Historical Materialism: A Critical Look at Some of its Concepts

THIS ESSAY is an attempt critically to reappraise certain key concepts in the Marxist interpretation of history – historical materialism – in the light of actual historical events. These concepts are the class theory of the state and the role of the individual in history.

I: The Class Theory of the State

In his introduction to *In Defence of the Russian Revolution: A Selection of Bolshevik Writings 1917-1923*, Al Richardson, in discussing the collapse of the Soviet regime, wrote:

"for those of us who envisaged it at all, the circumstances attending the disintegration of the Soviet state in no way accorded with our expectations. Trotskyists always expected the workers would fiercely resist any counter-revolution, and a Marxist party would be present to lead the struggle to restore working-class control over social property And what was not at all expected was that these states would collapse without an armed counter-revolutionary overturn accompanied by a civil war. Can one property form really change into another with so little dislocation in its state apparatus, no visible destruction of it caused by revolution or counter-revolution? *Is not this phenomenon a direct challenge to the class theory of the state? The tools of analysis used by thinkers of the left are quite inadequate for a true appreciation of the problem*" (my emphasis).

I took up and enlarged on this in a letter that was published in *Revolutionary History*, Vol.6 No.3. I wrote:

"From 1917 to 1991, the *same state apparatus* (superstructure) presided over a number of *different economic systems* (economic bases). From October 1917 to mid-1918, the young Soviet state presided over a disintegrating capitalist economy. The enterprises had not yet been nationalised and were still under nominal capitalist ownership, although the owners' actual control was effectively challenged from below by the workers' committees and from above by the Soviet state apparatus. From 1918 to 1921, the economic base was War Communism, characterised by centralised military control of industry and the abolition of commodity exchange and money. From 1921 to 1929, the New Economic Policy saw the development of a mixed economy, combining private ownership, petty production for the market by independent producers, and state ownership.... Stalin's forced collectivisation and industrialisation cut across this whole process, and from 1929 to 1991 the Soviet state presided over and directed a centralised state-owned command economy, and from 1991 to now we have seen basically the same state apparatus carry out the privatisation of state enterprises, the replacement of the command economy by the free market and the reintegration of the Soviet economy into the capitalist world market. And yet all these different economic bases and property relations succeeded each other under the same superstructure And not only this, but the changes in the economic base – from War Communism to the NEP, from the NEP to the command economy, and back to capitalism – were brought about by the conscious decisions and actions of the superstructure. So much for the economic base determining the political superstructure! It was the other way round."

But it is not only in relation to the Soviet regime that the class theory of the state does not tally with reality, but also in relation to wider aspects of history – to the transition from feudalism to capitalism, to the English and French revolutions, to the emergence of capitalism in Germany and Japan – and by extension to the probable course of any future transition from capitalism to socialism.

Briefly, the class theory of the state argues that since the state is the organ of the existing ruling class, and is a political superstructure resting on, and in the final analysis determined by, the economic base of society, that is to say, the property relations, any change in these requires the destruction of the existing state machine and its replacement by another state machine representing the new class that comes to power. In my view, Marxists are trapped in this mechanical and reductionist view of the relations between states and societies. A consequence of this mechanical and reductionist view is to seek a rigid one-to-one correspondence between the economic base and the political superstructure which is not

confirmed by actual historical experience.

Marxists consider the English Civil War and the French Revolution to be classical bourgeois revolutions. So what happened to the state structures? Was the old monarchical state of Charles I simply destroyed and replaced by a brand new bourgeois state? Hardly. What actually happened was that the opposition to the Stuart monarchy, though developing in the country as a whole, also found its expression within a part of the state machine – parliament. The struggle took the form of a struggle between one part of the state machine – parliament – against another part of the state machine – the court and ministers of Charles I. Adopting Marxist phraseology, we can say the *bourgeoisie* captured control of part of the state machine – parliament. At first they would have been quite happy to have had a constitutional monarchy limiting the powers of the monarchy. But the manoeuvrings and intransigence of the king forced them eventually to behead him and abolish the monarchy. Some Marxists may argue that the clash of social classes, the objective situation, made a compromise impossible. In the end, they might argue, the old state machine had to be replaced by a new one, the republic and the Cromwellian protectorate. But then how explain away the fact that after the restoration of 1660 the economic base (that is to say, the property relations) continued to develop in the direction of capitalism? And which class controlled the state after the restoration? The as yet hardly existing industrial bourgeoisie? Or the landed aristocracy (admittedly eventually to become fused over the coming centuries with the new industrial and banking bourgeoisie)? The industrial bourgeoisie did not even get the vote till the 1832 Reform Act.

Let us look at the French Revolution. Here again, we saw not the simple replacement of the monarchy by brand new state structures formed outside the existing state apparatus, but the capture by the revolution of a part (admittedly a subordinate and hitherto inactive part) of the existing state – the Third Estates – and then the transformation of these Third Estates into the Convention and a revolutionary assembly.

In both these cases, we saw not just simply the destruction of the old state apparatus and its replacement by a brand new one. Instead, we saw a more complex development; the seizure by the new social forces of part of the existing state machine and its transformation into a weapon against the other parts of the state machine still controlled by the old ruling elite.

It would seem that a feature of history is that new ascendant social groupings and classes will, if at all possible, take the easier route of infiltrating and capturing existing structures and then transforming them, rather than develop entirely new ones.

Does this have implications for the transition from capitalism to socialism? I think it does, and I shall discuss this later.

In the case of England and France, it may be argued in defence of the class theory of the state that nevertheless there had to be revolutions – bourgeois revolutions – and the eventual elimination of the old ruling elite – the king and his ministers and servants – and their replacement by new administrations deriving their power and legitimacy from elected parliaments; even though this change had to come about through transformations rather than simple replacements of old by brand new state machines.

So Marxists may on this basis still argue that the transition from pre-capitalist to fully capitalist property relations and economic systems did require a replacement of the old feudal and monarchical state machines by bourgeois ones. But what of Germany and Japan?

There was no bourgeois revolution in Germany. The existing Prussian monarchy and the multitude of German statelets survived the 1848 upheavals with only minimal modifications. German industrial capitalism developed without a bourgeois revolution under the aegis of state machines staffed by the old Junker aristocracy and German nobility. The historian James Joll writes:

"The unification of Germany, bringing as it did the removal of the last barriers to internal trade as well as a common banking and currency system, helped to speed the industrial development which was already under way before 1870 . . . Germany's emergence as the strongest military power in Europe was paralleled and sustained by her emergence, in a short period of time, as a leading industrial power." (James Joll, *Europe Since 1870*, p.2.)

And who presided over this national unification and rapid industrialisation? A new bourgeois political ruling class, or a Prussian Emperor, his Iron Chancellor Bismarck, and a multitude of minor kings and princes?

Bismarck and the Junker ruling elite encouraged the development of German industry, and thereby capitalism, because their aim – to build up a powerful military machine – required industrial development. The new industrialists and the Junkers and military elite had a common interest; and the imperial state machine and those of the various German statelets were modified and developed new departments and functions to cater for the new economic and social imperatives resulting from the development of capitalism. But there was no classical bourgeois revolution accompanied by civil war and the destruction of the old state machine. Nor was there the political overthrow of an existing ruling class and the coming to power of a new class. Rather, there was an alliance and partial fusion of the new class of industrial capitalists and bankers with the old landed nobility.

Even the reforms and modification of the existing state machine in the direction of parliamentary forms, associated by Marxists with bourgeois as compared to pre-bourgeois state machines, were initiated by Bismarck. To cite Joll:

"The political force behind Bismarck in his creation, first of the North German Confederation after the war of 1866 [against Austria], and then of the German Empire after the victory over France, was the National Liberal Party. One of the measures which Bismarck hoped to use as a means of controlling the liberals by mobilising loyal and ignorant peasants against the urban middle classes was the introduction of universal suffrage in the elections to the Diet of the North German confederation, and this had also applied to the elections to the Imperial Parliament (Reichstag) after 1871. This concession to democratic ideas was perhaps not as important as it seemed: the government, embodied in the office of the imperial chancellor and in the person of Bismarck, remained responsible to the emperor alone and not to the Reichstag Moreover, many of the individual states which composed the German Empire, and notably Prussia, did not have universal suffrage for the elections to their own parliaments, while their governments retained control over important areas of administration directly affecting the ordinary lives of their citizens – including education, direct taxation, the police and the laws regarding the press and public meetings." (Ibid, p.4)

Capitalism developed in Germany without a bourgeois revolution. The "classical" political superstructure, associated by Marxists with a capitalist economic base, did not in fact emerge till November 1918 – as a result, according to Marxist orthodoxy, of a betrayed proletarian revolution!

I should also mention Japan, where capitalism developed after the Meiji restoration under Imperial leadership. Here the introduction of "bourgeois democracy" had to wait till the American occupation of 1945!

So we see that the transition from one economic or social system to another does not necessarily require the violent and rapid replacement of one state form for another. There is no rigid correlation or correspondence between economic base (relations of production) and political superstructure as postulated in the class theory of the state. The mechanical reductionist class theory of the state must be replaced by a holistic approach seeing society as a complex unitary whole in which economic base and political superstructure mutually react without giving permanent and exclusive causal precedence to either.

It also follows that a social class can be economically dominant without necessarily exercising direct political rule. As Marx himself remarked, the economically dominant class and the political elite are not identical. By 1914, the industrial and banking capitalists in Germany surpassed the old Junker landed nobility in wealth and economic influence, but the latter still controlled and staffed the state machine.

Even in present-day developed capitalist countries, the economically dominant class and the political rulers are not identical. It is true that insofar as the state presides over and defends the economic and legal frameworks which enable capitalist industry to function profitably, the state can be described as a "capitalist" state. But it not simply and only the executive of the ruling class. It has a certain autonomy. There is a separation of functions. In the normal daily round, the directors and executives of banks and other financial institutions and of industrial firms are wholly engaged in running them; they leave the running of the state to professional politicians, whose full-time job it is. Of course the financial, industrial and political elites are united by social and family ties; retired ministers join the boards of banks, and governments – especially so-called Labour governments! – recruit ministers and political advisers from the ranks of big business. Despite this intermingling of the personnel of the economic and political elites, the state has a relative independence. It can at times act in opposition to the will of big business, or at least a large section of it. A striking example of this was Roosevelt's New Deal in the United States in the 1930s. The New Deal was pushed through by the Roosevelt administration in spite of the opposition of corporate giants like Ford and General Motors. In fact, the bulk of the American business community looked on Roosevelt and his New Dealers as dangerous reds, or at least pinkos. Yet Roosevelt saved American capitalism – despite the opposition of a large section of big business. He was able to do this partly because he was able to use the support of organised labour and discontented farmers; even more important was the perceived danger of labour and poor farmers being driven towards communism by the continuing economic crisis that in the final analysis ensured that big business accepted, albeit reluctantly, the New Deal. This is only one example among several of the capitalist' state saving capitalism despite the capitalists.

However, a more important reason for saying that the present-day state is more than just "the executive of the ruling class" is that since the early days of the nineteenth century the organisations and movements of the working class, with the support of other social groups, have been able to win democratic liberties, including universal suffrage and parliamentary rule. Marxist-Leninists are wrong to belittle parliamentary democracy as merely a fig-leaf to hide the naked rule of capital. Why, after the victory of Nazism in Germany and Germany's occupation of most of Europe, was one

of the central demands of the Resistance movements, backed by the working class, the restoration of parliamentary democracy? However imperfect it is, however emasculated it is by the power of money to distort its functioning, through the control of the media and the bankrolling of pro-capitalist parties, it is a fact that in order to govern capitalist parties *have to win elections*. And where it is impossible sufficiently to rig the elections, this means that even pro-capitalist parties, such as the British Conservatives, have to win the votes of a large proportion – if not an absolute majority – of the electorate. In industrially developed countries, this must include a substantial proportion of the working class. It is not enough for them merely to pretend that, for example, the National Health Service is "safe in our hands". They actually have to deliver. Thus the very existence of parliamentary democracy acts as an important constraint on attacking the conditions of the working class and middle class. It also provides the organisations representing the working class and the underprivileged with an important lever for exacting concessions and reforms. This why the working class, to the dismay of ultra-lefts, will not easily abandon the parliamentary road.

The achievement of parliamentary democracy means that the oppressed classes and their organisations can make the state an arena of struggle. They can, as happened under Cromwell, capture part of the state – parliament – as a first step. It is unlikely that a radically reforming or socialist government based on parliament would be allowed to function without the reactionary forces attempting to overthrow it by sabotage and military coups, as in Chile. But to adopt the Marxist-Leninist view, which flows from the class theory of the state, that the parliamentary road can never be trod in case it is blocked, and to announce in advance that the "soviet" road is the only one, is to abandon an important field of battle to the enemy. It needs to be said that socialists must not limit themselves purely to parliamentary and electoral activity. A radical transformation of society requires the development of grass-roots popular initiatives and structures to implement the transformation and overcome the resistance of reactionary forces. In this process, parliament itself will be transformed as will the other parts of the state machine – just as they were at the time of Cromwell.

In order to free the left from ultra-left abstentionist politics, it is necessary to revise the class theory of the state and to replace a crude mechanistic and reductionist view by a holistic one, seeing base and superstructure, state and economy as a *totality* of interrelated parts.

II: The Role of the Individual

Linked to the question of the role of the state and the relationship between base and superstructure is the question of the relative importance to be assigned to the activities of individuals. This is another aspect of the seeming contradiction in Marxist theory (and practice) between determinism and voluntarism. If, according to some Marxists, history is determined by large-scale objective forces and Marxism has uncovered the "laws of motion" which govern the development of human societies, are the activities of individuals of any consequence? One of the arguments constantly aimed at Marxist historical materialism is that it leaves no room for the conscious activities of individuals. The Russian Marxist Plekhanov answered this criticism, and set out the Marxist view in his celebrated pamphlet *The Role of the Individual in History*, first published in 1898. Plekhanov did not deny the role of the individual. He admitted that in many instances individuals had had a great influence upon history, but he argued that the extent of this influence, whether it was great or minimal, was determined by the objective situation.

Plekhanov gave as an example the influence of the Marquise de Pompadour on Louis XV as a cause of the defeat of France in the Seven Years War. This defeat led to France losing many of its colonies, and obviously affected the subsequent history of Europe. Plekhanov points first to the general social causes, that is, objective factors:

"[This] deplorable state of military affairs was due to the deterioration of the aristocracy, which, however, continued to occupy all the high posts in the army, and to the general dislocation of the old order, which was rapidly drifting to its doom. These *general* causes alone would be quite sufficient to make the outcome of the Seven Years War unfavourable to France. But undoubtedly the incompetence of generals like Soubise greatly increased the chances of failure for the French army which these general causes already provided." (G.V. Plekhanov, *The Role of the Individual in History*, Lawrence & Wishart, p.39.)

Plekhanov then explained that Soubise was kept in his post because of the influence of Madame Pompadour, Louis XV's mistress. After the battle of Rosbach, there were calls for Soubise's dismissal. But Madame Pompadour persuaded Louis XV to keep Soubise on. So both Madame Pompadour and Louis XV, as individuals, had an important role in France's defeat. But Plekhanov asks why was this so. He answers that it was because the French society of that day had no means of compelling Louis XV and Pompadour to sack Soubise:

"It was prevented from doing so by its form of organisation, which, in turn, was determined by the relation of social forces in France at the time. Hence it is the relationship of social forces which, in the last analysis, explains the fact that Louis XV's character, and the caprices of his favourite,

could have such a deplorable influence on the fate of France. Had it not been the King, who had a weakness for the fair sex, but the King's cook or groom, it would not have had any historical importance. Clearly it is not the weakness that is important here, but the official position of the person afflicted with it." (Ibid., p.40.)

Plekhanov continued: "It follows, then, that individuals can influence the fate of society. Sometimes this influence is very considerable; but the possibility of exercising this influence, and its extent, are determined by the form of organisation of society, by the relation of forces within it. . . It is the form of organisation that in any given period determines the role and, consequently, the social significance that may fall to the lot of talented or incompetent individuals." (Ibid., p.41.)

Having admitted that in some circumstances individuals can have a great influence on history, Plekhanov then drastically limits the extent of this influence as against impersonal social forces, particularly economic ones:

"The final cause of social relationships lies in the state of the productive forces. This depends on the qualities of individuals only in the sense, perhaps, that these individuals possess more or less talent for making technical improvements, discoveries and inventions.... No matter what the qualities of the given individual may be, they cannot eliminate the given economic relations if they conform to the given state of productive forces. But the personal qualities of individuals make them more or less fit to satisfy those social needs which arise out of the given economic relations. The urgent social need of France at the end of the eighteenth century was the substitution for the obsolete political institutions of new institutions that would conform more to her economic system. The most prominent and useful public men of that time were those who were more capable than others of helping to satisfy this most urgent need." (Ibid., p.45.)

Plekhanov then identifies Mirabeau, Robespierre and Napoleon as such men. But then he argues that the influence on events of even such prominent individuals was minimal; that if some accident had led to their premature death and removed them from the scene, their places and roles would have been filled by others stepping into their shoes:

"All such changes in the course of events [their premature deaths] might to some extent have influenced the subsequent political, and through it, the economic life of Europe. Nevertheless, under no circumstances would the final outcome of the revolutionary movement have been the opposite of what it was. Influential individuals can change the individual features of events and some of their particular consequences but they cannot change their general trend, which is determined by other forces." (Ibid., p.49.)

So despite acknowledging the influence of individuals in some circumstances, Plekhanov asserts a fundamentally determinist view of history. Individuals cannot alter the general trend of history, which is determined by large-scale social and economic forces. Individuals only have significance as *the agents of these historical forces*. These social forces needed a Robespierre or a Napoleon. If an accidental fall of a brick had prematurely killed Robespierre, or if Napoleon had been killed by a stray bullet at the battle of Arcole, some other individuals would have fulfilled their historically determined role, maybe a little better or a little worse, but would still have fulfilled it.

Plekhanov was thus articulating the determinist strand that runs through the Marxist interpretation of history. If society develops according to objective laws of history, if the past, present and future are determined by these objective forces, then how can the individual alter things? It is as if history is a play already written. Of course, it requires people to play the parts called for in the script, the heroes, villains, victims, etc. But they cannot alter their roles or the outcome of the drama. And if they fail to turn up to play their roles, then the casting director – history – will find someone else to fill that role. So Lenin, Stalin, Margaret Thatcher could not have acted otherwise than they did. They were mere players acting according to an already written script. Their decisions were already determined by the overall historical situation they were in.

If this is the case, then what is the point of ordinary rank-and-file activists in political movements working their guts out, marching in demonstrations, selling papers, going to jail, and, in dictatorships, being tortured and killed if everything is historically determined, and even people like Robespierre and Napoleon – and, by implication, Lenin and Trotsky – made no difference, or could be replaced. An activist would be tempted to conclude that he might as well take it easy, drop out of activity and enjoy himself, since the outcome of the struggle for socialism is already determined, and, in any case, does not depend on his contribution.

Yet many others active in socialist politics, though accepting Marxist theory, did not and do not take that attitude. They believe that their contribution could make a difference. So who is right?

Let us examine Plekhanov's arguments a little further. His examples seem to imply that only in exceptional circumstances do individuals have more than a minimal influence on events. Louis XV's decisions had an influence because he was king in an absolute monarchy. By implication, modern dictators like Stalin and Hitler also had that sort of influence on events. Or at least they and a small body of their closest advisers. Historians point out that Hitler's decision, against

the advice of many of his generals, to refuse to allow the German Sixth Army to retreat at Stalingrad resulted in its encirclement and annihilation, and thus, possibly decisively, led to Germany's defeat; as did his refusal to release the Panzer reserves to repel the Allied landings in Normandy before they had consolidated their beach-heads. The victory of the Allies during the 1939-45 war was by no means assured. It was a very close run thing. It is quite possible that had the commanders and general staffs on both sides taken decisions other than they did, the outcome would have been a German victory with far-reaching consequences for the future history of Europe and the world. Here Plekhanov's observation that the extent of the individual's influence is determined by his position is apposite. Just as in the case of Louis XV mentioned by Plekhanov, Hitler's disastrous influence was only possible because the political structure of Nazi Germany at the time provided no mechanism whereby Hitler's decisions could be challenged.

This importance of the actual position of the individual in the social, political or military structure in determining the effect of his actions applies in all situations. If at the battle of El-Alamein a lowly platoon commander had made a blunder, it might only have resulted in the loss of a skirmish or of a strongpoint. But if General Montgomery had had a breakdown or got blind drunk at a crucial moment, the whole battle might have been lost. As against this, it might be argued that since the Allies had such an overwhelming economic and material superiority over the Axis powers, even a different outcome of the battles of Stalingrad and El-Alamein might have delayed but not prevented the eventual Allied victory. But at the time and in the consciousness of those involved no such certainty existed. All was in the balance. And even from the point of view of a lowly platoon commander and an even more lowly private soldier, he could not know whether the fortunes of battle were so evenly balanced that his own failure to advance or hold his position might not just tip the balance. The historian can with the benefit of hindsight come to the conclusion that the balance of social, economic, political and military factors was so overwhelming that only one result was possible. The actual participant cannot know in advance whether his actions, choices and decisions will be decisive or not.

Going from the military to the political field, two further examples spring to mind. Was the Russian Revolution of October 1917 inevitable? And was the manner of its future degeneration? It can be argued that the whole history of Russia, the large-scale historical factors, its whole previous history and social development, its participation in the 1914-18 war, made the overthrow of Tsarism and the February Revolution inevitable. And that the further developments from February onwards made the Bolshevik revolution of October also inevitable. But for the October Revolution to happen, the Bolsheviks had to decide to take power. The October Revolution depended on 12 members of the Bolshevik Central Committee taking a decision to launch the insurrection on the eve of the meeting of the Congress of Soviets. If they had decided against, *there would have been no October Revolution*. Even if one accepts that large-scale historical and social movements prepared October and led to the situation that existed when the Bolshevik Central Committee met, it is still a fact that the decision of just 12 individuals was a necessary link in the chain of cause and effect. And the influence of one individual, Lenin, was vital in forcing this decision on a reluctant Central Committee.

In his biography of Trotsky, Isaac Deutscher quotes him as writing that had Lenin not managed to come to Petrograd in April 1917, the October Revolution would not have taken place. Deutscher comments:

"If Lenin is not yet a 'demiurge of history' here, this is so only in the sense that he did not make the revolution *ex nihilo*: the decay of the social structure, the 'steam' of mass energy, the 'piston box' of the Bolshevik party (which Lenin had designed and engineered) – all these had to be there in order that he should be able to play his part. But even if all these elements had been there, Trotsky tells us, without Lenin the Bolsheviks would have 'let slip the revolutionary opportunity for many years'. For how many years? Five – six? Or perhaps 30 – 40? We do not know. In any case, without Lenin, Russia might have continued to live under a capitalist order, or even a restored Tsardom, perhaps for an indefinite period; and in this century at least world history would have been very different from what it has been." (I. Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, p.242.)

It has been argued that, given the failure of revolutions in Western Europe and the subsequent isolation of Soviet Russia plus its economic and social backwardness, the degeneration of the revolution into a Stalinist dictatorship was inevitable – whatever the outcome of the factional struggles within the leadership of the Bolshevik party. If Trotsky and his faction had secured the leadership instead of Stalin, they would still have been unable to avoid this degeneration which the above-mentioned factors made inevitable – the only difference is that Trotsky, not Stalin, would have presided over the growing inequalities; and he would have been forced to impose the same kind of terror to defend the regime. The Soviet state, whoever led it, could not have avoided falling prey to the overwhelming social factors that led to its transformation into a repressive apparatus. But is it really the case that the actions of this leadership were predetermined by the social conditions? For example was it really inevitable

that the development of a mixed economy of state-owned large-scale industry and a private market-driven agriculture under the New Economic Policy would be replaced by the forced collectivisation of agriculture and the accelerated growth of a "command economy" under the Five Year Plans? Was this made inevitable by the existing social and economic conjuncture? No: this drastic change in the economic and social development of the Soviet Union was the result of a decision taken by a handful of individuals comprising the Politbureau of the Communist Party. The decisive influence was that of Stalin. Of course, Stalin's influence was dependent on the support of a majority of the Politbureau; and in turn their ability to enforce their decisions was dependent on their control of a whole structure of party and state organisations and repressive police forces comprising hundreds of thousands of individuals – all created by the whole gamut of events since 1917. But it is still undeniable that the decisions of the Politbureau could have been different. If Bukharin and his faction had been able to defeat Stalin, the NEP might have continued, and the subsequent history of Russia might have been substantially different.

What all these historical examples show is that in certain conjunctures the balance of social forces is such, the relative possibilities of different courses so evenly balanced, that the decisions of individuals or small groups of individuals can have widespread consequences for the whole future development of societies. Plekhanov observed: "The possibility – determined by the form of organisation of society – that individuals may exercise social influence, opens the door to the influence of so-called *accident* upon the historical destiny of nations." (Ibid., p.42.)

III: Conclusions

I mentioned earlier that one interpretation of the Marxist view of history – historical materialism – can lead to a fatalistic attitude. Why should you or I bother? The course of history, hence the success or failure of the struggle for socialism, is determined by large-scale historical forces in relation to which the influence of the individual is minimal. Que sera ... sera. This was in fact my attitude when I dropped out of political activity many years ago.

However, in view of all that has been discussed above, I must conclude that this fatalistic view is wrong. The individual can make a difference. How much of a difference depends on the overall objective situation and the individual's position in the social context. A Lenin has more influence than a rank-and-file party member. A Tony Blair or Gordon Brown has more influence than a member of a Labour Party Management Committee. But no one can tell in advance how much influence he or she may have in the future.

Even a marginal individual can, thanks to the accidents that Plekhanov mentioned, have a considerable influence on history. As already mentioned, Lenin and Hitler had a decisive influence. And this depended on their actual positions in the political hierarchy.

This raises two further questions. Were their paths to these positions of leadership and influence accidental, or determined by previous causes? Lenin was not born a Bolshevik, nor was Hitler born a Nazi. Obviously, genes have an influence on character, but so have life experiences and the social environment. At some early stage in his life, certain events and individuals must have influenced Lenin in the direction of political commitment rather than, say, developing a career as a lawyer or in the ranks of the Tsarist bureaucracy in the footsteps of his father. We are told that the execution of his brother for an attempt on the Tsar's life had a great influence. But this of itself might not have been decisive. It is interesting to speculate that some schoolmate or fellow student might have, at a critical stage in his growing up, handed the young Vladimir Ilyich a revolutionary publication, or had been the first to introduce him to other revolutionaries and thus set him irrevocably on the revolutionary path. And would Hitler have become as involved as he did in right-wing nationalist movements had not some unknown individual pressed anti-Semitic pamphlets into the hands of the young Adolf? If this is the case, even less significant individuals can have a great impact on history, at second-hand so to speak, by being decisive influences on other individuals who do reach positions of power. In this case, Hitler's unknown anti-Semitic pal has a lot to answer for!

One further question needs to be examined. If the actions of one individual or a small group of individuals can have a major effect as instanced above – the so-called *accident* as Plekhanov defined it – are these actions really accidental or are they predetermined? A determinist would argue that they are. The actions and decisions of a Lenin, Stalin, Hitler and others were determined by a combination of preceding factors; their genetic make-up, their whole life experiences, the total social environment in which they lived, all predetermined what action they would take in a given situation. Thus Lenin could have acted in no other way than he did in building the Bolshevik party, or in advocating an armed uprising in October 1917; nor could Zinoviev, Kamenev or Stalin have acted other than they did either in relation to October or the decision to collectivise. Nor could Hitler have acted differently.

But even if one interprets Marxism in the most determinist manner, it is still a fact that even so-called "impersonal" social and economic forces are made up of the actions of myriads of *individuals*, even if these are themselves determined. Even so-called "impersonal" economic forces are the

cumulation of the actions of individuals; individuals investing in businesses, workers selling their labour, traders buying and selling; all seeking to satisfy their personal needs through economic relations. There would be no classes or class struggles without individual workers, no trade unions or parties without individuals. So in the final analysis, there is really no mutual incompatibility between the so-called "impersonal" and the personal, nor between the actions of individuals and the action of social forces. Social forces are the cumulation and summation of the interrelated actions of individuals. There is no incompatibility between determinism and voluntarism. The actions of individuals in their totality and interactions are the necessary links in the networks of cause and effect that make up so-called "impersonal" social forces and determine the course of history.

According to a fully determinist interpretation of history, everything that happens, whether as a result of large-scale forces or the actions of individuals or a combination of these, has been determined since the beginning of time. If this is a truth it is a useless truth (as Al Richardson once observed), since no one can tell in advance what has been determined, nor what consequences his or her actions and choices will have.

So, in the final analysis, even the hard-line determinists have to act as if they have free will and hope that their actions will have the consequences they desire, while at the same time understanding that these consequences are in turn determined by their position in society and the overall social conjuncture.

Plekhanov described the views of the subjectivist historians of the eighteenth century who reduced everything to the conscious activities of individuals as the *thesis*. He called the fatalistic views of later historians Guizot, Mignet and others who completely denied the role of the individual the *antithesis*. We may describe the view that the actions of individuals, even though themselves determined, are necessary links in the networks of cause and effect that determine history as the synthesis. In the same way, the attempt to place the actions of individuals within the framework of large-scale social forces, and the reconciling of free will and determinism in the actions of individuals that I have made above may be described as a *synthesis* between the determinism and voluntarism that coexist in Marxism and historical materialism.

One further thought occurs. If we accept that ideas and ideologies, even though arising from and reflecting material processes, also become material forces when embraced by individuals and classes, and, in turn, change material conditions, should we not abandon the term "*materialist* interpretation of history", which implies a one-way causal direction, and adopt a new term – say – an "holistic interpretation" of history?