of it. In short, the idea of the party as the vanguard that directs and educates the masses for communism denies that communism is the movement of the working class'. In fact, it may be that 'the party is the most powerful *check* on the real movement of communism, the working class'. Moreover, and drawing on Marx, he suggests 'the project of human emancipation and the seizure of political power are mutually exclusive: the state cannot be used for the purpose of human emancipation'. Bonefeld recognises that '[a]gainst the background of existing conditions of human indignity, the Leninist idea of leadership appears persuasive: the demand for human self-determination appears to summon romantic illusions, rendering Leninism credible by default'; however any such credibility rests upon a dualist conception of objectivity (the class in-itself) and subjectivity (the class for-itself) which is false. The problem remains of 'finding a means or method of struggle that is worthy of Man [*Mensch* — 'man, woman or person'] and which, at the same time, is able to withstand not just the most heavily armed reaction but, importantly, the mimicry of power in everyday life practice'.

Sergio Tischler is also concerned with the concept of separation and 'the Leninist division between economic and political struggle'. He suggests that, for Lenin, 'the revolutionary party expresses the organized consciousness of the class... acquires its theoretical horizon precisely because it exists outside the direct capital/labour relation.' '[C]apital is opposed to the political [and thus] Leninist theorization reproduces the reified theoretical basis of its time'. He argues instead that '[o]nly the idea of *class as struggle* can go beyond the objectivist point of view and rescue dialectics from instrumental closure'. One consequence of this position is that '[t]he struggle of the oppressed ... is a struggle against progress. ... [W]e cannot continue to think of revolution from the point of progress, with positive categories; it must be thought of "against the tide"'. Tischler suggests the Zapatistas' discourse perhaps 'represents struggle against reification, [implying] the urgency to liberate the concept of class struggle from its instrumental closure'.

George Caffentiz's chapter is perhaps the most sympathetic to the Bolshevik leader's political thought, although this sympathy is limited. Caffentiz argues that 'Lenin, in *What is to be Done?*, achieved an important methodological breakthrough in Marxism: the application of Marxism to itself'. For, 'Lenin was concerned with the question of how one can produce a revolution in a way that Marx was not': 'Could revolutions be made like other historical products?' Caffentiz suggests Lenin proposes a number of models of 'revolution-production' in *What is to be Done?*: military, manufacturing, agricultural, construction, communication. Of these, only the communicative model has any relevance today. Russia's political police played an important role in keeping struggle secret and strugglers confused: they had 'a perverse epistemological function: they are professional scientists of ignorance and disrupters of communication. Only equally professional revolutionaries could counter them by generating intra-class knowledge and communication, according to Lenin'. Today, 'organizations that can circulate and communicate struggles world-wide are crucial for anti-capitalist politics and social transformation' and thus, 'if *What is to be Done?* is to be at all relevant, its communicative model must be directed to the planetary proletariat'. Indeed, Caffentiz argues, organisations — e.g., People's Global Action, IndyMedia — and activists are already carrying out such tasks. Caffentiz concludes by countering Hardt and Negri's (2000) rejection of this communicative project, and suggests that although '*What is to be Done?* is hardly a good model for anti-globalization organization in general... Lenin's insistence on the need for putting the proletarian body in touch with all its members, actions and powers and his sober assessment of the need to have activists capable of outwitting a concerted police strategy of illusion- and ignorance-creation has even greater resonance today when revolution must be planetary or nothing. In these respects St. Lenin the Evangelist might be a more useful, if less heart-warming, ancestor for the anti-globalization movement than [Hardt and Negri's] St. Francis the Militant'.

The book's third thread, which contains an implicit critique of Leninism, concerns the general critique of capital and questions of anti-capitalist struggle. Here then, Johannes Agnoli warns that '[i]n order to go through the institutions, one must first give oneself over to them', while John Holloway suggests that '[g]oing to the state (by whatever means) is like going to a marriage counsellor. Its *raison d'être* is to preserve the relationship that we are determined to break'. Holloway is concerned with humanity's flight from capital and with its struggle to maintain that flight, 'to avoid being recaptured'. His essential argument is that these two elements — otherwise known as revolt and revolution — are inseparable: '[t]o speak of revolution makes sense only if it is grounded in revolt; and revolt can maintain itself only if it tends towards revolution', and '[t]he development of an alternative sociality is not to be seen as something that comes after the revolution: it is rather the movement from revolt to revolution'.

Holloway's emphasis on human *doing* is important. However, I found his 'capital as gatekeeper' metaphor unhelpful: it allows an understanding of capital as *thing* to creep back in, an understanding of capital as something which exists outside of us, of capital as (a) subject. If '[w]e are the doers, the only creators' then how can capital '*run* after us'? If 'capital fights back', then what exactly is capital? Of course, *sometimes* such an understanding can be useful: after all, cops may literally run after us. Cops may certainly repress 'violently and viciously'. But, this understanding can all too easily blind us to the individual and collective ways our own daily doing reproduces capital, helps to 'defend ... property and develop new forms of property', perpetuates 'the separation of that which has been done from the flow of doing'. It allows me, for example, to hold my hands up and say: "Hey, I'm a revolutionary, an anti-capitalist activist, a communist; how can I be part of the

problem?”... before I go ahead and fail some student, thus imposing on them additional days, weeks, months of alienated (and unwaged) labour. If capital is a ‘gatekeeper’, then it is frequently cloaked in the language of ‘efficiency’, ‘value-for-money’, ‘best-practice’, even ‘fairness’.

As noted above, the book’s editors write that Lenin’s question, ‘what is to be done?’, ‘has to mean “what is to be learned?”, “what is to be avoided?”, and “what has to be done differently?”’. Other contributors also mention the pamphlet’s title. While Agnoli suggests it ‘is one thing of lasting importance in Lenin’s text’, Caffentizis draws attention to its grammar. Caffentizis notes that the title ‘self-consciously echoes the title of Nikolai Chernyshevski’s novel. ... [But] “Chto delat” (the Russian phrase) is literally to be translated ‘What to do?’ ... The emphasis is on doing, not on the goal, or, in another reading, on production, and not the product’. Holloway too suggests that the question’s ‘formulation (“what is to be done? rather than ‘what do we do?’) already suggests an instrumental approach’. This grammatical point is extremely important.<sup>2</sup> The question’s formulation suggests separation along at least two different axes. First, it’s a grand (transcendent?) question, a question posed by and addressed to important people, decision-makers, leaders; it thus suggests separation either between those that decide and those that do, or between those that do and those that follow. Second, it suggests a one-off act: we decide, then we do, and then it’s done; in other words, it suggests a separation in time between decision and execution. The question, in this formulation should be discarded, along with Leninism itself. We should be asking instead (and continually asking), adopting the active, more down-to-earth (imminent?), human formulation: ‘what are we doing?’ and ‘what are we going to do?’<sup>3</sup>

To conclude: this collection is important. It raises interesting questions which should be discussed. I recommend it to all those struggling for other worlds.

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\* David Harvie is an anti-Leninist Marxist and ‘other-worldist’. He currently sells his labour-power to Nottingham Trent University, where he teaches political economy and tries to avoid failing students.

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<sup>2</sup> I remain unclear, however, whether the responsibility for this lies with Lenin himself, or with his translators.

<sup>3</sup> Many vanguard wannabes are fond of repeating Marx’s statement that ‘the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself’. The dictum is undoubtedly true, but its language is stuffy and dated. Why not say instead: ‘if we want to be free, we’ve got to do it ourselves’?