

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 F. Anarchist Influence in the U.S. Communist Movement

From the preceding discussion, we can see that petit-bourgeois subjectivism has more in common with the anarchistic critique of revisionism than it does with the Marxist-Leninist position. Its spontaneous ideological tendencies predispose the revolutionary intelligentsia to certain features of anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist doctrine. The intelligentsia therefore is liable to incorporate these features into its understanding of Marxism-Leninism. In other words, its understanding of Marxism-Leninism leans towards the anarchistic. A communist movement which largely originated in the revolutionary petit-bourgeoisie would then be peculiarly susceptible to "left" opportunism, to the adaptation of Marxism-Leninism to anarchism.

The characteristic deviations of the U.S. movement show how petit-bourgeois subjectivism and the anarchist tradition dovetail with one another. Here the ultra-left errors we have discussed in previous chapters have their ideological roots. The inflated estimate of the communist movement's own importance, the completely subjective picture of a working class ready for the revolutionary offensive, the adventurist tactics and raging phrase-mongering all stem in the final analysis from an anarchistic exaggeration of the role of the conscious element. From anarcho-syndicalism too springs the sectarian intransigence towards almost every non-communist organization in the national movements, towards the women's movement generally, towards all trade union officials, towards any alliance, however temporary, with petit-bourgeois democratic trends, and finally towards other communist organizations.

Semi-anarchist conceptions of revolutionary organization nourish one voluntaristic Founding Party Congress after another, each forswearing any compromise over any difference, each convinced that its actions can "unleash" a seething working class, each set against the discipline exercised by a powerful proletarian Party. The ultra-left trend draws upon anarchistic sympathies for its hostility towards any dealings with bourgeois democracy, for its rejection of the reform struggle and the fight for consistent democracy, for its worship of "heroic" confrontationist tactics in all situations, for its "leadership" of strikes in total disregard for the immediate demands of the workers. Our "Lefts" also seek militant actions or "small but spirited" demonstrations "at every opportunity" and recommend them solely for their "spiritual rather than for their immediate practical value."

The "opponentist" mentality of so many communist groups, their sense of themselves as less Parties than "parties of criticism" of all preceding groups, ultimately derives from an anarchistic conception of the fight against reformists. This conception exaggerates the importance of combating "revisionist ideas" with "revolutionary ideas," and so reduces the role of the revolutionary vanguard to education and "exposure." Again the WVO provides a textbook example: "the exposure of these labor misleaders and other liberal reformists is more than two-thirds of the way to revolution in the U.S." (**WV**, vol. 2, no. 1, p. 39) The ultra-lefts "enlighten" the masses, but they will never lead them in class struggle. If "exposure," education and

enlightenment define the role of the conscious element, then a small sect can fulfill that function quite nicely. Should it grow too large, or attempt to grapple with the practical problems of making revolution, another "party of criticism" can spring up from the same soil to find fault and replace it. What is a group like WVO but a "party of criticism"? What does it offer the working class but "opposition" to all the other communist groups?

To sum up, the voluntarism of revolutionary students and intellectuals naturally finds the voluntarism of the anarchist tradition attractive. No wonder then that a communist movement based mainly in this strata has difficulty distinguishing Marxism-Leninism from its pseudo-"left" competitor.

Voluntarist in Form, Fatalistic in Essence

In form, the main danger to the anti-revisionist forces stems from semi-anarchism, from "left" opportunism. **In essence**, however, it has a Rightist character. The "left" deviation shares the fundamental assumptions of Right opportunism, or what Lenin calls "semi-liberalism." For in essence, anarchism itself is but the flip-side of liberalism. Rudolf Rocker, the leader of the International Workingmen's Association (the anarcho-syndicalist international during the 20th century), defines anarchism as "a synthesis of Socialism and Liberalism," explaining that "Anarchism has in common with Liberalism the idea that the happiness and prosperity of the individual must be the standard in all social matters." (**Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 23) As an illustration of this point, we need only think of contemporary libertarianism in the U.S., which originally advertised itself as combining traditional conservative philosophy with various tenets of the "New Left," but in fact has grown up as an extreme Right-wing current (for the initial enthusiasm shown libertarianism by New Left publications, see the wide reception accorded Karl Hess, Barry Goldwater's former speechwriter, in magazines like **Ramparts** half a dozen years ago).

Fatalism breeds both passivity and voluntarism. Behind Right opportunism lurks the fatalistic belief that the maturation of objective conditions will bring about socialism. The ultra-leftists share this basic premise. They differ in that they act on the expectation that the objective factors have already brought the masses to the brink of revolution, where they now await some spectacular push from the revolutionaries. For Bakunin, revolutions come

"...like a thief in the night, ...produced by the force of events. They are long in preparation in the depths of the instinctive consciousness of the masses—then they explode, often precipitated by apparently trivial causes." (quoted in Guerin, p. 34)

On the one hand, the spontaneous class instincts of the revolutionary petit-bourgeoisie are bourgeois and evolutionist. On the other hand, owing to their keen resentment of their own social status, revolutionary students and intellectuals lack the patience for the revisionists' waiting game. Petit-bourgeois revolutionism therefore arises as the voluntaristic complement of evolutionism. Neither the "left" nor the Right pursues a line which will do everything to prepare the working class organizationally and ideologically for decisive class battles, lead it forward to the offensive when conditions warrant, while avoiding rash advances which isolate the most conscious forces and open them up to repression.

Because the evolution of objective conditions has brought or even now brings the masses to revolution, the semi-anarchists consider the reform struggle an unnecessary, dangerous, and futile diversion. Unnecessary because the masses do not need to improve their combative position.

Objective events have prepared them for revolution; they have no need of further preparation in the fight for consistent democracy, for economic and political reforms. Dangerous because it diverts the masses into reformist channels at a time when they yearn for the decisive onslaught against Capital. Futile because the maturation of the contradictions of capitalism has deprived the bourgeoisie of any room to maneuver, of any possibility for concession. Alliances with other classes, class fractions, or their parties are just as useless and just as dangerous. At a time when the inexorable march of events throws all intermediate strata, all class forces, into either the revolutionary or the counter-revolutionary camp, alliances are not necessary to win over anyone, and can only tie our hands. Nor do we have any need for compromise around tactical differences within the revolutionary camp, since there too the very ripening of the crisis will quickly distinguish the true revolutionaries from the Fifth Column behind their lines. And what purpose would the steel-like organization of the proletariat serve when objective factors themselves promise to catapult the class into revolutionary struggle?

The ultra-left mirrors the Right in yet another respect. Reformism and modern revisionism relegate the masses to the role of spectators or an occasional pressure group before the parliamentary maneuvering, trade-union negotiating, and electoral cretinism of the Right. The reformists and revisionists counsel the masses to have faith in their representatives, to leave matters in their hands. With the appearance of the ultra-left, the scene changes but not the actors. Because the slogans and actions of "left" opportunists do not correspond to the real possibilities of the situation, the masses find them incomprehensible if not simply crazy. "Left" adventurism and reformist politicking combine to deprive the masses of political education on the basis of their own experience. In essence, and despite all its fine words about the masses, the ultra-left tries to deny them their rightful place as the makers (and unmakers) of revolution.

That "left" opportunism shares the evolutionist framework of right opportunism explains in part the spectacular reversals in line which ultra-left groups frequently go through. As the Chinese Communists say, "one trend covers another." Trotskyism consists in a peculiar combination of the fatalist economism typical of Russian Menshevism and the Second International with Utopian anarcho-syndicalist thought. (Trotsky himself once confessed to "social-revolutionary fatalism.") But the common evolutionist framework of Right and "left" deviations also helps explain the ease of recent shifts in some of the modern revisionist parties.

Modern revisionism does not always and everywhere mean "peaceful transition," parliamentary cretinism, and opposition to armed struggle. In its contention with U.S. imperialism for world hegemony, the Soviet social-imperialists attempt to use the revisionist parties to further its global aims. "Swimming with the tides of history" will not bring these parties to state power. Indeed, the urging of "peaceful transition" on other parties by Krushchev was probably less motivated by a reformism of the Togliattian type on the CPSU's part than by the need for increased collusion with U.S. imperialism. At the present time, when the Soviet Union has passed from defensive collusion to a more offensive posture, "swimming with the tides of history" or "historic compromises" of the Italian sort no longer necessarily suit Soviet ambitions. The CPSU has therefore written articles recently denouncing "reformist" currents in the modern revisionist trend and criticizing too great a reliance on the parliamentary road. Where the modern revisionist parties give in to Soviet pressures for a more militant strategy, they have no real alternative except voluntarist action. Their entire practice has not prepared the subjective conditions for revolutionary struggle where the actual situation might allow it. Therefore they may fall

into adventurism, just as the ultra-left adventurers often swing back to reformism. The attempted putsch by the revisionist party in the Sudan (1971) gives a foretaste of what modern revisionism may have in store for the late '70's and '80's. So does the Chilean party's disastrous combination of the worst of both worlds—a reformist conception of state power and the neutrality of the armed forces married to some "left" policies in its nationalizations of national bourgeois and even petit-bourgeois property. These shifts within Soviet strategy and within the modern revisionist parties merit the greatest attention of Marxist-Leninists. They create pressures and open up opportunities which the revolutionary forces can use to the proletariat's advantage. Can use to their advantage **if** the communists reject trite formulas and pursue supple tactics in their stance towards the revisionist parties.