Among Hal Draper’s many contributions to our understanding of Karl Marx’s theory of revolution, one of the most important was his detailed study of the meaning of the phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat” in the Marxist tradition. Draper persuasively demonstrated that for Marx this phrase did not have the antidemocratic connotations it acquired in the twentieth century. “For Marx and Engels, from beginning to end of their careers and without any exception, ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ meant nothing more and nothing less than ‘rule of the proletariat,’ the ‘conquest of political power’ by the working class, the establishment of a workers’ state in the first postrevolutionary period.” The slogan “did not refer to particular characteristics, methods, or institutions of proletarian rule” — to a type of government — but merely indicated the class content of the future socialist state.¹ For Marx and Engels, Draper argued, the dictatorship of the proletariat did not imply an authoritarian restriction of democracy.

After Marx’s death that phrase acquired a different connotation, and in a 1987 work — *The “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” from Marx to Lenin* — Draper traced the transformation of Marx’s terminology into a codeword for despotic one-party rule. He argued that the Russian Social-Democrat G. V. Plekhanov “was the begetter, *fons et origo*, of the career of ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in the socialist movement,” and that he strongly influenced the interpretation adopted by Lenin and the Bolsheviks.² Plekhanov used the phrase more frequently than any other Social-Democrat at the end of the nineteenth century and was the first to include it in an official party program, the one adopted by the Russian Social-Democratic Workers’ Party (RSDRP) at the Second Congress in 1903. What is more, Draper argued, Plekhanov “explicitly conferr[ed] an antidemocratic content on the ‘dictatorship of the pro-

For him dictatorship meant a repressive regime, one which restricted the political rights of opponents and monopolized power in the hands of the party leadership. The term no longer referred to the class basis of the socialist state, as it had for Marx and Engels, but "was associated in [Plekhanov's] mind with special dictatorial measures of suppression, the need for which had appeared to him even before he heard of Marx's term." Lenin then picked up Plekhanov's language and "carried [his] approach to a logical conclusion — and therefore to a theoretical disaster." While Lenin's version of the dictatorship of the proletariat was more extreme than Plekhanov's, Draper argued, "the conception that linked 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and 'dictatorship of the party' was not his invention." Lenin was only clarifying what Plekhanov had already intimated.

Draper's argument about the meaning of dictatorship for Marx and Engels is sound, but his history of that term's transformation in the Russian movement is seriously flawed. A careful study of G. V. Plekhanov's writings demonstrates that he did not confer an antidemocratic content on the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Indeed, Plekhanov consistently distinguished between class dictatorship and party dictatorship and rejected the latter. Although he did bring the phrase into currency by including it in the RSDRP Program, at the time of the drafting and ratification of the Program Plekhanov understood the slogan in Marx's sense as referring merely to the class content of the future revolutionary state. It was Lenin who reinterpreted proletarian dictatorship in an antidemocratic fashion and made it synonymous with one-party rule and lawless terror. Lenin did not follow Plekhanov but broke with him and turned Marx's casual phrase into a justification for authoritarianism.

Draper's work is but one example of an important trend in Lenin studies, what might be called the "blame Plekhanov" interpretation. In the last several decades a number of scholars have argued that Lenin derived many of his antidemocratic ideas from the "father of Russian Marxism," G. V. Plekhanov. I think Plekhanov's influence on Leninism has been overstated, and in this paper I contest Draper's claim that Lenin derived his antidemocratic interpretation of proletarian dictatorship from Plekhanov (or anyone else). On a variety of issues Lenin was a genuine (if unwitting) innovator, and Leninism emerged as a novel