

This is a rough piece, slightly modified from two earlier drafts that were circulated privately to generate some discussion. This version is also unfinished and its analysis and strategic and organizational conclusions are tentative and provisional. I apologize for this and for the casual citations and references to authors and political tendencies that I am just getting around to considering carefully. I'm putting the argument out in this form, hoping that any frustrations and irritations with the general sloppiness, as well as the likely differences with political characterizations that are seen as mistaken, will provide added leverage towards needed discussions on revolutionary strategy and organization.

Some of the initial responses and reactions are being posted separately. These include a few responses from positions that are cited or criticized in the text. I have made some minor changes in this version as a result of these, but nothing, I think, that would undermine or deflect the thrust of any of the interventions. More such arguments have been solicited and will continue to be welcomed.

LENIN, LENINISM, AND SOME LEFTOVERS

“Leninist socialism as defined in the period of Stalin contained something wrong somewhere...” (Comrade Binod, Nepal; 8/8/09 Kasama)

This will be a start on some arguments that I have been threatening for a while. They will probably have no more real impact than my lapsed efforts to jack up the Jacobin spirit among the libertarian left in response to the current floundering of capital - but a little more discussion might emerge, because what is more fun than debating circumstances long removed and only dimly contextualized and with all alternatives open to caricature. The unfortunate aspect of this is that in the heat of the debate over the political choices of past generations, the most important issues, deciding what to do and beginning to do it in the here and now, can drift further out of focus. I recognize the problem and hope that this doesn't contribute to it.

I begin from the extended discussion of the “What In the Hell...” post of 10/20/2006. This opens with the question... “What in the Hell is the appeal of Lenin?” The current political circumstances are significantly more turbulent than those of 2006 and it's possible that the complacency that permeates much of that “What in the Hell...” discussion has dissipated. However, I wouldn't bet on it. More likely, a casual avoidance of real problems still persists, still encased within unstated and untested assumptions about the self sufficiency of current strategic perspectives. Throughout this piece I will return to this fault that pervades radical views that are otherwise quite different.

I regard myself as a Leninist – frequently to the dismay of others of the ilk – and have always attempted to work to the extent possible within or towards what I view as a Leninist organizational framework. The “What in the Hell...” question is not directed to me, but to unidentified people who the blog author feels are otherwise semi-intelligent leftists. Nevertheless, leaving open if I can make the semi-intelligent bar, I'll venture what will doubtless be seen as a pro-Lenin answer to the question. So this is my take on the appeal of Lenin – which also leads into positions on his continuing relevance and a number of related issues.

THE PERIOD OF INSURRECTION

In the rapidly changing conditions between 1914 and 1918, Lenin's writings and his political activity are a case study in the confrontation of major political questions and their practical resolution on the side of anti-capitalist revolution.

For radical anti-capitalists, the crucial elements of the period were the degeneration of the international workers movement into parliamentary reformism and national chauvinism and the transformation of proletarian revolutionary organizations and institutions into bulwarks of conservatism and caution. Towards the end of the period, this political environment was transformed by the rapid development of revolutionary potentials in Russia, and, to a lesser degree, throughout the world.

During these crucial years Lenin advanced a number of closely related strategic principles; some that reaffirmed radical positions that had been eroded and others that were essentially new. In the first place among these was the revolutionary obligation to utilize all forms of struggle against one's own imperialism under conditions of imperialist war - including those forms that were "illegal". This principle stressed turning the imperialist war into a (class) civil war and supporting and accelerating the national liberation aspirations and struggles of peoples oppressed by one's own capitalism. This was not just a discussion topic or a matter of abstract stance. It was the grounding for Lenin's practical political program in the turbulence of 1917. The fact that this position has become a mixture of meaningless and obscurantist slogans and debating points, notably in its current use by neo-trotskyists of the Marcy bent, does nothing to diminish its relevance in the WWI period.

In the second place, Lenin challenged the trajectory of social democracy towards an institutionalized junior management role in various national capitalisms. This role is a long established fact now, but prior to WWI it was still the focus of a strategic debate over social democratic and anarcho-syndicalist parliamentary and trade union tactics in the "advanced" capitalist countries. In 1917 Russia, Lenin and his allies presented a maximalist alternative, embodied in the prioritization of Soviet Power and the rejection of the path of the "Ten Capitalist Ministers". These issues were at the core of the debates in the Petrograd Soviet during 1917 when Lenin's distinctive positions developed from a small minority position within the Bolsheviks, themselves a distinct minority in the Soviet, into the hegemonic tendency.

In the third place, the Lenin of this period rejected conceptions of necessary protracted intermediate stages for the Russian revolution - and by implication elsewhere in the world - whether such stages were justified by an alleged backwardness of economic development or the limitations of working class consciousness - or any of a range of similar reasons. He emphasized the immediate anti-capitalist potential, including the possibility for a successful class challenge to capitalist state power - a working class insurrection - specifically, although not only in Russia. In taking this stance he also effectively de-emphasized the guiding, controlling and managing role of the organized revolutionary groups - a short-lived change in priorities that, I think, contains an implied critique of many subsequent problems in communist theory and practice.

In the fourth place, Lenin advanced this strategic perspective as part of an organizational separation from opposing social democratic and anarchist tendencies. Other revolutionaries of the period shared substantial political agreement with many of his positions and in some cases developed them earlier and expressed them more carefully and coherently. But most of them, with Rosa Luxemburg as the most obvious example, tended to function as organizationally indistinct minority tendencies in a larger social democratic and, sometimes, anarchist milieu. This limited their ability to test their positions through independent radical organizing initiatives and severely limited their options at moments of revolutionary crisis.

In my opinion, this Soviet Revolutionary period is a crucial episode in the historic struggle for the liberation of humanity from capital and the establishment of communism. It is one of the central human experiences that provide the hope for a different future. Notwithstanding the huge problems, some of which should have been apparent at the moment and others that can be seen clearly in historical hindsight, these political initiatives associated with Lenin, and the accessible history around them, are an example of a revolutionary praxis, warts and all, that should be more than enough to explain Lenin's continuing interest to all revolutionaries - including those with differences extending beyond tactical emphasis to matters of principle.

Lenin fought for his perspective during this period, at times against a Bolshevik majority. He continued the struggle through the destruction of the Russian autocratic state, the overthrow of Russian capitalism, and the establishment of what he believed was a transitional "worker's state" as a beachhead for an imminent international proletarian revolution. His approach expedited the development of a revolutionary project within the Bolsheviks - although without guaranteeing either its permanence or any specific outcomes. By any accounting, these are monumental historical achievements and it is childish to denigrate them. They still constitute the clearest attempt to collectively implement what Alain Badiou calls the "communist hypothesis".

THE LEGITIMATE CRITICAL REVIEW

The fact that this was an immense struggle under extreme conditions and with major limitations on understanding and resources doesn't adequately explain, and certainly doesn't justify, the eventual outcomes. The historical fact is that with dismaying speed, fetishized and mystified organizational forms swallowed emerging capacities to elaborate a revolutionary practice. Instead of facilitating the emancipation and liberation of the oppressed and exploited, monumental piles of shit in Russia and around the world were the result. This outcome was not the unavoidable collateral damage from the struggle against "class enemies," real and fabricated, and it was not the inevitable consequence of any "objective conditions." To a significant degree, it was the result of policies and approaches which had available alternatives, and, while the mere existence of other options does not prove they would have been more successful in either the long or the short run, could the outcomes have been much worse?

To me it seems undeniable that responsibility for the degeneration of the Russian revolution rests on Lenin. Particularly on the Lenin that is not the insurrectionist revolutionary of 1917, but the architect of the revolutionary party in 1903 and the theorist of the worker's state in 1921 and the NEP in 1922. This full legacy is complex and ambiguous, but only apologists and ignorant people deny that it has elements that undermine the democratic and autonomous popular movements and institutions that must be the substance of the struggle for communism. But this darker side of Lenin is also relevant to our current problems and potentials – relevant to many important questions where none of us have been inoculated against screwing up, and, in fact, have become quite good at it. Accordingly this side of Lenin's legacy does not subtract from his historical significance, it provides additional reasons to take it seriously.

If we are to actually learn from history, we must hold the Bolsheviks and Lenin responsible for how Russia developed and not waste time groping for partial and selective exonerations of this policy or that person. However, the process should not obscure the fact that the Russian experience is also our collective legacy. If it is scarred by bad answers, most were addressed to real questions, and many of these questions have not dissolved in the mist of history. We should not approach this collective legacy with the shallow and comfortable polarizations that have afflicted both M.L. and revolutionary anarchist perspectives. At this late date, it should not be seen as a moral divide between good and evil or a political divide between proletarian revolutionaries and petty bourgeoisie dilettantes. A clearer understanding of this legacy will help the left avoid the sterile confrontations between dogmatic and moralistic mindsets that obstruct the necessary discussions and joint initiatives within and between circles that should be able to move ahead in an increasingly cooperatively manner.

Most contemporary Marxist-Leninists spend little time on the full range of Leninist politics from the revolutionary period. (This is equally true of the bulk of their critics and some problems that originate from this additional fact will emerge down the road of this argument.) Instead, they emphasize the conception of the leading and guiding role of the centralized vanguard party - the repository for a determinate science of social formations and, as such, the ordained leadership of the people's struggles without which these struggles must inevitably fail. The mythic Bolsheviks, "...a chain without weak links..." in the profoundly mistaken words of L. Althusser, becomes the unquestioned model.

This party-centric approach asserts that only revolutionary movements led by centralized and disciplined parties have significantly challenged capitalist power. I argued from this flawed premise with blissful ignorance for decades, so I certainly understand its hold on others. Without getting into all the problems of logic and historical understanding that the position raises, it should be enough to point out that, on the one hand, the 1917 Bolsheviks came nowhere close to this centralized and disciplined model, and, on the other hand, many subsequent insurrectionary situations have contained "communist" parties that were quite monolithically centralized and disciplined, but no more revolutionary than my television set - or the capitalist ruling class.

This questionable assertion of distinctive and unique accomplishment – "we Communists have made the revolutions – you anarchists (or Trotskyists in an earlier day) haven't" - is typically combined with placing

an exaggerated blame for failures and limitations on the equivocation and vacillation of the non-M.L. party left – on alleged errors of omission by radicals who failed to challenge for power or to fully support those that did. This cripples any examination of the exercise of working class authority and power prior to, during, and following revolutionary crises; and, more specifically, it is a sectarian barrier to a thorough criticism of the actions of organized revolutionaries in these periods. As a consequence, real mistakes of commission appear as unavoidable or as isolated “accidents”, and policies and attitudes that cannot be justified are rationalized and minimized in the name of single-minded revolutionary commitment to the ultimate goal. This mode of discussion also tends to divert attention from many less discussed historical examples where the M.L. Party itself is a major obstacle to revolutionary progress and not just a source of equivocation and vacillation.

However, the rejection of this party-centric religion does not mean we should embrace an alternative dogma. The Soviet experience was generally accepted by all contemporary classes and strata, friends and enemies alike, as a revolution to overthrow the power of capital. Whether or not the objectives were seen in a common way, and whatever the criticisms of the ultimate goals and the methods selected to reach them, this was the widely shared view. Now, independent radicals frequently assert that the actual outcomes of the revolution demonstrate the covert goals of Lenin and the Bolsheviks - their real motivation for seizing power.

Larry Gambone’s anarchist critique of “State and Revolution”, a reasoned treatment in my view, notes this general tendency among anarchists without indicating the extent to which he accepts it:

“A major bone of contention between anarchist and Marxists is over the notion of the “workers’ state.” Anarchists typically see these concepts as a Marxist desire to erect a powerful centralized state and party dictatorship over the working class.” (Porcupine Blog, “State & Revolution”, p. 1)

This typical view is the J. Edgar Hoover “Masters of Deceit” conception of communism in its anarchist clothing. To the contrary, the substitution of vanguard party for revolutionary class, the substitution of the party leadership for a developing critical cadre, the transformation of a revolutionary praxis into a religious view of truth and validity and science, the institution of the Taylorist factory regime, indeed the elimination of direct democratic participation in virtually every arena - all happened, but not because they were part of a covert authoritarian project from the outset. The Bolsheviks (and other “successful” communist parties) certainly included fakers and frauds - and perhaps even some “capitalist roaders” to use the Maoist tautology - but none of this defined the Soviet experience or determined whether or where it went off path – which it most assuredly did. The actual process was a complex transmogrification of mistaken means initially aimed at legitimate ends. We oversimplify and caricature this process only at the great risk of repeating some of its elements.

I don’t want to spend much time on this point since hopefully many radicals are moving beyond these oppositions, but I must point out that this particular dogma is an aspect of a deadening fatalism that is apparent in a wide spectrum of left perspectives - and not only anarchist ones. How can we approach politics as if what people and movements do and did, and how they understand what they are doing when they are doing it is not really that significant? But, if they can be completely misled for generations, engaging in massive self-sacrificing struggles for transcendent goals that only strengthen what is struggled against - ending with nothing more than what would have been possible with complete passivity and capitulation to capitalist rule... what else can we conclude?

(I remember how difficult it was for the Facing Reality Crew to explain why revolutionary political work was meaningful when state capitalism appeared as the ordained result of every conceivable political struggle and alignment of forces: “Organize a successful anti-capitalist insurrection - end up with state capitalism; get crushed by a fascist street force and lose to a totalitarian capitalist reaction – end up with state capitalism; shape a mass popular upsurge into a movement for basic structural reforms – end up with state capitalism.” Only a faith in some underlying teleology, not to be disrupted by meddling communists, differentiates this from various capitalist “end of history” and neoliberal “There Is No Alternative” conceptions.)

Serious discussions of the core issues and questions of Leninism and its successes and failures in Russia are needed to determine what it might mean if the particular insurrectionist “communist hypothesis” identified with Lenin is indeed “saturated” (exhausted?) as Badiou claims. I believe that it is not, at least not if it is explicitly separated from the “party/state” formation that emerged in both the Soviet Union and China, and I will make some arguments in this regard later in this piece. However, genuinely satisfactory answers to such questions are entirely dependent on the development of a working political and intellectual framework for the distressingly small cadre of radicals that are committed to liberatory working class revolution.

Not just a framework for talk: As Marx said in the Eighth Thesis on Feuerbach: “All mysteries...find their rational solution in human practice and the comprehension of this practice.” We certainly have lots of “mysteries,” but lack the collective political practice necessary to test and evaluate alternative strategic initiatives that might provide some rational solutions. In my opinion the necessary first step in this direction in this country, and perhaps elsewhere, is to self-consciously bring together social anarchists and those Marxist and Leninists that could live with the lower case ‘m’ and ‘l’ – although they may not have realized it yet. I’m well aware that there are many, perhaps most, in each camp that think this is impossible, unnecessary, or a mistake. I hope that later sections of this paper give some reason to believe they are wrong and helps build some bridges towards broader agreement among revolutionaries.

But first, back to Lenin...There was a time when I scraped through the Collected Works quite diligently, looking for major Lenin positions that appeared “correct” to me – or, at least, ones that were better than Soviet Marxism’s permitted texts and the “famous quotations” (also Althusser d.h.). My emphasis was “State and Revolution”, the “Testament” material, some stuff from around the 1905 upsurge, and, of course the extensive writings on dual power and insurrection in 1917 that I referenced earlier. The comparisons were with “What Is To be Done,” “Left Wing Communism,” and the generally bad stuff from the 10th and 11th Party Congresses. This dichotomized Lenin could be extended out much further, e.g., “Materialism & Empiro-Criticism” vs. “Philosophical Notebooks.”

(I think some of the Kasama neoMaoists are engaged in a parallel endeavor – attempting to credit Mao with the elements in Chinese development that they view positively, and separating him from those not so positive by assigning them to contending positions within the party, or to the ubiquitous “objective limitations.” That is another important discussion that I will only touch in this paper.)

I’ve come to the conclusion that such efforts are essentially for historians, not activists. This history will not be reinterpreted to any good and productive end by the likes of us before the development of the struggle makes the effort redundant. So I attempt to incorporate aspects of Lenin’s positions that I think are relevant and useful and discount and dismiss other points without assuming any obligation to reconcile contradictions to provide the appearance of systematic coherence.

“VANGUARD PARTY”

Although I have been arguing that it is an essentially pointless exercise to try to determine what parts of Lenin are more authentically “Leninist”, this is no excuse for not examining some recurring themes in his writing and activity, particularly ones with current ramifications. The Leninist theme that is directly relevant to this piece concerns the nature and role of the “vanguard party” and I would like to spend some time on it.

There can be no doubt that Lenin was completely committed to the conception and the development of a unified, disciplined and centralized revolutionary party--a cadre party able to act as the leadership of the working class in struggle. In addition, and much more problematic--also far less clear in Lenin’s writings and political practice than with the “Leninists” that succeeded him--is the conception of the party as a core institution that should aim to unify, discipline, and centralize the entire working class and/or the “revolutionary people” around itself.

However, every one of these terms, “unified,” “disciplined,” “centralized,” etc., is ambiguous. Lenin interpreted and applied them all differently at different points – sometimes dramatically so, as with the famous

critique of the “spontaneous movement” in “What Is To be Done” and the subsequent not so famous critique of the critique a couple of years later in “The Reorganization of the Party”.

Lenin wanted a revolutionary organization that was “professional,” even in 1905 when he called for a membership composition of “...one Social-Democratic intellectual to several hundred Social-Democratic workers.” (X, p.36). He wanted an organization that could think critically, even when he called for “...one-tenth theory and nine-tenths practice” (X, p.38). He wanted an organization that could act decisively and exercise effective discipline even when he said “Criticism...must be quite free...not only at Party meetings, but also at public meetings.” (X, p.442)

(You might note that I’m relying disproportionately on Vol. 10. Much of our Collected Lenin has not survived the move to the woods. While I do think that I could easily support the same points with other references, some may disagree.)

Consider again, as a contrast, Althusser’s statement about Lenin building the Bolshevik Party as the essential subjective element of the Russian revolutionary process-- a “chain with no weak links.” This is the complete passage:

“Lenin was correct to see in it (“it” being the political circumstances of Russia in 1917 d.h.) the objective conditions of a Russian revolution, and to forge its subjective conditions, the means of a decisive assault on the weak link in the imperialist chain, in a Communist Party that was a chain without weak links.” (For Marx, p. 98. Althusser emphasis)

This historically laughable assertion illustrates the common core – the normative objective - of the dominant Marxist-Leninist conception of the vanguard role of the party – past and present. Althusser’s theoretical argument for the centrality of the party refers directly to his understanding of the famous “What Is To Be Done” critique of spontaneity. (see “For Marx”, footnote 7. p. 171.). Most of the current Marxist Leninist constellation, including some pretty bright and well read people, still holds to that rigid and a-historical view, actually more a characteristic of Kautsky and Plekhanov than Lenin. This is the case despite the fact that this critique is exactly what Lenin modified in the 1905 documents cited above, and despite the fact that most of Luxemburg’s contemporaneous criticisms of that document – which she viewed as Kautskyist - have been well vindicated by historical developments. (Her positions on a number of other questions, some directly related and some not, have also survived quite well, in my opinion.)

Many anarchists assert that the What Is To Be Done critique of mass spontaneity, at least as it has come to be interpreted, effectively denies the capacity of the working class to emancipate itself and robs the conception of communism of its central dynamic, the expansion of working class autonomy and human freedom. They argue that this underlies a number of the policy mistakes that followed the Russian October. I think they are certainly right on the first point and probably at least partially right on the second. The common M.L. conception of the revolutionary party elevates centralized party command over popular creativity and initiative and there is no doubt that this should be explicitly confronted and reversed to maximize revolutionary potentials. That was true in 1917. It is more clearly true now.

The problems with the militarized structure of command and discipline which was consolidated in the Russian Party and the Communist International within a few months of Lenin’s death are pretty obvious. I don’t see much point in running through another what’s wrong list for Chapter Six of Stalin’s “Foundations”. We’ve heard enough of “iron discipline” and know quite well that it is hardly true that once the “line is determined, organization determines everything.” However the trajectory that this issue followed from the Russian revolution to this disastrous end does raise some interesting questions – at least for me: Is there a clear path from Lenin’s approach to revolutionary organization to the Third International orthodoxy? If there isn’t, as I think is the case, is there a central weakness within Lenin’s perspective that facilitated this development? I think there is. Finally, and I confess, rhetorically, why doesn’t the general recognition of the problems of “actually existing socialism” lead to a more critical approach to communist organization among those thinking Leninists who are actually attempting to organize something?

The historical questions are complicated. At one end there is Lenin's Kautskian "What is to be Done" argument for the necessity to introduce revolutionary consciousness into the working class from the "outside." Almost twenty years later we have the terrible, at least I think they are terrible, statements in "Left Wing Communism" that ridicule any idea of a distinction or conflict, not to mention a contradiction, between the dictatorship of the proletariat and the dictatorship of a party in the name of the proletariat. But we also have Lenin's explicit recognition, paralleling Luxemburg's observations in *Mass Strike* and Gramsci's in the *Ordine Nuovo* period, that in the upsurges of 1905 and 1917, the masses of people were more revolutionary than the social democrats and the majority of Bolsheviks. And on the organizational side there are the well known examples of major strategic differences within the Bolsheviks being tolerated and even debated openly beyond the party under the most extreme circumstances, e.g., the "strikebreaking" of Kamenev and Zinoviev, without these individuals, or the substantial minorities they represented in the Bolshevik party, being significantly sanctioned.

Lenin frequently referred to the backwardness of the party cadre and leadership, their inability to think dialectically, and their propensity to administrative solutions, resolving ideological and theoretical issues through bureaucratic authority – sometimes even militarily. This might be the basis for a criticism of Lenin for holding an exaggerated sense of his own relative capacities, although it would take a lot of arrogance to push this point very far. However, it is no indication that he believed that the vanguard party was any place near infallibility.

We also have the interesting late writings where Lenin is so concerned with the increasingly bureaucratic and administrative character of Soviet Power that he proposes a reorganization that would empower the non-party "Workers and Peasants Inspectorate" to oversee the functioning of the elements of the state and government, and, by inference, the party. This is also hardly compatible with an exaggerated sense of what the communist party is and what it can do. In fact, it seems more like a foreshadowing of the positive aspect of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, capsulized in the slogan, "Bombard the Party Headquarters."

So I want to deal with two partial strands of the history. In one, the distinctively Leninist elements are in opposition to the future Bolshevik degeneration. In the other, his positions are a significant contribution to the process. The first strand relates to inner-party life, specifically the issues of debate and criticism that are codified under the heading of democratic centralism. The second theme I take from the anarchist, Larry Gambone (apologies if I get any of it wrong) who stresses Lenin's conflation of the concepts of centralization and unification, in a way that facilitates a reliance on mechanical and instrumental management techniques rather than the expansion of popular participation in a more organic and (dare I say it) more dialectical approach to the revolutionary process. I'm dwelling on these issues, not only because they have substantial intrinsic historic interest, but because I believe the questions involved and the range of inadequate answers to them, still plague us.

I'd like to get at the first point through a discussion that developed in the French Communist Party long after Lenin and Stalin had left the stage. In 1977, L. Althusser published a series of articles on the 22nd Congress of the French Communist Party. (I've mentioned Althusser earlier, assuming people will have some knowledge of his biography and his theoretical output, both of which in my opinion are extremely important.) The French Party, taking advantage of the increasingly flaccid authority from Moscow, was moving towards the EuroCommunist stance of the Spanish and Italian parties in a belated and unsuccessful attempt to come to grips with the obvious problems of Soviet Marxism and the increasing failures of its own strategic perspective.

Althusser was a spokesperson for a minority tendency in the French party. He was on record as sympathetic to Maoism, had endorsed the ambivalent 70/30 attitude the Chinese Communists took towards Stalin, and seemed to agree, at least for a substantial period, with the Chinese hostility to the post 1956 Soviet critique of Stalinism. Althusser also was opposed to the parliamentary reformism and the so-called "socialist humanism" of Eurocommunism. Here again he incorporated the Chinese positions which, significantly, were not initially

expressed as direct criticisms of the Soviets, but were addressed to “Comrade Togliatti,” the Italian communist and Comintern veteran who was an early advocate of what became Eurocommunism.

Althusser’s articles were thinly veiled criticisms from the left of proposed changes in the Party’s attitude towards democracy and state power, including its renewed emphasis on cross class unity and the “peaceful parliamentary transition to socialism.” But by 1977 the situation in China had deteriorated to the point where these politics no longer fit within a pro-Chinese stance and Althusser was limited to proposals to reform the structure and practice of the French C.P. to promote fuller debate and discussion of strategic issues within the Party and give he and his supporters’ arguments some space to gain strength. However, as Althusser notes, notwithstanding the 22nd Congress’ heavy emphasis on openness and democracy in the society, it had neither presented nor entertained initiatives to expand them within the party. So the prospects for his initiative were dim from the outset.

Althusser’s interventions immediately raised the issues of democratic centralism as it had come to be understood in Communist parties fifty years or so after the Russian Revolution. The emphasis in this concept always goes to the second term – centralism – where the ‘iron discipline’ originates. The democracy is normally more of a problematic afterthought that provides dangerous potentials for individualist and petty bourgeois weakening of the needed discipline and resolve – and to the extent it exists, it is always “guided” and managed – usually with a very heavy hand.

For better or worse, I have a good deal more experience with these matters than most current U.S. leftists, so it might not be out of order to indicate some typical operational features of democratic centralism. Challenges from below to basic strategic approaches or major theoretical concepts are seldom, if ever, in order. Open discussions of differences are generally limited to questions of “political line” and only permitted during designated and highly structured periods, usually pre-Congress/Convention discussions. (Many parties had very few full Congresses.) Minority arguments on “higher” bodies cannot be presented to the membership, except during pre-convention periods. Since the members of these “higher” bodies and “leading” committees are frequently co-opted or appointed, not elected, genuine differences are hard to formulate and motivate on any level. No “horizontal” political discussion or contact is permitted within the party – everything is channeled up through the structure and – sometimes – back down to the rank and file. Finally, there is no right, and very little opportunity, to raise differences within the party to individuals and groups outside of it, however relevant and important to broader constituencies the issues might be.

Implementation of this regime created ignorant and acritical communists around the world, most of them doggedly convinced of their collective capacity to provide infallible leadership for the working class, despite individually not knowing much of anything, including what was happening in the Communist movement or within the leadership of their own party. Of course, huge turnover, mass defections and some minor rebellions also resulted. All of this reaction, and particularly the rebellions, were lumped together as “deviations” and “factionalism.” Both charges carried serious weight in Party circles for a long time – not only did they invoke visceral fears of losing contact with the revolution, as perverse as that may seem now, they also brought to mind the bad things that happened to left and right deviationists and to factionalists when and where Communists gained some power.

Althusser’s articles include an instructive approach to factions and tendencies within the party. He asserted with his typical lack of historical references that “Lenin was against factions.”...and concluded that “Today the party expects something else, (other than factions d.h.) and it is right.” His practical suggestion was that party discussions on strategy should not be limited to specific periods before Congresses and that the rank and file should be aware of the differences that existed within their leadership – as was the situation, for example, in the Italian and Spanish parties at that time.

Althusser was unwilling to go any further to open up inner party life, but, predictably, his proposals went down the tube anyway. This was a sad and feeble protest. Althusser, a world class intellectual, seems not to have realized how far the democratic centralism that he was willing to accept had strayed from actual Bolshevik

practice up to the 10th Congress of the CPSU in 1921 – when the Bolsheviks instituted a “temporary” ban on factions.

I have mentioned this 10th Congress period as the context for a number of Lenin’s positions that I think are among the least defensible. His support for the temporary ban on factions is one of these positions. The attack on factions at the 10th Congress was aimed primarily at the “Workers Opposition” of Kollantai and Schliapnikov, a substantial party leadership grouping that, among other things, was critical of the state capitalist features of the NEP and opposed to increasing bureaucratization and the general substitution of party authority for working class power. As I mentioned, the ban was presented as a temporary measure required by extraordinary circumstances coming out of a protracted civil war. It is also noteworthy that Lenin argued against any sanctions on the Worker’s Opposition that would have banned them from future leadership roles in the party. Not that it made much difference a few years down the road.

Significantly, I think, Lenin argued for this step, not on the predictable grounds of maintaining unity and discipline in the party, but because factional divisions shifted the locus of debate to subgroupings and obstructed a full discussion in the entire party. This is quite different, if not directly opposed to permanent limits on discussion inside the party enforced by hierarchical buffers that prevented the rank and file from knowing what their leadership was arguing about; by barriers against horizontal contacts within the party; and by a ban on open political discussions of many important issues outside of the party framework.

(Lenin’s argument supports a point that my particular “faction” in the CPUSA made regularly. In normal party operation, it is the leadership, typically the smallest bodies that meet most often, the Secretariat and the resident National Board in the old CPUSA for example, that constitutes a faction – monopolizing certain types of crucial information, holding closed discussions and debates and reaching decisions that bind minority positions to present a solid front of unanimity to the larger membership.)

In short, we have no historical reason to doubt that Lenin’s general position on party discipline at the 10th Congress was pretty much the same as the position that he had argued more than a decade before:

“The principle of democratic centralism and autonomy for local Party organizations implies universal and full freedom to criticise so long as this does not disturb the unity of a definite action...” (X, p. 443, emphasis in original)

Clearly, and the text makes it quite clear that Lenin understood this as well, this formulation is open to interpretation. While I know of no contrary statement from Lenin and it does describe how he worked at some crucial junctures, there is plenty of material for others to judge whether Lenin’s practice was generally in line with this position or whether it was an opportunistic response to a particular situation. I’m not looking to justify or condemn on these sorts of issues. My point is only that, in principle, this position is in clear conflict with the current understanding of democratic centralism, the understanding that is accepted and reinforced by Althusser and many others who define themselves as Marxist Leninist. I think that it is significant that both critics and worshippers usually credit Lenin with the same position on democracy within the party as the one clearly held by Stalin and, to some extent, Trotsky, but a position that is quite different from this explicit statement on the importance of clear and sharp open discussion.

CENTRALIZATION AND UNITY

Whatever one’s attitude towards the Bolsheviks, the issues of organizational discipline and political unity are still relevant concerns for revolutionaries. Here I would make a short side trip to consider a piece on the Porcupine Blog website describing Larry Gambone’s approach to these issues in an organization of anarchist revolutionaries. In my opinion Gambone provides substantially less latitude for individual and minority positions, for public expression of differences, and for continuing substantive internal debate than that entailed by the Lenin position cited above. People should check it out for themselves. I suppose it might be argued that Gambone’s conception is actually more workable than Lenin’s, but that is another point.

Gambone also has a critique of Lenin's "State and Revolution" on the same blog. I was struck with what he sees as the central weakness of Lenin's line of argument. Gambone asserts that Lenin conflates the concepts of centralization and unity. I'm not sure whether I fully agree with his position in general, or specifically with respect to Lenin's theoretical attitudes toward class and state. However, I found it a helpful way to characterize some problems with Lenin's (any many others as well) positions on the role of the party on the practical issues that were confronted after the seizure of power.

Gambone is certainly right that organizational centralization is a problematic surrogate for political unification. Genuine political unity in a disciplined organization is inconceivable without a critical and a legitimately contested approach to all major strategic and theoretical issues. There can be no real political unity around positions that are not understood. The most extreme centralization in a party-type organization does not mean it has political unity – any more than it does or can in a military organization. The actual content of the Stalinist conception of the party is based on an essentially military model of leadership and discipline reinforced by a leadership monopoly of a determinist, pseudo scientific "materialist" and "objective" "theory" that supposedly provides it with unique access to objective truth. Thankfully, this model almost always has its cracks and imperfections, but to the extent it is consistently applied and enforced, it is a blueprint for religious cults, not revolutionary organizations.

When this process of bureaucratized centralization expands beyond the party and governs more and more aspects of society, it necessarily constricts the possibilities for autonomous development transforming all potential for actual unity into an imprinted uniformity. The beginnings of self government created in the Russian revolutionary process required cultivation, they could not survive the centralization through command of all elements of Soviet Society.

Of course such centralization never occurs in a political vacuum and it certainly didn't in Russia. There were real problems confronted in post revolutionary Russia that cannot be reduced to an abstract lust for power by the Bolsheviks. As the likelihood of successful working class insurgencies in Europe diminished, the strategic problems of holding together the poor peasant/working class popular base for Soviet Power grew more pressing. The specter haunting the Soviets was not the Kolchaks or Denikins, the Allied Intervention, or any other attempt of the defeated ruling class to retake state power, it was the 'Revolutionary Paris, Counter-revolutionary France' dichotomy. The first generation Bolsheviks were always preoccupied with the memory of the Paris Commune. (Remember the story of Lenin dancing in the snow when the Soviets survived a day longer than the Commune.)

The Soviet response to the weakening of the strategic class alliance was to accelerate production, guided by limited and narrow economic notions of the forces of production, to meet the sometimes conflicting demands and needs of the working class (small) minority and the peasant (large) majority. That this was also Lenin's response can be clearly seen in his remarks to the 11th CPSU Congress. (Zizek uses some phrases from this for one of his "ruthless Lenin" provocations.) This response was implemented through the party's growing monopoly of positions of governmental authority. Less and less priority was put on transforming the relations of production and reproduction through the expansion of democratic and participatory institutions, and when moves in this direction potentially conflicted with economic growth, as they almost always did, the initiatives were routinely crushed.

It was true that significant economic growth was needed to satisfy enough of the practical expectations that people had of the revolution to maintain the class alliance between workers and peasants. However, when the growth was not easily achieved, the increasingly centralized party authority opted for capitalist conceptions of industrial efficiency, Taylorism and one man management. The centralization of the party took on an increasingly technocratic character, promoting notions that its leadership and "guiding role" could and should be exercised through monopolizing positions of bureaucratic authority. This essentially ended any discussions about alternative approaches. Where such alternatives emerged, including attempts to expand popular control, they first were seen as disruptive and - rather quickly - as counter revolutionary.

All sorts of bad things emanated from this supposed efficiency through centralization – the notion of worker’s organizations as ‘transmission belts’ for industrial policy; the formation of a professional military; one man management of the firm; the eradication of organized left opposition in the country. It is true that until he died, Lenin opposed one centralizing element, the heavy pressure to limit or eliminate the right of secession for nations historically oppressed by Russia. However that struggle was also eventually a losing one –doomed in substantial part by the priority on party “guided” and managed development that was blinded by the peculiar economist bias that the Chinese call the “theory of the productive forces.”

REVOLUTIONARY ORGANIZATION AND WORKING CLASS SELF-ORGANIZATION

I think that many contemporary Leninist conceptions of revolutionary organization are fundamentally misconceived, but my alternative to them--one that I am perversely determined to also call Leninist--regards the role of the party and of its cadre of communists as equally important, although with a quite different content. Since I am concerned with discussions of substance, not the labeling of categories, it may be confusing -even self defeating - to assert the claim to Leninism. I hope my attachment to the term comes across as more than stubbornness, since I mean it to go to the continuing relevance of Lenin’s approach to the “art” of insurrection which I intend to consider in a later section. I’ll continue to be an uncomfortable Leninist, until a more appropriate label is developed.

I’ve written a good deal about the topic of revolutionary organization. This emphasized the development of disciplined and organized revolutionary cadre able to think critically and act collectively and decisively. Rather than repeating the Gramsci-based arguments that I have used, or indicating the changes in my views over some four decades, I’d like to finish this piece with some observations on more practical and immediate issues of organization and perspective as I see them presented - or avoided - by class struggle anarchism and by some contemporary Marxists. Some of this will refer back to the prior section’s emphasis on Lenin’s legacy, but as much as possible I will deal with these issues as they come up in more current circumstances

I want to be clear from the outset that I’ve never been that familiar with anarchist tendencies and arguments and have also lost touch with some emerging trends in Leninism and neoMarxism that hopefully aren’t limited to the academy. So I reference current positions tentatively, to clarify my own views, not to critique arguments which I don’t present fully and may not adequately understand. I am completely open to criticisms in this regard and fully expect to modify my positions and arguments in response to them.

In this context, I want to make a few explanatory comments about some anarchists that I cite. I’m interested in the section of anarchism in the tradition of Bakunin, Parsons, Malatesta, and Durruti that is variously described as social anarchism, class struggle anarchism, anarcho-communism or anarcho-syndicalism. I’m only concerned in passing with the primitivists, the “national anarchists,” or any of the various schools of lifestyle or individualist anarchism, and I am aware of the distinctions between these approaches and those of the class struggle social anarchists. I also wanted to use modern sources connected to some important areas of on-going anarchist experience and theory in Spain, Italy, and Latin America.

I have referred to Larry Gambone on a couple of points already. My major reference will be to Tom Wetzel of the Worker Solidarity Alliance (I think). They both express substantial positions on questions I think are important. However, I have not read many of their writings and my understanding of their positions may be inaccurate or incomplete. While both of them are clearly distinct from other important anarchist trends, I’m not sure to what extent each of them reflect the class struggle social anarchism views that I would like to engage and I make no claims in that regard. I don’t even know if they would agree with each other on the topics being considered.

I’m choosing Wetzel because of some of his writing on working class organization and culture, his specific criticisms of Bolshevik attitudes towards working class autonomy, and the base-building dual power/dual organization perspective which he shares. I initially found his stuff on the “What in the Hell...” blog and ZNet, but have read only a small fraction of what he has written. I presume a more complete collection can

be found on the WSA site. Wetzel appears to share a class analysis of capitalism that hasn't persuaded me to date, but I do recognize the compelling problems that it addresses, specifically with reference to understanding post revolutionary Russia and China. I don't think any differences over class analysis are significant to this discussion. I may also be mistaken on this point.

My ignorance makes Gambone a more dicey choice. I first encountered his "Porcupine Blog" on National Anarchist websites, including Troy Southgate's neo-fascist, "Synthesis" magazine. A lot of Gambone is on Keith Preston's more "anarchist," and certainly more eclectic, National Anarchist, "Attack the System" site. (Wetzel's ZNet "Re-imagining Society" article is included there as well but at least his name is misspelled.)

(I think the National Anarchism phenomenon merits way more of our attention than it has received - that won't surprise any of the unlucky handful familiar with my positions on neofascism. However, Preston is obviously attempting to cast a wide net in his red/brown merger project, and it's quite likely that he includes writings from a number of people that would be quick to disassociate from national anarchism's key particularist organizing tenets. Hopefully this includes Gambone.)

I will focus this section around a few topics in no necessary order and somewhat jumbled together: the issue of "representation," the class struggle social anarchist conceptions of dual organization and social insertion, Badiou's conception of the "Event," and possibly some speculation about that troubling erstwhile Kasama masthead slogan "Without State Power, all else is illusion."

I probably should know who said that and what they might have meant, but it is intriguing to explore possible interpretations in full light of ignorance.

I think that most of us (but not all, unfortunately) can agree that many strategic problems concern how to conceptualize and implement Marx's injunction - also Bakunin's - that the emancipation of the working class can only be accomplished by that class itself. We can also agree with Wetzel that these problems have to be approached in light of the variations and unevenness (to say the least) in the understandings and activities of the international working class and in the differences in objective socio-economic circumstance which currently segment it. It is helpful as well, and here I don't know whether Wetzel agrees, to approach the problems in light of the range of policies and institutions, both repressive and incorporative, that constitute the exercise of capitalist state power.

The Communist Manifesto spells out a couple of general principles for the relationship of communists to the mass struggles of working people. To paraphrase: communists should "represent" the interests of the whole in the movements of parts, and they should "represent" the interests of the future in movements of the present. Even before they objected to any group claiming to have the intellectual roadmap to the "future" or to "know" the interests of the "whole," most lifestyle anarchists would be skeptical of this entire notion. They tend to see all efforts of a smaller group to project and implement appropriate strategies and objectives for a larger group, or for any of its individual members, as authoritarian. This leaves them with some problems in the face of capitalist power which has no inhibitions about crushing isolated small scale initiatives towards self rule, but they still do present a potent source of resistance to virtually any left political strategy for a so-called advanced capitalist society.

Some non-anarchist radicals - autonomists - have a slightly different critique of representation, one that is less concerned with its potential restrictions on individual liberty and more concerned with the relationship between revolutionaries and the working class and with the issue of "substitutionism." Typically they see the changing class composition of the working class as the motor and primary determinant of historical change, but more or less independently of the conscious intent of its participants. Implicitly, and frequently explicitly, the importance of ideology and self conscious organization in the process of the class becoming "for itself," is diminished, replaced by some assumption of an underlying historic dynamic. This position can develop from a "workerist" outlook of the Johnson/Forrest or Italian variety, or from some version of the "irreducible singularities" conception in Negri's notion of the Multitude. In Negri's case, possibly a meta-consciousness, a "swarm intelligence" will come into play. This view often argues that virtually every organized intervention

by communists has and will result in a net subtraction from the working class struggle. Therefore the best course for communists is to stand aside and just “describe” - or to self consciously limit their role to helping out, possibly following some variant of Lynd’s notion of “accompaniment.”

Wetzel makes it fairly clear that he does not share these positions (“Anarchism, Class Struggle and Political Organization”, ZNet, p. 3), although I think some of his comrades may slip in that direction in their more generic criticisms of substitutionism - not that this criticism isn’t usually warranted. He, and most class struggle social anarchists, recognizes the unevenness in consciousness and development in the working class and the resulting role for an organized revolutionary grouping to motivate and consolidate organizing projects that advance and expand the general struggle. This necessarily entails a degree of “representation” of the interests and potentials of social groups that are not organized and politically unified by a revolutionary organization that hopefully is. However, it does not necessarily imply any delegation of authority from the one to the other.

I intend to raise some questions, and potentially differences, with this perspective, but I agree with the general thrust of the approach. However, before getting into those subjects, I want to consider some current attitudes towards these issues among the sections of the Marxist Leninist left that do not clearly place the emancipation of the working class (and humanity) as the historic role and responsibility of that class.

MLM OPTIONS

“Socialist Revolution does not require that conscious self-identification by sociological class be a defining feature.”

“...and what led... (the revolutionary process – d.h.)...were radical political forces (the communists generally) who saw themselves as representatives of the working class (and its objective interests) – and who won the allegiance of important sections of that class (often minorities, but significant sections none the less).” (8/19/09 Kasama, Mike Ely

Relying with quite amazing historical myopia on the positions Lenin advances at the beginning of “Left Wing Communism” despite almost a century of experience, most, but not all M.L. tendencies still deny or disregard any strategic problems that might emerge from the representation of the working class by a minority segment of that class or by a vanguard party. The discussions on the (generally) Maoist Kasama site tend to be much more thoughtful, however, I think, they often wind up in a similar position.

I opened this section with some comments from a recent Kasama discussion titled “Class against class vs. Revolutionary People”. These same selections are also in earlier Kasama discussions that I haven’t looked over carefully. There are similar statements in some extended responses to the Antaeus post of 4/27/09 “Why did Post-Maoist China restore capitalism?” I am quite sure they represent a considered position in that tendency and are not casual polemical formulations.

In my opinion, although quite possibly not in that of the author, the logical conclusion from these comments is that the revolutionary overthrow of the state power of the capitalist class will necessarily be accomplished by a movement that in no sense can be seen as the working class organized “in and for itself”. Indeed, that appears to be seen as a somewhat dysfunctional and utopian conception, a simplistic example of a class reductionist perspective. Therefore any emergence of that working class capable of achieving universal liberation in the process of its own self-emancipation, is pushed down the road and presented as an objective to be achieved with the assist of the authoritarian tools provided by the prior capture of the state, if it even remains as a programmatic objective at all.

Before getting to my differences, I’d like to indicate two areas of agreement with features of this position that may not be adequately expressed in the selections that I have cited. The position certainly has a basis in history and has the merit of raising important issues in what Gramsci called the “war of maneuver” --issues of qualitative leaps, revolutionary breaks, and adequately preparing for and responding to “events” in the Badiou sense. Certainly the complexity of popular movements of resistance and refusal are as unlikely to reduce to

a simple class polarization as the entire system is to reduce to domination by the economic element “in the last instance”. I intend to come back to this point from the other side in criticisms, possibly mistaken ones, of some incrementalist and evolutionary features that I see in class struggle social anarchist perspectives.

Gramsci also has a conception of a “war of position” in which the development of a “counter-hegemonic social bloc” plays a central role. I think that this notion has similarities to certain aspects of Ely’s conception of the ‘Revolutionary People’ – particularly when the consideration is of conditions prior to the seizure of state power. Of course, that is for Ely to say, not me.

However, to stick with Gramsci categories, the Ely position appears to completely break with the conception of the “directive (dirigenti) class” which accords a unique role in the revolutionary process to the working class as such. Gramsci’s position has the further merit of more clearly emphasizing the distinctions in this ‘directive’ role between “leadership” and “domination” (command), an area of confusions that are very relevant to the errors of actually existing socialism – the errors that underlie Binod’s “...something wrong somewhere...” that I cited at the beginning of this paper.

Basically, I think that any capacity for these particular M.L. politics to respond to the rapid, but temporary and reversible shifts in political potentials in epistemological break situations, is overshadowed by the massive problems when communists see “...themselves as representatives... of the ‘objective interests...’ of a class without prioritizing a social practice that can develop a genuine democratic legitimacy for such a representation and ultimately render it superfluous. The problems become even more intractable when the vanguard party sees itself as the representative, not only of an underdeveloped working class, but of an entire “revolutionary people” composed of a number of classes and strata and encompassing a bewildering array of internal contradictions; and when it then proposes to utilize the instrumentalities of state power to implement its - often quite subjective - conception of the objective interests of (other) people.

I’m not arguing that revolutions or major steps towards them can’t be accomplished by vanguards with only minority segments of the working classes in active and conscious support. They can, but only with real limitations that cannot be talked away. The seizure of the state by vanguards that claim to be acting in the objective interests of social classes does not answer the question about whether they actually are implementing such interests and whether they will continue to do so when they possess the instrumentalities of state power. These issues will only be displaced to the conception of “Socialism” where they will predictably confound any assertion that some short-on-workers “worker’s state” or short on popular participation “New Democratic” people’s state actually is “their state” for either workers or the people.

This displacement of the problem is quite clear in the history of all those “socialist revolutions” that are captained by a self-proclaimed proxy for the working class (or for a coalition of progressive classes). The real test of whether a seizure of power has initiated a trajectory towards socialism is whether working class and popular self organization and self rule is expanding. By that test these regimes fail and so – to a substantial degree – did the movements, fronts and coalitions that led to them. They don’t meet the essential requirement that there be significant concrete steps towards replacing the administration of people with the administration of things. None of them have led to increasing democracy, to authentic and expanding popular participation or to any discernable “withering away” of the functions of the bureaucratic state – at least not over any appreciable time span.

While many modern Maoist positions appear to be oblivious to these issues, there are some substantial arguments – also evident in Kasama discussions - that elements of the Chinese revolutionary experience may provide some answers to these problems, and not just illustrations of them. The thrust of these arguments is that Mao’s approach to contradictions among the people, in combination with the general radical and anti-bureaucratic thrust of the Cultural Revolution could have provided a workable alternative to the failed trajectory of the Soviet Union - if it had gained hegemony in the Chinese Communist Party and had successfully reversed some seriously mistaken policies in that party.

This argument deserves to be considered on its merits, even though the showing of some applicability to Chinese circumstances wouldn't necessarily demonstrate it has a more general validity.

The argument has two elements as I understand it: First, it presents Mao's approach to contradictions among the people as a model that would limit rule by command, mandate the expansion of open critical debate, and criticize the subordination of these priorities to "efficiency", most notably including efficiency in the expansion of material production. Second, at certain points the Maoist Cultural Revolution called for establishment of a Commune State with all elected officials subject to immediate recall. This was a direct confrontation with the emerging bureaucratic nomenclatura that culminated in a call for a mass movement to "bombard the party headquarters".

According to this scenario, these features of Maoism show a different version of democratic centralism, one that recognizes the dangers of the bureaucratization of the post-revolutionary state, as Lenin did also, but that makes a much more significant attempt to reverse the process through continuing popular class struggle. In this view it is not the party centric model itself that is the problem. The problem is the mistaken line that various parties have adopted. But the hegemony of that mistaken line is not an inevitable outcome, since a clear alternative developed in China and was almost victorious in that country. While the Cultural Revolution was ultimately unsuccessful, it could conceivably have succeeded and replaced the perspectives that had captured the Chinese party with categorical alternatives. So goes the argument.

This history isn't my field, but I was active during the crucial moments and paid some attention to what was happening. I can remember the impact of the piece on "...Contradictions among the People." The notion that disagreement wasn't necessarily always treason to the revolution and betrayal of the party, and that it could, and should, be handled through open democratic discussion was certainly refreshing. So was the "...hundred flowers..." campaign presented in the same document. It all appeared to be a much more balanced and comprehensive response to the issues that had finally emerged (for Communists, that is, who were well behind the awareness curve as usual) with the secret denunciation of Stalin's "cult of the personality" at the 20th Congress of the CPSU. It was also a welcome break from Peking Review's implausible "Great Leap Forward" economic stories about backyard steel production and Mao's ability to grow record size melons in his window box.

Some believe that this piece on non-antagonistic contradictions embodies an actual alternative conception of revolutionary organization, one that was partially employed in China, but eventually defeated. In retrospect, I certainly don't agree. The issue is important because there are revolutionary perspectives and groups that adhere to what they understand as this rectified Chinese model--a centralized vanguard (party, movement, charismatic leader) with a correct mass line leading a "revolutionary people" to state power as the platform for constructing a "socialism" - perhaps a "21st Century socialism."

We should be way past the point where we accept best readings of these historic documents and expect that there were or will be good faith applications of them in practice. So let me try a more skeptical "worst" reading of Mao on "...Contradictions among the people." Here is a key passage:

"But this freedom is freedom with leadership and democracy is democracy under centralized guidance, it is not anarchy ..."

(Note: this and the following citation are from internet sources that lack adequate page references. This passage can be found relatively early in the first section. d.h.)

Proceeding further into the argument we reach Section VIII, containing the "...hundred flowers bloom... hundred schools contend" injunction. This still sounds good as I remember it from the time. However, relatively quickly we encounter a set of the rules for dividing the "flowers" from the "poisonous weeds." Most of these rules raise questions. Consider, for example, nos. 2 and 5 that Mao indicates are the most important: Number 2 stresses that "weeds" include ideas and criticisms that will not be "...beneficial to socialism." So who decides what is beneficial and what is not? Number 5 provides a good clue to this answer: (Flowers d.h.) "...

should help to strengthen and not shake off or weaken the leadership of the Communist Party.” (These rules are in the middle of Section VIII. d.h.)

This clarifies a more plausible interpretation of the content of the “democracy under centralized guidance” and a better framework for understanding the limits of nice sounding positions about reasoned discussion, patient persuasion, open contention of different ideas, and the necessity to avoid arbitrary command and coercive tactics. Unfortunately, we have a near century of collective experience that demonstrates that such “worst” interpretations are the ones most likely to shed light on what actually happened.

In this particular case, the historical backdrop is significant. Mao presented the “Contradictions among the People...” speech to a major Chinese political meeting in November of 1957 – after Khrushchev’s secret speech to the Soviet 20th Congress; after the Hungarian and Suez events; and well after tensions had mounted with the Soviet Union over industrial aid and economic policy, over the pending Soviet reversal of the excommunication of Yugoslavia, over the Sino/Indian border conflict, over the Sino Russian border, over the Quemoy Matsu incidents, and over the increasing centrality of the “Three Peacefuls” in Soviet ideology and Russian state policy.

When these factors are introduced - and there also are others more related to internal Chinese problems, particularly the voluntarist and highly mystified approach to economic growth of the “Great Leap Forward” - a subtext of real issues is apparent for virtually every element of Mao’s discussion. However, these actual issues that should have been commonly understood and democratically discussed, certainly in the Party, and, I think, generally in the society, remained mystified and, in some cases, as with the need for socialist unity, deliberately falsified. In the actual practice, the “leadership” and “centralized guidance” role that Mao endorsed for the party in this speech provided an effective barrier that denied the masses of people - and probably the bulk of the party cadres as well - any opportunity for informed and timely participation in a debate over the real alternatives that would determine the future of “their” society.

It’s a bit of a diversion, but a loosely related personal experience might highlight how the M.L. approach to democratic and participatory discussion on “serious” issues actually works. By the close of the 1950s there was ample evidence in this country, some of which was widely reported in the capitalist press, that the divisions between China and the Soviet Union were growing larger and more antagonistic. Nevertheless, this was not acknowledged in the CPUSA and was definitely not a permitted topic for membership speculation.

The official Sino/Soviet break came at the 81 Party meeting in the fall of 1960. The N.Y. Times immediately carried a detailed report despite the fact that the meeting was supposed to have been closed. The Times reporting had substantial credibility, since a couple of years earlier it had also printed Khrushchev’s “Secret Report” to a closed session of the 20th Congress of the CPSU and forced that report to be made public before the Communist apparatus was prepared to deal with the repercussions.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Joe Hill’s “rebel girl,” was the chairwoman of the U.S. Communist Party and had headed the delegation to the 81 Party meeting. (The U.S. delegation also included the Chicago jeweler, Morris Childs - aka “Solo” - a long time FBI asset, who we now know was the source for both N.Y. Times reports.) Immediately after the Moscow meeting, Gurley Flynn toured the country to report back to the party. I was at two such meetings. The first was for a definitely atypical group of rank and file communists including my parents. The meeting included a number of knowledgeable activists who were not docile receptacles for anyone’s line and who read the N.Y. Times. Gurley Flynn was asked about the reports of a split between China and the Soviet Union and categorically denied that it had happened, launching into a heavy attack on; “comrades who rely too much on the capitalist press and its lies and distortions.”

At a meeting of the district leaderships of Washington and Oregon the very next day, a meeting largely populated by hacks who would never think to raise embarrassing questions or to question anything that came from party authority, Gurley Flynn began her report quite differently. I still remember the words quite well:

‘Comrades, I regret having to report that the Chinese comrades have fallen into complete adventurism and petty bourgeois leftism and have split with the international communist movement and the working class.’

Why the difference in reports? I asked at the time and was told that it was important to organize and plan such discussions carefully in order to “maintain morale and discipline.” That is what “centralized guidance” meant to me in the U.S. communist party, and it looks remarkably like what Mao is pushing in the Chinese Party in this period. The discussion only happens in a managed framework after the party leadership decides what is a “flower” and what is a “weed” for a cadre of slow-witted gardeners prone to fits of depression.

The Cultural Revolution period in the middle of the next decade is a more complicated situation. It is still hard to separate the truth from various different propaganda spins about the Cultural Revolution, particularly given the fact that very diverse tendencies all claimed to represent Maoist politics. There were certainly aspects of the movement that were anti-intellectual and presented a crude moralistic class reductionist perspective with cultish aspects. But there were also extremely important revolutionary strands centered on the Shanghai Commune experience. These were attempts to implement the directly democratic commune state – modeled on the Paris Commune – and on Lenin’s “State and Revolution.” They included a frontal attack on the domination of the society by the leading cadres of the party, an attack expressed in the slogan of “bombard the party headquarters” and made more concrete in the position that some 90% of the cadre of the Chinese Communist party should be removed from any position of authority.

It does not take much investigation to find that Mao was very ambivalent towards this element of the Cultural Revolution, specifically because of its attitude towards the merged party/state bureaucratic leadership group. Mao clearly held the position that the real problems within the party were limited to a “handful in positions of authority following a capitalist road.” The “handful” of capitalist-roaders (less than 10% was the way it was frequently quantified d.h.) was a constant theme in Mao’s centrist response to the left tendencies that were demanding a complete dismantling of the party/state apparatus. When the disagreement proved intractable, Mao supported the use of the army against the more radical segments of the Cultural Revolution movement and they were quickly crushed. Mao’s erstwhile allies among the more centrist elements in the movement shortly capitulated to similar fates providing what proved to be only a quite manageable disruption to the party structure

(Read the full piece by Antaeus on Kasama (4/27/09) and the ensuing discussion thread to see how this struggle developed – also how its suppression and failure is explained and rationalized in terms of “objective conditions” and a de-emphasizing of the point that the Shanghai Commune raised that the working class must emancipate itself.)

After the fact, there is little doubt that the left elements in Cultural Revolution had a more accurate understanding of the situation in China than Mao, assuming, as I find it very hard to do, that Mao genuinely believed all that he was saying. It is less clear, and definitely not the position of Antaeus, but I think that it is also true, that this experience demonstrates that no basic reform of the Chinese party/state was possible without calling the party-centric model into question, which specifically would include a critique of the last three words in Mao’s conception of “...democracy under centralized guidance.”

TRANSITIONS

The results of these workerless “worker’s states,” governing “for” the working class while ruling on the backs of actual working people, have been increasingly bureaucratized, repressive and exploitative societies.

Such societies may be “socialist” (of either 20th or 21st century variant) in some superficial public relations branding sense, but that are certainly still part of human prehistory and of the realm of necessity. There is no evidence that these displacements of the representation dilemma to the post-revolutionary society has illuminated any path that is clearly in the direction of communism. This is notwithstanding a good deal of quickly forgotten propagandistic apologetics that claim this is exactly what is happening - think Venezuela currently, another demonstration of the infinite elasticity of left naiveté, a characteristic that in this and other cases is certainly not unique to the Leninists and Maoists.

There is no shortage of stubborn, thick-headed self-deception in every segment of the left, although some promote it more aggressively. But it is hard for anyone to deny that the new types of authoritarian and exploitative social formations that have emerged out of major revolutionary struggles, rather than being transitional steps to communism, have been seed beds for both evolutionary and counter-revolutionary reversions to the most barbaric capitalist archetypes. This process, combined with the futile attempts to rationalize and justify it, compound the cumulative disastrous impacts on revolutionary morale and further muddy any popular liberatory revolutionary vision.

One short side point here: I would be much more open to hopeful possibilities in the situation in Nepal, than, for example, in Venezuela, that more popular current blindspot for the left that forgets Peronism and the Monteneros, discounts the relevance of “post-democracy” positions linked to the strengthening of the state not its withering away, and hopes that the existing state will provide the impetus and resources to build from the top a dual power against it from the bottom. Good luck. In my opinion, the struggle in Nepal isn’t receiving the attention it merits. It may eventually provide a catalyst for a strategic reorientation within the M.L. left towards the problems I have been describing. I don’t see Venezuela functioning that way for anybody.

I opened this piece with a remark from a recent interview with a leading Maoist in Nepal identified as Comrade Binod. Of course, there is a lot in the interview that stays with the traditional party-centric formulas, although these predictable left Maoist positions seem a bit at odds with the plaintive “...something wrong, somewhere...” comment that casts its shadow over growing questions about the model of revolution that had been accepted. Comrade Binod makes it clear that his concerns revolve around popular participation, individual freedom, and the legitimacy of the exercise of power under circumstances where the strategic task of a popular insurrection is on the order of the day.

So back to the original Kasama quote: “Without State Power, all else is illusion.” One actual illusion is that the capture of a state by a self proclaimed leadership is necessarily a step towards communism - whether its “leadership” is of the working class, the class “dirigente”, or of a broader and vaguer “revolutionary people” that incorporates the working class. For it to be a step towards communist society, there must be discernable movement towards the administration of things, not people. The substitution of “re-education” for the physical elimination of “class enemies” is not such a movement. Neither is it a significant revolutionary advance to replace the capitalist state with a different external authority that continues to administer people, but as if they were things – or maybe potentially wayward children.

What is needed is genuinely democratic participation in all major social decisions, as opposed to fabricated after-the-fact near-unanimities that hide the real dominance of technocratic notions of efficiency. There must be real steps towards expanding the individual freedom and autonomy necessary to make these changes real and substantive, not merely decorative. These are radically incompatible with all personality cults and near deifications of leaders or leaderships. Only with these changes will the outcome possibly be a different kind of state, a “Commune State” that will conceivably “wither away,” and only then is there real hope to establish a society where the “freedom of each is the condition for the freedom of all,” a society that is comprehensively and conclusively liberated from the domination of capital.

This does not stand in opposition to any possible need to exercise state power against the former ruling class – but it does indicate some limits on the methods this can employ without deforming our ultimate objectives.

Leaving aside those radicals that see separate communist organization as inherently authoritarian, the modern attempts to reconcile the Manifesto roles for communists with the notion that the working class must emancipate itself have led to this dilemma: On the one side, as Alonzo Alcazar said recently, “we are almost afraid to say ‘we’” and, on the other side, as the Kasama selection above demonstrates, the self-emancipation of the working class is put on the back burner until the “Socialist Revolution” is won by an internally disciplined party leading a disparate and only partially self conscious constituency – a constituency that lacks all capac-

ity to provide the needed external discipline over “its” vanguard, except possibly if evolutionary reformism becomes the strategy - and that is hardly a good thing.

Radicals must determine what to do and how to do it somewhere between these equally inadequate alternatives, recognizing that we will probably not stumble into insights that resolve all dilemmas. The issues will have to be constantly reinvestigated and the proposed solutions reinvigorated in the light of changing conditions and developing potentials. This need for constant reexamination of premises based on a working feedback loop between the development and the implementation of policies is another argument for a critical, but also an organized and disciplined structure for revolutionary political work. It is also, however, an argument against a structure that substitutes its own processes - even if they are qualitatively better than what we have come to expect - for the emancipation of the working class in and for itself.

DEMOCRACY?

“From the point of view of ‘organized anarchism with a class struggle perspective,’ two kinds of organization are needed: (1) forms of mass organization through which ordinary people can grow and develop their collective strength, and (2) political organizations of the anarchist or libertarian socialist minority, to have a more effective means to coordinate our activities, gain influence in working class communities and disseminate our ideas.”

“Dual organizational anarchists often say that the role of the anarchist political organization is to ‘win the battle of ideas,’ that is, to gain influence within movements and among the mass of the population by countering authoritarian or liberal or conservative ideas. Bakunin had said that the role of anarchist activists was a ‘leadership of ideas.’”

“But disseminating ideas isn’t the only form of influence. Working with others of diverse views in mass organizations and struggles, exhibiting a genuine commitment, and being a personable and supportive person in this context also builds personal connections, and makes it more likely one’s ideas will be taken seriously.”

“The idea of a ‘vanguard party’ is that a political organization is to try to draw to it the layer of the working class that has these sorts of leadership qualities and to use this ‘human capital’ to achieve a hegemonic position within mass movements. Its aim is to use this position of dominant influence to eventually achieve power for its party. And along the way it also thinks in terms of achieving power within the various union or mass movement organizations. This means congealing the party’s power through various methods of hierarchical control. This is formal leadership power and not just influence.”

“...the aim of libertarian socialism is that the masses themselves should achieve power, through mass direct democracy, not that a leadership group should do so through a party gaining control of a state. Reflecting this, the aim of the libertarian left activists should be to encourage self-management of movements/organizations.”

I’m citing selected excerpts from pages 4-5 of Wetzel’s article, “Anarchism, Class Struggle and Political Organization”. I found the article on Z-Net, but it is available from a number of sources. The selections indicate elements of his conception of anarchist political organization and strategy and contrast them with those of a “vanguard party.” Presumably Wetzel has other writings on the subject since, for example, these say nothing about the various questions of internal unity and organizational discipline that Gambone treats in some detail. I also should note that all competent advocates of the vanguard party position would regard Wetzel’s description of it as a caricature - although I find it to be a reasonable interpretation that accurately presents the way most such groups function once they reach a certain threshold of size and influence and internalize the resulting hubris.

I have a fairly wide area of agreement with this perspective - as I understand it - but there are questions, there are gaps, and perhaps there are significant differences. Accordingly, I’d like to use the final sections of this discussion to consider some class struggle social anarchist positions on organization and strategy; including

issues of democracy and participation within mass struggle; the element of capitalist class power and class policy with respect to legality, legitimacy and the potentially military dimensions of the struggle; the concept of “social insertion”; some approaches to workplace organizing; ending – at last – by returning briefly to the question of insurrection. None of this will be done adequately and I again apologize in advance.

This is the major problem that I see in these selections and in my understanding of the general approach. It posits an organization of revolutionary anarchists that relates to mass struggles in a collective and organized way; it recognizes that this organization should advance distinctively anarchist ideas; it provides a list of things that “vanguard parties” supposedly think and do which revolutionary anarchist organizations should not think and do. But there’s still not enough here to answer some very basic questions facing any revolutionary strategy - what are the potentials; how do we proceed; what are the appropriate standards for evaluating our work?

I mentioned earlier the importance of recognizing that we have a collective radical history, and that it is important to have a good handle on the facts of this history before making major judgments on its implications and motivations. I want to spell this out in a little more detail since I think it has particular relevance to anarchist critiques of Leninism that, in turn, are relevant to some of these questions of current approaches to work.

Although I have no overriding compulsion to defend major Leninist political interventions, past or present, general or specific, I do think we can only learn from criticizing such experiences if two conditions are met. The nature and significance of the issues that were/are addressed should be evaluated independently of the actions taken to address them. The actions taken to address them should be evaluated separately from the justifications offered for these actions, and both actions and justifications should be evaluated separately. This should provide an adequate factual groundwork before provisional judgments become hardened – which is particularly important when these are judgments that may assume a moralistic aspect.

The anarchist alternative to vanguardism in the selections cited above present greater democratic participation as the generic answer to most of the problems of revolutionary strategy. This same tendency is evident in the historical criticisms that don’t consider the possibility that the immediate issues of democracy and participation – and their limitations or restrictions – weren’t the only questions, or even necessarily the pivotal ones in various episodes of struggle. This has two consequences: it reduces the responsibility for revolutionaries to collectively formulate and advance their own positions and confront the underlying issues within various struggles in their own name - and the necessity to consider whether or not this was done properly in historical situations. It promotes the tendency to make premature and exaggerated moral judgments about matters that haven’t been adequately considered on a political level.

When current struggles are the focus - consider, for example, the recent anarchist exchanges over the English Oil Workers job actions that had some undeniably popular, but anti-internationalist elements – the discussions tend to be more realistic, but still not sufficiently centered on what can and should be done in situations where something must be done.

There can be a cost for being too quick to conclude a political analysis and draw moral conclusions. The accounting may come in the increased likelihood that in some marginally different circumstances parallel mistakes of commission will be made. It may also come as collateral damage from failures to confront real issues in an organized and collective way, not as external commentators and not as undifferentiated individual participants. Such errors of omission can result in important lost opportunities and even major setbacks.

There are crucial and complex issues of democracy, participation and militance where mass democratic struggles intersect with revolutionary groups that are attempting to intervene in them. It seems to me that class struggle anarchism tends to gloss over the tensions, contradictions and conflicts that are a necessary part of this intersection, although their general possibility is implied by Wetzel’s notion of “unevenness” – at least in my understanding of it.

Let me paraphrase another well known Marxist proposition: the "...ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas..." (taking "ideas" in the strongest sense of the term to include a range of cultural norms many of which are not really "thought"). These ruling ideas are supported by the tremendous institutionalized momentum of historical inertia, reinforced continuously by the exercise of both repressive and incorporative aspects of capitalist state power. "Normally" in most areas of the globe, even when they are resisting, working people and the working class are thinking, believing, and acting within some variant of capitalist ideology and capitalist culture. And, almost by the definition of normalcy, in "normal" times, no accurate index of popular opinion will show that the masses of people are with the revolutionaries, because, in a very basic sense, they are not. (Wetzel understands this, see p. 5, op cit) This is an aspect of reality that actually does matter, notwithstanding various spontaneists who discount the impact of this subordinated working class consciousness, since they see the working class always doing exactly what is possible in the given circumstances--no more and no less.

The ruling class ideas are not simply mirrored in the subordinated classes. The "high culture" of the actual rulers does not apply clichéd homilies like "Be all that you can be" or "With hard work, you can accomplish anything" to their own privileged lives. The ruling class does not question its own potential for class solidarity because "people won't stick together," although it certainly promotes such notions among the overwhelming majorities that are oppressed and exploited.

The primary manifestation of the dominance of the ruling ideas on popular attitudes is the mass buy-in to the "There Is No Alternative" mantra; the acceptance of the inevitability and essential rightness of the major features of the status quo and the ultimate folly and futility of collective resistance to it. For the majority of people, most of the time, this attitude predominates even while they are engaged in struggles and resistance that may test the framework of capitalist legitimacy in a given capitalist society and state. While these ruling ideas are never the only ideas and cultural patterns within the oppressed and dominated working classes, they determine the important segment of working class consciousness that Gramsci characterizes as "common sense," or that consciousness that is constituted as "common sense" in periods of capitalist stability and normal routine.

Looking at the same issues in a slightly different framework, most episodes of mass and class struggle include elements of a struggle for "better terms" within capitalism, for reforms, as well as at least an implicit struggle against the capitalist system. Clearly, then, moments will occur in mass struggles when participatory majorities tacitly or explicitly acknowledge their subordination in exchange for selective concessions and a circumscribed security. Struggles that de-emphasize or that oppose concrete issues of internationalism or defer possibilities to expand the opposition to white supremacy frequently take on this character in this country.

Revolutionaries have no particular interest in any reinforcement, "democratic" or not, of this subordinated working class consciousness that is neither "in itself" nor "for itself," but is distinctly "for another." When revolutionaries cave in to such popular opinions, which certainly can be expressed in democratic decisions, the results can be just as damaging as any authoritarian manipulation. I don't see how Wetzel deals with such situations where the revolutionary group should confront and challenge strongly held positions within the class and among the people.

For revolutionaries and revolutionary organizations including anarchist ones, certain principles constitute operating hypotheses--across all types of borders, an injury to one is an injury to all; under all circumstances, it is good and therefore "right to rebel." The validity of these principles will be determined in the long run through revolutionary political practice, and not, typically, by decisions of the moment, no matter how participatory and democratic the decision process may have been. Periodic democratic reaffirmations of our principles are certainly welcome, but with or without such validation, they will remain our operating assumptions. Unless there are basic changes in the strategy and the conception of the purposes and objectives of the struggle, revolutionaries must persist in attempts to win broader support for them whatever the polling indicates. Of course there are some extremely stupid and counter-productive ways of doing this that should be avoided.

Where I agree with the anarchist perspective is that no thinking head and acting body notions and no mystified embodiment of the prospects for revolution in some individual “genius” can substitute for actual changes in the collective understanding of what is and what is possible. This understanding can only develop and become a real social force through the experience of active resistance to the power of capital and from the construction out of this resistance of a popular cultural alternative to capitalist “civilization.” The introduction of notions of general “objective” interests of some broader social group can sometimes be helpful to this process, and sometimes it can be needed even though it might not be helpful, but no such intervention substitutes for decisions that the actual participants in the struggle can recognize as their own, and none should be used as a club against such decisions.

This essential function of participatory democracy in the course of struggle is degraded by the nested structures of Third International organizational centralism; an inner ring where the Party leadership is the general staff and the cadre are the disciplined soldiers; an outer ring where the party is the general staff and the working classes are the grunts – or maybe the collateral damage.

Revolutionaries will normally encounter the issues of democracy and participation in complex situations where the issues of who should decide and who should participate are not clear cut. In most cases we will be a minority working with and within larger minorities, although frequently not that much larger, under conditions where the domination of capital is at least potentially under challenge; where some resistance to its command has developed; and where there is a need to internalize and generalize a deeper understanding of the collective experience of struggle to most effectively continue and expand it, making the break with the “ruling ideas” as categorical and durable as is possible.

An expectation that greater democratic participation will provide the best answers to all questions can obscure the real possibility that it can also substitute lowest common denominator approaches that accept the logic of capital for much less comfortable and less popular initiatives that might prove out to be more productive. It is not at all unlikely that a formally democratic and participatory approach will result in decisions that will not move the struggle forward, at least not in the opinions of the revolutionary grouping and the organized militants. So there may be moments in a struggle when a confrontation with democratically expressed “common sense” is important.

Participatory majorities in this operational context will frequently be different from statistical “majorities” in any broader quantitative sociological view. But even internally, there is no guarantee that formal democratic procedures will promote the expansion and intensification of the struggle. In fact, there will almost always be some arenas and occasions for decision making where “democracy” would certainly end or cripple the continuing struggle. Such contradictions will be reflected in tensions between the rank and file including its effective leadership in “normal” conditions and the organizing projects of revolutionary groups. It will be reflected in tensions between emergent mass vanguards and the elements tied to the security of the existing class compromises.

Of course, this is not an argument against rank and file democracy and participation and in favor of leadership and guidance of the struggle by organized groups of revolutionaries. M.L. formations also capitulate to such lowest common denominator tendencies more often than not. As Luxemburg had forecast for socialist parties in general, they are typically an organized drag on revolutionary potentials, the setters and enforcers of bureaucratic limits at times when masses of people are breaking with them. They are seldom the excessively Jacobin insurrectionists or the “dare to struggle, dare to win” kooks - on balance, unfortunately I would say.

This doesn't mean that revolutionaries must always urge the fight forward. Many of us have experienced strikes or comparable insurgencies which have broken out of the institutionalized scripted routines and have seen a flowering of new leadership with new experiences of militant success and different conceptions of what success actually means. This upsurge of participation in a struggle, along with the more inclusive and substantive democratic discussion among the participants can lead towards more basic confrontations with capitalist economic and political power. These waves of enthusiasm can promote tactics that are not sustainable and

objectives that are not attainable. This is not always a bad thing, but neither is it always good. It can result in significant and predictable setbacks and even lead to that “Revolutionary Suicide” that some Black Panthers perversely presented as a goal, or maybe a prediction.

As a willing participant in the sixties, I can provide numbers of examples of such situations, and they still flare up regularly at moments like the height of the anti-globalization struggle. This can result in militant majorities that do not properly calculate the gaps and unevenness between what they are willing to do at a given moment and what they and others, possibly not so directly involved, will support over time. Frequently the root cause is that the experience of ruling class repression is also “uneven” and more significantly it is very unevenly understood. Popular struggles can create militant operational majorities that do not appreciate that they have an enemy with the demonstrated willingness to kill hundreds of thousands to maintain power--at times with actions that are barely rational in terms of the stakes in particular struggles. They don't understand that they have an enemy that is also able to fine tune repression, making its impact maliciously selective and compellingly divisive.

So there will be (and have been) points where it may be necessary and important to retrench, to consolidate advances and accept necessary losses, even while additional victories still seem attainable to many participants in the movement. It will certainly be unpopular, but it may be right to question or even challenge a militant majority under such conditions. Of course, this should be done with the greatest of care because nothing is more important than the willingness to fight collectively for important objectives although they may appear to be “unrealistic” within the hegemony of capital. The very worst position for revolutionary groups is to be behind the struggle when the action starts, counseling caution and timidity--patience and the long view.

Organized revolutionary groups have made mistakes in all areas and in every conceivable direction. However, no listing of past or potential mistakes takes away the need for an organized activist project, a project that is more than a stance and a vision; one that raises the need to take risks, including the risk of being quite wrong, to help transform the political context and balance of forces.

When mass insurgencies develop they transform popular consciousness and existing institutional frameworks, but never permanently. After everything is considered, revolutionaries must also act because there is no underlying dynamic that guarantees advances will be cumulative and irreversible. I don't see this understanding anywhere in Wetzel's arguments. But without it, we will be always lost: either just waiting for the “event,” pretty much guaranteeing that it will impact us more than we impact it; or bogged down in a deadening march through the institutions that ties us tighter and tighter to them and to the modes of operation that are realistic within them, not to mention, frequently binding ourselves to people that will almost certainly fall on the wrong side in an upsurge.

Beyond the issue of whether revolutionaries must organize themselves separately as a base from which to participate in class and popular mass struggles, there is the issue of the political content of that work. I agree with Gambone that the revolutionary group should be disciplined and that it should be politically unified along critical and coherent ideological lines. The questions still remain: What does it do? How does it do it?

RULING CLASS POWER & POLICY

The vagueness of Wetzel's answers extends to another problem. A potentially revolutionary working class movement is a mortal threat to the ruling class that controls the system of laws and deploys the bodies of armed men and women. A revolutionary grouping that attempts to implement a perspective towards this end will also be seen as a threat as it begins to have some impact. In fact, we cannot assume there will always be space for open legal political advocacy of the revolutionary supercession of capital, just because it is possible now when we are a feeble challenge - not unless we also assume that very low ceilings mark the limits of our potential.

How is it proposed to contend with the power of the capitalist state and develop the capacity to deal with and within repression and illegality? The space for “legal” struggle has been much more constricted in this

country at times in the past; it is essentially absent right now in many other countries. This must be taken into account. Will these issues never materialize because the U.S. left is destined to remain a tolerated nuisance at the margin providing a fig leaf of tolerance and openness to support the hegemonic power? I don't think so. And further, in my experience, these are issues that can develop and have developed almost overnight in the past -and could again.

The questions of "legality" lead directly to the problems/potentials of military forms of struggle and these also must be treated in a clear fashion. We know that these are immediately issues in much of the world, how can they be off the table in the center of capitalist power. Is the assumption – as appears with Alcazar – that the problems are so overwhelming that we should put them out of our head and operate on the premise that legality will be the norm and not the exception, since no forms of illegal activity, specifically including armed struggle, are viable in this country? This is a risky assumption for a number of obvious reasons. One that is less obvious is the growing presence of other revolutionary tendencies, neo-fascist to national anarchist, that explicitly do not accept it and are increasingly attracted to modern theories of "a-symmetric" "4th Generation Warfare."

Wetzel doesn't pursue these issues in what I've read as I don't intend to pursue them here. I have to assume that he might think it is a discussion for another time and place--and another method and format – as I do also.

However, we are left with the situation where, to an unfortunate degree, Wetzel's approach appears to rely on a cooperative capitalist state standing aside until it is too late to successfully defend itself, allowing us to develop an effective counterpower contending only with our own stumbling and with working class inertia. We are left with no indication of any responsibilities of revolutionaries to prepare for insurrection, for the forceful destruction of the state apparatus of capitalism when and where political circumstances make it possible. Not to mention the opposite responsibilities - including work to prevent premature or otherwise problematic military initiatives.

Instead, Wetzel offers a gradual and prolonged process of creating a dual power alternative through incremental steps which will "wither away" the capitalist counterpower. This does not take adequate account of the very "unevenness" of struggle that Wetzel raises. It doesn't consider how today's advances can obstruct tomorrow's struggles - how concessions in one area can facilitate repression in another. It doesn't take account of other political players with other agendas that are not going to be content to sit back and watch. In short, I think it is a perspective with serious utopian downsides, one that will have a great difficulty transcending the "unevenness" of the struggle and developing a mass revolutionary constituency that will not live in the old way any longer.

"SOCIAL INSERTION"

I want to make some brief comments on the concept of "social insertion," an aspect of some class struggle social anarchist perspectives which Wetzel endorses. I understand that this conception was initially projected in Latin America to broaden the political approach for Latin American anarchist groups with a clandestine armed struggle background and focus. These groups were encountering major limitations on their ability to relate to mass working class constituencies and mass struggles under changing political conditions. So the notion must have some connection to the southern cone guerilla movements and their "continental strategy" that was influenced by the anarchist Abraham Guillen, a comrade of Durruti, and someone whose writings on armed struggle and revolutionary strategy I've always liked and found useful.

Before I understood these origins of the concept, I had interpreted it more broadly and simplistically as a corrective to tendencies among U.S. anarchists to confine political work within incestuous "scenes" and milieus, usually ones branded by generational and class privilege. But even with a more accurate understanding of the concept, I see some problems with Wetzel's brief description of it. I'd make two points: First, Wetzel appears to assume that organizations of revolutionaries are destined to be dominated by a declassed

strata, able to treat its living circumstances and class role as life style options. While that may be an accurate description of present reality in this country, hopefully it is a reality that can be surpassed and revolutionaries with working class origins and working class futures will play an increasingly central role more akin to the situation in the Chicago anarcho-syndicalists, the historic IWW, and, to a lesser extent, to some aspects of C.P. and Trotskyist experience. Certainly this change in social composition should be part of the short range objectives of any revolutionary movement, and, at least under conditions of basic legality there is no justification for not prioritizing it. In fact, in my opinion, the extent to which this objective is met and working class “organic intellectuals” develop is an important test of the strategic perspectives that are being implemented.

Perhaps more important, revolutionary groups must understand the potential impact of mass upsurges on their structures and methods and have the flexibility to respond to them. With modern possibilities for social movement and with instantaneous global communication there may be moments when newly activated forces from the social base flood the political organizations with new ideas and new people that don't need to be inserted because they already come from the workplace and the community.

WORKPLACE ORGANIZING

When I look at the practical application of class struggle anarchist perspectives in this country, I'm not struck by the differences with M.L. vanguardism as much as by similarities with M.L. conservatism and incrementalism. Clear differences in political stance don't appear to result in significantly different approaches to work. If I was a naive visitor from Mars, I might think that - looking towards broader unity - this might have a potential good side. We know better than that. So I'm more concerned with the bad side; with the common promotion of frameworks for struggle that fight for today's gains without seeing their potential to be tomorrow's problems, frameworks that too often incorporate the struggle within capital thereby helping it adapt to changing circumstances.

I only want to make a few brief points limited to some issues in workplace organizing: the attitude towards contract unionism and “union reform” and the attitude towards the shop steward/committeeman post. This will take me quickly into areas where my lack of detailed knowledge of actual anarchist practice might result in exaggerations and other mistakes. As I have said, my reading has been limited and narrow, particularly with respect to approaches outside of North America. I would welcome corrections on any of this.

The tactical attitude towards unions and particularly towards the workplace and the process of production is an important question for the left, one with a range of options, not all of which are exclusive. One common approach is to emphasize work in organized workplaces that mobilizes a sufficient rank and file base to eventually capture and “reform” dysfunctional or collaborationist unions and revitalizes “class struggle” unionism. Another, slightly less favored is to emphasize work in unorganized situations (going “deeper into the class” as some less objectionable M.L. groups say) intending to eventually organize and certify a union, or to decertify a “bad” union in favor of a “good” one. Then there are possibilities with “independent” and with dual unions or alternatively a “base committee” approach.

(I have some experiences with all of the above, none particularly successful, but have always favored yet another option: organize a direct action mass grouping of workers at the point of production that can begin to understand the relevance of class issues beyond their particular shop floor--whatever the nature of the union or whether or not there is one. This approach has its problems as well, but they are a matter for a different discussion.)

It appears to me that class struggle social anarchism trends in this country tend to opt for more traditional approaches within the union reform genre. I don't think this is the case with Wetzell, based on his extended exchange with Carl Davidson that is appended to the article I've been citing. However, there appears to be a bit of contract unionism, “boring from within”, and NLRB fetishism in IWW circles. Again, I may be factually wrong here, but, if I am not, this is questionable in this country, where trade unions and union contracts have formal juridical status and limits that constrict trade union organizing within a framework that explicitly

recognizes and actively enforces the legitimacy of capitalist property rights and management prerogatives. The focus on contract unionism is usually a diversion from the issues of power in the workplace toward a quasi-parliamentary struggle for influence within the union, a form of struggle that the overwhelming majority of workers avoid like the plague. It is a diversion from the immediate arena of management command and worker resistance where the understanding of the potential power of autonomous organization can best be developed.

For those M.L. groups whose ideal situation is to capture an elected paid union leadership position, or at least to become part of the organizing or educational staff, these factors don't present any problems. Their working objective is the accumulation of positions of influence and authority within reform movements. Wetzel is completely correct in criticizing this conceptualization of a revolutionary "leading role" that amounts to placing communists and their allies in leadership positions in reform movements and organizations. The situation is, or at least it should be, much more complicated for revolutionaries who are attempting to build centers of autonomous activity that challenge all forms of delegated authority.

Short of becoming a paid official, which is almost always a disaster, the closest approach to the actual class struggle normally available within the union reform perspective only gives radicals sufficient access and influence to open up negotiations with the union structure and its paid lawyers and organizers, acting as proxies for management. Even the best of such union oriented work is forced to focus on the type of worker, the union militant, that is frequently a careerist and is recognized as such by peers - a "politician" who may talk a good militant and radical line when they are among the "outs" in the union, but only until they become the "ins." Such folks do not normally emerge as part of a militant organic leadership of significant struggles and, in fact, frequently turn out to be an additional layer of obstacles.

But what about the shop steward/shop committeeman? Is that a different position that can help radicals coalesce a revolutionary political base? I don't think so. Groups I worked have worked with in the past looked at the British shop stewards movement as an organizing model, but found it inadequate, at least for this country. In the first place, there were significant differences in circumstances. The British union system at the time did not have legally binding specific term contracts that outlawed job actions and the British Shop Stewards movement was not bound from the outset by those no strike strictures as any parallel formation in this country would be. In Britain the shop stewards grouping was able to organize job actions independently of the union structure, cutting across industrial divisions and union jurisdictions, even including the potential to initiate political strikes or a national general strike. There were clearly limits, but at least the British shop stewards generally represented workers to unions and management. In this country shop stewards must enforce the contract and generally represent unions and management to workers.

Despite the fact that almost every left perspective shares the goal, the question of whether revolutionaries active in workplaces should aim to become shop stewards or similar officials is no slam dunk - not if the goal is revolutionary organizing work at the workplace. Shop steward credentials are not that hard to come by for radicals in most organized workplaces unless they are completely socially dysfunctional. However, despite their cachet in radical subcultures, in the workplace the essence of the steward's role is to enforce labor discipline on other workers. That is the quid pro quo of the grievance system. Any steward that does not go along will not be an effective representative of the workers. Any steward that does go along will have problems "representing the interests of the future in the movements of the present."

The shop floor is the base point where workers can exercise their potential power over the work process. The steward function is a delegation of that power to an institution with a prior commitment not to employ it. It is infinitely better to have workers that still retain some trade unionist illusions learn themselves from the contradictions impacting this role, rather than having revolutionaries acting as good reformists in the pursuit of some skewed notion of efficiency. I don't want to extend any of these arguments too far since, as I have said, I'm no longer that close to the actual discussions of people doing this work. I do think it is a topic area that should be pursued.

CONCLUSION

This will be brief.

I recently read a report by an Irish class struggle social anarchist about a tour he took around the U.S. and his impressions of the anarchist movement overall and in specific localities. One point that I noted with more than a little consternation was that he treated “insurrectionist anarchism” as little more than the anti-working class anarchist primitivism of the Eugene variant. It does seem that class struggle social anarchists tend to discount the politics of insurrection, ceding the issue to various “post-left” elements, including the “crazies” among the life style anarchists, where it becomes little more than an element of generational extremism, a theatrical pose that will evaporate in the face of any real repression, if not at the mere possibility of repression such as followed after 9/11.

I think that the issue of insurrection, the basic reason to take Lenin seriously, is an essential element of a revolutionary perspective right now. I don't think that Wetzel or much of the class struggle social anarchist tendency agree. But I think it is hard to apply his concept of “unevenness” without reaching this conclusion. The ebbs and flows of the revolutionary process in different geographical and social spaces, combined with the different ruling class policies of suppression and incorporation make it unlikely that any political perspective can incrementally advance towards a revolutionary transformation without there being moments where only an exercise of collective will, a leap into the realm of the possible with no guarantees, will prevent an effective reversal of the process. As this dilemma emerges globally in open spaces and across boundaries, with different stages of development and different rates of change forming a complex mosaic where no one element can be treated in isolation, the issue of whether to take power when it appears possible, but also problematic, will inevitably emerge and we will either have a prepared - or an unprepared, and therefore certainly inadequate - response.

The development of mass revolutionary sentiment is not an extended and uniform process, but the result of sharp breaks and new normals that produce a strata of revolutionaries today that may not even have been the reformists of yesterday. These are not people who are discovered through a process of patiently arguing and convincing, but people who create and discover themselves through the unexpected leaps in perception and self conception that happen in actions, fights, struggles.

Alain Badiou, who I must get around to reading instead of reading about, has this conception of the “event”; sharp epochal changes that can transform potentials and problems - opening up new vistas for revolutionaries, if they recognize what is happening in time, if they have a program to capitalize on it in time, if they are not trapped in old paradigms until the time is passed. There are problems that I see with my limited understanding of Badiou's argument. It looks like there is little worthwhile doing until the event occurs, but we don't know its coming and we may miss it, so we must be content with mulling over the “idea of communism.”

I think, alternatively, that revolutionary organization should work to precipitate the “event” because that is the course most likely to leave us prepared to capitalize on it. I think this involves developing organizational forms that are mobile and flexible, and that are looking to intervene, not because they have the truth, but as a part of the development of the will to create new truths.

I think further that we should be aware of the specific liabilities that are tied to our ultimate goals as communists. We look to promote a universalistic liberatory future. But the very “unevenness” of the political circumstances creates obstacles to our perspective that are advantages to certain of our radical rivals. Rivals who also look to take advantage of an “event”, but in ways that threaten to unleash a centrifugal spiral into barbarism.

Don Hamerquist 9/22/09