What Was To Be Done About What Is To Be Done?

With a few exceptions, writers rarely make good politicians, just as politicians rarely make good writers. Yet in their job of depicting the animating forces of life, writers often have no choice but to address political situations. In doing so, they reveal the philosophical forces which underlie their literary sentiments. One example where this political gaze illuminates the general ethic of a writer’s work can be found in the reactions of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky to Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s What Is To Be Done? Tolstoy and Dostoevsky both took serious issue with the political principles Chernyshevsky laced throughout his novel. But neither did they did not agree with each other. Tolstoy’s traditionalist critique and Dostoevsky’s nihilist critique are interesting arguments in themselves. However, they become even more so when viewed as proxies for the broader literary themes developed, respectively, in Anna Karenina and Crime and Punishment. By comparing these two writers’ orientation towards a third point, I argue for a holistic interpretation of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in which the political, the philosophical, and the literary aspects of the works are considered in tandem.

Only the most isolated writer could have avoided confronting the Russian political situation through the second half of the twentieth century. With the traditional hierarchy of the czars struggling under its own weight and the entire country caught up in a rapid attempt to catch up with Western modernization, political life became coincident with general life. A whole host of spiritual, cultural, scientific, and artistic upheavals were proceeding hand-in-hand with political and economic ones. It was into this atmosphere that the young radical Nikolai Chernyshevsky published his novel What Is To Be Done? in 1863. The title of the book—together with its subtitle, Tales About New People—encapsulated the mood of the midcentury reformers amongst whom
Chernyshevsky was a prominent figure. The book is a parable about a brave new Russian society, ordered according to enlightened principles and dispensing with traditional articulations of culture. Centered around Vera Pavlovna, a woman revolutionary who commits herself to open sexual relationships and the radical cause, the novel was part of the cultural groundwork which established personal and social liberation as watchwords of the Russian left. What Is To Be Done? was as much a call to action as a novel, presenting in stark terms the sort of social reconstruction which Chernyshevsky and his sympathizers believed Russian life demanded.

Forty-three years later, an aging Leo Tolstoy wrote his own What's to be done?, reflecting on Chernyshevsky as communist revolution loomed on the horizon. In it, he describes a pair of escaped criminals, a radical peasant, and a conservative relative all employing the phrase “What's to be done?” not as a genuine question but as “an assertion that it will be much worse for everyone if we cease to do what we are doing.” Dismayed, Tolstoy turns away from ideologies both left and right and returns to an appeal to the decency of humanity. The answer to the question, he says, “is that you must do not what the Tsar, Governor, police-officers, Duma, or some political party demands of you, but what is natural to you as a man, what is demanded of you by that Power that sent you into the world—the Power most people are accustomed to call God.”

Tolstoy’s rebuttal is deeply rooted in his own faith in the power of men's humanity to work against social disarray for understanding and reform. In this, he found himself in contradiction to the scientific Marxism of the radicals who justified violence and terror in the name of revolution. Such dogmas, he felt, infected men with “the spiritual disease of political obsession.” It is notable that Tolstoy accuses revolutionary totalism as a ‘spiritual’ corrosion, for he placed his faith in “a

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2 Ibid., 391.

3 Ibid., 393.
general law acknowledged by all reasonable men and confirmed by tradition,” which states that “men, to fulfil their destiny and attain their greatest welfare, should help one another, love one another, and in any case not attack each other’s liberty and life.” These are naïve hopes, perhaps, but they also reveal an unwavering belief in the transcendent power of man’s interpersonal connections. Moreover, Tolstoy’s view organizes men into a neat community following “the reasonable, supreme law common to all mankind.” Tolstoy concludes that humans overcome evil by embracing their decency, their station in life, and their life with others, suggesting that ... if all men, forgetting their various positions as ministers, policemen, presidents, and members of various combative and non-combative parties, would only do what is natural to them as a human being—not only would those horrors and sufferings cease of which the life of man (and especially of the Russian people) is now full, but the Kingdom of God would have come upon the earth.

Much of this political sentiment can be unearthed in the social sentiment of Anna Karenina, published fourteen years after Chernyshevsky’s What Is To Be Done? and twenty-nine years before Tolstoy’s own What’s to be done? The plot of Anna Karenina opens on a disordered world, where subscriptions to various forms of social propriety have robbed each character of their humanity in one way or another. Stepan Arkadyich, who reads “a liberal newspaper” in which “mention was made of Bentham and Mill,” is so caught up in his modernized, fashionable life that he forgets his decency and repeatedly injures his relationship with his wife. Karenin, the stuffy aristocrat, finds himself so caught up in maintaining his appearance that his marriage erodes from under him. And so on, by degrees, with each of the characters. What Tolstoy unveils is a swathe of personal relationships robbed of their personal animation. When individuals turn

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4 Ibid., 391.
5 Ibid., 393.
6 Ibid., 393–4.
away from love and honesty, they cripple their emotional agency. And such crippled emotions, Tolstoy shows, can end only either in annihilation or by remembering the inherent commitment to goodness which relates men to each other and to God. Or, in other terms, the “reasonable, supreme law” of What’s to be done?

Nowhere is this more clear than at the very end of the novel, where the various questions posed by Tolstoy begin to converge in Levin’s spiritual conclusion. Reflecting on the words of the peasant Fyodor, Levin realizes “we’re all agreed on one thing: what we should live for and what is good [...] the meaning of my impulses is so clear to me that I constantly live by it, and was amazed and glad when a muzhik voiced it for me: to live for God, for the soul.” Levin is the embodiment of Tolstoy’s cry for humanity and decency. He is not necessarily a progressive thinker, and certainly not a radical. He respects the muzhiks but for the most part thinks they belong in their place. By contrast, Levin’s brother Nikolai is a replica of what Tolstoy saw as the distorted estrangement of the Chernyshevsky set. Nikolai’s prostitute-girlfriend Marya Nikolaevna is a sort of hollowed-out version of Vera Pavlovna. Notably, it is on the occasion of Nikolai’s death that Levin’s love begins to reveal its liberating power: “in spite of death, he felt the necessity to live and love. [...] No sooner had the one mystery of death been accomplished before his eyes, and gone unfathomed, than another arose, equally unfathomed, which was called to love and life.” Tolstoy’s plea to Russian politicians, his literary assessment of the bedrock of humanity, and his philosophical conjecture of the point of existence all bind together in this assertion: that we must elect the course of love over that of dogma and despair.

While Tolstoy offers a critique of What Is To Be Done? based on the social redemption of love, Fyodor Dostoevsky presents his own attack on the leftist radicals—one which is sympathetic to Tolstoy’s but built on quite different assumptions. Dostoevsky never published a direct rebuttal

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8 Ibid., 795–6.
9 Ibid., 505.
to Chernyshevsky’s novel. However, a litany of attacks ranging from mockeries to philosophical assaults are littered throughout *Crime and Punishment*. Some of the barbs are subtle, like the use of the ‘Palais de Crystal’ as the location of the police investigative office. This is a reference to the location of the ‘Elysian Social Utopia’ in *What Is To Be Done?* which Dostoevsky previously mocked in *Notes From Underground* by turning it into a symbol of nightmarish materialism. Others are sneering, as in the ridiculous political ramblings of the Chernyshevsky parody Lebezyatnikov, “one of that numerous and diverse legion of vulgarians, half-taught petty tyrants who make a point of instantly latching on to the most fashionable current idea.” In a muddle, Lebezyatnikov praises the sexual liberation of Chernyshevsky's utopians. He defends Sofya's prostitution, arguing that it “is the most normal condition for a woman. [...] In today's society it is, of course, not quite normal, because it's forced, but in the future it will be perfectly normal, because free. [...] At present I look upon her actions as an energetic and embodied protest against the social order, and I deeply respect her for it. I even rejoice to look at her!”

It is interesting that Lebezyatnikov is the only other character to truly accept Sonya's prostitution other than Raskolnikov. The two defend her in entirely different ways, though, and it is in this difference that the core of Dostoevsky's philosophical split from Chernyshevsky is constituted. Lebezyatnikov's defense of Sofya is rationalized, intellectualized, and comically detached from reality. He offers his commentary on her as if he is assessing a corpse. This material view of the world so closely held by the socialists disgusted Dostoevsky. For him and Raskolnikov, Sonya is heroic because she mirrors the protagonist's anguish and ambivalence. She is painfully human, caught up in the contentious, confused business of being human. A page before the end


12 Dostoevsky, 365.

13 Ibid., 369.
of the novel, it is Sonya who catalyzes Raskolnikov’s rebirth. The messianic depiction of this
awakening is rendered wide-open:

But all at once, in that same moment, she understood everything. Infinite happiness lit up
in her eyes; she understood, and for her there was no longer any doubt that he loved her,
loved her infinitely, and that at last the moment had come ...

They wanted to speak but could not. Tears stood in their eyes. They were both
pale and thin, but in those pale, sick faces there already shone the dawn of a renewed
future, of a complete resurrection into a new life. They were resurrected by love; the heart
of each held infinite sources of life for the heart of the other.14

This reads eerily like a maudlin version of Levin’s discovery of love. But the disorder that
Tolstoy depicted in society is here translated onto the ontological fact of existence itself.
Raskolnikov’s world is not just dissembled in point of fact; it is dissembled in point of existence.
While Tolstoy exhorts “the law to love one’s neighbor,”15 Raskolnikov finds himself peering over
the edge of morality. He dreams of “the fullfillers of mankind—perhaps after the elapsing of many
of thousands of millions of people one earth.”16 This is the sort of messianic vision which no
doubt inspired that same peasant revolutionary who so frightened the elderly Tolstoy. And
though Raskolnikov comes to spiritually atone for his assault against the edges of existence, it
cannot go unnoticed that he never outright retracts his ideals. Even in his exile, he finds comfort
only in a sort of spiritual embrace of greatness. “A new life would not be given to him for
nothing,” Dostoevsky concludes, “it still had to be dearly bought, to be paid for with a great future
deed ...”17

14 Ibid., 549.
15 Tolstoy, “What’s to be done?,” 393.
16 Dostoevsky, 263.
17 Ibid., 551.
Both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky recoiled at the prospect of a rationalized, radical materialism as put forth in Chernyshevsky’s nakedly political *What Is To Be Done?* They did so simultaneously in their political assessments of Russian life, their literary stylings, and their underlying philosophical generators. But Tolstoy and Dostoevsky’s criticisms are nearly as different from each other as they each are from Chernyshevsky. Chernyshevsky saw “tales about new people.” Tolstoy saw “man to be rightful and beneficent.” And Dostoevsky saw those “who lived by life alone.” Held up next to the common example of the leftist radical, the finely-textured disagreements between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky come into sharp relief.

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18 Tolstoy, “What’s to be done?,” 393.

19 Dostoevsky, 550.