UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICS OF LENIN

Neil Harding has outlined his understanding of the politics of Lenin in his book: Leninism (Macmillan 1996, London) His approach is to consider that the standpoint of Lenin was essentially elitist and authoritarian. This conclusion is based on the connected aspect of the character of Marxism is that it has the same character. The assumption being made is that the perspective of revolutionary socialism can only be upheld in an elitist manner because the democratic expression of this approach is problematical and as a result the viewpoint of Marxism is an attempt to impose the role of an elitist ideology onto the aspirations of the working class. In this context it is being suggested that the very character of socialism is not essentially generated by the role of the people and is instead an intellectual doctrine which can only become influential when the aims of various theoreticians becomes the expression of the aspirations of the working class. This approach implies that the very character of the conception of socialism is not something that has a genuine relationship to the role of the workers and is instead something that is imposed as a result of the artificial influence of the various intellectuals that promote the aim of socialism. In this context Lenin is one of these elitist theoreticians and he was able to successfully impose his version of Marxism onto the working class. But this approach can be rejected if we consider that Marxism became influential because of the various limitations of capitalism that led to the exploitation of the working class and as a result this situation became manifested in popular discontent. Without this aspect it is not possible for people like Lenin to have acquired influence. In this context the revolutions that occurred in 1905 and 1917 in Russia were an expression of the popular discontent of the workers and peasants. Only in this context was it possible for the Bolsheviks led by Lenin to acquire influence and to ultimately overthrow the provisional government in October 1917. Hence if the Bolsheviks had primarily been defined by elitist objectives it would have been very difficult for them to have acquired the allegiance of the workers and as a result been able to successfully overthrow the provisional government. In this context the approach of Harding is problematical because it is not able to establish how the elitist politics of Lenin could have acquired support and so facilitated the successful overthrow of the bourgeois regime. Instead we have to explain the development of the difficulties of the Bolshevik administration in terms of the difficulties caused by the economic situation, the development of civil war and the isolation of the regime. It was in this context that we can understand the increasing influence of elitism in the approach of Lenin, because this aspect represented a response to the difficulties of the situation. In other words, a contradiction developed between the perspective of Marxism and the undermining of this approach which was caused by the unfavourable character of the situation because of the various unfavourable circumstances in which the revolutionary regime was established. Thus, the character of Leninism between 1918-22 was an attempt to develop a practical response to various difficulties within the situation of the formation of the political power of the revolutionary regime. It could be argued that Harding seems to be indifferent to the complexities of this situation because of the dogmatic manner in which he insists that the character of the approach of Lenin was inherently elitist. But this criticism seems to imply that a more emancipatory and progressive alternative was possible despite these unfavourable circumstances. But this apparent assumption is never systematically articulated and instead it is assumed that Marxism is inherently authoritarian and elitist. Thus, the ultimate problem is that generated by the apparent utopian character of Marxism, and the connected fact that it is not possible to relate its approach to the possibility of resolving the various problems created by the capitalist and imperialist system. Such a standpoint would seem to imply that there is an alternative to the various limitations of Marxism, but this conception is never outlined by Harding. Instead he emphasises the problems created by the apparently authoritarian personality of Lenin. This conclusion is abstracted from any systematic discussion of the actual economic and political problems of the revolutionary regime between 1918-23. Therefore, this would suggest that his approach is dogmatic. However, this view is only assertion and has to be established more convincingly in terms of a thorough study of his book.

Harding’s initial perspective is to reject the view that the authoritarian aspects of Lenin was based on a rejection of the approach of Marx. Instead he suggests that: “It finds that Leninism was authentic Marxism, that it indeed did revitalise Marxism as a doctrine (and practice) of class war and revolution. It should not, however, be supposed that closeness to Marxism carries with it any positive recommendation. On the contrary, one of the themes of this book is that Leninism replicated the dogmatic and intolerant themes of Marxism itself. The dramatic contrast between Marxism and Leninism has, in short, been sustained only by counterposing a hypostatized and sanitised Marx to a mythic Lenin.”(p6-7) This is a dogmatic view that does not establish the basis of the contention that the apparently authoritarian Marx provided the justification of the approach of Lenin. Instead we can suggest that Marx was concerned to realise a system of participatory democracy similar to that of the brief experience of the Paris Commune of 1870 which could establish the political conditions for the social emancipation of working people. He may have underestimated the difficulties involved in the creation of this type of society, but this did not mean that he neglected the importance of establishing the democratic justification for the formation of a genuine revolutionary regime. His approach was based on the view that the successful realisation of the task of the achievement of the formation of a socialist government would express the possibility to express the role of democracy as the basis to achieve the objectives of communism. Engels clarified this perspective and outlined how it could be possible to utilise the role of universal suffrage in order to achieve these objectives. There was no suggestion that an authoritarian type government was necessary in order to realise the aims of socialism and communism. It could be suggested that this approach did not comprehensively outline a systematic analysis of the relationship between party and class in the process of the revolutionary transformation of society. But this apparent limitation did not mean that they rejected the importance of the role of democracy in the creation of the process of transformation that would result in the development of a classless society. Instead it was assumed that democracy would be the basis of the possibility to create a society that was aiming to realise the objective of the demise of the importance of the various exploitative aspects of the capitalist system. Hence if Lenin ultimately justified a form of one-party rule and the logic of authoritarianism this was not because of a supposed logical realisation of the aims of Marx and Engels. Instead what had resulted was an empirical digression from the objectives of original Marxism which had been caused by the complexities of the difficult situation in which the October revolution had occurred. It is true that Marx and Engels did not outline the principles of a type of socialism based on the effective competition of parties, but this apparent omission did not mean that supported the realisation of a form of authoritarian one-party rule. Instead they accepted the importance of the political distinctive role of various socialist organisations within the society of the Paris Commune. It was the role of counterrevolution that repressed this experiment in the creation of a type of democratic socialism in an authoritarian manner. Engels was to make the conclusion from this experience that the role of universal suffrage under the system of bourgeois democracy could express the democratic manner in which a socialist party could acquire influence within a capitalist society and utilise this increasing political power in order to acquire political power in terms of the norms of the role of universal suffrage. It was the opportunism of the leaders of the Marxist parties after Marx and Engels which undermined the credibility of this perspective and so indicated the renewed importance of an insurrectionary basis of the process of the overthrow of capitalism. Indeed, Leninism was a reaction to the opportunism of the Second International and in this manner the approach of an orthodox revolutionary approach was affirmed because of the opportunism of the various parties claiming to be Marxist. In this context the character of Leninism was created as a response to the opportunist degeneration of the Second International. In this context it was no longer possible to simply affirm the politics of Marx and Engels as outlined in the period between 1870-90. Instead it was necessary to have a response to the challenges posed by the development of capitalism into imperialism.

Harding accepts that Lenin outlined a perspective for the development of capitalism as imperialism which was consistent with the views of Marx and Engels. But he does not consider that there was anything praiseworthy about this relationship. Instead the assumption is that this apparently dogmatic connection was an expression of the authoritarian logic of Lenin. But what this viewpoint ignores is that the majority of the parties of the Second International had betrayed the revolutionary approach of Marx and Engels when they considered that the interests of the bourgeois nation were more important than the contrasting approach of the international class struggle. In this situation of the realisation of the opportunism of the parties of the Second International it was quite straightforward for Lenin to outline how these organisations had betrayed the principles and objectives of Marx and Engels. This criticism did not necessarily mean that Lenin had a convincing alternative, but he could indicate that it was necessary to reject the opportunism of the Second International which had effectively degenerated into becoming a collection of rival national parties. In this context it was possible for Lenin to contend that it was necessary to promote an alternative to this opportunism. Hence, he could argue that this approach was most consistent with the views of Marx and Engels because the alternative was to justify the standpoint of opportunism and accommodation to the interests of imperialism. Ironically Harding accepts this view but considers that it expresses the apparent dogmatism of Lenin: “The assessment that follows locates the origins of Leninism as a generalised ideology, as an authentically Marxist response to the First World War, and its mobilising appeal in a plausible (but fatally frozen) analysis of the degeneration of contemporary capitalism…..Its historical analysis added a final convulsive phase to the Marxist account of the development of capitalism – the phase of monopoly or finance capitalism. This was the historical terminus of capitalist civilisation in which all its contradictions would be raised to the highest degree and which simultaneously contained all the conditions necessary for the transition to socialism on a global plane. It should now be clear that we are dealing with a complex and highly theorised ideology that pretended to be a total explanatory system of ideas – all things past, present and future, fell within its purview and were, in principle at least, explicable in terms of peculiar to its thought structure.”(p7-8) But what this comment seems to have ignored is the recognition that Lenin understood that the importance of the class struggle implies the constant creation of theoretical and political challenges that cannot be tackled in a dogmatic manner. Instead the very significance of the economic and political situation means that a creative and flexible approach has to be upheld and promoted if the requirements of the objectives of the class struggle are to be tackled in a principled and empirical manner. In this context what seems to be an adherence to Marxism in a rigid and dogmatic manner is actually an expression of what is required in relation to the developments of the international class struggle. This also means that it requires flexibility and the capacity to relate to changing economic and political developments if a credible strategy of change is to be developed. Such an approach is connected to the recognition that the transformation of the situation of inter-imperialist war into international class struggle is essential if the possibility of progress towards the realisation of socialism is to be advanced. In this context the rejection of all forms of nationalism that justify the role of imperialism has to be promoted and instead of the nationalistic opportunism of the Second International the connection of Marxism to the approach of socialist internationalism has to be strengthened and developed. In this manner Lenin tries to connect the principles of Marxism to the political requirements of the present situation. Only in these terms will it be possible to facilitate the development of a revolutionary approach that is able to oppose and reject the process of the opportunist degeneration of the Second International. Therefore, what Harding considers to be the dogmatism and inflexibility of Lenin is actually an attempt to respond to the requirements of the present political situation in the most principled and resolute manner. This does not mean that the approach of Lenin is inherently correct, but it does connect his motives to revolutionary objectives in an intransigent manner. In contrast, Harding seems to consider that this approach was inherently problematical because of the apparent contradiction between an emancipatory promise and the limitations of the actual performance of Leninism. But this approach is unable to understand the actual complexity of the standpoint of Lenin which is about the development of a political relationship between party and class in order to promote the objectives of proletarian revolution and the construction of socialism.

Tony Cliff summarises the approach of Lenin in the following terms: “However, the heart of Marxism is that man makes history, man is the active subject of social change. And as the working class is not homogenous it is up to the advanced section of the class to coalesce in a revolutionary party. Without such a party there can be no victory of the revolution. Of course, the party has to be rooted in the class, has to be taught by the experience of the class and has to lead the class. Unevenness also exists inside the party: between different comrades with different levels of experience, talent and so on. In the struggle the development and selection of cadres for the leadership takes place.”(Tony Cliff, Lenin volume 2 Pluto Press, London 1976 p139) However this approach can result in elitism if it is considered that the character of leadership is essentially more important than the role of the mass movement. This seems to be the limitation of the approach of Cliff when he comments that: “Revolutions tend towards centralism because their aim is the taking of state power, and the state is highly centralised. Hence at the moment of the revolution, more than ever before, a decisive role is taken by the leadership in the central direction of the revolutionary forces. The initiative of the revolutionary centralist leadership does not negate democracy; on the contrary it is its dynamic realization. The great revolutionary leader is great because he expresses the needs of the millions, because the slogans be puts forward, the tactics and strategy he uses fit the needs of the time.”(Cliff p139) But the point is that unless there is a dynamic interaction between the leadership and the role of the working class the possibility for revolutionary change will not occur. In this manner the working class in the Russia of 1917 had become revolutionary and had already acted to overthrow the Tsarist regime in February. They had become militant and discontented with the character of society. The workers were becoming receptive to the possibility of the overthrow of capitalism. Lenin responded to this mood, but he could not invent it. Instead he developed a strategy that attempted to connect the discontent of the people with the aim of the overthrow of the bourgeois Provisional government. In this context the very greatness of Lenin was his ability to relate the consciousness of the people with the aim of opposing the continuation of a regime based on the interests of capitalism. But if he had not been successful in this context his approach would have been a failure. Without the support of the people the objectives of the Bolsheviks would not have been achieved. Therefore contrary to the views of Harding there must have been an aspect of the politics of Lenin that was not elitist and was instead concerned with connecting the aspirations of the workers and peasants with the aim of the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeois regime. If the approach of Lenin had been limited by an elitist standpoint his perspective of change could not have been realised. Instead the greatness of Lenin was based on his recognition of the importance of calling for ‘All Power to the Soviets’ or the hegemony of the institutions established by the workers and soldiers. Hence it was not possible for Lenin to be merely an elitist because such a perspective would not have been able to successfully overthrow the bourgeois government. This is why Cliff seems to be correct to make the following observations: “Throughout all the zigzags in tactics, Lenin’s leitmotif was constant: to raise the level of consciousness and organization of the working class, to explain to the masses their own interests, to give clear political expression to the feelings and thoughts of the people. He knew how to express the programme of the revolution in a few clear and simple slogans which fitted the dynamic of the struggle, and meshed in with the experience and needs of the masses.”(p169) But the point is that this process of interaction could not have been possible if the workers were not increasingly receptive to the objectives of further revolutionary change. Without this aspect even the brilliance of Lenin would have been ineffective. But this aspect is what is ignored by Harding. He can only consider Lenin to be an elitist because he underestimates the importance of the process of dynamic interaction of party and class in 1917. The result of this essentially one-sided approach is to ignore the dynamic importance of the workers in 1917 and to instead define the revolution as an elite action based on the will of Lenin. But as Cliff outlines the actual greatness of Lenin in 1917 is his ability to provide a perspective for revolutionary change that was able to acquire popular mass support. People became convinced of the necessity to act according to the revolutionary objectives of the Bolsheviks. Without this dynamic the possibility of revolutionary change could not have been realised. Or as Cliff suggests: “By drawing ever broader masses of workers, soldiers and peasants into the struggle under the banner of the revolution, by increasing the scope of the party’s influence, by raising the level of self-activity and consciousness of the masses, by constant self-education of the proletariat, the party and leadership, Bolshevism led the people to victory in October.”(Cliff p169) Therefore the conception of Lenin outlined by Harding could not have been realistic in relation to the political role of Lenin in 1917. An elitist Lenin could not have provided a perspective that was capable of developing popular and mass support. Instead he had to justify a programme of action that was based on the aspiration of the realisation of the effective popular democracy of the people. Hence even if we accept that there were important elitist limitations in the approach of Lenin, these could not explain his motives and actions during 1917.

Indeed in an important sense Harding accepts this point when he concedes that Leninism had a genuine popular appeal: “A large part of the appeal of Leninism was that it provided not only a comprehensive critique of the economics and politics of contemporary capitalism, but also an integrated alternative. To many, who, various reasons, felt themselves disadvantaged, deprived, alienated, exploited, or marginalised by a capitalist dominated national or international market, it offered explanation for their grievances, and inspiration and organisation to motivate themselves to remedy their situation.”(Harding p8) Thus Harding accepts that this aspect expressed the revolutionary aspects of Leninism and its connection to a perspective of social emancipation. Hence in order to understand the ultimate limitations of Leninism we have to connect them to the adverse situation of the Soviet state that undermined the possibility to realise a genuine socialist society based on the emancipation of labour because of these unfavourable aspects that meant the result was the generation of the importance of the party elite rather than the realisation of human liberation. But whilst the approach of Harding implies that the standpoint of Lenin justified this development, we would contest this understanding and instead suggest that adverse social circumstances led to the undermining of the possibility to construct a genuine socialist society. Indeed, Lenin tried to develop policies that attempted to oppose the development of the role of the party as a privileged stratum within society. Ultimately it was unfavourable circumstances that led to this development, and Lenin tried to suggest measures to try to change this situation. The ultimate futility of these policies was not because of their unrealistic character but was instead because of the unfavourable social situation which facilitated the development of the increasing influence of the role of the party as a privileged bureaucratic elite. But instead of acknowledging these complexities Harding instead assumes that Leninism was ultimately unrealistic. He essentially considers that socialism is an impractical objective that cannot be realised. In this manner Leninism was bound to be an inevitable failure: “But it was precisely in terms of its own protestations that it was judged and found wanting. It was finally rejected because not only could it not realise the aspirations it had itself promoted, it could no longer maintain, even to itself that it was making progress towards their fulfilment.”(p8) Hence Leninism was bound not to succeed because it was ultimately impractical and could not become an expression of an efficient and successful social formation. But this criticism does not allow for the importance of the adverse circumstances in which the Russian revolution occurred, and the problems created by economic crisis and the development of civil war. The point is that the perspectives of Leninism became impractical under these adverse circumstances, but the success of the international proletarian revolution may have transformed this situation. With the realisation of the objectives of the class struggle it may have been possible to create a type of society in which the aims of socialism may have been achieved. But the isolation of the revolutionary regime meant that it was necessary to impose policies of austerity and in these circumstances this led to the undermining of the popular support of the Soviet regime and the development of a situation in which a process of tension developed between the state and the working class. But Harding does not seem to allow for the importance of these adverse circumstances and instead assumes that the objectives of Lenin and the Soviet regime were unrealistic. This standpoint is an indication of his lack of sympathy for the revolutionary state and instead considers that its unrealistic objectives could only result in the increasing undermining of its popular support and credibility. But what this criticism does not explain is that the policies of the Bolsheviks were based on the expression of the popular discontent of the people with the actions of the bourgeois Provisional government during 1917. This meant that the Bolsheviks attempted to connect their policies to this situation in terms of a strategy of the revolutionary overthrow of the regime. There was effectively no opposition to this approach, and instead the popular character of the revolutionary process seemed to suggest that the new Bolshevik regime could be able to relate its mass support to the attempt to create a new type of society. But this possibility was undermined by the adverse economic conditions and the development of civil war. Did these developments mean that Leninism was impractical and unable to relate in an adequate manner to these adverse circumstances? This seems to be the conclusion of Harding who criticises Lenin for his revolutionary intransigence, and the dogmatic view that the crisis of the capitalist system in its imperialist form meant that the process of the realisation of world revolution was a short-term possibility. Lenin is considered to be the exponent of a form of revolutionary dogmatism that is unable to comprehend the important fact that the capitalist system is more durable than he recognises. The development of an authoritarian regime is because of the failure to understand the durability of world capitalism despite the situation of international war. In other words, the survival of an isolated regime is only possible in terms of the promotion of the importance of the repressive role of the state and the formation of a one-party system. The illusions of Lenin concerning the success of world revolution actually result in the consolidation of authoritarianism. But what this criticism ignores is that the unrest of the working class in 1917 provide the momentum for the creation of the political conditions for revolutionary change. Lenin and the Bolsheviks were only responding to the political situation in terms of the actuality of the discontent of the workers and peasants. The result of this situation was the creation of a revolutionary strategy that attempted to connect to this situation in terms of the perspective of ‘All Power to the Soviets’. The point is that if Lenin had not advocated this perspective it would have been promoted by rival political forces, such as the anarchists. Lenin was relating his political approach to the character of the political situation which was based on the situation of mass discontent during 1917. In this manner his approach was not necessarily elitist, contrary to the views of Harding, but was instead an attempt to relate the objectives of the Bolsheviks to the development of popular discontent. It was the challenges of the post-revolutionary period that led to the problems expressed by the influence of elitism. The point is that it is necessary to connect the character of the politics of the Bolsheviks to the complexity of the situation after the assumption of power. This is why it is problematical to assume that Lenin was an inherent elitist and so indifferent to the importance of the objective of the creation of a regime based on the role of popular democracy.

However, Harding is right to suggest that the character of Leninism changed in 1914. With the onset of the imperialist war his approach became based on an internationalist perspective: “For the first time in his career Lenin became convinced that he had a unique responsibility to restate the Marxist imperative for revolution on a global scale, and to reformulate it in the economic and political conditions of the modern world. He embarked for the first time upon themes that no longer had Russia as their central point of reference but were intended to be of a general European, and indeed global significance. Up to this point Lenin had never presumed or attempted to write about international political economy, the history of socialism in Europe, or the character of the imperialist state and how to construct a Marxist alternative to it. Indeed, up to this point, Lenin had, actually written almost nothing on the nature of socialism or the conditions necessary for its realisation. From now on he was to write about little else. Within three years of the start of the First World war he had, in most essentials, defined the economic, historical and political world view that was to characterise subsequent Leninism.”(Harding p11) This point seems to be correct, but the reasons for this development was connected to the opportunist and nationalise degeneration of the parties of the Second International. The failure of people like Kautsky to outline a principled alternative to the process of the opportunist degeneration of the Second International, meant that Lenin recognised the important of developing a principled strategic alternative based on an analysis of contemporary capitalism and in this manner uphold a revolutionary perspective which had been undermined by the opportunism of the major socialist parties. Therefore, the response of Lenin was to a serious political crisis of international socialism and this meant that he could no longer be primarily concerned with the role of Social Democracy in Russia. The point is that he was attempting to respond to a serious political crisis of the international forces of socialism. If he had not attempted to explain the process of degeneration of the Second International, his political approach would have been seriously one-sided and increasingly antiquated. But does this response mean that Harding is correct to suggest that Leninism only developed in 1914? This would seem to be a one-sided view that ignores the important emphasis on strategy that is expressed by the Lenin before 1914. He outlines a strategy of revolution as a response to the events of 1905, and also elaborated his conception of the relationship of party to class. Thus, Leninism is already developed even if it was not based on the recognition of the importance of international revolution to the class struggle in Russia. The actual problem with this early form of Leninism was that it was not based on an understanding of the importance of the dynamism of the workers in the process of political development, and instead his conception of the character of revolution was connected to the justification of the dominant role of the party to the effective exclusion of the importance of the dynamism of the working class. This ones-sidedness was not overcome in relation to his response to the events of the 1905 revolution. Only in 1917 did he fully appreciate the importance of the dynamism of the workers in relation to the advocacy of the perspective of ‘All Power to the Soviets’. Hence the strategic essence of the increasing emphasis on the importance of international revolution was connected to the recognition of the importance of the mass actions of the workers if the regime of the bourgeois government in Russia was to be overthrown. Hence the increasing internationalist approach of Lenin in 1914 was also developed in strategic terms by the necessity to relate to the revolutionary events of 1917. The dynamic actions of the workers led to a process of strategic elaboration of the necessity of a dynamic relation of the part to the militant activity of the workers. Therefore, the character of Leninism was also changed by the necessity to respond to the events of 1917 in a principled and strategic manner. Hence it was also the importance of these developments that led to an evolution and development of the standpoint of Lenin. This approach was also modified by the necessity to respond to the complex situation after 1917 in terms of how it would be possible to maintain the continuation of the Bolshevik government in a situation in which counterrevolution could be realised. Hence it could be argued that Leninism became an expression of the necessity to develop a principled response that upheld the objectives of the class struggle in a situation in which the very aims of the realisation of socialism were being called into question. Hence it could be argued that Leninism was a combination of principles and understanding of the challenges of the empirical situation. This is the relationship that Harding does not seem to accept given his understanding of Lenin as a dogmatist.

Harding contends that the position adopted by Lenin in ‘What is to be Done’ that the role of the revolutionary party is crucial to the possibility of the development of revolutionary consciousness within the working class is not unique to Lenin, but is the effective standpoint of Marxism in general: “The privileged role allotted to the socialist intelligentsia in organising and articulating the grievances of the proletariat and leading their political struggle, far from being a Leninist deviation from Marxism, is central to the arrogance of Marxism as a whole. Marx (and subsequent Marxists) had to assert that he had a more profound awareness of the long term interests and objectives of the proletariat than any proletarian, or group of proletarians could themselves possess.”(p34) But the point is that this approach is not elitist because it is based on the development of a genuine interaction between the role of party and class. The point is that revolutionary change cannot occur unless the workers become seriously committed to the objectives of socialism as articulated by the Marxist party. Without this aspect of dynamic interaction, the possibility of revolutionary change is not very likely. But this means that sections of the workers become seriously committed to the aims of socialism as outlined by the Marxist party. Without the popular support of these objectives of socialism the possibility of revolutionary change is not likely to occur. Furthermore, the very struggles of the workers provide the necessary confirmation that social transformation can occur, and so without this development the possibility of revolutionary change is not likely to occur. Hence there is a genuine interaction of the role of the workers with the influence of Marxism. Such a development is not likely to occur if this aspect was merely about the party dictating to the workers how they should realise their objectives. Instead the very mass actions of the workers provide the basis to develop a strategy of change as outlined by the Marxist party. It is the very dynamism of the role of the workers in struggle which expresses the potential for revolutionary change. Therefore, the assumption being made by Harding that Marxism is merely an elitist doctrine about the party instructing the workers how to realise their class objectives is a caricature of the approach of Marxists. Instead Marxism learns from the various mass struggles in order to create a strategy of change which is based on the expression of the dynamic possibilities of class struggle. Therefore it is a caricature of the Marxist standpoint for Harding to conclude that: “The leaders of the Communist Party not only manage to escape the constraints of their own bourgeois social being, they even manage to express the true consciousness of the proletariat far better than those whose social being is proletarian. Indeed, it would seem that without their guidance and leadership the proletariat would (as it had in England) forever wallow in false consciousness and be the ‘plaything’ of the political designs of the possessing classes.”(p35) This criticism is problematical because unless the Marxist party develops the dedicated support and involvement of the working class it cannot become an effective revolutionary leadership that is able to promote the possibility of change. Instead the very situation of differentiation between the Marxists and the working class would mean that the aim of revolutionary change would have an ineffectual character. Only when important sections of the working class become committed to the objectives of the Marxist party does the possibility of revolutionary change become a realistic possibility. Indeed, the very inability of Marxist organisations to become popular in the recent period has meant that their lack of working-class support has meant that they cannot become effective agencies of revolutionary change. Only a process of genuine interaction between the party and class can develop the possibility of the generation of the potential for the prospect of revolutionary change. Hence the increasing failure of Marxist organisations in this context has meant that they remain ineffective and so cannot promote the success of an effective programme for revolutionary change. Lenin was unable to sufficiently appreciate the complexity of this problem because he assumed the possibility that Marxism would develop the support of the workers for a programme of revolutionary change. But the complexity of the politics of the class struggle has meant that the assumptions that he took for granted have had to be seriously questioned. This means that the issue of class consciousness and its relation to revolutionary politics has had to be evaluated with greater complexity. But such a task does not mean that the approach of Lenin is merely antiquated. Instead the issue of class consciousness has to be understood in terms of the lessons of the lack of success in the class struggle which has occurred since the brief period of hope represented by the Russian revolution. The primary problem is not the supposed elitism of Lenin concerning the working class, but instead the complexities and problems posed by the class struggle since the time of the Russian revolution. However, the major issue is actually still to be understood in terms of the approach of Lenin’s ‘What is to be Done’, of how to undermine the influence of bourgeois ideology within the working class and so facilitate the possibility of a political relationship between the workers and a genuine Marxist party.

The point being made is that the conception of the connection of the party to class in terms of the importance of the organisation acting to oppose the influence of bourgeois ideology within the workers is not elitist if we accept that this activity is based on the objective of realisation of a popular revolutionary consciousness. Lenin outlines his approach in What is to be Done and suggests that: “The history of all countries bears witness that exclusively with its own forces, the worker class is in a condition to work out only a trade unionist awareness, that is, a conviction of the need to unite in unions, to carry on a struggle with the owners, to strive for the promulgation by the government of this or that law that is necessary for the workers and so on. The doctrine of socialism grew out of those philosophic, historical and economic theories that were worked out by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intelligentsia. The founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, belonged themselves, according to social origin, to the bourgeois intelligentsia.”(What is to be Done, Lars Lih translation in ‘Lenin Rediscovered’, Haymarket books London 2008 p702) Hence Lenin is suggesting that the ideas of revolutionary socialism are developed and promoted by the role of the intelligentsia which often has a privileged background. But this aspect does not mean that the character of the revolutionary process is merely about the workers acting to introduce the ideas of the elite philosophers of socialism. Instead they have to act in a dynamic manner in order to facilitate the possibility of the revolutionary transformation of society. The point being made is that there is a process of the potential for the interaction of Marxist theory with the aspirations of the workers that makes possible the development of militant mass action that can have political objectives concerning the transformation of society. In this context the militancy of the workers acquires conscious objectives in connection to the influence of Marxism. But the assumption that is being made is that without the role of the working class Marxism cannot become politically effective, but this also suggests that unless the influence of Marxism becomes effective and important the workers may accept the continuation of the domination of capitalism or accept the importance of reforms instead of revolutionary change. It could be argued that this approach is not elitist in that the Marxist party cannot change society by its own efforts, but what is required is the development of a dynamic process of interaction between party and class. This perspective was to be elaborated in terms of an understanding of the strategy that was outlined for the 1905 revolution in Russia.

Lenin outlined his approach in ‘Two Tactics of Social democracy in the Democratic Revolution’ (Progress publishers, Moscow Collected works volume 9) Lenin outlines his approach in terms of the importance of interaction of party and class: “Undoubtedly, the revolution will teach us and teach the masses of the people.” But the question that now confronts a militant political party is shall we be able to teach the revolution anything? Shall we be able to make use of the correctness of our Social Democratic doctrine, of our bond with the only thoroughly revolutionary class, the proletariat, to put a proletarian imprint on the revolution, to carry the revolution to a decisive victory, not in word but in deed and to paralyse the instability, half-heartedness and treachery of the democratic bourgeoisie?” (p18). Lenin is aware from this understanding that the major political issue is about the development of a relationship of party and class: “It is to this end that we must direct all our efforts, and the achievement of that end will depend, on the one hand on the accuracy of our appraisal of the political situation and the correctness of our tactical slogans, and on the other hand whether these slogans will be backed by the real fighting strength of the masses of the workers.”(p18) The point being made is that if the workers consider the perspectives of the revolutionary Marxists are problematical and not relevant for the tasks of the class struggle they will not support them. In this context the relationship of party and class will not be realised, and this will undermine the possibility of achieving progress in the situation of mobilisation against the Tsarist regime. Hence the character of the revolutionary process is dependent on the development of a principled and effective relationship of party and class. The party outlines the aspects of what can be an effective strategy of political change, but unless this perspective acquires mass support the possibility of the realisation of this approach will not be realised. Hence what is important is that the workers become consciously mobilised in terms of the aim of the realisation of the objective of revolutionary change as outlined by the Marxists. Without this aspect of conscious support of the workers the possibility of the transformation of society will not occur. Hence there is no suggestion that the party somehow imposes its revolutionary programme on the workers. Instead the working class has to become conscious and enthusiastic adherents of the objectives of the Marxists. Only this process of conscious interaction of the role of the party and class will ensure that the possibility of revolutionary change will become realised. In this context the role of the Marxist party is to convince the workers that should have the role of leadership in the revolutionary process: “The outcome of the revolution depends on whether the working class will play the part of a subsidiary to the bourgeoisie, a subsidiary that is powerful in the force of its onslaught against the autocracy, but impotent politically, or whether it will play the part of leader of the people’s revolution.”(p19) In other words the major task of the Marxists is to convince the workers that they should have the primary political role in the revolutionary process of the struggle against Tsarism. Hence it is necessary to convince the workers that they should not defer to the national bourgeoisie and instead become the politically astute leaders of a revolutionary alliance with the peasants against the regime. Thus, the task of the Marxist party is to outline the reasons why the crucial question is about the generation of the revolutionary capacity of the workers. This means that what is important is a development of a genuine interaction of the roles of the party and class. The party provides strategic guidelines, but these will remain ineffective and unimportant unless the workers become conscious and dynamic adherents of this approach. However, Lenin does not seem to provide sufficient recognition that the workers can spontaneously provide important aspects of the strategy of revolutionary change. This point was indicated by the formation of Soviets. Instead he assumes that the party will have an effective monopoly of wisdom in terms of the elaboration of the aspects of a strategy of change. Hence, he does not adequately allow for the importance of the initiative of the workers in the development of the revolutionary process. Instead his approach is generally about the role of the party as teacher and the workers as students of this wisdom. But this does not mean that he somehow denies the revolutionary potential of the working class. Instead this very aspect is expressed by the ability of the workers to become adherents of the strategy of the party. Thus, he does outline a process of interaction between the role of party and class, but this aspect is unequal in that it assumes that the party has the more conscious role in this relationship. But it is also understood that without the dynamic importance of this interaction revolutionary change will not be possible. Hence the party cannot act independently of the class. Such a possibility would be counterproductive and could only have reactionary effects. Instead the role of the party is to convince the workers of the importance of the objectives of revolutionary change. A genuine process of interaction of party and class is required if the potential for transformation of society is to be realised in an effective and progressive manner. But the implicit assumption is that without the dynamism of the role of the working class the party will remain ineffective and unable to generate the prospect of radical change.

However, the importance of the objective and social conditions means that there is a limitation on the possibilities of the struggle led by the revolutionary party of the working class which is that it is not yet possible to transcend capitalism. But this aspect does not undermine the importance of the initiative and dynamism of the role of the workers and instead it is necessary to have a perspective in which the workers are the hegemonic social force within the limits of a bourgeois democratic revolution: “While recognising the incontestable bourgeois nature of a revolution incapable of directly overstepping the bounds of a mere democratic revolution our slogan advances this particular revolution and strives to give it forms most advantageous to the proletariat, consequently, it strives to make the utmost of the democratic revolution in order to attain the greatest success in the proletariat’s further struggle for socialism.”(p87) Thus the highest levels of class consciousness and organisation are required in order that the workers become the leadership of the process of democratic revolution. In other words, the bourgeois democratic limits of the revolution against absolutism does not in any manner undermine the importance of the dynamic role of the working class in the process of social transformation but instead indicates the importance of the connection of the militant opposition of the workers to the domination of absolutism with the development of support for the strategy of change of the Marxist party. Only this conscious process of interaction of party and class can ensure the success of the development of the mass struggle against absolutism. The point being made is that if the workers did not consciously support the programme of the Marxists the possibility of democratic change would not be possible. Hence the importance of the party is only decided by its ability to obtain the support of the workers for its revolutionary aims. Without this development the role of the party is ineffective and so cannot facilitate the possibility of progressive social change. Therefore, the strategic approach of Lenin in relation to an actual revolutionary situation indicates that it is dogmatic to define his position s being elitist. Instead he outlines in systematic terms the importance of the inter-related political relationship of party and class. Without the party the class would not be able to relate to a strategy of change, but without a connection to the class the role of the party is ineffectual. Instead the major task of the party is to outline an approach that can facilitate the realisation of the potential of mass struggle. If it is not able to obtain the support of the workers in these terms, then its perspectives cannot possibly be realised. Only the activity of the workers and peasants can facilitate the transformation of the programme of the party into becoming an aspect of social reality. Hence the party cannot substitute for the class in the process of political struggle. Furthermore, if the party was to develop a problematical strategy this could undermine the realisation of the potential of the actions of the workers. Thus, it is not an irrelevant issue to have concern about whether the strategy of the party is principled and so able to facilitate the advance of mass struggle. Instead the relation of party to class is defined by the political character of the strategy that is adopted, and so an opportunist approach can only undermine the possibility of the realisation of the potential of the actions of the workers. However, the very support of the workers for the strategy of the party is generally a good indication that its approach is principled and so in accordance with the requirements of the class struggle. But the problematical aspect of the approach of Lenin was that he did not sufficiently appreciate the extent of the revolutionary aspirations of the workers in the manner of Trotsky. It was Trotsky who understood that the mass actions of the workers could not be limited to the aim of the establishment of a democratic republic and instead had a potential to pose the possibility of the formation of a workers government with socialist aims. It was this aspect that was problematical in the approach of Lenin rather than the supposed aspect of elitism. But Lenin was to tackle these issues in a comprehensive manner in relation to the events of 1917. In other words, he become more adequately aware of the revolutionary possibilities of the struggles of the workers. However, such an issue was not because of his elitism but was instead because of his orthodox conception of the character of the revolutionary process in Russia.

Harding considers that the political character of Leninism was primarily developed in relation to the advent of the first world war: “Lenin’s reaction to the war (out of which his rounded ideology would emerge), far from being opportunist, was a doctrinaire restatement of the fundamentals of Marxism – loyalty to the international class struggle of the workers in the battle for socialism was the only proper course available to Marxists. If this meant going against the tide of public opinion, proclaiming the excommunication of virtually all the established leaders of Europe, and even scandalising his own party members; then so be it.”(Harding p77) This comment seems to imply that there was a different and superior perspective that could have expressed criticism of the first world war and the conduct of the leaders of the Second International in a more reasonable manner. But the point is that the primary objective of Lenin was to establish that the character of the first world war was reactionary when considered from the standpoint of the interests of the working class and the objectives of international socialism. The various leaders of the Second International had upheld a position that promoted the interests of nation instead of class. Lenin indicated his opposition to the opportunism of the leaders of the Second International in the following terms: “The opportunists had long been preparing to wreck the Second International by denying the socialist revolution and substituting bourgeois reformism instead, by rejecting the class struggle with its inevitable conversion at certain moments into civil war, and by preaching class collaboration; by preaching bourgeois chauvinism under the guise of patriotism and the defence of the fatherland, and ignoring or rejecting the fundamental truth of socialism, long ago set forth in the Communist Manifesto, that the workingmen have no country, by confining themselves, in the struggle against militarism to a sentimental philistine point of view, instead of recognising the need for a revolutionary war by the proletarians of all countries, against the bourgeoisie of all countries, by making a fetish of the necessary utilisation of bourgeois parliamentarianism and bourgeois legality, and forgetting that illegal forms of organisation and agitation are imperative at times of crisis.”(Lenin: Tasks of Revolutionary Social Democracy in War, in Collected Works volume 21) This comment indicates quite eloquently that an opportunist and national chauvinist position in relation to the first world war is an expression of the political degeneration of most of the parties of the Second International. Only a position of opposition to the imperialist character of this conflict could express the possibility to develop principled and internationalist socialist politics of the promotion of the role of the class struggle as the basis to realise socialism. But instead of this approach the various parties of the Second International had put the interests of nation as being more important than the development of the international unity of the working class as the basis to facilitate the overthrow of capitalism. The expression of opportunism was a national chauvinist rejection of the primary importance of the role of international class struggle in order to undermine the domination of capitalism. Harding suggests that the result of Lenin’s stance was to develop his understanding of world capitalism as imperialism and in that manner express the possibility to comprehend the international situation and so be able to elaborate a revolutionary perspective. This point is correct, but prior to the realisation of this theoretical task he indicated the necessity of a strategy of change that was the basis of the rejection of the politics of those who had accommodated to the interests of the imperialist nation state. In the article just mentioned he outline a political perspective of the necessity to mobilise the international working class against the war on the basis of the struggle to achieve the Republican United States of Europe. This approach was an understanding that the workers could only realise their class interests in terms of an international opposition to the first world war and the achievement of aims that could correspond to this perspective. This understanding is confirmed by the comments of another article: “The War and Russian Social Democracy’ when he comments that: “But the harsher the government and the bourgeoisie of all countries try to disunite the workers and pit them against one another….the more pressingly is it the duty of the class conscious proletariat defend its class solidarity, its internationalism, and the socialist convictions against the unbridled chauvinism of the “patriotic” bourgeois cliques in all countries. If class conscious workers were to give up this aim, this would mean renunciation of their aspirations for freedom and democracy, to say nothing of their socialist aspirations.”(Lenin: The War and Russian Social Democracy Collected Works volume 21 p29) Thus in these impressive terms the understanding is presented that the class interests of the working class are of an international character and that this aspect is only upheld by the development of genuine and serious opposition to the inter-imperialist war. But if the workers continue to be divided in national terms then this can only mean that they will be unable to generate the necessary level of unity and solidarity that is required in order to develop an effective international opposition to capitalism.

In these terms Lenin outlines a principled position, but this aspect is obscured by the connected defence of what has been defined as revolutionary defeatism: “In the present situation, it is impossible to determine from the standpoint of the international proletariat, the defeat of which of the two groups of nations would be the lesser evil for socialism. But to us Russian Social Democrats there cannot be the slightest doubt that, from the standpoint of the working class and the toiling masses of all of the nations of Russia, the defeat of the tsarist monarchy, the most reactionary and barbarous of governments, which is supressing the largest number of nations and the greatest mass of the population of Europe and Asia, would be the lesser evil.”(p32-33) This standpoint was a dogmatic approach which did not promote the cause of developing principled opposition to the war. The problem is that implies that the victory of particular imperialist nations is to be accepted if this development could in some ambiguous manner contribute to the cause of the realisation of peace and socialism. But it is not likely that in this context people would accept the defeat of their particular country in the cause of internationalist objectives. Instead the approach of Lenin seems to be more principled and realistic when he outlines his standpoint in terms of internationalist objectives of the realisation of a democratic united states of Europe: “The formation of a united states of Europe should be the immediate political slogan of Europe’s social democrats. In contrast with the bourgeoisie, which is ready to “promise” anything in order to draw the proletariat into the mainstream of chauvinism , the social democrats will explain that this slogan is absolutely false and meaningless without the revolutionary overthrow of the German, the Austrian and the Russian monarchies.”(p33) This additional comment indicates that the possibility of developing serious opposition to the inter-imperialist war is an international task for the workers, and so implies the ending of the war and the connected advance of the conditions of the realisation of a democratic united states of Europe. But this approach implies that the feasibility of the logic of revolutionary defeatism in any particular country is not really realistic or advisable, and that instead the workers should act in an international manner to try and end the war and in that manner advance the possibility for the realisation of the objective of a democratic united states of Europe. This perspective is more principled because it is based on the workers putting their international interests above the rival claims of the nation and so in that manner facilitating a united struggle for the advance of the aims of democracy and socialism. In contrast revolutionary defeatism was obscure and not likely to generate support because it was based on the differentiation of the national situation from that of the international. Instead what was more likely to develop adherence was the call for the realisation of peace based on an international opposition to the war and the promotion of the possibility of a democratic republic within Europe. In this context the national opposition to war would have an international objective and emphasis. Hence Lenin’s support of revolutionary defeatism in relation to the situation within Russia could only undermine the clarity and coherence of his contrasting emphasis on the importance of a situation of international peace and the realisation of a democratic republic within Europe.

But Lenin is emphatic that the only principled position that can be adopted with regards to the issue of a Marxist attitude towards the world war is based on the approach of defeatism. In an article: ‘Defeat of One’s Government in Imperialist War’ he comments: “A revolution in wartime means civil war; the conversion of a war between governments into a civil war is, on the one hand, facilitated by military reverses (“defeats”) of governments; on the other hand, one cannot actually strive for such a conversion without thereby facilitating defeat.”(Lenin: ‘Defeat of One’s Government in Imperialist War’ p276) But this perspective ignores the importance of the aspect of peace in the process of developing opposition to the war. People will not be motivated to strive for ending the imperialist war in terms of the problematical approach of defeatism but instead will attempt to replace the present situation with the genuine alternative of peace. This means that the progressive aspect of this aspiration is to struggle for the realisation of peace without the aspect of annexations and the domination of nations. Lenin seems to ignore the importance of this aspect of the role of peace and instead in an abstract and dogmatic manner calls for the transformation of the imperialist war into civil war. But such an approach will not have any attraction for the workers because it implies the continuation of military struggle in a new form. Instead the only genuine alternative to war is to strive for the realisation of peace in the most democratic manner. Lenin would contend that the only possible basis of the ending of imperialist war is by the approach of defeatism, but this would not have an appeal to the people because of the possibility of the strengthening of the military power of the imperialist opponent of the revolutionary nation. Lenin rejects this view and suggests that the alternative approach of not supporting the victory or defeat of a given imperialist power is opportunist. He comments: “On closer examination, this slogan will be found to mean a “class truce”, the renunciation of the class struggle by the oppressed classes in all belligerent countries, since the class struggle is impossible without dealing blows at one’s “own” bourgeoisie, one’s own government, whereas dealing a blow at one’s own government in wartime….means contributing to the defeat of one’s own country. Those who accept the “neither victory nor defeat” slogan can only be hypocritically in favour of the class struggle of “disrupting the class truce”; in practice, such people are renouncing an independent proletarian policy because they subordinate the proletariat of all belligerent countries to the absolutely bourgeois task of safeguarding the imperialist countries against defeat.”(p278-279) But this comment ignores the principled character of the struggle for the realisation of peace as the alternative to imperialist war. This perspective is likely to acquire mass support whilst the standpoint of revolutionary defeatism will be only upheld by a few members of one or two revolutionary parties. Hence Lenin is upholding the dogmatic view that only an absolute policy of defeatism is principled and based on the interests of international revolution whilst ignoring the popular aspiration of the people for peace. Instead of ignoring this sentiment in terms of rigid principles it is necessary for Marxists to articulate it in terms of relating this aspiration to the realisation of the end of the inter-imperialist conflict in the most progressive terms. This means the articulation of the demand for peace in terms of the repudiation of annexations, and the promotion of the aim of a democratic Europe. Instead of an acknowledgment of the principled character of this approach, Lenin considers that the aim of nether victory nor defeat is an opportunist accommodation to imperialism. But the point is that the achievement of peace in these terms means the effective victory of the aspirations of the workers of Europe with regards to bringing about the end of the world war. Such an advance would then facilitate the possibility of making advances in the struggle for making progress towards socialism. Lenin cannot recognise these possibilities because he can only envisage the exclusive principled content of the approach of revolutionary defeatism.

Lenin elaborates his position in the article ‘Socialism and War’. He outlines his standpoint in the following terms: “The standpoint of social chauvinism is shared equally by both advocates of victory for their governments in the present war and by advocates of the slogan of “neither victory nor defeat”. A revolutionary class cannot but wish for the defeat of its government in a reactionary war, and cannot fail to see that the latter’s military reverses must facilitate its overthrow. Only a bourgeois who believes that a war started by governments must necessarily end as a war between governments, and want it to end as such, can regard as “ridiculous” and “absurd” the idea that the socialists of all the belligerent countries should express their wish that all their “own” governments should be defeated. On the contrary, it is a statement of this kind that would be in keeping with the innermost thoughts of every class conscious worker, and be in line with our activities for the conversion of the imperialist war into a civil war.”(p315) But this comment only establishes the illusion that Lenin has that his approach is popular with the people of Europe. In actuality there is a mass sentiment in favour of peace and so instead of ignoring this aspiration it should be the task of the Marxists to connect this aspiration to the promotion of the ending of the war in the most progressive manner. Such an approach is based on the standpoint of advocating peace without annexations. But Lenin rejects this approach because it seems to express a rejection of revolutionary principles. However, in actuality there is little popular support of his standpoint of revolutionary defeatism because of the very fact that this seems to express indifference about the issue of how to realise peace as an alternative to the situation of inter-imperialist conflict. Hence Lenin’s standpoint seems to express dogma rather than the combination of principles with flexibility.

He tries to justify his view in terms of the dogmatic assertion that the demand for peace has opportunist possibilities: “The temper of the masses in favour of peace often expresses the beginning of protest, anger and a realisation of the reactionary nature of the war. It is the duty of all Social Democrats to utilise that temper. They will take a most ardent part in any movement and any demonstration motivated by that sentiment, but they will not deceive the people with admitting the idea that a peace without annexations, without oppression of nations, without plunder, and without the embryo of new wars among the present governments and ruling classes, is possible in the absence of a revolutionary movement. Such deception of the people would merely mean playing into the hands of the belligerent governments and facilitating their counterrevolutionary plans. Whoever stands for a democratic peace must stand for civil war against the governments and the bourgeoisie.”(p315-316) This comment indicates that the major limitation in the approach of Lenin in this period is no that of elitism but is instead dogmatism. He is unable to appreciate the important and potential character for developing opposition to the imperialist war in terms of the aspiration for peace and how this approach can be connected to the objective of the revolutionary transformation of society and the advance of the realisation of the aim of socialism. Hence he is unable to recognise that the perspective of defeatism is not likely to obtain support because the possibility of the undermining of the military objectives of a given imperialist power is not considered to be either practical or desirable by the workers and soldiers of the countries involved in the imperialist conflict. Instead the aspiration for peace is something that is more credible and so the actual question is how to connect this objective with the advance of the interests of socialism. In this context the demand for peace without annexations is an indication of how the increasing aspirations of the workers can be connected to making progress in the class struggle and so enhancing the social power of the people when compared to that of bourgeois governments. Lenin is unable to recognise this dynamic possibility of the demand for peace because of his sectarian rigidity that is only able to accept the apparent principled and intransigent character of the approach of revolutionary defeatism, or the transformation of the inter-imperialist conflict into a civil war. But the point is that the consciousness of the workers are not yet receptive to this type of approach and instead they yearn for peace, and so instead of rejecting this aspiration in a sectarian and elitist manner it is necessary to relate to it in terms of the perspective of the connection of the objective of peace with the advance of the interests of the international working class. This approach is based on the simple slogan of peace without annexations. Lenin is opposed to this demand because it is not connected to the apparent intensification of the class struggle against the capitalist class, but this understanding denies the importance of the aim of peace as being an aspect of the class struggle in that the realisation of peace would undermine the interests of the various imperialist powers and instead facilitate the increased ability of the international working class to be able to generate influence in relation to the character and trajectory of politics. The workers if they succeeded in the realisation of peace would have the developing ability to generate the increased strength necessary for socialism.

Lenin outlines his approach in the following terms: “Marxism is not pacifism. Of course, the speediest termination of the war must be striven for. However, the “peace” demand acquires a proletarian significance only if a revolutionary struggle is called for. Without a series of revolutions, what is called a democratic peace is a philistine utopia. The purpose of a real programme of action can be served only by a Marxist programme which gives the masses a full and clear explanation of what has taken place, explains what imperialism is and how it should be combated, declares openly that the collapse of the Second International was brought about by opportunism, and openly calls for a Marxist International to be built up without and against the opportunists.”(p328-329) But this perspective is inconsistent because Lenin admits that it would be a progressive objective to aspire for the realisation of peace in terms of the ending of war, and then also suggests that without revolution a democratic peace is not possible. But the point is that a democratic peace can only be realised in relation to the application of the mass pressure of the workers. Only the development of the mass actions of the workers on the basis of an interconnection with the programme of a Marxist party will it be possible to realise the objective of a democratic peace. Lenin suggests that without the realisation of a revolution the possibility of peace is remote, but he contradicts this perspective by accepting that it would be beneficial if the war could be ended and replaced by peace without imposing any conditions on this development. Hence there is an apparent tension between his acceptance of the unconditional benefit of the realisation of peace and the greater emphasis on the view that only successful proletarian revolution can realise this possibility of a peaceful situation. However, the emphasis of his approach is that the only feasible basis of peace is the prospect of successful revolutionary change. This overall standpoint ignores the importance of the popular sentiment of the people in favour of peace and the related potential to mobilise in these terms. Hence it is not unrealistic to suggest that it could be a practical possibility to achieve a situation based on an international peace without annexations. Indeed, Lenin does not absolutely reject this possibility, but he also implies that it would be preferable and more realistic to achieve peace by the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. What his stance ignores is that the objective of socialism is advanced by the realisation of peace because such a development would indicate the importance of the role of the actions of the workers in bringing about this situation. Hence such a development can only be in the interests of the international working class and the possibility of the advance of the objective of socialism. Instead Lenin is suggesting that the realisation of socialism can only occur in the present circumstances in terms of the realisation of the approach of revolutionary defeatism or the role of civil war. But such a rigid approach ignores the importance and principled character of the realisation of peace as the alternative to international imperialist conflict. Lenin is unable to recognise how this approach is compatible with the success of the workers in the class struggle and so facilitates the possibility of the realisation of socialism via the undermining of the power of the various imperialist powers. The point is that the prospect of peace in these circumstances will be a defeat for the capitalist countries and so creates a balance of political power in favour of the interests of the workers in international terms.

The contradictions in Lenin’s position are indicated by Lenin’s comments in his ‘Draft resolution Of the Zimmerwald Left’: “The masses growing desire for peace expresses their disappointment, the defeat of the bourgeois lie regarding the defence of the fatherland, and the awakening of their revolutionary consciousness. In utilising that temper for their revolutionary agitation, and not shying away in that agitation from considerations of the defeat of their own country, the socialists will not deceive the people with the hope that, without the revolutionary overthrow of the present-day governments, a possibility exists of a speedy democratic peace, which will be durable in some degree and will preclude any oppression of nations, a possibility of disarmament, etc. Only the social revolution of the proletariat opens the way towards peace and freedom for the nations.”(p347) This understanding indicates that Lenin understands the importance of the aspiration for peace on the part of the people, but he then concludes that this objective can only be realised in terms of the success of proletarian revolution. But this understanding is similar to the view that reforms cannot be achieved within capitalism and that the only possible change that can be attained is in terms of the success of proletarian revolution. This stance admits to the importance of the aspiration of the people for peace and then suggests that it can only be realised by the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. But this understanding would also imply that reforms are not possible under capitalism and that making limited gains by the workers under the present system is an illusory aspiration. Hence it can be suggested that Lenin is implying that the very possibility of transforming the war into a situation of peace within the context of the capitalist system is an illusion despite his acceptance of the aspiration of the people for the realisation of peace! Hence in order to defend this rigid approach he has to contend that the era of social revolution is imminent: “The imperialist war is ushering in the era of the social revolution. All the objective conditions of recent times have put the proletariat’s revolutionary mass struggle on the order of the day. It is the duty of socialists, while making use of every means of the working class’s legal struggle, to subordinate each and every of those means to the immediate and most important task, develop the workers revolutionary consciousness, rally them in the international revolutionary struggle, promote and encourage any revolutionary action, and do everything possible to turn the imperialist war between the peoples into a civil war of the oppressed classes against the oppressors, a war for the expropriation of the class of capitalists, for the conquest of political power by the proletariat, and the realisation of socialism.”(p347-348) This rigid approach does not recognise the revolutionary possibilities of the struggle for peace. What Lenin does not recognise is that the workers will not yet support the insurrectionary character of civil war and instead will be primarily determined to try and realise peace. Instead of ignoring this sentiment in an inconsistent manner it is necessary to relate to it in terms of the realistic and realisable demand of peace without annexations. This is the manner in which the aim of socialism can be advanced in a more definite and principled manner. Therefore, this approach is not an expression of reformist illusions but is instead the suggestion of how peace can be realised in a progressive manner that ultimately upholds the interests of socialism, internationalism and the facilitating of the influence of the working class within society. This approach is more likely to have the support of the workers when compared to the abstract, sectarian and rigid approach of turning the imperialist war into civil war. Such criticism is not meant to deny the possibility of revolutionary struggle against war, but the point is that such a development would occur in relation to actual developments as opposed to what is a dogmatic aspiration as outlined by Lenin. It is interesting that in relation to the actual events of 1917 Lenin began to emphasise the importance of a democratic peace without annexations. This standpoint only indicated the limitations of his position of 1914-15.

Harding contends that after the revolution in February of 1917 most people accepted the importance of what had occurred and supported the government that was established. Only Lenin disputed the validity of what had occurred: “Until Lenin’s return to Russia in April 1917 there was a broad socialist consensus that the revolution in Russia should not go beyond its bourgeois democratic limits. The Tsar’s abdication on 15 March and the proclamation on the same day, that a Provisional government had been established, appeared to most socialists to signal the beginning of a more or less prolonged period of bourgeois dominance of Russian politics.”(Harding p80) The view that is developed by Harding was that it was the dogmatic intransigence of Lenin who argued in favour of a revolutionary alternative to the supremacy of the bourgeois government. But the important point that Lenin understood better than anyone was that the February revolution was based on the dynamism of the role of the working class, but because of limitations of class consciousness, the Soviets which had been established had effectively bestowed power on the bourgeois provisional government. Hence it was both a principled and realistic perspective to strive for the realisation of the political hegemony of the Soviets: “The masses must be made to see that the Soviet of workers deputies are the only possible form of revolutionary government, and that therefore our task is, as long as this government yields to the influence of the bourgeoisie, to present a patient, systematic and persistent explanation of the errors of their tactics, an explanation of the errors of their tactics, an explanation especially adapted to the practical needs of the masses.”(Lenin: Tasks of Proletariat in Present Revolution, in Collected Works volume 24 p23) Therefore: “The specific feature of the present situation in Russia is that the country is passing from the first stage of the revolution – which, owing to the insufficient class consciousness and organisation of the proletariat, placed power in the hands of the bourgeoise – to its second stage, which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasantry.”(P22) The genius of Lenin was that this was an astute understanding of the situation and an expression of the tasks of party and class. What Lenin had understood was that the spontaneous militancy of the workers had led to the overthrow of Tsarism, but this development was not sufficient in order to bring about the demise of the domination of the bourgeois elite. However, in a certain sense the workers had effective political power in terms of the influence of the Soviets, but this not realised because of the opportunist leadership of this organisation. Hence it was necessary to strive to realise a revolutionary leadership of the Soviets which would be able to promote the possibility of the overthrow of the bourgeois government and so establish the political ascendency of the working class. In this manner there had to be established a relationship between the role of the popular organisations of the workers with the objectives of the party. Without this connection the possibility of change would not occur in a definite revolutionary manner.

Harding indicates the importance of the above point in terms of the distinctive and crucial role of Lenin: “By ‘decisively’ we mean that without the presence of Lenin, the power and persuasiveness of his ideas, his enormous personal authority, and above all his steely certitude, there would have been no second or socialist revolution in Russia in 1917……In the last analysis, no amount of Marxist debate about the levels of productive forces, consciousness or international ripeness could settle the issue of whether Russia would or would not go beyond the bounds of the bourgeois democratic revolution. It was in fact settled by the ‘accidental’ presence of one man with an unshakeable belief that one civilisation was foundering and that imperatively another was being born.”(p110) This comment seems to have been generally true but the point is that without the active support of the workers for the objectives of the Bolsheviks the possibility of a successful revolution would not have occurred. The point is that the increasing discontent of the workers with the policies of the bourgeois government, and their rejection of the support of the Soviet leadership for this administration created the political conditions for change. Without this development the possibility of the realisation of the aspiration for revolutionary change could not have been realised. Hence it was the creation of the connection of party and class that facilitated the possibility that revolutionary change could be realised. Without the development of this type of connection the dynamic will of Lenin would have remained formal and of limited significance. But this development of the relationship of party and class was connected to the opportunist limitations of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries who could have led a successful struggle against the bourgeois government. It was the failure of the opportunist approach of these organisations which indicated to the workers the validity of the approach of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. The crisis of these parties facilitated a popular acceptance of the credibility of the standpoint of the Bolsheviks, and the result was a process of the realisation of a popular insurrection.

Harding contends that it was the dogmatism of the interpretation of the Marxism by Lenin that was the ultimate problem and cause of the failure of the Russian revolution: “Lenin urged his followers on with the certainty of an ideologue, and, consequently, he had to ignore the methodological uncertainties that lay at the very heart of his analysis. This does not mean that Lenin violated the logic of Marxism in inspiring and leading the October revolution. It merely means that Marxism could never supply in advance a specification of the necessary and sufficient conditions for a successful socialist revolution. Marxist revolutionary action could only be based upon a series of more or less well-informed predictions or inferences from a more or less accurate analysis of a temporally distant socio-economic structure. Its ‘justification’ therefore, always lies after, rather than before the event. It is justified if, and only if, its predictions turn out to be accurate. That precisely, was the burden of difference between making history and merely writing it. In the event, none of principal predictions, upon which the whole Russian revolutionary venture was premised, in fact materialised. The country was forced upon its own ruined resources and low cultural level. In these circumstances the regime, as even Lenin was prepared to admit, was bound to degenerate. But what was never conceded was Lenin’s (and the Bolsheviks) huge responsibility for inaugurating a venture of total transformation that turned to cataclysm when the predictions on which it was based proved to be false.” (p112)

This criticism implies that Lenin should have been able to provide certainty for the character of history and the possible success of the revolutionary process. But the point is that no individual can define what will happen in terms of the importance of historical events. Hence whilst the approach of Lenin was based on the connection of the Russian revolution with that of the possibility of international revolutionary change there could be no guarantee of the success of this perspective. However this could not mean that it was necessary to moderate the approach in relation to the situation in Russia because of the militancy of the aspirations of the workers who were increasingly discontented with the bourgeois government and the opportunism of the leadership of the Soviets. Instead Lenin felt obliged to uphold a perspective based on the revolutionary transformation in order to create the possibility of the success of international revolution. This approach was partially correct in relation to events in Russia, but he could not anticipate the difficulties involved in the international situation. In contrast Harding is implying that Lenin should have had a policy of moderation in relation to Russia because of the inevitable failure of any attempt at international revolution. But this passive standpoint could only have alienated the Bolsheviks from the workers. Instead the popularity of this organisation was based on the intransigent stance it developed and there was increasing support for its perspective of ‘All Power to the Soviets’.

Lenin possibly outlined his perspectives most systematically in his article: ‘The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution’(Collected Works 24 p57-91) He contends that what has occurred in 1917 is the combination of the realisation of the bourgeois democratic revolution with that of the proletariat-peasant revolution. Hence this situation of dual power is favourable to the possibility of the realisation of the supremacy of the proletariat and peasants. This means a principled political stance has to be based on this understanding. In relation to the issue of war, Lenin has moderated his revolutionary defeatist stance and instead emphasises the importance of the realisation of peace. He outlines his position in the following terms: “It is impossible to slip out of the imperialist war and achieve a democratic non-coercive peace without overthrowing the power of capital and transferring state power to another class, the proletariat.

The Russian revolution of February-March 1917 was the beginning of the transformation of the imperialist war into a civil war. This revolution took the first step towards ending the war; but it requires a second step, namely the transfer of state power to the proletariat, to make the end of war a certainty. This will be the beginning of a “break-through” on a world wide scale, a break-through in the front of capitalist interests; and only by breaking through this front can the proletariat save mankind from the horrors of war and endow it with the blessing of peace.”(p67)

There is still the mention of the approach of revolutionary defeatism but this is of a formal character because the emphasis of his approach is on the importance of the struggle of the Russian workers for the realisation of peace which will become the basis of an international development of the striving for peace as an alternative to the inter-imperialist war. Hence the question of peace is connected to the successful realisation of the political power of the working class via the role of the Soviets. Therefore, peace Is an issue that is understood in revolutionary terms as being an expression of the realisation of the overthrow of the bourgeois government and in that manner encouraging the possibility of international revolutionary change. The Soviets represent the potential for the realisation of this perspective of peace and the advance of the aim of socialism. Such an approach is an indication that Harding’s claims that Lenin’s approach is dogmatic is unfair because his standpoint is related to the interests of the workers in national and international terms. The workers aspire to the realisation of peace in the situation of the inter-imperialist war. Lenin is indicating that this aim can only be achieved in terms of the possibility of the successful transformation of society by means of the role of revolutionary change. This development would then generate the possibility of international revolution which would definitively end the inter-imperialist war and so connect the objective of peace to the possibility of socialism. Harding claims that this type of perspective is unrealistic, but in actuality Lenin’s standpoint corresponded to the aspirations of the international working class for peace to the alternative of war. But Lenin is providing genuine and principled leadership by indicating that the possibility to realise this aspiration is connected to the relationship of peace to the attainment of the political power of the working class. Only the success of a revolutionary perspective is the definitive basis to attain peace. Therefore, the vague sentiment in favour of peace has to become clarified and strategically connected to revolutionary objectives of the aim of the overthrow of capitalism and the achievement of the formation of genuinely socialist administrations. The very bourgeois and reactionary character of the government in Russia is indicated by its determination to carry on the war and to reject the possibility of peace. Only the successful creation of a government based on the interests of workers and peasants can facilitate the realisation of peace. In this manner the aims of international revolution will be advanced because it will be shown that the aim of peace can only be ensured by the formation of governments committed to the realisation of the objectives of socialism. In these terms the approach of revolutionary defeatism is being substantially modified and instead the emphasis of Lenin is on the relationship of the role of workers governments with the realisation of peace. This is an indication that Harding’s contention that Lenin had a dogmatic approach is problematical because instead Lenin was prepared to modify his political stance in relation to the necessity to relate to the demands of the political situation. He could recognise that the connection of the realisation of peace with revolutionary change was the basis for increasing the influence of the Bolsheviks and in that manner promoting the political radicalisation of the working class.

Lenin summarises his approach in the following manner: “Its distinctive feature is the complete break with both social-chauvinism and “Centrism”, and its gallant revolutionary struggle against its own imperialist government and its own imperialist bourgeoisie. Its principle is “Our chief enemy is at home”. It wages a ruthless struggle against honeyed social-pacifist phrases (a social-pacifist is a socialist in word and a bourgeois pacifist in deed; bourgeois pacifists dream of an everlasting peace without the overthrow of the yoke and domination of capital) and against all subterfuges employed to deny the possibility, or the appropriateness, or the timeliness of a proletarian revolutionary struggle and of proletarian socialist revolution in connection with the present war.”(p77-78) Therefore the emphasis of Lenin is on revolutionary change in order to advance the possibility of peace and socialism. The approach of revolutionary defeatism has been modified in order to emphasise that the process of successful revolutionary developments will facilitate the possibility of the realisation of the prospect of peace. This standpoint is summarised in the following manner: “There is no possibility of this war ending in a democratic non-coercive peace…except through a revolution of the proletariat.”(p80 Hence the perspective of revolutionary defeatism has been seriously modified and instead the connection of peace and revolutionary change has been emphasised as the basis of a principled political stance. The view that is being emphasised is that the continuation of the domination and supremacy of the various bourgeois governments will not be sufficient in order to create the conditions for the realisation of the possibility of peace. Instead only the connection of a process of successful revolutionary change will ensure that the prospect of peace becomes a genuine possibility.

However, it could be argued that this position was problematical because the emphasis of Lenin on the importance of peace was conditional and not absolute. For example the following comment to a meeting of the Petrograd City Conference Lenin upholds the stance on the war of the Bolsheviks of 1915 and contends: “Moreover….if the revolution placed our party in power while the war was still on we would forthwith propose openly to Germany, together with all the other nations, a non-coercive, i.e., democratic peace, and that in the event of the German, British, French and other capitalists declining such a peace, we would ourselves start a revolutionary war, and call upon the workers of all countries to join us.”(p164-165) But such a policy was impractical because it would be illogical for a country trying to uphold the principles of peace to start a new development of war and conflict. Instead the revolutionary government would be more consistent and principled to uphold the aims of peace and indicate the militaristic and aggressive character of the policy of the various imperialist governments. Indeed, this is what occurred in 1917-18. This is why Lenin is being more principled and consistent when in another comment he emphasises the possibility of peace in relation to the success of revolutionary change: “Only if state power in both the, at present, hostile countries, for example, in both Russia and Germany, passes wholly and exclusively into the hands of the revolutionary Soviets of workers and soldiers deputies, which are really capable of rending the whole mesh of capitalist relations and interests, will the workers of both the belligerent countries acquire confidence in each other and be able to put a speedy end to the war on the basis of a really democratic peace that will really liberate all the nations and nationalities of the world.”(p188) This approach was more convincing because it consistently connected the formation of revolutionary governments with the advance of the possibility of the realisation of peace. In this context the approach of international revolutionary war could only undermine the credibility and importance of the connection of peace with the process of change that could result in socialist type governments. In actuality the emphasis on the importance of revolutionary war with imperialism was not promoted and instead the contrasting relationship of the formation of a Soviet administration with the realisation of peace was promoted in more consistent and convincing terms.

However it was still necessary for Lenin to clarify and make more precise this emphasis on the importance of peace, and he carried out this theoretical task at the April 1917 conference of the Bolsheviks when he clearly supports the objectives of peace without annexations: “We have found it necessary to mention this, because the issue of peace without annexations is the basic issue in all these discussions of peace terms. All parties recognise that peace will become the alternative, and that peace with annexations will be an unheard-of catastrophe for all countries. In a country where there is political liberty, the question of peace cannot be placed before the people otherwise than in terms of peace without annexations. It is therefore necessary to declare for peace without annexations, and so the only thing to do is to lie by wrapping up the meaning of annexations or evading the question altogether.”(The April All Russian Conference p261) Therefore Lenin has modified his stance and admitted the importance and progressive character of the demand for peace without annexations. This implies that this approach has replaced the emphasis on revolutionary defeatism in the international policy of the Bolsheviks. The point is that this change of emphasis is based on an appreciation of the views of the people of Russia after the success of the February revolution. The people would not support the approach of revolutionary defeatism in the situation in which a successful revolution had occurred. This perspective would not make sense in terms of the fact that the regime that had been established was based on the intervention of the people in what could be defined as a genuine revolutionary process. Therefore, the aim of the Bolsheviks had to be modified and could no longer be identical to that which was upheld during the period of the Tsarist regime. It seemed appropriate to call for the downfall of the Tsarist government by means of civil war because of its reactionary character. But such a stance could not be defended given the creation of the Provisional government with the support of the Soviets. Hence it was necessary to modify tactics in relation to this new situation and to instead call for the realisation of peace without annexations. If the provisional government was reluctant to support the aim of peace this would be an important indication that it should be opposed and replaced by a government based on the role of the Soviets. In other words, the policies of Lenin and the Bolsheviks began to be modified in relation to the new situation and so it was no longer claimed that the stance of peace without annexations was a centrist and opportunist position. Therefore, the emphasis of the Bolsheviks is about the necessity of the realisation of a democratic peace. Only in this manner can it be possible to advance the aims of international socialism. There is an important acknowledgment that the combination of the revolutionary struggle for socialism is combined with the aim of the realisation of peace in national and international terms. Hence, far from being an elitist dogmatist, as Harding contends, the approach of Lenin is flexible and is attentive to the aspirations of the people for the realisation of peace. Hence the perspectives of the Bolsheviks are modified in order to relate to the views of the working class in Russia and internationally. The result is that there is a systematic emphasis on the relationship of proletarian revolution with the realisation of peace. It is the continuation of capitalism that will result in the prolonging of the situation of inter-imperialist war. Only the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism can ensure the realisation of the mass aspiration for peace.

The approach of the Bolsheviks on the issue of imperialist war is outlined by the Bolsheviks at their April conference in the following terms: “Our party will patiently but persistently explain to the people that wars are waged by governments, that wars are indissolubly bound up with the policies of definite classes, that this war can only be terminated by a democratic peace only if the entire state power, in at least several of the belligerent countries, has passed to the class of the proletarians and semi-proletarians which is really capable of putting an end to the power of capital.”(p272) Therefore: “In Russia, the revolutionary class, having taken state power, would adopt a series of measures that would undermine the economic rule of the capitalists, as well as measures that would render them completely harmless politically, and would immediately and frankly offer to all nations a democratic peace on the basis of a complete renunciation of every possible form of annexation and indemnity. Such measures and such a frank offer of peace would bring about complete confidence of the workers of the belligerent countries in each other and would inevitably lead to uprisings of the proletariat against those imperialist governments as might resist the offered peace.”(p272-273) Thus the very issue of peace is given a revolutionary character. Instead of the dogmatic emphasis on the role of civil war as the expression of revolutionary upheaval the issue of peace is expressed in terms of its connection to the class struggle and the development of the possibility of the overthrow of capitalism. The discontent of the workers will develop because of the very opposition of the imperialist countries to the realisation of peace. In this context the aspiration of peace will acquire revolutionary implications and become the basis to radicalise the international working class and so facilitate its struggle for the overthrow of capitalism. In this context the example will be established by the formation of a Soviet government in Russia which will outline the basis of its international policy in terms of the realisation of the aims of peace and socialism. In other words, the approach of defeatism has been replaced by an understanding that the consistent promotion of the importance of peace by the working class will be an important aspect of the development of the struggle for socialism. Therefore, the approach of revolutionary defeatism has been seriously modified in order to recognise the aspirations for peace by the Russian and international working class. Therefore, the strategy and tactics of the Bolsheviks with regard to the inter-imperialist war have been seriously modified in relation to the events of 1917. This development indicates that Harding is wrong to define Lenin as a dogmatist who is indifferent to the important significance of the various events of the class struggle. The actuality of the revolution of February 1917 seriously modified his conception of international policy and led to an effective acceptance of the principled character of the aim of peace without annexations. This understanding was connected to the recognition of the mass popular appeal of the aim of peace, and this sentiment could be defined in revolutionary terms because the bourgeois government was determined to carry on the imperialist conflict. Hence the objective of the revolutionary overthrow of the administration could be connected to the aim of the realisation of peace. This approach would be more simple, understandable and popular than the more obscure approach of revolutionary defeatism. What Lenin is now suggesting is that only a genuine Soviet government can realise the aim of peace without annexations and so the possibility to realise this perspective requires the successful establishment of the political power of the Soviets. Hence this understanding is no longer considered to be merely the justification of the vacillation of the centrist and instead can be defined and defended in principled revolutionary terms. This very approach is an indication of Lenin’s perceptive response to the popular mood and how he relates it to the revolutionary objectives of the Bolsheviks. Such flexibility could not be understood if he was merely an elitist, as Harding contends, and instead what is being indicated is the ability of Lenin to connect the discontent of the people to the revolutionary objectives of the people. He is explicit that the popular aspiration of peace requires the revolutionary realisation of Soviet power, and so he criticises the present opportunist leadership of the Soviet for accommodating to the militaristic objectives of the bourgeois government. The realisation of peace requires the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeois government by the actions of the Soviet. But such a possibility also requires the replacement of the present leadership of the Soviet with a different one in terms of the creation of majority support for the Bolsheviks. In this context the creation of a worker’s government is connected to the realisation of peace.

Therefore, in his short article: ‘Defence of Imperialism clocked with specious phrases’ Lenin criticises the existing Soviet leadership for upholding the illusion that the present bourgeois government can realise the aim of peace without annexations. He comments: “The Executive Committee’s proclamation covers up the lies about annexations with specious phrases, and thereby does great harm to the cause of the proletariat. First of all, the proclamation does not differentiate between the renunciation of annexation in words (in this sense, all capitalist governments, without exception have “adopted” the “platform of peace without annexations”) and renunciation of annexation in deeds (in this sense, not one capitalist government in the world has renounced annexations. Secondly, the proclamation – without any justification, without any basis, contrary to the truth – whitewashes the Russian provisional government of the capitalists, which is probably not a bit better (and, probably, not worse) than any other capitalist government.”(p341) Thus Lenin suggests that the present Soviet leadership undermines the genuine realisation of the approach of peace without annexations by its accommodation to the bourgeois government and its promotion of the illusion that this administration can realise this objective. Instead Lenin is suggesting that only a revolutionary government of the Soviets can express the possibility to genuinely promote the realisation of this demand in a consistent and principled manner. Therefore, the opportunism of the present Soviet leadership undermines the possibility to achieve this demand in a genuine manner, and instead they perpetuate the illusion that the bourgeois government is acting in accordance with the attempt to realise this objective. Instead Lenin is connecting his revolutionary objectives to the realisation of the aim of peace without annexations because only a principled Soviet government can achieve this demand. Hence the objective of peace without annexations becomes effectively the most important aspect of the reasons why a principled Soviet government should be formed, and the bourgeois government overthrown. This approach is an indication of Lenin’s flexible response to the situation and his connection of the aspiration for peace to the objective of the realisation of the political supremacy of the Soviets. In this manner he is responding to the popular mood and connecting the possibility to realise the objective of peace that it represents with the revolutionary objective of the overthrow of the bourgeois government and the establishment of a genuine Soviet administration. Hence Lenin is connecting the popular mood for peace with the understanding that such an aspiration can only be realised by the successful realisation of a Soviet government. Thus, Lenin is connecting political principles to a perceptive understanding of the popular moods of the people. If he was the dogmatist and elitist that is suggested by Harding such a development would not be conceivable.

Lenin summarises his approach in the following terms in his article ‘Muddle-headedness’. He indicates: “When our party speaks of “peace without annexations” it always explains as warning to muddle-headed people that this slogan must be closely linked with the proletarian revolution. Only in connection with this revolution is it true and useful; it pursues only the revolutions line, and works only for the revolution’s growth and development. To vacillate weakly between hopes in the capitalists and hopes in the workers revolution is to condemn oneself to impotence and muddle in the question of annexations.”(p434-435) Hence Lenin is indicating that the present leadership’s justification of peace without annexations as a demand that can be realised by bourgeois governments is an opportunist approach that effectively denies the imperialist character of capitalism. The only feasible and principled manner in which this demand can be realised is by the successful establishment of workers governments. In this manner these administrations have the social interest and incentive to facilitate the realisation of a policy of peace without annexations. Hence the present Soviet leadership is promoting opportunist illusions when it considers that this approach can be realised under the present bourgeois government. This standpoint denies the importance of the imperialist character of the present world war which is based on the aim of expansionism. Therefore, the only consistent manner in which peace without annexations can be realised is by the realisation of the success of international proletarian revolution and in particular the attainment of a Soviet government in Russia. This means that principled Marxists have to reject the opportunist politics of the right wing and centrist Social Democrats who undermine the possibility to realise this revolutionary approach because of the limitations of their approach. Hence Lenin is suggesting that the aim of peace can only be realised by the adoption of the most principled revolutionary politics. This is a feasible and principled approach despite the immense difficulties of trying to realise this standpoint. Harding cannot appreciate what is principled in this standpoint because he considers the approach of Lenin to be nothing more than the justification of elitism. But this criticism is dogmatic because Lenin envisages the popular mobilisation of the workers in favour of the combined objectives of peace and socialism. Without the support of the workers for this perspective the possibility to realise such aims would be very remote.

Harding contends that Lenin was in a minority of one in early 1917 because of the extremism of his views: “It was not simply the leaders of his own party, those of the Mensheviks, the Socialist Revolutionaries, and the soviets that stood opposed to Lenin, the mass of the workers, and particularly the soldiers did too. Lenin’s denunciation of a war of defence, and the summary dismissal of a peace without annexations and indemnities, smacked to many as treason, not merely to Russia but the freedom won by the February revolution…….It can, in short, be said that nothing could be further from the truth that the often repeated claims that Lenin’s revolutionary programme, as presented in the April Theses, was a carefully contrived set of opportunistic propositions designed to flatter the prevailing moods of the Russian populace. On the contrary, in the extremity of his views he was effectively in a minority of one.”(Harding p90) But Lenin recognised the importance of his isolation and so began to relate the objective of the realisation of the power of the Soviets to the views of the people. In this context he recognised that the continuation of the imperialist war by the bourgeois government was unpopular, and as explained outlined an alternative in terms of his acceptance of the objective of peace without annexations. He also outlines a programme of land reform and the realisation of workers control of industry which is connected to the actual actions of the people who are increasingly discontented by the continuation of capitalism and the inequality within society. Indeed, Harding accepts that this perspective was effective and led to increasing support for the Bolsheviks. Thus, he concludes in an inconsistent manner that the role of Lenin, who initially advocated unpopular politics was vital for the success of the October revolution: “By ‘decisively’ we mean that without the presence of Lenin, his power and persuasiveness of his ideas, his enormous personal authority, and above all his steely certitude, there would have been no second or socialist revolution in Russia in 1917. That he did not make the October revolution single handed goes without saying…..In the last analysis, no amount of Marxist debate about the level of productive forces, consciousness or international ripeness could settle the issue of whether Russia would or would not go beyond the bounds of the bourgeois democratic revolution. It was, in fact settled by the ‘accidental’ presence of one man with an unshakeable belief that one civilisation was foundering and another one had to be born.”(Harding p110) Harding concludes that the very adventurist character of the actions of Lenin could not result in the successful promotion of the realisation of socialism. Instead the only possible result of his adventurist promotion of revolutionary change could be failure: “In the event, none of the principal predictions upon which the whole Russian revolutionary venture was premised in fact materialised. The country was forced upon its own ruined resources and low cultural level. In these circumstances the regime was bound to degenerate. But what was never conceded was Lenin’s (and the Bolsheviks) huge responsibility for inaugurating a venture of total transformation that turned to cataclysm when the predictions on which it was based proved to be false. Men can, no doubt, be inspired by ideas to heroic and self-denying action, but, by a similar token, those same ideas can inspire actions that inadvertently perhaps, lead onto barbarism.” (P112)

This criticism implies that Lenin’s reckless actions could only have a logical result in the regression of society and the onset of the formation of a repressive and authoritarian government. But this is a denial of the importance of the development of the process of interaction of party and class that facilitated the possibility of revolutionary change. Without this aspect the Bolsheviks would have remained isolated and unpopular. The process of change in which the Bolsheviks were transformed from being a small and unpopular organisation into the expression of an organisation that could facilitate the possibility of revolutionary change was not merely about the dynamism of Lenin’s will but was more importantly related to increasing support for the programme of the Bolsheviks. People could understand that the support of the Soviet for the bourgeois government was not realising social progress. Instead the Soviet had to accommodate to the reactionary objectives of the administration. The point being made is that the politics advocated by Lenin could not become effective without relating to the aspirations of the people. It was not possible to realise the success of his convictions if they had not connected with the interests and aims of the workers and peasants. In other words, it would be an idealist fallacy to suggest that Lenin was able to realise his ambitions unless they in some sense connected with the interests and objectives of the people. The point is that the bourgeois government was a disappointment to the workers and peasants because it carried on the war and was reluctant to call for elections to a constituent assembly, whilst also being opposed to the introduction of land reform. In this context the Bolsheviks could become popular because they argued in favour of an end to the involvement of Russia in the war and supported land for the peasants and argued for elections to the Constituent Assembly. If this approach had not been popular then the determination of Lenin would have been essentially ineffective. The point is that increasingly a relation of the people with the objectives of the revolutionary party developed and became increasingly important in connection to defining the character of political events. This aspect was connected to the discrediting of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries because of their uncritical support of the bourgeois Provisional government. By June the slogans of the Bolsheviks could dominate popular demonstrations and the opportunist organisations were increasingly on the defensive and becoming unpopular. The point is that the Bolsheviks increasingly expressed the popular will by calling for the formation of a Soviet government. As Lenin explained in his article ‘All Power to the Soviets’ (Collected works volume 26) “How, then, can anyone oppose the transfer of power in the state to the Soviets? Such opposition means nothing but renouncing democracy! It means no more than imposing on the people a government which admittedly can neither come into being nor hold its ground democratically, i.e., as a result of truly free, truly popular elections.”(p155) Thus increasingly the limitations of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries means that they uphold their opportunist politics despite the apparent democratic aspiration of the people in favour of a revolutionary government of the Soviets. The result is that these organisations become increasingly unpopular whilst the credibility of the Bolsheviks is generated. The spontaneous unrest of July led to a confused attempt to seize power by the supporters of the Bolsheviks, and this semi insurrection was suppressed by the government with the cooperation of the leadership of the Soviets. This led Lenin to mistakenly conclude: “Soviets may appear in this new revolution, and indeed are bound to, but not the present Soviets, not organs collaborating with the bourgeoisie, but organs of revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie. It is true that even then we shall be in favour of building the whole state on the model of the Soviets. It is not a question of Soviets in general, but of combating the present counter-revolution and the treachery of the present Soviets.” (On Slogans p191) This confused position was an indication that Lenin could become confused by events and so advocate flawed perspectives. The result of this disorientation was the defence of what could be defined as false policies based on the ultra-left rejection of the importance of the present Soviets: “The substitution of the abstract for the concrete is one of the greatest and most dangerous sins in a revolution. The present Soviets have failed, have suffered complete defeat because they are dominated by the Socialist Revolutionary and Menshevik parties. At the moment these Soviets are like sheep brought to the slaughterhouse and bleating pitifully under the knife. The Soviets at present are powerless and helpless against the triumphant and triumphing counterrevolution. The slogan calling for the transfer of power to the Soviets might be construed as a “simple” appeal for the transfer of power to the present Soviets, and to say that, to appeal for it, would now mean deceiving the people. Nothing is more dangerous than deceit.” (p191-192) This ultra-left view is an indication that the approach of Lenin was not infallible. It was actual developments in the class struggle which convinced him of the premature character of this conclusion. The point is that the actual greatness of Lenin was that he was prepared to learn from the class struggle and so reject the possible tactical limitations of previous forms of perspectives. The actual greatness of the Bolsheviks was that their orientation was ultimately based on trying to understand the potentialities of the actual class struggle. In this manner they could correct any possible mistakes in previous policies. In other words, contrary to the views of Harding Lenin did not have some mythical absolute control of events. Instead he could be disorientated by the actual complexities of the class struggle and so advocate what could be defined as wrong and problematical policies. The point is that he was wiling to learn from these mistakes, but this meant the approach of the importance of the requirements of the class struggle was his ultimate motivation. If he was merely ambitious this aspect of relating to events could have become merely the justification of what was defined as being in the interests of Lenin. But instead of this opportunist approach he was motivated in terms of what would advance the realisation of the revolution in Russia and internationally. However, it is important to understand that this aspect of the politics of Lenin was made possible by the genuine radicalisation of the consciousness of the Russian workers in 1917. They were increasingly prepared to support the politics of the Bolsheviks because of the increasing failures of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Lenin could argue that the support of these organisations for the bourgeois government had not resulted in the end of the war and had not led to land reform or the generation of economic prosperity. Therefore, the approach of Lenin was increasingly in correspondence with the aspirations of the workers and peasants, and his credibility was that he was able to articulate their discontent. Without the failure of the bourgeois government in relation to meeting the aspirations of the people the credibility of the perspectives of Lenin would not have developed. Only the failure of the administration in relation to the problems of the country created the basis of increasing support for the Bolsheviks. Hence Harding’s suggestion that there was something unrealistic and impractical about the approach of Lenin is actually a dogmatic appraisal because it was the very discontent of the people that provided the validity of his standpoint. Increasingly it was Lenin who articulated the dissatisfaction of the people, and as a result the Bolsheviks acquired popular support. But this does not mean that Lenin did not make mistakes, such as in June and July 1917 questioning the importance of the Soviets and so calling for a revolutionary alternative to this institution. However, the very dynamics and lessons of the class struggle meant that such mistakes were overcome and instead a more appropriate strategy was advocated. This aspect was connected to the important role that Trotsky had as the leader of the Soviet since September 1917. Hence it has to be established that contrary to the view of Harding the character of the events of 1917 was not primarily defined by the individual role of Lenin. Instead what was of crucial importance was the relationship of party and class. In these terms it was possible to understand that this interaction expressed a dynamic that created favourable conditions for the possibility of revolutionary change. This did not mean that change was inevitable because it could be suggested that various defeats during 1917 could have led to the undermining of the possibility for the realisation of revolutionary change. But in an important sense it was the very ability of the Bolsheviks to learn the lessons of the various setbacks that enabled it to become such an effective leadership of the process of change.

Lenin outlined his assessment of the developments of initial part of 1917 in his article: ‘Lessons of the Revolution’. His approach is based on the perspective that the Soviets had the ability and support to attain political supremacy in 1917. This would be the basis to advance the realisation of the principles of peace and genuine democracy: “It goes without saying that the Soviets could and should have taken over state power in full. Pending the convocation of the Constituent Assembly there should have been no other power in the state other than the Soviets. Only then would the revolution have become a truly popular and truly democratic revolution. Only then could the working people, who are really striving for peace, and have no interest in a war of conquest, have begun firmly and resolutely to carry out a policy which would have ended the war of conquest and led to peace. Only then could the workers and peasants have curbed the capitalists…..But in the Soviets only a minority of the deputies were on the side of the revolutionary workers party, the Bolsheviks, Social Democrats, who demanded that all state power should be transferred to the Soviets. The majority of the deputies to the Soviets were on the side of the parties of the Menshevik Social Democrats and the Socialist revolutionaries who were opposed to the transfer of power to the Soviets.”(p233-234) This understanding would seem to logically imply that the primary aim is to transform the character of the Soviets so that there popular character is connected to the realisation of this potential to become the primary political force within society and so replace the supremacy of the bourgeois coalition government. The ability of this administration to function is only made possible by the opportunist character of the Soviets. But it is these organisations that express genuine popular legitimacy and so should logically become the dominant political institution within society. But instead of this possibility the opportunist character of the leadership of the Soviets meant that it cooperated with the bourgeois government despite the fact that it was determined to continue with the imperialist war. The result of this situation was the formation of a coalition administration based on the effective involvement of the leaders of the Soviet in the government. However, the discontent of the workers continued to develop, and the ultimate result was the semi-insurrection of the workers in July 1917. This development result in the defeat of the mass actions of the workers and the temporary decline of the influence of the Bolsheviks. Lenin was obviously disorientated by these developments because he does not seem to have analysed them in any detail and instead vaguely calls for the promotion of a new tactic of civil war without elaborating what this means and what is implied in terms of the role of the Soviets. He is obviously put on the defence by this serious defeat of the workers and Bolsheviks and so the result is a crisis of perspectives. Such a situation indicates that Lenin can be disorientated by reverses within the class struggle and so as a result he is unable to provide consistent leadership and so is unable to elaborate what should be the tactics of the mass movement. This effective demoralisation caused by a serious defeat of the mass movement is an indication that ultimately Lenin’s morale and confidence is connected to the possibility of the advance of the struggle against the Provisional government. In this context defeats could disorientate him, and the result was a failure to defend effective perspectives for the next phase of the class struggle. Therefore, the setback in July led him to vaguely and unconvincingly advocate the development of civil war. But this approach is not elaborated as an alternative to the objective of the realisation of the political power of the Soviets, and so the result is an expression of demoralisation and disorientation. But the attempt at a military coup by General Kornilov revived the influence of the Bolsheviks and led to the ability of Lenin to promote consistent politics. This led to approach that called for the Menshevik and Social Revolutionary led Soviet to form a government. The point that was being made in effective terms was that only this type of administration could oppose the possible realisation of the formation of an authoritarian administration. Hence the collaboration of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries with the bourgeois government was facilitating the potential creation of a right-wing administration that would seriously act to undermine the influence of the workers within society. The only alternative was the realisation of genuine Soviet power, even under its present Menshevik and Social Revolutionary leadership. Hence Lenin in a flexible and principled manner call for the realisation of a Soviet government even if it did not have an authentic revolutionary leadership. The point is that the determination of the present leaders of the Soviet could result in this type of development, and the Bolsheviks would support this possibility. In other words, Lenin was aware of the changing character of political events and that the role of the Bolsheviks in developing the Soviet opposition to the possibility of a coup by Kornilov meant that it had become increasingly influential and able to promote this perspective of a Soviet government in a credible manner. But Lenin was not merely astute in relation to tactics, he was also aware of the necessity to outline a credible programme of change and this he outlined in his pamphlet: ‘The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It.”(CW 25)

He outlines how the situation is characterised by increasing acute economic crisis in which the possibility of famine and increased unemployment are developing. The government is unable to tackle this situation of crisis and instead a revolutionary administration is required which would nationalise the banks and organise the major companies in an effective manner. The result of this situation would be to develop measures that act to end the possibility of famine and which facilitate the increased influence of the role of the working class to be able to intervene and organise the process of economic activity. The forces of labour will be organised in order to influence the character of economic activity, but this situation will not be the expression of socialism but instead represent a process of advance towards the realisation of this objective. The urgent requirement will be to create the level of organisation required by the process of interaction of the revolutionary state with the dynamism of the people in order to tackle immediate and important economic problems. These tasks will be combined with the commitment of this administration to the realisation of a democratic peace, of all nations, and the necessity of the defence of a Soviet Russia from imperialist aggression. This perspective represents a credible perspective for the organisation of the economy, but it has no mention of the relations of the agricultural system to the requirements of industry and the city. This is the central task which requires attention. Also, it is not established how it will be possible to ensure the cooperation of the capitalists with the revolutionary government given the related influence of the workers within the economy. Instead the situation implies that the workers and revolutionary administration will have no alternative than to organise and administer the economy without the cooperation of the capitalists. Hence there is an element of illusion in the approach of Lenin who is suggesting the possibility of the development of a state capitalist economy based on the cooperation of workers and the employers. But despite these limitations at least Lenin has outlined a credible programme of change that a Soviet government could try to realise as an expression of genuine advance towards socialism. The point is that the programme of Lenin for economic change is connected to his renewed emphasis on the importance of the realisation of the power of the Soviets. Hence the importance of the democratic character of this organisation can generate the support of the revolutionary leadership by the people and in this manner ensure the potential effectiveness of the realisation of the economic measures being proposed by Lenin. In other words, the Soviets express the political credibility that is required in order to facilitate the realisation of the economic changes that are necessary in order to improve the situation of the working class. But the aspect that still has to be established is the issue of whether the working class has the ability and capacity to be able to act in an effective manner in order to transform the character of the economy, or in this context be able to organise a capitalist economy so that improvements are made that enable progress to be made towards the realisation of socialism. This objective implies that under difficult circumstances the working class is able to interact in an effective manner with the role of a Soviet government. It could be argued that Lenin does not sufficiently establish this point and ambiguously insists that the realisation of the increased influence of the workers within the economy can be established without the importance of nationalisation of the economy by a Soviet state. Hence he contends that: “The purpose of “unionisation” is to institute the fullest, strictest and most detailed accountancy, but chiefly to combine operations in the purchase of raw materials, the sale of products, and the economy of national funds and forces….And it is to be repeated that this unionisation will not in itself alter property relations one iota and will not deprive any owner of a single kopek.”(p348) But how is this assumption of cooperation of employers and workers to be realised given the inherent opposing economic interests that they represent? The answer to this question is only assumed and not effectively addressed by Lenin who instead implies in some vague manner that the interests of workers and employers can be reconciled in these circumstances. But in actuality the very expression of aspects of workers control in 1917 led to the alienation of the employers from their obligations to the process of production. The approach of Lenin in this article proved to be unrealistic even if had outlined a potentially credible economic programme of state capitalism. (This point will be elaborated)

Lenin also recognised that in order to inspire support for the aims of the Bolsheviks is was necessary to outline a conception of what was meant by the socialist society. This was outlined in ‘State and Revolution’ (CW 25) Harding has carried out an extensive analysis of this work. He contends that Lenin was motivated by the importance of developing a conception of society that people could be inspired to support: “Lenin recognised perfectly well that, in order to get the masses to act decisively, it was not enough for the revolutionaries to expose the rottenness of existing society. The withering critique of state monopoly capitalism might be sufficient to undermine the legitimacy of existing structures of power but this of itself would not dispose the mass of the people to act to overthrow it. Before they could have the confidence to do this, Lenin argued, they had to be persuaded that it was feasible and practicable to replace it with something better. The positive content of the socialist transformation had, therefore to be projected as something that was not only necessary, but also practicable.”(Harding p142) This point seems essentially correct but it has to be emphasised that Len considered that this possibility of the creation of a new type of socialist society would be the ultimate outcome of the successful realisation of the transitional aspects of the increasing influence of the working class in relation to its ability to create a soviet government that would be able to act in accordance with the interests of the people. The point that he made in his articles of 1917 was that this type of administration would introduce transitional measures that would enhance the possibility of the generation of the economic and political conditions that would make socialism a possibility. The implication was that if the Soviet government was unable to succeed in these terms the prospect of advance towards the realisation of socialism would be problematical. Hence the solving of political tasks such as achieving a decisive victory in the class struggle was the only basis for the creation of a workers government that would enable the introduction of the transitional measures that would realise the supremacy of the working class over the economic process. This was not the immediate introduction of socialism but instead would mean that the very system of capitalism would be modified in terms of the realisation of the interests of the workers and peasants. Only the success of this transitional period could ensure that the realisation of the conditions for transition to socialism could become feasible: “The Leninist road to socialism ran through the terrain of monopoly capitalism. It would, according to Lenin, abolish neither its advanced technological base not its institutionalised means for allocating resources or structuring industry. Only the motive and goal of these institutions would be transformed and, along with the change of goal, the existing irrationalities, imbalances and injustices of the productive and distributive system would be done away with…..The institutional framework of advanced capitalism could, to put it shortly, be utilized for the realisation of specifically socialist goals.”(p145) But the point is that such a possibility was connected to the success of a revolutionary strategy that was again related to the issue of the realisation of the power of the Soviets. Only the formation of a genuine Soviet government based on the influence of the revolutionary party could begin to contemplate the introduction of this approach. Hence even though Lenin did not consider the feasibility of the immediate realisation of socialism, he was aware that the feasibility of the introduction of a minimum programme of what could be defined as state capitalism could only occur in relation to the successful realisation of a process of revolutionary change. The point being made is that the feasibility of the aim of socialism had two important transitional aspects, the success of the perspective of the process of revolutionary change and the stage of state capitalism in which the organisations of the working class acted to direct what is still a capitalist type of economy in terms of the aims of the promotion of the realisation of socialism. Only the successful completion of this stage would make the possibility of change to a socialist form of economy both feasible and practical. But this point is ignored by Harding who instead seems to emphasise the understanding that Lenin envisaged a direct realisation of socialism via the power of the Soviets: “Politics in this view, is no more than concentrated economics, and the state is no more than the agency that preserves the exploitative privileges of the ruling class. The positive content of the Leninist project for socialism consisted in this: it proposed to transform the present (coercive and statist) domination of the vast majority by a small minority into the co-operative and voluntary participation of all to realize a more efficient system of production and a just distribution of rewards.”(p153) But the point is that this comment only establishes the overall approach of Lenin in terms of how he envisages the character of the state after a period of the government of the soviets. The first period of this process of transition is a situation in which the working class organise a type of economy in which the interests of the workers and capitalists are reconciled in terms of the role of state capitalism. Only in a long-term situation is the understanding that the conditions for socialism will be gradually realised. Hence in these terms Lenin rejected any concessions to utopianism and instead tried to outline the situation in which the hegemony of the working class would in the long-term create the conditions for the realisation of socialism. But this is obscured by Harding who instead does considers that there is no essential differentiation of stages in the conception of Lenin’s understanding of the realisation of socialism. The point is that Lenin understood that the situation was not immediately favourable for the realisation of socialism in terms of the creation of a system based on nationalised production under workers control and the related demise of the major aspects of capitalist production like commodity exchange. Instead he was aware that the economic system in Russia was not favourable for the short-term realisation of this objective and that instead a long process of transition would have to occur before such a possibility of genuine socialism could become realisable and possible. This is precisely why he was aware that capitalism would continue under a system of the hegemony of the Soviets and that the realisation of the international revolution would be the primary basis of the possibility of advance towards socialism in Russia. Thus, the approach of ‘State and Revolution’ in which the aspects of a socialist society are outlined is not meant to be an expression of short-term possibility. Instead what is outlined is the result of the success of the initial period of the role of the government of the working class. The point being made is that this work is of a theoretical character which tries to indicate the principles on which a worker’s government would be based. It is not an analysis of the actual immediate policies and objectives of the Soviet state. Hence this work does not indicate the details of how to define the character of the economic and political measures of the Soviet state. Instead it establishes the principles of how the realisation of a genuine commune type state can be advanced and realised.

Lenin outlines the history of the role of the state and its connection to the perpetuation of the domination of various ruling classes. He concludes that the proletariat needs to overthrow the bourgeois state and establish its own state: “The proletariat needs state power, a centralised organisation of force, an organisation of violence, both to crush the resistance of the exploiters and to lead the enormous mass of the population – the peasants, the petty bourgeoisie, and semi-proletarians in the work of the creation of a socialist economy.”(State and Revolution CW25 p409) This would seem to imply that the primary role of the workers state is to ensure that the promotion of the socialist system is not overthrown by the counterrevolutionary action of the bourgeoisie. But this would be a misleading impression because this task is subordinated to the importance of the activity of the working class in the organisation of a new type of economy and society. Hence the emphasis of Lenin is about the development of a alternative to capitalism in terms of the promotion of the realisation of the aspects that will contribute to the possibility of the realisation of socialism: “By educating the workers party, Marxism educates the vanguard of the proletariat, capable of assuming power and leading the whole people to socialism, of directing and organising the new system, of being the teacher, the guide, the leader of all the working and exploited people in organising their social life without the bourgeoisie and against the bourgeoisie.”(p409) Therefore the aspect of the domination of the capitalist class in the new system is a secondary aspect which is not as important as the advice and guidance of the Marxist party in the promotion of the ability of the working class to be able to organise and develop a socialist economy. The obvious problem in this perspective is that it implies that there will be an inherent compatible relationship between party and class. The party will be content to facilitate the realisation of the capacity of working people to be able to organise society and the economy. However, such a relationship in which the party has an undoubted privileged connection to the role of the working class could imply problematical tensions which could only be resolved by the party being genuinely accountable to the working class. But Lenin does not seem to recognise the importance of this issue, and indeed the role of the party is not discussed in detail in his work. Instead it is assumed that there will be an inherently principled relationship of party and class in which the role of the party is dedicated to the enhancement of the ability of the workers to be able or organise society. It is not considered conceivable that the genuine revolutionary party could in some bureaucratic manner undermine the possibility for the workers to be able to determine the character of economic and political activity within the revolutionary society. Instead it is suggested in an un-problematical manner that the working class can create a state formation that expresses is interests and so enables the realisation of a classless society: “The transition from capitalism to communism is certainly bound to yield a tremendous abundance and variety of political forms, but the essence will inevitably be the same: the dictatorship of the proletariat”(p418) But the important issue that this formulation creates is how can this type of society be effectively a dictatorship against the role of the bourgeoisie but without becoming a repressive and coercive organ of administration that establishes a situation of general domination over society? The point is how can the principles of democratic accountability be realised by the role of what is still essentially a form of dictatorship? Lenin does not seem to answer these questions directly but instead assumes that a state based on the realisation of the interests of the working class will be inherently democratic and yet able to repress the opposition of the bourgeoisie: “This shows more clearly than anything else that the turn from the bourgeois to proletarian democracy, from the democracy of the oppressors to that of the oppressed classes, from the state as a “special force” for the suppression of a particular class to suppression of the oppressors by the general force of the majority of the people – the workers and peasants.”(p425) This comment indicates that Lenin does not seem to recognise the contradictory relationship between the situation of coercion of the former ruling class and the role of popular democracy. Surely the genuine realisation of the importance of democracy under a revolutionary regime will undermine the necessity of coercion in order to sustain this type of society. Instead the democratic support of the revolutionary regime will provide it with the popular credentials that mean that the importance of repression is diminished. In this context the former ruling class will be politically isolated and unpopular and so the revolutionary regime will be able to sustain its hegemony without the necessity of the role of coercion and instead its democratic popularity should provide it with the legitimacy and durability necessary to generate its continuation. In these terms the forces of counterrevolution will be isolated and not strong and so instead the popular support of the regime will ensure that it can continue without the necessity to apply the role of state coercion. Instead the aspect of democratic accountability will ensure the primary basis for the consolidation of the revolutionary regime, and the isolation of the former ruling class in these terms should ensure that the necessity of the role of coercion of these forces need not be applied. It could be argued that this view underestimates the antagonism of the former ruling classes towards the revolutionary regime, but this development of opposition by the supporters of capitalism should not mean that the importance of the democratic character of the political system should be undermined as a result of these tensions. But this was the very aspect that was challenged by the development of civil war and the opposition of the bourgeoisie to the actuality of a Soviet state. The ultimate problem was that this situation of political polarisation led to the development of one-party rule and the undermining of the importance of the democracy of the Soviets. This development could not have been anticipated by Lenin’s ‘State and Revolution’ because the role of the revolutionary party is not discussed in detail in this work. Instead in a dogmatic manner the political character of the workers state is assumed to be inherently democratic without the necessity of outlining the characteristics of the system that will ensure that this aspect of democracy is realised in an effective and principled manner. Instead the assumption is that the role of the major revolutionary party will ensure the realisation of popular democracy. This standpoint implies that there is an inherent relationship of democracy with the role of the workers state even though the aspects of the political system are not outlined in detail. But how is the assumption of the importance of the dominating role of the exclusive revolutionary party to be reconciled with the actuality of the effective functioning of a genuine democratic system? This point is never explained and instead the emphasis is on the importance of the political role of the revolutionary party. But what if the workers genuinely decide to support a rival organisation? The apparent dilemmas and tensions of this rigid assumption of the hegemonic importance of the revolutionary party are not resolved. Instead it is assumed that the relationship of party and class will be enduring and so sustain the primary importance of the revolutionary organisation within an assumed democratic political system. But the very events of the period 1918-21 indicated that this assumption was problematical, and the workers often expressed their dissatisfaction with the Bolsheviks by supporting the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Hence the assumption that one party rule could be reconciled with the role of democracy was not sustained by the political tensions of the period 1918-21. The approach of Lenin in ‘State and Revolution’ was shown to be one-sided, dogmatic and unable to anticipate the issues that indicated a popular questioning of the role of one- party rule. The conception that one party could inherently express the revolutionary aspirations of the workers was shown to be problematical in the period 1918-21 despite the assumptions being made in ‘State and Revolution’. The ultimate problem is that the intention of the revolutionary party to express the interests of the working class can be undermined by the complexity of social circumstances that result in the increasingly discrepancy between the role of the Marxist organisation in contrast to the aspirations of the people. This situation cannot be easily resolved in any harmonious manner, but instead only the genuine accountability of the party to the class can ensure that the party consistently acts in accordance with the interests and objectives of the people. But this is the very aspect that is not discussed by Lenin in a consistent and effective manner because he instead assumes this essential relationship of the party to the historic interests of the workers. Therefore, he does not outline in political terms how this prospect of harmony between the aspirations of party and class can be realised in practice. He does not indicate the necessity of the accountability of party to the class because he does not consider that this issue will become a problem. Instead he assumes that the party because it is revolutionary will act in accordance with the aspirations of the workers and so he does not allow for the possibility that the vey exercise of political power may result in the degeneration of the party to the extent that it is no longer an expression of the aspirations of the workers. This problem is connected to the fact that he does not outline the necessity for a genuine democratic political system to be the expression of the realisation of the relationship of the role of the people to the activity of the revolutionary party. Instead this understanding is assumed and not outlined in any detail. He cannot conceive of the possibility of the degeneration of the revolutionary party to the extent that it begins to reject being an expression of the political interests of the people. Only actual political developments led him to serious analyse this issue.

Lenin considers that the development of capitalism has created the conditions for the realisation of a socialist society: “Capitalist culture has created large scale production, factories, railways, the postal service, telephones, etc., and on this basis the great majority of the functions of the old “state power” have become so simplified and can be reduced to such exceedingly simple operations of registration, filing and checking that they can be performed by every literate person, can quite easily be performed for ordinary “workmen’s wages”, and that these functions can (and must) be stripped of every shadow of privilege, of every semblance of “official grandeur”.(p425-426) These measures are connected to the democratising of the character of the state: “All officials, without exception, elected and subject to recall at any time, their salaries reduced to the level of ordinary “workmen’s wages” – these simple and “self-evident” democratic measures, while completely uniting the interests of the workers and the majority of the peasants, at the same time serve as a bridge leading from capitalism to socialism. These measures concern the reorganisation of the state, the purely political reorganisation of society, but, of course, they acquire only full meaning and significance only in connection with the “expropriation of the expropriators” either being accomplished or in preparation, i.e., with the transformation of capitalist private ownership of the means of production into social ownership.” (p426)

This is a summary of the approach of Lenin. It is assumed that the workers will carry out this process of the transformation of the character of the state and thereby enable the process of the creation of a socialist economy and society to be realised. But the problem with this perspective is that it does not outline the relationship of party and class in this process of change. Are we to believe that the workers will act without the guidance of the party, or that this relationship is genuinely democratic in which the role of the party faithfully expresses the aspirations of the workers? Instead of tackling these issues Lenin outlines a vague process in which the workers apparently spontaneously act to develop democratic control of the state and so ensure that it expresses the aspirations of the realisation of socialism such as facilitating the creation of an economy based on nationalisation via the aspect of workers control of production. This criticism of Lenin’s conception of a revolutionary society is not meant to deny the importance of the leadership role of the party but instead to question whether Lenin has sufficiently established the criteria by which the accountability of the party to the workers has been outlined in an effective manner.

It seems that instead of indicating the various aspects by which the party has to act in accordance with the aspirations of the workers, Lenin prefers to outline his perspective in dogmatic terms that seem to be emphatic and the apparent problems of his approach are not indicated and tackled. In this context it is taken for granted that a state established by the process of proletarian revolutionary change will inevitably have a participatory character based on the involvement of the workers in the activity of the governmental apparatus, and that this social formation will be defined by the principles of democratic accountability. In this context it is assumed that a state organised in terms of the participation of the people will be without the role of Parliament: “To organise the whole economy on the lines of the technical service so that the technicians, foremen and accountants , as well as all officials, shall receive salaries no higher than “a workmen’s wage”, all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat – this is our immediate aim. This is the state and this is the economic foundation we need. This is what will bring about the abolition of parliamentarianism and the preservation of representative institutions.”(p432) But the question is what type of democracy, that is not of a parliamentary character, will ensure that the state is accountable to the people and that the economy is based on the democracy of the producers? In other words what type of representative institution can be more democratically effective than the role of Parliament? Lenin does not seem to provide a satisfactory answer to this question and instead seems content to argue in vague terms about the necessity to realise a democratic republic and uses the views of Engels to uphold his standpoint. He comments: “To develop democracy to the utmost, to find the forms for this development, to test them by practice, and so forth – all this is one of the component tasks of the struggle for the social revolution. Taken separately no kind of democracy will bring socialism. But in actual life democracy will never be “taken separately”; it will be “taken together” with other things, it will exert its influence on economic life as well, will stimulate its transformation; and in its turn it will be influenced by economic development and so on.”(p457-458) But this emphasis on the importance of the role of democracy under a revolutionary administration does not establish what is the precise character of democracy. For example, what is the role of different parties in this situation? Furthermore, what type of political system will replace the role of Parliament and yet maintain the importance of democratic principles in a superior manner? Indeed, Lenin is vey ambiguous when he contends that: ‘the withering away of the state means the withering away of democracy’(p460) What does this mean? The problem is that the most emancipatory type of political system that has been devised has been that of democracy based on the application of the principles of universal suffrage. Therefore, the most progressive type of society would be one in which the realisation of democracy achieved its most participatory and accountable form. But instead of outlining the principles and aspects of this type of society he instead justifies the role of democracy in terms of the application of the coercion of the state within society: “No, democracy is not identical to the subordination of the minority to the majority. Democracy is a state which recognises the subordination of the minority to the majority, i.e., an organisation for the systematic use of force by one class against another, by one section of the population against another.”(p461) Hence the role of democracy is not considered to be an alternative to the application of the coercion of the state but instead the popular justification of this aspect of the role of society. But this view seems to ignore the potential for democracy to develop popular support for the revolutionary regime, which would therefore lesson the necessity for the application of the coercion of the state. Lenin rejects this criticism and instead defines the character of democracy in a revolutionary society in strictly class terms: “Democracy for the vast majority of the people, and suppression by force i.e., exclusion from democracy of the exploiters and oppressors of the people – this is the change that democracy undergoes during the transition from capitalism to communism.”(p467) But the problem with this perspective is that the application of restrictions on the role of democracy, even for reactionary class forces like the bourgeoisie, could become a precedent to apply more limitations in the name of the interests of the revolutionary regime. The result of this development could be the creation of a one-party state in the name of the interests of the workers. This would mean that the actual role of democracy would be ended in the name of the interests of the workers state and the aim of communism. But Lenin’s reply to this objection is to suggest that: “A special apparatus, a special machine for the suppression, the “state” is still necessary, but this is now a transitional state…….And it is compatible with the extension of democracy to such an overwhelming majority of the population that the need for a special machine of suppression will begin to disappear.”(p468) But the point is the aspect of the application of democracy is possibly undermined by the continued importance of the role of the state as an apparatus of coercion. This is the vey issue that Lenin has not addressed. It would be more relevant to try and outline how the very importance of democracy undermines the necessity and importance of the role of the state as a repressive apparatus. The democratic support of the workers and peasants for the revolutionary state would undermine the credibility and legitimacy of any attempt to restore the old regime by means of counterrevolution. In this context the importance of coercion would become replaced by the ideological influence of consensus and the accommodation of different social interests. The important issue that Lenin does not address is the connection of the possible repression of the opposition of the bourgeoisie to the revolutionary regime could become the pretext of the coercion of sections of the working class. He denies the validity of this possibility by assuming that the workers will have a universal and uniform opinion of a revolutionary character. But such an assumption is dogmatic to assert. Instead it would be both more principled and flexible to recognise the possibility of the diversity of political opinion within the working class, and as a result it is necessary to develop a type of society that is able to allow for the importance of different views. The assumption of a monolithic working class opinion is not the basis on which to promote the realisation of a tolerant society in which the contrasting aspects of the promotion of the revolutionary interests of the workers can be reconciled with the acceptance of the importance of diverse views. Only the application of genuine democratic procedures can facilitate the realisation of an authentic consensus of opinion. But this situation would mean that the role of the revolutionary party would be as an advisory to the working class rather than the imposition of a rigid viewpoint that must be realised in relation to political activity. Lenin outlines the importance of the organisation of production by the workers, but this aspect is not connected to an outline of the role of the revolutionary party in systematic terms and the character of political democracy is not explained. Hence there are important aspects of the society after capitalism which are not outlined in systematic terms. The possibility of different views about how to develop socialism and the role of competition between rival parties is not incorporated into a conception of the post-revolutionary society. Instead the implicit assumption being made is that people will support the objectives of the revolutionary party because they correspond to the objective of the construction of the socialist society. But this is merely a vague conclusion of the approach of Lenin and is not outlined in explicit and systematic detail. The primary problem was that Lenin did not establish before the success of the revolution an understanding of the character and aspects of the political system after the overthrow of the political domination of the bourgeoisie. Therefore, it was not established how the policies that had to be established by the revolutionary regime should be the subject of genuine democratic discussion and decision making.

Harding considers that this limitation was an indication of Lenin’s contempt for the importance of democracy: “At no point in his career, either in or out of power, did Lenin ever recommend that the principles that informed economic priorities should be debated widely by the population as a whole, or that vital orderings of priorities should be adjudicated by democratic popular decision. He set an example that all communist regimes were to follow.”(Harding p153) But the point is that Lenin did outline the importance of democracy in the actions of the workers state but he failed to establish the conditions of this aspect. Instead it was assumed that the revolutionary commune state would be democratic because it expressed the aspirations of the working class. Harding considers that this perspective was utopian because Lenin assumed that the very success of the commune state would result in the end of the necessity of politics and of the role of the state. But the point is that Lenin considered that this possibility would only result with the creation of the classless communist society. Until the realisation of this development there would be the important role of the state in relation to the successful achievement of revolutionary objectives. But what was not explained was the connection of party and class in this development. How could the workers achieve the attainment of their objectives without the mediation of party? This was possibly the most important aspect that was neglected in ‘State and Revolution’. Instead Lenin outlined the democratic character of the workers state in a vague manner that ignored the importance of elaborating the type of political system that was envisaged. Primarily this meant neglecting discussion of the issue of elections to the Soviets, and the connection of this aspect to the realisation of genuine democracy. The point is that if it was assumed that the Bolsheviks were the only authentic revolutionary party, and the other organisations claiming to represent the workers were opportunist, the assumption that was being made was that only a one party state could genuinely express the interests of the working class. This approach seemed to have been confirmed by the opportunist actions of the Mensheviks. Hence it would seem that the necessity of politics in a society that was expressing the objectives of socialism would be undermined by the very realisation of this objective. Harding makes this point: “For the Leninist the state (and politics) had no autonomy and no permanence. Both reflected the contradictions of a class divided society. Both were fated to disappear in proportion as exploitation of one man by another was brought to an end. It followed, therefore that the crucial objective of the Leninists in power was economic rather than political – to eliminate exploitation to eliminate classes and therefore the need for politics and the state.”(p152) But this understanding underestimates the importance of the objective of the realisation of the political power of the working class if the objectives of the promotion of the possibility of socialism and communism are to be realised. The point is that the generation of the political supremacy of the working class is the only manner in which its economic aims can be achieved. Hence the issue becomes what is the character of the political system that will ensure that this perspective can be realised? Lenin does not sufficiently address this issue because he assumes that the revolutionary process will result in the creation of the dictatorship of the proletariat that enables these emancipatory objectives to be attained. But what is the political character of the dictatorship of the proletariat? Ironically this issue is not adequately addressed. Instead it is assumed that such a development will ensure the realisation of the objectives of the working class in terms of the creation of an economy with a socialist character, but the actual connection of the political to the economic is not clarified. What is the mechanism that will facilitate the development of the relation of the political power of the working class to the development of the socialist economy? The only answer to this issue is the vague understanding that the influence of political power of the working class will enable a socialist economy to be developed in terms of its administration based on the participation and control of the workers. But what precisely is meant by the realisation of the supremacy of the working class within the economy? How will it be possible to undermine and overcome the domination of capital within the relations of production? This issue is not adequately addressed except to vaguely imply that the establishment of the political power of the working class will facilitate the realisation of these conditions for the transformation of the character of the relations of production. But the details of the character and aspects of workers control of production is not outlined in any precise manner. Instead it is vaguely suggested that the domination of the state by the working class enables this process of change within the relations of production to occur. But Lenin’s understanding has not sufficiently advanced beyond the conception of a socialist society outlined by Marx in his writings about the Paris Commune. Therefore, it would require actual developments after the success of the October revolution for Lenin to outline his understanding of what is meant by the role of a worker’s state.

Lenin also outlines his premises for revolutionary change in relation to his understanding of the imperialist character of the world economy. Harding outlines the significance of Lenin’s major work on imperialism: “It encapsulated its world view and defined the global characteristics of what was held to be an entirely new epoch in human history – the epoch of the final collapse of capitalism and the advent of socialism. It also, of course, established the theoretical justification of the Bolshevik led October revolution of 1917.”(Harding p113) Hence: “The simplest and most fundamental message of Lenin’s Imperialism was: capitalism is ripe, it is rotten-ripe and decaying; its time has passed, it is living on borrowed time. An epoch is at an end. Socialism is not only its chronological successor, it is logically entailed in the very development of capitalism in its monopolistic phase; all its objective and subjective conditions have matured within monopoly capitalism and its triumph becomes a necessity….Its whole message is to point out the immediacy….. of the revolution.” (p114) But if this was approach of Lenin he could be defined as a determinist who essentially considered that socialism was inevitable because of the crisis character of the era of capitalism as imperialism. Instead he understood, as already outlined, the ideological importance of bourgeois nationalism which led to popular support for the various nations involved in the first world war, and as a result this reactionary sentiment was the basis to uphold the interests of imperialism and in that manner undermine the realisation of the potential for socialism in this situation of economic and political crisis. But the very fact that the character of capitalism led to inter-imperialist rivalry that created the possibility of war and political crisis meant that this situation was generating the situation favourable to the potential for the international realisation of socialism.

Lenin outlined his analysis of the character of imperialism as the expression of the transformation of capitalism into monopoly capitalism and state capitalism in his work: ‘Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism’(Collected works volume 22) He considers that this development is creating the material conditions for the realisation of socialism in terms of the fact that monopoly capital is both the highest form of capitalism and an expression of its decline. The intensification of the competition between the rival capitalist countries is creating the possibility for the generation of international proletarian revolution. But there is a complicating aspect caused by the nationalist support of sections of the working class for the aims of the given national imperialist state: “The receipt of high monopoly profits by the capitalists in one of the numerous branches of industry, in one of the numerous countries, etc., makes it economically possible for them to bribe certain sections of the workers, and for a time a fairly considerable minority of them, and win them to the side of the bourgeoisie of a given industry or given nation against all the others. The intensification of antagonisms between imperialist nations for the division of the world increases this urge. And so is created that bond between imperialism and opportunism….The most dangerous of all in this respect are those who do not wish to understand that the fight against imperialism is a sham and humbug unless it is inseparably bound up with the fight against opportunism.”(p301-302) We may question the view that the character of imperialism led to a greater prosperity for sections of the workers in the imperialist countries, but certainly the result of imperialism was to ideologically generate the view that the workers had an interest in support of their given nation state against its rivals. The result of this situation was to lead to the popular support of the various countries engaged in world war one. Hence Lenin understood that an aspect of the development of revolutionary consciousness was to indicate that the character of imperialism would not be to the benefit of the workers of the given imperialist countries and that instead the workers should unite in international terms in opposition to the role of their given nation in the inter-imperialist war. The simple point that was being made was that imperialism was a reinforcement of the exploitation of the workers and so should not be supported for national chauvinist reasons. Instead the workers should unite to oppose both imperialism and capitalism and as a result strive to realise the international proletarian revolution. This approach was generally principled, but it was undermined in strategic terms by the rejection of the aim of the realisation of peace without annexations. Instead Lenin advocated the ultra-left stance of transforming the imperialist war into a civil war, and so he rejected the progressive potential of the aspiration to realise peace. Therefore, what was a generally correct analysis of the character of capitalism as imperialism was undermined by its rigid and problematical strategy for change. Instead the logical perspective of opposition to the development of inter-imperialist war was peace without annexations. It was true that in general terms the generation of war was because of the competition between imperialist countries based on rival expressions of the role of monopoly capital, and so the ultimate outcome of this situation had to be the realisation of international socialism. But this very development could only be realised in terms of the successful attainment of peace, and the attainment of this objective would express the development of a balance of class forces that was favourable to the possibility of the realisation of socialism. But instead of this flexible understanding Lenin had the rigid perspective that because imperialism was based on the role of monopoly capital the only manner in which this situation could be transformed was by the development of international civil war. In this context Harding is right to claim that: “The theory of imperialism, and its derivative political strategies unmistakeably marked off Leninism, as an ideological statement and programme, from all competing strands of socialism.”(Harding p140) But as we have tried to indicate the intransigent revolutionary defeatism that accompanied his analysis of imperialism was modified in 1917 and Lenin became more sympathetic to the approach of peace without annexations. This very development was an indication that Lenin was not merely a dogmatist and was prepared to modify strategies and tactics in relation to the importance of the dynamics of actual political developments. Furthermore, he did not have to modify his theory of imperialism in order to allow for the importance of the demand of peace without annexations. He considered that his theory of imperialism remained valid, but that tactical modifications could be made in order to relate to the consciousness of the workers.

However, the political aspect that Lenin never tackled was the issue of the relation of imperialism to the influence of national chauvinism within the working class. The development of imperialist war led to the generation of the popularity of the nation state and in that manner the aspect of the internationalism of the working class was undermined. Lenin’s only answer to this development was to argue in favour of revolutionary defeatism, but this was a tactic that did not tackle the ideological aspects of the importance of nationalism as a motive for workers to uphold and in that manner to reject the alternative of the international solidarity of the working class. The emphasis of Lenin was on the tactics that could promote opposition to the imperialist war, but this did not mean that this aspect was connected to tackling the issue of the influence of national chauvinism in ideological terms. Hence, he failed to elaborate how the popularity of the imperialist nation could be opposed by the contrasting approach of proletarian internationalism. Instead of tackling this issue he assumed in dogmatic terms that the workers of the given imperialist nations were prepared to oppose the influence of national chauvinism and were receptive to the adoption of a revolutionary and internationalist stance. The result of this rigidity was that he could not comprehend the importance of a slogan for peace that would relate to the increasing aspiration for ending the war. The result of his limitations was that he promoted the approach of revolutionary defeatism despite the apparent lack of support for this approach. In other words, his tactical approach was based on his analysis of capitalism as imperialism and so he ignored the necessity to relate to the actual class consciousness of the workers and this means developing the importance of a perspective of peace.

However, Harding indicates that instead of having a perspective for the development of the revolutionary consciousness of the working class, Lenin’s position was based on the view that sections of the working class benefited from imperialism in terms of the profits obtained by the exploitation of colonies. Only the ending of the domination of oppressed nations by the imperialist powers could create a situation in which the workers would become radicalised. Harding suggests: “The proletariat of the advanced industrial countries could not, therefore, recover their vitality and revolutionary mission unless and until they were successful in ending their own countries participation in colonial exploitation……The corruption of the metropolitan working classes could only be remedied by the ending of colonialism.”(Harding p207) In other words it is possible that the struggle for national liberation of the colonies could be progressive both in the fact that it is opposed to imperialist domination and also that it results in the support of the workers of the major imperialist countries for this objective. Lenin outlines his position in the critique of the Junius pamphlet of Luxemburg. He rejects her view that progressive national wars cannot occur and indicates that these can be based on the struggle for national liberation of the oppressed colonies. But his major criticism is that Luxemburg does not sufficiently and consistently support the approach of revolutionary defeatism as an alternative to the imperialist war: “Junius came very close to the correct solution to the problem and to the correct slogan: civil war against the bourgeoisie for socialism; but as if afraid to speak the whole truth, he turned back to the fantasy of a “national war” in 1914, 1915 and 1916…..Under such circumstances to “proclaim” the programme of a republic, a permanent parliament, election of officers by the people….would have meant, in practice, “proclaiming” a revolution with the wrong revolutionary programme!”(Lenin’: The Junius Pamphlet, Collected works volume 22 p317) But this is to imply that any development that is not based on the overthrow of capitalism is unsatisfactory. But this stance meant denying the possible progressive importance of the working class being able to influence the capitalist government of an imperialist nation concerning the introduction of a policy of peace without annexations. Instead it is being suggested in a rigid manner that only the successful promotion of revolutionary defeatism is both principled and effective. Only the overthrow of capitalism is an expression of a successful approach. This is a rigid stance that denies that partial progress can have a beneficial result in the creation of the possibility of the realisation of peace and the ending of the inter-imperialist war.

However, despite this dogmatism there is also a pragmatic recognition of the importance of the struggle for national self-determination against imperialism. Therefore, Lenin upholds a contradictory perspective of the process of revolutionary developments. On the one hand: “To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty-bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc – to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution.”(The Discussion of Self Determination summed up, in Collected works volume 22 p355) On the other hand: “The socialist revolution in Europe cannot be anything other than an outburst of mass struggle on the part of all and sundry oppressed and discontented elements….But objectively they will attack capital, and the class conscious vanguard of the revolution, the advanced proletariat, expressing this objective truth of a variegated and discordant, motley and outwardly fragmented mass struggle, will be able to unite and direct it, capture power, seize the banks expropriate the trusts….and introduce other dictatorial measures which in their totality will amount to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the victory of socialism, which however, will by no means purge itself of petty-bourgeois slag.”(p356) Thus there is a connection between the struggle for liberation of oppressed nations and the process of the development of the social revolution in the advanced capitalist countries that will facilitate the possibility of the undermining of the hegemony of the present economic system. The assumption being made is that the striving for national liberation of the colonies will facilitate the radicalisation of the working class of the major capitalist countries. But the problem is not with the validity of this perspective but instead the tactics that are based on this approach. On the one hand the aim of self-determination of nations seems both a principled and realistic demand and is based on the recognition of the importance of undermining the economic and political power of the role of capitalism as imperialism. But on the other hand, the standpoint of revolutionary defeatism is both an ultra-left and unrealistic standpoint that is not based on recognising the importance and practical character of the aspiration for the realisation of peace during the world war. The call for the transformation of the imperialist conflict into a civil war does not recognise the impractical character of this objective and its lack of connection with the general aspirations of the people for the attainment of peace. Harding suggests that Lenin was trying to establish the inter-connection of the anti-imperialist revolution with the possibility of socialist revolution in the major capitalist countries: “The anti-imperialist revolution might begin in the colonies, though it could not be consummated there. To the extent that it was successful, it would induce economic and social crises within the imperialist countries. They would then take the path of properly socialist revolution and this, in its turn would greatly radicalise the working masses of the ex-colonial regimes.”(Harding p210) But the problem with this conception of a revolutionary dynamic was that it still underestimated the principled and important character of the demand for peace. Without this aspect the working class of the major capitalist countries would not become radicalised and so realise this conception of a perspective of change. Hence it was quite possible for mass struggles to develop in the oppressed nations without the result being the radicalisation of the workers of the major capitalist countries. Hence there were problems with the revolutionary perspective of Lenin because of important limitations.

Harding contends that after the revolution the increasing practical difficulties of the situation meant that the approach of Lenin’s ‘State and Revolution’, which was based on the concept of the important role of the people in the administration of society became rejected in favour of the absolute rule of the party: “It had Lenin asserts implicitly, been a mistake to identify the substantive content of socialism with administrative patterns catering for maximum public involvement. Socialism, he now concluded, had nothing to do with altering the relationship of power among men, but with transforming their productive relations so that, in the long run, the realm of necessity could be overcome and, with that, genuine social freedom realised. Only under far distant communism would it be possible to transform power relations radically within society and to create the opportunities for universal participation in public administration.” (Harding p159) This tendency towards elitism went together with the justification of an authoritarian political regime and the introduction of one man- management in the economy. These developments were upheld in elitist terms: “The Commune dream of universal participatory democracy would no longer serve. Only the advanced sector of the class, those blessed with knowledge, commitment and experience, were capable of leading the proletariat and administering the state. The finest of the class’s representatives, its disciplined and tested cadres, were the party members. It fell to the party, therefore to exercise the dictatorship on behalf of the class.”(p161) In other words: “It was abundantly clear that the dictatorship of the proletariat could not be exercised by the (non-existent) proletariat. Only the party could assume its historic role and act on the proletariat’s behalf as the governing power in the land.”(p161) Harding concludes that this situation justified the arbitrary power of the party and its unlimited possibility to govern in an authoritarian manner. The result of this situation was the repression of the Kronstadt rebellion of the sailors who attempt to promote the revival of the role of genuine soviet democracy. In other words the Bolshevik led revolution had led to the creation of a regime that justified the conception of socialism in the most elitist terms: “Socialism was defined as the most efficient allocation of capital and labour resources to guarantee maximal efficiency of production. It was not merely agnostic to administrative forms – it had in fact a strong preference for authoritarian one-person direction at every level of industry and of the state. Far from being hidden and apologised for, dictatorial power was of the essence of the proletarian state, and it could not be otherwise.”(p165) In this context there could not be any genuine expression of the role of democracy and instead the only possible was the exercise of the domination of the party. Harding concludes this analysis by claiming: “If the working class has one will, and science one outcome, and if the party is the guardian of the thought process and development of both, then it had to follow that opposition to the party was not only anti-class but also anti-science.”(p169) In these authoritarian terms the absolute rule of the party was being justified.

But this analysis implies that the approach of the Bolsheviks was always elitist, and so no consideration is given to the adverse circumstances of civil war and economic crisis that promoted the realisation of the elite rule of the party. The point is that it can be argued that Lenin’s initial intention was to promote the realisation of the genuine participation of the workers in what would be a democratic organisation of the economy and political structures. However, there was a problem because the political forces opposed to the Bolsheviks did not accept the validity of the process of revolutionary change. This meant there was a polarised situation that undermined the possibility to achieve the acceptance of the creation of a regime based on the political power of the Soviets. Instead the opposition to the Bolsheviks considered that the Constituent Assembly would represent an alternative form of political authority which would not accept the role of the Soviets. This is why the Bolsheviks considered that they had no alternative than to dissolve the Constituent Assembly. But the ultimate outcome of this development was the creation of a one-party regime. But part of the responsibility for this development is with the opposition to the Bolsheviks who could not try to compromise concerning the role of the Soviets. The result of this development was increased political polarisation that ultimately resulted in civil war. In these circumstances the possibility to achieve an agreed development of a democratic system was undermined by this situation of polarisation.

One of the most systematic attempts to defend the political character of the Bolshevik regime was carried out in his work: ‘The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky’ (Collected Works volume 28 p227-325) Lenin contends that Kautsky has both distorted and underestimated the importance of the role of the dictatorship of the proletariat after the overthrow of the capitalist system by the working class. He defines this approach as expressing the view that: “The revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat is rule won and maintained by the use of violence by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, rule that is unrestricted by any laws.”(p 236) But the point is that a regime based primarily on this importance of state coercion cannot sustain itself in any popular and democratic manner. It is necessary to relate the role of the proletarian state to the importance of being politically justified in terms of the realisation of what would be defined as a genuinely democratic political system. The point is that the application of state coercion can only have an exceptional character, and that the major aspect of the maintaining of the rule of the working class requires the democratic consent of the people. In this context the application of state coercion can only be of an exceptional character and so must not undermine the importance of the democratic expression of the hegemony of the working class. The point is that without this aspect the role of the coercion of the state will be ineffective. In this context Lenin seems to be incorrect to criticise Kautsky for suggesting that the role of democracy is important in the creation and sustaining of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Kautsky may be wrong to imply that only the application of the process of the bourgeois election system can result in the formation of a workers government, but this strategic limitation does not mean he is also incorrect to suggest that the stability of this regime requires the important application of the principles of democracy rather than the primary importance of the role of state coercion. Lenin is right to suggest that the Paris Commune should have acted more effectively to oppose the realisation of the possibility of the victory of the process of counterrevolution, but in general the most important aspect in the sustaining of the role of the revolutionary regime is expressed by the exercise of democracy rather than state coercion against the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, the limitations of the character of bourgeois democracy, the fact that it is biased in favour of the interests of the capitalists, does not mean that the revolutionary party of the workers should not try to utilise the role of bourgeois democracy in order to promote the realisation of the transformation of capitalist society into socialism. But instead of this understanding of the possible importance of the role of bourgeois democracy Lenin can only recognise its limitations: “Even in the most democratic bourgeois state the oppressed people at every step encounter the crying contradiction between the formal equality proclaimed by the democracy of the capitalists and the thousands of real limitations and subterfuges which turn the proletarians into wage slaves.”(p246) This may be an aspect of the problems of the role of democracy under capitalism but it also enables workers to organise in collective terms and to promote political objectives. The task is to utilise the advantages of the role of democracy under capitalism in order to facilitate the organisation of the workers to generate the possible realisation of important political objectives. This does not necessarily mean that the importance of democracy will in and of itself create the possibility of the successful realisation of revolutionary change, but the aspect of democracy is an important pre-condition of this development. Hence the actual major limitation of Kautsky is not his emphasis on the role of democracy but instead the failure to relate this aspect to the possibility of the successful realisation of revolutionary change. Therefore, it is the establishment of popular democracy by the workers under capitalism which results in the possibility of the transformation of capitalism into the establishment of a revolutionary government.

But instead of this understanding Lenin seems to imply that democracy only becomes important after the overthrow of the domination of the capitalists: “Proletarian democracy, of which the Soviet government is one of its forms, has brought a development and expansion of democracy unprecedented in the world, for the vast majority of the population, for the exploited and working people.”(p246) The character of bourgeois democracy is to deny the possibility of the workers to be to participate in the organisation of society and the state, but this very aspect of the dynamic involvement of the people in the activity of the state is realised by the supremacy of the revolutionary government: “The Soviets are the direct organisation of the working and exploited people themselves, which helps them to organise and administer their own state in every possible way. And in this it is the vanguard of the working and exploited people, the urban proletariat, that enjoys the advantage of being united by the large enterprises, it is easier for it than for all others to elect and exercise control over those elected. The Soviet form of organisation automatically helps to unite all the working and exploited people around their vanguard, the proletariat.”(p247) Thus the character of the Soviets is that they make the process of elections more democratic and therefore in this manner these organisations are genuinely more accountable to the people and so: “Proletarian democracy is a million times more democratic than any bourgeois democracy; Soviet power is a million times more democratic than the most democratic bourgeois republic.”(p248) But this formal expression of the democratic character of the Soviets cannot gloss over the apparent fact that this situation is increasingly based on the aspect of the political role of a single party, the Bolsheviks. Hence this contention about the democratic content of the Soviets must be based on the assumption that the Bolsheviks have an inherent ability to be able to express the interests of the workers and peasants. Hence the assertion that the Soviets have a democratic character superior to the role of bourgeois democracy is ultimately based on the understanding that this aspect is expressed by the relationship of the party to the interests of the workers and which is realised by the role of the Soviets. But what if it could be shown that the Soviets are merely a formal representation of the dictatorship of the party? However, Lenin tries to ignore the importance of this issue because he considers that the central question of the period immediately after the success of the revolutionary events is the problem of the counterrevolution opposition of the former ruling classes. In this context it is not possible to justify these elements having the vote and instead what is required is the defeat of these forces: “In these circumstances, to assume that in a revolution which is at all profound and serious the issue is simply decided by the relation between the majority and minority is the acme of stupidity, the silliest prejudice of a common liberal, an attempt to deceive the people by concealing from them a well-established historical truth. This historical truth is that in every profound revolution, the prolonged, stubborn and desperate resistance of the exploiters, who for a number of years retain important practical advantages over the exploited, is the rule.”(p253-254) But the point is that this very opposition can be undermined by the role of the political democracy of the Soviet regime. The realisation of a genuine majority for the Marxist parties in the Soviet elections can indicate that the forces of the counterrevolution lack popular legitimacy and that they can only attempt to overthrow the regime by the application of military struggle. Indeed, this very development indicated that the reactionary forces were without genuine political legitimacy. However, Lenin undermines the validity of his standpoint by suggesting that as a matter of principle the exercise of the franchise by the former ruling class should be ended after the revolution: “The indispensable characteristic, the necessary condition of dictatorship is the forcible suppression of the exploiters as a class, and consequently, the infringement of “pure democracy”, i.e., of equality and freedom, in regard to that class.”(p256) In other words: “In which countries, and given what national features of capitalism, democracy for the exploiters will be restricted, (wholly, or in part), infringed upon, is a question of the specific national features of this or that capitalism, of this or that revolution. The theoretical question is different: Is the dictatorship of the proletariat possible without infringing democracy in relation to the exploiting class.”(p256-257) In general terms Lenin considers that the possibility of the role of universal suffrage for the bourgeoisie is not feasible but the problem is that the effective denial of the vote for a section of the population means that the principles of a genuine democratic system have been undermined. If there is a situation in which some people are not able to vote they can feasibly claim that the elections were not valid and representative. Only the effective exercise of a system of competition between rival parties based on a system of the universal franchise can ensure that the revolutionary party is able to claim that it has genuine support for its policies. Lenin would contend that this was the position of Kautsky and so resulted in the rejection of the perspective of the revolutionary transformation of society. But the point is that the Soviets provided the political justification of the revolution because of their democratic character, and the counterrevolution opposition of the reactionary forces indicated that they rejected the importance of the democratic process. However, the supporters of capitalism would claim that the dissolving of the Constituent Assembly indicated the contempt of the Bolsheviks for the role of democracy. Indeed, this was the very view of Kautsky. Therefore, in order to provide justification for the approach of the Bolsheviks, Lenin has to claim that the Soviets are more important than the Constituent Assembly. So, this means that he has to claim that Kautsky denies the necessity for the Soviets to become state organisations: “And so we get an absurdity ….on the one hand, Europe is ripe for socialism, and is heading towards decisive battles between capital and labour; but on the other hand, the combat organisation….the organisation of the proletariat, the vanguard and organiser, the leader of the oppressed, must not be transformed into a state organisation!”(p262) In other words: “To say to the Soviets, fight, but don’t take all state power into your hands, don’t become state organisations – is tantamount to preaching class collaboration and “social peace” between the proletariat and bourgeoisie.”(p263) This viewpoint indicates in an effective manner that Lenin has outlined the inconsistency of the approach of Kautsky. The standpoint that Kautsky has outlined is that he is in favour of the role of the Soviets as defensive organisations of the working class, as expression of the organisation to realise immediate interests within capitalism but he is not supportive of the development of the potential of the Soviets so that they become committed to the objective of the realisation and expression of the political power of the working class. But the question that arises is whether the October revolution expresses the consistent possibility to realise this potential of the Soviets? Lenin is suggesting that Kautsky can only recognise the defensive role of the Soviets under capitalism, or as militant mass organisations of the workers, and so Kautsky denies the revolutionary significance of the Soviets. But the point does Lenin also act in an inconsistent manner with regards to the role of the Soviets because of his effective acceptance of the role of the party as a substitution for the importance of the Soviets in the situation of the post-revolutionary regime? Indeed, can it be argued that the attempt to realise the supremacy of the Soviets as the ultimate expression of the workers state was an unrealistic aim? The point being made is that whilst formally Lenin defended the importance of the role of the Soviets in actuality, he defended the party as being more significant in practice. Hence reference to the supremacy of the Soviets was a convenient fiction that glossed over the actual importance and domination of the party? This was the very point being made by Kautsky, and was an issue that Lenin preferred not to discuss. It could be argued that in theory Lenin made reference to the primary political importance of the role of the Soviets in the post-revolutionary society, but in practice his approach was based on the consolidation of the importance of the party. This contradiction can be resolved if we recognise that in theory Lenin did sincerely advocate the importance of the Soviets, but that in practice what actually occurred was the expression of the domination of the party. This situation did not mean that Soviet democracy was not feasible but that instead because of the polarised political situation the only practical development was the effective realisation of the domination of the party. This did not mean that Soviet democracy was unworkable but instead that in the adverse social conditions it was difficult to realise a functioning political system based on the expression of popular democracy.

On the issue of the dissolving of the Constituent Assembly Lenin considers that the major issue was the rivalry of the Soviets and this alternative parliamentary institution in terms of the issue as to which represented the supreme political authority. The Constituent Assembly is said to represent the interests of the bourgeoisie and so it was necessary to dissolve it in order to maintain and consolidate the newly acquired hegemony of the workers via the role of the Soviets: “To say that the Constituent Assembly should not have been dispersed is tantamount to saying that the fight against the bourgeoisie should not have been fought to a finish, that the bourgeoisie should not have been overthrown and that the proletariat should have made peace with them.”(p270) But this view ignores the fact that the majority party in the Constituent Assembly was the Social Revolutionaries who represented the interests of the peasants, and so the actions of the Bolsheviks could have seriously undermined the consolidation of the proletariat-peasant alliance. The point is that neither the Bolshevik led Soviet’s, nor the Social Revolutionary dominated Constituent Assembly, attempted to realise a policy of negotiated compromise in which the parliamentary institution would have acknowledged the legitimacy of the role of the Soviets. Hence it was the lack of compromise that led to a situation of intransigence and the result was that the dissolving of the Constituent Assembly alienated the peasant supporters of the Social Revolutionaries and led to the failure to establish the political conditions for the creation of an effective worker-peasant alliance. Only the reactionary role of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy in the civil war helped to obtain peasant support for the Soviet regime. The point is that a possibility to develop an alliance of the workers and peasants based on agreement between the Soviets and Constituent Assembly was undermined by the intransigence of the Bolsheviks and Social Revolutionaries. This setback was never properly overcome, and the result was the effective consolidation of the Bolshevik dictatorship. However, this criticism does not mean that Kautsky was correct because he effectively was for replacing the political supremacy of the Soviets with that of the Constituent Assembly. The point is that compromise was required that would have established a possibility of dual power between these two organisations. But the failure to realise this possibility meant that the result could only be the consolidation of the domination of the Bolsheviks via the role of the Soviets. Ultimately the problem was that the Constituent Assembly could not compromise because it failed to accept the legitimacy of the revolutionary process which had led to the power of the Soviets. The reactionary character of the Constituent Assembly meant that a process of accommodation with the Soviets could not be realised. But this development should have meant that the Soviets should have become considered as the most principled expression of the practice of popular democracy within society. But Lenin admits that not only has the votes of the bourgeoisie been ended, but also that restrictions on the role of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries has been introduced. Thus, the Soviets have become the basis of the realisation of the one-party rule of the Bolsheviks. Lenin justifies his approach in the following manner: “The fact that after a year’s “experience” the Soviets have deprived the exploiters of the franchise shows that the Soviets are really organisations of the oppressed and not of social-imperialists and social-pacifists who have sole themselves to the bourgeoisie.”(p279) But the problem with this viewpoint is that what are restrictions on the practice of democracy do nothing to consolidate and strengthen the Soviet regime. Instead they only make the creation of a one party state an inevitability. But the ultimate problem is that the denial of political rights to the bourgeoisie does nothing to promote the effective realisation of genuine democracy which requires the important role of different views and the ability to dissent from the actions of the government. Most importantly the expression of the aims of the workers becomes defined in terms of the role of orthodox opinion and the possibility of different views within the people is undermined and replaced with the unanimous approach of the ruling Marxist party. Only the genuine exchange of different views can enable an effective expression of democracy to be realised. Thus, the actual expression of authentic Soviet democracy requires the possibility of different views within the workers and the population in general. This understanding is being denied by Lenin in the name of the assumption that the role of the Soviet system requires the importance of a unanimous orthodox opinion.

Lenin elaborates his views in his: ‘Theses and Report on Bourgeois Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat’, which was presented to the first congress of the Communist International. (Volume 28 p457-474) He indicates that the capitalist system is connected to the role of a type of democracy which perpetuates the domination of the bourgeoisie, whilst the dictatorship of the proletariat is connected to opposing the reactionary aspirations of the former ruling class and instead consolidates the new system. But this situation also means the strengthening of the role of democracy for the workers and the majority of the population: “And indeed, the form of proletarian dictatorship that has already taken place…..all this implies and presents to the toiling classes, i.e., the vast majority of the population, greater practical opportunities for enjoying democratic rights and liberties than ever existed before, even approximately, in the best and most democratic bourgeois republics.”(p465) But what does this comment mean in terms of the ability of the working people to be able to exercise genuine democratic possibilities in relation to defining the character of the economic and political system? Lenin’s answer is that the role of the Soviet enables the democratic and participatory organisation of the state and economy: “The Soviet organisation of the state suited to the leading role of the proletariat as the class most concentrated and enlightened by capitalism.”(p466) But the problem with this understanding is that it essentially ignores the actual and primary role of the revolutionary party for acting on behalf of the workers organised in the Soviets. The essence of Soviet democracy becomes the domination of the role of the party and this is expressed in terms of the character of the organisation of the activity of the state. But this development is generally not outlined in any systematic manner because instead the illusion of the important and significant aspect of the democratic functioning of the Soviets in the organisation of society has to be promoted. However, there are articles in which Lenin explains the aspects of the character of the government and administration of society. One of them is ‘The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government’ (Collected Works volume 27) which is written in the immediate aftermath of the Brest-Litovsk treaty and the recognition of the possible isolation of the Soviet regime. It is suggested that the role of the workers and peasants is vital if the development of a successful organisation of the state and the economy is to be organised: “In every socialist revolution, however – and consequently in the socialist revolution In Russia which began on October 25, 1917 – the principal task of the proletariat, and of the poor peasants which it leads, is the positive or constructive work of setting up an extremely intricate and delicate system of new organisational relationships extending to the planned production and distribution of the goods required for the existence of tens of millions of people. Such a revolution can be successfully carried out only if the majority of the population, and primarily the majority of working people, engage in independent creative work as makers of history. Only if the proletariat and the poor peasants display sufficient class consciousness, devotion to principle, self-sacrifice and perseverance, will the victory of the socialist revolution be assured. By creating a new, Soviet type of state, which gives the working and oppressed people the chance to take an active part in the independent building up of a new society, we solved only a small part of this difficult problem. The principal difficulty lies in the economic sphere, namely the introduction of the strictest and universal accounting and control of the production and distribution of goods, raising the productivity of labour and socialising production in practice.”(p241) But this perspective is problematical in that it ignores the actual and important role of the party in the process of the economic and political organisation of society. However, Lenin rectifies this apparent omission and goes on to indicate the importance of the role of the party for the organisation of the role of the state and economic activity. The point is that his initial definition of the character of the state and economy as being based on the primary and dynamic role of the workers is implicitly recognised as being an objective which has not been realised. What is accepted is that the important political role of the Bolsheviks in the process of revolutionary transformation is being expressed in the period of the organisation of society in terms of the hegemonic role of this organisation: “We, the Bolshevik Party, have convinced Russia. We have won Russia from the rich for the poor, from the exploiters for the working people.”(p242) Hence it is explicitly being suggested that the role of the Bolsheviks is to act on behalf of the workers and peasants in relation to the task of the construction of socialism: “For the first time in human history a socialist party has managed to complete in the main the conquest of power and the suppression of the exploiters, and has managed to approach directly the task of administration. We must prove worthy executors of this most difficult (and most gratifying) task of the socialist revolution. We must fully realise that in order to administer successfully, beside being able to convince people, beside being able to win a civil war, we must be able to do practical organisational work.”(p242) Therefore the emphasis of Lenin is that the very character of the development of a genuine emancipatory society in which the tasks of the creation of socialism are being expressed in terms of the advance of the realisation of these objectives the role of the party is outlined as being of primary importance. It is effectively admitted that the party acts on behalf of working people in order to facilitate the possibility of the realisation of the development of socialism. But this perspective means that the actual relations between the party and class in this process of change are not outlined in any systematic detail. Instead it is assumed that the party acts in the interests of the workers even if this relationship consists of the party being the senior part and most dynamic component. There is no suggestion that the party cannot act in any other manner than as the expression of the interests of the workers, and so in this manner the emancipatory character of society is being developed because of the principled role of the revolutionary organisation.

But this situation means that the party has to take the initiative and introduce possibly unpopular economic measures such as the role of the bourgeois expert as the manager of the process of production: “Without the guidance of experts in the various fields of knowledge, technology and experience, the transition to socialism will be impossible, because socialism calls for a conscious mass advance to greater productivity of labour compared with capitalism, and on the basis achieved by capitalism.”(p248) Hence it is accepted that the tasks of the development of the socialist character of the economy are too complex to be realised without the importance role of the guidance of bourgeois experts and so the expression of the influence of the trade unions has to be that of a subordinate aspect in this context. The ultimate responsibility for the organisation of the economy will be that of the party and the trade unions merely have an advisory role in that context. But Lenin does not establish the actual possible undermining of the attempt to establish a genuinely participatory type of economic activity as the only plausible basis for the promotion of the aims of the attainment of socialism. Instead it is assumed that the role of the bourgeois specialists will be temporary in relation to the urgent economic requirements of the present situation and that the ultimate result will be the consolidation of a type of economy based on the involvement of the producers in its organisation and development. But what is not anticipated is that what is considered to be a temporary situation will become more permanent because of promotion of the domination of the party over the economy and the relationship of this situation to the increasingly durable role of the bourgeois specialists. There is no effective attempt to promote the possible realisation of the role of workers control of the economy, and so this means that a bureaucratic type of economic relations became consolidated. This serious criticism is not meant to deny the necessity to utilise the role of the bourgeois specialists but instead that this role should have been conceived in terms of the recognition of the temporary aspect of this development and the necessity to continue to promote the possible realisation of workers control of production. The ultimate problem is that it is not possible to envisage the role of the Soviet government without the dominating importance of the party. This character of the administration meant that the workers lacked the effective possibility to influence the role of the process of economic activity. Instead the party could dictate how the economy was to be organised. But what was envisaged to be the temporary measure of the introduction of the dominating role of the bourgeois specialists became a durable expression of the relations of production.

Harding suggests that the adverse circumstances of the serious economic situation, the isolation of the regime and the onset of civil war, are not the major reasons for the increasing elitism of the party regime during the era of Lenin. Instead this outcome was the result of Lenin’s approach: “As we have seen, the Leninist metaphysic of science was, from the first to last, radically at odds with democratic theory or practice. Objective truth, it maintained, was in no way advanced by taking a canvass of public opinion. Since that truth was a single and unique truth procedural means had to be arrived at whereby unanimity of opinion could be guaranteed. The monolithic organisational structure of the party were, in this way, legitimated by the twin axioms that the working class had but one real will in any historical situation, and that science yielded indisputable propositions about all phenomena.”(Harding p170-171) But this generation of dogmatic elitism was not merely the result of the character of Leninism but was instead the outcome of the complex problems of trying to establish a genuine conception of a socialist society in adverse circumstances. It was the problems of a serious economic situation combined with the onset of civil war that meant that this development of elite party rule became effectively inevitable. But Harding considers that this situation was because of the inherent theoretical character of the standpoint of Marx and Lenin: “It was the party that disposed of scientific and objective knowledge. Its analysis of the strivings of the proletariat, was, therefore, privileged over the proletariat’s own awareness of its goals. That there was but one cohesive set of class goals and a single discernible class will was, similarly, axiomatic to both Marxism and Leninism. Both maintained that it was the communists who alone articulated these goals and this will – that was the party’s principal historical role.”(p173) Therefore it was only a logical conclusion for Lenin to suggest that the class could not establish its principal objectives without the important role of the party in their elaboration. Indeed, only the party could indicate the importance and character of the aims of the class, and so the transforming role of the class was inconceivable without the effective directing role of the party. But what this criticism ignores is that without the genuine support of the class for the party the possibility of revolutionary change was inconceivable. In this context the situation in which the party does act on behalf of the class is considered by Lenin to be exceptional. Indeed, the temporary aspect of this development means that the aim of the party is to promote the increasing capacity of the workers to be able to organise society in an increasingly popular character. Therefore, the very aspect of elitism in the approach of Lenin is conditional and considered to be an expression of the urgent aspects of the situation. The major role of the party is to facilitate the workers to be able to organise Soviet society in a democratic and participatory manner.

Lenin develops his approach in these terms in: ‘Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder’ (Collected Works volume 31) Lenin comments: “It is, I think, almost universally realised at present that the Bolsheviks could not have retained power for two and half months, let alone two and half years, without the most rigorous and truly iron discipline in our party, or without the fullest and unreserved support from the entire mass of the working class, that is, from all thinking, honest, devoted and influential elements in it, capable of leading the backward strata or carrying the latter along with them.”(p23) Thus the assumption being made is that the character of the situation after the revolution is that of an inherent close relationship of the party and class. The workers accept that the party is acting in their interests and so this means that the role of the Bolsheviks is being considered to be the expression of the role of a type of government that is genuinely the representation of the political objectives of the workers. In organisational terms there is a distinction of party and class, but they are united in terms of objectives and aspirations. This approach means that the possibility of differences emerging between the party and class are considered to be inconceivable because the revolutionary character of the party is always able to express the genuine interests of the workers. In this manner the effective organisation of the party state is the basis for the promotion of the realisation of the emancipation of the working class. But what happens if the party becomes bureaucratised? This issue only became important to Lenin after 1921. Until that time his general approach was based on the assumption that the revolutionary character of the regime meant that it could satisfactorily express the aspirations of the workers. Such a viewpoint underestimated the importance of adverse social conditions which meant that the Bolshevik government would have to take unpopular decisions that could express the possibility of ignoring the importance of the realisation of the immediate interests of the workers. Obviously, the period of the civil war meant that such questions could be ignored because of the importance of the maintaining of the political unity of party and class in order to oppose the challenges posed by the possibility of counterrevolution. But the end of the civil war meant that the various tensions between party and class became immediately important and so led to an effective expression of opposition by the workers to the domination of the Bolsheviks. But in this work Lenin considers that the relationship of party and class means that such a possibility of discontent is inconceivable. He comments: “In Russia today, the connection between leaders, party, classes and masses, as well as the attitude of the dictatorship of the proletariat and its party to the trade unions, are concretely as follows: the dictatorship is exercised by the proletariat organised in the Soviets; the proletariat is guided by the Communist party of Bolsheviks….No important political or organisational question is decided by any state institution in our republic without the guidance of the Party’s central committee.”(p47-48) It is being admitted that in effective terms the major and most influential organ of administration and government is the role of the Party central committee. It is inconceivable that any political institution like the conference of the Soviets could take a decision that contradicted the policy of this influential organ of the Party. Therefore, Lenin is effectively admitting that the most effective and important expression of the policy of the state is connected to the views and decisions of the Party central committee. Hence the importance of the realisation of the principles of efficiency and organisation are considered to be more vital than the expression of the genuine democratic self-government of the role of the Soviets. Instead it is admitted that the party acts on behalf of the Soviets and the interests of the workers. This does not mean that Lenin is defending a conception of autocratic power because he accepts the importance of a process of democratic interaction between the roles of the party and Soviets, but it assumed that the party will have the dominant role in this situation. It could be argued that such a situation was unavoidable given the adverse political circumstances and that the dominant role of the party would be ended in more favourable circumstances but this is not the position adopted by Lenin who instead seems to assume that he is outlining a conception of the relationship of party and class that is to be of a long term character.

Harding considers that this approach had become consolidated by 1921. He claims that Lenin had developed an unapologetic elitist stance: “All socialist revolutions, Lenin now insisted, would have to go through a ruthlessly dictatorial period in which the party would be obliged to use the full coercive power of the state to put down its internal enemies – even within the working class. It could tolerate no political opposition and ought frankly to declare that, in such a situation of desperate struggle democracy had to be sacrificed. These were the negative coercive aspects of the dictatorship of the proletariat – the utilisation of state power to crush all opposition to socialism.”(Harding p189) This meant in other words: “In 1920-21 Lenin produced a comprehensive re-examination of the socialist project, not only for Russia but for all the emergent communist parties of Europe. The dictatorship of the proletariat exercised by the party, displaced the original version of communist soviet style democracy…..By this time the party had emasculated the trade unions and Lenin saw no larger purpose for them than to act as the ‘transmission belts’ or ‘cogwheels’ through which party and state policy was transmitted to the masses.”(Harding p192) But Lenin’s views on the trade unions as outlined in collected works volume 32 indicated a more complex position than that outlined by Harding.

The development of the understanding of the character and role of the trade unions within the Soviet state was expressed in a debate involving Lenin and Trotsky in 1920. It was argued by Trotsky the trade unions should effectively be integrated into the state to the extent that their independence should be denied. Lenin outlined his position in his article: ‘On the Trade Unions’. He suggested that the character of the trade unions was to be the expression of defence organisations of the working class within the Soviet state: “On the one hand, the trade unions which take in all industrial workers, are an organisation of the ruling dominant, governing class, which has now set up a dictatorship and is exercising coercion through the state. But it is not a state organisation, nor is it one designed for coercion, but for education. It is an organisation designed to draw in and to train; it is, in fact, a school of administration a school of economic management, a school of communism.”(CW 32 On the Trade Unions p20) This would imply that the trade unions have an important role in the development of the ability and possibility for the workers as producers to be directly involved in the organisation and administration of the role of the economy. The trade unions facilitate the development of the economic and political connections between the role of the workers as producers with the activity of the Soviet government that is administered by the party. But he is emphatic that the trade unions are not suitable to become the basis of the governing of society by the working class: “But the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of the class, because in all capitalist countries (and not only over here, in one of the most backward) the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts…..that an organisation taking the whole proletariat cannot directly exercise proletarian dictatorship.”(p21) Thus it is explicitly admitted that the workers do not have the capacity to directly govern and instead the party elite must be the expression of the realisation of this task. The only valid and feasible character of the workers state is one that is economically and politically organised by the role of the revolutionary party that acts on behalf of the overall interests of the people. But Lenin is also aware that this situation could result in differences developing between the actions of the state and the interests of the people as workers and trade unionists. Hence his difference with Trotsky is that he seems to want to ignore this possible contradiction. But he does not seem to outline how these differences should be resolved, nor is he in favour of workers control of production as the basis to organise the economy. Hence, he can only consider the organisation of the workers in trade unions, but what is their role? This point seems to be obscure, except for the vague assumption that they have to defend the interests of the workers in the process of production. But this very task implies the necessity to develop the role of the trade unions as organisers of production. However instead of this conclusion Lenin seems reluctant to define the importance of the trade unions in these terms and instead is more willing to consider that their functions should be limited to the defence of the interests of the workers. But this is the very aspect that trade unions have within the capitalist system and so his understanding of the character of the trade unions under socialism does not seem to have changed in terms of what seems to be a process of the continuation of the functions of these organisations that they have acquired under the capitalist system. Therefore, Lenin is only able to establish the validity of his position by suggesting that Trotsky and Bukharin seem to favour the bureaucratic subordination of the trade unions to the role of the state.

 In his talk to the congress of the miners, Lenin is emphatic that the organisation and character of the state has to be based on the dominant role of the party and not the workers organised in the trade unions: “Does every worker know how to run the state? People working in the practical sphere know that this is not true, that millions of our workers are going through what we always said the trade unions were, namely a school of communism and administration. When they have attended this school for a number of years they will have learned how to administer, but the going is slow. We have not even abolished illiteracy. We know that workers in touch with the peasants are liable to fall for non-proletarian slogans. How many of the workers have been engaged in government? A few thousand throughout Russia and no more. If we say that it is not the party but the trade unions that put up the candidates and administrate, it may sound very democratic and might help us to catch a few votes but not for long. It will b fatal for the dictatorship of the proletariat.” (The second all Russian congress of Miners p61-62) Therefore Lenin is quite emphatic that the workers lack the cultural capacity and organisational skills to administer the state and society. Instead only the party has the ability to be able to function in terms of the control of the state and economy so that it is able to advance the realisation of the aims of socialism. This situation implies that the workers should support this development and be supporters of the organisation of society by the party in order to facilitate the possibility of progress towards the realisation of socialism. Therefore because of this explicitly elitist approach there is a rejection of any suggestion that the trade unions should a type of rival to the party in the organisation of society. Instead the trade unions should have a limited role in the defence of the workers in relation to the policies of the state but they should not in any manner try to aspire to become organisers of the state and the economy, even if they have a role in the management of enterprises.

But does this standpoint mean that the following conclusion of Harding is essentially correct? He comments: “in 1920-21 Lenin produced a comprehensive re-examination of the socialist project, not only for Russia but for all the emerging communist parties of Europe. The dictatorship of the proletariat exercised by the party, displaced the original version of communist soviet-style democracy. Within society at large, politics and democracy had effectively been proscribed. Even within the party it was precisely the inappropriate continuation of debate and theoretical dispute that most exasperated Lenin.”(Harding p192) This view is a dogmatic generalisation that ignores the patience and willingness of Lenin to debate with various critics like Trotsky and Bukharin. It also ignores Lenin’s ultimate willingness to compromise and to introduce the New Economic Policy as a concession to the peasants and the necessity to try and consolidate a genuine approach of the redevelopment of the proletariat-peasant alliance. However instead of recognising this willingness to compromise in the approach of Lenin, Harding’s major conclusion is that Lenin facilitated the ascent of the domination of Stalinism: “Lenin was, in short, complicit in all that made Stalin possible. At every stage (until the very last when it was far too late) Lenin had personally supervised Stalin’s ascent to power within the party and the state and silenced his anxious critics. More significantly he had overseen the liquidation of politics …in the early years of Soviet power, and had approved the elimination of centres of opposition, both within the party and outside of it. The whole logic of both his philosophical position and political disposition inclined towards unanimity of outcomes.”(Harding p262) This seems to be a dogmatic view that ignores the importance of the polarisation generated by civil war and the necessity to impose tough measures to tackle the serious economic crisis. But ultimately Lenin was capable of compromise as indicated by the introduction of the New Economic Policy which led to the revitalisation of capitalism in order to provide food for the cities. It also can be indicated that this situation of the challenges posed by the NEP led Lenin to elaborate a conception of the participation of the workers in the organisation of a socialist society.

This understanding was developed in his article: The Role and Functions of the Trade Unions under the New Economic Policy’ (Collected Works volume 33 p184-196) He outlines how the introduction of the NEP means that aspects of capitalism are being encouraged and so in this situation the role of the trade unions has become more important in terms of the objective of the effective defence of the interests of the workers: “The proletarian state may, without changing its own nature, permit freedom of trade and the development of capitalism within certain bounds, and only on the condition that the state regulates…..private trade and private capitalism. The success of such regulation will depend not only on the state authorities but also, and to a larger extent on the degree of maturity of the proletariat and of the masses of working people generally, on their cultural level, etc. But even if this regulation is completely successful, the antagonism of class interests between labour and capital will certainly remain. Consequently, one of the main tasks that will henceforth confront the trade unions is to protect in every way the class interests of the proletariat in the struggle against capital.”(p185) Therefore it is admitted that the introduction of the NEP will generate the promotion of the role of capitalism and so the defence of the workers by the role of the trade unions acquires increasing importance. In other words, it is accepted that there will be the development of opposing interests between the administrators of the various enterprises who will increasingly recognise the profit motive and on the other hand the objective of the workers will be to uphold their level of wages and the quality of economic conditions: “In view of the urgent need to increase the productivity of labour and make every state enterprise pay its way and show a profit…this circumstance is bound to create a certain conflict of interest in matter concerning labour conditions between the masses of workers and the directors or managers of state enterprises, or the government departments in charge of them. Therefore, as regards the socialised enterprises, it is undoubtedly the duty of the trade unions to protect the interests of the working people, to facilitate as far as possible the improvement of their standard of living, and constantly to correct the blunders and excesses of business organisations resulting from bureaucratic distortions of the state apparatus.”(p186) Therefore it is accepted that the workers will need to effectively defend their interests against both the managers of their enterprises and against the state that might uphold the objectives of the administrators in this situation. Hence it is being admitted that in the given circumstances of the serious character of the economic situation that it is necessary for the managers to promote the most efficient development of production, but this very development means the trade unions have to effectively uphold the interests of the workers. In other words, it is acknowledged that the management of the enterprises may act in a manner that is against the interests of the workers and so the task of the trade unions is to defend them in this situation.

However, this very activity implies that the aim of the defence of the interests of the workers implies the development of the influence of the trade unions in the organisation of the various enterprises. But Lenin in a contradictory manner seems to deny this conclusion. He contends that: “Under these circumstances all direct interference by the trade unions in the management of factories must be regarded as positively harmful and impermissible.”(p189) But on the other hand he also maintains that: “It would be absolutely wrong, however, to interpret this indisputable axiom to mean that the trade unions must play no part in the socialist organisation of industry and in the management of state industry.”(p189) This seems to be a contradictory approach that seems to be uncertain about the exact character of the involvement of the workers in the organisation of the economy. On the one hand it seems that the principle of the importance of the role of the workers in the administration of the economy is rejected as being impractical and unnecessary and on the other hand this very aspect is considered to be important and a vital aspect of the process of the development of the socialist economy. Is Lenin merely confused or undecided about the character of the role of the workers within the socialist economy? The answer to this question and so shows the aspect of consistency in the approach of Lenin is outlined by the fact that he considers that the train unions should have an important role in the process of training people to become managers of industry. Therefore, in this consultative role the trade unions are involved in the process of the organisation and administration of the given enterprises, and in that manner have an involvement and influence in the development of the economy. But this is still a secondary role when compared to the primary role of the various managers in the organisation of production. But in this manner, there is the objective of the realisation of the interaction of the activity of the party, managers and the trade unions. Lenin emphasises this point when he comments: “One of the greatest and most serious dangers that confront the numerically small Communist party, which, as the vanguard of the working class, is guiding a vast country in the process of transition to socialism (for the time being without the direct support of the more advanced countries), is isolation from the masses the danger that the vanguard….fail to maintain firm contact with the whole army of labour, i.e., with the overwhelming majority of workers and peasants…..our work of socialist construction must meet with inevitable disaster if the trade unions – the transmission belts from the Communist party to the masses – are badly fitted or function badly.”(p192) Therefore whilst suggesting that the working class is not yet sufficiently able to directly organise the process of production without the role of the Communist party and the enterprise managers, this does not mean the justification of some form of elitist political system. Instead the trade unions should be effectively involved in the development of the economic and political system. They should express an influence that ensures that the party does not act in an arbitrary and elitist manner. Hence in this manner Lenin outlined what he considered to be the most realistic conception of how the development of socialism could be realised in economic terms. This was not a justification of elitism because he considered that the situation of the immediate primary role of the party and the specialists was temporary. The ultimate aim was to facilitate the ability of the workers to be able to organise the economy. However, Lenin in one of his last articles’ ‘Better Fewer, but Better’ indicated how the bureaucratisation of the state apparatus was undermining the realisation of these objectives. Hence, he was aware of the corrupting character of the exercise of monopoly political power by the party. But he did not really have any credible perspective to resolve this problem because it was connected to the isolation of the Bolshevik regime caused by the lack of development of international revolution. In this context Lenin’s conception of the interaction of party, trade unions and the specialists in order to create a progressive socialist economy did not have favourable possibilities for the realisation of these objectives. Therefore, the major limitation of Lenin was not his supposed elitism as Harding claims, but instead the unfavourable situation in which the Soviet regime had to function. Under the adverse circumstances Lenin was proposing a feasible programme of action that was aiming to establish the capacity of the workers to administer the economy. Presumably the successful realisation of this aim could have meant that the political system of Soviet democracy could have been revitalised. But the advent of the Stalin regime undermined the realisation of these possibilities. But Harding ignores these possibilities of Lenin’s regime and instead emphasises his supposed connection to the authoritarianism of Stalin.

Harding considers that Leninism was an authoritarian and omnipotent doctrine that justified the views of Lenin as being the only principled understanding of the revolutionary character of Marxism. Ultimately Lenin was a technocrat who had no patience with the role of politics: “Leninism, was, indeed hostile not only to democracy but also to politics; and science was to be the antidote to both.”(Harding p275) But, as we have tried to indicate the revolutionary politics of Lenin had to be influenced by the adverse circumstances in which the Soviet regime was established in Russia. This meant that principles of Soviet democracy and workers control of production had to become modified and ultimately undermined by the difficulties of the situation. But despite these limitations Lenin tried to reconcile the importance of pragmatic policies with the aim of the creation of an emancipatory society based on the application of the initiative of the workers. In this context he made serious mistakes, but he ultimately motivated by the combined aims of the promotion of international revolution and the creation of a socialist society in Russia and the other republics. It was the regime of Stalin which undermined and rejected the realisation of these aims. In a sense Lenin was an elitist but this was because he considered that the role of the party was important for the creation of socialism. In this context he was not opposed to the role of the democratic initiative of the worker’s but he considered that this very aspect could be most effectively realised in terms of the application of the important leadership role of the revolutionary party. The role of the party was to promote the possibility of the ability of the workers to be able to express their initiative to facilitate the creation of socialism. He could not consider the possibility that the party could become the very obstacle to the realisation of this objective. Only in his last writings did he acquire the understanding that a section of the party elite was undermining the advance of the realisation of genuine socialism. Therefore, whatever the faults of Lenin he was not responsible for Stalinism. In other words, we have to reject Harding’s conclusion that Leninism was the basis for the creation of Stalinism.