

## V. I. Lenin

### Political Agitation and “The Class Point of View”

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Let us begin with an illustration.

The reader will remember the sensation that was created by the speech delivered by M. A. Stakhovich, Marshal of the Nobility of Orel Gubernia, at a missionary congress, in the course of which he urged that *freedom of conscience* be recognised by law. The conservative press, led by *Moskovskiy Vedomosti*, is conducting a furious campaign against Mr. Stakhovich. It cannot find names vile enough with which to call him and almost goes so far as to accuse the entire Orel nobility of high treason for having re-elected Mr. Stakhovich as Marshal. Now, this re-election is indeed very significant and to a certain degree it bears the character of a demonstration of the nobility against police tyranny and outrage.

Stakhovich, says *Moskovskiy Vedomosti*, “is not so much Marshal of the Nobility, as the oh, so gay Misha Stakhovich, the life and soul of the party, the clever conversationalist...” (No. 348, 1901). So much the worse for you, gentlemen, defenders of the bludgeon. If even our jovial landlords begin to talk about freedom of conscience, then the infamies of the priests and the police must verily be without number....

“What does our ‘intellectual’, frivolous crowd that instigates and applauds the Stakhoviches care for the affairs of our sacred orthodox faith and our time-honoured attitude towards it?”... Once again, so much the worse for you, gentlemen, champions of the autocracy, the orthodox faith, and the national essence. A fine system indeed our police ridden autocracy must be, if it has permeated even religion with the spirit of the prison-cell, so that the “Stakhoviches” (who have no firm convictions in matters of religion, but who are interested, as we shall see, in preserving a stable religion) become utterly indifferent (if not actually hostile) to this notorious “national” faith. “... They call our faith a delusion!! They mock at us because, thanks to this ‘delusion’, we fear and try to avoid sin and we carry out our obligations uncomplainingly, no matter how severe they may be; because we find the strength and courage to bear sorrow and privations and forbear pride in times of success and good fortune...” So! The orthodox faith is dear to them because it teaches people to bear misery “uncomplainingly”. What a profitable faith it is indeed for the governing classes! In a society so organised that an insignificant minority enjoys wealth and power, while the masses constantly suffer “privations” and bear “severe obligations”, it is quite natural for the exploiters to sympathise with a religion that teaches people to bear “uncomplainingly” the hell on earth for the sake of an alleged celestial paradise. But in its zeal *Moskovskiy Vedomosti* became too garrulous. So garrulous, in fact, that *unwittingly it spoke the truth*. We read on: “... They do not suspect that if they, the Stakhoviches, eat well, sleep peacefully, and live merrily, it is thanks to this ‘delusion’.”

The sacred truth! This is precisely the case. It is because religious “delusions” are so widespread among the masses that the Stakhoviches and the Oblomovs,<sup>[1]</sup> and all our capitalists who live by the labour of the masses, and even *Moskovskiy Vedomosti* itself, “sleep peacefully”. And the more education spreads among the people, the more will religious prejudices give way to socialist consciousness, the nearer will be the day of victory for the proletariat—the victory that will emancipate all oppressed classes from the slavery they endure in modern society.

But having blurted out the truth on one point, *Moskovskiy Vedomosti* disposed, far too easily, of another interesting point. It is obviously mistaken in believing that the Stakhoviches “do not realise” the significance of religion, and that they demand liberal forms out of sheer “thoughtlessness”. Such an interpretation of a hostile political trend is too childish naïve. The fact that in this instance Mr. Stakhovich came forward as advocate of the entire liberal trend was proved best of all by *Moskovskiy Vedomosti* itself; otherwise, what need was there for waging such a campaign against a single speech? What need was there for speaking, not about Stakhovich, but about the Stakhoviches, about the “intellectual crowd”?

*Moskovskiy Vedomosti*'s error was, of course, deliberate. That paper is more unwilling than it is unable to analyse the liberalism it bates from the class point of view. That it does not desire to do so goes without saying; but its inability to do so interests us very much more, because this is a complaint that even very many revolutionaries and socialists suffer from. Thus, the authors of the letter published in No. 12 of *Iskra*, who accuse us of departing from the “class point of view” for striving in our newspaper to follow all manifestations of liberal discontent and protest, suffer from this complaint, as do also the authors of *Proletarskaya Borba*<sup>[2]</sup> and of several pamphlets in “The Social-Democratic Library”,<sup>[3]</sup> who imagine that our autocracy represents the absolutist rule of the bourgeoisie; likewise the Martynovs, who seek to persuade us to abandon the many-sided campaign of exposure (i.e., the widest possible political agitation) against the autocracy and to concentrate our efforts mainly upon the struggle for economic reforms (to give something “positive” to the working class, to put forward in its name “concrete demands” for legislative and administrative measures “which promise certain palpable results”); likewise, too, the Nadezhdins, who, on reading the correspondence in our paper on the statistical conflicts, ask in astonishment: “Good Lord, what is this—a Zemstvo paper?”

All these socialists forget that the interests of the autocracy coincide only with certain interests of the proper tied classes, and only under certain circumstances; frequently it happens that its interests do not coincide with the interests of these classes, as a whole, but only with those of certain of their strata. The interests of other bourgeois strata and the more widely understood interests of the *entire* bourgeoisie, of the development of capitalism as a whole, necessarily give rise to a liberal opposition to the autocracy. For instance, the autocracy guarantees the bourgeoisie opportunities to employ the crudest forms of exploitation, but, on the other hand, places a thousand obstacles in the way of the extensive development of the productive forces and the spread of education; in this way it arouses against itself, not only the petty bourgeoisie, but at times even the big bourgeoisie. The autocracy guarantees (?) the bourgeoisie protection against socialism, but since the people are deprived of rights, this protection is necessarily transformed into a system of police outrages that rouse the indignation of the entire people. What the result of these antagonistic tendencies is, what relative strength of conservative and liberal views, or trends, among the bourgeoisie obtains at the present moment, cannot be learned from a couple of general theses, for this depends on all the special features of the social and political situation at a given moment. To determine this, one must study the situation in detail and carefully watch all the conflicts with the government, no matter by what social stratum they are initiated. It is precisely the “class point of view” that makes it *impermissible* for a Social-Democrat to remain indifferent to the discontent and the protests of the “Stakhoviches”.

The reasoning and activity of the above-mentioned socialists show that they are indifferent to liberalism and thus reveal their incomprehension of the basic theses of the *Communist Manifesto*, the “Gospel” of international Social-Democracy. Let us recall, for instance, the words that the bourgeoisie itself provides material for the political education of the proletariat by its struggle for power, by the conflicts of various strata and groups within it, etc.<sup>[4]</sup> Only in politically free countries has the proletariat easy access to this material (and then only to part of it). In enslaved Russia, however, we Social-Democrats must work hard to obtain this “material” for the working class, i.e., we must *ourselves undertake* the task of conducting general political agitation, of carrying on a public exposure campaign against the autocracy. This task is particularly imperative in periods of political ferment. We must bear in mind that in one year of intensified political life the proletariat can obtain more revolutionary training than in several years of political calm. For this reason the tendency of the above-mentioned socialists consciously or unconsciously to restrict the scope and content of political agitation is particularly harmful.

Let us recall also the words that the Communists support every revolutionary movement against the existing system. Those words are often interpreted too narrowly, and are not taken to imply support for the liberal opposition. It must not be forgotten, however, that there are periods when every conflict with the government arising out of progressive social interests, however small, may under certain conditions (*of which our support is one*) flare up into a general conflagration. Suffice it to recall the great social movement which developed in Russia out of the struggle between the students and the government over academic demands,<sup>[5]</sup> or the conflict that arose in France between all the progressive elements and the militarists over a trial in which the verdict had been rendered on the basis of forged evidence.<sup>[6]</sup> Hence, it is our bounden duty to explain to the proletariat every liberal and democratic protest, to widen and support it, with the active participation of the workers, be it a conflict between the Zemstvo and the Ministry of the Interior, between the nobility and the police régime of the Orthodox Church, between statisticians and the bureaucrats, between peasants and the “Zemstvo” officials, between religious sects and the rural police, etc., etc. Those who contemptuously turn up their noses at the slight importance of some of these conflicts, or at the “hopelessness” of the attempts to fan them into a general conflagration, do not realise that all-sided political agitation is a focus in which the vital interests of political education of the proletariat coincide with the vital interests of social development as a whole, of the entire people, that is, of all its democratic elements. It is our direct duty to concern ourselves with every liberal question, to determine our Social-Democratic attitude towards it, to help the proletariat to take an active part in its solution and to accomplish the agitation in its own, proletarian way. Those who refrain from concerning themselves in this way (whatever their intentions) in actuality leave the liberals in command, place in their hands the political education of the workers, and concede the hegemony in the political struggle to elements which, in the final analysis, are leaders of bourgeois democracy.

The class character of the Social-Democratic movement must not be expressed in the restriction of our tasks to the direct and immediate needs of the “labour movement pure and simple”. It must be expressed in our leadership of every aspect and every manifestation of the great struggle for liberation that is being waged by the proletariat, the only truly revolutionary class in modern society. Social-Democracy must constantly and unswervingly spread the influence of the labour movement to all spheres of the social and political life of contemporary society. It must lead, not only the economic, but also the political, struggle of the proletariat. It must never for a moment lose sight of our ultimate goal, but always carry on propaganda for the proletarian ideology—the theory of scientific socialism, viz., Marxism—guard it against distortion, and develop it further. We must untiringly combat any and every bourgeois ideology, regardless of the fashionable and striking garb in which it may drape itself. The socialists we have mentioned above depart from the “class” point of view also because, and to the extent that, they remain indifferent to the task of combating the “criticism of Marxism”. Only the blind fail to see that this “criticism” has taken root more rapidly in Russia than in any other country, and has been more enthusiastically taken up by Russian liberal propaganda than by any other, precisely for the reason that it is one of the elements of the bourgeois (now consciously bourgeois) democracy now in information in Russia.

It is particularly in regard to the political struggle that the “class point of view” demands that the proletariat give an impetus to every democratic movement. The political demands of working-class democracy do not differ in principle from those of bourgeois democracy, they differ only in degree. In the struggle for economic emancipation, for the socialist revolution, the proletariat stands on a basis different in principle and it stands alone (the small producer will come to its aid only to the extent that he enters, or is preparing to enter, ranks). In the struggle for political liberation, however, we have many allies, towards whom we must not remain indifferent. But while our allies in the bourgeois-democratic camp, in struggling for liberal reforms, will always glance back and seek to adjust matters so that they will be able, as before, “to eat well, sleep peace fully, and live merrily” at other people’s expense, the proletariat will march forward to the end, without looking back. While the confreres of R. N. S. (author of the preface to Witte’s Memorandum) haggle with the government over the rights of the authoritative Zemstvo, or over a constitution, we will struggle for the democratic republic. We will not forget, however, that if we want to push someone forward, we must continuously keep our hands on that someone’s shoulders. The party of the proletariat must learn to catch every liberal just at the moment when he is prepared to move forward an inch, and make him move forward a yard. If he is obdurate, we will go forward without him and over him.

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## Notes

[1] *Oblomov*—the central character in the novel of that name by I. Goncharov. Oblomov was the personification of routine, stagnation, and inertia.

[2] The collection *Proletarskaya Borba (Proletarian Struggle)*, No. 1, was published by the Ural Social-Democratic Group in 1899. The authors, who espoused “Economist” views, denied the necessity of establishing an independent working-class political party and believed that a political revolution could be accomplished by means of a general strike, without the preliminary organisation and preparation of the masses and without an armed uprising.

[3] “*The Social-Democratic Workers’ Library*”—a series of pamphlets published illegally in Vilno and St. Petersburg in 1900-01.

[4] See *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. I, Moscow, 1959, pp. 21-65.

[5] The reference is to the general strike of students organised in the winter of 1901-02. Some 30,000 students took part in the strike.

[6] Lenin refers to the case of Dreyfus, a French General Staff officer, a Jew, who, in 1894, was court-martialled and sentenced to life imprisonment on an obviously trumped-up charge of espionage and high treason. That provocative trial was organised by French reactionary circles. The general movement for the defence of Dreyfus that developed in France exposed the corruption of the court and sharpened the struggle between republicans and royalists. In 1899 Dreyfus was pardoned and released. It was not until 1906, after a fresh examination of the case, that Dreyfus was rehabilitated.