SOFTWARE & TECH

What Is To Be Done

Published: November 20, 2026 | Index ID: #-

Introduction: The Enduring Power of a Single Question

The question **"What Is To Be Done"** resonates far beyond its origins in 19th-century Russian literature and revolutionary politics. It is a fundamental human inquiry, a call to action that surfaces in moments of personal crisis, social upheaval, and organizational transformation. For activists, leaders, and thinkers, this phrase represents a turning point—a moment when analysis must give way to strategy, and when identifying a problem is no longer enough. To fully understand the weight and evolution of "What Is To Be Done," we must trace its journey from a novel by Nikolai Chernyshevsky, through the revolutionary blueprint of Vladimir Lenin, to its modern applications in social movements and personal development. This article explores the layered history, core arguments, and lasting relevance of this powerful question.

The Literary Genesis: Chernyshevsky's Vision of a New Humanity

Before it became a political slogan, **"What Is To Be Done"** was the title of a novel published in 1863 by the Russian writer and philosopher Nikolai Chernyshevsky. Written while he was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress, the book was a response to the stagnation of Russian society under Tsarist autocracy. Chernyshevsky's novel is not a work of high literary artistry; rather, it is a philosophical and social manifesto disguised as fiction. It tells the story of a group of "new people" who reject traditional bourgeois morality and family structures in favor of rational egoism, cooperative labor, and collective living.

Chernyshevsky's answer to the question "What Is To Be Done" was radical for its time. He proposed that individuals could transform themselves and society through reason, education, and economic cooperation. The novel introduced the concept of a "revolutionary" not as a bomb-throwing anarchist, but as a disciplined, self-sacrificing individual dedicated to the cause of human emancipation. The most famous character, Rakhmetov, is an ascetic revolutionary who trains his body and mind for a future uprising. This archetype would later inspire generations of revolutionaries, including a young Vladimir Lenin.

The novel's impact was immense. It was banned by the Tsarist government but circulated in underground copies. It became a cult text for the Russian intelligentsia, offering a vision of a just society built on rational principles. The question in its title was not just rhetorical; it was a summons to action. For the first time, a generation of educated Russians was asked to consider what concrete steps they could take to change their world. The novel planted the seed that would later bloom into the Russian revolutionary movement.

The Political Transformation: Lenin's Revolutionary Blueprint

In 1902, Vladimir Lenin published his own work titled **"What Is To Be Done?"**, directly referencing Chernyshevsky's novel. Lenin's pamphlet was not a work of fiction; it was a sharp, polemical intervention in the ongoing debates within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). The central question Lenin sought to answer was practical and urgent: How could a revolutionary party be built in a country ruled by a repressive autocracy, where trade unions and legal political activity were heavily restricted?

Lenin's answer was controversial and transformative. He argued that the working class, left to its own devices,

could only develop "trade union consciousness"—a desire for better wages and working conditions within the existing capitalist system. True revolutionary consciousness, Lenin insisted, had to be brought to the workers from outside, by a vanguard of professional revolutionaries. These revolutionaries would be full-time, disciplined, and dedicated to the single task of overthrowing the Tsarist state. The party would be organized on the principle of "democratic centralism": free debate on policy, but absolute unity in action.

This was a direct challenge to those who believed in a more spontaneous, democratic, and mass-based approach to revolution. Lenin's critics accused him of elitism and authoritarianism. But Lenin countered that in a police state, a tightly organized, secretive, and centralized party was the only viable way to survive repression and eventually seize power. The pamphlet became the founding document of the Bolshevik faction of the RSDLP, which would later become the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The key arguments in Lenin's **"What Is To Be Done"** can be summarized as follows:

- The Necessity of a Vanguard Party: A small, dedicated, and disciplined group of professional revolutionaries is essential to lead the working class to victory.
- The Importance of Revolutionary Theory: Without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement. The party must be guided by scientific socialism (Marxism).
- Critique of Economism: Lenin rejected the idea that the working class should focus only on economic struggles. Political struggle—the fight for state power—was paramount.
- Democratic Centralism: The party would be united by a common program and leadership, with strict discipline in carrying out decisions.

Core Themes and Arguments in Lenin's Work

The Role of the Intellectual Revolutionary

Lenin placed enormous emphasis on the role of the revolutionary intellectual. He believed that socialist theory was not spontaneously generated by the working class but was developed by bourgeois intellectuals who had "gone over" to the side of the proletariat. Figures like Marx, Engels, and later Lenin himself were examples of this phenomenon. The task of these intellectuals was to infuse the working-class movement with socialist consciousness, turning spontaneous protests into organized revolutionary action. This argument has been endlessly debated. Critics argue that it creates a hierarchy between the "conscious" leadership and the "spontaneous" masses, potentially leading to authoritarianism. Supporters argue that it is a realistic assessment of how revolutionary movements are built in hostile conditions.

The Party as a Weapon

For Lenin, the party was not a debating society or a loose coalition of like-minded individuals. It was a weapon—a sharp instrument designed for a specific purpose: the seizure of power. This instrumental view of organization had profound implications. It meant that the party had to be centralized, hierarchical, and secretive. Members were expected to submit to party discipline, and internal dissent was tolerated only within strict limits. This model of organization proved remarkably effective in the underground conditions of Tsarist Russia, but it also laid the groundwork for the one-party dictatorship that would emerge after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.

The Critique of "Spontaneity"

A central theme in **"What Is To Be Done"** is the critique of "spontaneity." Lenin argued that a purely spontaneous movement—one that reacts to events without a coherent strategy—is doomed to be co-opted by the existing system. Trade unions, for example, might win concessions from employers, but they would never overthrow capitalism. The task of the revolutionary party is to transcend spontaneous economic struggles and connect them

to the political goal of overthrowing the state. This requires planning, discipline, and a long-term perspective—qualities that Lenin believed were absent in purely spontaneous movements.

The Impact and Legacy of Lenin’s Pamphlet

The immediate impact of Lenin’s **"What Is To Be Done"** was to crystallize the split within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. The Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, embraced the vanguard party model. The Mensheviks favored a broader, more democratic party structure. This split would have world-historical consequences. After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the vanguard party model was adopted by communist parties around the world, from China to Cuba to Vietnam.

The pamphlet’s legacy is deeply ambivalent. On one hand, it provided a powerful organizational template for revolutionary movements fighting against colonial rule, fascism, and dictatorship. Many national liberation movements in the 20th century adopted Lenin’s ideas about the vanguard party. On the other hand, the model has been criticized for its centralism and lack of internal democracy, which critics argue led to the bureaucratic authoritarianism of the Soviet Union and other communist states. The question of whether Lenin’s organizational model is inherently authoritarian, or whether it was distorted by later leaders like Stalin, remains a subject of intense debate.

Beyond the political sphere, the phrase **"What Is To Be Done"** has taken on a life of its own. It is used in business contexts to describe strategic planning, in social movements to ask what concrete actions are needed, and in personal development to prompt reflection on life goals. The question itself has become a universal tool for moving from analysis to action.

Broader Interpretations and Modern Relevance

For Social Movements and Activism

In the 21st century, the question **"What Is To Be Done"** is as relevant as ever for activists and organizers. Climate change, economic inequality, racial injustice, and political polarization all demand answers to this question. Modern movements like Black Lives Matter, Fridays for Future, and the global women’s movement have all had to grapple with organizational questions: How do we build a movement that is both effective and democratic? How do we balance spontaneity and strategy? How do we avoid being co-opted by the existing system?

Lenin’s emphasis on the importance of theory and strategy is a useful corrective to the tendency of some modern movements to prioritize "action" over "analysis." However, the centralized, hierarchical model he proposed is often at odds with the more horizontal, decentralized, and consensus-based forms of organization favored by many contemporary activists. The challenge is to find a middle ground—a way of organizing that is effective without being authoritarian, and democratic without being chaotic.

In Business and Organizational Leadership

The question **"What Is To Be Done"** is also relevant in business and organizational leadership. It is essentially the question of strategy: Given our current situation, what are the key actions we need to take to achieve our goals? Leaders who ask this question are forced to move beyond abstract vision statements and confront the concrete steps needed to enact change. The question encourages focus, prioritization, and decisive action. In a rapidly changing business environment, organizations that fail to ask "What Is To Be Done" risk being overtaken by more agile competitors.

The concept of a "vanguard" can also be applied in business contexts. Innovation often comes from a small group

of dedicated individuals who are willing to challenge the status quo and push for change. These "intrapreneurs" can be seen as vanguard elements within a larger organization, driving transformation from within. The challenge for leaders is to support these vanguard elements while maintaining the cohesion and stability of the overall organization.

For Personal Development and Life Planning

On a personal level, **"What Is To Be Done"** is a powerful question for self-reflection and life planning. When faced with a difficult situation—a career crossroads, a relationship challenge, a health issue—asking "What is to be done?" forces us to move from worry to action. It is a question that requires us to assess our resources, identify our options, and commit to a course of action. In this sense, the phrase is a tool for cultivating agency and purpose.

The personal application of this question can be broken down into a simple process:

1. Assess the Situation: What is the current reality? What are the key challenges and opportunities?
2. Define the Goal: What outcome do we want to achieve?
3. Identify Options: What are the possible paths forward?
4. Choose a Course of Action: Given our constraints and resources, what is the best thing to do?
5. Act: Commit to the chosen course and take concrete steps.

This framework is essentially a pragmatic, action-oriented approach to problem-solving that anyone can use. It is a way of applying the spirit of Lenin's question—the imperative to move from analysis to action—to the challenges of everyday life.

Conclusion: The Unanswered Question That Drives Change

"What Is To Be Done" is a question that refuses to be settled. It has

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