

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 H. But is Dogmatism the Main Danger?

The pervasive character of dogmatism in the communist ranks has suggested to some Marxist-Leninist groups and individuals that dogmatism constitutes the main danger to the movement. Organizations like the Philadelphia Workers Organizing Committee have said that "dogmatism and ultra-leftism" both constitute the main danger, but the party-building resolution where this formulation occurs pays almost exclusive attention to dogmatism, asserting, for example, that "the first step towards a national center consists in the drawing of demarcation lines between Marxism-Leninism and dogmatism," and speaking of "dogmatist opportunism" as a distinct form of opportunism. Many groups now speak of a "dogmatist trend" and an "anti-dogmatist trend," and regard dogmatism as the twin of revisionism which grows up in an overreaction to it. There is even talk of a distinct "dogmatist problematic." In general, a growing tendency has emerged which identifies the main characteristic of the dominant trend in the communist movement as dogmatism.

Without question, dogmatism has flourished in our movement, like weeds after a summer storm. The worship of quotations, the deprecation of serious theoretical work, the manufacture of dogma in the guise of "clear lines of demarcation," a contempt for some forms of practice, the propagation of metaphysics and idealism—all figure among the important ideological and methodological short-comings of our movement. And there is no denying that dogmatism has affected the consideration of virtually every major problem within the emerging Marxist-Leninist camp. Then too, "left" opportunism has definite philosophical and epistemological roots, and what we have called metaphysical dogmatism certainly buttresses the ultra-left trend. But though we believe that struggle against the philosophical roots of "left" opportunism has an important role to play in the defeat of ultra-leftism, and despite the importance of metaphysical dogmatism as a philosophical error, we do not think that dogmatism constitutes the main danger to the communist movement. Moreover, we think the identification of dogmatism as the chief threat can add to the corrosive and centrifugal influences within the movement and tend to derail the struggle against "left" sectarianism and "left" opportunism generally.

Behind these different estimates of the importance of dogmatism lie two different conceptions of dogmatism itself.

We regard dogmatism as a methodological and philosophical error. It consists in the creation of dogma through the metaphysical breaching of the dialectical unity of absolute and relative truth. For this reason, we prefer the term "metaphysical dogmatism," since it points to the **method** of dogmatism (metaphysics), a method which extends to other philosophical errors which are not necessarily dogmatic (the severing of the dialectical unity between quantitative and qualitative change, for example). The term "metaphysical dogmatism" also establishes a link to idealism. According to common usage, dogmatists "take quotes out of context": in other words, they take the particular (the particular reflection of reality) and "boil it down"—boil away its

particularity—to the general. From the given analysis, they seize upon the idealist "essence," an essential thesis which they then erect as an absolute.

The emerging "anti-dogmatist" view has put forward a contradictory analysis of dogmatism: it considers dogmatism at one and the same time **a form of opportunism** (the main opportunist danger even) and **the theoretical foundation or ideological source of opportunism**. Further, it defines dogmatism as "book-worship," as the repeating of phrases learned by rote and the failure to make concrete analyses, and it attacks "ultra-dogmatists" like the WVO for "sounding a retreat from the working class movement, a retreat from the stormy seas of class struggle to the cushioned rooms of intellectualist study and debate."

Dogmatism and Orthodoxy

Both halves of the "anti-dogmatist" analysis mistake the symptoms of a problem for the problem itself. To begin with, dogmatism is not itself a form of opportunism. Even more than the word "sectarianism," the term dogmatism covers a multitude of ideological tendencies and therefore conceals more than it reveals. Dogmatism accompanies many erroneous lines, both Right and "left," and in a given historical period may mark principally the Right or "left" opportunist camp. Stalin lists as one of the three "general principles of communist strategy and tactics,

"the repudiation of all doctrinairism (Right and Left) when changing strategy and tactics, when working out new strategic plans and tactical lines (Kautsky, Axelrod, Bogdanov, Bukharin), repudiation of the contemplative method and the method of quoting texts and drawing historical parallels, artificial plans and lifeless formulas (Axelrod, Plekhanov)." (CW 5, p. 81)

In addition, his book, **Foundations of Leninism**, treats almost exclusively the theoretical dogmas of the Second International, which at that time was the main proponent of a dogmatic "Marxism." Before we set off on a campaign against dogmatism, we need to know just whose dogmatism we are chasing after.

Now Marxism-Leninism is not a dogma, and therefore has nothing to fear from a campaign against dogmatism. But in the inevitable reaction to the opportunism, sectarianism, and dogmatism of the ultra-Lefts, some comrades will doubtless mistake one for the other. Therefore Marxist-Leninists have the obligation to distinguish what tradition calls orthodoxy from the dogmatism and false orthodoxy of the "Lefts," and guard against that dogmatism of the Right and the "Left" which will happily march under an "anti-dogmatic" banner.

In summary, identifying dogmatism as the main danger does not sufficiently specify the real culprit and may lead to a confusion of friends and enemies.

Nor does dogmatism constitute the theoretical foundation or ideological source of "left" opportunism, much less some distinct "problematic." Aside from its philosophical meaning, dogmatism has no specific content as a description of the ideological sources of any type of opportunism. Where "left" opportunism has a definite source in anarchist ideology, and right opportunism a definite ideological source in reformist or liberal ideology, the term dogmatism does not tell us from what major anti-Marxist current a given deviation has drawn (from where it gets its dogma, in other words). That dogmatism has no definite ideological content is shown by the willingness of both "Lefts" and Rights to attack the dogmatism of "left" groups. The Right case is obvious. But lest we forget, the Revolutionary Union has throughout

its history posed as a staunch champion of "anti-dogmatism. Its attacks on the Communist League and later the BWC and PRRWO contain analyses and explanations which some of today's anti-dogmatists have consciously or unconsciously taken over. And not only does anarcho-syndicalist influence often result in attacks on "dogmatism," but other forms of anarchism do as well. The Weather Underground and associated organizations, while certainly ultra-left, oppose both dogmatism and orthodoxy within the Marxist-Leninist movement.

Dogmatism is also inadequate as a description of the philosophical roots of "left" opportunism. We have attempted to locate metaphysical dogmatism in relation to a specific philosophical problem. Outside the problem of the relations between absolute and relative truth—outside the question of creating dogma—the term dogmatism has no definite meaning. Though metaphysical dogmatism leads to idealism, dogmatism is not by itself a philosophy. Again, it figures as a feature of a number of different philosophies, just as relativism does.¹ Metaphysical dogmatism does help shore up "left" sectarianism and other "left" errors. But that our "Lefts'" dogma takes the form of adventurism and not tailism stems from subjective idealism.

These misconceptions about dogmatism reflect the weaknesses in the anti-dogmatist comrades' understanding of "left" opportunism. The anti-dogmatists define dogmatism as "bookworship," the separation of theory from practice, and "grasping Marxism-Leninism as if it were the 'new religion,' to be quoted and parroted as a series of lifeless maxims." For them, these qualities characterize a "left" deviation. As we saw in Chapter Two, Section H, however, these same characteristics may accompany a Right deviation. This general view of dogmatism comes to us from the "Left" itself, in particular, from those organizations with stronger anarcho-syndicalist leanings. We can find the same phraseology, for example, in the special insert to **Revolution** (organ of the RU/RCP) devoted to criticizing the Communist League and in the RU pamphlet, **On Building the Party of the U.S. Working Class and the Struggle Against Dogmatism and Reformism**.

The "Lefts" benefit from such a definition of dogmatism, since many of the most grievous theoretical errors of the "left" groups have nothing to do with bookworship at all. WVO's "anti-revisionist premises," its "third period of bourgeois democracy," "third period of the communist movement," "third period of the movements of the oppressed nationalities;" PRRWO's united front "only from below" or its "central and only task" of party-building; the RU's "proletarian nation of a new type," its "Third Period" of the national question, its democratic centralism "of a new type," its left liquidation of struggles for democratic rights—none of these are "quotations" from Marxist-Leninist works. None of these result from the "parroting" of Marxist-Leninist books. None of these are "lifeless maxims" from the pen of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, or Mao. They are **creative applications** of semi-anarchist principles, or **further developments** of "left" opportunism. Similarly, the main problem with the activities of the major "left" groups is not their refusal to go to the shops, communities, and picket-lines and practice what they preach, but rather their eagerness to practice the "left" opportunist line they put forward in theory. The work of fusing Marxism-Leninism with the workers' movement would be further advanced today if the ultra-lefts **would** stay in their studies rather than actively present such a caricature of Marxist-Leninist work among the masses. In that case, the ultra-left would pose much less of a danger to the communist movement than it does today.

Even judged on its own terms, dogmatism is simply too vague a term to qualify as either the main danger or as indicating the key link in the struggle against opportunism. We said in the second chapter that the main danger is

the chief obstacle to decisive advances on our current tasks. On this basis, we argued that the main struggle for the Party at this time occurs around party-building line, and that the main deviation at this level among the communist forces comes from the "Left" and principally takes the form of "left" sectarianism. But crying "dogmatism" does not tell us where the chief obstacle lies or from what direction it comes. Depending on where dogmatism makes itself felt most acutely, communists would have different theoretical and political tasks. In other words, if dogmatism or even "left" dogmatism were the main opportunist danger, then dogmatism around what? Dogmatism in party-building line? Dogmatism in political line? Dogmatism in ideological line? Each choice carries specific practical implications, and the lack of any choice does too, as well as leaving the field open to those for whom the campaign against an undifferentiated "dogmatism" serves other, anti-Marxist ends. And while the view that "left" dogmatism on party-building constitutes the main danger is not the worst alternative to "left" sectarianism, even then the main kind of party-building deviation (the main kind of dogma on party-building, to use anti-dogmatist terms) goes undefined.

The Real Content of Anti-Dogmatism

Practically speaking, a number of the anti-dogmatist forces have implicitly taken into account all these weaknesses of their theoretical analysis. Since outside of certain restricted philosophical problems, dogmatism is a completely empty term, they have attempted to fill it out with a definite content. That content lies in all those other positions which the anti-dogmatists find "dogmatic." Most of these positions consist in different political lines (the Black national question, for example), and most especially, international political line, in which basic agreement with the analyses of the CPC and PLA has found itself labeled "dogmatic."

Targeting dogmatism as the main, immediate danger to the communist forces will lead to splitting the anti-"left" opportunist forces along unprincipled lines and divert a section of them from the fight against "left" sectarianism. In effect, it can have the same impact on the struggle for communist unification as the view that amateurishness is the source of disunity. The latter perspective, carried to its organizational conclusion, justifies the splitting of groups in the interests of eradicating amateurishness. In the name of the fight against dogmatism, comrades would contribute to the unprincipled division of the anti-"left" opportunist forces by organizing a separate "anti-dogmatic" tendency or trend. Holding dogmatism as the "root cause" of "left" opportunism, comrades would be led to organize such a trend along sectarian if "anti-dogmatic" lines. As a tactical approach to party-building, this is really a sometimes disguised case of the view that "political line is key," since the lines of demarcation between "dogmatism" and Marxism-Leninism consist almost entirely in differences over political line. A number of the anti-dogmatist forces in fact openly adhere to the view that political line is primary or key. As such, this party-building line has all the faults of the more common "left" position that "political line is key," which we analyzed in Chapter Two.

The sectarian character of the initiatives of some of the anti-dogmatist forces helps clarify relations between "left" sectarianism on the one hand and dogmatism on the other. We have said that dogmatism is not a distinct form of opportunism, not the ideological source of "left" opportunism, nor the single philosophical root of "left" opportunism. But this still leaves the question of the importance of dogmatism as a characteristic of the "left" line in relation to other errors of the "left" line. In terms of party-building strategy, this means the relative importance of fighting dogmatism in relation to the fight against other "left" errors. The anti-dogmatists view dogmatism as the single most

important characteristic of the ultra-Lefts, and the fight against dogmatism as the key struggle in the fight against "left" errors. We see "left" sectarianism as the chief characteristic of the "left" line at this time, and make the fight against "left" sectarianism the key link in the fight against ultra-leftism.

Though dogmatism and "left" sectarianism obviously condition each other and are mutually dependent, the fight against dogmatism mainly turns on the struggle against "left" sectarianism in the present-day U.S. communist movement, and not the other way around. The unprincipled polarization of communist organizations reinforces dogmatism as surely as it does amateurishness. The narrow practical and theoretical basis for the development of theory within each isolated group almost inevitably results in one-sided, subjectively biased analyses. These analyses in turn cannot be verified, since the small size of the various groups, their disorganization and weak ties to the proletariat prohibit the sustained, widespread implementation, investigation, and synthesis of experience which alone qualifies as the verification of theory. A one-sided, fragmentary practice exaggerates still further a one-sided, fragmentary theory. Finally, theory must frequently shoulder the burden of explaining the "principled" basis for each organization's separate existence. In order to justify a refusal to subordinate their part to the whole communist movement, the various "Left-Wing" groups need theories which emphasize all that distinguishes them from the ideological and political lines of their competitors. One-sidedness then becomes a virtue: it gives "our side" of the increasingly antagonistic contradiction between "us" and the rest of the movement. Theory serves as a ceremonial ornament for polemical attacks and internal display, a "line of demarcation" drawn across the communist movement which you then dare your opponents to cross. The reality and interests of "left" sectarianism can only result in dogma, in the production of what Lenin calls "special theories" (see **WITBD?**) which rationalize a "special place" at the party-building table.

The defeat of dogmatism requires the confrontation of the various "special theories," the correction of their almost inevitable one-sidedness through disciplined theoretical struggle. As long as theory ministers to "left" sectarian ambitions, that confrontation will not take place. Subjecting the "special theories" of our "Lefts" to the demands of revolutionary work in a real situation *cannot* be separated from the centralization of theoretical debate. "Anti-dogmatic" intentions can only float so long in a sectarian swamp without themselves taking on dogmatic features. If we want to get rid of dogmatism and other forms of subjectivism, we must first break the stranglehold of "left" sectarianism.

Footnote

¹ Dogma results even where a philosophy recognizes no absolute truth, and therefore in principle no dogma. Modern revisionism's denial of any universal significance to Marxism-Leninism constitutes a dogma for example, as does the more general proposition that no absolute truth exists.