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Marxism

Organisational theory, democratic centralism and soviet democracy

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive - 1970: The Leninist Theory of Organisation -

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The objection was made to Lenin's theory of organisation that through its exaggerated centralisation it would prevent the development of internal party democracy. But this objection is a confused one, for inasmuch as the Leninist principles of organisation restrict the organisation to active members *operating under a collective control*, they actually expand rather than reduce the scope of party democracy.

Once a workers organisation surpasses a certain numerical size there are basically only two possible organisational models: that of the dues-paying electoral club (or territorial organisation), which corresponds today to the organisational forms of the Social-Democratic Party of Germany and of the French Communist Party; or that of a combat unit based on the selection of only active and conscious members. To be sure, the first model in theory permits a certain latitude for grumblers and opponents to fool around in, but only where matters of secondary importance are involved. *Otherwise, the great mass of the apolitical and passive membership provides the apparatus with a voting base that can always be mobilized*, and which has nothing to do with class consciousness. (A not insignificant number of these members are even materially dependent on the apparatus - the bulk of the municipal and administrative workers and employees, the employees of the workers organisation itself, etc.) In the combat organisation, however, which is composed of members that have to exhibit a minimum of consciousness simply to become members, the possibility of finding independent thinking is actually much greater. Neither "pure apparatchiks" nor pure careerists can take over as easily as in an ordinary electoral club. So differences of opinion will be resolved less in terms of material dependency or abstract "loyalty" than according to actual substance. To be sure, the mere fact that the organisation is composed in this fashion is no automatic guarantee against bureaucratisation of the organisation. But at least it provides an essential condition for preventing it. [1] The relation between the revolutionary organisation (a party nucleus or a party) and the mass of workers abruptly changes as soon as an actual revolutionary explosion occurs. At that point the seeds sown over the years by revolutionary and consciously socialist elements start sprouting. Broad masses are able to achieve revolutionary class consciousness at once. The revolutionary initiatives of broad masses can far outdistance that of many revolutionary groupings.

In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky emphasised in several instances that at certain conjunctures in the revolution the Russian working masses were even ahead of the Bolshevik Party. [2] Nevertheless, one should not generalise from this fact, and above all, it must not be separated from the fact that, prior to Lenin's April Theses, the Bolshevik Party's strategic conception of the nature and goal of the Russian revolution was insufficiently worked out. [3] It ran the risk of having to pay for this until Lenin took decisive action with his April Theses. He was able to do so with such ease, however, because the masses of educated worker-Bolsheviks were pushing him in that very direction and were themselves a reflection of the powerful radicalisation of the Russian working class.

An objective, i.e., comprehensive, view of the role of the Bolshevik Party organisation in the Russian revolution would no doubt have to be formulated somewhat differently. While the leading cadre of the party proved several times to be a conservative block preventing the party from going over to Trotsky's position on the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat (soviet power), at the same time it became evident that the crystallisation of a revolutionary workers cadre schooled in two decades of revolutionary organisation and revolutionary activity was instrumental in making this decisive strategic turn a success. Should one wish to construct a correlation between the Stalinist bureaucracy and the "Leninist concept of the party," one would at least have to make allowances for this decisive element of intervention. *Stalin's victory was not the result of the Leninist Theory of organisation - but the result of the disappearance of a decisive component of this concept: the presence of a broad layer of worker cadres, schooled in revolution and maintaining a high degree of activity, with a close relationship to the masses.* Moreover, Lenin himself would have in no way denied that in the absence of this factor the Leninist concept of the party could turn into its opposite. [4]

The soviet system is the only universal answer discovered thus far by the working class to the question of how to organise its independent activity during and following the revolution. [5] It allows all of the forces within the class - and all the labouring and progressive layers of society in general - to be brought together in a simultaneous, open confrontation between the various tendencies existing within the class itself. Every true soviet system - i.e., one that is actually elected by the mass of the workers and has not been imposed upon them by one or another selective power apparatus - will for that reason only be able to reject the social and ideological diversity of the proletarian layers emphasised above. A workers council is in reality a united front of the most diverse political tendencies that are in agreement on one central point: the common defence of the revolution against the class enemy. (In the same way, a strike committee reflects the most widely differing tendencies among the workers, yet with one exception: It includes only those tendencies that are participating in the strike. Scabs have no place in a strike committee.)

There is no contradiction whatever between the existence of a revolutionary organisation of the Leninist type and genuine soviet democracy, or soviet power. On the contrary, without the systematic organisational work of a revolutionary vanguard, a soviet system will either be quickly throttled by reformist and semi-reformist bureaucracies (cf. the German soviet system from 1918 to 1919), or it loses its political effectiveness due to its inability to solve the central political tasks (cf. the Spanish revolutionary committees between July 1936 and spring 1937).

The hypothesis that a soviet system makes parties superfluous has one of two sources. Either it proceeds from the naive assumption that the introduction of soviets homogenises the working class overnight, dissolves all differences of ideology and interest, and automatically and spontaneously suggests to the entire working class "the revolutionary solution" to all the strategic and tactical problems of the revolution. Or, it is merely a pretext for giving to a small group of self-appointed "leaders" the opportunity to manipulate a rather broad, inarticulate mass in that this mass is deprived of any possibility of systematically coming to grips with these strategic and tactical questions of the revolution, i.e., of *freely discussing and politically differentiating itself* (This is obviously the case, for example, with the Yugoslav system of so-called self-management.)

The revolutionary organisation *can*, therefore, guarantee the working masses in the soviet system a greater degree of independent activity and self-awareness, and thereby of revolutionary class consciousness, than could an undifferentiated system of representation. But of course to this end it must stimulate and not hold back the independent action of the working masses. It is precisely this independent initiative of the masses which reaches its fullest development in the soviet system. Again we reach a similar conclusion: The Leninist concept of organisation, built upon a correct revolutionary strategy (i.e., on a correct assessment of the objective historical process), is simply the collective co-ordinator of the activity of the masses, the collective memory and digested experience of the masses, in place of a constantly repetitive and expanding discontinuity in time, space and consciousness.

History has also shown in this connection that there is a substantial difference between a party *calling* itself a revolutionary and actually *being* a revolutionary party. When a group of functionaries not only opposes the initiative and activity of the masses but seeks to frustrate them by any means, including military force (one thinks of Hungary in October-November 1956 or Czechoslovakia since August 1968), when this group not only finds no common language with a soviet system springing spontaneously from mass struggles, but throttles and destroys this system behind a pretext of defending "the leading role of the party" [6] - then we are obviously no longer dealing with a revolutionary party of the proletariat but with an apparatus that represents the special interests of a privileged layer deeply hostile to the independent activity of the masses: the bureaucracy. The fact that a revolutionary party can degenerate into a party of bureaucracy is, however, no more an argument against the Leninist concept of organisation than the fact that doctors have killed, not cured, many patients represents an argument against medical science. Any step away from this concept toward "pure" mass spontaneity would be comparable to reverting from medical science to quackery.

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[1] The formal rules of democratic centralism are, of course, part of these prerequisites. These rules include the right of all members to be completely informed about differences of opinion in the leadership; the right to form tendencies and to present contradictory points of view to the membership before leadership elections and conventions; the regular convening of conventions; the right to periodically revise majority decisions in the light of subsequent experiences, i.e., the right of minorities to periodically attempt to reverse decisions made by the majority; the right of political initiative by minorities and members at conventions; etc.

These Leninist norms of democratic centralism were rather strikingly formulated in the new party statutes drawn up before August 1968 in preparation for the fourteenth convention of the Czechoslovakian CP. The Moscow defenders of bureaucratic centralism reacted with the invasion. In fact, this proposed return to Leninist norms of democratic centralism was one of the most important "thorns" in the side of the Soviet bureaucracy as far as the developments in Czechoslovakia were concerned.

[2] Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, op. cit.

[3] Between 1905 and 1917 the Bolshevik Party was educated in the spirit of achieving the "democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants," i.e., in the spirit of a formula with its eye on the possibility of a coalition between a workers party and a peasant party within the framework of capitalism - foreseeing, in other words, a *capitalist* development of Russian agriculture and industry. Lenin clung to this possibility until late 1916. Only in 1917 did he realise that Trotsky had been correct back in 1905 when he predicted that the agrarian question could only be solved by the dictatorship of the proletariat and the socialisation of the Russian economy.

Hartmut Mehringer ("Introduction historique" in Trotsky, *Nos taches politiques*, op. cit., pp.17-18, 34 ff) is completely wrong to link Lenin's theory of organisation with his specific strategy in the Russian revolution, to explain it in terms of the "subordinate" role (?) of the working class in this struggle, and to trace Trotsky's theory of the gradual extension of class consciousness to the entire working class to the theory of the permanent revolution. Aside from the fact that Mehringer gives an inadequate and inaccurate outline of Lenin's revolutionary strategy (Lenin was for the absolute independence of the Russian working class in opposing the Russian bourgeoisie, and was completely in favour of this class playing a leading role in the revolution); and aside from the fact that, like Lenin, Luxemburg rejected as premature any attempt to establish the proletarian dictatorship in Russia and assigned the revolutionary struggle of the Russian proletariat the mere goal of carrying out the historical tasks of the bourgeois revolution (while at the same time she fought against Lenin's theory of organisation). It appears obvious to us that the very theory of permanent revolution (i.e., the task of establishing the proletarian dictatorship in an underdeveloped country) can be grasped with a minimum of realism only through the utmost concentration on the revolutionary tasks in general. Thus it leads not away from Lenin's theory of organisation but straight to it. See in this regard also the excellent pamphlet by Denise Avenas, *Economie et politique dans la pensee de Trotsky* (Paris: Maspero, "Cahiers Rouges," 1970).

[4] Lenin, *Oeuvres Completes*, Tome 12 (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1969), p.74.

"The pamphlet *What is to Be Done* repeatedly emphasises that the organisation of professional revolutionaries which it proposes makes sense only insofar as it is connected to the truly revolutionary class irresistibly rising up in struggle." Lenin underlines the fact that the sickness of small group existents can only be overcome through "the ability of the party, through its own mass work, to reach out to proletarian elements." (*Ibid* .., p.75.)

[5] Maspero in Paris will soon publish an anthology by us entitled "Workers Control, Workers Councils and Workers Self-Management" which attempts to prove this thesis. Europaischer Verlaganstalt has announced plans to publish a German edition in 1971.

[6] For Lenin the "leading role of the party" in the soviet system is a political one, not one of substitution. It is a question not of substituting itself for the majority in the soviet, but of convincing them of the correctness of the communist policy. The "leading role of the party" is not even mentioned in his basic work on soviets, *State and Revolution*. And if, in times of the greatest confusion and civil war, he sometimes made sharp sallies on tactical questions, arguments can be found in his writings against "soviets without communists," but no arguments in favour of "communists without soviets."