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Stalin's Organic Theory of the Party

ERIK VAN REE

When Joseph Stalin established his rule in the late 1920s, he introduced a new regime into the party. It included the obligation for the members to repent. They were obliged publicly to admit their "mistakes" and acknowledge the "correctness" of Stalin's general line. On 26 October 1926 the principle was officially laid down when a joint plenum of the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission accepted theses written by the general secretary for the Fifteenth Party Conference. They defined one of the tasks of the party as "trying to make the opposition bloc admit that their views are wrong."¹

Party members learned of their new duty to retract deviating opinions at the Fifteenth Party Congress in December 1927. In his political report of 3 December, Stalin demanded that the opposition "disarm fully and completely, ideologically and organizationally." It had "to take back its anti-Leninist views openly and honestly, in front of the whole world."² When Lev Kamenev argued that to demand such retraction was not part of the Bolshevik tradition, Stalin mentioned the expulsion of G. I. Miasnikov in 1922 for his "anti-Leninist views," stating a fact true in itself but not proving the point under discussion.³ The demand to retract opinions was part of a "mystical" interpretation of party unity. Rather than mere obedience, it aimed at the complete, psychological submersion of the individual party member in the larger collective.

During the Sixteenth Party Congress in July 1930, Stalin accused M. P. Tomsky of having missed "the opportunity to expiate his sins" at a conference in Tbilisi shortly before by not saying a word about "his opportunist work" in the trade unions. He demanded that they "break finally with their past, rearm themselves and *merge*

The author wishes to thank Rolf Binner, Meindert Fennema, Marc Jansen, Arno Langelier, Bruno Naarden, and Leo van Rossum for their critical comments and assistance.

¹ I. V. Stalin, *Sochineniia*, vol. 8 (Moscow, 1948), 233.

² *Ibid.*, 10:351.

³ For the Miasnikov affair see Paul Avrich, "Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin: G. T. Miasnikov and the Workers' Group," *Russian Review* 43 (January 1984): 1-29.

into one with the [Central Committee] of our party" in its struggle.⁴ Stalin abhorred not only the expression of fundamental differences of opinion but even their very existence. A. A. Epishev, deputy minister of state security from 1951 to 1953, recalled an aphorism of Stalin's that L. P. Beria used to quote: "Not only he who commits sabotage is an enemy of the people, but also he who doubts the correctness of the party line."⁵ Some other party leaders, even oppositionists, shared Stalin's mystical interpretation of party unity, thereby contributing to their opponent's success in the power struggle. In *Pravda* of 30 October 1927, A. M. Kollontai argued that the lack of support for the opposition among the party masses was the result of a new form of "collectivist thinking" which interpreted discipline as "merging one's will with the will of the collective body." In 1928 another prominent party leader who had won his spurs in the opposition, G. L. Piatakov, said to a friend referring to his own "capitulation" that the communist party was "a miracle" which was "always extending the realm of the possible until nothing becomes impossible." For such a party a true Bolshevik "will readily cast out from his mind ideas in which he has believed for years." To become one with the party "he would fuse himself with it, abandon his own personality, so that there was no particle left inside him which was not at one with the party."⁶

In this article I want to discuss the origins of Stalin's mystical interpretation of party unity. I will argue that it developed from a biological theory of the party. Stalin operated with an image of the party as a living organism endowed with only one will.⁷ Enforced identity of thought among the members was then the natural state of affairs.

THE ORTHODOX TRADITION

There is an unmistakable parallel between Stalin's mystical concept of unity and that of the Orthodox church. The practice of forcing dissidents to repent publicly is strongly reminiscent of the old treatment of heretics by the church. The Orthodox bishop Timothy Ware writes that his church rules out any diversity in matters of fundamental doctrine. The tradition must be accepted "*as a whole*" by all.⁸ This strictness is rooted in a mystical concept of unity: all church members and institutions are considered to be completely united because one and the same Holy Spirit is present in them. An ecumenical council of bishops is therefore considered infallible. The bishops are said to agree among themselves because the Holy Spirit, present in each of them separately, creates in them all a "common mind."⁹

One of the first to attribute the peculiarities of Stalinist dogmatism to the influ-

⁴ Stalin, *Sochineniia* 13:11, 16 (emphasis added).

⁵ Dmitrii A. Volkogonov, *Triumfi i tragediia. Politicheskii portret I. V. Stalina*, book 1, pt. 2 (Moscow, 1989), 202.

⁶ Quoted in Leonard Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (New York, 1971), 384–85.

⁷ Perhaps the first to point at Stalin's "biological metaphor" was Robert Daniels. He noted that Stalin saw party unity as "an organic whole" (*The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia* [Cambridge, MA, 1960], 305).

⁸ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Harmondsworth, 1983), 319.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 245, 252.

ence of Orthodoxy was Issac Deutscher, who saw Stalinism as a mixture of "Marxism, the product of western European thought" and the "Byzantine tradition, so deeply engrained in Russia." He added that it was perhaps natural that a man who had spent his formative years in an Orthodox seminary as Stalin had should be the foremost agent of the fusion process.¹⁰ Scholars with as widely divergent views as Nikolai Berdiaev and Isaiah Berlin described the messianic quality of the Russian socialist movement. The prerevolutionary socialist intelligentsia looked upon itself as a kind of secular priesthood, spreading its own gospel in order to uplift the downtrodden masses.¹¹ Robert Tucker later called attention to the fact that Stalin used terms such as "holy of holies" and "order of swordbearers" when describing the party. Tucker suggested that Stalin regarded party membership as "something like belonging to the priesthood of a revolutionary church."¹²

Unfortunately there exists virtually no evidence that Stalin was inspired by the example of how the church handled its dissidents, though the little information available about Soso Dzhughashvili's youth suggests strong Orthodox marks on his thinking. His mother was Orthodox. When he was three or four years old his family may have moved into the house of an Orthodox priest, where the mother worked as a servant. He attended ecclesiastical elementary school in Gori and the Tbilisi seminary.¹³ We can be certain that a man with this background must have been reasonably well versed in the Bible and church doctrine. This is indirectly confirmed by the numerous biblical expressions scattered throughout Stalin's works. The only real evidence of Christianity in his writings is the phrase: "Great is the providence of the Almighty," in a poem he published in 1895, "To the Moon."¹⁴

The basis of the collective mysticism of the church is, nevertheless, relevant to our purpose because ecclesiastical doctrine provided the first "organizational theory" to which Dzhughashvili was exposed. Most relevant in this respect are Paul's letters in the New Testament. The apostle was preoccupied with the idea of creating one church uniting Jews and gentiles, without internal squabbles. In his first epistle to the Corinthians he beseeched his brothers in the church "that all of you agree

¹⁰ Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin. A Political Biography*, 2d ed. (1949; London, 1967), 269–70.

¹¹ See Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (London, 1937); and Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (London, 1978).

¹² Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879–1929. A Study in History and Personality* (New York, 1973), 129–30. In July 1921 Stalin wrote a draft for an article called "On the Political Strategy and Tactic of the Russian Communists," which contained the following well-known definition: "The communist party as a kind of order of swordbearers [*orden mechenostsev*] within the Soviet state, directing the organs of the latter and inspiring its activity" (Stalin, *Sochineniia* 5:71). The order of swordbearers (the *Schwertbrüder*) was founded in 1202 by Albert, bishop of Livonia. These *Fratres militiae Christi* were an order of crusading monks, wearing white cloaks with the image of the cross supported by a red sword (Erich Dusterwald, *Studien zur politischen Geschichte des Deutschen Ritterordens* [Sankt Augustin, 1973]). By comparing the party to this order Stalin compared it to an organization of the church. It is interesting to note that the brothers took the three-fold monk's vow of poverty, chastity, and "to deny themselves to have a will of their own" (*Entsagung des eigenen Willens*); that is, "obedience until death" (P. Marjan Tumler, *Der Deutsche Orden im Werden, Wachsen und Wirken bis 1400 mit einem Abriss der Geschichte des Ordens von 1400 bis zur neuesten Zeit* [Vienna, 1955], 369).

¹³ See Robert H. McNeal, *Stalin. Man and Ruler* (London, 1988); and Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary*.

¹⁴ Quoted in Robert Payne, *The Rise and Fall of Stalin* (London, 1966), 48.

with one another so that there may be no division among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought." Later in the epistle he developed his concept of church unity. "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one spirit to drink." Further on in the letter he added explicitly: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one is part of it."¹⁵ In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul expressed the hope that the church members would "in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work."¹⁶

Paul's concept of the church was of an essentially biological nature. The church was a *body* with *one mind* (spirit), the *corpus Christi mysticum*, a concept that is fundamental to Orthodoxy.¹⁷ There is no evidence that Stalin consciously emulated it or even liked it. This is even improbable because of the hostility to religion that he developed. It must, however, have made him familiar with thinking about organizations in terms of living organisms.

DARWINIST MARXISM

Organic metaphors in describing human affairs became popular throughout Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. Such scholars as Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Ernst Haeckel, and Herbert Spencer contributed to this trend, but Charles Darwin made an especially powerful impression on the learned public. Soso "Koba" Dzhugashvili, who became a member of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party (RSDWP) in 1898, had been an avid reader at the seminary. He and his comrades read not only Marx and Russian Marxists but also Darwin.¹⁸

"Biologism" is a flexible doctrine that can be made to serve various purposes. Liberal capitalism can point to the "survival of the fittest" for support of its doctrine of competition. Conservatives find support for their notion of a stable social hierarchy in the structure of the zoological organism. The theoreticians of the Second International, of which the RSDWP was a part, were not immune either to the fascination of Darwinism that had so fundamentally challenged religion and therefore seemed to support their materialist philosophy.

In his two major philosophical works, *Herrn Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft* (1877–78) and *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie* (1886), Friedrich Engels expounded his natural philosophy.¹⁹ These two works were probably his most influential among the Russian Marxists, and Dzhugashvili read them.²⁰ The founding co-father of Marxism criticized the old

¹⁵ I Corinthians 1:10; 12, 13, 27 (according to the New International Version).

¹⁶ Ephesians 4:12–16.

¹⁷ Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 243f.

¹⁸ Joseph Iremaschwili, *Stalin und die Tragödie Georgiens* (Berlin, 1932), 20.

¹⁹ Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels. *Werke*, vol. 20 (Berlin, 1962), 1–303; *ibid.*, 21:259–307.

²⁰ Both G. V. Plekhanov (*Osnovnye voprosy marksizma* [St. Petersburg, 1908], 4) and Lenin ("Materializm i empiriokrititsizm. Kriticheskie zametki ob odnoi reaktsionnoi filosofii," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., vol. 18 [Moscow, 1961], 35 [hereafter PSS] [the work appeared in 1909]) mention the

materialism, which he called "metaphysical" or "mechanical." The universe, be it inorganic, organic, or human, was "dialectical," which meant basically that all its parts were mutually connected and in a state of constant, contradictory evolution. Engels admired Darwin for having shown this to be true in organic nature. By this analysis the self-taught philosopher may have encouraged a biological interpretation of human society, but he did not adhere to that himself. He preferred a strictly economic approach to social analysis.

One of his disciples, Karl Kautsky (1854–1938), was bolder in this respect. The philosophy of this major leader of the Second International has been analyzed as a hybrid of Marxism and Darwinism.²¹ In 1883–84 he published two articles in which he maintained that cooperation, not mutual strife, is the natural state of humans (and animals) in society. Society *as such* is a weapon in the struggle for the Darwinist survival of the fittest against nature.²² The articles were translated into Russian in 1903 as part of a compilation of Kautsky articles.²³ In another article in the compilation he pointed out that human society sometimes resembles "a living organism" or "a united economic organism." This was the case in primitive, undifferentiated societies or during the process of centralization and division of labor in the formation of modern nations.²⁴

Kautsky's great breakthrough in this respect came with *Ethik und materialistische Geschichtsauffassung*, published in 1906. In this major work the Darwinist struggle for existence of "organisms" was the central theme, from which Kautsky deduced his system of ethics. "The essence of an organism is division of labor as well as purposefulness," and Kautsky declared human society to be an organism in its highest form, though one in which the "organs" are "individuals with a movement and a consciousness of their own." The purposefulness of the social organism is retained when specially appointed functionaries "subject the social forces to a united will [*ein einheitlicher Wille*]." The more united the will, the more effectively society competes against nature in the struggle for existence.²⁵ The author suggested that the division of society into classes shatters the united will and therefore the strength of the social organism, perhaps its very character as an organism. This work was translated into Russian in 1906.²⁶

two works as basic to their understanding of Engels's philosophy. The two works were also among the few writings of Engels that Dzhughashvili discussed in "Anarchism or socialism?" (1906) (Stalin, *Sochineniia* 1:294–392).

²¹ See Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution, 1880–1938* (London, 1979), 23f.; and Hans-Josef Steinberg, *Sozialismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie. Zur Ideologie der Partei vor dem I. Weltkrieg* (Hannover, 1967), 43f.

²² Karl Kautsky, "Die sozialen Triebe in der Tierwelt," *Die Neue Zeit*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart, 1883), 20–27, 67–73; idem, "Die sozialen Triebe in der Menschenwelt," *Die Neue Zeit*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart, 1884), 13–19, 49–59, 118–25.

²³ See Werner Blumenberg, *Karl Kautskys literarisches Werk. Eine bibliografische Übersicht* ('s-Gravenhage, 1960), 32, 34.

²⁴ "Die moderne Nationalität," *Die Neue Zeit* vol. 5 (Stuttgart, 1887), 392–405, 442–51, (399, 402, 443). See also Blumenberg, *Karl Kautskys literarisches Werk*, 40. For an analysis of social revolution as the birth of a new social "united organism, of which the organs must cooperate," see Kautsky, *Die Soziale Revolution*, vol. 1, *Sozialreform und soziale Revolution* (Berlin, 1911), 13–14. The work, originally published in 1902, was translated into Russian in 1903 (Blumenberg, *Karl Kautskys literarisches Werk*, 64).

²⁵ Karl Kautsky, *Ethik und materialistische Geschichtsauffassung* (Berlin, 1980), 45, 60–61.

²⁶ Blumenberg, *Karl Kautskys literarisches Werk*, 75.

Though all Marxists shared an admiration for Darwin, not all followed the sociobiological trend. The father of Russian Marxism, G. V. Plekhanov, did not. In his influential work, *On the Question of the Development of the Monistic View of History* (1895), Plekhanov warned against "the misuse of biological analogies," which picture individuals as "just organs of a social body." Plekhanov believed that such a physiological image led to idealistic and utopian conclusions.²⁷ Plekhanov followed the more orthodox economic approach. So did V. I. Lenin, who was philosophically close to him. But Bolshevism as such was not immune; the faction of the RSDWP which arose in 1903 was not monolithically "Leninist." Lenin's most important associate and rival was the physician Aleksandr Bogdanov (1873–1928). Bogdanov became a member of the Bolshevik center in Russia, the Bureau of the Committees of the Majority, in 1904.²⁸ By that time he was already a well-known publicist.

Bogdanov's philosophy, as it was influenced by (among others) the Austrian physicist Ernst Mach (1838–1916), was an all-round one and need not be discussed in its entirety.²⁹ Some aspects of it are relevant, however, because Bogdanov was the best-known adherent to the Darwinist trend in Russian Marxism. In his first important philosophical work, *Osnovnye elementy istoricheskogo vzgliada na prirodu* (1899), he developed a monistic philosophy of the universe, based on the concept of energy in its various forms. "The development of society," he argued, was a "biological development, the growth of the viability of society." Time and again new phenomena arise in society—be they technologies or ideas, individuals or groups. These "social forms are a particular kind of biological forms of adaptation." The "law of selection" determines which social forms survive and which perish. Thus society develops.³⁰

In his later works Bogdanov elaborated on this theme. In 1902 he noted that society, like an organism, is a "form of life," but did not necessarily form an "organic unity." "In many cases society acts like a complicated complex of relatively independent life forms."³¹ Nevertheless, a *simple* society was characterized by "the homogeneity [*tseľnost'*] of an undifferentiated embryo, of a lower organism."³² In an important article from 1904 he asserted that individual personalities did not yet exist in such undifferentiated societies; there was no "I" as a center of separate interests and strivings." With the advent of capitalist individualism, however, people became

²⁷ G. V. Plekhanov (N. Bel'tov), *K voprosu o razvitií monisticheskogo vzgliada na istoriiu* (Leningrad, 1938), 39. In 1897 he repeated his sharp criticism of the Darwinist interpretation of society in *O materialisticheskome ponimanií istorii* (Moscow, 1948), chap. 4.

²⁸ P. N. Pospelov et al., eds., *Istoríia kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuza*, vol. 1, *Sozdanie bol'shevistskoi partii. 1883–1903 gg.* (Moscow, 1964), 514–15.

²⁹ See Dietrich Grille, *Lenins Rivale. Bogdanov und seine Philosophie* (Köln, 1966); Krisztina Mániche-Gyöngyösy, "Proletarische Wissenschaft" und "sozialistische Menschheits-religion" als Modell proletarischer Kultur. Zur linksbolschewistischen Revolutionstheorie A. A. Bogdanovs und A. V. Lunacharskijs (Berlin, 1982); Robert Williams, *The Other Bolsheviks: Lenin and His Critics, 1904–1914* (Bloomington, IN, 1986); and Zenovia A. Sochor, *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy* (Ithaca, 1988).

³⁰ A. Bogdanov, *Osnovnye elementy istoricheskogo vzgliada na prirodu. Priroda-Zhizn'-Psikhika-Obshchestvo* (St. Petersburg, 1899), 149–73.

³¹ A. Bogdanov, *Iz psikhologii obshchestva (Stat'i 1901–1904g.)* (St. Petersburg, 1904), 38, 48.

³² *Ibid.*, 98–99.

"separated organs of one organism." But now, the author added hopefully, a period of renewed "collectivization of mankind" was about to begin.³³ Elsewhere he revealed that this would entail the complete "merger of individual lives into one grand whole."³⁴ Individuals would again become like "cells in the system of the tissues of an organism."³⁵

In the early years of the century, then, a powerful Marxist tradition had developed in which human society was interpreted in organic terms. Plekhanov and Lenin had no part in it, but its followers were influential. The biological theories of Kautsky and Bogdanov, both available in Russian, implied the dissolution of the individual will into one "united," collective will.

PHILOSOPHY

In political terms Bogdanov's "collectivism" was even more radical than Lenin's authoritarianism. The two men made a marriage of convenience against the Mensheviks. Their important philosophical differences could be contained only as long as they traveled on the same political track, and when Bogdanov opposed a continuation of Bolshevik participation in the State Duma in 1908, Lenin became his enemy. Lenin's polemical study *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* (1909) was directly provoked by a publication that Bogdanov, A. V. Lunacharskii and others had written in 1908, but it also heavily attacked Bogdanov's three-volume *Empiriomonizm* (1904–06), particularly his theory of knowledge.³⁶

In my interpretation, the difference between Lenin and Bogdanov was a variation on the old difference in European philosophy as expressed in the positions of Spinoza and Descartes. According to Spinoza's monism, there existed one universal substance with two attributes: extension and the power of thought. "Matter" was the outside aspect of substance, as "mind" was its "inside." Bogdanov was always searching for a monistic principle. He thought he found it in Mach's philosophy, according to which "experience," whether sensual or introspective, was the one basic principle. There was no fundamental difference between mind and matter. Lenin, though, was so preoccupied with the primacy of matter over mind that he refused to say much more about mind than that it was secondary. Implicitly he made it into something fundamentally different from matter. In that sense he represented the dualistic Cartesian position of two substances.

In the early years of the century the German tanner-philosopher, Joseph Dietzgen (1828–88), a friend of Karl Marx, was rediscovered in Russia and Germany itself. In the foreword to his *Ethik*, Kautsky highly praised Dietzgen by putting him on a par with Marx and Engels.³⁷ By 1906 interest in his writings had grown enough to justify a Russian translation of *Das Akquisit der Philosophie* (1895).³⁸ Starting in

³³ A. Bogdanov, "Sobiranie cheloveka," *Pravda*, April 1904, pp. 158–75 (162, 167–68).

³⁴ Bogdanov, *Iz psikhologii*, 6.

³⁵ A. Bogdanov, "Ideal poznaniia," in *Empiriomonizm. Stat'i po filosofii*, book 1 (Moscow, 1905), 5–62 (48). The article was originally published in 1903.

³⁶ *Ocherki po filosofii marksizma. Filosofskii sbornik* (St. Petersburg, 1908).

³⁷ Kautsky, *Ethik*, v.

³⁸ Iosif Ditsgen, *Zavoevaniia (Akvizit) filosofii i pis'ma o logike; spetsial'no demokraticeskaiia proletarskaia logika* (St. Petersburg, 1906).

1907, the Bolshevik dentist P. G. Dauge translated and edited some other works on and by Dietzgen.³⁹ Dietzgen became famous for expressing the hope that socialism would develop into a new secular religion.⁴⁰ Actually, his lifelong preoccupation was the relationship between mind and matter. In the *Akquisit* he noted, as he had before, that knowledge itself was "material." "Mind and matter are two varieties of *one* substance [*Stoff*]." He described his position as "nature monism," nature being the one substance.⁴¹

Lenin critically read through a compilation of Dietzgen's most important writings, *Kleinere philosophische Schriften. Eine Auswahl* (1903).⁴² Despite important differences, the philosophies of Bogdanov and Dietzgen were related in that they both denied the fundamental difference between mind and matter, reducing them to one principle. Marx had highly praised Dietzgen, so Lenin could not very well put him on a par with Bogdanov, but in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* he sharply criticized the idea of mind as a form of matter and the concept of "nature monism."⁴³ So did Plekhanov in 1907, disparagingly noting the similarities between Dietzgen and Bogdanov.⁴⁴ But Koba Dzhughashvili did not.

In May 1908, while confined to jail in Baku, Koba Dzhughashvili received a letter from Switzerland from the Bolshevik M. G. Tskhakaia, who proposed following the political tactics of the Bogdanov faction. In July, Dzhughashvili replied that the philosophical debate was merely a "tempest in a teapot," partly caused by "the self-love of different 'I's.'" He added that though empiriocriticism was unacceptable, he considered Mach and Avenarius "men of science" comparable to Holbach and Hegel.⁴⁵ In addition he proposed developing dialectical materialism "in the spirit of J. Dietzgen, assimilating on the way the good sides of 'Machism.'"⁴⁶

Some time after the appearance of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, Dzhughashvili wrote to M. Toroshelidze in Geneva that Lenin's book was a unique "compendium of the theses of the philosophy [*gnoseology*] of materialism." But he also added that a "new book" by Bogdanov "pins down very strikingly and correctly some *particular* blunders of Il'ich. It also correctly refers to the fact that Il'ich's materialism differs in many respects from Plekhanov's, and that Il'ich, contrary to the demands of logic (for diplomatic reasons?), tries to cover that up."⁴⁷ The most likely candidate for Bogdanov's "new book" is *Vera i nauka*, which appeared in 1910 as a response

³⁹ See Lenin, *PSS* 18:474. Dauge also translated the *Akquisit*.

⁴⁰ See Joseph Dietzgen, "Die Religion der Sozialdemokratie," in *Schriften in drei Bänden*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1961), 182–267.

⁴¹ Dietzgen, *Schriften* 3:225, 231, 238.

⁴² See Lenin, *PSS* 29:365–454.

⁴³ Ibid., 18:256–63.

⁴⁴ G. Plekhanov, "Iosif Ditsgen," in *Sovremennyi mir*, 1907, no. 7:59–75.

⁴⁵ Richard Avenarius (1843–96) was a German philosopher with ideas similar to those of Ernst Mach.

⁴⁶ See P. N. Pospelov et al., eds., *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin. Biografiia* (Moscow, 1963), 179–80; S. G. Shaumian, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 1 1902–1914 gg. (Moscow, 1978), 266, 485n.; and I. Dubinskii-Mukhadze, *Ordzhonikidze* (Moscow, 1963), 93n.

⁴⁷ Dubinskii-Mukhadze, *Shaumian* (Moscow, 1965), 156–57n.

to *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. It said that Lenin operated with a different notion of the "*Ding an sich*" than Plekhanov but refused to admit it.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, Bogdanov listed many of Lenin's "blunders," and because only fragments of Dzhugashvili's letters to Tskhakhia and Toroshelidze were published, we have no way of knowing which "blunders" Dzhugashvili referred to, nor can we reconstruct his own philosophical position on their basis alone. Fortunately, in 1906, Dzhugashvili had written "Anarchism or Socialism."⁴⁹ He proclaimed himself a follower of monistic materialism and explicitly attacked "idealism" and "dualism." His basic position, that "consciousness and being, mind and matter, are two different forms of one and the same phenomenon which is generally called nature," was not exactly the same as Dietzgen's position, which tended to call mind "material."⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Dzhugashvili's version of nature monism was close to Dietzgen's. It was definitely un-"Leninist" to call matter a form of something more basic—nature.⁵¹

Dzhugashvili shared Lenin's materialist notion that the world "outside" undoubtedly existed; he did not accept empiriocriticism's agnostic neutrality about what lay behind experience. Because he did share Bogdanov's monistic temperament, however—the hope that mind and matter could be reduced to one and the same principle—a form of nature monism was the ideal compromise. We cannot know whether Dzhugashvili reached this position on his own or through (perhaps indirectly) his acquaintance with Dietzgen's work. But their philosophical closeness explains what Dzhugashvili meant in his letter of July 1908 when he positively referred to the German thinker. In this philosophical debate Dzhugashvili took a position midway between Lenin and Bogdanov. "Nature" was his most fundamental concept.

THE PARTY AS A LIVING ORGANISM

The first article that Dzhugashvili wrote about the party after Bolshevism emerged was a note on the controversy with Martov about the party constitution. For Dzhugashvili, the party was "not a coincidental accumulation of individuals, but a closed [*splochnaia*] centralized organization." He further noted that the "unity of views" was "the very basis upon which our party is built. . . . If the unity of views falls apart, then the party falls apart." He therefore concluded that only he who "completely accepts" these views may enter the party. Only he who "considers it his duty to *merge [slit'] his wishes with the wishes of the party* and to act jointly with the party" could become a member.⁵²

In an explanatory footnote Dzhugashvili stated that he considered the party to be a "complex organism (consisting) of a great number of very simple organisms,"

⁴⁸ A. Bogdanov, *Padenie velikogo fetishizma (Sovremennyi krizis ideologii). Vera i nauka (o knige V. Il'ina "Materializm i empiriokrititsizm")* (Moscow, 1910), 163ff., esp. 171.

⁴⁹ It was published in two slightly different versions. See Stalin, *Sochineniia* 1:412–13.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 383, 385.

⁵¹ This has been pointed out in somewhat different terms by Kenneth Neill Cameron, *Stalin: Man of Contradiction* (Stevenage, Herts, 1989), 150.

⁵² Stalin, *Sochineniia* 1:64, 66 (emphasis added). "The Class of the Proletarians and the Party of the Proletarians" was published on 1 January 1905.

the simpler organisms being the party organizations, led by the Central Committee according to one plan.⁵³ The young social-democrat had a very high opinion of the party. He saw it as a sacred institution: accepting twaddlers into it would mean the "desecration of the party holy of holies."⁵⁴ This view infused Dzhugashvili's analysis of the ultimate cause of the split with the Mensheviks. It was not so much a matter of real differences as of personal arrogance toward the sacred party. When the Second Party Congress had decided not to reelect Aksel'rod, Potresov, and Zasulich to the *Iskra* board, these leaders felt hurt. They were not prepared to "submit to the will of the party." They did not "submit their 'I's to our sacred cause."⁵⁵ That was all there was to it.

Dzhugashvili elaborated upon his ideas of what the RSDWP ideally should become during the difficult years after the failure of the 1905 Revolution, when the party came under severe pressure from the police, lost most of its members, and was in danger of falling apart. In August 1909, *Bakinskii Proletarii* published "The Crisis in the Party and Our Tasks," in which Dzhugashvili regretted the fact that the party had lost its connections with the masses. The various party organizations also had lost contact with one another. The result, Dzhugashvili lamented, was that there was no longer a "united party, leading one common life." He proposed establishing a new central newspaper, to be published in Russia, that would provide the necessary backbone to the RSDWP and transform it into one "united organism."⁵⁶

These articles contain Dzhugashvili's early ideas of what a social-democratic party ought to be like. The contours are vague because the author is brief in style, but they become illuminated once we see them against the background of Lenin's ideas on the one hand and those held by Bogdanov on the other. Dzhugashvili accepted Lenin's extreme interpretation of the vanguard party. He did not follow the "collectivists" in their half-hearted flirtation with the idea of the autonomous liberation of the working masses. By giving the party a "sacred" touch he went even further than Lenin in glorifying it. On the other hand, he interpreted the party in biological terms strongly reminiscent of the way Bogdanov discussed mankind at large: the party was a complex "organism" into which the member's "I" must merge in order to build an organization with one completely unified will. Dzhugashvili's concept was "party-ized" Bogdanovism.⁵⁷

⁵³ Ibid., 66n.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 123, 129.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 2:147, 149.

⁵⁷ Dzhugashvili shared Bogdanov's idea that the "I" should merge itself beyond recognition in a larger collective; the party in the case of the former, future mankind in the case of the latter. In both cases this idea was connected to their philosophical system. Bogdanov adopted Mach's system in which there was no fundamental distinction between the inner, psychological reality (the "I") and the outer world, both were forms of experience. Bogdanov tended to dissolve the "I" into the world at large as only one particular bundle of experiences. Dzhugashvili went even further when he stated in *Anarchism or Socialism*, that "Our 'I' exists only insofar as the outer conditions, which cause impressions in our 'I,' exist" (Stalin, *Sochineniia* 1:318). The idea of the "I" dissolving into a grand whole, like a drop into the ocean, parallels the Buddhist Nirvana. Buddhism also teaches that the "I" is basically no more than a complex of sensations. According to Williams, Mach was indeed influenced by Buddhism (*The Other Bolsheviks*, 44). Williams (p. 4) also pointed at Stalin's fatal "fusion of two traditions, authoritarian individualism [as represented by Lenin] and self-sacrificing collectivism [as represented by Bogdanov]."

After Bogdanov was excluded from the Bolshevik faction in June 1909 and Lenin secured unchallenged dominance, Dzhughashvili refrained from referring to the party as an organism.⁵⁸ He returned to the idea only in July 1921, when he drafted an ambitious brochure "On the Political Strategy and Tactics of the Russian Communists." In the section on the party he wrote that Lenin had been right in waging his uncompromising ideological struggles because otherwise the party would not have been "an organism, but a conglomerate of heterogeneous elements" without "inner weldedness [*spaika*] and closedness."⁵⁹ At the Twelfth Party Congress two years later, Stalin introduced the biological metaphor into his most important speech to date, the organizational report on behalf of the Central Committee. The new general secretary gave a dual description of the party "as an organism, living its particular life, and as an apparatus, giving out slogans and checking on their fulfilment."⁶⁰

The biological metaphor soon came to occupy a central role in Stalin's thinking on the party. He cited it again and again to prove various, sometimes contradictory points in the struggle against the emerging opposition and its attacks on the power of the secretarial apparatus. On 2 December 1923, when a compromise with the "left opposition" was in the making, he acknowledged that the party needed more discussion and a really joint life. The party line stipulated that the "responsible functionaries of the different branches of work" had to be "mutually linked and must, as parts of a whole, not be torn apart." It was wrong to see the party only as "something like a complex of a whole series of institutions with lower and higher functionaries." Instead, it was a "self-acting [*samodeiatel'nyi*] organism." He described it as "actively thinking" and "living a lively life."⁶¹

Two weeks later, when the attempts at compromise had broken down, he attacked the "left opposition" more confidently in an article for *Pravda*. The opposition wanted new elections in the party, Stalin wrote, in order to change the guard. But that was not at all what democracy was about. He did favor, however, "the democratism of the party masses which strongly desire self-activity [*samodeiatel'nost'*] and active participation in the leadership of the party." To attain that situation it was necessary to drop the civil war ideas according to which "the party is not regarded as a self-active organism, but as a system of institutions."⁶² On 9 January 1924, when victory over the opposition was secure, *Zaria Vostoka* published Stalin's optimistic note to the effect that the "discussions, repeatedly emerging in our party, resulted every time in the disappearance of the differences of opinion." The "essence of the

⁵⁸ Dzhughashvili, who was close on many points to Bogdanov, did not agree with the decision to expel Bogdanov. In August 1909 the Baku party committee, while condemning the leftist tendency in the Bolshevik faction, protested against the policy of "casting [people] out of our midst" by the majority of the editorial board of *Proletarii*, which was the *de facto* Bolshevik center (Stalin, *Sochineniia* 2:168). In a comment Dzhughashvili flatly denied that the faction had split, stating that "such differences of opinion were always there and will always be there in such a rich and lively faction as the Bolshevik" (*ibid.*, 164). When it suited him Dzhughashvili shifted to another aspect of the metaphor of "life," stressing the necessary "liveliness" of the party instead of the concept of the party as an organism with fused individual "wills."

⁵⁹ Stalin, *Sochineniia* 5:71. See also note 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 197–98.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 358, 360, 363.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 382. The article was published on 15 December 1923.

fight" with the left opposition concerned the question of whether the party would allow factionalism or be "a united self-active organism with a united will."⁶³

At the Thirteenth Party Conference in January 1924, where the left opposition suffered an overwhelming defeat, Stalin repeated that it would be wrong to see the party as "something like a system of subordinate, middle and superior institutions" instead of a "self-acting organism living its independent ideological and practical life." Determined to fend off Trotsky's unacceptable accusation that the party was in imminent danger of degeneration, the general secretary argued that Trotsky "set the party apparatus against the party by presenting a battle slogan against the 'apparatchiki.' Bolshevism cannot accept that the party is set against the party apparatus." He condemned factionalism, describing the party as "a monolithic organization, carved from one piece, having one will and uniting in its work all shades of thought in one stream of practical action."⁶⁴

In his speeches and articles in 1923 and 1924, Stalin consistently argued that the party should be considered as a living organism. In what amounted to a rudimentary theory, Stalin believed that the party had an inner division of labor, the most important of which being the differentiation between rulers and ruled, the apparatus and the members. Despite this stratification the party should act as a united "whole." Its "weldedness" and "closedness" were achieved by "self-activity," the participation of all members in party work and discussions on policy. Only thus could the ranks truly be tied to the common purpose. Thus the party *lives*. But discussion must contribute to "unity" only; hostility toward the apparatus was unacceptable. Discussion, moreover, had to result in unanimity—in one common will among all members—for the party was an organism that had only *one will*. This definition of an organism as a living unit with a division of labor and a united will is similar to the one Kautsky used in his *Ethik*. It stemmed from Dzhugashvili's publications of 1905. And it was the logical background of the demand, which became apparent in the late 1920s, that members repent and "merge" themselves completely into the party whole.

IMPLICATIONS

Curiously, Stalin did not repeat this theory in his well-known lectures at Sverdlov University, published by *Pravda* in April and May 1924. In *Foundations of Leninism* the general secretary codified Lenin's thought into a compilation of dogmas in order to present himself as the dead leader's staunchest pupil. Discussing the party and its organizations, Stalin said that the party "is the united *system* of these organizations, their formal unification into a united whole, with superior and subordinate organs of leadership, with submission of the minority to the majority." He further discussed the "*Party as a unity of will, incompatible with the existence of factions.*" Iron discipline did not, of course, mean that there was no room for a struggle of opinions within the party. Such a struggle was a precondition for iron discipline. "But once the struggle of opinions is terminated, after criticism is exhausted and a decision is taken, the unity of will and the unity of action of all party members form that nec-

⁶³ Ibid., 6:1–2.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 9, 15, 23.

essary condition without which a united party and iron discipline in the party is unthinkable.”⁶⁵

He left out the biological basis of the theory, with its implication of the complete elimination of the “I” and the creation of literally one common will. This cannot be explained by a change of heart of the author: as we will presently see, Stalin even expanded the scope of this organic theory of the party in the years to come. It is also inconceivable that he simply forgot to mention a concept of the party that he used so consistently. The best explanation is that the theory deviated too obviously from Lenin’s, which Stalin was supposed to be laying down.

Lenin rarely used biological metaphors when discussing the party, preferring the image of the modern factory.⁶⁶ In *What Is to Be Done?* (1902) he branded the concept of a party of local circles as the primitivism of artisans, the very opposite of the modern factory.⁶⁷ In *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (1904), he scorned the Mensheviks for their “tragical outcries against transforming people into ‘nuts and screws.’” His opponents charged that he saw the party as “‘a huge factory’ with the CC as its general manager.” True to his style, Lenin admitted that the modern factory teaches the workers precisely the kind of discipline that the party needed: “discipline, based on collective labor, welded together by the conditions of technologically highly developed production.” The “factory ‘school’” teaches the workers “division of labor under the leadership of a center.”⁶⁸ This metaphor smacks of dictatorial efficiency, but not of “mystical” demands, because a factory consists of separate individuals. Lenin’s concept of discipline concerned itself more with the smooth and efficient functioning of the party than with the mental make-up of its members. Their psychology was relevant only insofar as it might disrupt the centralization of the party.

This approach was evident in Lenin’s interpretation of the “unity of will” of the party, a concept which he also employed. The resolution “on party unity” against factionalism, adopted by the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921 at Lenin’s insistence, called for concerted work which genuinely “embodies the unity of will of the vanguard of the proletariat.”⁶⁹ The concept itself was not defined further in the resolution, but Lenin’s previous writings give us a good indication of what he believed it meant. Lenin, the enthusiast for Taylorism, had argued in April 1918 that “all large machine-driven industry . . . demands an unconditional and exceptionally strict *unity of will*, which directs the common work of hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands of people.” This must be realized by the “submission of the will of the thousands to the will of the one.” Lenin aimed at the “unconditional submission to the will of the Soviet leader and the dictator *during worktime*.”⁷⁰ In the draft of this

⁶⁵ Ibid., 175, 181–82.

⁶⁶ Michael Waller has noted that at the Tenth Party Congress Lenin used the metaphor of the party as an organism by implication, by speaking of factionalism as a sickness (*Democratic Centralism: An Historical Commentary* [Manchester, 1981], 40). The image of a “left-wing disorder” is also a biological analogy.

⁶⁷ Lenin, *PSS* 6:99.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 8:379–80.

⁶⁹ *Kommunisticheskaia partiia Sovetskogo Soiuzu v rezoliutsiiakh i resheniiakh s’ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK*, pt. 1, 1898–1925 (Moscow, 1953), 527–28.

⁷⁰ Lenin, “Ocherednye zadachi sovetskoi vlasti,” *PSS* 36:165–208 (200–201).

article he noted that the system would make "millions of people work with the regularity of clock work."⁷¹ Lenin's "unity of will" did not mean a full *identity* of "wills," but a *temporary submission* of one's will to the executive power of a dictator. Applied to the party in 1921 it aimed at a suppression of open criticism against the emerging secretarial regime (which Lenin supported at that time), but not at the *Gleichschaltung* of the member's minds, which Stalin's organic metaphor implied.

Stalin did not include his organic theory of the party in *Foundations of Leninism* and he never subsequently expounded upon it in any systematic way. But it continued to guide his thinking on the party. After Lenin's death, moreover, he added a new dimension to the theory by elaborating on the *metabolism* of the party organism. In a lecture to local party secretaries on 17 June 1924, for example, Stalin hailed the influx of 250,000 party members in the "Lenin Levy," but he also warned against exaggeration. The party's theoretical level might fall too much. Even the greatest parties, he said, can perish when they capture so much that they are "unable to keep hold of, to *digest* what they have caught."⁷² Stalin appears to have visualized the party members as the food producing the materials of the party organism. In a memorial article dedicated to Ia. M. Sverdlov in November of the same year the general secretary wrote that leaders like him formed the "life juices" of the revolutionary movement.⁷³ Returning to the "Lenin Levy" in October 1925 he described how "the non-party activists therefore form the environment, from the juices of which the party lives and develops."⁷⁴ The juices were the "digested" new members.

The negative side of this idea was apparent. In a letter to a German comrade written in February 1925 Stalin discussed the rotation of leaders in the Communist Party of Germany and pointed at the similar process in Russia of "the dying-off [*otmiranie*] of a whole series of old leaders," which was "a necessary process of renewal of leading cadres of a living and developing party."⁷⁵ He was referring to Bogdanov, among others. This line of thinking reached a climax at the Fifteenth Party Congress in December 1927, where Stalin confirmed his victory over the left opposition. In his political report of 3 December he pointed an accusing finger at all those cadres who took life too easily. This attitude prevented the correction of mistakes, driving "the sores into the inside of the party organism, and the party falls ill." Complacent cadres "first get moldy and then turn gray."⁷⁶ It was only logical to conclude that the really rotten cadres would turn into the waste of the organism.

In his concluding words on 7 December, Stalin indeed told his audience that the fall of the leftist leaders was nothing to worry about. On the contrary:

Our party is a living organism. As in every organism a metabolism takes place: old, obsolete stuff falls off (*applause*); new, growing things flourish and develop (*applause*). Some leave the stage, at the top and at the lower levels. New forces grow up, at the top and at the lower levels, and carry

⁷¹ Ibid., 155.

⁷² Stalin, *Sochineniia* 6:255 (emphasis added).

⁷³ Ibid., 277.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 7:240.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 10:331, 333.

forward the work. This is how our party grew. This is how it will continue to grow in the future.⁷⁷

All this had particularly sinister implications; in a later period Stalin took the “dying-off” very literally. The idea of the party metabolism was intimately bound up with a basic mechanism of Stalin’s rise to undivided power: his policy to replace old generations of leaders by “new forces” from below which, in turn, became obligated to him.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 371.