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Mangling the party: Tony Cliff's Lenin

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The following is dedicated to anyone and everyone has sacrificed in the name of “building the revolutionary party.”

January 24, 2012 – Submitted to *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — Tony Cliff's *Lenin: Building the Party* published in 1975 was the first book-length political biography of Lenin written by a Marxist. As a result, it shaped the approach of subsequent investigations by academics like Lars T. Lih as well as the thinking of thousands of socialists in groups like the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP, founded by Cliff), the US International Socialist Organization and Paul Le Blanc, author of *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* and former member of the US SWP (no relation to Cliff's group).

Cliff begins his biography by debunking the USSR's official state religion of Lenin-worship that “endowed [Lenin] with superhuman attributes”. Yet throughout the book Cliff refers to these “superhuman attributes”:

“Lenin adapted himself perfectly to the needs of industrial agitation.”

“[Lenin] combined theory and practice to perfection.” [1]

If these passing remarks were the main flaws of Cliff's book it would still be useful to read, full of political and historical lessons. Sadly, this is not the case.

Cliff's errors and distortions begin with Lenin's political activity in mid-1890s. According to Cliff:

*“**Ob Agitatsii** [“On Agitation”, a pamphlet written by Ardadii Kremer and Martov] had a mechanical theory of the relation between the industrial struggle, the struggle against the employers and the political struggle against tsarism, based on the concept of “stages”. ... [W]hatever the official biographers may say, the truth is that in the years 1894-96, [Lenin] did not denounce **Ob Agitatsii** as one-sided, mechanical and “economist”. His writings of the period coincide exactly with the line which it put forward.”*

To show that Lenin's writings of this period “coincide exactly” with the arguments of *Ob Agitatsii*, Cliff quotes Lenin's 1895 draft Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) program and cites his article “What Are Our Ministers Thinking About?” [2] in which Cliff claims “Lenin urged the expediency of leaving the tsar out of the argument and talking instead about the new laws that

favoring employers and of cabinet ministers who were anti-working class”.

Cliff later states in *Building the Party* that “[n]ot to point out the direct connection between the partial reform and the revolutionary overthrow of Tsarism is to cheat the workers, to fall into liberalism”. Did Lenin fall into liberalism at this early stage of his career?

Anyone who reads either document will find that Lenin’s views do not “coincide exactly” with those of Ob Agitatsii. Neither the draft program nor the article Cliff cites are mechanical, one-sided, stageist, or “economist”. In “What Are Our Ministers Thinking About?” Lenin did not “urge the expediency of leaving the tsar out of the argument”. Lenin did not fall into liberalism.

These egregious misrepresentations of Lenin’s views occur throughout *Building the Party*.

‘Bending the stick’

Cliff closes chapter two by claiming that Lenin’s penchant for “bending the stick” was “a characteristic that he retained throughout his life”.

“[Lenin] always made the task of the day quite clear, repeating what was necessary ad infinitum in the plainest, heaviest, most single-minded hammer-blow pronouncements. Afterwards, he would regain his balance, straighten the stick, then bend it again in another direction.”

Throughout the book Cliff makes reference to Lenin’s “stick bending”, by which Cliff means deliberately and one-sidedly over-emphasised something one day and then the opposite thing the next day in different circumstances.

If “stick bending” was Lenin’s political method, it would mean that none of his writings should be taken at face value. Each piece would suffer from one-sided overemphasis and distortion. Such a method would also call into question Lenin’s intellectual and political honesty. How could anyone be sure what Lenin really meant or thought if his arguments were always exaggerated in some way? Furthermore, why would anyone in the Russian socialist movement take what Lenin had to say seriously if the only thing that was consistent about his message was its exaggerated character? Such a method would create a culture of disbelief and cynicism among Lenin’s followers that would grow more toxic with each “bend”.

Lenin’s letter to Georgi Plekhanov on the economist trend that Cliff uses to illustrate “stick bending” tells us something very different from what Cliff claims:

*“The economic **trend**, of course, was always a mistake, but then it is very young; while there has been **overemphasis** of “economic” agitation (**and there still is here and there**) even without the trend and it was the legitimate and inevitable companion of **any step forward** in the conditions of our movement which **existed in Russia** at the end of the 1880s or the beginning of the 1890s. The situation then was so murderous that you cannot probably even imagine it and one should not censure people who stumbled as they clambered up out of that situation. For the purposes of this clambering out, some narrowness was essential and legitimate: was, I say, for with this tendency to blow it up into a theory and tie it in with Bernsteinism, the whole thing of course changed radically ... The overemphasis of “economic” agitation and catering to the “mass” movement were natural.”*

[3]

Here, Lenin’s real method emerges. The one-sidedness Cliff lauds is not Lenin’s but a feature of a particular stage of the Russian socialist movement’s development, namely the transition from study

circles and propaganda to the field of mass action and agitation. In this transition some mistakes were inevitable and “one should not censure people who stumbled as they clambered up out of that situation”. However, when people elevated inevitable mistakes, errors and stumbles into a full-blown theory and then connected it with Bernstein’s revisionism “the whole thing of course changed radically”. Once the whole thing changed radically, Lenin wrote, *A Protest by Russian Social Democrats* in 1899 [4].

Cliff conflates features and stages of objective development with Lenin’s subjective responses to them:

“[F]ear of the danger to the movement occasioned by the rise of Russian “economism” and German revisionism in the second half of 1899 ... motivated Lenin to bend the stick right over again, away from the spontaneous, day-to-day, fragmented economic struggle and toward the organisation of a national political party.”

Lenin did not transform from an armchair revolutionary in a study circle into an economist factory agitator, from economist factory agitator into top-down party-builder and from top-down party-builder into a proponent of building the party from the bottom up around the elective principle in the name of the spontaneously socialist working class in 1905, attacking his own former positions all along the way. He continually grappled with the development of Russia’s worker-socialist movement through each of its distinct stages, each of which had unique challenges and opportunities (or “tasks”). Together, these stages were part of a single process that Lars T. Lih described as Lenin’s “heroic scenario” — the RSDLP would lead the workers, who, in turn, would lead the peasants, oppressed nationalities and all of the downtrodden, exploited and oppressed people of tsarist Russia in a revolution that would destroy the autocracy, setting the stage for international socialist revolution.

In polemics Lenin typically reminded his readers about the importance of keeping the whole process of development in mind and instead of isolating its individual elements:

*“That which happened to such leaders of the Second International, such highly erudite Marxists devoted to socialism as Kautsky, Otto Bauer and others, could (and should) provide a useful lesson. They fully appreciated the need for flexible tactics; they themselves learned the Marxist dialectic and taught it to others (and much of what they have done in this field will always remain a valuable contribution to socialist literature); however, in **the application** of this dialectic they committed such an error, or proved to be so undialectical in practice, so incapable of taking into account the rapid change of forms and the rapid acquisition of new content by the old forms, that their fate is not much more enviable than that of Hyndman, Guesde and Plekhanov. The principal reason for their bankruptcy was that they were hypnotised by a definite form of growth of the working-class movement and socialism, forgot all about the one-sidedness of that form, were afraid to see the break-up which objective conditions made inevitable and continued to repeat simple and, at first glance, incontestable axioms that had been learned by rote, like: “three is more than two”. But politics is more like algebra than elementary arithmetic and still more like higher than elementary mathematics. In reality, all the old forms of the socialist movement have acquired a new content, and, consequently, a new symbol, the “minus” sign, has appeared in front of all the figures; our wiseacres, however, have stubbornly continued (and still continue) to persuade themselves and others that “minus three” is more than “minus two”.” [5]*

It was Lenin’s appreciation for the totality of development, not “stick bending”, that led him to write polemics against economists, Mensheviks, followers of Bogdanov, liquidators, “left” communists and Karl Kautsky, all of whom did not make the transition from one stage of the “heroic scenario” to the next by adapting themselves to the new “tasks”.

In chapter three, Cliff continues his “bending the stick” narrative:

“It was fear of the danger to the movement occasioned by the rise of Russian “economism” and German revisionism in the second half of 1899 that motivated Lenin to bend the stick right over again, away from the spontaneous, day-to-day, fragmented economic struggle and toward the organisation of a national political party.”

This is totally false. The 1895 draft RSDLP program Lenin wrote and Cliff cited in chapter two proves that Lenin sought to build a national political party years before the economist trend emerged:

“The Russian Social-Democratic Party declares that its aim is to assist this struggle of the Russian working class by developing the class-consciousness of the workers, by promoting their organisation and by indicating the aims and objects of the struggle. The struggle of the Russian working class for its emancipation is a political struggle and its first aim is to achieve political liberty.” [6]

Anyone who reads Lenin’s draft program will know where he stood on the party question in 1895. Fear had nothing to do with Lenin’s commitment to organising a national political party.

Lenin and party rules

Cliff’s chapter on Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* is unremarkable except for the section dealing with Lenin’s attitude towards party rules. Cliff quotes Lenin’s 1902 Letter to a Comrade on Our Organisational Tasks that was circulated as an RSDLP pamphlet in 1904 to show that Lenin had a “distaste for red-tape and rule-mongering”. Cliff goes on to say:

“Lenin’s faction was for a long time very informal indeed. He started to build his organisation through Iskra agents. When, after the second Congress, as we shall see, he lost the support of his own Central Committee, he reorganised his supporters around a newly convened conference that elected a Russian Bureau.” [7]

There are a number of errors here.

The first is that the purpose of Iskra agents was to build the RSDLP, not an organisation loyal to Lenin (another falsehood that runs throughout *Building the Party* is the notion that Bolsheviks and/or the central committee were “his”).

The second and more serious error is to use Lenin’s actions in the aftermath of the RSDLP’s second congress that gave birth to the Menshevik-Bolshevik split as proof of Lenin’s preference for informal or loose rules. One of the central charges [8] that Lenin and his Bolshevik co-thinkers levelled at the Mensheviks was that their resignations, boycotts of party institutions, refusal to call a third congress despite the expressed will of the majority of the 1903 congress delegates and declaration that the League of Social Democrats Abroad was autonomous from the RSDLP all violated the rules adopted at the 1903 congress.

Anyone who reads *Lenin’s One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* [9] will find that Lenin paid very close attention to rules, regulations, procedural minutiae and abided by them. One of the central reasons why Lenin spent years working to convene the 1903 congress in the first place was to eliminate the informal rules and procedures that prevailed in the socialist circles and replace them with the formal rules necessary to govern the workings of a professional political party. In contemporary terms Lenin sought to overcome what feminist Jo Freeman described as “the tyranny of

structurelessness" [10].

Lenin's *Letter to a Comrade on Our Organisational Tasks* proves the opposite of what Cliff claims. In that letter Lenin writes [11]:

*"It would be all the less useful to draw up such Rules at present [1902] since we have practically no general Party experience (and in many places none whatever) with regard to the activities of the various groups and subgroups of this sort and in order to acquire such experience what is needed is not Rules but the organisation of Party information, if I may put it in this way. Each of our local organisations now spends at least a few evenings on discussing Rules. If instead, each member would devote this time to making a detailed and well-prepared report to the **entire** Party on his particular function, the work would gain a hundredfold."*

*"And it is not merely because revolutionary work does not always lend itself to definite organisational form that Rules are useless. No, definite organisational form is necessary and we must endeavour to give such form to all our work as far as possible. That is permissible to a much greater extent than is generally thought and achievable not through Rules but solely and exclusively (we must keep on reiterating this) through transmitting exact information to the Party centre; it is only then that we shall have real organisational form connected with real responsibility and (inner-Party) publicity. For who of us does not know that serious conflicts and differences of opinion among us are actually decided not by vote "in accordance with the Rules", but by struggle and threats to "resign"? During the last three or four years of Party life the history of most of our committees has been replete with such internal strife. It is a great pity that this strife has not assumed definite form: it would then have been much more instructive for the Party and would have contributed much more to the experience of our successors. But no Rules can create **such** useful and essential definiteness of organisational form; this can be done solely through inner-Party publicity. Under the autocracy we can have no other means or weapon of **inner-Party publicity** than keeping the Party centre regularly informed of Party events."*

Here Lenin stressed the importance of reporting and inner-party publicity as opposed to rules because he believed (correctly) that proper decisions about rules could only be made if the RSDLP's leaders were fully aware of the work each of its members engaged in. (Lenin viewed the centralisation of information regarding members' activity into the hands of the party leadership as a response to operating as an illegal organisation; presumably information would be decentralised among the membership as a whole through the medium of a newspaper if the party was legal.)"

Lenin closed this letter with the following words:

"And only after we have learned to apply this inner-Party publicity on a wide scale shall we actually be able to amass experience in the functioning of the various organisations; only on the basis of such extensive experience over a period of many years shall we be able to draw up Rules that will not be mere paper Rules."

So while it is true that Lenin detested rule mongering, it is equally true that Lenin spent the better part of 1904 and 1905 fighting in defence of the rules adopted by the 1903 congress and against the informal methods that the Mensheviks proved unwilling to part ways with.

Chapter five on the 1903 congress is again replete with errors. In discussing the famous debate between Lenin and Martov over what the definition of a party member should be, Cliff attacks Martov and Trotsky for supporting Lenin's organisational plan as laid out in *What Is To Be Done?* and then opposing Lenin's formulation on membership, writing [12]:

"To combine a strong centralist leadership with loose membership was eclecticism taken to an extreme. ... [T]he revolutionary party cannot avoid making strong demands for sacrifice and discipline from its own members. Martov's definition of party membership fitted the weakness of his conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat."

Cliff fails to note that Martov's membership definition became the basis for recruitment into the Bolshevik wing of the RSDLP for three years until the Mensheviks agreed (in conjunction with the Bolsheviks) at the 1906 party congress to a formulation in line with Lenin's 1903 wording. According to Cliff's logic then, the Bolsheviks during 1903-1906 were guilty of "eclecticism taken to an extreme" for combining "strong centralist leadership with loose membership" and "weakness" with regards to proletarian dictatorship, while the Mensheviks were innocent of these things after 1906 because they supported Lenin's definition of party membership.

Eclecticism indeed!

In this regard, Cliff is like most other "Leninists" who invest the 1903 membership debate with an artificial and ahistorical significance. If Lenin did not mention the issue in his discussion on the "Principle Stages in the History of Bolshevism" in *Left-Wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder* written for foreign communist audiences unfamiliar with RSDLP history it could not have been a terribly important issue from his point of view.

Cliff's next egregious error comes in his discussion of Lenin's actions after the 1903 Congress that gave birth to the Menshevik and Bolshevik trends within the RSDLP [13]:

"With the aid of Krupskaya in Geneva and a group of supporters operating inside Russia, [Lenin] built a completely new set of centralised committees, quite regardless of Rule 6 of the party statutes, which reserved to the Central Committee the right to organise and recognise committees. He goes on to say that these "completely new" and "centralised committees" began to agitate for a new RSDLP congress in 1904 to resolve the disputes that arose between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks at the end of the previous congress."

If Cliff's statement is true, then Lenin was a hypocritical and ruthless faction fighter who attacked his political opponents for not playing by party rules that he exempted himself from. If true, it would have fatally undermined the whole basis of post-1903 Bolshevik agitation for a new congress because it was based on the following rule adopted by the second congress: "The Party Council must call a congress if this is demanded by Party organisations which together would command half the votes at the congress". If Lenin himself violated these rules by creating "completely new centralised committees" it would have been impossible for him to attract support within the RSDLP for his claim in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* that it was the Mensheviks who were making a mockery of the RSDLP's rules.

Cliff's assertion has no footnote, so it is unclear what the source of his claim is. What is certain is that there is no mention of illegal (in the sense of being against the RSDLP's rules) and "completely new set of centralised committees" in Krupskaya's memoirs. Surely if Lenin had done what Cliff claims the Mensheviks would have pounced on this monstrous fact and included it in their bitter attacks on Lenin in the pages of the post-congress *Iskra*.

Another element that appears in this chapter and throughout *Building the Party* is Cliff's "truisms" about a variety of topics that have no basis in things Lenin said or did. For example [14]:

"[T]he leadership of a revolutionary party must provide the highest example of devotion and complete identification with the party in its daily life. This gives it the moral authority to demand the maximum sacrifice from the rank and file."

Lenin certainly appreciated the sacrifices people made for the revolutionary movement, but this was not limited to those who were party leaders or even party members (for example, his attitude towards earlier generations of Russian revolutionaries, the Narodniks and Decembrists). At no time did Lenin use his position as a party leader to demand “maximum sacrifice from the rank and file”. This sounds like something from the Stalin era or from Mao’s *Little Red Book* which is full of timeless, moralistic phrase mongering.

Cliff’s references to Lenin’s imaginary disregard for rules serves an important purpose in the Building the Party narrative: Lenin has to constantly circumvent rules and fight against his own followers who become “conservative” and “formalistic” in their approach to politics by resisting Lenin’s continual “stick bending”. This narrative reaches its climax in chapter eight which celebrates Lenin’s fight at the third RSDLP congress held in April 1905 against the Bolshevik committeemen over two issues: recruiting workers to party committees and democratising the party in the midst of the 1905 revolution. According to Cliff, “[b]uttreising themselves with quotations from *What Is to Be Done?* [the Bolshevik commiteemen] called for ‘extreme caution’ in admitting workers into the committees and condemned ‘playing at democracy.’” [15]

The problem with Cliff’s account is that Lenin and the Bolsheviks never fought about either recruiting workers to party committees or democratising the party at the third congress. It simply did not happen. Lih discovered that this episode in *Building the Party* was “lifted wholesale from Solomon Schwarz”, a Bolshevik-turned-Menshevik who wrote *The Russian Revolution of 1905: the Workers’ Movement and the Formation of Bolshevism and Menshevism* (“wholesale” meaning copied word for word) [16].

Cliff’s plagiarism is a relatively minor issue compared to the real scandal: he evidently never bothered to read Lenin’s *Report on the Third Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party* written in May 1905! [17] Had Cliff read Lenin’s account of the third congress he would have discovered that Lenin makes no mention of any conflict, debate, or friction over whether to recruit workers and democratize the party in light of the new conditions created by the 1905 revolution. The report is positively glowing about the results of the third congress, which included more clearly defined party rules (so much for Lenin’s alleged informality) and a series of resolutions guiding the RSDLP’s conduct during the 1905 revolution.

The conclusion is inescapable: either Cliff did not read what Lenin said about the 1905 third congress or he knowingly repeated a falsehood taken from someone else’s work in order to support his narrative of “Lenin versus the party machine he built”. Neither is acceptable for a political biographer of Lenin.

It is in this chapter that the contradictions embedded in Cliff’s “Lenin must continually fight the party machine he built” narrative become most apparent. Suppose that Cliff was right that the committeemen did indeed defeat Lenin on the issue of recruiting workers at the third congress and stubbornly resisted such recruitment efforts. The question then becomes: how did the Bolshevik wing of the RSDLP grow so rapidly? How could workers join the party against the will of the people who were the party? Cliff does not explain this impossibility but exclaims, “nevertheless it moves” and quotes figures showing the rapid growth of the Bolsheviks in 1905 and after [18]. Cliff’s Lenin was evidently a magician who could make the party take actions the people who constituted the party opposed.

– ‘Democratic centralism’ and party discipline

In chapter 15 Cliff’s litany of errors continues. The 1905 revolution created strong pressure from the RSDLP’s rapidly growing ranks to unite the Menshevik and Bolshevik factions. This unity was consummated at the RSDLP’s 1906 congress held in Stockholm. Cliff neglects to mention that this congress elected a central committee of three Bolsheviks and six Mensheviks [19]. He recounts that an RSDLP conference in Tammerfors held in 1906 decided to create an electoral bloc with the Constitutional Democrats (Cadets), a liberal party backed by big business. Lenin insisted that the decisions of this conference were not binding on local party bodies. A surprised Cliff writes:

“What had happened to the democratic centralism so dear to Lenin? For years he had argued for the subordination of the lower organs of the party to the higher and against the federal concept of the party. In One Step Forward, Two Steps Back, written February-May 1904, he had said that “the undoubted tendency to defend autonomism against centralism ... is a fundamental characteristic of opportunism in matters of organisation”.” [20]

What Cliff means by “democratic centralism” is “subordination of the lower organs of the party to the higher” and a non-federal party. What Lenin meant by “democratic centralism” was altogether different.

The quote Cliff cites from *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* is misplaced because Lenin was arguing against those, like Trotsky, who held that the editorial board of the party’s newspaper should be autonomous and not subject to the democratic control of the party congress, a very different issue from the autonomy of local committees or local party branches to make decisions regarding local work. The notion that local autonomy was a new element in Lenin’s thought in 1907 is mistaken. Lenin noted that the third congress of the RSDLP in 1905 affirmed this principle:

“The autonomy of the committees has been defined more precisely and their membership declared inviolable, which means that the C.C. no longer has the right to remove members from local committees or to appoint new members without the consent of the committees themselves. ... Every local committee has been accorded the right to confirm periphery organisations as Party organisations. The periphery organisations have been accorded the right to nominate candidates for committee membership.” [21]

The principle of autonomy was first affirmed at the RSDLP’s second congress in 1903:

“All organisations belonging to the Party carry on autonomously all work relating specially and exclusively to the sphere of Party activity which they were set up to deal with.” [22]

Another element missing from Cliff’s account of “democratic centralism” is the following rule, also adopted at the second congress:

“Every Party member and everyone who has any dealings with the Party, has the right to demand that any statement submitted by him be placed, in the original, before the Central Committee, or the editorial board of the Central Organ, or the Party Congress.” [23]

This rule seems to have been designed to prevent secret expulsions and other abuses of power by party officials that plague all “Leninist” organisations, abuses which are almost always justified on the grounds of “democratic centralism”. The term has been abused to such an extent that it no longer conveys the organisational norms that prevailed within the RSDLP among Mensheviks (who first coined the term) and Bolsheviks alike until the 1917 revolution.

Lenin famously defined “democratic centralism” as “freedom of discussion, unity in action” [24]. Cliff appropriately quotes Lenin on what this meant in practice:

“After the competent bodies have decided, all of us, as members of the party, must act as one man. A Bolshevik in Odessa must cast into the ballot box a ballot paper bearing a Cadet’s name even if it sickens him. And a Menshevik in Moscow must cast into the ballot box a ballot paper bearing only the names of Social Democrats, even if his soul is yearning for the Cadets.” [25]

Note what “freedom of discussion, unity in action” *did not mean*. It did not mean that the minority had to publicly champion the “line” or argument of the triumphant majority. “Unity in action” for a dissenting minority simply meant acting in concert with the majority, not singing their tune or arguing for their “line”. Nowhere did Lenin say “a Bolshevik in Odessa must argue with his workmates that supporting the Cadets is the way to go”, or “a Menshevik in Moscow must convince everyone he knows to vote Social Democrat even if his soul is yearning for the Cadets”. A line of action and a line of argument are two different things; “unity in action” did not mean unity in argument or political position.

Given this understanding of what “democratic centralism” meant to Lenin and the RSDLP, the following lines by Cliff are wildly, unfathomably wrong:

“A couple of months later, in January 1907, Lenin went so far as to argue for the institution of a referendum of all party members on the issues facing the party – certainly a suggestion that ran counter to the whole idea of democratic centralism.” [26]

Polling the party to determine the party’s course of action is antithetical to “democratic centralism” only if we use Cliff’s definition of the term and not Lenin’s. The answer to Cliff’s question, “What had happened to the democratic centralism so dear to Lenin?” is simple: nothing.

Cliff’s failure to understand the meaning of “democratic centralism” becomes a problem again in chapter 17 when he discusses a Menshevik-led party trial of Lenin in 1907. Surprisingly, Cliff agrees with the Mensheviks that Lenin was guilty of violating party discipline, writing:

“Lenin’s behavior at the trial is very interesting, because it shows the relentless way in which he conducted a faction fight against the right wing of the party. As the trial opened, Lenin calmly acknowledged that he used “language impermissible in relations between comrades in the same party”, but he made absolutely no apology for doing so. Indeed, in fighting the Liquidationists and their allies in the movement, he never hesitated to use the sharpest weapons he could lay his hands on. Moderation is not a characteristic of Bolshevism.” [27]

The incident that precipitated the trial occurred after the Mensheviks in St. Petersburg created an electoral bloc with the Cadets in defiance of the majority of the local RSDLP organisation. Lenin wrote a pamphlet attacking the Mensheviks for doing so. The Mensheviks retaliated against Lenin by having the RSDLP central committee, on which they had a majority, charge Lenin with violating party discipline. So it was the Mensheviks who were violating the rules of the RSDLP, not Lenin.

The Bolshevik Party: not formed in 1912

In chapter 17, Cliff discusses Lenin’s fight against the liquidationist trend in the RSDLP. He notes that a January 1910 RSDLP conference vote forced Lenin to disband the Bolshevik faction, close its newspaper and break off relations with the “boycottists” in their ranks while the Mensheviks were obliged to do the same: disband their faction, close their newspaper and break with the liquidators

in their midst. Lenin dutifully complied. His Menshevik counterparts did not.

After the Mensheviks proved unwilling to follow through with their obligations, Lenin launched a new weekly paper at the end of 1910, *Zvezda*. Cliff omits this fact and instead picks up the story with the Prague Conference held in January 1912. He also omits the fact that this conference elected a pro-party Menshevik (one of two who attended) to the RSDLP's central committee. This is important because the 1912 Prague Conference is almost always referred to as the beginning of the Bolsheviks as a separate party from the Mensheviks. Cliff evades this issue by referring to those elected to the central committee in 1912 as "hards", a term used nowhere else in *Building the Party*.

After chapter 17, Cliff claims the RSDLP's daily newspaper *Pravda* played "a central role in building the Bolshevik Party", declares that the Bolsheviks became "a mass party" in 1912-1914 and says that the Bolshevik Duma deputies "finally ended" relations with their Menshevik counterparts in late 1913 (when World War One broke out the deputies issued a joint statement, so this is false). Based on these claims it is clear that Cliff adheres to the myth that the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks separated into two parties in 1912.

However, a cursory glance at Lenin's writings in 1912 reveals how wrong this view is. Shortly after the 1912 Prague Conference, Lenin wrote the following in an explanatory note to the International Socialist Bureau:

"In all, twenty organisations established close ties with the Organising Commission convening this conference; that is to say, practically all the organisations, both Menshevik and Bolshevik, active in Russia at the present time." [28]

The 1912 Prague Conference separated pro-party Mensheviks and Bolsheviks from the liquidators. The Menshevik-Bolshevik divide did not culminate in two separate parties until the 1917 revolution. Cliff's account of the 1912-1914 period is terribly flawed because it is predicated on falsehoods. The Bolsheviks were not a party, therefore they could not "become a mass party", nor could *Pravda* have played "a central role in building the Bolshevik Party" because such an entity did not yet exist. This explains why, when Lenin referred to *Pravda*'s success against its liquidationist rival *Luch* he wrote, "four-fifths of the workers have accepted the Pravdist decisions as their own, have approved of Pravdism and actually rallied around Pravdism" instead of using the terms "Bolshevist" and "Bolshevism" [29].

Cliff's treatment of the history of Lenin and *Pravda* is just as error-ridden as the rest of *Building the Party*. For example, he claims, "Lenin practically ran *Pravda*" [30]. What he neglects to mention is that 47 of Lenin's articles were rejected [31] and that many of Lenin's published articles were heavily edited to weaken their factional content. If Lenin "practically ran *Pravda*", why would he reject so many of his own articles and censor himself politically?

Pravda was run by a team of editors, not by Lenin and the initiative for it came from the lower ranks of the party. It was not "Lenin's *Pravda*" as Cliff claims, but a workers' paper to which Lenin was one contributor among many (Plekhanov, Rosa Luxemburg and Kautsky also wrote for it). The overwhelming majority of *Pravda*'s content, including poems and humour columns, was written by workers, not by higher-ups in the party or the paper's editorial team.

Conclusion

Building the Party has so many gross factual and political errors that it is useless as a historical study of Lenin's actions and thoughts. This conclusion is inescapable for anyone who reads the book

closely and compares it with the writings of Lenin and the historical record. Those who read *Building the Party* and take it seriously will need to unlearn the falsehoods and misinformation contained in its pages if they want a reasonably accurate picture of Lenin's work in the context of the Russian socialist movement of the early twentieth century.

Bookmarks in Britain and Haymarket Books in the US should think twice before republishing, selling and profiting from *Building the Party* since it contains so many errors, falsehoods and lies about Lenin.

Pham Binh

P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/2710>

* Dedicated to anyone and everyone who has sacrificed in the name of "building the revolutionary party". Pham Binh's articles have been published by Occupied Wall Street Journal, The Independent, Asia Times Online, Znet, Green Left Weekly, Counterpunch and Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal. His latest project is thenorthstar.info, a collaborative blog by and for occupiers from across the US.

Footnotes

- [1] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap02.htm>
- [2] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1895/dec/31.htm>
- [3] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap02.htm#f63>
- [4] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1899/sep/protest.htm>
- [5] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch10.htm>
- [6] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1895/misc/x01.htm>
- [7] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap04.htm#s7>
- [8] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/feb/00.htm>
- [9] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1904/onestep/index.htm>
- [10] See on ESSF (article 12592), [The Tyranny of Structurelessness](#).
- [11] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1902/sep/00.htm>
- [12] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap05.htm#s2>

- [13] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap05.htm#f56>
- [14] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap05.htm#s2>
- [15] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap08.htm#fa>
- [16] <http://www.brill.nl/historical-materialism-volume-18-issue-1-2010>
- [17] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/may/27.htm>
- [18] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap08.htm#s3>
- [19] <http://members.optushome.com.au/spainter/Pearce.html>
- [20] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap15.htm#f18>
- [21] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/may/27.htm>
- [22] <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/rsdlp/1903/rules.htm>
- [23] <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/rsdlp/1903/rules.htm>
- [24] <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/may/20c.htm>
- [25] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap15.htm#f20>
- [26] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap15.htm#f20>
- [27] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap17.htm#f31>
- [28] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1912/mar/00b.htm>
- [29] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/may/30.htm>
- [30] <http://www.archive.org/stream/Elwood--LeninAndPravda1912-1914.pdf/Elwood--LeninAndPravda1912-1914#page/n0/mode/2up>
- [31] <http://www.archive.org/stream/Elwood--LeninAndPravda1912-1914.pdf/Elwood--LeninAndPravda1912-1914#page/n0/mode/2up>