

Proletarian Unity League

2, 3, Many Parties of a New Type? Against the Ultra-Left Line

Chapter 5: The Social and Ideological Roots of "Left" Opportunism D. The Ideological Roots of "Left" Opportunism: Petit-Bourgeois Subjectivism

Propelled by the ideological revolt of their stratum, a section of the students and intellectuals rallied to the anti-revisionist banner. But the revolutionary-minded intelligentsia approaches the betrayal of modern revisionism from and through perspectives arising out of its own social position. There is no question but that revolutionary students and intellectuals can adopt a proletarian class position—they have done so throughout the history of the international communist movement. In order to do so, however, they need continual ideological remoulding in close contact with the working class, and tempering in the heat of revolutionary class struggles. Throughout that process, the revolutionary forces have to fight against the spontaneous ideological tendencies of the intelligentsia.

The intelligentsia obviously does not have its own class ideology: either it adopts the world view of the proletariat, or it espouses one or another variant of bourgeois ideology. It does have, however, characteristic ways of appropriating bourgeois ideology, and certain peculiar prejudices. Some features of this ideological position are well-known, and stem from the ideological makeup of the classes and strata from which the intelligentsia is largely drawn: the intellectuals' vacillation, the tendency to jump rapidly from exhilaration to despair, individualism and hatred for discipline, spontaneous contempt for the working class, etc. Here we want to introduce a different element: the intelligentsia's conception of ideological and political struggle.

Defined by their place in various bourgeois ideological institutions (particularly the educational apparatus), students and intellectuals naturally adapt the bourgeois world view to their own material circumstances. Spontaneously the intelligentsia has a bourgeois understanding of the primacy of revolutionary political struggle. Under bourgeois rule, each class or class fraction falls under the bourgeois illusions appropriate to its concrete conditions. For example, trade unionism collapses the political struggle into the economic struggle, such that the political struggle merely reflects the inherent limitations of the economic struggle under capitalism. By contrast, the intelligentsia collapses the political struggle into the ideological struggle, such that the ideological struggle is understood itself as political.

Spontaneously, the intelligentsia does not view ideology as having any material existence. Bourgeois ideology defines the intelligentsia as people who make their living by "thinking," by "having ideas," and not as the functionaries of given institutions, charged with the reproduction of the ideological conditions of capitalist production. Under the weight of this ideology, the intelligentsia does not relate "having ideas" to the given institutions and practices in which one "has ideas." It regards ideas as an independent realm. Consequently, the intelligentsia spontaneously views the revolutionary as one "having revolutionary ideas"; making revolution as revolutionizing ideas; and organizing the masses as winning them to revolutionary ideas. Of course, all these conceptions conform to an **aspect** of revolutionary work; the point here is that the intelligentsia tends to seize upon this aspect as the exclusive feature of communist activity.

Formal Logic and Dialectical Materialism

Many of the specific "left" opportunist lines we have dealt with in the past two chapters contain this intellectualist bias. In party-building line, both the exaggeration of revisionist influence and the inability to distinguish between outright revisionists and those simply making errors reflect it. The petit-bourgeois intelligentsia is disposed to view phenomena from the perspective of formal logic, as the logical development of ideas, and not from the dialectical materialist standpoint. The ideological struggle occurs, then, between Right and Wrong ideas. Wrong ideas represent bourgeois influence,

therefore, they represent the bourgeoisie. An error carried to its logical conclusion results in a full-blown line. A deviation is a deviation is a deviation. In waging ideological struggle or making a concrete analysis, the intelligentsia tends not to weigh errors in relation to the **material reality** of their influence, or in relation to political reality generally. It severs the dialectic between matter and idea. Therefore, the CPUSA can represent the main danger to the workers' movement, as many groups like the OL and the MLOC claim (see Chapter Three, section E.), not because of its real weight or influence on working class struggle, but rather because it spreads revisionist ideas, and revisionist ideas represent the main danger to Marxist-Leninist ideas. One or another group can represent a "better defender of the bourgeoisie than the bourgeois themselves" not because of their real importance as social props of bourgeois rule, but simply because their erroneous ideas have disguised themselves as communist ideas.

Marxist-Leninist politics demand concrete analysis of actual subjective and objective conditions. When Lenin described "working-class activists who follow the opportunist trend" as "better defenders of the bourgeoisie than the bourgeois themselves," (**LCW 31**, p. 231) he based that estimate on detailed knowledge of the size and importance, ideologically, politically, and organizationally, of the Social-Democratic opportunists of his day. "Without their leadership of the workers," he writes, "the bourgeoisie could not remain in power." In support of this thesis, he cites the examples of the Kerensky regime in Russia, the democratic republic in Germany under its Social-Democratic government, and "similar experience in Britain and the United States." Kerensky's regime could not have lasted for the better than half year that it did without the **mass** support in the Soviets and the army which the Mensheviks and the Socialist-Revolutionaries gave it. The bourgeoisie in Germany could not have put down the proletarian insurrections guided by Rosa Luxemburg and other Communists without the mass control which the Social-Democratic political and trade-union apparatus had behind its murderous actions. In Britain, what Lenin calls the opportunist trend refers to the British Labor Party, an organization which like the German Social-Democrats, and, for a time, the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, had direct organizational and ideological influence over millions even before it got into government. And the reference to the U.S. needs to be treated carefully, since it is doubtful that Lenin means that without the Socialist Party, the bourgeoisie could not remain in power. More likely, it refers to the AFL, since four days after the above speech, Lenin speaks of "the parties of Gompers [of the AFL] and Henderson [of the British Labor Party], parties of parliamentary smart dealers and traitors to the working class." (**Ibid.**, p. 236) (On a cadre for cadre basis, a reformist Socialist Party working class activist would do a more effective job of defending the bourgeoisie than, say, a Board member of J.P. Morgan's bank, but taken as a whole the Socialist Party of that time did not do a better job of defending bourgeois rule than the bourgeoisie of Woodrow Wilson, the Palmer Raids, the great "race riots" of 1919-1920, and union-busting.)

Contrast Lenin's materialist analysis with the phrase-mongering that infests our movement. When the Workers Viewpoint Organization headlines an article "Better Defender of the Bourgeoisie than the Bourgeoisie Itself—On the 'Communist' League [now the CLP]," what is this but petit-bourgeois delirium? Do hundreds of thousands or millions of CLP-led working class activists presently insure the Carter regime and the continued reproduction of capital? Does the bourgeoisie presently really have need of their services to stay in power? And when some comrades claim that "just as dangerous, in their own way, as the CPUSA is the so-called Revolutionary Communist Party," they cite not real influence of the RCP in any trade union even remotely comparable to the CPUSA influence in UE, or 1199, or DWA, or the Steelworkers reform movement, not RCP influence in any national movement comparable to what the revisionists hold in the Black movement, but simply "the revisionist essence of the RCP." The RCP is then as dangerous as the CPUSA because the ideas of the RCP are also, "in essence," revisionist.

This type of spontaneously intellectualist reasoning has grave consequences for the struggle for Marxist-Leninist unity. If we consider only pure, "independent ideas, it is extremely difficult to distinguish between the two basic types of contradictions: those between ourselves and the enemy, and those among the people. Mao says that "the former are a matter of drawing a clear distinction between ourselves and the enemy, and the latter a matter of drawing a clear distinction between right and wrong." ("On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People") But he adds that "the distinction between ourselves and the enemy is also a matter of right and

wrong." If we abandon the dialectical materialist standpoint, separate matter from idea, we cannot make concrete distinctions between right and wrong within the people's camp, and right and wrong between us and the enemy. Everything then appears as right and wrong in the abstract, and since "ultimately" "in the final analysis" "taken to their logical development" "in essence" right and wrong reflects bourgeois influence, everything becomes right and wrong between us and the enemy. It matters whether a militant worker puts forward a bourgeois notion, or whether some slick International Rep from union headquarters does the same, and it requires different methods to resolve the contradiction. It also matters whether a group of communists, relatively new to Marxism-Leninism, with good practices of criticism and self-criticism, and developing ties to the working class, set down some "ultimately" revisionist-inspired conception, or whether some CPUSA Central Committee member spouts the same thing. That also requires two different methods to resolve the contradiction. But what matters to the ultra-left line, driven by the spontaneous ideology of the petit-bourgeois intelligentsia, is guarding the purity of its own ideas and justifying its own sectarian self-importance.

Bourgeois Influence Means More Than Bourgeois Ideas

The same spontaneous prejudices of the intelligentsia provide fertile ground for the growth of "left" opportunist political lines. Ultra-left abstentionism towards the reform struggle, in favor of adventurist, super-revolutionary rhetoric and action, betrays a view of reformism as simply "reformist illusions." If we "expose" these illusions, the "lefts" argue, the masses will reject them and opt for revolution. If, on the other hand, we go into the reform struggle, we will only encourage the masses in their reformist illusion that their conditions can change in any fundamental way under capitalism. Here the "Lefts" separate the illusions from the actual struggle which produces them. In this they remind us of a man who claims he wants a fight, but won't go the one place his opponent is staying. If reformist illusions are produced through the intervention of the bourgeois line in the reform struggle, then the place for communists is precisely in the reform struggle, combating reformist illusions at the same time as they attempt to lead the masses in bettering their combative position vis-a-vis Capital. Only in the thick of the daily mass struggle for political and economic reforms can the communists win the masses to revolutionary leadership. Only when the communists share the experiences of the masses, and educate them on the basis of their own experience with the bourgeois reformists, with the social-democratic reformists, with the revisionists, and even with the ultra-leftists, will the masses abandon their deep-seated faith in reformism and take up the revolutionary cause. It simply does no good to tell people, "over in the next town, they are doing terrible things." Unless they respect you from the beginning (which implies that at one time you had earned their respect), they won't believe you and will want to see for themselves. The masses of the working class do not follow the Marxist-Leninists and so far have very little reason to. Therefore, we must go to the next town, which is where the masses are, share their experiences, and together with them, sum them up.

There are countless examples of this intellectualist approach to combating bourgeois influence within the class. The instinctive "left" contempt for electoral work, of which any type is dubbed "electoral cretinism" on the grounds that it encourages "electoral illusions," provides one such instance. The opposition to struggles for the democratic rights of Black people, of Chicanos and other oppressed nationalities, or of women, as expressed in opposition to the fight for partial desegregation of schools through busing, or the ERA, provides another. To fight "bourgeois-democratic illusions" we must oppose struggles for democratic rights, deduce the "Lefts", "Left" opportunists cannot understand the opportunities for revolutionary work offered by these struggles because they do not analyze the **material basis** of white-supremacist ideology, nationalist ideology, or male supremacist ideology within the working class. Therefore, they cannot see how these struggles could permit the revolutionary workers' movement to attack the real structure of white-supremacist national oppression or the oppression of women in this country, while showing them that this or that democratic reform will not alter their basic lot in the U.S. Instead, like the contemplative flunkies of the university, the super-revolutionary intelligentsia reduces racism and male supremacy to "bad ideas" which we must fight with the "good ideas" of proletarian dictatorship and armed struggle. With the abandonment of the masses' ongoing struggle for reforms and democracy, the petit-bourgeois intelligentsia often falls into a ferocious form of economist agitation. Because

the reformist allegiance of the working class rests on no more than "ideas," which certain types of political struggles only stimulate, the "Lefts" head for the struggle of real "substance," the fight for a better standard of living.

The "left" attack on nationalism which we mentioned in the last chapter finds support in the same intellectualist and idealist bias. Rather than examining the nationalism expressed by different classes and different movements—i.e., examining nationalism in its concrete reality—the ultra-lefts treat nationalism as a set of concepts. Since an idea is an idea is an idea, and since nationalism, as an idea, stems from the bourgeoisie, Progressive Labor can tell us that "all nationalism is reactionary" and the RU/RCP can pontificate, "all nationalism is...nationalism."

The intelligentsia's spontaneous conceptions of the Party and party-building render the ideological level of the Party principle absolute. In effect this reduces the Party's role to that of a propaganda sect or political book club, a function which accords with the intellectual's fear of the discipline necessary to a powerful, proletarian Party. But then the intelligentsia does not instinctively see the necessity for a strong Party in the first place. We do not need a strong Party to "have revolutionary ideas," to issue statements which "expose" bourgeois-democratic illusions, or to abstain from the mass reform struggle—a small group will do. To organize the proletariat, to lead it in its political and economic battles, and to combat reformist influence on the basis of the masses' own experience requires a powerful revolutionary organization. But to wage a "revolution" of ideas does not.

"Left" Subjectivism

In sum, the class instincts of the revolutionary intelligentsia tend towards a deep-rooted **subjectivism**, and this in three senses. First, in its study of reality, the intelligentsia frequently falls into subjectivism because it privileges the analysis of ideas. By separating ideas from their place in material institutions (including the apparatus of the proletariat: its Party, its trade unions, etc.) and material practices, these tendencies deprive revolutionaries of their ability to make concrete analyses of concrete conditions.

Second, the exaggeration of the importance of ideas commonly leads the revolutionary intelligentsia into a confusion of its own ideas and in particular, of its wishes, with the real world. The severing of theory from practice, criticized in works like Mao's "On Practice," provides a good example. In the present period, many Marxist-Leninists agree that the study and application of theory has priority over practice. In other words, the quantitative accumulation of more experience, of more practice, will not decisively advance the communist movement in its grasp of U.S. reality; the Marxist-Leninists chiefly lack the qualitative leap which the theoretical synthesis of past and present revolutionary experience will bring. At the same time, however, the dialectical materialist thesis on knowledge maintains that the development of theory itself requires struggle to lead the masses, according to the formulation, practice, theory, practice. But a number of comrades, reflecting on this general truth, think they see a shortcut. They think they see a shortcut both because they want a shortcut and because the intelligentsia does not spontaneously recognize the dependence of theory on practice. If we practice in order to advance our theory, they reason, why not save time and forego practice? This question belongs to the typically petit-bourgeois "what if?" syndrome discussed in Chapter Four: **what if** theory didn't depend on practice? **What if** we could develop theory without rooting ourselves in the practical movement? **What if** theory didn't need development at all—what if we could find all the theory we need in books other Marxist-Leninists have written? Then revolution would come all the more quickly! Lacking the patience for protracted revolutionary work, and anxious to achieve a rapid change in their present social position, the revolutionary petit-bourgeoisie tends to grasp at any short-cut, any adventure which promises quick results.¹

Third, the subjectivism of the revolutionary intelligentsia expresses itself in the characteristic **voluntarism** of petit-bourgeois revolutionism. Revolutionary intellectuals and students underestimate the strength of reformism within the working class. They reduce it to ideas whose only material support lies in the bourgeois media and bourgeois education which spread those bad ideas. By the same token, the radicalized intelligentsia overestimates the effect and significance of certain subjective factors, especially revolutionary ideas. As a consequence, it exaggerates the importance of its own subjective activity. This exaggeration is reflected in such

phenomena as the "leaflet-forum-demonstration style" within the communist movement and the overextension of so many of our organizations. Faced with almost any situation in mass work, the first impulse of many cadre pushes them to issue an agitational leaflet or call a "small but spirited" demonstration. From the excitable perspective of petit-bourgeois revolutionism, everything needs to be done today, and if the masses aren't ready to do it, we should do it for them. In a situation marked by a low level of spontaneous mass struggle and the continued strong hold of bourgeois reformism, this voluntarism quickly results in the Marxist-Leninists monopolizing effective leadership functions in mass activities, which in turn leads to the complete exhaustion of overextended cadre. But most importantly, it means depriving the masses of their own political experience in setting a direction for their own revolution.

Footnote

¹ This irresolution compels petit-bourgeois revolutionism to "revise" famous axioms of Marxism-Leninism in its own image. Where Gramsci counseled, "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will," the ultra-left might cry, "Optimism of the intellect, optimism of the will!" Where Mao declared that "The future is bright, and the road is tortuous," the super-revolutionaries protest that "The future is bright, and the road is always very bright too!" Because it longs for a radical transformation of its own conditions, **and** because it cannot endure the twists and turns of revolution without a profound remolding of its world outlook, the revolutionary petit-bourgeoisie refuses to see any difficulties on the high road to revolution. Everyone has had the experience of listening to a wide-eyed member of some "left" group describe in incredibly glowing terms virtually every action in which his or her group has had even the most peripheral involvement, and the pages of many of the communist newspapers speak for themselves.

False exhilaration breeds false despair. Disillusionment follows "revolutionist illusions," and from ultra-leftism the petit-bourgeoisie can easily swing back to reformism. The Weatherman/McGovernites of 1972, or the careers of people like Tom Hayden, Eldridge Cleaver, and Jane Alpert, or, more relevant to the present communist movement, the many "burned-out" PL members who devote themselves to professional careers or become trade-union reformists offer the proof. Both Gramsci's and Mao's maxims represent the world view of a class historically destined to emancipate all mankind, yet faced with a powerful enemy who will not leave the world stage of his own precious "free will." Bourgeois ideology, in either its anarchist or its reformist guises, can only reason in unilateral, metaphysical fashion: either we are optimistic, or we are pessimistic; either we despise the enemy, or we take him seriously. Therefore the ultra-leftist battle-cries easily change into the whimpering of the reformist: "pessimism of the intellect, pessimism of the will," or "The road is tortuous, and anyway, so is the future..."