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Spectral Socialisms: Marxism-Leninism and the Future of Marxist Thought in Post-Socialist Bulgaria

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Spectral Socialisms:
Marxism-Leninism and the Future of Marxist Thought in Post-Socialist Bulgaria

By
Zhivka Venelinova Valiavicharska

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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Rhetoric
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:
Professor Wendy Brown, Chair
Professor Samera Esmeir
Professor David Cohen
Professor Alexei Yurchak

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Abstract

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Asking what discursive conditions enabled the unchallenged reign of neoliberal capitalism in Eastern Europe after 1989, this dissertation argues that Stalinist philosophy leaves a silent yet powerful structuring legacy in post-socialist politics and intellectual discourse. Stalinist Marxism-Leninism has survived in the presumption that there is a necessary relationship between authoritarianism and politics on the left, and conversely, between democracy and free-market capitalism. Rejecting the premise that there is an inevitable, trans-historical relationship between socialism and authoritarianism, this project locates the historical juncture that sealed them together in the discursive production of Leninism and the doctrines of Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism during Stalinist Soviet Union. With a focus on socialist Bulgaria, the dissertation examines the political uses and material effects of the Stalinist ideologemes throughout the intellectual history of East-European Marxist thought. In addition, it retrieves Marxist humanist intellectual movements from the post-Stalinist 1960s and 1970s, which contested the legitimacy of the Stalinist doctrine. Challenging Marxism-Leninism’s claim to the historical inevitability of state authoritarianism, they imagined a “third way” for socialism’s future—a third way between liberal democracy and authoritarian socialism. In conclusion, the dissertation turns to the question of what possibility for politics on the left remains in the post-socialist historical conditions, a left that finds itself inevitably implicated in the histories of state socialisms. Redressing these foreclosures requires recovering the emancipatory ideas and practices out of the contradictory experiences of the socialist past and reformulating their critical potentials for the future.
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chapter one

Socialist Past and Neoliberal Present in Eastern Europe:
A View from the Bulgarian Experience

At the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the socialist states, the Bulgarian weekly newspaper *Kultura* asked Alexander Kiossev, a leading intellectual from the 1980s, to reflect on his experience before and after 1989. “During the early 1990s,” he says,

I was writing a variety of things—they were related to the problem of truth. I was working on ideas coming from the circle *Sintez*; we argued that, generally speaking, in reality, socialism is a semiotic phenomenon, an ideological language that infiltrates all spheres of life and begins to replace their specific logic and languages. It ideologizes everything—from childhood to sports and science, to, for example, the economy.¹

Borrowing from Vaclav Havel’s famous work, “The Power of the Powerless,” he continues:

In this total ideologization everyone was forced to communicate not via everyday ways of conveying facts, i.e. via truth-telling discourse, but through automated, clichéd pathos statements, ideological slogans devoid of meaning and emptied out of content. In other words, everyone almost everywhere, even in the most specialized spheres, communicated via the language of deception.²

Kiossev refers to the official state discourse, known as Marxism-Leninism, as well as the state’s practices of political indoctrination. That Stalin’s doctrine of Marxism-Leninism served to legitimate one of the most unprecedented moves towards extreme concentration of state power in modern history is a common argument. In its most compelling formulations, this argument sees Marxism-Leninism as an ideology of legitimation of the authoritarian state, claiming that the socialist ideals of social equality and justice were necessary to legitimate the consolidation of sovereign power and to justify the various abuses of state power and state violence.

Those familiar with the intellectual genealogy, trajectory, and different theoretical formulations of the term ideology from Marx to Althusser and beyond would certainly notice that such an argument uses a common-sense notion of “ideology,” a notion that has borrowed little from the complexity of philosophical formulations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century

¹ Alexander Kiossev, “Prehodut i ilyuzite na intelektualtsa,” *Kultura*, November 5, 2009, 9. (All translations from Bulgarian are mine unless otherwise noted. Transliterations from Bulgarian follow the BGN/PCGN systems, with the exception of some authors who have consistently used their own Romanized versions of their names in Roman languages. Transliterations from Russian follow the Library of Congress guides.)
aiming to capture the intricate function of knowledge in social relations. This common-sense notion presumes that ideology’s utterances constitute a stale and transparent corpus of principles aiming to construct a false representation of “reality.” It usually opens a gap between the content of the ideological doctrine, standing above and outside an independently existing—preexisting—“reality,” where the latter is forcefully imposed upon and intruded onto the former. Crucial for this understanding is that, despite its totalizing reach into the social fabric, “totalitarian ideology” fails to interpellate “non-ideological” subjects into existence, and consequently has no effect on social relations, no bearing on “actually existing reality.” An opposition emerges between ideology and the “non-ideological” everyday, where the former is externally imposed onto a preexisting everyday social structure. Kiossev contends that there are mundane sites of “non-ideological activities” that fall outside the reach of the state, and subsequently spell the failure of the latter’s mechanisms. Coming prior to the state, these “non-ideological” spaces have remained essentially outside state control and are immune to the discursive and material agency of state power—these are spaces where the socialist order has virtually not taken place. Speaking from this “non-ideological” or “supra-ideological” space, Kiossev has rendered himself virtually immune to what he calls the totalitarian state, to its discourses and its mechanisms of subordination.

To imagine oneself as positioned outside of ideology betrays a lack of self-reflexivity not uncommon to the generation of “dissident” intellectuals—it is the denial that any “ideology” has managed to affect their self-understanding as social beings or to shape their political subjectivity. The former dissidents could not be swayed by ideologies, they were “realists”: their political “realism” rejected all projects for social justice or equality as “utopias” doomed to failure, as the romantic idealism of youth inevitably leading to disillusionment. François Furet’s book *The Passing of Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, which appeared a few years after the fall of state socialisms, became a source of inspiration for post-socialist intellectuals. It triumphantly proclaimed the failure of the “utopian” imaginary and revived the theoretical appeal of the analogy between Fascism and Communism. Drawing from Furet’s work, Kiossev states: “[t]he very ideological foundations of such a project have collapsed: the

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3 “Ideology does not manage to convince fully the ordinary, non-ideological person that Cuban coffee is better than Brazilian coffee, it cannot replace all children’s stories and games, it fails when it attempts to change old customs, greetings, gestures, body culture, [and] it does not manage to change family relations between brothers and fathers, grandsons and grandfathers, men and women, adults and children.” Alexander Kiossev, “Thaumazein i traumazein: opit vurhu luzhata,” in *Okolo Zhak Derida: Chudovishtniyat Diskurs*, ed. Ivaylo Znepolski (Sofia: Dom na naukite za choveka i obshtestvoto, 2002), 222.

4 Admittedly, Kiossev’s thesis has evolved from the early 1990s onwards. While his earlier statements have put forward a notion of ideology as a set of clichés and a language of deception, which he opposes to Havel’s concept of “living in truth,” his later work sees the language of ideology as a mechanism of total subordination, and yet a mechanism that fails to permeate certain spheres of everyday, “non-ideological” life. Compare his texts from the early 1990s with “Thaumazein i traumazein.” Alexander Kiossev, “Teoretichni spomeni,” *Lelyata ot Gyotingen* (Sofia: Iздателство Figura, 2005) , 9-51; “Opit vurhu terora,” *ibid.*, 52-64. I thank Momchil Hristov for pointing out some of these contradictions.

5 Kiossev, “Prehodut i ilyuziite na intelektualetsa,” 10.

collapse of actual socialism is also collapse of the possibility of utopia; and this is the big tragedy of contemporary society, which has no alternatives left.”

Because he sees ideology as a utopian construction or a flat and ineffective doctrine, Kiossev also finds it logical that the end of socialism also brought the end of ideology, in other words, that the post-socialist present is ideology-free. When asked about the ideological conditions of the post-socialist period, he responds: “There is no ideology today, what ideology?”

There is no such a thing, after all, ideology is a system of ideas—or at least, [a system of] cliches resembling ideas, which need to be propagandized, inculcated, and so on. […] If currently there is a problem, it is not a problem of ideology, but a problem of disintegration of trust in this society (i.e. its social ties).

It is in this perceived “non-ideological,” “neutral” space opened up by the fall of “utopian ideologies” that the promises of unregulated, free-market capitalism settled. Kiossev’s generation gave birth to the westward-looking political movements in Bulgaria. Calling for democracy and mobilizing the progressive social forces to help bring down the authoritarian regimes in the late 1980s, they embraced economic deregulation, privatization, and free markets as the inevitable road to “recovery,” becoming the backbone of the post-socialist East-European right. Aided by Euro-centric discourses and progressivist visions of economic development, the language of neoliberalism became naturalized: arguments about the inevitability of private ownership, the natural human propensity to competition, about individual entrepreneurship and individual survival easily triumphed in post-socialist politics. With no visible alternatives to “de-ideologization,” privatization, and the establishment of a “functioning free market,” the trajectory towards neoliberal capitalism was naturalized as “self-evident” and “normal.” Thus, cast as an unattainable dream for social justice, socialism was condemned as an unsuccessful political experiment that interrupted the “natural” historical development of the countries.

In the post-1989 conditions, the political meanings of “right” and “left” found themselves paradoxically reversed, to replicate the contradiction surrounding the question of how to interpret the 1989 revolutions: experienced as historical moments of liberation, they nevertheless restored a range of political discourses and practices that invited and celebrated neoliberal development across the board. For less than two decades, countries swiftly privatized most of their social and material infrastructure, dismantled labor protection laws, and created “free economic zones” to open their labor force and resources to global capital. As a result, wealth was quickly consolidated, the jarring reality of extreme material disparities appeared, and the neoliberal logics permeated the sphere of education and cultural life without any challenge from within.

This dissertation asks what discursive conditions enabled the unchallenged support of free-market capitalism after 1989, aiming to open space for a critique of neoliberal politics in post-socialist Eastern Europe. The pro-democracy political forces after 1989 articulated themselves by

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7 Kiossev, “Prehodut i ilyziite na intelektuatsa,” 9.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 10.
condemning the historical legacies of socialism and by dismissing politics on the left as the disastrous failure of unattainable utopia. The former “dissident” intellectuals were the leading agents of the new democracies and the most outspoken anti-leftist: they repudiated the left ideas on the grounds of a narrow, predominantly Stalinist understanding of Marxist thought. Interlaced with the peculiar meanings of the post-socialist right and left, a discredited “Marxism” associated with totalitarianism and state centralism became the constitutive outside to post-socialist politics and critical inquiry. It set the outer boundaries of the politically speakable and imaginable to help settle a hegemony of neoliberal discourses and practices. Recently, spontaneous grassroots formations with left-leaning political demands have emerged—one example is a growing environmental movement in Bulgaria protesting the illegal conversions of protected lands, mountains, and forests into private profit-generating tourism and entertainment zones. However, trapped in the impasses of the available political meanings of right and left, these movements are struggling to articulate themselves in a language riddled with contradictions: defining themselves as right-leaning, they resort to national sentiments to address the forced expropriation of state-administered lands through corruption and theft, what is essentially an almost classic case of primitive accumulation. They see the destruction of nature and the destruction and loss of national heritage, but what remains invisible is how these lands have become a new target for capital accumulation through various forms of dispossession, how they drive self-subsistent peasant populations sharing land resources into dependency and poverty, and how what practically used to function as the commons is now partitioned into rich and poor by the fences of a private property regime.

Rejecting the premise that there is an inevitable, trans-historical relationship between socialism and authoritarianism, this dissertation uncovers the discursive production of this relationship in post-1917 East-European Marxist thought and traces its political uses throughout the intellectual history of socialist Bulgaria, up to its complete naturalization after the fall of state socialism. By means of what historical turns, accidents, or internal mechanisms, by virtue of what relationship between political vision, political action, and political effects, did the project of socialism become unhinged from the project of democracy? I locate the genealogy of the juncture between authoritarianism and socialism in what is usually perceived as a seamless historical continuity between Lenin and Stalin. Chapter Two, “Lenin-Stalin: A Juncture in Disquiet,” aims to disarticulate Lenin’s contributions to radical revolutionary thought from the Stalinist construction of Leninism and from its subsequent Stalinist uses. Lenin’s work has been usually known for the worst kind of Party vanguardism, state authoritarianism, and intellectual elitism; it has been critiqued for seeing the working class as a unified historical subject occupying an ontologically privileged position in the revolutionary struggle. Moreover, the classic intellectual histories of Marxist thought have unproblematically retained and reproduced the Stalinist renditions of Lenin’s political thought. As the chapter will show, this is especially evident in the convenient divide between Western Marxism and East-European Marxism, which


suppresses Lenin’s influence on thinkers such as Georg Lukacs, Karl Korsch, Antonio Gramsci, C.L.R James, and Henri Lefebvre, some of whom have been of critical influence to intellectual developments known as “Western Marxism.”

Recently, Lenin’s revolutionary thought has been the subject of renewed theoretical interest. Lars T. Lih has published an impressive historical reconstruction of What Is to Be Done?, aiming to dispel common prejudice against the text and reassess its political effects as an intervention in a particular historical context. The analysis, accompanied by a new translation of the text, has revived discussions among historians of Lenin’s political life, testing and refining Lih’s interpretations. With a few other exceptions, including Kevin Anderson’s in-depth study of Hegel’s influence on Lenin’s dialectical thought, work on Lenin in the fields of critical theory, political theory, and the intellectual history of Marxism remains sparse and unsystematic, and a sustained critical reinterpretation of Lenin’s contributions to twentieth-century revolutionary political thought is long overdue. A careful, historically sensitive reading of even some of the most “problematic” texts central to the canon of “Leninism” shows that they have very little in common with what is widely known about them: they reveal a political thinker of colossal proportions whose work is marked by unsurpassed rigor, dynamism, and nuance, a thinker who is relentlessly committed to the contingency of the historical moment.

Chapter Two examines Lenin’s political thought between 1902 and 1917 to offer new interpretations of Lenin’s shifting notion of class subjectivity and his dynamic ideas on the problem of organization, which emerged out of Lenin’s careful observations of situated historical experiences and the concrete realities of the revolutionary struggle. The chapter also develops some largely unexplored questions on Lenin’s views on autonomy and the state, on Soviet power and collective self-governance, and offers an alternative understanding of his views on autonomy and freedom as tied to the state’s subjectivating practices. Rather than insisting on theoretical coherence of Lenin’s thought, the chapter explores the profound instabilities in his vast body of work, which undermine any attempt to draw causal relations or inherent links between Lenin’s


political and theoretical writings and its Stalinist uses. Once we recover the diverse and rich nature of Lenin’s voluminous writings, we are left with the question how “Leninism” was discursively produced and how the history of this production was then lost. In short, this chapter asks how the reification of a discursive construct called “Leninism” produced its own historical effects and political divisions. It refuses to take for granted the relationship between a historically situated political intervention and its political uses and historical interpretations. The reader may object that a differently constructed “Lenin” emerges out of the project of deconstructing the old Leninist paradigm, but this different “Lenin” should be a test of both whether we could truly leave the Stalinist burden behind and whether there could be a Lenin relevant to our historical present.17

Historian Lars T. Lih has studied some aspects of the canonization of Lenin’s work in Western scholarship on Lenin, tracing the “textbook” interpretations of What Is to Be Done?—interpretations which have largely remained in line with a Cold-War political agenda.18 But strangely, what has remained outside of his attention is Stalin’s international campaign to propagate the canon in the 1930s by producing historical and theoretical books on Leninism and Bolshevism in dozens of languages and distributing them in tens of millions of copies via a powerful world-wide publishing machine, for which the Soviet regime spared no resources. And although the argument periodically appears that “we should […] distinguish “Leninism” (as the authentic core of Stalinism) from the actual political practice and ideology of Lenin’s period,”19 there has been no in-depth, consistent theoretical exploration of how the discursive production of Leninism occurs in the Soviet Union, and what the mechanisms of its propagation were.20 Treating the juncture between Lenin and Stalin as a historical construct and an object of inquiry, Chapter Three, “Marxism-Leninism: The Apparitions of a Disavowed Paradigm,” explores the discursive production of “Leninism” in Soviet Russia between 1924 and 1938. What we know as “Leninism” took shape between 1924 and 1938 through Stalin’s renditions of Lenin’s contributions and was expanded and refined by a number of Stalinist Marxists. An interpretive analysis of Stalin’s body of work will show how much violence was done to Lenin’s writings and their widely diverging interpretations in order to systematize them into the stable set of general, ahistorical principles known as Marxism-Leninism. This is not to say that the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism has nothing to do with the thought of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, but to show how it takes certain concepts of Marxist thought out of their historical context, reformulates them, and reassembles them into a coherent philosophical system that in turn claims a universal, trans-historical validity. There is much irony in this development, considering the fact that Marx

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17 See Zizek’s call for retrieving the force of Lenin’s political insight and “political impulse,” for ‘repeating’ in the present worldwide conditions, the Leninist gesture of reinventing the revolutionary project […].” Zizek, “Introduction: Between the Two Revolutions,” Revolution at the Gates, 11.
20 Paul Blackledge acknowledges and frames this question quite well, but provides no research to develop it any further. “[F]or their own short-term political reasons, first the triumvirate [Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Stalin], and then Stalin alone promoted WITBD? [What Is to Be Done?] as the definitive manual for their own authoritarian model of political leadership. Unappealing as it was, this image of ‘Leninism’ was quickly embraced by Western liberals as an authentic rendering of Lenin’s politics.” Paul Blackledge, introduction to “Symposium on Lars Lih’s Lenin Rediscovered,” 26.
and Lenin are thinkers who gave us some of the most powerful critical tools to dismantle the naturalizing mechanisms making power relations and inequality appear as ahistorical truths.

Chapter Three explores both internal coherences and internal contradictions in the Stalinist doctrine, analyzing its structural implications for subsequent developments in East-European philosophical inquiry. The advanced detachment of the party—the vanguardist doctrine central to the organization of the Stalinist state, positing a transcendental hierarchical separation between Party and masses—becomes one of the foundational concepts of Stalinist philosophy. Further, the Stalinist system constructs an ossified dichotomy between base and superstructure and imagines the superstructure—knowledge and political institutions—as derivative of and secondary to economic development. This theoretical paradigm became a founding bloc in the Stalinist versions of Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism, known as Diamat and Istmat, and later, for the theory of “reflection” in the 1940s. Marxism-Leninism also develops the ahistorical concept of the class enemy, which helped the Stalinist regime imagine itself in a perpetual state of war taking place outside of history and constantly needing to reinvent the enemy. Classic political histories of Stalinism have explored brilliantly how the Party turned in upon itself in search of that enemy. Yet, they have often attributed this infamous chapter of Soviet political history to the dynamics of the political forces and power struggles within the Party or to Stalin’s authoritarian personality, in which the doctrine functioned only as an instrument. For the last three decades, social historians of Stalinism have addressed these limitations by taking the arguments of the doctrine seriously. They saw the Stalinist system of ideas not simply as an “ideology of legitimation” external or tangential to the organization of power and everyday life, but as a structurally essential component of political life and the social dynamics of socialist realities. 21 Admittedly, their discussions of the theoretical and philosophical aspects of the doctrine are often clumsy, overly broad, and sometimes simply inaccurate, yet they have offered a wealth of historical research that profoundly revised our relationship to the historical experience of Stalinist and post-Stalinist socialism. Building upon their work, Susan Buck-Morss has explored brilliantly how the Soviet notion of political sovereignty, as it intersects with concepts of geography, history, and collective subjectivity,
drives the organizing logic of Soviet government and Soviet political culture. This dissertation follows the steps of their work. Rather than treating Marxism-Leninism as an “ideological” doctrine external to the reality of power, I take it as a discursive formation that organized regimes of power, established the terrains and limits of what was politically possible and speakable, generated social practices, and produced concrete realities.

While arguing that Marxism-Leninism produced a set of rigid philosophical formulations, I am far from suggesting that the Stalinist philosophical tradition itself was “stable” and “immutable.” The ritualization of the doctrine in certain spheres of political and everyday life was inevitable, especially as it continued its life in coexistence with other philosophical ideas after it lost its legitimacy in the 1960s. And even then, as anthropologist Alexei Yurchak has demonstrated using performative and speech act theory, these ossified ideologemes, seen as reiterative practices, produced unpredictable effects that rearticulated and subverted their official meaning in everyday life. During the Stalinist years, the philosophical doctrine underwent significant transformations, and while its basic foundational principles remained unquestioned—because their status was unquestionable—those who called themselves Marxists-Leninists did not just blindly reproduce these postulates but tried, through their own understanding, to complicate, refine, and expand the central premises of the doctrine and build upon their foundations, applying them to different spheres of knowledge.

In other words, the Marxist-Leninist principles formed the axiomatic grounds for a complex system of knowledge; the latter’s development, evolution, and crises in each particular national or local context are yet to be studied more closely. I take socialist Bulgaria as a case study. Part of this choice has to do with my proximity to the site and with considerations around access to research materials, but taking into account the fact that the Bulgarian socialist state was the Soviet Union’s most loyal political “friend,” a puppet state which often enforced the Soviet line more diligently than the Soviets themselves, this choice shouldn’t be too hard to defend. The first generation Bulgarian Marxists adopted an almost unedited version of Soviet Stalinist Marxism-Leninism, but they also made significant contributions and adapted it to the local problems of building a socialist state and a socialist citizenry. The formidable Stalinist philosopher Todor Pavlov brought rigor and force to the doctrine, taking the paradigm of base-superstructure as a starting point to develop his theory of “reflection,” an ambitious theory of human knowledge and human cognition seen as a function of material and biological processes. His work had international significance and established the theoretical foundations of the Marxist-Leninist humanities and aesthetics; it provided the lens through which multiple analyses on literature and art were written.

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24 I thank Momchil Hristov for alerting me against the danger of representing Marxism-Leninism as a fixed doctrine without historical development.
25 While the question of Marxist-Leninist humanities and aesthetics certainly belongs to this project, it will remain to be developed in a separate chapter in the future.
Zhivko Oshavkov is another such thinker with respect to the discipline of sociology, which Marxism-Leninism stigmatized as a bourgeois discipline. The question of the social constituted a sub-branch of philosophy in the hierarchy of Marxist-Leninist knowledge: the study of social processes belonged to the sphere of “particularity” and as such, it always assumed a place subordinate to “general” philosophical questions. Svetla Koleva has developed a brilliant study of the genealogy of the discipline of sociology in socialist Bulgaria, showing how Oshavkov, a philosopher by training, literally recreated the discipline within a Marxist-Leninist framework, defending it from allegations that stigmatized it as bourgeois and reactionary, and legitimating it as a “proper” Marxist-Leninist discipline. Koleva shows how Oshavkov, while laying the theoretical foundations of sociology, managed to turn it into a discipline independent from and equal to philosophy, practically “emancipating” it from the latter’s patronage.26 This move had a social function—the new social reality needed its own empirical analysis and empirical understanding, and later, in the context of post-Stalinist Bulgaria, sociology would become one of the most theoretically progressive disciplines, opening up spaces for critical rethinking of both the Marxist tradition and contemporary socialist relations. These critical endeavors will be the subject of Chapter Four.

The question of human agency is one of the most important aspects of Marxism-Leninism. Stalinist philosophy eliminates human agency from the understanding of historical development, turning ordinary humans into passive subjects with no political or collective historical agency. In other words, it is not the collective activity of humans, and it is certainly not collective struggle, that makes change possible. Instead, Stalinist philosophy proffers a teleological understanding of history, which makes the arrival of socialism inevitable, while at the same time claiming that this arrival needs to be forced into existence. The only active agent in history remains a dominant Party whose legitimacy is grounded in the teleological inevitability of historical development and is reinforced by a positivist understanding of social development. What perhaps is the most defining feature of its theory—the advanced detachment of the Party—renders the “masses” a passive subject in the socio-historical process, subordinate to a relentless hierarchy that requires participation through full obedience and discipline.

It is not surprising that much of the efforts to overcome the legacy of Stalinist thought in Eastern Europe from 1956 onwards found it compelling to engage with the question of human agency. Post-Stalinist intellectuals, struggling to overcome the limitations of the Stalinist doctrine, sought to restore the humanist aspects of both Marx’s work and the bourgeois liberal traditions. Multiple revisionist left intellectual movements emerged during the socialist 1960s and 1970s, whose histories have remained largely suppressed under the monolithic category of totalitarianism. Post-Stalinist revisionist Marxists—not to be confused with the reformist revisionism of Bernstein, or later, with the various Trotskyist revisionisms—recovered and published early works by Marx formerly excluded from the canon in order to come up with humanist concepts of social development and freedom. In fact, starting with the 1960s, almost every socialist state developed its own humanist intellectual movements—the Yugoslavian Praxis School being the most prominent example. If carefully constructed, the exchanges between East-European humanist Marxists and Western intellectuals, including Frankfurt School members Herbert

Marcuse and Erich Fromm, as well as Ernst Bloch, Bertrand Russell, Irving Fetscher, and others, would soften the rigid separation between the two traditions.27

Chapter Four, “Holistically Developed Persons,” is a case study of Marxist humanism in post-Stalinist Bulgaria in the 1960s and 1970s. It turns to the inquiries of a powerful revisionist movement spearheaded by progressive sociologists, social theorists, and philosophers. They reintroduced Marx’s early works and his concepts of alienation and objectification, previously suppressed by the Marxist-Leninist canon, and returned to ideas of human emancipation and freedom. The chapter shows how the philosophical discussions during the decades after the Stalinist era became sharply divided between self-described “dogmatists” and “revisionists.” The former remained proponents of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, largely associated with the most conservative, authoritarian elements in the Party pledging unconditional allegiance to Soviet power. The latter, by contrast, fought to unsettle Stalinism’s claim that there is a necessary relationship between socialism and authoritarian state power, working towards reinventing the socialist project, rescuing it from authoritarian bureaucratism, and opening a space between authoritarian state communism and bourgeois democracy—a third space in which another kind of socialism was thinkable. They argued for democratic pluralism, insisting that a plurality of perspectives is compatible with socialism, and that the state can allow a heterogeneity of socialist experiences while maintaining the broad normative premises of the left project.

Marxist humanism in Bulgaria was never a purely philosophical or theoretical movement. Always attuned to contemporary social realities, it remained committed to changing the practices of the state to introduce democratic-socialist elements. As political reformists, revisionist social theorists in Bulgaria laid the groundwork for significant state reform, and under their advocacy and supervision the state adopted a novel philosophy of social governance. Against arguments that the socialist states had designed blueprints for utopian social visions that remained never achievable ideals, Chapter Four demonstrates that post-Stalinist state practices moved towards productive modes of social governance, opening up room for “personal initiative,” autonomy, and grassroots activity. Moving away from ideological indoctrination, the post-Stalinist state implemented intricate governing mechanisms that embraced the subject’s experience of self-empowerment and freedom yet contained a distinct political rationality aiming to “channel” social energy away from political conflict and into social integration.

The concept of youth played a central role in the state’s experiments with productive forms of social governance. Having successfully superseded class as the primary agent of history, youth appeared as an active, self-participating subject, possessing social energy to be tapped into, channeled, and regulated. Because youth occupied the juncture where both social differentiation

and social mobility occurs, the state saw it as the most crucial terrain for achieving the total social integration it had promised.

The new philosophy of social governance was grounded in recognizably humanist concepts. The modern socialist human was a “holistically developed person” (*vsestranno razvita lichnost*)—a central concept in post-Stalinist theories of social development, with the help of which the state designed highly normalized yet flexible spaces for the subject’s empowerment, for her social, personal, and intellectual self-realization through education, work and family, arts, leisure, and sports. The chapter shows how the architects of socialism after Stalinism conceived of a radically different—socialist—subject in relation to the socialist state, how the state organized experiences of freedom and opened conditions for practices of self-governance that are specific to the socialist experiences.

The post-Stalinist period also opened space for a strong quasi-liberal humanist philosophical movement by restoring the place of Western bourgeois philosophy and aesthetics into the history of philosophical ideas—in post-Stalinist Bulgaria, for example, the Kantian, Romanticist, and German Idealist traditions were systemically translated and reintroduced shortly after 1956, reviving the appeal of a quasi-bourgeois humanist individualism. Reasserting the positive value of liberal concepts of the individual and seeing creative activity as the space of freedom, post-Stalinist liberal humanism produced literary and artistic movements that refused to bring any political or social content into their creative inquiries. To practice creative autonomy meant to choose subjects with “socially neutral” content and to experiment with form. Post-Stalinist literary and artistic production thus became obsessed with the formal dimensions of the work and developed a rich tradition of socialist high modernism, the social function of which is yet to be analyzed.

Chapter Five, “Totalitarianism and Utopia: Dissident Discourses of Late Socialism,” traces the unique trajectory and political life of one of the few political texts in Bulgaria’s liberal-humanist tradition, *Fashizmut* (“Fascism”). Its author Zhelyu Zhelev, a Marxist philosopher by training who turned liberal, became the first democratically elected President of Bulgaria after 1989—his political trajectory is the emblem of an entire generation of dissident intellectuals, which assumed a central place in political and public life after 1989. Written in the 1960s and published in the 1980s, *Fashizmut* was immediately censored after its publication for making implicit analogies between the fascist regime and the political organization of the socialist states. Yet it captured the political imaginary of the generation of the 1980s with unrelenting force. It introduced the totalitarian discourse into late socialism’s political and scholarly debates, structuring the liberal imaginary of dissident intellectuals and critically-minded communities at large.  

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28 According to Michael Geyer, the term totalitarianism entered Soviet political discourse during perestroika, but the comparison did not appeal widely to scholars and the public. “It did not generally seem to be as interesting to Russians in the late 1980s and 1990s as it had been in the 1960s.” Michael Geyer with assistance from Sheila Fitzpatrick, introduction to Beyond Totalitarianism, 13. The ubiquitous resurgence of liberal thought in Bulgaria shows a very different picture (this will be the focus of Chapter Five), but preliminary research on late Soviet and post-Soviet Russia shows an overwhelming amount of publications on totalitarianism in the early 1990s, suggesting that parallel developments may have occurred there. Publications on totalitarianism from the late 1980s and early 1990s include: Alexei Kara-Murza and A. K. Voskresenskii, eds., *Totalitarizm kak istoricheskii fenomen* (Moscow:
*Fashizmut* introduced one of the most tenacious ideologemes of liberal democracy—the totalitarian paradigm—by performing a tactical inversion of the most central tenets of Marxism-Leninism: First, he attacked the Marxist-Leninist base-superstruct ure model at its heart: by seeing the fascist state as the most important agent in determining social relations, he displaced Marxism-Leninism’s claim that material relations always come prior to and determine political structures. And second, by pitting liberal democracy against fascism (and by analogy, against socialism), he radically reordered the political coordinates of the Marxist-Leninist system, for which fascism constituted the most dangerous enemy and the most stable line of opposition.

The 1980s, paradoxically, was the time when Western historians of socialism began to move away from the totalitarian analytical framework, questioning the liberal categories informing decades of scholarship on socialism and refocusing their inquiries on questions of subjectivity, everyday practice, and the multiplicity of social agencies to unsettle earlier conceptions of socialism as a monolithic, static, and repressive regime.²⁹ By contrast, East-European intellectuals eagerly embraced the totalitarian discourse as their own favorite analytical framework, stubbornly resisting any approaches that may provide an alternative to the picture of “total ideologization,” top-down, ubiquitous control, and massive repression.³⁰ After 1989,


³⁰ In Bulgaria, only recently more ambitious efforts have appeared to produce systematic research on socialism, and the Institute for the Study of the Recent Past, under the supervision of Ivaylo Znepolski, leads the efforts. Much of the Institute’s methodology shares the premises of the totalitarian model: a good example is Znepolski’s own book *Bulgarskiyat komunizm* (“Bulgarian Communism”), which posits a passive, undifferentiated and abstract mass in the singular, coerced by the various totalitarian technologies—the “mass” is “forced,” “coerced” (*prinudena*), “manipulated” (*manipulirana*), “intimidated” (*splashena*), “crushed” (*smazana*); the “masses” are “bought” (*kupuvane na masite*), “the low social layers are seduced” by the regime (*prelustyavane na sotsialnite nizini*)—a language employed throughout the entire study without much theoretical reflection or elaboration of methodology. Znepolski, *Buglarskiyat komunizm: Sotsiokulturni cherti i vlastova traektoriya* (Sofia: Institut za izsledvane na blizkoto minalo and Institut Otvoreno Obshtestvo Sofia, 2008), 29-29, and throughout the entire work. The studies published by the Institute has so far explored the political economy of the Bulgarian state, the institutional logic of the “cultural front”, party mechanisms of censorship, and other traditional political science topics focused on political and state institutions. While these first scholarly ventures into unstudied archives offer valuable research, they unforgivably fail to reflect on methodology and position themselves in the wider international debates on socialism, tacitly reproducing the totalitarian theoretical model. Besides Znepolski’s, studies published by the Institute include: Alexander Vezenkov, *Vlastovite strukturi na Bulgarskata Kommunisticheska Partiya 1944-1989g* (Sofia: Institut za izsledvane na blizkoto minalo and Institut Otvoreno Obshtestvo Sofia, 2008); Momchil Metodiev, *Mashina za legitimnost: Rolyata na Durzhavna Sigurnost v komunisticheskata durzha* (Sofia: Institut za izsledvane na blizkoto minalo and Institut Otvoreno Obshtestvo Sofia, 2008); Martin Ivanov, *Reformatorstvo bez reformi: Politicheska ikonomiya na bulgarskiya komunizm* (Sofia: Institut za izsledvane na blizkoto minalo and Institut Otvoreno Obshtestvo Sofia, 2008); Ivan Elenkov, *Kulturniyat front: Bulgarskata kultura prez epohata na komunizma—politichesko upravlenie, ideologicheski osnovaniya, institutsionalni rezhimi*
totalitarianism’s political valence powerfully persisted in post-socialist political and intellectual life, forming a hegemony of sorts, to enable the unrestrained reign of neoliberal politics, the massive privatization of the commons, and the widening gap between poverty and wealth.

The chapter shows how the liberal language saturated public and intellectual life in the early years of post-socialism by turning to the political writings of radical thinkers and public figures from the late 1980s and early 1990s. They embraced the concepts of totalitarianism, utopia, and terror in order to describe the socialist experience as a state of absence marked by multiple deficiencies, and as a political experiment which failed to produce cultural or material history. Furet’s claim that the socialist states fell apart, leaving nothing behind was particularly appealing—it looked as if socialisms “vanished,” leaving neither culture nor civilization, “[neither] principles nor laws, nor institutions, nor even history,” ending “in a sort of nothingness.” In fact, some former dissident intellectuals had begun making arguments about socialism as a historical nothingness as early as 1989, shortly after the “fall,” going as far as questioning if their own lived experience had been “real at all.” In the words of Ivaylo Dichev, a Bulgarian philosopher and a member of the circle of radical thinkers Sintez from the 1980s,

[t]he wall separated neither nations, nor cultures, nor natures of some sort; it was absolutely arbitrary, running between towns, houses, households: it vanished into thin air (except for souvenirs and tourist guidebooks), as if it had never existed. Thus there is nothing to learn from the fall of communism, no moral to be taken. The enemy left no corpse behind—you have ruined economies, killed people, polluted lands, but the transcendence as artifact is nowhere to be seen; the will to power disappeared in being defeated and one could ask oneself whether one’s life had been real at all.

By “transcendence as artifact” I take Dichev to mean the irreducible historicity of that reality, of history’s material-spectral resistance, which he felt had vanished into thin air and had left no significant material or social or cultural legacy. Now, two decades later, these arguments appear mostly as a desire to eliminate socialism’s historical presence, and indeed, the early 1990s were years driven by the wishful thinking that socialism’s historical past could be erased, that its material presence could go away, that the past could be completely forgotten.

“Forget your past”—says a graffiti on the inside walls of the Buzludzha Monument, an enormous edifice dedicated to the Bulgarian Communist Party and designed for official rituals, meetings,

(Sofia: Institut za ızsledvane na blizkoto minalo a nd Institut Otvoreno Obshtestvo Sofia, 2008). For some recent alternative approaches developed by scholars trained in the tradition of revisionist sociology during socialism, see the discussion and references in footnote 248 in Chapter Four.


and ceremonies (Fig. 1-2). Built in 1981, it is nested on a mountain top in the Balkan mountains, where a hundred years earlier a few rebels had secretly assembled together to form the first proto-communist organization in the country. Marked by the imposing grandeur of the monumental arts from the late socialist years, it is nevertheless a marvelous example of the striking novelty of modernist socialist architecture from the 1970s and 1980s, which combined monumental abstraction and symbolism to create haunted, otherworldly sites. “Forget your past”—this is not an invitation to remember but a call to forget. Rather than inviting post-socialist societies to come to terms with their past and move on, it asks them to refuse to deal and look away, pretending that it never happened. “Forget your past”—one should acknowledge the force of this call as symptomatic of the immediate post-1989 political climate and as immensely consequential for subsequent political development. The 1990s in Bulgaria was a time of intense purging, burning, and destruction: libraries were cleansed of ideological literature, educational curricula were purged of Marx, piles of books and symbols of the regime were burnt in public squares, public monuments were looted, mausoleums were destroyed, property was restored to former owners, lustration laws were instituted, street names were changed, a private property regime was established. In their rush to erase their socialist past, post-socialist societies even restored the historical symbols of the monarchy, paradoxically making it appear as if the legacy of the ancien regime is perfectly compatible with the new liberal democracies.

In this massive disavowal of the socialist past, discourses on the left indebted to Marx’s critical project were completely banished from the political and intellectual spaces in Eastern Europe, allowing for the neoliberal discourse to establish its hegemony. Intellectuals were eager for exchanges with the West, but these exchanges were subject to a filter whose logic preserved intact a hostile and discredited conception of a singular, dogmatic “Marx.” Bulgarian intellectual elites organized a series of international conferences, which energized the intellectual life of the capital: Francois Furet was invited in 1996 to discuss his book The Passing of an Illusion, followed by a visit by Ricoeur in 1997 and Habermas in 1999. In the height of all the euphoria of the early 1990s, the bookstores—those quiet, modest, often boring spaces—were flooded with an overwhelming amount of translated literature, from Habermas, to Karl Popper, to Friedrich Hayek. As former dissident intellectuals themselves admitted, until recently they made no distinction between the arguments of classic liberalism and the neoliberal celebration of the total

33 “Forget your Past” is the title of Nikola Mihov’s photo essay, capturing the present state of socialist monuments. http://www.nikolamihov.com/forget_your_past.html, accessed August 1, 2011. I thank Mihov for letting me use some of his photos as illustrations.

34 On the way socialist monuments organized urban space and produced the socialist cityscape and the experience of nature, see my article “Socialism’s Decrepit, Useless Monuments: Can We Really Do Without Them?,” in The Renaming Machine, ed. Suzana Milevska (Ljubljana: Parasite Institute, 2010), 346-366; also published in the University of California, Berkeley’s Newsletter of the Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies 26, 2 (Fall 2009): 7-13 and 25.

free market\textsuperscript{36}—a conflation that made them not only incapable of producing any political challenge to the neoliberal rush, but turned them into neoliberalism’s most dedicated supporters.

I treat the neoliberal turn in Eastern Europe as a distinct effect of the Stalinist philosophical legacy, which survived in the presumption that there is a necessary relationship between authoritarianism and politics on the left, and conversely and by extension, between democracy and free-market capitalism. This structuring legacy poses a question mark after any attempt to draw a radical break between socialism and post-socialism when it comes to their epistemic foundations. What we may have to grapple with in the future is a certain continuity between the premises of the Stalinist and post-socialist political categories—a continuity that should not be seen as caused by a single agent, but are conditioned by the organizing power of the lingering paradigm of Stalinist Marxism that we have renounced yet failed to overcome.

\textsuperscript{36} In Kiossev’s words: “What I didn’t know back then, and what I know now, is that there is enormous difference between economic neoliberalism and classical political liberalism. Today I am firmly against neoliberalism and a supporter of classical liberalism—in other words, the individual needs to be given freedom to do what she wants, but the market as a system prone to crises cannot be left as the only regulator.” Kiossev, “Prehodut i ilyuzite na intelektualista.” 9.
In order to investigate the historical production of the relationship between authoritarianism and socialism, we need to go back and revisit a seemingly unproblematic theoretical link: between Lenin and Stalin. One could hardly deny that Lenin and Stalin are historically and theoretically conjoined, and yet a quiet but profound instability defines their juncture, an instability that leaves a question mark behind claims about their necessary relation or their predetermined historical linearity. How we understand this juncture not only manifests our political commitments, but may also partake in a historically accumulated prejudice about Lenin’s legacy that has been adopted with a certain innocence and brought into our political present without our realizing how it risks foreclosing our political futures. Contemporary political thought has retained some assumptions about Lenin’s theoretical work, assumptions which, shared by liberal and Marxist thinkers alike, have formed a certain consensus around his philosophical and political legacy. The intellectual histories of Marxist thought trace similar trajectories, locating in Lenin the split between the dogmatic Soviet Marxism-Leninism and the West-European Marxisms, the latter having preserved and carried on Marx’s project of social critique while the former degenerated into an unfortunate dogmatic distortion. From the Frankfurt School thinkers to Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Lenin’s work is consistently associated with the Party vanguard, with the centralized, oppressive state, with the anti-dialectical, hierarchical relations between masses and leaders—in short, with all those unfortunate errors in political thinking which sealed the failure of the Revolution, and due to which the project of socialism became unhinged from the project of democracy and took its unfortunate turn towards authoritarianism and terror.

The consensus around Lenin’s authoritarianism remains complicit with and perpetuates the Stalinist paradigm long after political thinkers—liberal and left alike—thought they had subjected Stalinism to ruthless scrutiny and eradicated all remnants of its legacy. Part of this work will thus necessarily join voices invested in the project of disarticulating Lenin from Stalin. The point is not to insist on the fallacy of the “continuity” argument or to insist on discontinuities, whereby the ambiguities and contradictions in Lenin’s own political and philosophical writings would inevitably invite counterarguments, contributing to the somewhat limited pendulum effect of the debates. Instead, we should treat the Lenin-Stalin juncture as an object of inquiry while seeking alternative theoretical and methodological approaches to transcend some of the limitations. But rather than seeing Lenin and Stalin as opposites and excavating the historical accidents that contributed to their continuity, rather than shining light on the moments when Lenin and Stalin’s political leadership converged or clashed—these are all questions historians have explored brilliantly—this chapter aims to open an alternative set of questions: How was the theoretical and historical juncture between Lenin and Stalin discursively produced and what is its genealogy?
What we know as “Leninism” is a Stalinist production, and the historians of the Soviet Union have been much more aware of and sensitive to this fact than most Marxist philosophers, theorists, and intellectual historians—let alone liberal thinkers. In fact, Lenin’s own political thought remains full of inconsistencies and contradictions despite the power of his political insight. It is precisely the instability of Lenin’s political and theoretical legacy, an instability Lenin owes to his uncompromising commitment to the unpredictability of the revolutionary turns in every concrete historical situation, that Stalin’s formulations of Marxism-Leninism would eliminate. Stalin’s philosophical work performs a number of dehistoricizing moves, producing a system of stable ahistorical, general principles with its own internal consistency and its own paradoxes. In order to understand how our histories might still be trapped in the effects of this construction, we need to retrieve Lenin’s political thought from multiple theoretical and philosophical perspectives—a project long overdue, considering the tremendous work revisionist scholars of the revolutionary years and the Stalin era have handed to us.

Undoing the Stalinist canonization of Leninism aims to reaffirm precisely what Lenin repeatedly and tirelessly insisted on: that history will not remain faithful to any general theoretical assertion. Lenin insisted that the moment when knowledge forgets the situated historical experience from which it derives its claims, when it slips into making transhistorical claims, when it loses sight of the historical conditions of its production, it exposes itself to a tremendous risk: the risk of losing its critical potential and turning into a colonizing paradigm. Those who see Lenin as a general theorist of class, the Party and the state often that Lenin’s theoretical contributions occur at particular historical junctures, contributions which he significantly revised and often completely renounced and abandoned when confronted with changing historical situations. And a close reading of some of his most quoted texts discovers very little of what is often imputed to them. Such is the case with the very “problematic” What Is to Be Done?, known as the worst kind of Party vanguardism, intellectual elitism, and authoritarian centralism, and blamed for producing an undialectical dichotomy between spontaneity and consciousness. These entrenched perceptions are sometimes so far from what a careful reading of the text reveals, that we are only left to wonder how they acquired validity and came to dominate the field of political thought without being questioned, and what political and discursive conditions were in place to maintain their persuasiveness for decades.

A similar problem persists in what is claimed about Lenin’s views on state power. For Lenin, the state remains a mechanism of class domination through and through, the argument goes, and this ontology of the state will find its full expression in the Stalinist repressions. But in fact, works like State and Revolution and Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power? are attempts at formulating state governance as a practice of direct democracy and grassroots organization. What is more interesting, they are concerned with preserving and developing the state’s productive mechanisms of governance, meant to gradually replace the coercive and juridical institutions of the state. Autonomy, freedom, and self-empowerment for Lenin mean the ability to own and govern collectively one’s means of subsistence, but they are also practices inevitably tied to the state’s ability to bring into being empowered subjects through productive forms of subordination.

And finally, it is easy to overlook the fact that the category of class undergoes extensive revisions throughout Lenin’s work. It is said that Lenin prescribes an ontological priority to
class, opening a gap between party and masses, and remaining blind to political categories and relations of power surpassing the labor-capital antagonism. But one only needs to return to Lenin’s work on imperialism and the national question, and remember his call to mobilize the revolutionary potentials of national emancipation and anti-colonial movements towards the socialist revolution to see that Lenin’s notion of the working class subject cannot remain a self-sufficient category, and it can no longer function as the single revolutionary agent—because it finds itself inevitably intertwined with modes of domination that exceed the category of class.

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Trajectories of Leninism

When reading Lenin, one needs to keep in mind that he does not offer a well-elaborated philosophical system. Anyone who would attempt to extract a coherent “Leninist” theory out of Lenin’s work would have to confront a vast corpus of writings—forty five volumes of essays, letters, telegrams, pamphlets, fragments, polemical addresses, and speeches written over the span of thirty-something years—which have left a record of Lenin’s political growth, of the internal shifts and turns in his theoretical commitments, at times subtle and at times quite abrupt. One would also inevitably have to struggle with the immense tensions and contradictions even within some of his most systematic theoretical treatises and consistent political analyses. Any attempt to extract an overarching system exposes itself to multiple counterarguments to underscore the impossibility of constructing a “Lenin,” a thinker, a line of thought, a corpus of systematic theoretical premises divorced from a situated historical understanding. As historian Lars T. Lih has put it recently in what is perhaps the most epic reconstruction of Lenin’s What Is to Be Done?, “Lenin cannot be understood just by reading Lenin.”37 There is no such a thing as a “Lenin” autonomous from the shifts and contradictions of a historical stretch marked by a dynamic unfolding of events constantly reconfiguring past history, political alliances, openings and possibilities, dead-ends, backlashes and defeats. His interventions are intertwined with the fabric of a temporally evolving maze of political positions, theoretical confrontations, and micro-events. The unprejudiced reader might be quite astonished to notice how, at certain times Lenin would easily embrace his adversaries, while at others, he would attack his most trusted political allies and his closest friends with vehemence and fury. At times he would lend himself to some of the most uncomplicated formulations of Kautsky’s orthodoxy—a reductive set of evolutionary pronouncements on the inevitability of socialism, based on a stagist economic progression towards a socialist mode of production; other times he would criticize every trace of determinist thinking with unsurpassed rigor of thought.38 His purely theoretical treatises suffer from similar inconsistencies and tensions, from his early, pre-Hegelian, and certainly premature experiments in framing a materialist philosophy in Materialism and Empirio-criticism, to his much more theoretically rigorous State and Revolution.

37 Lih, Lenin Rediscovered, 21.
38 The question of Lenin’s allegiance to Kautsky and his theoretical break with orthodox Marxism has been a continuous source of discussions and disagreements, and Lenin’s exposure to Hegel’s dialectical thought at the outbreak of the World War certainly completed the break. The question remains, however, to what extent Lenin was a “strict” follower in his early work and to what extent the “Hegelian” Lenin constituted a radical break, as his own theoretical and political positions were often at odds with that of Kautsky. For further discussion, see footnote 120.
This is not to say that it is impossible to trace the historical itinerary and the internal evolution of Lenin’s intellectual thought, but we should be cautious in treating Lenin as a philosopher in the traditional sense, or as a political theorist—and it does not hurt to repeat this even if it has been said before. Lenin’s language carries a sense of political mission, a calling; his pamphlets, letters, telegrams, and orders call into being, summon, and steer rather than describe and analyze the historical events. His urgent and instructive voice throughout, as well as his insistent, systematic attacks on his theoretical opponents shows a keen awareness that the revolution is a delicate, precarious human project that lies in the ambiguous space between collective human agency and a succession of historical openings. The imperative force of his voice permeated with anxiety and urgency throughout suggests that there is very little margin for “error.” It conveys the pressing feeling that, as Georg Lukacs eloquently phrased it in a book published on the occasion of Lenin’s death, a “chance” may be missed, a chance to seize on the fragile possibility of driving history into a daring human vision. Back in 1924, Lukacs called this kind of knowledge a revolutionary Realpolitik, the power of which carried “a world-historical responsibility.” It is the responsibility of having grasped a precarious possibility—to bring about, for the first time in the course of history, a better human life and a present that belongs to the dispossessed. Lukacs saw Lenin as the historical figure who, by following the dialectical principle of realizing the struggle on a daily basis, in a number of concrete decisions within concrete historical situations, fully enacts Marx’s philosophy of praxis—and by becoming its practitioner, abolishes its reified status. According to this conception, only theoretical rigor combined with accurate analysis of the concrete historical situations can guide one through the labyrinth of historical openings and enable one to discern and mobilize the revolutionary potentials residing in the diversity of social forces.

Lenin’s work conceives of the revolutionary project not as a historical inevitability but as a field of historical openings. The arrival of the new social order cannot be “promised,” he cautions in his State and Revolution, and we have to always remember that it is not a historical necessity but requires enormous human will and human endeavor. As Lukacs has written, “all attempts to gain knowledge of socialism which do not follow this path of dialectical interaction with the day-to-day problems of the class struggle make a metaphysic of it, a utopia, something merely contemplative and non-practical.” By contrast, Lukacs sees Lenin’s life as embodying the “final elimination of all utopianism, the concrete fulfillment of the content of Marx’s program: a theory become practical.”

The strong temptation to draw continuous lines between Lenin’s theoretical contributions to the revolutionary movement and the authoritarian turn under Stalin has often determined the study of Lenin’s political thought. Yet, arguments about their innate temporal relation must be made only

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39 Georg Lukacs, Karl Korsch, Henri Lefebvre, C.L.R. James, Louis Althusser, and, most recently, Slavoj Zizek have dedicated considerable efforts to retrieving Lenin’s contributions to political philosophy and have called for reactivating Lenin’s thought in different historical contexts. I will be discussing these in detail here and in the next chapter.


43 Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness, 73.
with great caution, as these arguments can reduce to a simple historical linearity the complex interaction of multiple historical forces, their contingent collisions and unfoldings, the multiple pasts and epochs, which, as Moshe Lewin has recently put it, “converge, diverge, collide.” It is a relation in which no single or singular event, leader, or institution can ever serve as a self-originating agent. Rather, the temporal articulation of such a relation depends on a constellation of forces, so that its effects can only have a spectral imprint on the future. If Lenin’s utterances had the political agency to mobilize with a force which, having no doubt material effects, was able to put history in motion, it is not to suggest that the historical effects of his interventions can be ever conclusively known, even in their aftermath.

The instability of Lenin’s historical and political legacy lies at the core of contradictions surrounding the interpretation of his contributions. It has manifested itself in perpetual debates about the relationship between Lenin’s definitions of the dictatorship of the proletariat and Stalin’s turn towards a radical centralization of power, between Lenin’s views of the instrumental use of the state in the revolutionary takeover and Stalin’s move to legalize terror and begin his mass political cleansing campaign, between Lenin’s call for a rank-and-file Party organization and Stalin’s hierarchical, warlike Party machine, between Lenin’s determination to argue and fight against all “errors” in revolutionary thinking and Stalin’s subordination of all knowledge to a regime of political censorship. The historical and theoretical relationship between Lenin’s and Stalin’s legacy has been a contested terrain, and the emphasis on either continuities or discontinuities persists in structuring the debates. Efforts at periodizations are subject to similar hesitations, and even if marked by watershed years in Soviet history such as the February and October Revolutions or 1928 (Stalin’s abrupt end of the New Economic Policy and the beginning of aggressive collectivization through the launch of the First Five-Year Plan), drawing the boundaries of periods has been difficult. This is particularly true with attempts to trace the “roots” or “seeds” of Stalinism, attempts that presume a relationship of simple causality between Bolshevism and Stalinism, posit a predetermined historical linearity leading from Bolshevism to Stalinism, and see Stalin’s rise to power as an inevitable consequence of Lenin’s political and theoretical impact. Stephen F. Cohen was among the first to point out the evolutionary presumptions which shaped a solid consensus among both “anti-socialist” and revisionist scholars during the 1960s. Even the work of first-generation historians, who were interested in remaining alert to the complexities of Bolshevism’s and Stalinism’s social realities, while somewhat more critical of simple causal relationships, has repeatedly tripped over the conundrums around change and continuity. More recent work by historians in the “revisionist” tradition has seen both Bolshevism and Stalinism in terms of the dynamic social forces that they participate in and propel, complicating immensely the focus on institutional regimes and party

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structure and shattering the monomanality of periods and “epochs.” Rethinking Russia’s early twentieth century history as a period of great upheaval charged with contradictions and uncertainty, they have directed much of their efforts towards recovering the uneven social dynamics and various heterogeneous agencies involved in the making of the new social order, while disrupting monolithic narratives as well as categories that imply conceptions of unified and stable subjects, homogeneous states, and singular historical agents.46

It has become more and more apparent to historians sympathetic to revisionist approaches how the continuity paradigm in the history of Revolutionary and Soviet Russia lends itself to anti-Soviet cold-war political investments, methodologies, and discourses. By contrast, philosophical and theoretical rethinking of Lenin’s legacy has lagged. And one may not be surprised here: Althusser has remarked on philosophy’s quite pronounced intolerance of Lenin.47 He observes that Lenin has been “philosophically intolerable” to all who had intellectual encounters with him in one form or another, and this was the case precisely because Lenin would remain sarcastically indifferent to all philosophical objections.48 The aversion to Lenin is not surprising, considering


48 One might remember Althusser begins his essay with Lenin’s letter which declines Gorky’s invitation to join a philosophical circle of Russian Social-Democrats in 1908. Althusser cites Lenin’s letter of 7 February 1908, but it is not clear which letter he had actually encountered. Lenin stayed in continuous correspondence with Gorky in 1908 and 1909 over a newly formed philosophical circle in the Italian Island of Capri. (See Lenin, Collected Works, 13, 34; also V.I. Lenin and A. M. Gorky, Pisma, vosominaniti, dokamenti (Moskva: Nauka, 1969).) It is more likely that Althusser had read the letter of 19 April, 1908, in which Lenin, writing from Geneva, explicitly stated his refusal to join the new formation (Lenin, Collected Works, 34: 393, 394). At the time philosophical “talk” made Lenin extremely anxious indeed, but Althusser may not have been completely aware that only a year later Lenin too would “surrender” to philosophy. As one of the editors of Proletary at the time (the illegal organ of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, between 1906 and 1909 first published out of Finland, then relocated to Switzerland), Lenin had to deal with the volatile unity of the Party, aggravated by recent philosophical disputes. In his earlier letters to Gorky, for example from 25 February and 24 March 1908, Lenin shared his fears of a split triggered by the neo-Kantian collection of essays recently published by Bazarov, Lunacharsky, Bogdanov, and others, Studies in the Philosophy of Marxism. (Lenin, Collected Works, 13: 448-454). In fact, the situation was so precarious that Lenin and the Editorial of Proletary adopted a tactical line of keeping debates associated with the “properly philosophical” sphere out of political discussions (and out of the newspaper) as a way of preserving the unity of the movement as much as possible. The paper adopted a line of “philosophical neutrality” and refused to publish articles attempting to draw alliances between political factions and philosophical arguments. For these tactical reasons Proletary had to reject Gorky’s article on Bogdanov, a follower of Neo-Kantian Ernst Mach and author of Empirionism. On 25 February, 1908, Lenin pleaded with Gorky: “You can help by contributing to Proletary on neutral questions (that is, unconnected with philosophy) of literary criticism, publicism, belles lettres,
that he offers “a different practice” of philosophy, one which threatens the status quo of current philosophical practice, marked by philosophy’s refusal to recognize its own preconditions in the political predicament. “Between Lenin and established philosophy there is a peculiarly intolerable connection: the connection in which the reigning philosophy is touched to the quick of what it represses: politics.”

If we turn back to Western Marxist thought and its intellectual histories, Althusser’s judgment concerning Lenin appears disturbingly accurate. Even with Lenin’s considerable impact on key political thinkers of the 1920s such as Lukacs or Gramsci, long considered among the “originators” and “pillars” of Western Marxism, and later, with more sympathetic interpretations by Lefebvre or Althusser, the disavowal of Lenin is foundational to the broadly accepted divisions between Western Marxism and its bad, dogmatic, historically catastrophic counterpart, Soviet Marxism. Post-war European Marxist thought took certain turns precisely because of the historical realities of Nazism and Stalinism. Scholars have noticed that the Frankfurt School has

and so on. As for your article, if you wish to prevent a split and help to localize the new fight—you should rewrite it, and everything that even indirectly bears on Bogdanov’s philosophy should be placed somewhere else. You have other mediums, thank God, besides Proletary. Everything that is not connected with Bogdanov’s philosophy—and the bulk of your article is not connected with it—you could set out in a series of articles for Proletary. Any other attitude on your part, that is, a refusal to rewrite the article or to collaborate with Proletary would, in my opinion, unavoidably tend to aggravate the conflict among the Bolsheviks, make it difficult to localize the new fight, and weaken the vital cause, so essential practically and politically, of revolutionary Social-Democracy in Russia.”

(Lenin, “Letter to A. M. Gorky,” Collected Works, 13: 454). As Althusser suggests, Lenin’s refusal signifies his “consciousness of the ruthless, primary fact that philosophy divides, […] and it can only unite by dividing.” At that particular moment, Althusser continues, a practice of philosophy was to refuse to be divided (Althusser, p. 13). But Althusser does not dwell on what is at stake in Lenin’s anxious attempts to maintain the separation between philosophy and politics and to insist on the philosophical “neutrality” of political debates. If philosophy cannot help but make political assumptions, and if the political stakes concealed in philosophy’s claim to “political neutrality” should be ruthlessly exposed, what about the philosophical arguments politics makes? How is it that politics can remain “philosophically neutral”?

Was Lenin’s refusal to draw an organic and internal connection between political lines and philosophical claims suggesting that these are incidental and historically articulated? As of February 1908, the Editorial Board of Proletary, desperately struggling to maintain the precarious bonds within the Party, refused to admit any internal connection between the two and argued against claims that political lines coincided with philosophical clashes: “[A]ny attempt to represent these differences of [philosophical] opinion as factional is radically erroneous. Both factions [Bolshevik and Menshevik] contain adherents of the two philosophical trends” (“Statement of the Editors of Proletary,” Collected Works, 13: 447). Or it might be the case that we dealing with philosophical inquiry’s limits set in crisis, or more properly, philosophy’s claim to autonomy set in crisis, a crisis which Lenin had no way of grappling with at the time. Either way, it was clear that Lenin could not sustain this position for too long. David Joravski has shown how Lenin “surrendered” to philosophy with his first major purely theoretical work written in 1908-9 precisely in response to Bogdanov et al. He crafts an intricate reading of the evolving relationship between philosophical questions and political commitments in the first two decades of the 1900s. It would be wrong, Joravsky argues, to attribute to Lenin the turn towards subordinating philosophy to the Party line (the so-called doctrine of partyinost, which Joravski translates as “partyness”), which did not occur until the late 1920s. He reads Lenin’s Materialism and Empiriocriticism, the work which later became widely utilized in establishing the Party-sanctioned canon of philosophical discourse, as the sacrifice Lenin made to attempt to settle philosophical controversies between neo-Kantian (Machist) and orthodox materialist tendencies within the Party. Joravsky argues that, while joining the debates in defense of the orthodox economist views of Plekhanov, Lenin in fact sought to reestablish the common grounds of philosophical discourse among the revolutionaries (hence the simplicity of his materialism vs. idealism argument), and to prevent the Party from fracturing any further. David Joravsky, “Lenin and the Partyness in Philosophy,” Soviet Marxism and Natural Science: 1917-1932 (New York: Columbia University, 1961), 24-44.

shared the rejection of orthodox Marxism, and by association,Leninist Bolshevism—so much so that, as it has been argued, their legibility as a school of thought was premised on this shared contempt. Without much examination, Soviet Marxism has remained a stable referent even in the most careful studies, typically manifested in clumping together the philosophical legacies of Lenin and Stalin in what came to be a set of canonical, reductive principles known as “Marxism-Leninism.” Herbert Marcuse, while a senior fellow at the Russian Institute at Columbia University in the early 1950s undertook a study of Soviet Marxism’s philosophical foundations, and, partially refusing to accept the tacit premises of Cold War oppositions, worked to understand the relationship between political discourse and social practice against readings which posit a gap between ideology and reality, propaganda and truth. Attempting an “immanent critique” of Soviet Marxism, he conceptualizes the theoretical quandaries of state-controlled knowledge production as structurally inherent to the political and social developments of the Soviet state, and views the maze of theoretical contradictions in which the Soviet doctrine found itself over time as a functional element in the political and social challenges the Soviet state tried to manage internally and internationally. However, for him, too, “Leninism” is the fatal anti-philosophical turn: Lenin’s work fathers the vanguardism of the Party, it ontologizes the economic domain and confers a derivative, reflective status on all knowledge, and it pushes orthodox Marxism’s economic determinism to an extreme—all these having turned into the sad fragments of a failed and shattered dialectic. “A straight road seems to lead from Lenin’s ‘consciousness from without’ and his notion of the centralized authoritarian party,” Marcuse says of Lenin’s What Is to Be Done?, “to Stalin’s personal dictatorship—a road which ‘scientific determinism’ gives way […] to decisions on the ground of shifting political and even personal objectives and interests.”

Around the same time Merleau-Ponty wrote his Adventures of the Dialectic with a similar critique in mind. “He [Lenin] never asks himself by what miracle knowledge carries on a relationship with a suprahistorical object,” Merleau-Ponty writes of Materialism and Empirio-criticism while lamenting the loss of the dialectic, “a relationship which is itself removed from history. This new dogmatism puts the knowing subject outside the fabric of history and gives it access to absolute being, releases it from the duty of self-criticism, exempts Marxism from applying its own principles to itself, and settles dialectical thought, which by its own movement rejected it, in a massive positivity.” Seeing Marx’s work as the place “where dialectical thought begins,” he reads it in terms of a structural incompleteness, a structural ambiguity, a “discordancy between naive realism and dialectical inspiration,” which then

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50 While making this argument in his Dialectical Imagination, Martin Jay nevertheless retains an unrefined understanding of Leninism and Bolshevism as a crude reference to hierarchical party organization with inherently authoritarian aspects. Jay, Dialectical Imagination, 173-93. Although he develops his understanding of Lenin in later work, as in his more detailed study of Lukacs, Jay refuses to give any concessions to Lukacs’ reading of Lenin. “Discourse of Totality before Western Marxism” and “Georg Lukacs and the Origins of the Western Marxist Paradigm,” Marxism and Totality (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 67 and 81-127. A similar problem persists in the work of intellectual historians Andrew Arato and Paul Breines, who refused to acknowledge not only the profound influence Lenin’s political thought has had on foundational “Western” Marxists such as Lukacs and Gramsci, but also to take seriously any of these thinkers’ acknowledgements of Lenin. See my discussion of their position in footnote 60.


53 Ibid., 62.
defines the historical meanderings of the dialectical project. Having an imperfect grasp of Marx’s basic principle laid out in the *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* “that one cannot destroy philosophy without realizing it”—and for Merleau-Ponty this endeavor includes rescuing every bit of radicality present in all philosophical inquiry from Cartesian philosophy to Kant and onwards, liberating it from metaphysical and formalist elements, and transforming it into Marxist praxis—much of subsequent work has tried instead to do away with philosophy by destroying it. The Marxist orthodoxy and Lenin’s legacy according to Merleau-Ponty commits precisely this act by relocating the dialectic to “the place where it is least capable of residing, namely, in the object, in being.” The theoretical implications for such an ontological move include “replacing total praxis by a technician-made action, replacing the proletariat by the professional revolutionary. It means concentrating the movement of history, as well as that of knowledge, in an apparatus.”

But Merleau-Ponty himself does not commit the unphilosophical error of condemning these “failed” forms of revolutionary knowledge. There is a truth to this “communist eclectism,” he states, “there is a truth to these ideologies […], a participation of ideas among themselves that forbids them ever to be absolutely unusable and false.” The ossification of the subject–object relationship into a simple opposition, its dissociation from the historical process, the oscillations between Hegelian subjectivism and positivism—all these are due to the very instability of the dialectical project, to its precarity as a revolutionary practice, a dialectical project that according to him renews itself only in revolutionary moments.

And yet a great contradiction resides in the claim that seemed so obvious, so self-evident at the time: Leninism spells the death of the Revolution. It leaves those of us privileged to look back from a distance to ponder how the immense paradox such a claim contains could have escaped the critical mind. If “Leninism” is antithetical to Revolution indeed, then how are we to understand the relation between “Leninism” and Lenin’s contributions to the revolutionary years?

While, during the 1950s, the conflict between “Western Marxism” and “Leninism” was quite real, it also rested on the latter’s discursive production, its historical construction. The Soviet version of Marxism-Leninism has a very tangential relationship to the philosophy of Marx, Engels, or Lenin, and by no means has it progressed linearly or unchallenged out of the agitated philosophical debates of the Second International. “Leninism” and what later came to be known as “Marxism-Leninism,” were constructed discursively in Stalin’s work after Stalin assumed power immediately upon Lenin’s death in January 1924. Stalin’s doctrine defines the general principles of Leninism out of Lenin’s theoretically incomplete but contextually situated interventions to extract a set of “proper Leninist” principles of Party dictatorship. Perhaps most crucially, his formulations perform a number of decontextualizations of Lenin’s work to develop a set of ahistorical, general categories, in addition to notions that building socialism necessarily

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57 *Ibid.*, 64.
depends on a coercive state, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is nothing more than the mirror reversal of class domination, and that the Bolsheviks must retain state power by making use of all available means of repression.

Intellectual historians have observed that the Hegelian influences on Marx’s own thought began to suffer considerable repression within the Second International—they remind us of the work of Karl Korsch, a contemporary of Lenin and Lukacs, who signaled this tendency as a kind of “Hegel amnesia.” Much of what determined the terrains of contestation from 1918 onwards was structured around the birth of some leading works such as Lukacs’ *History and Class Consciousness* or Karl Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy*, which appeared independently but synchronically in 1923, and sought to recover Marx’s indebtedness to Hegel in his attempts to reinvent the dialectic in materialist terms. Korsch, for example, shows how from the 1850s onwards, Hegel disappears from the philosophical debates of both bourgeois and Marxist philosophers in Germany. It was inconceivable for bourgeois philosophers of history, treating philosophy as a self-referential chain of ideas divorced from their social foundations, to imagine philosophy departing from the terrains of “purely” philosophical questions. They failed to notice how the Hegelian dialectic, rather than “decaying,” formed a symbiosis with social practice while inaugurating forms of knowledge immediately concerned with social processes. As for the Marxists, Korsch argues, they got completely carried away in their attempts to supersede philosophy altogether, as was the case with the economic determinism and positivism of orthodox Marxism. What both philosophical trends missed was Marx and Engels’ attempt to come up with “a theory of social development seen and comprehended as a living totality, or, more precisely, [...] a theory of social revolution comprehended and practiced as a living totality.”

Lukacs responds precisely to this general move away from Hegel when powerfully reinserting the concept of totality in *History and Class Consciousness* as a core concept in Marx’s theory of revolutionary practice. The proletarian class, he shows, is the only collective historical subject that embodies the unity of the social at this particular historical juncture. Only the proletarian


60 On the controversy, *ibid.*, 163-209. Arato and Breines rightly view Lukacs’ turn to Lenin in his 1924 contribution an indirect but obvious response to the criticisms leveled at him upon the publication of *History and Class Consciousness*; however, rather than seeing Lukacs’ recuperation of Lenin a considerable advancement in the materialist radicalization of the dialectic, a contribution to the understanding of the political enactment of the dialectic as practical steps taken from a concrete historical conditions, they call Lukacs’ reading of Lenin “a virtual construction,” an invention, mythology, or projection informed by a realization that all revolutionary potentials in Europe had been irretrievably lost: “[T]he crucial element here is that the emergent reorientation (or demessianization of Lukacs’s outlook), combined with the events of late 1923 and 1924, prepared him to see a great deal in Lenin, even to a point of constructing a virtual Lenin mythology of his own.” *Ibid.*, 196. Obviously keeping out of sight Lenin’s preoccupations with studying the Hegelian dialectic, Arato and Breines read Lukacs’ embrace of Lenin as an unfortunate turn towards dogmatism, where “Lenin emerges [in Lukacs’ study] as the first and only among Lukacs’ contemporaries regarding whom he has not a single critical word to utter.” *Ibid.*, 195. For some informative although contested intellectual histories of Korsch, see Jay, “The Revolutionary Historicism of Karl Korsch,” *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984), 128-149; Douglas Kellner, *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977); Kevin Anderson has also addressed Korsch’s political relationship to Lenin, which shifted considerably between his 1923 *Marxism and Philosophy* and his 1930 introduction to the new edition of the book. Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*, 173-180.

class, as the subject-object of the historical process, is capable of walking humanity up the narrow path of revolutionary practice. As a result of the rationalization of the labor process, of the specialization and fragmentation of knowledge and human activity, and of the commodification of needs, the bourgeois subject has acquired a fragmented and reified knowledge of reality that he cannot transcend. Plugged into an increasingly preexisting and self-sufficient rationalized production process, the bourgeois subject finds himself gradually deprived of all agency, his activity progressively becoming more passive, his thought more contemplative. It is only the working class that can surpass the reified and contemplative stance of the bourgeoisie and restore the integrity of the fragmented social whole. “Capitalist society is—immediately—the same for both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat,” Lukacs observes in *History and Class Consciousness*, “but […] this same reality employs the motor of class interests to keep the bourgeoisie imprisoned within the immediacy while forcing the proletariat to go beyond it.”

Confronted with the “brute fact of the most elementary gratification of his needs,” with his own exploitation and misery, the worker is able to “[perceive] the split of his being preserved in the brutal form of what is in its whole tendency a slavery without limit.” The irreducibly unique, accidental nature of life clashes with the rational, quantified, and systematized process of capitalist production in the experience of the worker; his labor is objectified and quantified in a regime of exchange value; the needs crucial for his survival are only available to him in the form of commodities. Hence, he embodies—in his physical, living being, in his material needs, and in the material liminality of his human constitution—the very historical contradictions that capitalism produces. This is how the proletarian class is able to grasp the material and socio-historical preconditions for its own existence and gain self-knowledge as a subject, i.e. become conscious as a class.

Proletarian class consciousness is “the last consciousness in the history of mankind.” Lukacs reminds us; “the revolutionary victory of the proletariat does not imply, as with the former classes, the immediate realization of the socially given existence of the class, but, as the young Marx clearly saw and defined, its self-annihilation.” The working class is the only historical subject that can overcome itself as a class. Its practical revolutionary activity dissipates antitheses between subject and object, thought and action, theory and practice, and hurls the revolutionary drive into the historical present. Its action abolishes all fragmentation, transforms the potentials of social collectivity into historical reality, and brings into being the social whole dwelling in the industrial mode of production.

Seeing emancipatory potential in the totalizing element of the social organization of capitalism and going forward with social designs that aim to realize it—rather than abolish it—is one of the most criticized moments of the socialist projects. Lenin is certainly guilty of it in his own way,

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63 Ibid., 166.
64 Ibid., 70-71.
65 A good example is Moishe Postone’s critique of Lukacs’ use of the Hegelian historical Subject. Postone argues that Lukacs’ appropriation of Hegel in *History and Class Consciousness* significantly diverges from Marx’s, and unlike Marx, he fails to transform it radically, essentially reinstanting the bourgeois connotations of the Hegelian Subject. Postone returns to Marx’s much more historically grounded transfiguration of the category—in contrast to Lukacs, he argues, the Hegelian Subject in Marx’s work appears as a concrete function of capitalist relations, as the agent of the forms of social mediation of capitalism. Because Marx’s historical Subject, seen as Capital itself rather
although, as I will show later, his works go much against the self-sufficiency of Lukacs’ revolutionary subject. The works of Lukacs and Korsch however stirred up quite a controversy for the right reasons—namely, because they appeared as unrelenting critique of proponents of reductive evolutionary materialism who pressed for economic determinism and an epiphenomenal, derivative understanding of knowledge as the radical elimination of all traces of Hegelian idealism. Both authors suffered criticism for their unabashed Hegelianism, culminating in their official denunciation by Grigory Zinoviev, Chairman of the Comintern after Lenin, during the Fifth World Congress of the Comintern in July 1924.  

Korsch explicitly distanced his attempt to restore the dialectic as a revolutionary practice from any association with Lenin. This is evident in his reply to criticisms of Marxism and Philosophy in 1930, and in his critical review of Pannekoek’s Lenin as Philosopher, eventually turning to the right by the time he published Karl Marx. 67 It was a response to the narrow version of Leninism coalescing in Europe during the second half of the 1920s, starting with the Fifth Congress of the Comintern, right after Lenin’s death, and later, with the wide international distribution of a careful selection of Lenin’s works, among which was Materialism and Empiriocriticism (translated and distributed internationally in 1927 by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow). Lukacs, by contrast, took a more difficult path—of recuperating the Lenin that got lost in the doctrinization of Leninism. Almost immediately after publishing History and Class Consciousness, he began to move away from the “ethical idealism” and Party elitism he endorsed in his loyalty to Hegel. Responding to the main critiques of the work, he also corrected himself with regard to the omission of the central question of labor and the economy in his account of the totality of the historical process and refined his views on the questions of objectification and human alienation. In the 1967 Preface to the long-awaited second edition of the book, he stresses the importance of labor in Marx’s radical reformulation of the Hegelian dialectic: it is only with the insertion of labor as the mediator between human activity and nature in its historically specific forms that we can finally rid ourselves of the last vestiges of ontological conceptions of nature, as well as deliver an effective critique of deterministic reductions of Marx’s method framing the economy as an objective process with internal laws, independent of human activity. 68 Omitting labor as the “metabolic interaction between society
and nature” for Lukacs means that “the most important real pillars of the Marxist view of the world disappear and the attempt to deduce the ultimate revolutionary implications of Marxism in as radical a fashion as possible is deprived of a genuinely economic foundation. [...] In consequence, my account of the contradictions of capitalism as well as of the revolutionisation of the proletariat is unintentionally colored by an overriding subjectivism.”

It is also crucial, Lukacs reflects in his self-critique published more than four decades later, that the category of objectification, as the general means of human interaction, is distinguished from alienation, as the objectification of a particular kind of social activity under capitalism, namely, labor. In the capitalist mode of production, alienation has devastating social effects. “In these and similarly problematical premises we see the result of a failure to subject the Hegelian heritage to a thorough-going materialist reinterpretation and hence to transcend and preserve it.”

In a gesture that disowns the project of his book almost in its entirety, a book acknowledged by admirers and critics alike as one of the most remarkable achievements within Marx’s philosophical legacy, Lukacs declares: “This completely shattered the theoretical foundations of what had been the particular achievement of History and Class Consciousness.”

“The book,” he says, “became wholly alien to me just as my earlier writings had become by 1918-19. It suddenly became clear to me that if I wished to give body to these new theoretical insights I would have to start again from scratch.”

Yet it was as early as 1924, in his work on Lenin, that already signs of a practical, materialist conception of the historical process as totality appeared. Lukacs undertook the study of Lenin without being aware of the latter’s Philosophical Notebooks—a voluminous record of Lenin’s close study of Hegel’s Logic in 1914-16—which were published in Russian only in 1929 and in German in 1931, nor, it seems, of State and Revolution. “It is undoubtedly one of the great achievements of History and Class Consciousness to have reinstated the category of totality in the central position it had occupied throughout Marx’s works and from which it had been ousted by the scientism of the social-democratic opportunists.” Lukacs writes in the Preface. “I did not know at the time that Lenin was moving in a similar direction. [...] But whereas Lenin really brought about a renewal of the Marxian method my efforts resulted in a—Hegelian—distortion, in which I put the totality in the center of the system, overriding the priority of economics.”

There are very few serious interpretive analyses of Lenin’s often quoted 1914 Philosophical Notebooks—Lenin’s contribution to the understanding of Hegel’s Logic—among them the marvelous 1948 study by C.L.R. James and Henri Lefebvre’s work on the Notebooks from 1938.
onwards. The question of what place and significance the Notebooks has in Lenin’s revolutionary thinking has been of marginal scholarly interest to intellectual historians. Kevin Anderson is perhaps the only scholar who, indebted to Raya Dunayevskaya’s humanism, has dedicated significant attention to the question: he noticed how Lenin’s dedication to formulating a revolutionary materialist dialectic has consistently evaded the intellectual histories of Western Marxism, aligning Lenin along the trajectory leading from Kautskian orthodox Marxism to its canonical Stalinist version. He treats Lenin’s encounter with Hegel as a watershed period in Lenin’s political thought. Such clear lines between a pre- and post-Hegelian Lenin might be difficult to maintain, and I will address this in a bit, but the Notebooks do indeed leave a record of Lenin’s profound rethinking of his own former attempts at grasping the theoretical foundations of Marx’s dialectical materialism, which Kevin Anderson traces in every aspect of Lenin’s post-1914 revolutionary work. These, according to Kevin Anderson, are Lenin’s arguments on the new political subjectivities emerging with national self-determination movements and anticolonial struggles and his call to mobilize their revolutionary potentials, as well as his attempts to engage in formulations of state governance as a practice of direct democracy and grassroots organization that will appear in works such as State and Revolution and Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?

A closer reading of State and Revolution shows precisely Lenin’s preoccupations with a dialectical-materialist notion of freedom as a human practice that embraces the totality of social relations of the industrial mode of production, a practice of freedom that recognizes the priority of the social nowhere else but in the activity of labor. The work makes clear that labor, that most fundamental and creative of all human activities, that collective, history-making human force, cannot and should not be objectified, quantified through the mediating abstraction of money, and offered for exchange. Socialism must restore the unmediated social meaning of labor and need: “there will be no need for society, in distributing products, to regulate the quantity to be received by each; each will take freely ‘according to his needs.’” And because labor is an inevitably social activity inadvertently embedded in the industrial mode of production, “freeing” humans would always require some form of subordination on their part, a subordination that embraces both the sociality of labor and the particular forms of social dependency that the industrial age requires. In State and Revolution Lenin envisions nothing less than the practical realization of total social subjectivation, a social entirety where, strikingly, “complete,” radical human freedom is possible. It is, however, a kind of freedom that can never be thought or practiced outside of subjectivation, it is a practice of freedom and social self-realization radically conditioned by the

76 Kevin Anderson, Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism; “Lenin’s Encounter with Hegel after Eighty Years.”
77 Anderson’s only criticism concerns Lenin’s failure to subject the concept of the Party to dialectical critique after it had captured the state. While Anderson notes that the Bolsheviks were forced to centralize the Party and strengthen the state to maintain power in the extremely tumultuous conditions of civil war, he maintains that Lenin offered no real alternative to increasingly vanguardist formulations coming from prominent Central Committee members such as Grigory Zinoviev. Anderson, “State and Revolution: Subjectivity, Grassroots Democracy, and the Critique of Bureaucracy,” Hegel, Lenin, and Western Marxism, 166-169.
material dimensions of collective human activity. For Lenin, the state assumes a central function in circulating the normative principles assuring collective subjectivation and remains an indispensable element in the practical realization of freedom.

**Lenin and the State**

There have been some valuable efforts recently to reclaim the theoretical and political legacy of Lenin’s work, aiming to question from the ground up some prevailing myths about it, and to reclaim its emancipatory agency. Yet, some of them point to the immanent ontological claims in Lenin’s work when it comes to his views on state power. Slavoj Zizek alerts us to the fact that Lenin’s conception of the state somehow remains a general rather than historical category throughout, and that Lenin’s state is ultimately founded on the premise that it organizes social relations through oppression and remains an inherently coercive mechanism of domination. “The key premiss of *State and Revolution,*” Zizek writes, “is that you cannot fully ‘democratize’ the State; the State ‘as such’, in its very notion, is a dictatorship of one class over another; […] [and] insofar as we still dwell within the domain of the State, we are legitimately entitled to exercise full violent terror, since, within this domain, every democracy is a fake.”

This ontological gesture expresses itself fully under Stalin, Zizek observes, and this is the case both with the “bad” Lenin of Party elitism in *What Is to Be Done?* and the later, “good” Lenin of *State and Revolution.* Any such distinctions inevitably spell the failure of work attempting to redeem Lenin even partially from having a stake in the Stalinist outcome. “The element of truth […] is that you cannot separate the unique constellation which enabled the revolutionary takeover in October 1917 from its later “Stalinist” turn in its aftermath,” Zizek states, calling their internal juncture “the real Leninist tragedy.”

Indeed, a single reading of *State and Revolution* may only register Lenin’s emphasis on the need for a violent takeover of the state and its coercive use. In fact, for many years Lenin has been dismissed on those grounds by even some of the most enthusiastic students of the revolutionary process. A closer look at the text, however, shows that revolutionary action, as Lenin imagined it, has a more ambiguous relationship to both violence and rupture, and indicates that he is far from indulging in utopian illusions about the revolutionary project. On the one hand, Lenin considers the liberal state, which has emerged historically as the political outcome of the capitalist reconfiguration of productive forces and property, to be a major and inevitable element

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82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
84 Against this reading of *State and Revolution,* I have shown how Lenin’s famous work on the “withering away” of the state is concerned with developing the productive governing functions of the socialist state. These are forms of social regulation and methods of socialization meant to replace the coercive mechanisms of the state. “Socialist Modes of Governance and the ‘Withering Away of the State’: Revisiting Lenin’s *State and Revolution.*”
in class domination and class reproduction, and asserts, against the Mensheviks, that only a rupture, a revolutionary takeover of the state, can uproot the exploitative practices of the capitalist material organization. He sharply condemns the lingering legacy of reformists such as Eduard Bernstein who remain loyal to the bourgeois institutions and stand for approaches to solving social inequalities through the regulatory procedures of the liberal state. In the heart of its composition, the liberal state is indelibly marked by bourgeois privilege and reinscribes an unequal and exploitative social order. Thus, if class inequality is to change, the bourgeois state needs to be taken over with violence so it can be rejected in its entirety, the state needs to be “smashed.”

On the other hand, however, Lenin is equally dismissive of anarchist doctrines that invest all hopes in the singular and final act of abolishing the “state machine.” He opposes vehemently anarchists who assume that abolishing the state will eradicate all social oppression overnight. Such views remain outright utopian, completely blind to the historical dimensions of social transformation. For him, framing the revolutionary question in terms of either a violent action or a carefully steered reform misses the possibility of understanding the revolutionary task as an intricate historical process that requires both. The revolution is both a rupture and a slow process of social transformation, conjoined in a complex temporal dynamic, ultimately seeking to eradicate all repressive forms of state control and replace them by alternative forms of administration and subject production. Far from being antagonistic, rupture and transformation appear as mutually enabling, dialectically interactive forms of collective political engagement, the necessary aspects of a project of political renewal inevitably unfolding within a temporal dimension.

What is most salient about Lenin’s attempts at theorizing the socialist state in *State and Revolution* and *Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?*—two “sister” texts, written almost at the same time on the eve of October 1917—is the effort to imagine modes of state governance that would replace the coercive and violent mechanisms of the “state machine.” In both texts he talks about “replacing” the standing army and the police with a different, already existing set of institutions, one that embraces the industrial mode of production while adopting the grassroots models of self-governance of the Soviets.

In addition to the chiefly “oppressive” apparatus—the standing army, the police and the bureaucracy—the modern state possesses an apparatus which has extremely close connections with the banks and syndicates, an apparatus which performs an enormous amount of accounting and registration work, if it may be expressed this way. This apparatus must not, and should not, be smashed. It must be wrested from the control of the capitalists; the capitalists and the wires they pull must be cut off, lopped off, chopped away from this apparatus; it must be subordinated to the proletarian Soviets; it must be expanded, made more comprehensive, and nation-wide.

Fredric Jameson, pointing to Lenin, writes about the often forgotten dialectical understanding of the revolution as “event-as-process” and “process-as-event,” which contains the “perpetual injunction to keep the revolution alive.” “Lenin and Revisionism,” in *Lenin Reloaded*, 68.

The capitalist system has provided the social infrastructure and the level of literacy that would enable anyone to perform the regulating functions of the state; people would not need to acquire specialized knowledge to enhance the efficiency of the social body; rather, every person would be schooled and gradually accustomed to performing their bureaucratic duties. Thus, while giving rise to a modern state bureaucracy and the inequalities generated by its privileges, the capitalist mode of production has also provided a way out of it—it contains the conditions and the instruments for its own overcoming. Such a slow cultivation of social practice

[…] will of itself lead to [the] gradual “withering away” of all bureaucracy, to the gradual creation of an order—an order without inverted commas, an order bearing no similarity to wage slavery—an order under which the functions of control and accounting, becoming more and more simple, will be performed by each in turn, will then become a habit and will finally die out as the special functions of a special section of the population.  

Lenin sees in such gradual habituation a possibility for a collective—in fact, total—subjectivation: it would eventually “become universal, general and popular; and there will be no getting away from it, there will be ‘nowhere to go.’ The whole of society will have become a single office and a single factory, with equality of labor and pay.”

A totalizing gesture clearly structures Lenin’s thinking. This gesture invokes a uniformly coherent social body comprising the fabric of the socialist order in State and Revolution. This singularity is especially pronounced in Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power? Here is how he imagines transforming the bureaucratic technology of capitalism into a set of socialist mechanisms of governance:

“The big banks are the “state apparatus” which we need to bring about socialism, and which we take ready-made from capitalism; our task here is merely to lop off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus, to make it even bigger, even more democratic, even more comprehensive. Quantity will be transformed into quality. A single State Bank, the biggest of the big, with branches in every rural district, in every factory, will constitute as much as nine-tenths of the socialist apparatus. This will be country wide book-keeping, country-wide accounting of the production and distribution of goods, this will be, so to speak, something in the nature of the skeleton of socialist society.”

Lenin wrote this text during provisional government Russia facing the imminent possibility of a socialist revolution, to discourage the arguments of skeptics who question the Bolsheviks’ ability, in case they capture power, to govern the state. The text also aimed to radicalize the Soviets against Menshevik and bourgeois attempts at co-opting and minimizing the Bolshevik’s legitimacy and visibility in a complicated “dual power” situation. But most importantly, Can the

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89 Ibid., 474
90 Lenin, “Can the Bolsheviks Retain Power?,” 106.
Bolsheviks Retain Power? asserts that Bolshevik state control is only possible in a symbiotic configuration with the Soviets, in other words, if it embraces the flexible grassroots, self-regulating “apparatus” of the Soviets’ direct, participatory democratic practices, a powerful apparatus which, “by virtue of the fact that its personnel is elected and subject to recall at the people’s will without any bureaucratic formalities, is far more democratic than any previous apparatus” and “provides a bond with the people, with the majority of the people, so intimate, so indissoluble, so easily verifiable and renewable, that nothing even remotely like it existed in the previous state apparatus.”

Lenin’s image of a homogeneous social totality as it is regulated by a singular all-encompassing apparatus of production, distribution, and governance, stands in clear tension with his insistence that the socialist model is possible only if control over the apparatuses of the modern state are handed over to the very young but powerful self-governing peasant and worker councils (the Soviets), while empowering the latter’s horizontal and grassroots models of direct democracy, as Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power? clearly suggests. But if there is not necessarily a contradiction between forms of autonomous self-governance and the collective democratic subject on the one hand, and the totalizing approaches of productive state governance mechanisms on the other, then perhaps we are dealing with a certain insufficiency in Lenin’s theoretical formulations. His works on the state nevertheless make an effort to articulate a circularity of power that renders the coercive and juridical institutions of the state all but unnecessary. It picks up the opposition between capital and labor as a starting point to formulate an alternative practice of governance and a form of power that aspires to eradicate oppositions between the state and the social, between majority and minority, between oppressed and oppressors, and to imagine a practice of governance where violence and coercive control would be unnecessary—a social order that would make resistance unthinkable. What Foucault, some fifty years later, articulated in the form of critique of the liberal state in his writings on governmentality, Lenin grasped as a vision of alternative state power and a possibility for alternative social governance dormant in the capitalist mode of production. A new formulation of autonomy emerges here: autonomy that recognizes the radical dependency of the subject, where the subject’s agency can never circulate outside a certain mode of subordination. Because Lenin’s freedom is always already a category carrying an element of corporeality and socialization, an emancipatory project is imaginable only if it recognizes human practice as subordinate to concrete forms of material organization.

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91 Ibid., 103. See also Kevin Anderson’s very accurate discussion of Lenin’s emphasis on direct democracy in State and Revolution and related writings. His work, nevertheless, overlooks the obvious totalizing tendencies in Lenin’s models of productive state governance, which appear as an unresolved contradiction, considering Lenin’s affirmation of the Soviet’s grassroots and decentralized forms of self-governance. “State and Revolution: Subjectivity, Grassroots Democracy, and the Critique of Bureaucracy,” Hegel, Lenin, and Western Marxism, 148-169.

92 Lenin, “Can the Bolsheviks Retain Power?,” 102.

93 Chapter Four will offer an extended discussion on the relationship between Foucault’s theory of governmentality and socialist theories of social governance.
The Troublesome *What Is to Be Done?*

Together with an earlier essay *The Task of the Russian Social Democrats*, the main text in which Lenin unfolds his theory of party organization, *What Is to Be Done?* is invoked as one of Lenin’s most problematic arguments in defense of party centralization and the homogenization of the political field.\(^94\) Lih’s recent reinterpretation of the text has sparked a much needed discussion around it among historians of the revolutionary years in Russia, and yet more work is needed to undo the deeply seated prejudice against the text in contemporary political thought on the left. Even the most original readings of the debates of the Second International find in it the “seeds” of Stalin’s authoritarianism and trace the conceptual foundations of the repressive state apparatus back to some of Lenin’s formulations from 1901-02. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have narrated the genealogy of the concept of hegemony in the debates of the Second International and the function it performed in the history of political movements in the early twentieth century. The hegemonic relation, Laclau and Mouffe argued back in 1985, emerged to reconsolidate the class struggle on a political level, once the agents of the revolution became multiple historical forces non-identical with the working class subject. The dispersal of the political forces, the proliferation of political subjects, their unmooring from the material organization of labor and property guaranteeing their class identity, could be reconstituted as a cohesive force against capital only on a terrain of hegemonic relations. For Laclau and Mouffe, preserving the class content and the class unity of the project “depended on constant political initiative.”\(^95\) They see much of the history of socialist struggles constantly endeavoring to resolve the proliferating dispersals and antagonisms within a plurality of political agents emancipated from the class category. Such multiplicity of subjects necessitated a relationship of exteriority between the radicalized subject and the class nature of the revolutionary project. Thus, paradoxically, the revolutionary subject found herself in a relationship of full externality to her social constituents, and a gap emerged between “a necessary interior” and “contingent exterior.”\(^96\) This structural gap produced irreconcilable problems that would haunt the organizational challenges of the movement: from then on, there would be separations between the “natural” class agent and the historical forces that are capable of carrying out its political demands, between classes and masses, between leadership and social base.

A crucial question follows: “How then, are we to account for this paradox: at the very moment when the democratic dimension of the mass struggle was being enlarged, an ever more vanguardist and anti-democratic conception asserted itself in socialist political practice?”\(^97\) In other words, how is it that the authoritarian political form, rather than the democratically consensual, became the dominant solution to these irreconcilabilities in the histories of successful socialist struggles?

“[T]o the extent that democratic demands become more diverse and the terrain of mass struggle more complex, a vanguard that continues to identify with the

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\(^{94}\) The text is generally interpreted as Lenin’s most articulate “authoritarian” theory of the Bolshevik Party, even in sympathetic interpretations—see for example historian Neil Harding’s *Leninism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 171-196.

\(^{95}\) Laclau and Mouffe, 27.

\(^{96}\) Ibid., 49.

\(^{97}\) Ibid., 56.
objective interests of the working class must increasingly broaden the hiatus between its own identity and that of the sectors it seeks to lead. The very expansion of the democratic potential of the mass movement gives rise, in a strictly classist conception, to an increasingly authoritarian practice of politics. While democratization of the mass struggle depends upon a proliferation of points of rupture which overflow class boundaries, political authoritarianism emerges at the movement when, in order to ground the necessity of class hegemony, a distinction is established between leaders and led within mass movements.

Quite convincingly, Laclau and Mouffe locate the shift towards party vanguardism and state centralization in the ontological primacy of class, most pronounced in the economic determinism of the orthodox Marxists. For them, Plekhanov and Kautsky first attempted to reconstitute the unity of the class subject by linking its political future to a line of predetermined historical changes in the relations of production, i.e. the “base,” and thus affix a fatally two-dimensional, non-dialectical relationship of representation between base and superstructure. The stagist view of political development easily follows from here. However—and this move is central to our concerns—it is to Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?* that they will attribute the full articulation of the working class subject’s universalism and the centralist paradigm, thus positioning Lenin firmly within the lineage of political arguments which quite predictably led to the authoritarian state form culminating in Stalin’s rule. Lenin for them opens the gap between the ontological priority of the working class subject on the one hand, and the multiple social agents subsumed henceforth under the category of “masses,” on the other. Socialist consciousness, Lenin infamously argues (it has rarely been noticed that Lenin here is actually quoting Kautsky, the same Kautsky whom Lenin will repeatedly renounce later), “is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without and not something that arose within it spontaneously.” This is where, critics have said, the pedagogical function of knowledge will emerge to bring class consciousness to a universal scale, and the contract between political vanguard and the access to “correct” knowledge will be sealed. “Leninism […] maintains that there is a “for itself” of the class accessible only to the enlightened vanguard—whose attitude towards the working class is therefore purely pedagogical. The roots of authoritarian politics lie in this interweaving of science and politics.”

That such philosophical trajectories bear subtle analogies to the historical narratives of cold-war Sovietology need not be pressed too hard here—the enormous originality of Laclau and Mouffe’s contribution notwithstanding. But how they remain conditioned by and complicit

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98Ibid., 56.
99Ibid., 19-20; 55-65.
102Laclau and Mouffe, 59.
103The authors see the possibility of preserving the relationship between mass democratic practice and socialism only if the socialist struggle abandons the class subject’s claim to embodying the totality of relations and reconfigures class struggle in the form of hegemonic links between decentered political practices. “[I]nsofar as dislocation of stages compels the working class to act on a mass terrain, it must abandon its class ghetto and transform itself into the articulator of a multiplicity of antagonisms and demands stretching beyond itself. […] A
with the pervasive Stalinist uses, interpretations, canonizations, and dissemnations of *What Is to Be Done*? remains a question to be studied further—and it will be addressed in the next chapter.  

Lenin wrote *What Is to Be Done?* in 1901-2, when the Russian industrial working class, having grown to upwards of three million by the turn of the century, had already experienced a series of dramatic waves of unrest. Agitated by the so-called “exposure” leaflet literature—illegal flyer-type materials massively distributed to workers to reveal conditions of extreme poverty and exploitation in the factory, the dissenting energy of workers had unprecedented potential to grow. Although the worker movement had discovered the general strike as a tactic, its exposure to the ideas of socialist revolution entering the political horizon via the young Social Democratic Party, was limited. Worker mobilization, significantly disconnected from the work of the socialist party, which had to exist underground in the conditions of extreme political oppression of a strongly centralized, autocratic state in crisis, confined itself to the sometimes fragmented, sometimes mass-scale efforts to unionize and negotiate better conditions from factory owners.

In fact, the “disconnect” between these two powerful phenomena—between the Social-Democratic movement mostly populated by intellectuals and the mass worker unrest in the factories—movements which appeared synchronically but without much communication, will be a central problem for the revolutionary project. In this sense, the project of their convergence or their unity will define the debates in the years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but not in the sense of Laclau and Mouffe’s reading, who imagine a prior unity lost with the dispersal of political subjects, as if a primary unity preceded them historically. Rather, for the first time the revolutionary project was conceived as transcending fragmentations by grasping the system of exploitation in its totality. The language referencing social activists in Lenin’s and Luxemburg’s work from the early years of the 1900s refers to two different kinds of struggle, the “political struggle” and the “economic” one. Political, counter-intuitively, meant engaging the parliamentary mechanisms of the state, while economic, again, referred to the disconnected trade-union struggles bargaining for the interests of the workers against individual managements. Their demands were context-specific to practices of exploitation in each particular industry, and each struggle gained certain concessions based on isolated antagonisms. Refusing to put forward demands for larger, systemic changes at the state level, these struggles remained fragmented and isolated. Marked by certain conservatism, they often insisted on being “politically neutral,” a stance that both Luxemburg and Lenin critiqued unforgivingly.

Mass democratic practice […] can be achieved only if it is recognized that these tasks do not have a necessary class character and if stagism is renounced in a thoroughgoing manner. It is necessary to break with the view that democratic tasks are bounded to a bourgeois stage—only then will the obstacle preventing a permanent articulation between socialism and democracy be eliminated.” *Ibid.*, 58. Left critics of the book have detected and unmasked liberal commitments that depart from the Marxist project in the authors’ attempt to discontinue the “identity of social agents” from their relation to the mode of production and material relations, rather than emphasizing their historically contingent rearticulations. Indeed, one needs to keep in mind the danger of undoing the socialist project by giving autonomy to a political subject fully divorced from a material understanding of human activity, a political subject fully disconnected from material activity as a metabolic mediation of social relations.

Lih traces in detail the “textbook interpretations” of *What Is to Be Done*? during the Cold War, although he focuses mostly on dominant readings and uses on the west side of the Iron Curtain, and the work’s central presence in the Stalinist canon is barely mentioned. Lih, “How a Founding Document Was Found, or One Hundred Years of Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done*?,” 5-49.

On their discussion of Luxemburg, see Laclau and Mouffe, 18.
Luxemburg addresses precisely this historical context when she writes her compelling essay on the mass strike as the dialectical convergence between the broad worker movement and the Social-Democratic political constituency.  

By transcending its immediate circumstances and by overcoming this disconnect, the mass strike for her becomes an expression of that unity. Luxemburg calls the general strike “the totality concept of a whole period of the class struggle lasting for years, decades”; it becomes the critical expression of an entire system of exploitation protected by state institutions, it reaches beyond the existing order in its entirety. As such, the labor movement acquires a political dimension for the first time in history, and what is more, it acquires a genuinely revolutionary force. She defines that force as a live and dynamic body responsive to the state of collective unrest, to changing material conditions, to fluctuating historical forces; it is “the living pulse-beat of the revolution.”

One can see Lenin’s preoccupation with the connection between social totality and the revolutionary subject as early as What Is to Be Done?. The text is often quoted for constructing undialectical oppositions between spontaneity and consciousness: the “spontaneous” trade-union struggle is incapable of gaining political consciousness on their own, the common reading goes, and they need the Social-Democratic party to gain revolutionary consciousness “from without.” But Lars T. Lih reminds us that What Is to Be Done?, distributed in pamphlet form, swept the radicalized communities only for a brief period. It was buried after the 1905 Revolution, which profoundly altered the political conditions in Russia. Only after it acquired a textbook status was it recast as a founding document of Bolshevism, and certain readings slowly crystallized to dominate historical research around it. However, by focusing on its uses by West-European historians, Lih overlooks the Stalinist legacy in the text’s distribution and canonization in the West. Stalin will use the pamphlet profusely in Foundations of Leninism to develop his theory of advanced detachment of the Party and his pervasive references to certain passages in the text will become known as the above-mentioned “signature” statements. The spontaneity-consciousness dichotomy is one of them: as the next chapter will argue, emptied of philosophical value and detached from philosophical context, it will appear in Stalin’s renditions and become a common trope in the canonical reiterations of socialist realist literature and art.

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107 Ibid., 237.
108 Ibid., 236.
109 “How a Founding Document was Found, or One Hundred Years of What Is to Be Done?,” 5-49.
110 Here is the only thing Lih has to say about Stalin: “WTBD [What Is to Be Done?] was clearly an inspiring milestone in the personal and political life of Dzughavivili/Stalin. He mentions it in a 1920 article entitled ‘Lenin as Organizer of the Russian Communist Party’ and also uses some of its characteristic language in Foundations of Leninism (1924). But the WTBD-Stalin connection hardly strengthens the textbook version of WTBD’s role as founding document, since the young Dzughavivili did not read the book as arguing that workers could not achieve socialist consciousness or that intellectuals should dominate the movement—indeed, he stoutly denied any such interpretation.” Lih, “How a Founding Document was Found, or One Hundred Years of What Is to Be Done?,” 24. Also, Lars T. Lih, Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? in Context, 3-37.
It should be noted here that *What Is to Be Done?* abounds with theoretical vacillations and contradictions, and perhaps it is due to them that the text attracted fierce attacks and supporters from all camps of the movement at the time of its publication. Lenin’s theory of “imputed consciousness” is far from coherent, as some have tried to suggest, and if one reads the text closely, one may notice that Lenin does not endorse the language of spontaneity but actually offers a critique of the unstated quasi-bourgeois logic and reformist political commitments hiding in the dehistoricizing discourse of spontaneity (*stihiynost’*); that what he means by “vanguard” is more of a contradiction than a clear idea of leadership hierarchy, providing a record of Lenin’s not quite philosophically mature, pre-Hegelian attempt to formulate a structure of dialectical interaction between progressive social forces and their political expressions; that his attitude towards intellectuals as having a possible leading role in the movement as educators is most often quite hostile to intellectuals themselves; that the militant centralism he advocates responds to the ambitious, daunting task of overthrowing a highly centralized autocratic and oppressive government; that the “anti-democratic,” “conspiratorial” Party structure is his awareness that an underground party is the only possible solution for the Social-Democratic movement confronted with the reality of ruthless, violent raids and crackdowns by the “political police”; and that, as Lih has boldly argued, Lenin’s main concern was how to open and expand the spaces of political autonomy in conditions of severe political repression.

It became a long list, but I should say it could be even longer—*in lieu* of a careful theoretical reinterpretation and philosophical recuperation of *What Is to Be Done?* What needs to be underscored here is Lenin’s attempt to articulate a collective revolutionary subject whose political self-recognition emerges in the act of grasping the totality of social relations in what appear as fragmented and isolated forms of domination and oppression. One of Lenin’s central concerns is the massive radicalization of the working class, radicalization that does not begin and end with the opposition between the fragmented interests of the industrial worker and factory owner, but develops a comprehensive, holistic critical grasp of the exploitative mechanisms of capitalism in all social relationships, social practices, and discourses. “Working class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter what class is affected.” It is the political maturity to develop a critical understanding of the workings and

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112 As in Jay’s *Marxism and Totality*, 112-113.
113 Historian Anna Krylova’s interpretation attempts to transcend the spontaneity-consciousness opposition by pointing to Lenin’s use of the term “working class instinct.” Although an interesting observation, this interpretation rests on and reproduces the Stalinist use of the categories *stihiynost’*-soznanie, which decontextualizes their theoretical understanding and reduces them to a canonical dichotomy. Anna Krylova, “Beyond the Spontaneity-Consciousness Paradigm: ‘Class Instinct’ as a Promising Category of Historical Analysis,” *Slavic Review* 62, 1 (2003): 1-23. For a much more nuanced discussion on the function of these terms in historical context, including Lih’s new translation of Lenin’s terminology, see Chris Harman, “Lenin Rediscovered?,” and Alan Shandro, “Text and Context in the Argument of Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?*,” 75-89.
115 Perry Anderson’s essay on Gramsci remains an unsurpassed example of a historically sensitive reading of Lenin’s views on democratic centralism. The author reminds us that, taking into account the political conditions of an oppressive, centralized monarchical state, Lenin saw that the only way the Social-Democratic Party could survive was if it went underground. “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci,” *New Left Review* 100 (November 1976): 5-78.
mechanisms of forms of domination which reproduce the capitalist order in “[e]very other social class in all the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical, and political life, “ […] “[in] all aspects of the life and activity of all classes, strata, and groups of the population.”

“in order to become a Social Democrat, the worker must have a clear picture in his mind of the economic nature and the social and political features of the landlord and the priest, the high state official and the peasant, the student and the vagabond; he must know their strong and weak points; he must grasp he meaning of all the catchwords and sophisms by which each class and each stratum camouflages its selfish strivings and its real ‘inner workings’; he must understand what interests are reflected by certain institutions and certain laws and how they are reflected.”

There is concern here with the deep connections between social forces and social phenomena as they manifest themselves in fragmented oppositions, as they appear in disconnected and partial articulations, as they take various mystified forms—in short, conditions of oppression cannot be sufficiently—”politically”—grasped outside of a totality of capitalist relations, and the political emancipation of the working class subject necessarily means self-recognition within such a totality. As we’ve mentioned above, Lenin did not have the opportunity to study Hegel closely until 1914, to be able conjure a powerful image of Lukacs’ totality as it appears in History and Class Consciousness, but such early formulations pose a question mark behind attempts to see the 1914 Philosophical Notebooks as a radical break, defining his prior political analysis as insufficiently dialectical. Perry Anderson, in his seminal essay from 1976 on the Gramscian concept of hegemony, has already made the argument that the “qualitative shift” of attributing political primacy to the proletariat contributes to the conceptual drift towards orthodoxy. He notices that the notion of “hegemony” appears consistently as early as 1901 to conceptualize the

118 Ibid.
119 Ibid., 413.
120 Kevin Anderson, Hegel, Lenin, and Western Marxism. Much of the question what constitutes a radical break in Lenin’s thought is also organized around Lenin’s fluctuating relationship to Kautsky’s mechanistic materialism which, unlike in Lih’s reading, Lenin never fully endorsed, taking every opportunity to attack its evolutionary, teleological elements. See Chris Harman, “Lenin Rediscovered?,” 69-74. Alan Shandro raises a similar concern about Lih’s attempt to see Lenin’s What Is to Be Done? as a straightforward application of Kautsky’s revolutionary program. Alan Shandro, “Text and Context in the Argument of Lenin’s What Is to Be Done?,” Savas Michael-Matsas makes a similarly compelling case against arguments about Lenin’s clean break or discontinuity with a pre-Hegelian mechanist materialism, pointing to the Stalinist vulgarization of Materialism and Empiriocriticism. Savas Michael-Matsas, “Lenin and the Path of Dialectics,” in Lenin Reloaded, 101-119. Étienne Balibar, by contrast, has argued for a radical break, entering the discussion from a surprising angle. He concedes that Lenin’s thought profoundly shifted following the “philosophical moment” of WWI, or in his words, by “the effect of the philosophical rethinking that the war immediately aroused.” Balibar observes that what remained unpublished in Volume 38 of Collected Works, the volume containing Lenin’s Philosophical Notebooks, are Lenin’s notes on Clausewitz’s “total war” (first published in 1930 in Leninsky Sbornik, vol. 12; see footnote 193 in Chapter Three). He argues that Clausewitz deeply influenced Lenin’s understanding of the practical application of the dialectic and informed his critique of reformist pacifism. Balibar, “The Philosophical Moment in Politics Determined by War: Lenin 1914-1916,” in Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth, 211-12. On the post-Stalinist revisions of Marxist-Leninist materialism and the contributions of philosopher Evald Ilyenkov, see David Bakhurst, Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy: From the Bolsheviks to Evald Ilyenkov (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
unification and dominance of the working class in the prospects of having what was seen as a bourgeois revolution ahead, and heated debates would unfold to justify or question the advantage ascribed to the working class. In his defense of Lenin’s “hegemonic” approach to class mobilization, he would come closest to understanding Lenin’s attempt to formulate a temporally dynamic, decentered notion of totality capable of disintegrating and reconstituting the revolutionary forces at any given moment.  

Class and Beyond Class

Indeed, some words in Lenin’s essays would make one repeatedly nervous, especially in those early works as *What Is To Be Done?* and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*: the vanguard party appears occasionally, or, in a quite distressing way for those of us who have embraced the poststructuralist, postcolonial, and queer perspectives, there is the statement that (in a nod to Kautsky) “there is no middle course,” that “mankind has not created a “third” ideology [because] in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or an above-class ideology.”

And yet it seems that a third way has been offered by Lenin himself. It is a common argument that any identity beyond class will remain unthinkable throughout Lenin’s work, and such a theoretical position leaves the revolutionary completely blind to any political signifier other than class. But one only needs to return to Lenin’s work on imperialism and national self-determination to detect a proto-postcolonial thinker. Marked by turns and hesitations, his writings from 1912-16 and onwards argue for the socially progressive element in national movements and eventually succeed in envisioning a major revolutionary subject in national liberation and anti-colonial movements without whom, in the conditions of world capitalism, a world socialist revolution is unthinkable.

Insisting on the progressive nature of national emancipation movements in Eastern Europe in the context of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Tsarist Russia, Lenin unsettles the assumption that generalizes all nationalism as a bourgeois ideology, and that socialist internationalism is antithetical to national self-determination, to struggles for national autonomy. He quickly becomes aware that national liberation movements have a historically progressive nature. His acute historical intuition suggests that a socialist revolutionary project is impossible without the full realization of national emancipatory movements in Eastern Europe and Russia.

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In his essay “Critical Remarks on the National Question,” Lenin detects “two elements” in every national culture. One is the dominant culture—that of the landowners and the bourgeoisie; the other one is the revolutionary and democratic element that belongs to the “toiling and exploited masses.” The “Critical Remarks” are clearly a transitional text, where Lenin argues against national state independence, federalism, and decentralization and famously pushes for “democratic centralism”: a form of state government that aims to preserve large state territory while granting certain autonomy to regions. The assumption behind the “democratic centralism” model is still that of evolutionary economic development: large states are more suitable for industrialization; small states will impede the development of capitalism and therefore a strong international proletarian class is less likely to emerge. It is also a concept that still holds onto the working class subject as the central historical agent of revolution. Soon he will abandon these positions. The conditions of unrest among dispossessed peasants and exploited workers in Russia show that a socialist revolution need not wait for capitalism to develop any further. Confronted with the effect of the uneven development of capitalism, the coalition with the dispossessed and radicalized peasant subject emerges as the only possibility for a revolution ahead.

However, it is here that he carefully distinguishes between national expression as a struggle for national emancipation and the expression of the “great Russian” chauvinism and nationalism. It is a recognition that national identities participate in power relations that class analysis alone falls short of capturing adequately. In a scant few months, in his heated polemic with Luxemburg regarding the national question, he defends the right to national secession. In *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* Lenin argues against Luxemburg who, extrapolating from the experience of a developed capitalist Poland and Germany, dismisses all nationalism as the ideology of the national bourgeoisie. On the contrary, he turns the dynamic between “subjugated” and “oppressor” nations and ethnicities into a central problem of human liberation. Therefore, he says, the resolution of the International in 1896 has rightly proclaimed the right of nations as a part of the international visions of the class struggle: on the one hand, it demands “the absolutely direct, unequivocal recognition of the full right of all nations to self-determination; on the other hand, the equally unambiguous appeal to the workers for international unity in their class struggle.” Hence the dialectical, “twofold” nature of the proletarian struggle—on the one hand, the socialist movement is inevitably international, while on the other, it will only succeed if it embraces the national struggles for independent states. The right of nations to self-determination, rather than supporting bourgeois chauvinism and producing cleavages in the fragile international union of the working class, will foster “the maximum of democracy and the minimum of nationalism,” and will contribute towards the advancement of an internationally oriented revolutionary struggle.

What is more important, however, is that the working class subject no longer remains a fully self-sufficient revolutionary agent, but finds itself inevitably intersected with subject positions and relations of power that exceed the class category. The promise of emancipation emerges precisely at this junction: the socialist revolution is possible only if class remains aware of the “incompleteness” that defines its historically contingent rearticulations with other modes of inequality, if it remains open to them, and if it mobilizes struggles against other forms of domination at any historical juncture.

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126 Ibid., 434.
Hence Lenin’s language: in order “to move forward” towards revolution at any particular moment, the proletarian movement “needs” the peasants, it “needs” the national bourgeoisie of the subjugated peoples, it “needs” the anti-colonial struggles.

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There are obvious discrepancies in Lenin’s work: between the dictatorship of the proletariat and his call for embracing forms of direct democracy, between the takeover of state power and its abolition. Lenin’s concept of “democratic centralism” remains a contradiction of terms rather than a sign of authoritarianism, an effort to integrate the promises modern state bureaucracy offers with his support for existing direct democracy practices and decentralized, autonomous forms of self-governance. Insufficiently subjected to dialectical formulations, these have remained unresolved contradictions in Lenin’s work. What I have sought to underscore in this chapter is the instability of Lenin’s work, an instability not just due to Lenin’s theoretical inconsistency or the crudeness of his philosophical articulations, but an instability owing to Lenin’s acute sense of historicity, an instability that stems from his unbending loyalty to the historical moment, an instability which is the effect of both always keeping attuned to theory’s historical conditions of production and making sure that the continued life of our political thought never escapes the test of history. But to begin making the necessary distinctions between Lenin and Leninism would require that we also examine the genealogy of the latter’s formation.

It is not a coincidence that Leninism begins to take shape as Lenin’s life begins to fade away—and some will certainly find it ironic. The cold winter day of his departure becomes a central trope in the emerging political culture of the Soviets, the site of his entombment becomes a center of political ritual and organized veneration. They say that he spent the last months of his fading life in isolation in his residence in Capri under strict medical supervision, and that Stalin carefully controlled and censored Lenin’s access to information about political developments as well as his communication with the Central Committee. His death also marks the symbolic moment when his daring political visions were set free of his agency only to surrender to a tightly controlled regime of political meanings and interpretations.

The “Lenin” we know—the proponent of Party centralization and state coercion, the theorist of the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” the “Lenin” who essentialized the working class and subscribed to the evolutionary economic determinism of the orthodox Marxists—this “Lenin” acquires theoretical consistency as the Marxist-Leninist doctrine begins to take shape. The theoretical principles of Marxism-Leninism slowly crystallized in the years between 1924 and 1938 and it accompanied the turn towards a radically centralized and hierarchical state order—albeit not without the fierce resistance of Stalin’s political rivals and theoretical opponents.


128 Moshe Lewin, Lenin’s Last Struggle.
throughout the 1920s. Such resistance culminated in a chain of political repressions, starting with the suppression of the anti-government street demonstrations in Moscow and Leningrad in November 1927, the expulsion of Trotsky and Zinoviev as leaders of the united opposition at the Fifteenth Party Congress in December the same year, and the beginning of a campaign of political cleansing of Party members sympathetic to the opposition. While I will leave all these events to the historians, in the next chapter I will consider Marxism-Leninism not just as a means of power legitimation, as historians most often read it, but as a discursive formation which produced particular realities. Ironically, Stalin himself knew well that discourse and reality cannot be treated separately and that suppressing and censoring all intellectual “deviations” required nothing less than exterminating lives—and vice versa, state violence successfully reproduced the discursive regime of the state.

Chapter Three will trace the discursive production of Leninism with attention to the great degree of violence, discursive or otherwise, that this crude systematization required. From the start, constructing a universally relevant “Leninism” entailed erasing the historical conditions of its production and establishing the hegemony of a singular meaning by suppressing competing interpretations. Stalinist Marxism-Leninism removes collective human agency from historical development and replaces it with the trans-historical agent of the Party, for which building socialism will be a perpetual war. Stalin’s theory of the “advanced detachment”—a theory of the Party as a centralized formation superior to the masses—renders the social forces it aims to empower completely passive and subordinates them to a hierarchical structure of participation. And while it promises that socialism looms on the horizon of an inevitable historical progression, it nevertheless insists that all available means of violence should be applied to deliver the socialist order. Further, Stalinist Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism remove the subject in power from the study of social processes, they expel the knowing subject from all knowledge production and establish the positivist methodologies of socialist knowledge. Marxism-Leninism becomes a system of general principles, a system which lays the epistemological foundations of socialist knowledge. The next chapters will show how its theoretical claims and its internal consistency have become foundational for socialist philosophical development, how its instabilities, paradoxes, and contradictions have conditioned the directions and conundrums of post-Stalinist philosophical inquiry and critical endeavors.

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chapter three

Stalinist Marxism-Leninism: The Apparitions of a Disavowed Paradigm

One of the central claims this project makes may be as simple as it is unwelcome: Stalin’s philosophical impact on East-European thought has been so profound that it invisibly inhabits the post-Stalinist and post-socialist political and theoretical terrains—precisely because this influence has not been acknowledged. It continues to haunt the post-socialist world in that it has been renounced and yet preserved almost intact, that it has been rejected without being subjected to thorough critique, that it has been repudiated without having been critically understood. Having disavowed the Marxist-Leninist philosophical system, post-socialist political discourse nevertheless remains fundamentally defined by it, and this rejection has continued to shape the contours of critical thought after socialism. Part of this chapter, then, engages in a thorough critical reinterpretation of Stalinist Marxism. This is not because such critiques do not already exist—the reader will notice that the readings I offer echo French and Frankfurt School critiques from the 1930s to the 1960s. My goal is rather to make legible and visible a different (and no doubt unpopular) perspective on East-European intellectual thought, namely, that post-Stalinism and post-socialism are marked by a certain succession or continuity, or more properly, that they remain defined by the spectral appearance of Stalinist philosophy—an argument that is somewhat at odds with the position that proclaims the fall of the regimes as a radical historical break. In other words, some of the most central—and problematic—tenets of Stalinist thought still defines the way we understand the socialist past, and because the post-socialist present is always already implicated in the socialist past, it therefore remains trapped in the Stalinist epistemology.

Chapter Three begins by tracing the discursive production of “Leninism” between 1924 and 1938 in early Soviet intellectual life. Historians have shown in numerous ways how the massive political authority Lenin had accumulated became a contested terrain immediately after his death; his words and image became sites for various claims to power, legitimacy, and succession. Similarly, a great degree of violence was exercised upon both Lenin’s writings and their widely diverging interpretations to gradually consolidate and “fix” a solid narrative, which culminated with the publication of the widely distributed History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks), known as The Short Course. The chapter moves on to a close interpretive reading of Stalin’s theory of the Party and of Marxist-Leninist Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism (Diamat and Istmat). Diamat and Istmat are not just crude philosophical reductions which have remained politically ineffective. Rather, they skillfully take away political agency from the collective body they were meant to empower; they remove human agency from historical development and eliminate the subject from the study of social processes, in fact, from all knowledge production, to establish positivist methodologies of socialist knowledge. Similarly, harmonized with Diamat and Istmat, the theory of “the advanced detachment” of the Party adopts and refines the orthodox Marxist teleological notions of revolutionary development and the economic reductionism of their “base-superstructure” models, not without importing its own contradictions and paradoxes. Dehistoricizing the political enemy, the doctrine of the
advanced detachment turns the process of building socialism into a state of perpetual war, an endless conquest taking place outside of history.

“Classic” cold-war, liberal, and even some left scholarship on Stalinism has consistently argued that Stalin usurped the leadership vacuum resulting from Lenin’s death and claimed to be the legitimate successor of Lenin through a number of mechanisms, including the production of an entire discourse around continuity and succession through a simplified textual vocabulary and clear visual iconography. How this claim to continuity served to legitimate Stalin’s move towards radical centralization of state power is also a well-circulated argument. While they offer valuable insight, these accounts attribute an instrumental function to philosophical discourse, treating it as a legitimating tool, an “ideological” instrument, while implicitly drawing separations between discourse and political “reality.” Marxism-Leninism is often defined by the common-sense use of the term “ideology,” signifying a two-dimensional, almost self-evident and transparent regime of ideas. Such a notion of “ideology” is founded on the inherent presumption that its production, a stale and transparent corpus of principles and statements, is nothing more than an all too obvious, failed attempt to conceal power relations, to idealize the present or cover its grim social reality. It presumes that ideology’s stale products fail to interpellate a collective subjectivity, to organize productively a discursive or normative order, and consequently, to have any bearing on social processes and the subject’s self-understanding.

This analysis will avoid treating the socialist version of Marxism-Leninism as an “ideology,” for the lack of a better word. By contrast, it aims to take the Stalinist philosophical system on its own terms, or put differently, to acknowledge its organizing, agentic function and to study its discursive productivity. Two sets of questions will inform my analysis: First, how did the official political discourse of the state become embedded in normative regimes productive of particular configurations of collective practice and collective subjectivity? How did it reproduce itself and by means of what mechanisms did it survive? And second, how did Marxism-Leninism organize the fields of possibility of the intellectual and political discussions; how did its paradigms provide the outer limits of subsequent intellectual inquiry and critique? In other words, Marxism-Leninism will be understood as a set of discursive arrangements that laid the epistemological foundations of socialist knowledge.

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Marxism-Leninism Seen through the Prism of Totalitarianism

In the 1980s, revisionist historians of the Soviet Union, and Stalinism in particular, insisted on rethinking how common assumptions and taken-for-granted categories driving academic research on the socialist regimes have informed our understanding of relations of power, social practice, and everyday life in the socialist countries. Examining the cold-war and liberal premises of previous research, they called for abandoning the “totalitarian model” of studying Soviet state power as a static, immutable “top-down” state-bureaucratic machine, for questioning conceptual modalities that posit oppositions between an oppressive state versus repressed subjects and for challenging notions of the “social” as a passive and undifferentiated body. Rethinking Stalinism as a period of great upheaval wrought with contradictions and uncertainty, much of their efforts have been channeled towards articulating the uneven social dynamics and
various heterogeneous agencies involved in making the new social order, while shattering monolithic narratives as well as categories that imply conceptions of unified, stable and coherent subjects. The “totalitarian paradigm,” although extremely valuable when bringing to light and much needed recognition the abuses of violence culminating in detention camps, “disappeared” people, and cover-up murder, proved incapable of capturing the productive effects of discursive regimes—and violence—and consequently, was unable to bring to light the ambiguous terrains of human agency that the fluctuating relationship between state power and state subjects constantly generated and rearticulated.

More recently, Stephen Kotkin’s Foucault-inflected *Magnetic Mountain* from 1995 narrates the story of Soviet industrialization, urbanization, and modernization through the building of the city of Magnitogorsk, a steel factory complex and its working class urban microcosm of unprecedented scale at the time, a story told through the lives, aspirations, values, and efforts of everyday people. “Stalinism was not just a political system,” he says, “let alone the rule of an individual. It was a set of values, a social identity, a way of life.”

Following Kotkin and drawing from Foucault’s wide-ranging work on the subject, younger historians have brought to the foreground the question of the Soviet subject—which, as they have rightly noted, remains unarticulated and somewhat implicit in previous revisionist work, but which becomes crucial for the conceptual shift in scholarship. Such approach enables historians to gain sight of the complex apparatuses of socialist governance employed in remaking the Soviet citizen, to examine the state’s interpelling mechanisms and subjectivating practices, to refocus on the multiple agencies and self-investments that made possible the new social order.

Historian Anna Krylova observes how, after two generations of revisionist scholarship in the West, “the new Soviet man [has] acquired many faces, personalities, and histories punctured with difference and change.” Excavating the multiple conflicting perspectives and experiences of building socialism also brought to the surface a “multifaceted subject in the making,” often “disoriented and unsettled, ignorant and confused, neurotic and unable to grasp the overwhelming and rapid historical change by which he is interpelled in frequently contradictory directions.”

Intellectual autonomy, dissidence, ideological censorship, resistance—all these categories

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permeate scholarship on socialism and yet much of it takes for granted their liberal premises: relying on oppositions between an autonomous social field versus a repressive state, they posit a fully formed preexisting “free” subject located outside or prior to state power. If practices of autonomy or dissidence is equated exclusively with resistance and framed via notions of power that take into account only the repressive or antagonizing effects of the totalitarian state, then we are guided by conceptual limits incapable of coming to terms with questions such as why organized collective resistance had not taken place where all conditions were present. Krylova has elaborated quite well the liberal premises driving the intellectual trajectory of western scholarship on the Soviet Union from WWII onwards, but her study nevertheless entirely leaves out the complete hegemony of the liberal paradigm in post-socialist analysis of socialism. How the liberal paradigm was fully embraced by the generation of former dissident intellectuals and then powerfully redeployed in the anti-totalitarian discourses of the post-socialist right will be a central question in the following chapters. The first step towards rethinking the categories of autonomy and censorship with the problem of the socialist subject in mind would require that we refuse to see them as opposites. Rather than thinking the rigid normative control of language and meaning as a repressive measure imposed upon a fully formed and pre-existing free subject that constrains h/her agency, we should be interested in how censorship can be seen as a foreclosure that comes prior to the subject and enables her subjecthood within its limits.

The totalitarian framework dominates analyses of Marxism-Leninism, arguing that philosophy gradually dissolves into ideology and becomes an instrument of authoritarian power. Dobrin Todorov, in a recently published study of the historical trajectory and “general trends” of philosophy during socialist Bulgaria claims that “thinkers experience influences external to the fundamental philosophical problems, which leaves them with a limited terrain for expressing innovative views.” For him, philosophical writings from this time display a “high degree of monotony, schematism, and narrow-mindedness.” In Todorov’s reading, ideology takes priority over philosophy’s preoccupation with what are fundamentally and intrinsically philosophical questions—in his words, “philosophy undergoes pragmatization, where the search for knowledge for its own sake [!] is no longer valid.” The limits imposed on philosophical inquiry disable original intellectual pursuits and creative individual agency, resulting in a particular kind of anonymity, detrimental to the philosophical project. Philosophers, he continues, “lose their status of free intellectuals and turn into ‘philosophical workers,’ i.e., laborers similar to those in other public domains.” This also means that philosophy’s priority becomes “not truth, but [serving] the ‘needs’ of certain social strata and their political representatives.”

The political implications of Todorov’s statements about the objects of philosophical inquiry and the intellectuals’ subject position in the context of post-socialist Bulgarian academic and political culture may be obvious enough to require no mention. One also need not wonder for too long

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135 These questions are indebted to Judith Butler’s work, and especially to her Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative (New York: Routledge, 1997)
136 Dobrin Todorov, Filosofkata publichnost v totalitarna i posttotalitarna Bulgariya (Sofia: Cieła, 2008), 7.
137 Ibid., 30-112.
138 Ibid., 31.
139 Ibid.
about the hidden presumptions in claims to the absolute self-sufficiency of knowledge or to a
practice of philosophy fully “liberated” from political premises or social and material conditions.
Such approach leaves no opening for an interpretive or critical analysis other than Marxism’s
denunciation, leaving “the Marxist paradigm” throughout as a monolithic and stable category
around which real philosophical contributions developed. Marxism-Leninism in this process
acquires “a hidden subtext”: it is transformed into an instrument and a means, appropriated by
some to achieve and legitimate their power status in the new political order, while establishing
control over intellectual freedom and producing conformity with power.  

Todorov’s study is one of the few more exhaustive intellectual histories of Bulgarian philosophy
during socialism published after 1989, and this should not be surprising because it is a field
which not only offers little intellectual temptation but brings up a lot of unease and discomfort
for the post-socialist scholar. The author fully equates all Marxist thought with its canonical
Marxist-Leninist version, demonstrating nothing less than the successful Stalinist mediation of
Marxism for generations of East-European philosophers. How such positions might be a product
of the very success of the Stalinist philosophical project—rather than its failure—will be
addressed in detail later. Here I would like to offer a way towards a more nuanced critical
understanding of these practices informed by a different set of questions: What was philosophy’s
increasingly normalizing function in the social domain, a normalizing function that led not just to
“complicity with power,” but is complexly implicated in the subjects’ sense of self-realization
and of belonging to community? What kinds of subjects were integrated precisely through the
practices of reproducing the discourse of power, what kinds of socialities emerged in the course
of its numerous reiterations? How were subjects invested in their own subjection and what
promises did these practices carry beyond the acquisition of power “outside” of their meaning?
In other words, the important question to ask here is not how Marxism-Leninism as a limited
philosophical discourse failed but how it succeeded, how these practices successfully produced
regimes of normality while also bringing about a sense of collective selfhood and offered
avenues for personal and social self-realization.

Establishing the Stalinist Epistemology of Knowledge: Marxism-Leninism and the Party

*Foundations of Leninism* and *Lenin and Leninism* are among Stalin’s first systematic efforts to
lay out a general theory of Party leadership. “The party must be, first of all, the advanced
detachment of the working class,” Stalin states in *Foundations of Leninism*, a book assembled
from his lectures delivered at the Sverdlov University in early April 1924, only months after
Lenin’s death and immediately after Stalin assumed power.  

140 Ibid., 37-38.
detachment” first appears in the work of first generation orthodox thinkers such as Pavel Axelrod, in discussions
about the possibility of having the proletarian class take on the project of overthrowing the absolutist state in the
context of an insufficiently developed and mobilized bourgeois class. Pavel Axelrod, *Istoricheskoe polozhenie i
vzaimoe otmoshenie liberal’noi i sotsialisticheskoi demokratsii v Rossii* (Geneva: Tipografiia Soiuza Russkikh
Sotsial-demokratov, 1898); *K voprosu o sovremennykh zadachykh i taktik russkikh Sotsial-Demokratov* (Geneva:
Tipografiia Soiuza Russkikh Sotsial-Demokratov, 1898). Lenin uses it occasionally in *One Step Forward, Two Steps
Back* and some other texts without any systematic elaboration. It is in Stalin’s work that the concept is appropriated
and redeveloped.
detachment leans explicitly on select paragraphs of Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done* and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*; his interpretation will dominate the scholarly understanding of Lenin’s positions on the Party both in the West-European context and in its East-European uses. Now that the state is in the hands of the revolutionary forces, a dominant Party—a singular, qualitatively superior power removed from the “masses,” standing above the dispersed social movements—emerges as an agent necessary to bring into being the revolutionized social order.

“The party cannot be a real party,” he states, “if it limits itself to registering what the masses of the working class feel and think, if it drags at the tail of the spontaneous movement, if it is unable to overcome the inertia and the political indifference of the spontaneous movement, if it is unable to rise above the momentary interests of the proletariat, if it is unable to raise the masses to the level of understanding the class interests of the proletariat.”

Stalin’s Party is a rigidly organized, removed and elitist segment of the movement that possesses the superior intellectual understanding and skill to perform leadership, it possesses a “revolutionary theory,” “a knowledge of the laws of the movement,” and a “knowledge of the laws of the revolution.”

Being the “highest form” of the movement, the Party:

[...] must stand at the head of the working class; it must see farther than the working class; it must lead the proletariat, and not drag at the tail of the spontaneous movement. [...] Only a party which adopts the standpoint of advanced detachment of the proletariat and is able to raise the masses to the level of understanding of class interest of the proletariat—only such a party can divert the working class from the path of trade unionism and convert it into an independent political force.

The “necessity” for a party of a new type is determined by another “necessity”: the centralization of power that will prevent a diversity of historical forces and secure the predetermined linearity of historical development. Stalin writes unequivocally about the danger of diversity of power and the need for centralization:

[T]he existence of factions is compatible neither with the Party’s unity nor with its iron discipline. It scarcely needs proof that the existence of factions leads to the existence of a number of centers, and the existence of a number of centers means the absence of one common center in the Party, the breaking up of unity of will, the weakening and disintegration of discipline, the weakening and disintegration of the dictatorship.

This central body would need to steer the direction of historical development, to dictate, and to control, in order to attain a “unity of will” and “unity of action” and to rescue the promised linear development.

143 Ibid., 178.
144 Ibid., 178.
145 Ibid., 190.
historical progression from the danger of deviation or fragmentation. Such a body ought to have “the sufficient prestige” to attain “unity of leadership” by subordinating qualitatively all proletarians and followers to a rigid hierarchy; it ought to possess the authority to “induce” coherence and apply force where necessary—by “reeducating” and remodeling the petty bourgeoisie and all political and intellectual phenomena deviating from this path. This is where Stalin’s conception of “Party unity” also morphs into a notion of purity, where bourgeois, reformist and anarchist shades in the Left political spectrum are seen as “elements” that pollute, contaminate, and corrupt the cleanliness of the whole, where they threaten the alleged progression of history towards its inevitable future. This is also where the language of “removal,” “purging,” “expulsion,” and elimination is called forth to achieve this purity: “Ruthless struggle against such elements, their expulsion from the Party, is a pre-requisite for successful struggle against imperialism.” And because state power is the best instrument for achieving it, the revolutionary human project in Stalin’s vision fully coincides with the unlimited sovereign power of the center, where complete human emancipation stands for exterminating all possibility of contesting the inevitability of the project.

As if aware of teleology’s immanent failure when put to history’s test, Stalin’s Party would resort to and take possession of all means of power available, including the law, violence, and the force of knowledge, to make sure that history follows its projected linearity. Historical contingencies then become departures from the “correct” and “truthful” line of development; the multiplicity of social forces turns into contamination; the spectrum of available political discourses, identities, and configurations is mapped onto an evolutionary plane of retrograde and vanguard forces, where “being a reformist means to be on the bad side of history,” and where all critique and interpretation is a threat, an enemy, a deviation. This is also where Stalin’s imperative language intensifies to the extreme: “Hence, in order not to err in policy, one must be a revolutionary, not a reformist.”

The shift towards party vanguardism and state centralization is often attributed to the poverty of a certain theoretical understanding: that is, to assigning ontological primacy to the economic domain and to the working class subject. Laclau and Mouffe refer this unfortunate move back to the economic determinism of the orthodox Marxists. As they remind us, it was Plekhanov and Kautsky who first attempted to reconstitute the unity of the class subject by linking its political future to a line of predetermined historical changes in the relations of production, i.e. the “base.” The stagist evolutionary view of political development easily follows from here; it becomes one of the pronounced features in Stalin’s doctrine. Stalin will make the ambitious and unattainable claim about the inevitability of the socialist future: “[I]f the passing of slow quantitative changes into rapid and abrupt qualitative changes is a law of development, then it is clear that revolutions made by oppressed classes are a quite natural and inevitable phenomenon.” Combined with a class identity that has acquired ontological value, Soviet

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146 Ibid., 188.
147 Ibid., 192.
149 Laclau and Mouffe, 19-29.
power becomes the “the power of the majority of the population over the minority, it is the state of the majority, the expression of its dictatorship.”\textsuperscript{151}

Stalin formulates this unfortunate political vision under the misguided title “democracy of a new type,” as “the most all-embracing and most democratic state organization of all possible state organizations.”\textsuperscript{152}

\textit{[T]he dictatorship of the proletariat does not differ essentially from the dictatorship of any other class; or the proletarian state is a machine for the suppression of the bourgeoisie. But there is one \textit{substantial} difference. This difference consists in the fact that all hitherto existing class states have been dictatorships of an exploiting minority over the exploited majority, whereas the dictatorship of the proletariat is the dictatorship of the exploited majority over the exploiting minority. Briefly: \textit{the dictatorship of the proletariat is the rule—unrestricted by law and based on force—of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie, a rule enjoying the sympathy and support of the laboring and exploited masses}.\textsuperscript{153}

And further:

The dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be “complete” democracy, democracy for \textit{all}, for the rich as well as for the poor; the dictatorship of the proletariat must be a state that is democratic \textit{in a new way}. […] Under the dictatorship of the proletariat, democracy is \textit{proletarian} democracy, the democracy of the exploited majority, based on the restriction of the rights of the exploiting minority and directed against this minority.\textsuperscript{154}

Stalin’s definition of dictatorship, as it privileges an ontologically defined working class subject, leads to repressive views of state governance. Of course, what the dictatorship of the proletariat means has been quite a contentious question in the history of the European left, and the Stalinist meanings and uses of the concept have triggered perhaps the most bitter discords around the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat for a politics on the left. We know that Lenin’s work becomes increasingly preoccupied with the concept of Soviet power around and after 1917. We cannot deceive ourselves, Lenin has repeatedly insisted, that what we have in the parliamentary system is democracy: it is the rule of the bourgeoisie, it should be called bourgeois rule or bourgeois dictatorship, and we need to discard the institutions of bourgeois parliamentarism, of “bourgeois bureaucratism” to slowly begin building practices of broadly inclusive direct democracy. Soviet power needs to reject the ideological language of equality, rights, and liberty in the abstract that secures the class hegemony of the bourgeoisie; on the contrary, it should be completely transparent and should call itself what it is: a dictatorship of the proletariat; the working class in power.

\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Ibid.}, 124.
\textsuperscript{152} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{153} \textit{Ibid.}, 117-18 (all emphasis is original).
\textsuperscript{154} \textit{Ibid.}, 118-19.
But even the most sympathetic analyses of the troubled concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat have failed to notice Lenin’s unwillingness to make a distinction between democracy and dictatorship, his refusal to see them as opposites.\textsuperscript{155} These categories inhabit the internal logic of his concept of Soviet power in a non-oppositional, circular fashion, and their distinction is so blurred that Lenin often uses them synonymously or interchangeably. “These people believed, or half-believed,” Lenin says of those in comfort with “peaceful” politics and the bourgeois parliamentary system, “[t]he bourgeois lies about Soviet power in Russia and were unable to distinguish the nature of the new, proletarian democracy—democracy for the working people, socialist democracy, as embodied in Soviet government—from bourgeois democracy, which they slavishly worship and call ‘pure democracy’ or ‘democracy’ in general.”\textsuperscript{156} In this celebratory letter to the newly established Hungarian socialist government, he continues, “[t]hese blind people, fettered by bourgeois prejudices, failed to understand the epoch-making change from bourgeois to proletarian democracy, from bourgeois to proletarian dictatorship.”\textsuperscript{157} Lenin’s theoretical formulations admittedly suffer from a certain poverty as their synonymous use most often appears as a contradiction. But like the unreconciled relationship between a centralized party and self-organized grassroots forms of governance of the new socialist state in Lenin’s work around and after 1917, democracy and dictatorship seem to be inevitably bound in a circular or synonymous fashion—to offer a critique of liberal democracy that posits itself against authoritarianism and to point to a future social order that will transcend their opposition and render it useless.

Two years after \textit{Foundations of Leninism} came out, Stalin published another work, \textit{Concerning Questions of Leninism}, in which he found it necessary to reiterate some points previously made and to provide a “concise synopsis of the foundations of Leninism.”\textsuperscript{158} “In these two years much water has flowed under the bridge: the Party has passed through two discussions, a number of pamphlets and manuals on Leninism have been published, new practical questions of socialist construction have come to the fore.”\textsuperscript{159} We know well that those two years after Lenin’s death the Party was riddled with infighting and witnessed Stalin’s gradual seizure of the state instruments of power while slowly gaining monopoly over the political debates. They also saw the rise of the united opposition of Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Kamenev against Stalin’s gradual consolidation of power, completely destroyed only a few years later. Confronted with the problem of Lenin’s succession and what that means as a political practice, the Party was divided over angry disputes about what the “main” principles of Lenin’s theoretical contributions were, and for a while, “Leninism” as a concept in formation was openly contested.\textsuperscript{160} Lenin’s understanding of power relations as always situated in history implied that no emancipatory category can ever acquire an ahistorical “centrality,” and yet the question of the “central tenets” of Leninism dominated the debates after his death. It is, in fact, precisely the contested meaning of “Leninism” and its radical instability during these two years that necessitated some of Stalin’s insistent reiterations in \textit{Concerning Questions of Leninism}: “The fundamental question of Leninism, its point of departure, its foundation, is the question of the dictatorship of the

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\item \textsuperscript{155} Etienne Balibar, \textit{On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat} (London: NLB, 1977).
\item \textsuperscript{156} Lenin, “Greetings to the Hungarian Workers,” \textit{Collected Works}, 29: 387.
\item \textsuperscript{157} \textit{Ibid.}, 388.
\item \textsuperscript{158} Stalin, “Concerning Questions of Leninism,” \textit{Works}, 8: 11.
\item \textsuperscript{159} \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{160} For a more detailed discussion, see Tucker, “Power and the Lenin Succession,” \textit{Stalin as Revolutionary}, 292-329.
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proletariat.”

“[B]ut some people have ventured,” he continues referring to Zinoviev, “to define [it] somewhat differently.”

Trotsky emphasized Lenin’s radical position on critical analysis as revolutionary practice and vigorously resisted systematizing Lenin’s work into a body of general principles—while also, counter Stalin, arguing that collective leadership is the only possible successor of Lenin’s legacy. He came closest to Lenin’s belief that in order to practice knowledge as a revolutionary, one needs to remain open to the unknowable, to remain always attuned to concrete historical situations and let them function as a corrective to reified concepts and subjects.

Zinoviev, by contrast, in a book on Leninism which came out in 1926, pointed to the peasant revolutionary subject and the national liberation question as the central contribution of Lenin’s work—and although not theoretically articulated, his reading placed emphasis on Lenin’s interventions into the particular historical and economic conditions of pre-Revolutionary Russia, and thereby remained somewhat more receptive to Lenin’s relentless historical intuition. All these arguments become a point of attack in Stalin’s Concerning Questions of Leninism and subsequent offensives such as The Opposition Bloc in the C.P.S.U (B). “Is not Leninism the generalization of the experience of the revolutionary movement of all countries?”—he argues against Zinoviev, who has confined Lenin’s political relevance to the Russian revolutionary experience. “Are not the fundamentals of the theory and tactics of Leninism suitable, are they not obligatory, for the proletarian parties of all countries?” The dictatorship then becomes an “international doctrine of the proletarians of all lands, suitable and obligatory for all countries without exception, including the capitalistically developed ones.”

Concerning Questions of Leninism is perhaps the clearest example of the impossibility of constructing an ahistorical “Leninist” theory without a certain violence, without a series of violent enclosures or erasures, discursive and institutional. Stalin’s 1931 Decree of the Central Committee closed the space of relative intellectual autonomy by denouncing all “deviating” theoretical lines, restructuring academic institutions from the ground up, and reinforcing the internal consistency of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine. The year 1938 was marked by the publication of the famous History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): A Short Course, written by an anonymous collective (although after 1948 it has been universally attributed to Stalin himself, especially the chapters on Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism). Widely distributed internationally—Gustav Wetter’s study reports that over 35 million copies translated in 66 languages were distributed between the years of 1938-49—Short Course is the triumphant result of a long and contested consolidation of the official Stalinist narrative of the revolutionary decades in Russia from the birth of the working class movement and the formation of the Russian Social-Democratic Party in the 1880s to the passing

162 Ibid., 13-14.
163 See Tucker’s discussion on Trotsky’s New Course, which contains the author’s most vigorous revolt against the petrification of Lenin’s work into a body of general principles. “Power and the Lenin Succession,” Stalin as Revolutionary, 311; 319-324.
164 Stalin, “Concerning Questions of Leninism,” Works, 8: 15.
165 Ibid.
of the infamous Stalinist Constitution of 1936 that legalized terror and marked the beginning of the purges.\textsuperscript{167}

**Building Socialism Is a War**

Socialism as a dehistoricized, perpetual state of war will become a specifically Stalinist paradigm. Tucker has noticed Stalin’s excessive affinity for war, which shaped the way Stalin imagined the building of socialism. He saw how Stalin consistently worked to extend the approaches of war communism during the civil war to the post-civil war period—against the Bukharinist proponents of gradualist approaches to building socialism, who called for the eradication of all traces of war communism.\textsuperscript{168}

If Lenin advocated for a collective, massive revolutionary insurrection as the only means available to capture state power, but only to reorganize its function towards more productive forms of collective self-governance and participatory, grassroots forms of state organization, Stalin saw the capture of the state not as the end of war and conquest but as its beginning. For this, he leans heavily on *State and Revolution* and a few other texts on the socialist state that Lenin wrote between 1916-18. If we recall our earlier analysis of *State and Revolution* and related texts, Lenin’s concept of the socialist revolution acquires a complexity aiming to transcend oppositions between the revolution as a rupture, a break, a takeover, a single act of abolishing the capitalist state on the one hand, and a slow, gradual reform through existing institutions on the other. For Lenin, either of these taken as a singular approach is politically insufficient; such conceptions of the revolution cannot produce an alternative social reality but fall into either utterly utopian visions or reproduce the fundamental mechanisms of capitalist exploitation. We already saw that for Lenin, revolutionary rupture and transformation are dialectically conjoined in a project that transcends the repressive practices of state control and creates/produces alternative forms of state governance.

Subsumed under objective tasks and anti-historical categories, Stalin’s concept of socialist state power becomes a machinery of perpetual class war, transforming the project of building socialism into an ahistorical process of incessant conquest, expansion, and domination. The language of war, conquest, and expansion permeates *Foundations of Leninism* to such a degree that one can read the booklet as a combat manual. It filters out Lenin’s formulation of the revolutionary process as a dialectical interaction between rupture and transformation, and likens the building of socialism to an ahistorical perpetual war, a process “replete with civil wars and external conflicts, with persistent organizational work and economic construction, with advances and retreats, victories and defeats.”\textsuperscript{169} As Stalin himself unambiguously puts it, the Party is not an “organization of order” but an “organization of war.”\textsuperscript{170} Insisting that “the whole point is to retain power, to consolidate it, to make it invincible,” he defines the dictatorship of the proletariat as the war machine that needs to “arm the revolution, to organize the army of the

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{167} For a fuller discussion of the *Short Course*, see Wetter, *Dialectical Materialism*, 180-81.

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{168} Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary*, 400-402.

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{169} Stalin, “Foundations of Leninism,” *Works*, 6:115.

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{170} This is in reference to Lenin’s speech at the Third Congress of the Party in 1905, in which he defined the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry in combative terms. *Ibid.*, 104.
revolution for the struggle against foreign enemies, for the struggle against imperialism.”¹⁷¹ This is also where the difference lies between, on the one hand, Lenin’s notion of revolution as a complex undertaking that comes from a historically specific analysis of the capitalist forms of domination, and the Stalinist notion of revolution as a project of Empire.

From the start the Stalinist vision of bringing about the socialist order acquires enemies and a battlefield, and the working and peasant classes are militarized—in fact, the entire social field becomes a war field. The battle has a “forefront” and a “rear,” “revolutionary positions” and “fortifications,” an organization of military hierarchy with the Soviets as the vanguard of the revolutionary force and the peasants as the “reserves” “to be tapped into.” The strategy of war maneuver is also clearly legible: there are advances and retreats, “decisive blows” should be timed when the crisis in the enemy’s ranks “has reached its climax” and “maximum consternation reigns in the ranks of the enemy.”¹⁷² Strategies have different “objects”: “to gain time, to disrupt the enemy, and to accumulate forces in order later to assume the offensive.”¹⁷³ They also aim

“to take advantage of the conflicts in the camp of the imperialists, to disrupt the forces of the enemy, to retain the support of the peasantry, and to accumulate forces in preparation for the offensive [...] Maneuvering the reserves with a view to effecting a proper retreat when the enemy is strong, when retreat is inevitable, when to accept battle forced upon us by the enemy is obviously disadvantageous, when, with the given relation of forces, retreat becomes the only way to escape a blow against the vanguard and to retain the reserves for the latter.”¹⁷⁴

If one reads those lines without the historical context, one might think a revolutionary insurrection has not happened yet, that the state has not yet been captured. Actually, the Revolution appears both behind us and ahead of us: while it has already happened, it is endlessly deferred into the future, and a constant state of war reigns over an ahistorical present. The new period evolves into one of perpetual “class collisions,” of ceaseless revolutionary action, a continuous overthrow of imperialism, a perpetual seizure of power by the proletariat, of gaining territories and positions. It shouldn’t be surprising then that Stalin’s regime constantly had to reinvent the enemy, culminating, most cunningly, in turning in upon itself in waves of political purges within the Party ranks.

**Revolutionary Theory as Party Armor**

The Stalinist philosophical system affixes a fatally two-dimensional, non-dialectical relationship of representation between base and superstructure, the latter having the simple status of secondary phenomenon derived from the primary economic, material relations and merely reflecting their order. “Every base has its own corresponding superstructure”—Stalin writes in *Marxism and the Problem of Linguistics*, one of his last major theoretical works written in 1950.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 112-13.
¹⁷² Ibid., 164.
¹⁷³ Ibid., 166.
¹⁷⁴ Ibid. (order of quotes is reversed).
“The base of the feudal system has its superstructure, its political, legal and other views, and the corresponding institutions; the capitalist base has its own superstructure, so has the socialist base. If the base changes or is eliminated, then, following this, its superstructure changes or is eliminated; if a new base arises, then, following this, a superstructure arises corresponding to it.”

However, one crucial ambiguity structures Stalin’s understanding of the “base-superstructure” relation, an ambiguity which becomes a founding contradiction in Marxist-Leninist understanding. On the one hand, knowledge—belonging to the “superstructure”—reflects the economic realm’s objective progression; derived from and secondary to the “base,” it follows its necessary development. Various theories of reflection emerged out of this paradigm—such as the writings of the Bulgarian Marxist-Leninist scholar Todor Pavlov (writing in Russian under the pseudonym T. Dosev), who elaborated an ambitious philosophical system to battle and oust remnants of idealist and gnostic philosophy prevalent in early twentieth-century Bulgarian thought. On the other, however, Stalin gives all “superstructural” formations, including knowledge, the state and the law, a tremendous mobilizing agency in revolutionary social transformation. Gustav Wetter calls the theoretical move of attributing an active role to the superstructure Stalin’s most significant philosophical “novelty.” It allows Stalin to justify the erection of a strong political structure, to begin aggressive state consolidation and radical restructuring of the economy, to employ all juridical means towards a campaign of terror, and to control education and culture—what has been termed as “the revolution from above.”

Stalin insists that “retrograde” ideas are quite significant. In his words,

[Their] significance lies in the fact that they hamper the development, the progress of society. Then there are new and advanced ideas and theories which serve the interests of the advanced forces of society. Their significance lies in the fact that they facilitate the development, the progress of society; and their significance is the greater the more accurately they reflect the needs of development of the material life of society.

The Party must then take possession of this knowledge, the knowledge that “correctly reflects the needs of development of the material life of society,” and deploy it towards the overcoming of reactionary forces to facilitate history’s acceleration towards a more advanced historical stage. This is where knowledge acquires purely instrumental value—it acquires the status of a weapon which, because of the qualitative and historical privilege of the Party, must remain exclusively in the hands of the vanguard: “[I]n order that it may really be the advanced detachment,” Stalin wrote, “the Party must be armed with revolutionary theory, with a knowledge of the laws of the movement, with a knowledge of the laws of revolution. Without this it will be incapable of directing the struggle of the proletariat, of leading the proletariat.”

176 P. Dosev, Teoriia otrazheniia: Ocherki po teorii poznaniia dialekticheskogo materializma (Moscow: Gosudarstvenoe sots.-ekon. izdatel'stvo, 1936); first publication in Bulgarian is in 1945. Todor Pavlov, Teoriya na otrazhenieto: Osnovni vuprosi na dialektichesko-materialisticheskata teoriya na poznanieto, (Sofia: Narizdat, 1945).
177 Wetter, Dialectical Materialism, 209-220.
179 Ibid., 117.
The terrain of “ideology” thus became the Party’s most important war front. Philosophy, having to refine the normative foundations of the new order, acquired a superior status among all other domains of knowledge. The discipline’s foundations underwent colossal revisions to establish the grounds of a radically new socialist philosophy, organized around its pillars Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism. The scale of methodological, disciplinary, and institutional reforms of the discipline during the early socialist years is astonishing. In a swift, albeit a rocky and uneven process, old research institutes, journals, and departments were refashioned and new ones were opened; faculty was completely rehired and expanded; sub-branches of philosophy were designed to infiltrate the natural sciences and establish their “Marxist-Leninist” positivist methodological foundations; a canon of texts was established and the first textbooks appeared. And while the political and pedagogical sciences, together with the humanities and the arts were designed to carry out the prescriptive, imperative nature of the socialist project, the natural sciences and some social sciences—such as sociology—would fully embrace the positivist foundations of Diamat to retain the invisibility of both the knowing subject and the subjectivities that knowledge itself interpellates.

Philosophy’s pedagogical, instructive purpose was greatly emphasized during the first years. It not only sought to expand critical understanding of the social, cultural, and political actualities through the lens of class domination and class struggle. Because building socialism was a collective endeavor which requires the energies, efforts, and creativity of all, it was burdened with the mission to tear apart social ties and radically remake the social constitution of the population, forming new modes of sociality, community, and forms of dependence grounded in the normative predicates of socialism. This is why the writings from the first years are marked by a strong imperative language; they are infused with a heightened sense of urgency, duty, and mission, they often employ a didactic tone and harsh judgment where deviating political ideas venture into the public.

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182 Some of the classical Stalinist thinkers in Bulgarian socialist philosophy include Todor Pavlov, Asen Kiselinchev, and Zhivko Oshavkov, to name a few. For the earliest Bulgarian versions of Diamat and Istkmat, almost entirely designed to import and popularize Stalinist thought in Bulgaria, see Todor Pavlov, Dialekticheskiyat materializum, edinstvenata nauchna filosofiya (lektsiya) (Sofia: Narodna Mladezh, 1948); Asen Kiselinchev, Dialekticheski materializum (Sofia, 1948); Istoricheski Materializum (Sofia, 1948); Zhivko Oshavkov, ed., Programa po dialekticheski i istoricheski materializum (Sofia: NI, 1953).


184 A history of the institutional restructuring in the Bulgarian context after 1944, see Todorov, Filosofkata publichnost, 30-112. See also Svetla Koleva’s much more sensitive, Foucault-informed study of Bulgarian sociology, an attempt to develop an epistemological history of the discipline as it emerges as a specifically socialist discipline. Koleva, Sotsiologiyata kato proekt.
The early writings published in *Filosofska misul*, the journal to become the main territory of Marxist-Leninist philosophical development in socialist Bulgaria, describe the field of knowledge, ideas, and disciplines as a battlefront. Writings from the first years carry a strong imperative mode of address; infused with a heightened sense of urgency, duty, and mission, they harshly reprimand deviating political ideas that venture into the public.\(^{185}\) Georgi Dimitrov, a pronounced figure in the Comintern who would soon return from the Soviet Union to become the leader of the Bulgarian Working Class Party and a Prime Minister of the new government, addressed the young journal *Filosofska Misul* in 1946: “Complete convergence between practice and theory is absolutely necessary, for without practice theory is blind, and without theory, practice is helpless. This is especially the case when it comes to the working class, which has the historical task not only to explain correctly and scientifically the actually existing reality, but also to change it towards the benefit of its people.”\(^{186}\) Dimitrov outlined the five main didactic functions of the journal, founded to serve as the official academic platform of the Party: it must devote its subsequent years to the critique of “fascist ideology (racism, the theory of domination of the ‘superior’ races over the ‘inferior’ ones, Fuehrerism, the theory of the superman, and our Great Bulgarian chauvinism) until [their] complete uprooting”; to expose and critique fascist readings of history and learning materials with fascist content; to help peasant and working class intellectuals acquire a solid grip on the dialectical method of Marxism-Leninism, to expose and fight retrograde and idealist philosophical schools of thought; and “to encourage love for science and the questions of philosophy.”\(^{187}\)

Vulko Chervenkov, an ardent proponent of Stalin’s political line and soon-to-become the Prime Minister of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria and the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, outlined the tasks and function of Marxism-Leninism in light of “the fight” on the “ideological battlefront” in *Filosofska Misul* from 1948. Metaphors of knowledge as seeds planted onto the fertile soil of the social field abound in his account, likening bourgeois and reformist ideas to weeds to be uprooted, exterminated, extinguished: “We are still far away from having seriously cleaned up the Bulgarian ideological field from decay, from the weeds and thorns of capitalism. Without such cleansing we cannot sow the seeds of socialism, of the great Marxist-Leninist doctrine.”\(^{188}\) But more often such accounts became openly militant, where building socialism amounted to nothing less than a battle in the trenches. Marxist-Leninist knowledge became both a “lantern” that brings enlightenment and power, and a mighty weapon that exterminates, destroys, and cleanses the “rotten, the unfit, the harmful.”\(^{189}\) We need “to purge and air the trenches and the bunkers on the front,” Chervenkov demanded, “to examine the army lines, to check their weaponry, to change the rusty guns, to gradually arm the entire ideological front with the magnificent and never-out-of-date weapons of Marxism-Leninism.”\(^{190}\) “Harmful” knowledge would then need to be uprooted from reality because “it has no right to existence. […] For as long as there exist antagonistic class relations, as long as there is


\(^{186}\) Dimitrov, “Dr. Georgi Dimitrov za rolyata i zadachite na sp. ‘Filosofska misul,’” 6.

\(^{187}\) Ibid., 6-9.


\(^{189}\) Ibid., 85.

\(^{190}\) Ibid.
capitalism, there will be dangerous ideologies, and they will reemerge in one form or another.”

He continues, “[t]he fight against the bourgeois ideology is a life and death fight. We should not and will not leave a single corner of the ideological front where the theories and worldviews of the class enemy can hide, where the life-bearing fire of the almighty Marxist-Leninist school cannot reach.”

Invoking images of bloodshed, the Stalinist language is a militant language. It is a language that has declared a war. However, this is not a war-as-struggle but a war-as-conquest, a war-as-Empire. It is a language that draws no boundaries between knowledge and bodies, between discourses and lives—and, ironically, as if aware of the theoretical limits to drawing such lines, the elusively defined domain of ideas easily becomes a field of masses becomes classes becomes persons becomes bodies becomes lives. This unmistakable continuity illustrates how Stalinist politics function as an effect of theoretical commitments set in motion—the massive purges being their most extreme example.

**Diamat and Istmat: Some Founding Contradictions**

David Joravsky’s study of the historical formation of partynost in knowledge (what is often translated as “partisanship” or “partyness”)—the expected political commitment of knowledge and the loyalty of intellectuals to the Party line which secures the complete merger between Party and knowledge and the subordination of the latter to the former—shows that the academic communities and debates in the philosophical disciplines in the 1920s enjoyed a relative autonomy in relationship to Party infighting. Why is it that Trotsky was under immense political pressure, Joravsky asks, while at the same time the “idealist” Abram Deborin, an influential Hegelian Marxist scholar from the 1920s who could have easily been labeled a Trotskyist, enjoyed enormous authority in academic discourse? (Indeed, Deborin was involved in the publication of Lenin’s notes on Hegel’s *Logic* and *Philosophy of History* in *Leninskiy Sbornik*, a supplement to the first edition of *Collected Works*. Refusing to draw organic and internal connections between political lines and philosophical claims, Joravsky states: “Intellectual history would be easy to write—and hardly worth writing—if there were an unexceptionable logic by which the political and philosophical views of men and their parties could be inferred from each other.”

Joravsky’s study not only suggests that these are historically articulated; it also attests to the contested process of consolidating the official Party discourse.

The intellectual climate during the 1920s in the Soviet Union was quite dynamic, marked by a plurality of theoretical and philosophical debates, of intellectual clashes, and it was not until

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191 Ibid., 88.
192 Ibid., 89.
193 See *Leninskiy Sbornik*, vol. 9 and 12 (Moscow and Leningrad: Institut Lenina pri TsK na RKP (b): 1924-38). Volume 9, published in 1929, includes mostly notes on Hegel’s *Logic*; volume 12, published in 1930, contains Lenin’s notes on Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, as well as some notes on Lasalle, Feuerbach, Leibniz, Aristotle, and Clausewitz. Hegel’s notes from both volumes and some additional texts from vol. 12 were later combined into what is known as the *Philosophical Notebooks* (vol. 38 of *Collected Works* in English). For a brief discussion on the publication of Lenin’s work on Hegel in the 1920s and Deborin’s involvement in it, see Kevin Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*, 174-5.
1931, the final year of the first Five-Year Plan, that the canon began to take shape. A vibrant plurality of theoretical and philosophical positions existed, including Marxist Hegelians, neo-Kantians, mechanists (who, spearheaded by Nikolay Bukharin, advocated for the priority of scientific positivism and denied philosophy any independent validity). The influential figure of Deborin, founder of the Hegelian journal *Pod znamenem marksizma* (usually translated as *Under the Banner of Marxism*), dominated the theoretical and institutional environment until 1931, when officially “reprimanded” by Stalin for his Hegelianism and labeled a Menshevik idealist—although after “repenting” and coming out in support of Stalin’s versions of Dialectical Materialism, Deborin kept his leading administrative and academic posts until his death.

It is also not until the early 1930s that the official, singular version of Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism was established to provide the general methodology for the historical and social disciplines, and the natural sciences. Stalin’s writings on the questions were originally published in the ambitious work *The History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course*, commissioned by Stalin in the early 1930s as the official Party version of the socialist movement in Russia. Attributed to Stalin himself, the chapters on Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism established the state-sanctioned paradigms of inquiry as the only correct modes of knowledge about the world.

What are the theoretical claims of the Stalinist version of Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism? Referred to as *Diamat* and *Istmat* in the more colloquial or informal culture (abbreviated versions of *Dialekticheskiy materializm* and *Istoricheskiy materializm*), they reject ideational philosophies of history and theories of social development. Contending that all products of consciousness are secondary to the particular form of social organization of the means of production and labor, they insist on the primacy of an independently standing objective material reality and assign a superstructural, secondary status to all political forms, philosophical systems, and intellectual and creative production. Further, *Diamat* and *Istmat* completely eliminate the dialectical foundations of Marx’s philosophy of history, which grasps the manifest contradictions of social forces as the enabling conditions for historical change while relocating history’s metabolic force in the practical activity of humans. “The proletariat was developing as a class, whereas the peasantry as a class was disintegrating. And just because the proletariat was developing as a class the Marxists based their orientation on the proletariat. And they were not mistaken; for, as we know, the proletariat subsequently grew from an insignificant force into a first-rate historical and political force.” Stalin thereby reduces historical process to an evolutionist vision premised on economically determined internal laws of development.

The Soviet version of Dialectical Materialism, or *Diamat*, instructs that all social processes are objectively knowable by means of scientific method, and thereby, in Stalin’s words, “the history of society ceases to be an agglomeration of “accidents”; [it] becomes a development of society according to regular laws, and the study of the history of society becomes a science.” Hence, he

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195 For a detailed discussion on the 1920s, see Wetter, *Dialectical Materialism*, 128-182. Bukharin’s and Deborin’s versions of Dialectical and Historical Materialism have important differences; their significance for the formation of the Stalinist doctrine deserves a place in this study and will be addressed in the future.

196 Wetter, *Dialectical Materialism*, 159-166.

continues, “the science of the history of society, despite all the complexity of the phenomena of social life, can become as precise a science as, let us say, biology, and capable of making use of the laws of development of society for practical purposes.” Similarly, Historical Materialism, or Istmat, puts forward a philosophy of history by advancing a teleological understanding of history as a mechanistic progression of alternating phases, where “the dying away of the old and the upgrowth of the new is a law of development.” Because it is scientifically knowable, historical progress can be studied by a science of social phenomena with the aid of a systematic methodology, which identifies the correct vanguard historical elements, analyzes them, transforms them into normative instruments, and redeploy them back onto historical reality to accelerate its movement. “We must not base our orientation on the strata of society which are no longer developing, even though they at present constitute the predominant force, but on those strata which are developing and have a future before them, even though they at present do not constitute the predominant force.”

A clear contradiction structures the foundations of Diamat and Istmat. Confronting the same difficulties of the Party doctrine where a complex dialectic is reduced to a number of paradoxes, Diamat and Istmat define socialism both as a historical inevitability and a prescriptive call; they proclaim its inevitable historical arrival and yet they insist that it ought to be; they perpetually announce that socialism has fully unfolded in the present moment, while deferring it interminably into the future. And while insisting that the “ought” and the “is” have fully coincided, they retain the gap between the two wide open. This structural tension—between, on the one hand, asserting that socialism is already here and it is ours, and on the other, deferring it perpetually into the future—will remain a defining structural tension in the intellectual production and material culture of Stalinist socialist discourse and socialist realism.

Such contradictory, simultaneous insistence—the claim to descriptive, truthful, and accurate representation or reality and a prescriptive call at once, the desire to ground the socialist project in a social ontology and yet retain the emancipatory element in the prescriptive call for social equality—will be at the center of the merger between Party line and the project of positivist knowledge. It is a merger that, because of its founding difficulties, will always remain incomplete and fraught with challenges. Asen Kiselinchev, a leading Stalinist philosopher in early Socialist Bulgaria and future Professor of Dialectical Materialism in the Institute of Philosophy in Sofia, in a three-month course on Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism in 1948, defines Marxism as “an all-encompassing theory of scientific socialism,” in which Diamat is seen primarily as a method, “an approach towards things, facts, [and] phenomena,” which then establishes the scientific premises of studying political and social processes. Following Stalin’s Anarchism or Socialism, Stalin’s earliest theoretical subscription to orthodox Marxism, Kiselinchev reinforces the text’s claim that “Marxism” is the only method

198 Ibid., 114.
199 Ibid., 110.
200 Ibid.
201 Kiselinchev’s work was firmly dedicated to importing and establishing Stalin’s intellectual legacy on the Bulgarian philosophical scene. See for example Kiselinchev, Stalin: Klasik na Marksizma (Sofia: Durzhaovno izdatelstvo Nauka i izkustvo, 1949).
capable of scientific inquiry, the only set of premises that makes the world scientifically knowable, and the only approach that can deliver a full and accurate understanding of an ontological social reality posited outside to and independently of the subject. Seeing “the criteria for truth” as the most fundamental question of the Marxist project today, Kiselinchev proclaims Marxism-Leninism as “the only philosophy” in possession of the universal key to accessing reality as it objectively exists, and its scientific methodology as the only one capable of grasping correctly and accurately social processes as they unfold independently of man.203 “Materialism holds that there is an objective truth that we can reveal both in nature and in social laws. Materialism argues in the following way: man is a product of nature, […] he is a product of the reality of social labor. […] and our consciousness is the reflection of this very reality, of its laws. So, the theory of reflection is the basic postulate of Marx and Lenin as the real theory of knowledge. It shows that we can know actual reality and its laws.”204

This line of argumentation provides the grounds for an openly positivist Marxist-Leninist social science: there is no such a thing as a “non-Marxist” truth because no other methodology has the capacity to investigate empirical reality, no other methodology has the power to reveal the world as it objectively exists, no other methodology has the means of, or the key to, an ontologically defined social and physical reality as it unfolds according to an evolutionary logic. All knowledge that does not accept the objectivist premises of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine is denied the status of science apriori: all that is bourgeois is non-scientific or anti-scientific. In Kiselinchev’s words, “we Marxists, before speaking about benefit speak about objective truth. And that which is objectively true according to the laws of development is beneficial for the progressive forces, and it is not beneficial for the reactionaries.”205

But it is a kind of positivism, a kind of science that, instead of refusing to admit its political premises, keeping them well-buried in unstated methodological presumptions, openly proclaims its political foundations and claims that only that which is “Marxist-Leninist” is empirically correct and “scientific.” This paradox couldn’t be more clearly legible in Kiselinchev’s conclusion that “[w]e will win because our direction is objectively true and accurate.”206 Making the contradictory argument that only that which is politically “right” is also scientifically “correct,” Marxist-Leninist Diamat thus lays claim on all scientific discourse. Diamat remains “the only scientific philosophy”: from its perspective, bourgeois historiography and its methodology, being “subjectively-classist” and “idealist,” are fundamentally “anti-scientific.”207

Henri Lefebvre, in his attempt to revive the Hegelian aspects of Marxist thought, translated for the first time Lenin’s Philosophical Notebooks in French in 1938, and wrote a little book on Dialectical Materialism, which meant to recuperate the emancipatory powers of concepts such as alienation, reification, and praxis, while opening the understanding of dialectical materialism to the contingency of the historical process and deliberately shifting the interpretive lens onto

203 Ibid., 21.
204 Ibid., 22.
205 Ibid., 24.
206 Ibid., 24.
human agency. And while his early objections against the dogmatic versions of Dialectical Materialism takes him to affirm concept such as total man or creative activity as total human liberation, aligning him, at least in his early work, with the humanist side of the debates, his critique of Stalinist Marxism contains an astute diagnosis of Diamat’s misuses of Marx. In the 1961 Foreword to the fifth edition of the booklet, twenty five years after its first publication, he says, we are just “beginning to see and know better what took place.” What Lefebvre saw was how Diamat’s drive towards a reductive, positivist methodology represses Marx’s early writings, while dismissing all other sciences as bourgeois or reformist and establishing “economicism” as the only legitimate science.

In other words—and what is of central significance here—Diamat and Istmat remove the knowing subject from the production of knowledge. Insisting that the study of the social can qualify as “socialist” only if it embraces objectivist premises, Diamat and Istmat eliminate human agency from the study of historically meaningful practice—reducing the project of critique to a set of postulates that claim the status of “correct” knowledge. As we remember, the Stalinist doctrine of the vanguard Party dispossesses ordinary subjects from their revolutionary agency, rendering the “masses” passive and incapable of governing themselves; further, it subordinates the working class to a hierarchy of political structures aiming to manufacture a seamless system of disciplined, participating subjects. Diamat and Istmat perform a similar set of foreclosures: they deprive the collective subject of its ability to produce its own revolutionary knowledge and render passive those it intends to empower.

Lefebvre also noticed how Diamat’s methodology completely dismisses the “mediation of discourse” with its capacity to reproduce relations of power. And worse still, “for many and obscure reasons,” Diamat rejects anything that has to do with the concept of alienation. For Lefebvre alienation is a powerful critical concept flexible and open enough to escape the confines of bourgeois societies and offer a valuable tool for a critical analysis of material and social relations within the socialist systems. It makes the Stalinists particularly vulnerable as it may expose the “ideological and political alienations inside socialism.”

This problem persists in Stalin’s linguistic theory in Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics, one of his last monographs on a theoretical subject published in 1950. It defines language as a stable system of fixed, universally valid signifiers and attributes objective and transparent qualities to it, turning it into a system capable of surviving radical changes in the “base”—thus foreclosing crucial questions not only about the inherent instability of the sign and the historical contingencies of meaning, but also about the subject of power, as well as language’s subjectivating mechanisms.

It makes a lot of sense that the post-Stalinist East-European cultures produced their own humanist traditions across the board, retrieving the humanist elements in Marxist thought, while

208 Henri Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press, 2009).
210 Ibid., 2.
211 Ibid., 4.
212 Ibid., 5.
also opening space for the return of West-European bourgeois humanism. During the 1960s and 1970s, philosophy would welcome a number of “rehabilitation” projects by restoring the philosophical traditions of Romanticism and German Idealism. A quasi-bourgeois humanist individualism will emerge in philosophical preoccupations with intellectual and creative freedom—a humanism which, while specifically socialist, will provide the intellectual paradigms and political arguments for the liberal commitments and anti-left attitudes of the dissident intellectuals. The Marxist humanists, on their part, venture into new readings of Marxist texts to introduce some marginalized works by Marx, previously seen as suspect and threatening to the official doctrine, and come up with humanist concepts of socialist personhood and humanist visions of social integration. The socialist 1960s and 1970s exhibit a remarkable plurality of movements, comprising a rich field of intellectual ideas and a wide spectrum of political discussions. While Stalinist philosophy retains its status as an official state doctrine, it loses its dominance and legitimacy in political discourse, and its proponents, labeled as “dogmatists,” occupy the most conservative position on the political spectrum, countered by radical democratic-socialists and liberal-democrats. Taking the Bulgarian 1960s and 1970s as a case study, the next two chapters aims to introduce these new intellectual ideas, situating them in the expanded field of political positions.

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Multiple revisionist left intellectual movements emerge during the socialist 1960s and 1970s, whose histories have remained largely suppressed under the monolithic category of totalitarianism. Reacting to the grand dichotomy of Stalinism, which aligns socialism to authoritarianism and labels every alternative to the authoritarian form of state organization as bourgeois or reactionary, post-Stalinist revisionist Marxists continuously struggled to rescue the normative foundations of socialism from authoritarian state bureaucratism. This chapter turns to post-Stalinist revisions of Marxism in Bulgaria, aiming to recover some of the political subjects and political projects from the 1960s and 1970s that struggled to make another kind of socialism thinkable. Insisting that a plurality of perspectives is compatible with socialism, they argued that the state can allow a heterogeneity of socialist experiences while maintaining the broad normative premises of the left project. In their efforts to reinvent the socialist project, post-Stalinist intellectuals struggled to open a space in between—a space between authoritarian state communism and bourgeois democracy—a third space in which another kind of socialism is thinkable.

It is no accident that the majority of these movements, which sought to overcome the limitations of Stalinist understanding, returned to humanism. As Chapter Three showed, Stalinist philosophy eliminates human agency from the understanding of historical development, rendering ordinary humans passive subjects with no historical agency. According to the Marxist-Leninist system of knowledge, historical change does not result from the social activity of humans, and it is certainly not the effect of collective struggle. Instead, it insists that the arrival of socialism is predetermined and inevitable, while at the same time claiming that this arrival needs to be forced into existence through radical top-down economic reforms.

In an effort to overcome Stalinism’s simplistic, dogmatic system, progressive Marxist scholars from the post-Stalinist years sought to restore the place of human agency to the understanding of social change and historical development. With revived interest in the humanist aspects of Marx’s early work, notions such as alienation, reification, and human freedom regained their critical vocabulary. In fact, starting with the 1960s, almost every socialist state developed its own humanist traditions. The Yugoslavian Praxis School is perhaps the most well-known example of an intellectual movement, but it is easy to detect this humanist turn in the more popular call for “socialism with a human face,” which Khruschev declared as a program in 1956, and which was embraced by the Prague student protests in 1968. Post-Stalinist Marxist social thought in Bulgaria is no exception. Its return to humanism came with a significant shift in the philosophy of state governance, which most histories of state socialisms, excessively preoccupied with the repressive aspects of the state, have completely overlooked. The discipline of sociology in post-Stalinist Bulgaria became home to a reformist left political and intellectual movement responsible for a tangible shift in the modality of state power—from ideological indoctrination to
social governance—while radically redefining the relationship between state power and state subjects. The post-Stalinist state model introduced a grassroots approach to social governance. As this chapter will show, while this progressive reformist effort was achieved not without struggle, it also appeared to be a necessary move because it eased tensions that had arisen from the contradictions between a top-down, conservative political state organization and heterogeneous and dynamic social forces. At any moment, these contradictions could be converted into political antagonism.

In a contentious process aiming to reclaim the socialist project from economic determinism, social theorists from the 1970s and 1970s “discovered” youth as a new collective subject “on the ground.” As the first generation to grow up under socialist conditions, the youth appeared on the historical horizon as an emancipated collective subject whose will and social power could no longer be ignored but had to be taken into account and carefully studied. To imagine an ordinary, everyday subject as an active agent of historical change was quite a remarkable shift from the past. For the first time in socialist Bulgarian Marxism an element of historical contingency appeared, which restored the lost relationship between historical change and collective human agency. This theoretical element reimagined ordinary people as active subjects and placed them at the center of historical development. Even more importantly, it saw their experience of empowerment and autonomy as indispensable to entering the “stage” of “developed” socialist relations. In post-Stalinist visions of state governance, a developed socialist society does not depend solely on the evolution of objective material conditions. The state’s ability to deliver material equality “objectively” became irrelevant unless it successfully redefined social practices, produced new forms of sociality and collective experiences, made and remade persons, and encouraged their sense of integrity and power.

The paradigm of youth brought the dialectical totality back into the conceptual understanding of the social, superseding the category of the class enemy. The Stalinist notion of class antagonism was no longer capable of capturing the social contradictions arising out of the new social relations, and social thinkers were faced with the task of redefining human emancipation in entirely new conceptual terms. Superseding the class relation while remaining grounded in humanist categories, the post-Stalinist notion of human freedom became inseparable from a practice of social normalization. The new, emancipated socialist person was individualized while fully socialized; she brought into existence the totality of social relations through her purposive self-activity, through her sense of accomplishment, through her experience of social and personal self-realization.

Taking up the question of the governing mechanisms of the socialist states, this chapter also offers a test and a critique of Foucault’s work on governmentality. Foucault’s theoretical framework on governmentality and biopolitics has only recently been taken up and tested in relationship to the socialist states’ practices of social governance and population control.\footnote{Susan Greenhalgh, \textit{Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng’s China} (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2008); Susan Greenhalgh and Edwin A. Winkler, \textit{Governing China’s Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Politics} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Momchil Hristov, “Biopolitiques de l’habitat socialiste. Le privé comme objet gouvernemental dans les politiques de l’Etat bulgare des années 1950 et 1960,” \textit{Histoire@Politique: Politique, Culture, Societe} 7 (2009), \url{http://www.histoire-politique.fr/index.php?numero=07&rub=dossier&item=70}, accessed March 6, 2009; David L. Hoffmann and}
yet, major inconsistencies between Foucault’s theoretical grasp of the political rationality of the bourgeois liberal state and that of the governing practices of the socialist states, including the normative principles they were grounded in, leave the possibility of “socialist governmentality” studies an open terrain with many question marks awaiting theorists, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists.

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Socialism between Authoritarianism and Bourgeois Democracy

The diaries of Hristo Radevski, a radical writer and prominent literary figure in the 1960s, include some thoughts about the Prague events from the spring and summer of 1968: “There are some people here who are afraid of two things happening in Czechoslovakia: one is the return of the bourgeois regime, and the other is socialist democratization. The second one is no less threatening than the first one—because it indirectly threatens their administrative positions.”214

The return of the bourgeois regime or socialist democratization—this distinction is extremely important, and yet it has been overlooked by even the most intricate histories of dissent during socialism. As the reader might remember from earlier chapters, one of the most widely practiced rhetorical manipulations of Stalinist discourse was to label every position in favor of democracy and anti-authoritarianism “counter-revolutionary” and “reactionary,” to turn it into an argument against socialism, and maintain strict control over its interpretation in public. Such dichotomous discourse turned every argument against state monopoly into an attack on the ethical and normative foundations of socialism, an attack on the socialist “idea,” easily fitting it into the expansive category of the “enemy.” It is a rhetorical maneuver repeatedly invoked to stall or shut down any attempt to challenge the bureaucratic hierarchy and command order culture exercised through the doctrine of Party loyalty (partiynost).

This crude dichotomy did not just define the politics of “us” and “them.” Through a set of canonical formulations, Stalinism virtually established a monopoly over the experience of socialism as a historical reality. It must have been difficult to contain the heterogeneous social reality and social practice in such a two-dimensional understanding. During the 1960s and 1970s, many critically-minded thinkers who were attempting to raise concerns about the authoritarian-bureaucratic state model and its discursive modalities repeatedly insisted that their critique was not synonymous with anti-socialism. The parameters of the political spectrum around which various arguments emerged was reformist-socialist, and the debates most often deployed Marx and Lenin themselves against the Party’s monopoly of public life, against bureaucratic privilege and discursive monism, or simply—as Stalinism was referred to from the 1960s onwards—against dogmatism.


214 Hristo Radevski as quoted in Nataliya Hristova, Spetsifikata na Bulgarskoto disidentstvo: Vlast i inteligentsiya 1856-89g (Plovdiv: Letera, 2005), 286; Hristo Radevski, Razgovor sus sebe si: Nepublikuvan dnevnik (Sofia: Zakhari Stoyanov, 2000), 62.
Atanas Slavov’s fascinating analysis of the Bulgarian 1960s and 1970s makes visible the rich political spectrum unfolding on the terrains of literary production. His study points to the emergence of a crucial distinction during the years after Stalin: on one side it was the elite cultural establishment, virtually all of which also held Party membership, divided itself into partiytsi, or “Party-followers,” a signifier for opportunist intellectuals attracted to the privileges and social status the Party gave access to, and on the other side were komunisti, or the “communists,” those non-conformist “old-guard Party members” who fought to reform the system from within. This distinction, in effect, detached the corrupting influence of state power from its political foundations and recuperated the socially progressive and “noble” elements of the left ideas. More importantly, it also opened space for the self-articulation of a new political subjectivity: that of the “non-aligned communists” (bezpartiyni komunisti, or non-party communists)—a young generation of intellectuals who identified as communist while retaining their distance from the Party.215

Similarly, political historian Nataliya Hristova, in her study of the Bulgarian dissident movement, skillfully captures the efforts of Bulgarian intelligentsia to argue against, maneuver around, and survive the shallow rhetorical manipulations of Stalinist discourse. Hristova focuses on the enormous political influence of a contingent of “disappointed” and radicalized first-generation Party members who challenged some of the Party’s most egregious attempts to control intellectual production by employing its well-rehearsed patronizing messages. Because of their activist record and high political posts, they were relatively immune to overly harsh punishment but nevertheless remained vulnerable to disciplinary sanctions that could prove shattering to their social existence, or rather, to their social privilege.216 Although Hristova often slips into equating anti-totalitarianism with “anti-communism” or “anti-socialism” (one may actually not be able to make this distinction without adequate theoretical vocabulary), her study captures Bulgarian intellectuals as they repeatedly insisted that discursive pluralism or heterogeneity of self-expression should not be stigmatized as anti-communist because it is communist in the most profound sense.

Consider, for example, a speech by the famous Bulgarian satirical poet and writer Radoy Ralin, a first-generation Party member and perhaps the most visible and influential dissident figure from the 1960s onwards. Pluralism of thought, he observed, does not necessarily mean “liberalism,” and just because Mao and Tito disagreed does not mean that they were not Leninists. He stated: “We don’t need to be afraid and follow a singular framework. […] Until now it was assumed that our poets need to think alike, write alike, and dream alike. We cannot and should not think alike.”217 Blaga Dimitrova, another distinguished Bulgarian writer and poet and Party member, made a similar point. At the National Meeting on the Ideological Work of the Party in 1962, called to discuss the challenges that the loosened control on public discourse posed to the legitimacy of Party monopoly, she raised her voice in a remarkably well-crafted speech:

216 On the social function of intellectuals, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Front*, 37-64; *Education and Social Mobility*, 68-88.
217 Radoy Ralin, as quoted by Hristova, *Spetsifikata na bulgarskoto disidentstvo*, 182-3.
In order to open broad horizons for creative thought, unleash initiative and energy, we need to free ourselves from the deep roots of dogmatism, schematism, and reductivism—they pull us backwards and fetter our wings. This is why we are delighted with the Central Committee’s decisions to let different perspectives clash, open space for argument and discussion grounded in the broad basis of Marxism-Leninism.\textsuperscript{218}

Giving an overview of developments in literature in the post-Stalinist period, she launched a defense of literary experiment, literary pluralism, and freedom of artistic expression aligning the new Bulgarian writers of the Thaw with Neruda, Brecht, Guillen, and Mayakovski. Unlike the formulaic and canonical renderings of socialism in socialist-realist works, she argued, the works produced by these young writers managed for the first time to capture successfully the “vibrancy” and “polyphony” of socialist reality, grasp and express its complexity, and convey its richness and depth. Writer Lyudmil Stoyanov defended such plurality differently—by insisting that every honest creation is socialist-realist \textit{by definition}.\textsuperscript{219} Their differing strategies notwithstanding, each of these arguments insisted that a plurality of perspectives was not antonymous to socialism, and that it was possible to unfold a heterogeneous field of socialist experiences while retaining the broad normative premises of the left project.

\textbf{Towards a Theory of Socialist State Governance}

Bulgarian progressive sociology from the post-Stalinist period re-appropriated Marxist critical inquiry to study the reality of social relations by deploying historical-materialist analysis as a critical tool against the ossified Stalinist philosophemes. Its analysis embraced the positivist methodologies of empirical analysis as a critical practice to arrive at a new understanding of social relations. In a sense, the authority of the positivist scientific method was employed tactically against dogmatic scholarship, against the monopoly of political power, and against the centralized state apparatus.\textsuperscript{220} Reviving a historical-materialist analysis of contemporary social relations, revisionist Marxist sociologists came up with a radical philosophy—and practice—of productive state governance intricately linked to socialist notions of social emancipation and self-realization. It opened the road to state reform, which introduced elements of grassroots community organization.

What were the parameters of the new philosophy of state governance? Borrowing from Foucault’s work on governmentality and biopolitics, anthropologists working on socialism have applied his framework to examine the biopolitical technologies of the socialist states and shed light on various questions, including, for example, how the states utilized fertility control as a way of managing social programs and of controlling social forces.\textsuperscript{221} Their work opens valuable and much needed horizons for a new perspective on the socialist state, and yet, major questions remain unexplored regarding the relevance of Foucault’s analysis of the state with respect to the

\textsuperscript{218} Blaga Dimitrova as quoted by Hristova, \textit{ibid.}, 244.
\textsuperscript{219} \textit{Ibid.}, 184.
\textsuperscript{220} A roundtable organized by the Center for the Scientific Study of Youth published on the pages of \textit{Problemi na mladezhata} openly discusses the function and strategy of sociology and empirical research \textit{vis-à-vis} the possibility of state reform. “Komsomolut i naukata za mladezhata,” \textit{Problemi na mladezhata}, 2 (1979): 15-27.
\textsuperscript{221} See footnote 213 for references.
historical conditions of socialism. At the end of his *Society Must be Defended*, Foucault himself suggests that the socialist states could be studied as biopolitical states. He observes that what had evaded the scrutiny of socialist critique were precisely the biopolitical practices of the liberal state. Further, he hypothesizes that the socialist projects had unwittingly imported the unquestioned racist premises of the biopolitical modalities of power, redeployed them, and brought them to their logical extremes in the form of purification, extermination, and cover-up murder. “[Socialism],” he argues, “inevitably reaffected or reinvested the very power-mechanisms constituted by the capitalist state or the industrial state. […] It has in fact taken [biopower] up, developed, reimplanted, and modified it in certain respects, but it has certainly not reexamined its basis or its modes of working.”

However, while keeping sight of these overlapping dimensions, a productive socialist governance would necessarily begin with a slow and careful theoretical elaboration of the disjunctures between the liberal and socialist governing modes. These disjunctures are evident in Foucault’s cursory observations on the subject, and especially in the uncertainty and long disclaimers prefacing his arguments. Some of them are worth quoting in full:

> I find this [the socialist state as a biopolitical state] very difficult to talk about. To speak in such terms is to make enormous claims. To prove the point would really take a whole series of lectures (and I would like to do them). But at least let me just say this: In general terms, it seems to me—and here, I am speculating somewhat—that to the extent that it does not, in the first instance, raise the economic or juridical problems of types of property ownership or modes of production—or to the extent that the problem of the mechanics of power or the mechanisms of power is not posed or analyzed—[socialism] inevitably reaffected or reinvested the very power-mechanisms constituted by the capitalist State or the industrial State.  

Foucault’s words betray a sense of anxiety, which reveals his awareness of the instability of this comparison and points to gaps and disjunctures worth exploring in greater detail. The question of political economy would certainly be at the center of this project. Foucault himself defines the governmental reason of the modern liberal state as internally related to political economy and to capitalist market relations. For him, liberal political economy, as the new form of knowledge on how to procure the state’s prosperity and self-enrichment, becomes an integral rather than external component to the liberal state’s logic of governance. He formulates the question the following way: “If there is political economy, what is its corresponding public law?” The first economists were also jurists, he reminded the reader, and the question of public law and political economy were almost indistinguishable. In this mutually constitutive relationship Foucault saw the genesis of an entirely different conception of freedom, which clashes with the “traditional” juridical notion that sees the place of rights as “external” to the exercise of state power (normative, natural rights, “god,” etc):

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222 Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* (New York: Picador, 2003), 261.
On the one side you have a juridical conception of freedom: every individual originally has in his possession a certain freedom, a part which he will or will not cede. On the other side, freedom is not conceived as the exercise of some basic rights, but simply as the independence of the governed with regard to government. We have therefore two absolutely heterogeneous conceptions of freedom, one based on the rights of man, and the other starting from the independence of the governed.\footnote{Ibid., 41-42.}

The second “kind” of freedom is the one that conceives of the market as “a site of justice” and “a site of jurisdiction”—price regulations, consumer protections, and others emerged because the market, rather than the state, ensured a sense of fairness and equity in the act of exchange.\footnote{Ibid., 31.} In other words, a good government is the government that takes away excesses to secure the equilibrium of market relations.

While Foucault does not address directly the problem of the generation of surplus, he ties his analysis of the population, as a category, to capitalism’s capacity to generate profit, presuming the state benefits from capital’s profit-generation. In his analysis, the liberal deployment of population is no less rational and totalizing—at least no less rational and totalizing than socialist notions of the social whole. The multitude takes the form of a fully calculable entity, which privileges the average and deemphasizes the “extremes” inhabiting the margins of its scale. This idea of the population shows no interest in the social fringes from a normative perspective; in fact, the fringes become a necessary and constitutive element in the coherence and integrity of “average.”\footnote{Foucault, \textit{Security, Territory, Population} (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 43.} Population thus remains an economic category that aids the maximization of efficiency and productivity—it remains in service of a capitalist mode of production and its ability to extract surplus.

Two years later, in a series of lectures on biopolitics, Foucault returns to the comparison between the liberal and socialist modes of governmentality, proposing a somewhat different hypothesis: the socialist states failed because they had no “autonomous” philosophy of state governance. He notes that scholars consistently identified a “lack” of a theory of the state in Marx’s work: while Marx gave us a good foundation for a critique of the liberal state in his early works, he never developed or even gave a hint of what a positive theory of the post-capitalist state could look like. However, Foucault continues, we don’t really need a theory of the state. He makes the bold—and entertaining—argument that the liberal state functions perfectly well without a theory of the state: there are liberal theories of right or the law, he observes, but since Hobbes, who was a theorist of the state but in the end a supporter of the monarchy, no liberal theory of the state has emerged.

If such an argument leaves scholars of liberal political thought hesitant, its central point remains somewhat intact: that we do not understand properly the roots of socialism’s failures. Like the liberal state, socialism does not need a theory of the state but a theory of governmentality, and
because state socialisms never had the latter, they were bound to fail. In his words, socialism “lacks not so much a theory of the state as [much as it lacks] a governmental reason, the definition of what a governmental rationality would be in socialism, that is to say, a reasonable and calculable measure of the extent, modes, and objectives of governmental action.”

Foucault in fact had planned on developing the question further: “Do socialists have a problematic of government, or do they only have a problematic of the state?” was the preliminary title of a series on the issue of socialist administration and socialist governance, which he proposed in 1983 and began collecting material on it. If we judge from his unsystematic preliminary remarks from 1976 onwards, he was most likely thinking of stressing the state’s “administrative” rationality:

[W]e have seen [socialism] function, and still see it function, within governmentalities that would no doubt fall more under what last year we called the police state, that is to say, a hyper-administrative state in which there is, so to speak, a fusion, a continuity, the constitution of a sort of massive bloc between governmentality and administration. At that point, in the governmentality of the police state, socialism functions as the internal logic of an administrative apparatus.

If the socialist state showed some signs of “governmental” rationality, Foucault saw it as an attempt to “correct” the excesses and “internal dangers” of the liberal modes of governance. In other words, if any forms of governmental rationality appeared, they were derivative rather than independent. In fact, because socialism maintained a “relationship of conformity to a text,” it was possible to question its authenticity or “essence”: “I think that if we are so strongly inclined to put to socialism this indiscreet question of truth that we never address to liberalism […] it is precisely because socialism lacks an intrinsic governmental rationality […]”

In other words, Foucault does not consider the socialist regimes capable of coming up with a logic of governance that generates, commands, and enables patterns of productive social practice beneficial to the state’s survival and endurance. He is obviously not aware of post-Stalinist theories of social governance. One wonders what he would have discovered anyway, what kinds of materials he would have come across and focused on, and whether his project might have been just a little too ambitious, considering the daunting labyrinth of bureaucratic and political obstacles western scholars had to overcome to reach the infamous archives of the Soviet and socialist states. Even then, they were faced with another puzzle: how to interpret the materials obtained through the filter of an unyielding censorship apparatus.

230 Daniel Defert in “Chronologie,” *Dits et Ecrits*, vol. 1, 62, as quoted in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 100, footnote 53.
231 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 93.
Regardless of the nature and source of his blind spots, one could note that Foucault certainly asked the right questions: “What would really be the governmentality appropriate to socialism? Is there a governmentality appropriate to socialism? What governmentality is possible as a strictly, intrinsically, and autonomously socialist governmentality?” And although he posed these questions as a way of opening a possible future for a durable socialist state, they are nevertheless questions worth testing with regards to the past, especially if we accept that the past we have created would hardly ever cease to bear on our future. The following addresses some of these questions with regard to reformist theories of state governance in post-Stalinist Bulgaria.

**A Call for Reform in the Komsomol: From Political Indoctrination to Social Governance**

In 1967 the Bulgarian state released a milestone document, *Theses on the Komsomol and Youth*. Signed by the secretary of state Todor Zhivkov but likely written in collaboration with progressive sociologists, the *Theses* called publicly for state reform and marked an important shift in state power—from ideological indoctrination to governing the social. Two central subjects became the site of state reformism from the late 1960s onwards: “youth,” or the new generation; and the Dimitrov Communist Youth Organization (*Dimitrovska Komunisticheska Mladezhi Suyuz*, or DKMS), the Party’s main youth organization responsible for the political education of youth. During the socialist years in Bulgaria, DKMS was often referred to as the Komsomol without quotation marks because it was an exact copy of the Soviet Union’s Komsomol. Under direct control of the Bulgarian Communist Party, its structure conveniently mirrored that of the Party, and, like the latter, its design and activities were driven by the totalizing ambition to incorporate every young person into its ranks. Upon turning fourteen, every teenager would go through the collective ritual of giving pledge, receiving the Komsomol’s membership card and symbolic insignia worn at official political events. A child’s preparation to enter the Komsomol begins well before they reach the age of fourteen. All children between seven and fourteen years old participated first in the Chavdarche and then in the Dimitrov Pioneer Organization Septemvriyche.

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236 “We should simply and always ask socialism: So, what is this necessarily extrinsic governmentality that makes you function and only within which you can function? And if this kind of question seems to smell too much of resentment, let us put the question in a more general way, and more turned towards the future: What would really be the governmentality appropriate to socialism? Is there a governmentality appropriate to socialism? What governmentality is possible as a strictly, intrinsically, and autonomously socialist governmentality? In any case, we know only that if there is a really socialist governmentality, then it is not hidden within socialism and its texts. It cannot be deduced from them. It must be invented.” Ibid., 94.
238 Susan E. Reid has written on the function of the Pioneer and Komsomol organizations in governing children in post-Stalinist Soviet Union. Particularly compelling is her argument that these institutions were designated spaces for children and adolescents, and while aiming to introduce a degree of autonomy from the family, they were heavily mediated by the state. Susan E. Reid, “Khrushchev’s Children’s Paradise: The Pioneer Palace, Moscow, 1958-62,” *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, ed. David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002), 141-80. See also Hilary Pilkington, “‘The Future is Ours: Youth Culture in Russia, 1953 to the Present,” in *Russian Cultural Studies*, ed. Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 368-84.
Using the public school system as the structure for its organizational units and activity, these organizations were designed to permeate the social activity of youth in all spheres of daily life. The structure of socialist political youth organizations has often been compared to the Scout movements which took root in Eastern Europe during the early twentieth century, and while the socialist states banished and prosecuted the Scouts, researchers have shown how socialist youth organizations have borrowed directly from them and have largely preserved their structure and practices. Like the Scouts, socialist youth organizations were in charge of shaping the normative values of communities-in-formation. Their activities were focused on cultivating norms of civility in public, encouraging ethics of sociality in community settings, building social values such as love for labor and education, encouraging commitment to sports and creative activities, and finally, cultivating habits that integrate these values into the daily lives of youth. From their founding documents to their imperative slogans regularly encountered in the hallways and yards of schools, and on walls and community boards, the organizations’ primary role was to prescribe a code of conduct, organize the ethical values of the community, and cultivate a sense of responsibility and leadership. While the bylaws of each organization insisted that membership was voluntary, the strong political culture and language of patronage made it imperative that, upon exiting the “lower level” organization, children “advanced” to the next. Such design aimed to produce a “natural” continuity with the mature political organizations, and many youth later pursued political careers or simply joined the Party ranks as a common-sense path in their social self-realization as adults.

Zhivkov’s Theses openly admitted that the organization and political practices of the Komsomol had reached a state of crisis. This crisis stemmed from the generally taken-for-granted fact that for many years the Komsomol, in its structure and activity, had merely copied the Party in its commitment to “observe,” “give advice,” “exercise control,” and “give leading directions” to its members and its subordinate organizations. In other words, the Komsomol served as another instrument of political pedagogy and patronage. What was more disconcerting, Zhivkov noted, was that Komsomol activities were “emptied of meaning.” Life in the Komsomol was plagued by idleness and lack of vitality, and the social activity of youth occurred elsewhere, outside the

240 Consider, for example, some of the duties of the pioneer from the bylaws (Ustav) of the Pioneer Organization Septemvriyche. Revised according to the new governing principles of youth, the document outlined the pledge, symbols, rights, and duties of its members: “[It is the Pioneer’s duty to] cultivate within herself the qualities of socialist personhood—honesty, love for labor, kindness, civil dignity, [and] justice; to be a loyal comrade and friend, to help the elderly and young children, to be modest and self-critical, uncompromising towards her own flaws and the flaws of her friends, to fight with those who break norms of behavior at school and on the street, to fight against idleness, laziness, rudeness, and egotism”; “[It is the Pioneer’s duty to] serve as an example in study and work; to study consciously and in-depth the […] foundations and the latest achievements of science and technology; to constantly improve the quality of that which is her biggest priority—education; to use her time sparingly and divide it with balance among activities, to be disciplined and organized, to learn how to think and act creatively; to cultivate curiosity towards the new and the undiscovered, to enrich her interests and her general culture in the spheres of science, technology, literature, art, as well as to participate actively in kruzhoks [extracurricular skill-oriented classes], clubs, councils; to develop her capacities.” From *Ustav na Dimitrovskata Pionerska Organizaciya Septemvriyche.*  
reach of the organization. Calling for ways “to do away with this abnormal situation,” Zhivkov advised the Komsomol to step away from its patronizing role, that is, its function of “leading” and “enlightening” the young generations. It is high time, he continued, that the Komsomol begin “catching up with the interests and capacities of youth, [...] harmonizing [its efforts] with the multifarious (vrestranni) pursuits and aspirations (stremezhi) of youth.”

Admitting the failures and insufficiencies of the “ideological enlightenment” approach, Zhivkov called on the state to abandon its top-down model of discipline and instead assume a regulating and enabling role, arguing that this would be the most effective way to “convert” or “recreate” (pretvoryavat) politics into life. Instead, the state would be expected to take full responsibility to provide the material and cultural conditions for the socialist subject’s experience of social emancipation, and to fulfill her professional aspirations, and her social and cultural needs. The state would need to remove all “impediments” (i.e. all factors that would slow or limit the socialist person’s aspirations for autonomy and empowerment), and at the same time assist the subject in inventing herself as part of a process of social integration.

The Beginnings of a Marxist Social Critique of Socialist Relations

The Theses, and the question of youth more generally, opened a terrain for social critique, which progressive Marxist sociologists skillfully interpreted as an invitation to revive a historical materialist analysis of contemporary social relations. Zhivkov maintained that during the first twenty years of socialist development society had changed tremendously: qualitative and quantitative changes in developing socialist societies had unleashed new social forces with creative potential, and, having found no realization, they had entered into antagonistic relations with the state’s existing institutions and practices. The Theses made an important public concession—the existence of the so-called “small truth.” The “small truth” was that, in reality, the socialist states were plagued by negative social phenomena that hindered socialism’s progress towards its “higher stage.” The small truth acknowledged “vices” such as the epidemic practices of nepotism and favoritism and the “informal” appropriation of goods from state-owned enterprises through personal or familial connections (the so-called “second networks,” a ubiquitous phenomenon across all socialist states). Progressive sociologists finally managed to...

242 Zhivkov, Theses, 17.
243 Ibid., 16.
244 Ibid.
245 Ibid., 28.
246 Ibid., 14.
247 Vera Staevska has recently finished a case study of the question of youth in Bulgaria, attempting a discursive analysis of the category in official state policy throughout the years of communist rule. She reads it through Paul Ricoeur and argues that it retains a utopian element, functioning as a mechanism of ideological legitimation. This is precisely the approach I would like to avoid here in order to understand how the concept contributed to a critical rethinking of Stalinist philosophy and how it provided the terrain for testing revisionist interpretations of Marxism. A central argument in this chapter has been that, contrary to readings such as Staevska’s, via the problematic of youth revisionists put behind the Stalinist function of knowledge as an “ideological indoctrination” and instead recovered knowledge’s potential for a critical understanding of social relations and its capacity to bring about social change. Vera Staevska, “Metamorfozite na mladezhta v ofitsialniya diskurs na BKP—’Noviyat chovek’ na bulgarskiya komunisticheski proekt kato ‘stroitel,’ ‘dostoyna smyana’ i ‘zhizneradostno-druznoven’ tvorets,” Altera Akademika II 3, 7 (2008): 79-135.
convince the state leadership that these “vices” were not, as Stalinist discourse would label them, remnants of bourgeois social relations or reactionary social elements that needed to be exterminated by waging a war on the class enemy. In other words, they were not external to socialism, but on the contrary—they were social phenomena internal to the particular social organization of the system and the unintended effects of the system’s internal organization. Such concession was unthinkable within the framework of the Stalinist doctrine, and discussions related to the “small truth” could only be whispered in the informal spaces of close circles.

Sociologists eagerly took the opportunity to begin a critical analysis of contemporary socialist relations by studying networks of privilege and patterns of unequal access specific to socialism, and by addressing social inequality and dynamics of power arising from within the very conditions of socialism. Mincho Semov, a leading sociologist who pioneered some of the revisionist work and reformist efforts in the sphere of youth and the Komsomol, noted that it was time to begin a dialogue with the young generation over “failures,” “weaknesses,” and “flaws”—because youth is at the heart of contemporary social contradictions, and “contradictions comprise the actual, real driving force of our contemporary society, and society in general.” Thus, youth emerged both as a new and autonomous collective subject and a new category of social analysis, in order to articulate a crucial disjuncture—disjuncture coming from the fact that contemporary social reality has superseded the state’s existing forms of social organization and come into conflict with it. During the two decades between 1961 and 1980 sociologists conducted a tremendous amount of empirical research and theorizing framed around the question of youth. Preceded by smaller research projects under the auspices of more popular youth periodicals such as Mladezhta and Narodna Mladezhta throughout the 1960s, in 1969 the Komsomol opened the National Institute for Research on Youth (renamed to Center for Scientific Research on Youth in 1974), and later, in 1971, launched the academic journal Problemi na mladezhta (Inquiries on


Youth). The latter became the public terrain for discussions, for testing out ideas, and for publicizing the results of numerous ambitious multi-year projects conducted by teams of scientists, often interdisciplinary, on youth and creative self-activity, youth and tourism, the formation of professional leadership among young specialists in industry, the role of higher education in social integration, and so on.\textsuperscript{250} From 1978 onwards, the Komsomol press Narodna Mladež dedicated a book series to research on youth, publishing dozens of collected essays and single-author books. Sometimes the studies simply collect data. Without being too analytical, they aim to capture collective experiences to piece together “a scientifically grounded portrait” of contemporary social relations from the perspective of the new generation.\textsuperscript{251} They describe youth as a collective subject whose capacity to revolutionize existing social forms was both a threat and a resource to be productively explored. Resting on the premise that youth is neither fully contained nor containable, they see it as a force exerting its own resistance and friction, a force that constantly rearticulates itself vis-à-vis existing conditions, a force generating unpredictable social effects and requiring serious analysis and understanding. In a sense, this work offered the first attempt to incorporate historical contingency into the philosophy of socialist development, resulting in a push for progressive state reform.

Astonishing contrasts begin to appear on the pages of scholarly periodicals from the late 1960s onwards: while Filosofska misul, the official Marxist-Leninist journal, continues to wage wars against class enemies and degrading bourgeois influences, patronize its peers, and promise unconditional loyalty to the Soviet state, Problemi na mladežta, the new journal for progressive sociology, enters the fabric of everyday life with a new conceptual vocabulary. Opening up to a historical reality defiant and unknown yet profoundly socialist, its pages explore the unforeseen effects of twenty years of industrialization and urbanization, the crisis in the patriarchal system of social reproduction, the mechanisms of adaptation and persistence of traditional social practices and new values emerging in the new social conditions.

All this work certainly did not mean to question, undermine, or unsettle the “marriage” between knowledge production and the state. An effort by progressive Marxists, it succeeded in turning the tables on the Party, and, by using the “weapon” of scientific inquiry, it pushed for state reforms, calling on the state to loosen political control. However, it never made an explicit call for democratizing political power and question the vanguardist role of the Party. Bulgarian sociologist Petur-Emil Mitev, a leading theorist in the revisionist Marxist circles and a scholar with enormous institutional power, made this point while reminiscing on the new role of sociology: “The sociologist could contribute with something substantial: to ease or limit the repressive actions of the apparatus in a certain sphere or a certain situation, counteract the system’s degeneration, and work towards its reform, first and foremost by increasing opportunities for gaining rational knowledge of contemporary social relations as they are.”\textsuperscript{252} Mitev’s concrete example is quite telling: On a morning of May 1974, in response to the state’s


disciplinary actions against the youth, Sofia woke up spray-painted with political graffiti. “Today hair, tomorrow heads!” (“Dnes kosite, utre glavite”)—read one of the graffiti, referring to the actions of the so-called “fashion police,” which patrolled public spaces, using scissors to cut off hair and clothes worn in the western 1970s style. The state still feared the specter of the 1968 worldwide social movements—and especially the Prague Spring events of the same year—and the “fashion police” action was taken in an effort to control public appearance, at that time influenced by the youth subcultures of the late 1960s and early 1970s.253 These laconic words, composed in memorable rhymes and rhythms, stood as a reminder of a disturbing continuity, or more properly, of the short distance separating political censorship from the return of mass political murder under Stalin. Mitev remembers other spray-painted graffiti: “Solzhenitsin is a hero,” or “simply,” “Liberte.”254 Worried that the state would respond heavy-handedly by launching another cycle of disciplinary actions and prosecutions, sociologists “urgently” (in their own words) designed anonymous questionnaires, conducted some fieldwork interviews, and delivered the results of their study to the Komsomol leadership: young people were not against “the system” but “against concrete repressive measures.”255

In other words, in the absence of a collective self-governance system, sociology assumed an important political function: convincing the state to take a more self-reflexive approach, it introduced an element of mediation between state policy and the collective will of the youth, and offered itself as a corrective or a “feedback” mechanism.256 Of course, these maneuvers were preservationist, staying safely within the confines of socialist reformism. Sociologists argued that maintaining a balance between institutionalized and informal structures of social activity would restore a certain equilibrium and avoid social antagonism, creating a certain durability of state power.257 They stopped short of calling for radical political reform. Many would argue that, considering the conditions of severe state repression, such calls would have been unthinkable (of course one wonders what the “right” conditions for open revolt would be), but they nevertheless managed to turn the tables on the authoritarian political structure of the state. Arguing that the

253 Having supported the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, the Bulgarian state had portrayed the Prague protests as a counter-revolutionary political statement influenced by the degrading influences of bourgeois western youth movements. In the last several years Bulgarian intellectuals have opened an ongoing discussion on the Bulgarian 1968, which I will be addressing elsewhere.

254 Mitev, “Sotsialisticheskata mladezh i vtorata mrezha,” 137.


256 Reflecting on the tenth anniversary of the Institute for Scientific Research on Youth, Mitev observes: “The place, role, and significance of sociological research of youth […] serves the purpose of providing a ‘feedback connection’ in the mechanism of governance, which gives leadership the opportunity to take into account the public need, mood, and opinion. […] That way sociological research becomes an example of the internal connection between socialist democracy and scientifically informed state governance.” Mitev, “Deset godini institutualizirani izsledvaniya na mladezhata,” Problemi na mladezhta 5-6 (1978): 23.

257 Arguing for balance, some sociologists warned that “[i]f one tries to regulate too much informal groups by converting them into regular public organizations, then new nodes of informal activity would emerge to restore the informal social structure.” Valentina Alekseeva and Anatoliy Harchev, “Tsennostnite orientatsii na uchlastite se ot gradskite uchilishta i PTU v sferata na svobodnoto vreme,” Problemi na mladezhta 2 (1977):13-17.
system’s survival was dependent on reorganizing social institutions according to a contingent and unpredictable historical process rather than a teleological movement of history, their work turned the will of the collective subject into an agent indispensable to the survival of state power.

**Social Totality beyond the Class Antagonism: the Socialist Human**

In post-Stalinist Bulgaria, the paradigm of youth offers one of the most fascinating manifestations of post-Stalinist socialist humanism. Petur-Emil Mitev, who spearheaded subsequent research on youth, pointed out that “a new perception begins to establish itself,” namely, “that [in our society] the social world is a product of human activity, that humans can change and improve [their social conditions] as a result of [their] own activity, and that personal contribution and initiative is a necessary element in collective endeavor of group, class, and social activity.” In other words, the paradigm of youth gave progressive social theorists the opportunity to construct and imagine a subject whose agency—collective and personal—became a driving motor of social change for the first time in socialist history.

In the numerous theoretical debates and empirical studies between 1961 and the early 1980s, the question of what youth “is” was riddled with uncertainties, and was variously defined as a social, ontological, demographic, or “gerontological” category. Regardless of these uncertainties, youth emerged as a subject who could no longer be contained within the category of class. This should not be surprising, since the generation which became the subject—and agent—of social reformism in the late 1960s was the first generation born and brought up under socialist conditions. The generation of the 1960s loomed on the horizon as the first historical subject living and embodying the new social relations, and while it posed no substantial threat to the political foundations of the regime, it completely defied its most central category of social analysis—that of class, or more properly, class antagonism. Youth appeared as a subject who, having successfully transcended class antagonisms, embodied a totality of new, classless social relations. A microcosmic conglomeration of various social tendencies, it contained within itself society’s internal logic and integrity, and expressed the diverse yet fully integrated classless social whole—including all of its contradictions and heteronomous aspects.

Thus youth appeared as a subject too complex to be seen as homogeneous, yet a subject possessing its own distinct identity, a subject profoundly unknown yet distinctly socialist. In a sense, it emerged on the social terrain like a puzzle, forcing social thinkers to put aside the Stalinist language of class war, class enemies, and the rhetoric of political demonization for the sake of gaining a better understanding of new social phenomena and dynamics “on the ground.” Defying previous understanding, it demanded to be taken and studied on its own terms. Hence

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258 Mitev, “Problemi na aktivnata zhiznena pozitsiya na mladata lichnost,” in *Mladezhta—problemi i izsledvaniya*, 135.

259 Consider, for example, Mitev’s conclusion when asked to elaborate on the relationship between youth and class. “In other words, we have a historical process which has more or less homogenized the generation and has transformed it into a separate social group. It is precisely this process that marks the beginning of the new phase of socialism. Overcoming the class antagonism means that class differentiation decreases. At the same time, generational differentiation becomes more significant.” From the perspective of Stalinist Marxism such utterance would be unthinkable heresy as it undermines the emphasis on class war. Mitev, “Marks i mladezhta: Diskusiya,” *Problemi na mladezhta* 3 (1984): 33.
Zhivkov’s advice to Party committees in the Theses: “[o]ur task is to comprehend deeply into the specificity of the young generation’s life”\(^\text{260}\) and “to know well the problems of the Komsomol and youth, to study the social processes they undergo and the questions immediately concerning the young generations.”\(^\text{261}\)

Emancipated from older patriarchal family relations via socialist urbanization, industrialization, education, and the social welfare system, the young socialist subject was a “free” person. She was free in a sense that she experienced herself as a socially independent and empowered person capable of owning her future.\(^\text{262}\) Carrying with themselves “a fire” and “creative force,” the young generation could not simply be told what to do. The historical subject called “youth” was marked by determination and independent will, it possessed transformative energies, which could be productively utilized only through institutional change that captured and channeled its potentiality. “More trust in the Komsomol, more trust in Youth!”—the Theses proclaimed, while adding, “[t]his should not be just a slogan; Party organs, state and public institutions, need to materialize this call, infuse it with concrete meaning, and embrace it as a guiding principle in their concrete, practical work with youth.”\(^\text{263}\)

Concepts such as “self-activity,” “active life position,” “self-realization,” and “personal initiative” entered the vocabulary of sociologists to recover the agency of the ordinary subject in everyday practice. Problemi na mladezhata periodically published discussions on how to combine the more traditionally collected positive data with analysis drawn from participatory observation, from personal diaries, correspondence, and confessional material, in order to develop a “psychological portrait” of the generation—in other words, to capture the subject’s personal and social experience.\(^\text{264}\) Later, in the early 1980s, this line of inquiry would open up some theoretical interest in phenomenological approaches to the question of ordinary, everyday life. Indirectly influenced by Husserl, Heidegger, and Alfred Schutz, the sociology of the everyday introduced an element of contingency, opening discussions about the subject’s agency as she participated in, rearticulated, and subverted existing structures of power in her daily activity.\(^\text{265}\)

Some of the more theoretically articulate writings from the 1970s put forward proposals for social regulation that embraced forms of self-organization and introduced grassroots and participatory elements. Sociologist Ovidiu Badina argued that the success of the socialist order depended entirely on youth’s active self-realization: “the self-realization of youth is an important

\(^{260}\) Zhivkov, Theses, 59.

\(^{261}\) Ibid.

\(^{262}\) Mincho Semov, “Promenite v mladezhda,” in Mladezhta—problemi i izsledvaniya, 8.

\(^{263}\) Zhivkov, Theses, 59.


\(^{265}\) Sociology of the everyday contributes tremendously to overcoming the rigidity of Stalinist conceptual understanding in Bulgarian social theory. Among the significant theoretical contributions on the question of the everyday is the conference “Marx and the question of the everyday,” held in 1983 as part of the yearly seminars in Gyolechitsa. For a report on the conference and summary of some of the papers, see Filosofska Panorama 3 (1984): 21-37; for full publication of selected papers, Kolyo Koev, ed., Sotsiologicheski pregled, special issue (1984). See also Kolyo Koev, Metamorfozite na chuzhdenetsa (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo Kliment Ohridski, 1991); Elementarni formi na vsekidnevni zhivot: Max Weber i nemskoto sotsialnomauchno poznание ot kraya na XIX i nachaloto na XX vek (Sofia: Prosveta, 2003).
question of social development, because the social-political system, the level of social-economic development, the cultural features of our society, and the level of our democratization—all this depends on the active, daring (boyko) self-realization of young people.” In other words, the subject’s agency, her social and personal investment became a measure of the “system’s” effectiveness and significance. Mitev wrote an open critique of the approaches of the annual political education program, called the Political Academic Year (Politecheska Uchebna Gonina, known as PUG)—Mitev being a well-respected second-generation Party figure certainly helped. “Our research shows,” he concludes, that “the [current] system of PUG makes the skeptics even more skeptical, the conformists even more conformist, and the disappointed—even more disappointed. [...] This can only be explained with the fact that the system itself is insufficiently connected to the social initiative of youth.” He argued that unless the state embraced a bottom-up approach, “skepticism would settle”; this skepticism would render the efforts of political education completely ineffective and undermine the legitimacy of the socialist project. Mitev noted that, furthermore, “[t]he problem deepens all the more in the case of disappointed innovators,” carefully implying that this would not only be incompatible with socialist practice but could pose direct threat to the political legitimacy of the state. Mitev recalled Anton Makarenko, an early twentieth-century Ukrainian educator and founder of Soviet experimental pedagogy, to argue against educational models that interpellate their subjects as passive recipients of the normative system: Makarenko’s “pedagogical miracle [...] contains the following ‘secret’—it refuses to treat its students simply as objects of training, but instead lets them embrace an active position. How much moral power one discovers in the hearts of those young ‘criminals’!” For Mitev this theoretical understanding differs from both bourgeois and dogmatic–left formulations. “The ‘youth activity’ of Mao’s demagogy is nothing more than the activity of cogs in a military-bureaucratic apparatus.” In his view, the political “superstructure” found itself inevitably intertwined with and realized as social practice, mobilizing the subject’s personal and collective agency.

In the late 1970s, the official public message addressing youth changed from “Education and Labor, Labor and Education!” to “Education and Labor, Exuberance and Audaciousness!” (Uchenie i trud, zhizneradostnost i druznovenie!). Those who grew up in the 1980s would certainly smile with a mix of nostalgia and irony when reminded of this ubiquitous slogan appearing on textbooks, bulletin boards, school buses, and other public spaces, but few would be aware that the latter two words—”exuberance” (zhizneradostnost) and “audaciousness” (druznovenie)—introduced a significant break with the canonical vocabulary, thanks to the persistent efforts of the progressive sociologists. Those involved in the efforts to open up the

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266 Ovidiu Badina, “Mladiyat chovek, sotsialnata aktivnost, realizatsiyata: Diskusiya,” in Mladezhta—problemi i izsledvaniya, 47.
267 Mitev, “Kakvo oznachava aktivnata zhiznen pozitsiya na mladata lichnost,” in Mladezhta—problemi i izsledvaniya 144.
268 Ibid., 143.
269 Ibid.
270 Ibid., 145.
271 Mitev, “Deset godini tezisi na TsK na BKP za rabota s mladezhta i komsomola, 6-12.
272 The slogan became the title of Zhivkov’s famous open address to the Komsomol from 1978. Todor Zhivkov, Uchenie i trud, zhizneradostnost i druznovenie: Pismo do TsK na DKMS (Sofia, Partizdat, 1978). “Education and Labor, Exuberance and Audaciousness!” is the closest translation I can offer, with the help of valuable suggestions by Vessela Valiavitcharska and Miglena Ivanova.
official language report that the term “audaciousness” was particularly contentious—it made the high-rank Party order nervous as it could easily encourage defiance among youth. And yet, sociologists insisted on these terms to underscore the new emphasis on the subjective dimension of social relations—a theoretical turn marking the beginning of a historical-materialist revision of the base-superstructure relationship. This revision aimed to revive the dialectical aspects of Marxist materialist thought, but what is more interesting, it placed emphasis on the subjectivating capacities of the organization of labor and the material domain. Mitev’s work from the late 1970s refuted the “primitive notion” that “socialism consists of factories and assembly lines only. It is worth reminding ourselves the ABC of historical materialism: socialism—these are new social relations.” “Indeed,” he continues,

the social effect of the first brigade movements was much bigger and more important than the economic one. Our youth’s slogan ‘We build the passageway—the passageway builds us!’ was genuine and meaningful. The first phase of the brigade movement was an example of true social creativity, creativity that proved immensely influential for the entire society, the entire social climate, the entire social relations. With the voluntary labor of youth the brigades were breaking down age-old barriers separating the person from society.

From now on, socialist relations could no longer be thought outside the subject’s experience of autonomy and power, outside her sense of personhood, community, and dependence, in short, outside the crucial dimension that takes into account the subject’s agency and self-constitution. Socialism no longer involved eradicating class divisions, delivering material equality “objectively,” and bringing the state one step closer to the objective evolution of material relations through the next five-year plan or the next wave of collectivization. Instead, the specific organization of productive forces and material relations became a person-making and a relation-forming medium with the capacity to define our sense of autonomy, dependency, and togetherness, interpellate the self in relation to a collective order, and redefine our social practices.

**Holistically Developed Persons: Education, Labor, and Leisure in Symbiosis**

Because post-Stalinist Marxists saw productive human activity as a social rather than an economic category, the normative foundations of their theories of state governance were fundamentally humanist. The socialist person was a “holistically developed person” (*vsestranno razvitia lichnost*)—a concept which revived and reinvented the Renaissance version of the human being, whose harmoniously developed capacities became an expression of man’s universal condition. In the socialist context, the holistically developed person embodied a micro-universe of sorts through her purposive self-activity, reintegrating the differentiated social activities within herself to restore the social whole. Mitev argued that through her agency, the socialist individual

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273 Interview with Mitev, March 2009.
275 Ibid., 6-7.
reunites separate spheres of human existence which have been historically
fragmented, even juxtaposed or antagonized—the family, the professional sphere,
and public-political sphere. In this sense, the active life position means the
multifarious development of the person, and the public attention [the concept of
multifarious development] is recently gaining shows that a moment will come
when the holistic and harmonious human will enter the historical stage and
become its main actor.277

Similarly, Marxist-feminist sociologist Svoboda Puteva wrote:

the ideal of socialist humanism is the dialectical totality of the laboring, political,
and exuberant human—in other words, the harmoniously developed person, who
engages in creative activity in all aspects of human life—in labor, in public life, in
science, culture, entertainment. Such dialectical totality is expressed both through
the external products of social activity—the products of labor, public life, and
relations with others, and through the subjective experience of the person […]278

Returning to social analysis grounded in decidedly humanist terms, post-Stalini
Marxist notions of human freedom aimed to abolish boundaries between different human activities to embody the
dialectical totality of the social. However, this new notion of socialist freedom became
inseparable from a practice of social normalization. As one theoretical essay from the early
1980s argues, the ultimate goal of socialist governance was the complete convergence between
human self-realization and socialization, and this overlap expressed the socialist understanding
that human freedom is inherently linked to the production of regimes of normality.279 In other
words, human self-realization and freedom emerged through the person’s successful social
integration in a governable, integral social fabric that is totalized yet differentiated, non-
antagonized yet heterogeneous, integrated yet diverse. This concept of social totality generated
its own categories of social “deviation” and patterns of segregation and exclusion, which
intersected with racialized, ethnicized, and gendered bodies. Their enforcement through the law
and the police was an integral part of the project.280

Education, labor, and leisure were the three spheres of social activity seen as main components
constitutive of the holistic experience of the socialist human, the human who achieves full
emancipation and self-fulfillment through maximum social integration and social mobility. In
developed socialist relations, these three aspects of human activity—education, labor, and
leisure—were to be organized in harmony and symbiosis. Numerous empirical analyses were

277 Mitev, “Problemi na aktivnata zhiznena pozitsiya na mladata lichnost,” in Mladezhta—problemi i izsledvaniya, 136.
completed during the 1970s and 1980s, subjecting the study and regulation of social activity to this normative framework. Such is, for example, the new vision of education: moving away from an understanding of education as a political indoctrination tool, post-Stalinist visions of state governance viewed education as an engine of social mobility and an institutional framework for a person-forming experience. Mihail Stefanov argued that one entered college overdetermined by family background and social status, a social position that limited the realization of the full potentials of the “individual.” Upon graduation, however, one was already a fully reinvented person prepared to enter professional life on his or her own terms.281 Similarly, Mitev defined education as a means of “creating equal opportunities for [social integration] by removing social obstacles, by offering free education and other necessary material conditions (stipends, housing, cafeteria) for students.”282 Education became a crucial mechanism for eliminating the reproduction of social inequality where “the social basis which gives priority of one over another not according to their abilities but according to their status, disappears.”283 Mitev noted that while aiming to eliminate class difference, “socialist homogenization is not meant to be a lever, it is called to compensate with social opportunities where individual ones are not equal.” Thus education, while taking an increasingly homogenizing role, became also a means of social differentiation: “starting in secondary and even primary education, [it becomes] a differentiating approach designed to develop the potentials of the individual.”284

Labor was subject to a similar governing logic: although labor remained a central category in sociological analysis from the 1960s and 1970s, it was not focused on the efficiency and rationalization of production, but on the professional and social self-realization of the socialist person. Because labor acquired social value, it served primarily as a vehicle for personal self-affirmation and social self-realization. And finally, both labor and education were unthinkable outside the problem of leisure and extracurricular activity.285 If the socialist division of labor required high degree of specialization and early professionalization in school, leisure and extracurricular activities became the compensatory aspects that “captured” and channeled the social energy left unexpressed in the professional life of the individual. Puteva argued:

[I]eisure time needs to be coordinated with all other functional systems of the person’s material environment—including labor and domestic life—which determine the functional unity of the person’s way of life. Only then will the problem of leisure become incorporated into the complex problems of material

283 Ibid.
284 Ibid., 7. Interestingly, some studies on the pages of Problemi na mladezhta address emerging patterns of social reproduction of the intelligentsia, noting that the children of intellectuals are more likely to pursue career in academia. The inconclusive debates make it unclear whether the intellectuals of the 1970s found this a disturbing development or not, but in positions such as Mitev’s one could see first steps towards a critical analysis of the emergence and persistence of new patterns of social status and social privilege.
285 Notions of labor in post-Stalinist theoretical work and empirical research on labor deserve a more detailed analysis, which I am hoping to develop elsewhere.
life, only then will it find its own organic connection with the remaining components of the socialist way of life. 

Recovering the humanist aspects of the concepts of labor and alienation in Marx’s early works, she defined leisure as a measure of social wealth: because the essence of leisure was men’s activity freed from the objectifying and alienating force of the wage labor form, leisure was therefore a measure of freedom. However, leisure could function as a measure of freedom only if it contributed to the reproduction of positive social values—hence it also needed to be governed. And most importantly, because the activity of labor under socialism was subordinated to a logic of personal and social self-realization, oppositions between labor and leisure disappeared, entering a symbiotic relationship of mutual complementarity in what would emerge as a specifically socialist culture of work and entertainment.

A series of empirical projects from the 1970s and 1980s focused on studying leisure patterns and designed proposals for governing leisure—a result of the state’s efforts to reduce the socially necessary labor time while introducing social services such as the three-year maternity leave (eight months of which were covered at minimum-wage), the five-day work week, the seven-hour workday, and the twenty-day paid vacation time. Dozens of collectives of sociologists conducted descriptive empirical studies, usually followed by a set of recommendations, operating on the notion that the working person’s leisure time, seen both as social wealth and a social value, is a socially necessary element in the development of socialist personhood and the “socialist way of life.” For instance, to examine the structure of leisure, Ivan Velev studied the young person’s “time budget” and argued that it should be harmoniously distributed to reproduce different aspects of social life in a balanced and reciprocal way. He collected statistical data on a wide range of activities, from attending movie theaters, art shows, dance clubs, soccer games, and live music, to reading fiction, socializing, drinking, and gardening. Focusing on gaps between the “actual” and desired time spent on these and a host of other activities, the study concludes somewhat tautologically that “from the perspective of the holistically developed person,” one should strive for a balanced and harmonious combination.

Some of these studies put forward a decisively feminist perspective, opening up the question of women’s social emancipation understood not only as women’s social integration but also as women’s opportunity to develop as holistic and harmonious socialist humans. In her research on young professional women working in the so-called “light” industry (manufacturing), feminist sociologist Svoboda Puteva showed that women’s successful professional realization depended on their “harmonious development as creative persons in her leisure time” and argued that the

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288 Miglena Nikolchina has given us a short and entertaining description of the blurred boundaries between leisure and work, between personal and professional life during late socialism. Miglena Nikolchina, Zapadut kato intelektualna utopiya: Izgubenite ednorozii na revolyutsiyata (unpublished manuscript, 2010).
state should immediately provide the necessary conditions for expanded leisure time for women. Maria Dinkova’s early 1970s critical study of inter-generational family relations rested on similar normative premises. She showed how newly professionalized women relied heavily on their parents for reproductive labor, a pattern of dependence that remained an obstacle to the new generation’s emancipation and to higher social mobility. Dinkova argued that social reproduction occurring in the sphere of private-familial relationships remained a function of the private ownership social system. The more public institutions stepped in to provide the material needs for the “physical and spiritual reproduction of society,” the more traditional patriarchal relations would recede into the background, giving way to wider horizons for youth, and therefore, to higher social mobility. Dinkova proposed a well-functioning public system of credit and finance to provide young families with the minimum required housing and furniture, and stressed the need for more childcare centers, kindergartens, and longer maternity leave.

Some of the central “practical” concerns of these studies included how to reduce domestic housework (which usually fell on women’s shoulders). By placing professional labor at the center of women’s emancipation while endorsing the gendered dimensions of domestic and reproductive labor, the state made the project of socialist women’s liberation a contradictory experience. While they failed to examine critically the state’s dual discourse on women as both mothers and workers, these studies show concern for the infamous “double burden” on women, urging the state to triple the production of modern household equipment so that every household could acquire a washing machine, a refrigerator, a TV, and a car. The concept potreblenie, the socialist word for “consumption,” a carefully selected term emphasizing the product’s relationship to domestic needs and personal use while avoiding associations with the commodity form and capitalist consumer culture—entered the vocabulary of the social sciences. The 1970s

292 The study shows that as of 1972 public daycare availability had the capacity to accommodate only 20 percent of all kids under 3 years old, and 55 percent of 3-7 years old. An expansive network with virtually 100 percent capacity was developed in less than 10 years. Maria Dinkova, “Semeystvoto i sotsialnata realizatsiya na mladiya chovek,” Mladezhta—Probelmi i izsledvaniya, 57-73. Also see Kristen Ghodsee, “Red Nostalgia? Communism, Women’s Emanicipation, and Economic Transformation in Bulgaria,” L’Homme: Zeitschrift für Feministische Geschichtswissenschaft 15, 1 (2004): 23-36.
saw a thriving leisure and tourism culture, a boom in the production of goods and household utilities, and the development of popular music, film, and entertainment industries as part of the state’s efforts to produce the experience of the modern, emancipated socialist human.  

In addition to improved and modernized standards of living, the holistically developed person required spaces for intellectual and creative work, and the state opened a variety of programs using the existing infrastructural facilities of the Komsomol. The latter emerged as a reinvented institution to experiment with new forms of social governance. Its programs, formerly limited to meetings, events, and trips with political content, entered all spheres of public and community life of the young generation, aiming to provide the material conditions that would enable the subject to invent herself as a socialist person. Over the years the Komsomol built and opened centers for extracurricular and recreational activities, known as the Youth Centers for Science, Technology, and the Arts (Centur za Tehnichesko i Nauchno Tvorchestvo na Mladezhta, or simply, the TNTM Centers), offering free or low-cost open access extracurricular workshops (kruzhoks) in arts and crafts, photography and film-making, science and technology, math, chess, astronomy, and many others, depending on community initiative and the local availability of knowledge resources. In 1966, the Komsomol launched the Bulgarian Youth Tourism agency Orbita, and over the next fifteen years it built an expansive material infrastructure for mountain hiking and recreation, including roads, transportation, hostels, mountain huts, and camp sites, making virtually every corner of the country accessible for recreation activities. An indispensable component of the “multifarious development” of youth, Orbita was involved in the production of national geography and landscape, providing an experience that was national yet distinctly socialist.

**Autonomous Subjects during Late Socialism: the “Seminar” Culture of the 1980s**

After 1989, Bulgarian intellectuals have written various accounts of the “dissident” and “differently thinking” [inakomisleshti] movements of the 1980s, of the spaces of radical rethinking of existing discursive limitations, and of the establishment of informal political organizations. Accounts of the intellectual life of the 1980s describe a diverse and eclectic intellectual community, which cultivated a culture of defiance and formed the backbone of the progressive intellectual circles during late socialism. According to some, it became a central

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295 On various aspects of socialist modernity as experienced in the GDR, see the collection of essays by Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, eds., *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics.*


actor in the demise of the totalitarian state. A new generation of sociologists, philosophers, and critical theorists, active in the early 1980s, developed a vibrant intellectual scene, what has been called the “Seminar culture.” Miglena Nikolchina, one of the visible members of the 1980s generation, has offered a sensitive description of the “Seminar”—a loose, heterogeneous, and eclectic intellectual movement among university students, professors, artists, and intellectuals from a variety of fields. Ranging from private gatherings to meetings in university lecture halls tightly packed in the hundreds, their activities made no distinction between public events and private gatherings, and had the audacity to both inhabit and transgress a variety of institutional, literary, and disciplinary forms. Their intellectual endeavors indicate an expanded theoretical vocabulary and emphasis on experimentation in reading, conversing, and interpretation. Among their most remarkable activities was the famous Marxian Seminar, which started in the university seminar rooms and continued with annual gatherings at the university recreational facility “Gyolechica” located in the Rila Mountains—an international event, similar to the Praxis school gatherings in Korchulanci, which made theoretically groundbreaking contributions. Marxist philosopher Deyan Deyanov, one of the founders of the seminar, described this context as “our 1968 prolonged and stretched through the 1970s and 1980s.” Through discussions of Husserl and Heidegger, Weber, and Mamardashvili, they introduced conceptual categories such as “the everyday” and “the lived world” (zhiznen svyat) and refocused their inquiries onto the contested terrains of micropractices in the everyday lives of ordinary people.

These accounts reveal a bonding experience and a strong sense of community, experiences of strong relationships, friendships, and conflicts. In the words of Alexander Kiossev, one of the founders of the radical “postmodern” circle Sintez, “[t]his was as much discussing-things-together as it was living together, and everyone—under the influence of the other, under the influence of their own influences reflected in the other, etc—was gradually losing (obliterating) his traditional, ideologically and professionally permissible profile, fixed by the totalitarian surroundings.” A sense of emancipation permeates their writings. Regardless of their somewhat arrogant tone and lack of coherence or philosophical rigor, their texts are documents that reveal the intensity of the late socialist experience of collective autonomy and empowerment.

300 Miglena Nikolchina, Zapadut kato intelektualna utopiya.
302 Interview with Deyan Deyanov, March, 2009.
303 Svetla Koleva, Sotsiologiyata kato proekt, 163-70. Koleva’s reading of these intellectual shifts is indebted to Simona Treneva’s field research material for her master’s thesis on the synthesis of sociology and phenomenology in Bulgarian sociological thought. See Treneva’s essay “Za edna alternativa na ofitsialnata bulgarska sotsiologiya v kraya na 70-te i prez 80-te godini na XX vek,” Sotsiologicheski problemi 3-4 (2005): 287-301.
304 Kiossev, introduction to Post-Theory, Games, and Discursive Resistance, xi (original in English).
However, most accounts written by the participants in the movement have difficulty grappling with an important fact: the audacious and defiant intellectuals of the 1980s enjoyed an open terrain for intellectual experimentation, which was the result of an entire previous generation of reformist Marxists and was directly supported by the state. The founders of the Marxian Seminar remember that they requested funding from the Komsomol and acquired all due permissions by the Dean of the University.\(^\text{305}\) In fact, most of their activities inhabited the Komsomol’s vast and well-funded material infrastructure and institutional spaces in the form of seminars, summer schools, conferences, workshops, poetry clubs, and creative work retreats.

What also remains suppressed in “dissident” accounts of the 1980s is that their experience of autonomy and emancipation was designed and enabled by the state—which leads us to an important theoretical point. Conceived as a critique of the liberal notion of political autonomy, where the autonomous subject is constituted through the private sphere, understood as a political space shielded from the sight and reach of the state, the post-Stalinist socialist state forged an ambivalent relationship between subjects and state, producing an imperfect yet effective bond or continuity between the two. This continuity is a serious challenge to any attempt to draw strict oppositional boundaries between individual or collective autonomy on the one hand, and state power on the other. Superseding the oppositions foundational to the liberal understanding of the sovereign individual, this autonomous-yet-dependent socialist subject comes into being precisely by embodying the normativity of the state, suggesting a circular, rather than oppositional, configuration of the subject-state relationship. This circularity of power constituting the subject-state bind spells the failure of any attempts to draw clear lines of opposition between state and subjects, between state and “civil society,” between state functionaries and dissidents, or to demarcate an “outside” to state control and to isolate spaces external to the state. Because any practice or position was unimaginable as being outside of the state, the socialist subject asserted her agency exclusively within the state’s institutional and discursive conditions, both reproducing and redefining the normative regimes prescribed by the state.

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This chapter aimed to excavate the contributions of a powerful Marxist humanist movement in post-Stalinist Bulgaria. Deployed against the evolutionary historical determinism of Stalinist thought, it returned to ideas about human freedom, human self-realization, and socialist personhood. Most importantly, it restored the place of historical contingency in Marxist thought so central to Marx’s understanding of history and to Lenin’s political analysis and political strategy. As I argued, socialist humanism is not uncommon to other post-Stalinist East-European traditions as it sought to overcome the epistemological limits of Stalinist Marxism, but in the Bulgarian context, it never remained a purely theoretical or philosophical movement. Above all it was a progressive political phenomenon within the intellectual and political leadership that fought for state reform and introduced practices of grassroots self-governance, opening spaces for the social emancipation of the new generation. Under the guidance of reformist Marxist thinkers who used social analysis and sociological research of contemporary social relations, the state expanded its traditional focus on education, professionalization, and welfare towards a

\(^{305}\) Interviews with Andrey Bundzhulov, Deyan Deyanov, Lilyana Deyanova, and Andrey Raychev, Sofia, March and April, 2009.
practice of social governance and administration concerned with the professional, personal, and social self-realization of the young generation. Under its reforms, the state developed a vast recreational infrastructure and provided the material conditions for leisure and the creative self-realization of the modern socialist person. As Chapter Five will show, the same generation of intellectuals empowered by the reforms of the 1970s took a leading role in post-socialist politics and intellectual life to restore the political appeal of bourgeois liberalism and free market capitalism. The next chapter will show how the liberal political terminology entered public life in Bulgaria during the 1980s through the language of totalitarianism and structured the liberal political imaginary of the defiant youth while reconfiguring the discourses around which political claims were made.
For decades, Western scholarship on socialism pictured the socialist states as monstrous and repressive regimes—repression being the sad yet predictable outcome of an unattainable human utopia doomed to failure from the start. However, recent work focused on socialist culture and socialist subjectivity showed that the socialist experiences were inevitably implicated in the subject’s sense of personal self-realization and emancipation. It revealed a complex picture of socialist modernity as a contradictory yet distinct socialist experience, suggesting that the socialist projects lived up to some of their promise of social emancipation and equality. Chapter Four hoped to contribute to this multi-dimensional project by excavating the work of a powerful humanist Marxist movement in Post-Stalinist Bulgaria, which revived the question of human agency, human freedom, and human self-realization. Calling for a “third way” for socialism—between authoritarian socialism and bourgeois democracy—they fought to transform state institutions and introduce elements of autonomous self-governance. Contrary to arguments that the socialist states had designed blueprints for utopian social visions, which remained never achievable ideals, Chapter Four showed that post-Stalinist state practices moved towards productive modes of social governance opening up room for autonomous collective and personal initiative and grassroots activity. While grounded in the normative dimensions of the humanist project, they nevertheless had a distinct political rationality, aiming to channel social energy away from direct political antagonism and stabilize political power.

Yet, to ignore the repressive apparatus which chronically “flared up,” although in more subdued manifestations, would be politically naïve—in fact, state oppression and enabling state governance were two competing yet conjoined modalities of power of the modern socialist state, providing a structuring condition for a contradictory socialist experience. The historical dimension of this experience has been described as an oscillating rhythm, where state surveillance and control fluctuates from more stagnant and rigid to more accommodating and liberal. Such cycles of freezing and thawing resulted from the internal logic of political reform, but they were also contingent upon historical events of international significance or triggered by discrete interventions posing an imminent threat to the legitimacy of state power.

The Bulgarian 1980s were marked by one of these events—the publication of Zhelyu Zhelev’s book *Fascism*, a subtle yet powerful political intervention that re-ordered political coordinates and eventually turned into an uncontrollable force, triggering a crisis of legitimacy of state power of enormous proportions. This chapter offers a close reading of the political and philosophical debates surrounding Zhelev’s book as a way of reconstructing the shifting discursive context of public life during late socialism. Written in the mid-1960s, the book offers a straightforward political analysis of the fascist state, reproducing the cold-war liberal political framework from the mid-1940s, which dominated the understanding of the communist regimes in the West well into the 1960s; introducing the totalitarian paradigm into late socialist political discourse in the
context of the economic stagnation and the crisis of the centralized economy of the early 1980s, it functioned as an invitation for political awakening.

The publication of the book triggered a complex political response. On the one hand, it inflamed the repressive apparatus to such an extent that people began speaking of the next wave of re-Stalinization—in a certain way it called into being or reignited what it aimed to expose. On the other hand, the nuances of the political dynamic unfolding around its publication reveals a three-dimensional political spectrum that complicates any attempt to paint a picture of total domination, total subordination, massive complicity, and the unproblematic rule of a top-down hierarchy—the very picture Zhelev puts forward in his descriptive analysis of the totalitarian state. A careful reconstruction of the debates shows an active political terrain unfolding within the available political vocabulary and critical terms. Its complexity questions widely accepted arguments about the tangential and inconsequential role of “official ideology” in political life during socialism, as well as arguments about the “apolitical” or “depoliticized” nature of the “official” public sphere, as opposed to the “private” one, where politics was lived and experienced.

At the same time when Western scholars of Soviet and socialist history cultivated a second- and even third-generation scholarship working to undo the tenacious legacy of the “totalitarian” framework and the impact of its theoretical and political assumptions on our understanding of the modern socialist era, Zhelev’s book introduced the totalitarian discourse into late socialism’s political and scholarly debates and structured the popular liberal imagination during late socialist Bulgaria. Its political effects were as powerful as they were ruinous: they erased the memory of the very conditions that enabled its publication—two decades of struggles by a diverse democratic-socialist movement endeavoring to undo socialism’s link to authoritarian power and re-imagine socialist governance through democratic pluralism and freedom of intellectual thought. Looking into the 1960s and 1970s reveals a complex and dynamic field of political discussions defined by fractures and tensions between “dogmatists” and democratic socialists, conservatives and reformist leftists, radical communists and liberal individualists. Rather than functioning as a stale and ineffective “ideology” with no apparent connection with “socialist reality” or “actually existing socialism,” these discussions influenced the political course of the socialist states as well as the daily lives of ordinary people and opened up the intellectual conditions that made the historical turn of 1989 possible. What remains suppressed should be of greatest scholarly and political interest to us as it harbors an alternative historical understanding and a possibility for an alternative post-socialist future.

For a most recent synthesis of the state of scholarship on Stalinism and Nazism “after totalitarianism,” see the collection of comparative essays edited by Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, Beyond Totalitarianism. Also, Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., Stalinism: New Directions.

Achim Siegel attempts to trace the historical dynamic of the totalitarian discourse and its “cognitive potential” (an inadequate word choice intending to indicate his effort at an epistemological inquiry) among dissident political movements in post-Stalinist Eastern Europe, which unfortunately, with its sweeping and largely unsupported claims, leaves more question marks than offering a historically grounded contribution based on careful historical reconstruction of the political and theoretical discussions. He is right, however, to turn to the Central-European dissident intellectual developments as most receptive of popular Western liberal terms such as totalitarianism, the state/civil society opposition, etc., Vaclav Havel being their most articulate proponent in the Czechoslovakian case. Achim Siegel, The Totalitarian Paradigm after the End of Communism: Towards a Theoretical Reassessment (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), 22-24.
There certainly wouldn’t be many people willing to dispute the claim that the most significant political event—and perhaps political text—in the history of late socialism in Bulgaria is Zhelyu Zhelev’s *Fascism*. Its unique story is an important aspect of what made it memorable. Completed in 1967, the manuscript led an underground life for almost fifteen years. *Samizdat* copies circulated from one hand to another, year after year, getting increasingly worn out and difficult to read. Shared only in private and discussed in quiet voice, the manuscript inhabited the ambivalent spaces of insider intellectual circles and trusted networks of friends. Yet, paradoxically, the unpublished book generated its own publicity: not only was it surrounded by curiosity, conversations, rumors, and various stories, but it had been held by so many hands over the years that no one could any longer make any assumptions about its readership. The author remembers that visitors from the Soviet Union would often inquire about it—the book must have escaped the confines of the country and criss-crossed the *samizdat* readership in Moscow.\(^{308}\) It was also well known that even Lyudmila Zhivkova, the First Secretary’s daughter and the Head of the Committee for Culture and the Arts for most of the 1970s, kept a copy for her own library.\(^{309}\) Later when the book was published, a rumor began circulating that she herself had recommended and ordered the publication. Well-respected and prominent thinkers swore it was true as a way of crediting Zhivkova’s role in the cultural renaissance of the 1970s, others thought these were the self-disempowering speculations of skeptics and envious critics who needed to justify their own fearful conduct and restore their belief in the omniscience of the state apparatus.

Surprisingly, however, the book was not conceived as an underground project. It wasn’t meant to be kept secret from the “state” and the author longed for recognition of his work. The manuscript, accompanied by informal recommendations from reputed scholars and intellectuals, was shuffled from one state publisher to another and spent countless months in the drawers of various editors. The usual excuse was the “infamous” shortage of paper—Zhelev recounts in the preface of the second edition—or he was told that they couldn’t fit it in the budget, or that they were overbooked for years ahead. But the truth was, no one was willing to take the risk.\(^{310}\)

Finally, in 1979, the *Komsomol* publisher *Narodna Mladezh* accepted *Fascism* as part of the book series *Maurus*. Focused on popular books in philosophy and politics tailored towards youth, the series was created to showcase young and debuting Bulgarian authors and more experimental subjects, establishing a unique presence in the vast and quite decentralized world of

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\(^{309}\) Lyudmila Zhivkova was Deputy Head from 1972 to 1975, after which she was appointed Head of the Committee for Culture until her death in 1981.

\(^{310}\) “The only publisher that was honest with me was the publishing house of the Military,” he recalls. (A fitting subject for the publisher, for sure.) “I remember when I went to the publishing house of the Military to see what is going on, all editors came to see me. They look at me and laugh. Their laughter was well-natured. I ask them —Will you publish it? —No, we can’t. —Why? You don’t like it? —No, we really like it. —Well, then? —It’s too good to be published at home. In Bulgaria such a book can’t come out.” Zhelyu Zhelev, introduction to the second edition of *Fashizmut*, page missing.
the book publishing industry in the country. “Because of his curly hair and dark skin as a young lad, Marx was called Maurus by his friends and relatives—this is what the cover [of the series] said,” Georgi Markovski, an editor-in-chief of the Literature section of Narodna Mladezh, remembers.\footnote{Georgi Markovski, “Kak izdavahme ‘Fashizmut,’” in Fashizmut sreshtu Fashizmut, ed. Ivan Slavov (Sofia: Universitetsko Izdatelstvo ‘Sv. Kliment Ohridski,’ 1991), 44.} Zhelev’s manuscript was proposed and brought into the office by another member of the editorial team, Ivan Slavov, who became one of the book’s reviewers and later, the book’s outside editor. Markovski recalls the circumstances around the decision to go forward with it: “Once I opened the manuscript, I remembered I had read it before. […] A rumor was circulating that this book came with a vulchi bilet;\footnote{A colloquial for professional and administrative sanctions, sometimes through forced change of residence, aiming to inflict professional damage and social isolation. After Stalin, the policy of disciplinary sanctions were significantly loosened, and the sanctioned individuals were often reshuffled to other similar positions or “demoted,” affecting their professional prestige and influence, but they rarely lost their status of “Director.” On the structure and function of the intellectuals as a privileged quasi-class during Stalin, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, The Cultural Front; Education and Social Mobility.} it had been rejected by other publishing houses.”\footnote{Georgi Markovski, “Kak izdavahme ‘Fashizmut,’” 44.} But the subject matter seemed to be a good match for the series and “the risk was worth taking.”\footnote{Ibid.} Yet no one who worked for the publisher was prepared for what followed—some were under the impression they were publishing a well-written, solid scholarly work for a larger audience, expected to receive recognition and even “a high prize.”\footnote{This is according to the recollection of Evtim Evtimov, who was Director of Narodna Mladezh at the time. Evtimov, “Istoriyata na edna inkriminatsiya,” Fashizmut sreshtu Fashizmut, 268.} The book came out in 1980 in an edition of 10,000 copies and reached book stores and book fairs across the country through the regular state book distribution channels. As is always the case with public controversy in the written form, it was like a bomb with a detonator: the controversy came with slight delay but then quickly turned into a cascading force: those who knew about the book were buying it by the dozens, by the hundreds, to make sure their friends and colleagues were not left without a copy. Bookstores in the capital ran out of it the fastest, so in order to obtain it, some traveled to smaller towns nearby or called their friends across the country hoping to take advantage of the slower pace of political life in the province and race ahead of the news about it.

Three weeks later, sales were halted and the remaining copies were quietly seized. Library copies were also withdrawn following an administrative order stating, in cryptic bureaucratic language that the book was “inexpediently assembled” (netselesobrazno komplektuvana).\footnote{See the published letter from the Director of the Public Library of the District of Pernik to the Community Library (Chitalishina biblioteka) of Divotino, “Konfiskatsiyata,” Fashizmut sreshtu Fashizmut, 209.} But an entire mountain of 7,000 copies had irretrievably left the storage rooms and had begun their journey, moving from hand to hand across the country and beyond. Some of those who acquired it kept it like a secret in their drawers and never mentioned to anyone that they owned it, while others became lending machines. People shared stories about the fate of their copy: “It’s hard to keep track of how many people have read [my copy]. […] It looks like a veteran from several wars.”\footnote{“Mneniya i otsenki za Fashizmut (pod surdinka),” Fashizmut sreshtu Fashizmut, 201.} Another publicly minded reader describes: “I bought five copies in Stara Zagora
thinking I would give them away to friends, but then I had second thoughts. Why give them away? They’ll leave them on their bookshelves and if they get scared, they won’t give them to other people to read.”  

Instead, he began circulating all five copies, keeping a log and a waitlist, running an informal library of sorts. “There are seventy nine people signed up for my copy”—boasts another one, adding that he feels like a missionary.

Rumors started circulating about pending political and administrative sanctions, which in fact followed shortly after: all who initiated, reviewed, and approved the publication were removed from their posts and demoted to other administrative positions; some of the transgressors were relocated outside the capital; academic or research positions were eliminated; Party rituals of public reprimands and reproaches followed; patronizing critiques appeared in the official Marxist-Leninist periodicals. The author Zhelyu Zhelev was released from his academic position through a mock restructuring of the Institute for the Study of Culture where he held a position. Zhelev was not a Party member, hence he did not suffer further sanctions: he had been expelled more than fifteen years earlier, in 1965, for trying to defend a daring dissertation in the Department of Dialectical and Historical Materialism, the theoretical stronghold of the Stalinist contingent. A meticulous and passionate student of Hegel, he tried to develop a critique of the stagnant and narrow systems of the Marxist-Leninist dichotomous categories, drawing attention to the emphasis on movement, process, and transformation in Hegel’s dialectical method both to allow conceptual openness and to account for some contingency—with varying degrees of success. His work objected to the narrow Stalinist formulations of matter as a fixed and stagnant category that renders things as isolated and absolutely self-sufficient entities, but nevertheless remained a firm positivist. He argued that the opposition between matter and consciousness could not function as a foundational set of categories for dialectical understanding. Because matter for him was a privileged category—unlike consciousness which for Zhelev could only “exist” in relation to matter, matter always came prior to and outside of the knowing subject—the opposition seemed unequal and asymmetrical, and therefore fundamentally incomplete or “one-sided.”

“Of course, it is a scientific fact that matter historically has existed before the advent of consciousness, which means that it has existed before the emergence of its opposition to consciousness.” The Marxist-Leninist matter-consciousness relationship therefore did not contain the dynamic relationality of the Hegelian opposites, each defined by and negatively retaining the other. They were incapable of providing the conceptual structure foundational to dialectical understanding. But instead of attempting to restore the dialectical dynamism out of the simplistic yet pervasive positivism of doctrinaire Marxism-Leninism, Zhelev’s work scraps the “classical” opposition altogether and calls for a return to the Hegelian categories of subject and object, a relationship he considered much more philosophically potent than the narrow and asymmetrical matter-consciousness relationship.

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318 Ibid.
319 Ibid., 198.
320 Zhelyu Zhelev, Disertatsiya: Opredelenieto na materiyata i syvremennoto estestvoznanie, 1965 g. (Sofia: Fondatsiya D-r Zhelyu Zhelev, 2010), 120.
321 Zhelyu Zhelev, Disertatsiya, 119.
One can imagine why these kinds of arguments would upset a whole legion of gray-haired, grumbling Stalinists. Todor Pavlov, the head of the inquisition on the “ideological front,” wrote several condescending articles. Nothing less than his own theory of reflection was implicitly under attack. In response to Zhelev, he wrote, “I have personally repeatedly expressed my opinion that not always everything can and should be discussed, that there are things that are beyond discussion.”

The rhetoric of warfare immediately came to justify his dogmatism: we cannot bear such “revisionist retreats” or, even worse, such direct rejections of some foundational postulates of Marxism-Leninism—because—

[Diamat] is the mightiest, most reliable, and well-tested weapon in scientific inquiry. It needs to be flexible, i.e. to take into account new facts, developments, theories, hypotheses of the applied sciences and practice, but at the same time it needs to remain solid as steel. Otherwise it would be a rubber bullet good for neither effective defense nor victorious offense in the historical battle for the new social reality, for the new social order, man, and culture.

Among these contrived efforts to restore the unsettled stability of the Stalinist doctrine there were also substantive remarks, including concerns about Zhelev’s attempt to displace the matter-consciousness relationship from the center of philosophical understanding and his audacity to question the centrality of materialism as a category in philosophical analysis, lapsing into ideational discussions of what the main philosophical questions are. “We have a very interesting position: philosophy without materialism or more properly, philosophy in which materialism is not an internal, immanent, essential aspect, but [an element which] comes from the outside, from a non-philosophical discipline.” Zhelev’s work contained another argument that proved quite unpopular: that matter and objective reality were not reducible to each other and that Lenin failed to distinguish clearly between the two, an argument that extended the objectivizing drive of the doctrine beyond what was strictly considered a matter of scientific inquiry. Thus, while insisting on the “relative” (as opposed to “absolute”) independence of the properties of things, including time, space, and energy, he also made the ontological move of expanding the notion of “objective reality” to other forms of human experience.


326 Mitryu Yankov, “Kakuv e logicheskiyat kray na edna takava teza?,” 39.

327 Zhelyu Zhelev, Disertatsiyata, 134; 139-141.
There were numerous objections to Zhelev’s view from a strictly Marxist-Leninist perspective, but no one had a problem with the un-reflexive universalism typical of Marxist philosophy of natural science at the time. What also remained less visible was that none of the scandalized dogmatists questioned Zhelev’s use of Lenin’s *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. Arguably one of the most abused of Lenin’s works, it had been reduced to painfully familiar sound bites endlessly regurgitated in textbooks, academic polemics, or Party meetings: “Matter is a philosophical category denoting the objective reality which is given to man by his sensation, and which is copied, photographed and reflected by our sensations, while existing independently of them.” Zhelev’s work is impressively well-researched and solidly argued; it is well-grounded in the contemporary debates across the socialist countries. Yet, while meant as a critique of the Stalinist categories, in a typical Stalinist fashion, his work endorses the crude Stalinist uses of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, accounting for neither its political-philosophical context nor the internal evolution of Lenin’s own understanding. His use of the canonical passages in the text is so excessive that one begins to think that his mentors, some of the most accomplished professors in Marxism-Leninism, had actually done their work really well. It is precisely this peculiar form of revolt, one that nevertheless accepts and preserves the foundations of the Stalinist structure of thought, that interests us here the most. It is a direct testament to the enormous, active power of Stalinism’s philosophical legacy, a power that propels the violence on historical understanding.

In return for the long and arduous process surrounding his expulsion from the Party, Zhelev produced 200 *samizdat* copies of his dissertation and let them go their own way. The university procedures around the defense of his dissertation had not yet begun, but he had no hopes of defending it—he had a much more effective way of publicizing it and generating recognition. The date of Zhelev’s “revenge” was also tactically and conceptually thought-out: it was the eve of September 9, the day of the socialist revolution and the official national holiday of socialist Bulgaria. The date had an obvious symbolic significance, but it also offered a very practical advantage in that the next few days would also be holidays. The Party nomenclature wouldn’t bother to interrupt their celebrations and the Secret Services would not be able to respond with swiftness. “They” came indeed, if only months later: the following spring the militia took him away from Sofia, “relocating” him to a small village in Northern Bulgaria, his place of birth. He spent the next several years in exile, but the capital remained haunted by his presence, unsure if the episode would quell the unruly spirits and fade into oblivion, or perhaps would be followed by a comeback.

A second strike followed—the book *Fascism*—and although it came fifteen years later, it struck right at the heart of the beast. Its publication was so explosive that it demoted and brought political sanctions to a number of editors and reviewers while threatening an army of outspoken supporters with a similar fate. Taken on its own merit, Zhelev’s *Fascism* is a straightforward and somewhat unoriginal, if well-researched, systematic critique of the political structure of the

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329 Zhelev prefaced the *samizdat* copies with a short note expressing outrage at the sanctions of the repressive state and stating that copies of the dissertation would be sent to major officials, including the First Secretary Todor Zhivkov. According to him, this was part of a strategy to create full publicity, which would eventually protect him from further sanctions. Zhelyu Zhelev, “Uvod,” 65-69.
fascist state. A historical study of the rise and establishment of the fascist state in Germany, Italy, and Spain, its ambitions nevertheless lie in distilling the structural elements of the “ideal, completed form” of the fascist state “in relation to which the different fascist states are only modifications, approximations containing certain accidental elements.”\textsuperscript{330} In fact, he continues, “this is the goal of every scholarly study—to give the ideal, ‘pure’ model of a certain cluster of phenomena so that later it can be used as a basis for understanding the specific nature of separate phenomena.”\textsuperscript{331}

The elements of Zhelev’s general model should be familiar to generations of historians and political theorists working on twentieth century European history and political thought across the political range, but I will take the risk of reproducing them here to show how they were conceived within Zhelev’s particular theoretical milieu, and to reconstruct the way their central claims played out in relationship to Marxism-Leninism’s conceptual terms. Historical differences set aside, they include the elimination of all organized political opposition and the establishment of a single-party system by force; the consolidation of the legislative, executive, and judicial functions of the state apparatus and its total subordination to Party control where the state becomes “the Party’s private property, or at least its monopolized estate.”\textsuperscript{332} As “a state within the state,” the Party is an absolute sovereign located outside the state’s jurisdiction, possessing immunity from the law that is legitimated by historical necessity.\textsuperscript{333} Not only has the fascist model fused political and administrative functions “deeply and organically” where “it is difficult to determine where the party begins and where the state ends,”\textsuperscript{334} but it has reorganized the apparatus into a top-down hierarchy, granting Party members the privilege of becoming state functionaries, or drawing populations into the Party through coercion. As state resources fall fully into the hands of the Party, the latter obtains the power to expand the administrative state bureaucracy endlessly, gradually producing a corrupt and privileged bureaucratic class. “While classical bourgeois democracy propounds the principle ‘whoever has the money can get a hold of political power,’ the fascist state exhibits the opposite. The absolute rule of politics over all other spheres of public life demonstrates the principle: ‘Those who have political power also have the money.’”\textsuperscript{335} This leads to struggle for power in the state apparatus as a way of amassing personal, social, and material privilege.

Further, Zhelev describes the structure of government, including the abolished separation of powers between the executive and the legislative branches; a justice system subordinated to the police resulting in a tautological configuration that “turns the executor into a judge”;\textsuperscript{336} the puppet role of the parliament and the elections; the expropriated political rights of citizens. He moves on to describe the logic of the state’s resort to violence, the police regime, the security and surveillance apparatus, the need for political repressions, and the concentration camp.

\textsuperscript{330} Zhelyu Zhelev, \textit{Fashizmut}, 24.
\textsuperscript{331} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{332} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{333} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{334} Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{335} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{336} Ibid., 264.
Zhelev then analyzes the logic of authoritarian control in various spheres of social and public life through establishing monopoly on spiritual, creative, and intellectual activity. He focuses on the totalizing grasp of mass and youth organizations and labor unions, the abolition of self-governance, the use of technology and mass communications to impose informational isolation and build the modern propaganda machine—all being instruments of full homogenization, unification, and total control of the population in all spheres of their moral, intellectual, and spiritual life. Civil society as it functions “in traditional bourgeois democracies” is now under the control of the state.  

It relies on the creation of the leader cult and a supporting ideology which cannot tolerate liberal or different-minded individuals. “Fascism hates bourgeois democracy because the latter allows for what is deadly to the totalitarian state: tolerance.”  

“It is an illusion that the ideology of the totalitarian state contains intolerance, fanaticism, and hatred towards free thinking and implants them as principles of political life of the state. In fact, it works the other way around: the reality of political life in the fascist state … creates [intolerance and fanaticism] and strengthens them in the ideological sphere.”  

This is a totalizing picture of a fully centralized and integrated authoritarian state which has successfully established total control and domination—a picture familiar from the sweeping definitions of totalitarianism from the early days of the Cold War, which overdetermined scholarship on socialism for over two decades. Considering that Zhelev wrote his work in the mid-1960s, he should certainly be included in that tradition, while being among the first to introduce the terminology of totalitarianism in a socialist context. “[T]he fascist state is a strictly and consistently a centralized system, where the separate ingredients are found in full subordination [to the whole], and it does not tolerate asynchrony in any part of the whole.”  

It is a state that has managed to produce fully subordinate subjects, reducing them to compliant elements in the power machine: “[T]he fascist state is so totalizing that it devours all activities of the individual, including the individual himself. This is why the individual belongs to the state and therefore cannot be freed from the state. … He does not have the right to ask for his freedom in the same way he cannot be freed from his mother.”  

In such a state, “there are no debates, political conversations, public discussions—there is only blind unity, the unity of compliance and silence, of mutual surveillance and betrayal. Political banditry instead of democracy, secrecy instead of publicity.”  

The internal logic reveals a closed, immutable, and self-sufficient system where all parts are structurally necessary and dependent upon each other, amounting to a smoothly functioning and well-engineered mechanism: “Structurally the fascist state constitutes a closed system every detail of which is strictly connected to the rest; deformation in one part inevitably ruıns the whole. […] In this sense the totalitarian state resembles a well-conceived and smoothly functioning machine where all details work with precision and accuracy. If one detail is out of commission, it threatens to paralyze the entire machine.”  

To complete this mechanistic
reading, Zhelev contrasts it to democracy, which he imagines as a “live organism” containing a structural incompleteness that makes it inherently dynamic and much more volatile.

Bourgeois democracy […] resembles more a live organism rather than a machine. If a certain part gets broken, it doesn’t paralyze the entire system. Thanks to the instability in the relationship between the whole and its separate parts, as well as between the actual parts, it compensates every separate defect in the same way that a live organism adapts to pathological changes in the separate organs. This is why liberal democracy within certain limits cannot be easily invaded without being destroyed as a system, while the totalitarian fascist state knows only one change: its full demise or destruction produces a spontaneous irreducible domino effect.344

The totalitarian state is therefore monolithic, static, and inflexible yet a system vulnerable to elements of liberalization, which, always external to the state, pose a threat to its integrity. Unlike liberal democracy, it cannot absorb any structural or functional change. Every element of liberalization introduced into the system destabilizes it and ultimately erodes the whole, leading to its inevitable demise. In fact, “[i]t excludes by definition every liberalization, even if such liberalization is evidently within the interest of the state.”345 In order to compensate, the totalitarian state resorts to violence, repression, and terror to restore the integrity of the system.346

The book never makes an explicit comparison with the socialist regimes, but it didn’t have to—its systematic analysis draws mainly on political and economic structures that can be found in socialist states and the analogy was easily available to those readers who wanted to find it. “If the theory and practice of fascism suspiciously coincides with some facts from our reality, then this coincidence is certainly not in favor of these facts,” remarks Georgi Markovski as he recounts the details around their decision to publish the work.347 Before 1989, the author did not admit that the project invited the analogy or contained any political subtext, but in the introduction to the second reprint of the book in 1990, he is already able to spell out the political gesture clearly:

While totalitarianism exists, [the book] will not lose its significance because it is an attempt, with the help of documents, to reconstruct diligently, as in paleontology, bone by bone the enormous political skeleton of the totalitarian edifice. And those who are serious about fighting totalitarianism need to gain access to critical knowledge about its anatomy and physiology—without this knowledge one cannot guarantee success.348

He adds that the “complete” version of the totalitarian state includes the “absolute monopoly […] of the superstructure on the economic base of society. Everything had to be turned into state property.”349 An essential feature of the totalitarian regime therefore includes, in his words, the

344 Ibid., 225-6.
345 Ibid., 228.
346 Zhelev, Introduction to the second edition of Fashizmut, page missing.
347 Markovski, “Kak izdavahme ‘Fashuzmut,’” 44.
349 Ibid.
full overlap of base and superstructure—more properly, the state’s monopoly over material relations and the forces of production. “Without this [element] we cannot understand the relationship between fascism, or the relationship of fascism with its other version, communism.”

In fact it is the latter that makes the most “complete” totalitarian system:

This is how the communist model of the totalitarian state is created—up to this day it is the most perfected model of a totalitarian regime in history and our contemporary times. The fascist model, which has often been presented as the antithesis of the communist, can actually be distinguished from the latter only by the fact that it is incomplete, unfinished when it comes to the economic base, as a result of which it is imperfect and less stable.

In a sense, this is an analysis developed from the perspective of the socialist regimes where the latter become the highest expression of totalitarianism, its most “truthful” and “authentic” form next to which fascism becomes a meager imitation, a “copy plagiarized from the original.”

_Fascism_ offers no more than a straightforward liberal critique of the totalitarian state seen as both the demise and antithesis of bourgeois democracy—they are “organically hostile to each other and incompatible as a principle.” Further, “[t]he very structure of the fascist state does not allow for democracy as long as it absolutely subsumes every individual and deprives her of every possibility for defending herself.”

Zhelev notes that the authoritarian state suppresses civil liberties and the freedom of labor and immigration, and most importantly, it annihilates the sovereignty of the separate individual, “a central political value of bourgeois democracy, which advocates that the prosperity of the entire society depends on the prosperity of the individuality of its citizens.” Instead, it transforms the individual into an instrument of the state. Further, it suppresses freedom of speech, assembly, and the press because it cannot tolerate independent thought and critique even if it comes from the ruling class or political leadership. “It gives its supporters the freedom to repress, to terrorize, but only according to the laws of the existing structure, without giving them the right to discuss or oppose them. If they oppose the laws of the system, they inevitably fall victims to it.” This is why, Zhelev continues, “it would be naïve to think that the totalitarian state is democracy for the fascist bourgeoisie while a dictatorship for the laboring classes.”

Zhelev’s academic apparatus shows a wealth of primary materials, and his secondary literature includes mostly Marxist analyses of the national-socialist movement and the fascist state published in German, Russian, and Bulgarian, up to 1978, suggesting that the book was revised and expanded up until the days of its publication. Many similarities with early post-war concepts of totalitarianism developed in the West could be drawn, most notably with Carl Friedrich and

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350 Ibid.
351 Ibid.
352 Ibid.
353 Zhelev, _Fashizmut_, 252.
354 Ibid.
355 Ibid., 253.
356 Ibid., 229.
357 Ibid., 228.
Zbigniew Brzezinski’s well-known “six-feature” typology: an official ideology, a single-party system, state control of mass communications, a centralized economy, state monopoly over the use of force, and a repressive police regime. Some Marxist-Leninists familiar with the “enemy” literature on socialism mentioned Raymond Aron’s sociological observations on political regimes Democracy and Totalitarianism, which he developed in a series of lectures in 1957-58, making the distinction between the “total” and “limited” state, the former defined by its “irrational” conduct invoking the colonial discourse of barbarism, while the latter founded on rational principles, and therefore, legitimately succeeding the Enlightenment European tradition. A parallel with Karl Popper’s liberal notion of the open society was particularly suitable, especially because of Zhelev’s emphasis on critique as a functional mechanism of the liberal democratic state. Zhelev’s analysis also yields certain analogies with Ernst Nolte’s controversial “historic-genetic” theory of the modern totalitarian state, which casts Hitler as the “successor” of a modern machine of terror that Nolte generally perceived as the child of the revolutionary ideology on the left. Nolte considered Stalin’s dictatorship the primary and most abominable act of atrocity, and he was fiercely critiqued as an apologist and banished by even mainstream European liberal thinkers who largely accepted the premises of the comparison. 358 Fascism’s bibliography indicates that Zhelev was certainly familiar with Nolte’s Three Faces of Fascism from the 1960s, which became foundational to the study of fascism outside the Marxist tradition and which, as scholars have noticed, was not inimical to associating the political mechanisms of fascism with the political strategies of “Marxism.” 359

Zhelev had probably encountered Arendt’s The Origins of Totalitarianism as well, which showed a new social totality of anonymous, homogenous, indifferent mass in the making as old class, community, and familial social ties are torn asunder. Arendt’s automized, isolated subjects become an anonymous mass as their only social bond remains an attachment to the Party, the youth organization, the march—a sweeping picture that has been subject to numerous critiques. 360 But Zhelev’s ahistorical account of a stable, immutable, and static oppressive regime has very little in common with Arendt’s interest in the dynamism of the social process. Zhelev

359 Shorten, in “Europe’s Twentieth Century in Retrospect?,” 288.
360 Against Arendt, social historians have shown the formation of new bonds of solidarity and sociality at the work place, in political life, in military service, and through the states’ various practices of racial and political exclusion, questioning Arendt’s somewhat condescending concept of the “mass” comprised of automized and alienated individuals. By tracing new bonds of solidarity and community, networks of support and survival, as well as new “comradeships” against the political “enemy” —a process infused with emotion and energy—they have showed how deeply the new state regimes have changed the social fabric and reorganized community life. Studying Nazi and Stalinist societies as dynamic fields open to internal change and development, they have opened possibilities for inquiry into the historical evolution of social relations. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Alf Ludtke, “Energizing the Everyday: On the Breaking and Making of Social Bonds in Nazism and Stalinism,” in Beyond Totalitarianism, 266-301. See also Sheila Fitzpatrick’s fascinating exploration of identities in the making in Stalinist Soviet Union, and especially her analysis of the reinvention of class identity through a number of social discrimination and affirmative action policies in the 1920s, when, paradoxically, the Civil War had unsettled the stability of class or social belonging and when Soviet society finds itself in a “chaotic and amorphous condition.” Tear Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 29-50.
also had access to some of Marcuse’s works, notably *Faschismus und Kapitalismus*, a work co-authored with Otto Bauer and Arthur Rosenberg, yet his picture of top-down control and oppression seems to suggest he was not susceptible to Marcuse’s nuanced analysis of modern forms of domination as they are implicated in subjects’ sense of freedom and the fulfillment of their socially produced desire, pleasure, and need. Zhelev’s analysis, on the contrary, subscribes to crude oppositions between the state and a naturalized, pre-existing civil society, and yet, his reading of the state’s bureaucratic and technological apparatus that both master and slave are compelled to reproduce lends itself to parallels with Frankfurt school arguments that modern technologies of domination contain a self-perpetuating, self-expanding element which has escaped human control and human agency.

Zhelev never admitted to borrowing directly from critiques of the totalitarian state developed by his liberal contemporaries, and here we should take his word on that, especially if we want to acknowledge the possibility that post-Stalinist socialism created its own conditions for liberal political thought via the Kantian, Romanticist, and German Idealist traditions. Major works of West-European bourgeois philosophy and aesthetics were reintegrated into the humanities and most philosophical disciplines from the 1960s onwards, reinserting the positive value of concepts such as the individual and the autonomy of the creative act—but the function they played and this should be the subject of a separate study. Thinking of Zhelev’s critique of the totalitarian state simply as a derivative of its western liberal and anti-left “cousins” would foreclose inquiry into questions such as what discursive and political conditions made such critique possible, available, and favorable, and further, how it was conceived and articulated as a theoretical intervention in relation to and in conversation with the Stalinist theoretical terminology. As we saw in Chapter Four, post-Stalinist socialism developed its own humanist Marxisms in a similar effort to overcome some of the limitations of the Stalinist philosophical vocabulary, and this development, both in its quasi-bourgeois liberal and Marxist humanist manifestations, deserves to be taken on its own terms.

To what extent *Fascism* was informed by and written in an undisclosed conversation with other analyses of totalitarianism is unclear, but the book became a revelation, a dismantling truth, for many. The systematic analysis combined with an invitation for a parallel with the political system and historical experience of the socialist states had tremendous political force and structured the political imagination of tens of thousands. As one reader remembers, “[the book] ordered my understanding of reality. Every element has its own place.” As political commitments became much more visible and pronounced, the public was tangibly politicized: “Everyone had to identify themselves [in relation to the book] and take their actual positions. That way they were forced to show their true political faces... the masks were taken down.” Thus many felt the book was a historical event, it brought about a turn in their thinking that reordered political coordinates and opened political possibilities, and the Party nomenclature felt seriously threatened.

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361 “Mneniya i otsenki za Fashizmut,” 199.
Perhaps most revealing is the observation of an alarmed secretary of the Central Committee of the Party: “This is not a book against fascism of the usual kind, it is a structured political platform for creating a dissident party at home.” Only a few months after the book was published, a reader commented: “Only in a week the author became an ideological leader of the nation. Now he is the informal ideological leader of public thinking.” His statement was uncannily prophetic. The book played an unprecedented role in structuring the popular liberal imagination during late socialist Bulgaria and was almost unconditionally accepted by intellectuals and scholars critical of the regime. At a time when Western historians of both Stalinism and Nazism, having “escaped the epistemic prison” of the perfect synchrony imposed by “ideal type” formulations, struggled to recover from the effects of the sweeping generalizations of the totalitarian model and faced the “irreconcilable asymmetry” of the two social systems, the East-European imaginary constructed its own version of the seamless symmetrical parallel, reimagining totalitarian fascism and socialism as free-market liberal democracy’s other.

The arguments in Fascism, as unoriginal as they may seem to those familiar with the chronic revival of the totalitarian paradigm across the political spectrum, played out in a unique way in the epistemic regime defined by the Marxist-Leninist categories. Consider one of Zhelev’s claims, which proponents of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine considered most problematic: that the totalitarian state cannot be reduced to a mechanism of oppression of the finance capital bourgeoisie. Here is the full quote:

Sometimes [theorists] try to reduce the nature of the fascist state to its class function, in a sense that, as a tool of the most reactionary element of the imperialist bourgeoisie, the state is democracy for [the imperialist bourgeoisie] and dictatorship for the laboring [classes]. This is, in general terms, correct: under the fascist state the most economically advantaged remains financial capital. The state provides cheap labor power that does not go on strikes, does not demand higher wages and better working conditions; [its productive capacity] can meet the enormous orders needed for militarization, etc. In this sense, the fascist state is a haven for financial capital. But nevertheless, it would be naïve to think that the totalitarian state is democracy for the fascist bourgeoisie while a dictatorship for the laboring classes.

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364 Ibid., 198.
365 Ibid., 196.
366 Michael Geyer, introduction to Beyond Totalitarianism, 18-22. Geyer’s and Fitzpatrick’s edited volume Beyond Totalitarianism calls for a return to a comparative approach that acknowledges Stalinism’s and Nazism’s mutual historical “entanglement” without subscribing to ahistorical models of understanding. Geyer argues that exploring their interaction and mutual influence can inform a historically grounded comparative history that restores their place in “Europe’s common history” and goes beyond what empirical studies limited to their respective national histories can yield. Ibid., 25. “[I]n understanding and making sense of the two, we gain a crucial vista into twentieth century history that on their own neither of the two national histories can produce. […] It is this puzzle of acute-difference-in-manifest-similarity that leads us to believe that comparison will not only help us understand the two nations and regimes better, but will also bring new insight to the question of what made these regimes such quintessential forces in twentieth-century history.” Ibid., 26.
367 Zhelev, introduction to Fashizmut, 228.
Conceived as a political intervention within the socialist context, Fascism dramatically displaces the Party’s official political perspective. While seeing the formation of the totalitarian state as part of the reactionary consolidation of power against the menacing growth of left movements and the possibility of a socialist revolution in Europe, the analysis nevertheless presents a state that has escaped the social contradictions leading to its formation. The argument underscores the state’s structuring agency in social relations and the state’s ability, as an autonomous, self-reproducing body, to generate relations of power and forms of subjugation on its own. The latter point became especially contentious as it exceeds orthodox materialism’s insistence that property relations, the organization of labor, and the distribution of wealth determine relations of social domination as well as the structure of political forms and the content of political ideologies, i.e. society’s corresponding and derivative “superstructure.” In fact, in Zhelev’s text this relationship works exactly the other way around: in its most “complete” form, fascism is defined by the state’s ability to keep the economy under its tight grip. Marxism-Leninism’s rigid, ontological understanding of class and its antagonistic logic could no longer account for the state’s agency in subject formation, it could not explain how the state was able to draw into its ranks layers of the petty-bourgeoisie and the working class and subsume them under its control, and it could not explain the self-reproducing mechanisms of the state that gave little agency even to the highest ranks in the hierarchy and subjected their will to the authority of its practices.

So obviously, the book was a serious matter. It was an explosive public phenomenon with unclear dimensions that the ruling elites could not leave in silence. Whether or not it was conceived as a “malicious” attack, it was so successful in eroding the political legitimacy of the socialist state and its founding categories that it made thousands revel in triumph: “We are revenged! For all humiliation and offenses.” Part of this success was that the book’s object of attack was paradoxically displaced: it avoided a critical analysis of the social relations of contemporary socialist reality and instead made its point through a transparent dislocation. It unmasked the present while under the guise of a mask. This is why the book was often defined as political satire, a work of great literary significance, and it can certainly be read as a literary intervention with tremendous political impact, but for Zhelev this was a shrewd tactical move that disabled the possibility of substantive critique. As fascism was Stalinism’s most stable political enemy, the Stalinist discourse relied heavily on anti-fascist rhetoric. No one who called himself a Marxist-Leninist could critique a work that exposed the power mechanisms of the fascist state without opening up himself to a host of contradictions. Thus, the book placed the Party nomenclature in a curious bind. By contrasting fascism to bourgeois democracy, it reconfigured the enemy discourse and the oppositions navigating the Stalinist perspective. What were previously seen as complete opposites were now reconfigured in a perfect symmetry; the antagonists stared at each other in a moment of profound self-recognition. Radoy Ralin, a poet and first-generation Party member known for his laconic and biting satire ordered in rhythmic staccato, dedicated a short poem to the book’s author and three editors, a rough translation of which would be: “You forced the corrupt/ in his own antipode himself to see!/ And this is why/ you will be/ by history acquitted.” Some other political “folklore” (as Zhelev calls it) quickly
flourished around the book: Historian Nikolay Genchev, one of the two reviewers and Dean of the Division of History at the Sofia University at the time, was heard joking while waiting for his pending sanctions: “If I get expelled from the Party, I’ll submit documents for political status of an activist against fascism.” Friends meet Ivan Slavov, the outside editor of the book, after he received his political sanctions: “How are you doing, what are you up to?” “Rebuilding the frontlines after the victims of Fascism!” Some of the comments were as simple as they were poignant: “Since when did anti-fascism become criminal activity?”

Yet the Central Committee felt the need to react urgently and “set the picture straight” with a solid critique, even more so because they had no way of controlling the “domino effect,” the cascading grassroots propagation of the text. After much effort to find someone among reluctant intellectuals in the Party ranks, it commissioned Marxist-Leninist philosopher Mitryu Yankov to write a review of the book and submit it to Filosofska Misul, the journal that most diligently maintained the Party line. But even here the plan encountered complications.

Yankov’s critique objected mostly to Zhelev’s conception of the state as a formation outside of and autonomous from what should be the determining agent, class relations:

[Zhelev’s] concrete analysis in all chapters and paragraphs treats the fascist political system […] as something independent from the economic base, as a phantom of sorts, which spreads and functions according to internal and enigmatic laws and principles. The fascist state is interpreted as an anonymous, autonomous, self-sufficient mechanism, like a demon who generates its unlimited energy in some unknown way and who subjects everything else to its total dependence.

He points out that, stepping outside “one of the central categories of [Istmat]—the socio-economic formation,” the author forgets to mention fascism’s antipode, socialism, failing to juxtapose both their radically antithetic political content and their incompatibly different class composition. Going a bit too far in explicating what in Zhelev’s work remains implicit, Yankov openly concludes that “the author […] is trying to discredit the state and the political order of socialism by invoking multiple allusions and analogies with fascism.”

Upon receiving Yankov’s review, Filosofska misul’s editor-in-chief, philosopher and social theorist Dobrin Spasov, called a meeting to discuss the matter. Having found itself in a

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Fashizmut,” 206. I thank Vessela Valiavitcharska for lending me her sense of rhythm and helping me with this translation.
370 Zhelev, introduction to Fashizmut, page missing.
371 Ibid.
372 “Mneniya i otsenki za Fashizmut ,” 203.
374 Ibid., 95.
375 Ibid., 94-113.
376 Ibid., 107.
delicate situation, the editorial board had to take into consideration strategic, political, and scholarly concerns—should the journal engage in any kind of response, it would need to address the multiple dimensions of Zhelev’s intervention and at least match the elegance, shrewdness, force, and rigor of his challenge. Such a task proved immensely difficult, if not impossible, and Dobrin Spasov returned Yankov’s review over and over for revisions. But the article eventually went to print against the editor’s will, following an order from the “top.” Spasov wrote a long, sharp letter to the Central Committee in response asking to resign. Nevertheless, he remained the editor for another year, from the beginning of 1980 until the end of 1983, opening up the journal to discussions on Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, on phenomenology, on Marcuse and the Frankfurt School, on Heidegger and Wittgenstein, while translating previously unpublished pieces.

The editorial board’s discussion is much more nuanced than what a first glance would suggest, and it is completely not the case that, as Ivan Slavov’s somewhat affected reading claims, “there was full consensus that a book of a heretic has entered their circles.” On the contrary: the discussion is quite aggressive and hostile, but not so much towards Zhelev’s intervention as towards Yankov’s critique. Above all it betrays destabilized trust in Marxism-Leninism’s foundational terms, forcing even the most prudent Marxist-Leninists to make certain concessions to Zhelev’s arguments. Everyone agreed that the review was lacking in the subtlety, rigor, and historical analysis necessary for it to play a worthy counterweight to the book—if published, it should undergo some serious revisions and avoid “schematic formulations.” A critical review that bashes Zhelev’s work for omitting the question of class without offering a careful and detailed alternative historical analysis would only “add fuel to the fire” and intensify social polarization.

378 “Dear Comrades, a few months ago I spoke to Comrade Stoyan Mihaylov, asking to be released from my duties as Editor-in-Chief of Filosofska Misul. Now I repeat my request with greater insistence while adding another important reason: my strong concern about the way I am being helped when making important decisions. [...] Now I have in front of me the fifth version [of the review], with changes made by Comrade Todor Stoychev. At the same time the Department of Science and Education has ordered that the review go in print today.” Dobrin Spasov’s letter to the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Fashizmut sreshtu Fashizmut, 182-83.
384 Ivan Slavov, editorial note to “Zasedanie,” Fashizmut sreshtu Fashizmut, 114.
Some editors even declared an open war on the doctrine’s conceptual limitations. “Social-class interests matter, but so does the so called ‘formal element,’”—argues Vasil Prodanov, by “formal element” meaning the form of political organization of the state. “The same class interests may express themselves via different political regimes, but it is not unimportant what these regimes actually are.” In the same way that socialists make a distinction between a “formal” and “real” democracy, he continues, they should make a distinction between “formal or political dictatorship” and “class dictatorship.” For Prodanov these terms signify certain useful differences, but they are nevertheless permeated with contradictions “present at home.”

Different political systems have the ability to form different subjects, he concludes, stopping short of saying that modalities of social oppression and relations of power cannot be limited to class alone. It is true, Kiril Delev adds, that the fascist state expresses the interests of the monopolies of finance capital, but isn’t it also true that, after all, the state not only acquires great independence but also methodically tries to eliminate the social power and expropriate the material wealth of the monopoly capital class? To follow blindly Lenin’s definition of the bourgeois state and “say that fascism is democracy for the ruling class—this is complete nonsense. Where are the [political] forms that this democracy takes?” It turns out in the end that Zhelev has it right: “It is not far from a historical materialist understanding to say that, once having emerged, this demon—the fascist party and the fascist state—escapes control precisely in the sense that appears in Mitryu Yankov’s critique.”

In other words, once turned into historical reality, ideas, products of labor, and forms of social organization acquire an agency of their own, a capacity that allows for various forms of social domination to emerge, opening up questions of hegemony and subject formation that are not accessible via the narrow theoretical paradigms of doctrinaire Marxism-Leninism. Both Kiril Delev and Asen Davidov saw this as the road to retrieving the depth of dialectical understanding rather than paying lip service to it: “[I]n reality, it is that irony of history which Hegel talks about and which Engels takes up, that products of conscious activity [have the ability to] turn against their own originators.”

While the review itself seemed unconvincing and anachronistic, some members thought Zhelev’s intervention had opened up questions way too complex to be addressed in a single article, no matter how intelligent—a seemingly straightforward, predominantly liberal book on totalitarianism, a book that none of the members appreciated as an original scholarly contribution, had become a public phenomenon, a political event that deserved to be studied closely and taken seriously. For some members it was obvious that the book filled an “ideological and theoretical vacuum that the available literature doesn’t address.” Deyan Pavlov pointed out that the concept of totalitarianism had become a powerful tool in the “monstrous” campaign of associating fascism with actually existing socialism, and rather than ignoring the enormous amounts of bourgeois liberal and Marxist-liberal theoretical production

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386 Vasil Prodanov, Ibid., 126-7.
387 Ibid., 127.
388 Ibid., 127.
389 Kiril Delev, Ibid., 152.
390 Ibid., 162.
391 Ibid., 161
392 Asen Davidov, Ibid., 131.
393 Prodanov, Ibid., 119-120.
on the subject, the journal should engage with the concept of totalitarianism, as well as the fascism/socialism parallel and its limitations—from the Frankfurt school and Arendt to Brzezinski and Friedrich—through a series of conferences, articles, debates, and critical analyses (which the journal never did).394

Others pointed out that, even though the book had become a public sensation, it is far from the truth that everyone succumbed to the analogy—on the contrary, some editors even accused Yankov himself of having “corrupt conscience” [porochno suznanie] for seeing parallels with socialism.395 Indeed, old-generation communist activists and guerrilla fighters (partisans) during WWII all praised the book as an accurate and powerful description of the Nazi state. In Bulgarian history the rise of a powerful underground communist movement is historically intertwined with a tide of resistance against a three and a half year pro-Nazi tsarist Bulgarian government, which joined the Axis powers in March 1, 1941. Lodged in the small towns and villages of the lower forested mountains, their militant offensives proved crucial for the surrender of the pro-Nazi government in September 1944 to a welcomed Red Army. Thus not only the identity of the Communist Party but the very foundation of the Bulgarian socialist state was bound with the antifascist struggle, and that founding bond was unexpectedly reactivated with Zhelev’s intervention. “When activists against fascism gather at home lately, they all start talking about Zhelev’s book”—a Party member shares. “But they never make analogies with socialism. For them this is a study of fascism. It is interesting that those who like making the analogies have not participated in the struggle against fascism.” An older, first-generation member confirms this observation: “I fully support the content of the book and I think it is a marvelous study of the political system of fascism. I think accusations about the analogies are completely arbitrary. If we go that road, we can always find analogies in anything.”

In other words, for some readers the book functioned on a literal level and brought into the discussion the historical context of anti-fascist struggle which, revived in the political conditions of the 1980s, became ironically subversive. During Filosofska misul’s discussion Azarya Polikarov’s comment opened up another dimension:

I’ll make the biggest concession in my critical assessment and will define the entire book as a liberal critique of fascism, not a Marxist one, even though it is not just liberal but it contains [Marxist] elements, declarations if you wish—we can’t say they don’t exist. But the general direction is non-Marxist, it is a liberal critique. Even in this case I think we should say the following: we welcome every critique of fascism, even if it is from a liberal standpoint.398

Of course, he continued, we would be right to require more from our authors—to go farther, be more systematic, more in-depth. But he reminded that it was important to bear in mind the united front that brought down the fascist state and to remember that the struggle required the

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396 “Mneniya i otsenki za Fashizmut,” 198.
convergence of multiple forces. If the principle of partiynost can justify just about anything, Polikarov argued, 

why don’t we justify the carnage in China during Mao Dze Dun, and so on... we need to distance ourselves in principle, and not just along class lines. Otherwise we could justify all kinds of abuses, deviations, deformations, etc., which admittedly exist. [...] Why not struggle for democracy, why not align ourselves with the democratic forces? We have fought fascism both on the international and domestic fronts and we’ll continue that fight. [...] This is about more than just liberalism. We don’t need to fight with the liberals when fighting fascism [...]."

In the final, published version of the critique Yankov had removed all explicit analogies with socialism, but he couldn’t navigate the subtle complications Polikarov raised. The oldest generation communists, activists, and veterans from WWII who helped drive the Nazis out of Southeastern Europe began a letter-writing campaign against the review defending precisely the alliance with the liberal forces. "The author [of the review] accuses Zhelev for taking ‘bourgeois-liberal positions’ to critique fascism? Even if that is the case (and that is not the case), it is, after all, a critique of fascism. [...] [W]e, the communists, formed a united front [...] under the initiative of the Comintern precisely with these ‘bourgeois-liberal’ critics of fascism. And that same solidarity with the liberal bourgeoisie helped create the Fatherland Front at home.”

The structural ambivalence of Zhelev’s message had the capacity to reactivate and rearticulate all these historical layers, layers that became politically mobilized in the present and subverted the legitimacy of the orthodox arguments. It became a prism through which an entire spectrum of late socialist political life was revealed, while also shifting and reconfiguring stable political coordinates. Zhelev’s intervention tapped into and activated a certain circularity of the structure of the terrain of political discourses, a circularity that has the capacity to reorder extreme opposites into perfect symmetries and turn enemies into allies. Often suppressed in theoretical inquiry, this circularity remains the source of contradictions in political understanding and erodes political oppositions. Yet, it remains structural to the political predicament and defines the instability of political antagonisms. We constantly reinvent politically generative lines of oppositions only to see them being eroded, shifted, and reshaped into ever newer frontiers.

But as sharp as Zhelev’s political move was, it relied on a sweeping dehistoricization, and whether this was a tactical decision or a genuine political reading, or both, it granted easy access to the “fascism-communism” analogy and made the political move more visible. In fact, the book editor Ivan Slavov considered such dehistoricization to be the main value of the work: “As opposed to the other studies [of fascism], historicism here is reduced to a minimum, i.e. only to an extent to which the author could extract the model of the totalitarian system. Critiquing the

399 Ibid., 171-72.
401 Letters to Filosofska Misul, in Fashizmut sreshtu Fashizmut (Sofia: Universitetsko Izdatelstvo Sv. Kliment Ohridski), 228-246.
402 Fatherland Front, [Otechestven Front] was the militant Communist Party in pre-socialist Bulgaria, which became the legitimate agent of state power after the government was transferred to the Communists. The quote is from Ducho Mundrov, letter to the Chief Editor of Filosofska Misul Prof. Dobrin Spasov, Sofia, 9 February 1983, in Fashizmut sreshtu Fashizmut, 231.
Nazi state, Zhelev achieved the ultimate task: to dismantle indirectly socialism as a dictatorial, repressive, demagogical, manipulative system. Echoing “classical” formulations of totalitarianism from the 1940s and 1950s, Zhelev later confirmed that the goal was to construct a “unified theory of fascism, which would save us the endless meanderings in the details of this or that national fascism.” Such a general model—he continues—would be of methodological significance in that it could be used as a diagnostic method both for everyday political life and historiographic analysis.

Only Dobrin Spasov brought up the grave political implications of such an approach: Why does everyone speak about socialism in general?—he asks during the discussion of Yankov’s review.

When Mitryu Yankov remains silent about what these reputed [liberal] scholars call Stalinism and what we call the perversions during the personality cult, what would be the reaction towards his work? It would be read as a defense of Stalinism, what is called Stalinism without any disclaimers. And we will give the opportunity for arguments that this person now found it appropriate to criticize in this non-differentiated way and indirectly, like Zhelyu Zhelev, to defend dogmatism and the Stalinist perversions.

It is of course true that an open, direct comparative analysis would have been impossible as a public utterance in the conditions of censorship, or very costly in any kind of form—as if anyone would think that politics comes without a cost—and it was a cost Bulgarian intellectuals, as a privileged quasi-class in the social structure, were not willing to pay. But in a certain sense, the political gesture came with a price that was no lesser: the book constructed an absence structurally crucial to its success. The “communist regime” was never present in any historical form but only invoked, alluded to, or analogized with—and this double-speak was at the heart of the very success of Zhelev’s political intervention. “Communism” haunts the book but is never present with its own historical experience, it speaks yet remains always silent. It is through this structural absence that the pair of socialism and fascism become liberal democracy’s constitutive outside; it is only through this absence that socialism can be constructed as the symmetrical reflection of its official other, of its enemy. Such ghostly presence, one without history, without language, configures a seamless correspondence, identity, or synchrony between the two. Even a straightforward comparative approach would have failed to construct a symmetry so seamless. As Michael Geyer has put it, these comparisons were bound to be “caught in epistemic crisis,” a crisis triggered by historical misalignments and uneven experiences. If readers were to respond to the book’s invitation and decipher its political meaning, if they were to welcome the analogy it called for and embrace its political power, they had to let that perfect reflection structure their own phenomenal experience of the present and their historical understanding of the past.

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403 Ivan Slavov, introduction to Fashizmut sreshtu Fashizmut, 9.
404 Zhelev, Fashizmut, 26.
405 Ibid., 25.
**Fascism** had enormous influence in the construction of the totalitarian experience in the historical memory of socialism during the Bulgarian 1980s. As Ivan Slavov put it in the aftermath of 1989, totalitarianism as a concept “was absent from our vocabulary until recently, the word ‘totalitarianism’ came together with the words democracy, privatization, liberalization […]”  

The circle *Sintez*, one of the most radical informal intellectual formations during the 1980s, wrote a number of provocative pieces on the topic of ideology, totalitarianism, and state power, where the socialist period figures as a monolithic dehistoricized bloc defined by a number of “lacks” and “deficiencies.” They saw the totalitarian state as a monstrous oppressive entity which had produced no history or material reality of its own other than an abstract state of terror and oppression, which had failed to reorganize social life and produce alternative social relations. Alexander Kiossev, one of the four members of *Sintez*, attempts to apply Baudrillard’s thought to the socialist context (entirely inappropriately, as the author himself later admits):

> The ‘virtual model’ of our society (the communist bureaucratic utopia) had one characteristic—it could reproduce no reality but itself. […] The only thing that this nonproductive, and in that sense impotent, symbolic order was capable of doing was to control the order of languages; to enforce a mandatory total world of appearance; to self-reproduce by means of terror.

The totalitarian state’s ideology, a central theme in these writings, remains a failed utopia, an impotent language. It is a top-down manufactured political language that ultimately fails in its effort to produce social effects—to organize material, social, or political life, and to have any effect on the lived experiences of daily life under socialism. In other words, the socialist “experiment” failed to interpellate a socialist subject, and its official discourse was capable of articulating nothing more than utopian visions that produced only distortions of “reality.” Sometimes it is simply a fictitious non-happening that delivered a “non-reality.”

> The very reality was precipitated [sic] as an irrational, anti-utopian residue, as a dark, obscure remainder after the non-productive ideological procedures of the totalitarian society. Being a function of an utopia that never came true, reality seemed utterly wretched, disgracefully failed, consisting mainly of deficiencies—of commodities, books, technologies, entertainment, authenticity… and most importantly of signs […]

For Vladislav Todorov, one of the thinkers in the group, even the material organization of the socialist system is reduced to an “aesthetic artifice.” “Industry” he states,

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408 Slavov, introduction to *Fashizmut sreshtu Fashizmut*, 7.
410 Alexander Kiossev, “Introduction: A Broken Promise,” in *Post-Theory, Games, and Discursive Resistance*, xix (original in English).
411 Ibid.
412 Ibid.
413 Vladislav Todorov, “Introduction to the Political Aesthetics of Communism,” in *Post-Theory, Games, and Discursive Resistance*, 65 (original in English).
represents the leading metaphor of party ideology and factories are the works of this ideology. They result in a deficit of goods, but in an overproduction of symbolic meanings. Their essence is aesthetic, not economic. They are the poems of communist ideology. The work process creates just these factory poems, not commodities [commodities!]. Labor is a ceremony begetting the communal body of the working class. The worker labors for the sake of the factory poem, not for the sake of the market [the market!]. The aim of labor in the factory is the poetic completeness of the factory itself.\textsuperscript{414}

“Reality,” on the other hand (it remains unclear what theoretical understanding of “reality” Sintez members endorsed), “is manifested as a painful absence that perpetually created simulations which problematized, picked on, perplexed, and blocked the functioning of the totalitarian discourse.”\textsuperscript{415} This is why socialist “reality” is most often defined in terms of a lack and a “torturous absence,”\textsuperscript{416} it is a reality that consists of “anti-utopian residue,” a “dark, opaque remainder after the non-productive ideological procedures of totalitarian society.”\textsuperscript{417} For Todorov, factories, industrial infrastructure, the organization of labor under socialism—these are nothing more than the “allegorical figures of industrialization,” and the laboring subject is engaged in fictional activity with aesthetic purposes with no productive or material effects. Designed to do “poetic work,” labor “reproduces metaphors, not capital [not capital!],” it generates empty symbolic content rather than “real,” market value.\textsuperscript{418}

As such, socialist “reality” can only manifest itself through deficiencies and mutations of an imagined, “non-ideological” normality that comes from elsewhere and has universal purchase—that is, “the market reality,” the normality of capitalist relations.\textsuperscript{419} Making commodities and generating capital—these are the only kinds of human activity capable of producing a historical reality, and the market seems to be history’s only stage. Late socialist dissident discourse makes legible the self-understanding of the dissident subject, who imagines himself within a “non-ideological” or “supra-ideological” space, positioned outside of and immune to the state’s mechanism of political and social organization. But it is a position that naturalizes the private property regime and the free market as an ontological reality against which socialist relations appear as deviant, failed, and even non-existent. It is this ahistoricizing discourse calling for return to “normality” that saturated post-socialist political discourse and restored an unrestrained reign of neoliberal capitalism.

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In the early 1990s in Bulgaria, during the height of anti-communist opposition mobilizations, public spaces in urban areas began waking up covered in swastikas and fascist symbols. Their resurgence was anonymous and unarticulated, yet they did not appear just randomly in public but targeted the surfaces of socialist monuments, to both mark their territory and defame those mute

\textsuperscript{414} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{415} Kiossev, “Introduction: A Broken Promise,” xix (original in English).  
\textsuperscript{416} Kiossev, “Teoretichni spomeni,” 26.  
\textsuperscript{417} Ibid., 25.  
\textsuperscript{418} Todorov, “Introduction to the Political Aesthetics of Communism,” 65-66 (original in English).  
\textsuperscript{419} Kiossev, “Teoretichni spomeni,” 25.
but visible and persistent signifiers of the socialist past (figs. 1-3). Why some anonymous agents persistently matched their fascist symbols onto the material remnants of the socialist period could be interpreted differently. Did they mean to visually reinforce the analogy from a pro-privatization and free-market liberal-democratic perspective that embraced the totalitarian discourse? Or perhaps the phenomenon became the public expression of a burgeoning socially conservative, reactionary right wing movement that revived radical racist and nationalist discourses, negatively rearticulating the socialist state’s founding historical juncture? Twenty years later, this tension is already well-articulated in the opposition between neoliberals who have reluctantly supported minority rights on the one hand, and on the other, extreme racist and homophobic neo-nationalists, but they appear on the same side of a political constellation defined by an anti-communist consensus. A constructed historical memory, the totalitarian experience became the constitutive outside to both right wing nationalist politics and liberal struggles for inclusion and equal rights.

In this context it would be useful to remember Dobrin Spasov’s open address to Zhelev from the early years of the 1990s, when Zhelev was already a leader of the Union of Democratic Forces (Suyuz na Demokraticheskite Sili), the main right-wing party which was the main proponent of pro-democracy reforms while pushing for aggressive privatization, and when he was soon-to-become President of the first democratically elected post-socialist government. Spasov publicly lamented Zhelev’s pronounced political support for the return of the private property regime, turning Zhelev into “an apologist for some ‘democratic capitalism.’” “[S]ome people say that ‘democratic socialism’ is something like a ‘round square,’ an absurd contradiction, because the socialist [form] from its inception cannot be democratic.” “Actually,” he continues, “democracy would hardly be ever complete if it didn’t include collective control over the fruits of [social] labor, if it didn’t carry the mark of socialism.”

The link that sealed authoritarianism and socialism made the very possibility of converging democratic pluralism with social equality unthinkable in post-socialist political discourse. “I am afraid,” Spasov said to Zhelev, “that with such reorientations you [in plural] will turn into the local voices of neoconservative, rather than progressive, forces in the contemporary capitalist world; your social goal may turn out to be not some democratic but some savage capitalism.” His fear was certainly justified, as it foresaw that post-socialist East-European societies would become some of the most socially conservative forces on the terrains of global contemporary struggles for social equality and justice.

Only Dobrin Spasov persisted in bringing up the question of what remains banished from historical memory, insisting on a historical-materialist rethinking of the dynamic evolution of

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422 Ibid.

423 Ibid.

424 Ibid., 261.
socialist material histories. Those who wish “total deconstruction of the totalitarian system […] wish great malice to our society”—he reminds Zhelev in his open letter. 425 It was a reminder that the socialist states developed mass literacy and free access to education, produced the specialized knowledge necessary for modernization, laid the material foundations and infrastructure of the modern state—foundations without which a new democratic political order would be unthinkable.

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425 Ibid., 260.
What language and future remains for the possibility of a post-socialist left, a left that finds itself inevitably implicated in the complex histories of state socialisms? Paradoxically, any possibility for retrieving critical thought on the left remains locked in a self-defeating closure, delegitimated a priori—by its own past. But as Jacques Derrida writes in *Specters of Marx*, whether we like it or not, we already bear the mark of Marx’s messianic calling for a more just future. We are marked by being heirs to the fact that the revolutionary attempt has taken place in history, that it can no longer be simply a vision because it has left an irreducible historical imprint:

Whatever one may think of the event, of the sometimes terrifying failures of that which was thus begun, of the techno-economic or ecological disasters, and the totalitarian perversions to which it gave rise (perversions that some have been saying for a long time are precisely not perversions, that is, they are not pathological and accidental corruptions but the necessary deployment of an essential logic present at the birth, of an originary disadjustment—let us say, for our part, in a too-elliptical fashion and without contradicting this hypothesis, they are the effect of an ontological treatment of the spectrality of the ghost), whatever one may think also of the trauma in human memory that may follow, this unique attempt took place. A messianic promise, even if it was not fulfilled, at least in the form in which it was uttered, even if it rushed headlong toward an ontological content, will have imprinted an inaugural and unique mark in history. And whether we like it or not, whatever consciousness we have of it, we cannot not be its heirs. There is no inheritance without a call to responsibility.426

Derrida insists that if we are to know ourselves, we need to recognize that we are history’s inadvertent creations—and this is what makes us history’s heirs. This inheritance comes with enormous responsibility: of both needing to know the dead (“one has to know,” he insists) and of understanding the heterogeneity of that inheritance, that is, of always being aware of the multiple, spectral, and never fully graspable—rather than singular, causal, and final—ways in which the dead bear on the living. A post-socialist politics for social justice therefore would need to look into the past not just to put a light on the terror, not just to reconcile the losses and move forward, not just to establish the truth-narratives and build the monuments to their victims, but to delve into socialisms’ uneven, contradictory endeavors and reopen them for the future.

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Fig. 3. “X Together Against Communism X,” Bratska Mogila, Plovdiv, 1974. Photo by the author, 2008.

Fig. 4. “Bulgaria above all! 14/88” Memorial Complex Apriltsi, Panagyurishte, 1976. Photo by Nikola Mihov (Photo courtesy of the artist).
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