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Centralised Party, Yes – Centralism over the Party, No!

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We should first address the issue of centralism which the “Programmists” have never been able to define in an “organic” way. Linked as it is to the interpretation of a given historical experience, it simply cannot be reduced to formal and scholastic abstractions.

These muddle-headed “left communists” argue thus: in Lenin’s International, there were no “pure communist parties” so the use of the democratic mechanism was inextricably linked to what went at in that particular historical time. It is therefore obvious that an International unlike the Third, which consists of “pure communist parties” should be identified by a different internal mechanism and not by democratic centralism, which ceased to be operative with the death of Lenin. What happened after that, in the Stalinist era, is not covered in their analysis because it had nothing to do with the working class and the objectives of the revolution.

But to suppose, as the “Programmists” do, an organisation in a state of chemical purity, an international of “pure Communist parties” as opposed to that of Lenin made of “impure parties,” is playing with a metaphysical paradox. Instead of formulating the problems of a whole series of historical events through the lenses of dialectical materialism, they adopt a formal mechanistic calculation, which tends to get lost in the fog of the most obsolete idealism.

We can tell these comrades in all certainty that there will be no international of pure communist parties, but only an international that will reflect within it the good and the evil, the contradictions and absurdity, of a society divided into classes, themselves torn by various layers of interest, social conditions, culture, etc. The assumption of communist parties in a pure state with an equally pure world organisation, even as a simple aspiration, is not the result of any serious investigation based on Marxism. It strangely resembles a certain mysticism which had its heyday in the twenty years of fascism.

Lenin’s International certainly had its weaknesses, due to the immaturity of the historical period that followed the collapse of the Second International and the crisis then afflicting the capitalist world. Every proletarian organisation reproduces, though in a more advanced way, and on an inversely proportional scale, the characteristics of the historical period in which it was formed. And it is certain that the negative aspects present in the Third International will be present, although differently articulated in future international organisations, as amply proved by the objective conditions in which the various Left Communist groupings, who today claim the right to make a contribution to the reconstruction of the international proletarian party, are operating. Amongst these groups, the one that suffers most from intolerance and crises is the Bordigist “Communist Programme” where the dynamics of democratic centralism work more deeply, as seen in the explosive cycle of its internal contradictions. Today, for polemical convenience, the “Programmists” would like to pass off the Third International as made up of “impure” parties. But here’s how Bordiga previously judged Lenin’s International, in clear contradiction with the current positions.

“After restoring proletarian theory, the practical work of the Third International towered over the divisions raised by opportunists of all countries in banning from the ranks of the world’s vanguard all reformists, social democrats, and centrists of all types. This renewal took place in all the old parties and is the foundation of the new revolutionary party of the proletariat. Lenin guided with an iron hand the difficult task of dispelling all confusions and weaknesses.”

The real strength of these Bordigists lies in their inconsistency!

How can this group, with its structure of an aristocratic and intellectual elite, with a filtered and distilled Marxism, developed in backrooms rather than in the storm of class struggle, contest the accuracy of what we are saying? So then, how can we resolve, with Leninist integrity, the debate over the two faces of centralism?

In the phase of imperialist domination and proletarian revolution no organisation of the revolutionary party can conceivably exist which is not based on a highly centralised structure. Perhaps this is the feature that most dramatically distinguishes it from parliamentary parties. If centralism is therefore an imperative requirement imposed by class conflict, the attributes of “democratic” and “organic” define the subjective terms of a polemical distinction that has never affected the substance of this centralisation. Who can say with absolute precision how far bodies involved in this centralisation make use of the tools of democracy (active participation and active control of the rank and file) and how far the centres of power are based on an authoritarian regime in the physical person of a leader, and through him, to the Central Committee?

For the Bordigists of “Programma” the problem is posed in terms that come from the counterrevolutionary practice of Stalinism. This is how they tried, finally, to clarify their extraordinary theory that goes under the name of “organic centralism.” We have

reproduced it above in the same words in which it was formulated.

But we need to clarify once and for all the relationship that must exist between the centre and the base so that the party is structured and operates according to Leninist principles. An ongoing dialectical relationship exists between the members and the party centre. It is obviously on the basis of that relationship, in the context of theoretical and political platform already agreed that the party leadership develops its tactical action. Lenin never advocated, either in theory or in his political actions, any other way in which the organisation could act. And how can we understand the organisational formula of a Central Committee or of a leader who relies only on himself, on his capacity as related to a “set” of *already planned possible moves* (our emphasis) in relation to *no less foreseen outcomes* whilst the “so-called membership can usefully be ordered to perform actions indicated by the leadership?”

It simply means the same as the policy of the Central Committee under Stalin, once all working class elements had been eliminated from the dictatorship of the proletariat. It means a deep and irreparable rupture between the members of the party and its directing centre and the resulting slide into the open reconstruction of capitalism. It also means that the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party and Stalin himself was tied to a “set” of possible moves that were perfectly planned in advance, that would be carried out with equal accuracy, in terms, and in a reality, we all know. What we are denouncing are the disastrous consequences which occur in a supposedly revolutionary party when its central organ, as a body, operates outside of the bounds and control of the organisation’s membership.

But closer to our experience, we have to denounce precisely those who postulate, or allow to be postulated, this laughable distinction between a political membership required only to carry out acts indicated by the centre and a centre that is entrusted with such powers of foresight and divination that it does not offer us a very encouraging sight. And here we are dealing with comrades who in terms of preparation and long militancy are highly skilled and command the respect and confidence of the whole party.

Was the leadership of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd’I), through Bordiga’s declarations to the Comintern, perhaps not bound to a set of possible options that denied the possibility of Fascism’s rise to power at the very time when it was carrying out the March on Rome? And was this glaring error of perspective not “in correspondence with the no less foreseeable outcome” of jeopardising the party with the tactic of the offensive for the offensive’s sake?

And who prepared a “scientific” analysis of the Russian economy defining the October Revolution as anti-feudal revolution after having celebrated it as a socialist? Had Bordiga not affirmed (in *Lenin nel cammino della rivoluzione*): “The revolution will be made in Russia, by and for the working class itself”? And further: “Soviet power was victorious, the dictatorship of the proletariat predicted by Marx, made its tremendous entrance onto the stage of history”?

How should we judge someone who was the most prominent exponent of the party and of “left-wing communism” who refused to become a “militant” in the Internationalist Communist Party at the time of its formation, as he considered it a mistake to fight directly against “the national communist party” (the PCI) [1] with the excuse that the workers were in the party of Togliatti? Then, when our split occurred, agreed to enter the PCd’I provided that the rump remained true to him, politically neutered and reduced to a sect of repeaters of not always digested formulae?

What was his contribution to the development of a critical examination of the nature of the Second World War and the role played by Russia as a major imperialist player, when he rejected our definition of state capitalism to speculate about Russia as a spurious form of “industrial state”?

The questions could continue, but we have said enough to show how ill-founded, precarious and objectively dangerous is his claim to assign to the Central Committee and this or that person, whatever their esteem, or skills of divination, the tasks of arbitrarily developing our theory, and functions of leadership, outside of and above, the party as a whole.

Lenin, at his most personal and most decisive, by which we mean the Lenin of the “April Theses” had a desperate determination to “go to the sailors,” beyond the formal organisation of the Bolshevik Party’s Central Committee whose positions which were based on misunderstanding and compromise. Lenin was not operating on organic or even democratic centralism here, but acting as the chief pillar of the coming revolution, the only one who had understood and endorsed the demands of the working class and this is because his feet were firmly on a class terrain, because he thought and worked in class terms, and for the class, and had a very lively sense of history which teaches us that revolution loves action and hates cowards who turn up a day late.

In this constant dialectical relationship between the membership and leadership of the party, in this necessary integration of freedom and authority, lies the solution of a problem to which professional objectors have perhaps paid too much attention.

Any revolutionary party which is not a mere abstraction has to address the problems of the class struggle in a historical climate in which violence and unchallenged authority dominates. In order to increasingly become a living instrument of combat it can only be organised around the most iron unity. Its ranks therefore have to be closed against the general thrust of the counter-revolution. The revolutionary party does not ape bourgeois parties, but **obeys the need to adapt its organisational structure to the objective condition of the revolutionary struggle.**

The elementary tactical principle of the revolutionary party in action, is that it must take into account the characteristics of the terrain on which it works and that its members are adequately prepared for their tasks. We do not believe there needs to be

disagreements on the question of centralism. These only begin when we talk in “democratic” or “organic” terms. The use, or worse, the abuse, of the term “organic” can lead to forms of authoritarian degeneration which break the dialectical relationship that must exist between the leadership and the members. The experience of Lenin is still valid, and it is vital to be able to fuse together, in a single vision, the seeming contradiction between “democratic” and “organic” centralism.

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1. The Italian Communist Party was formed under the leadership of Togliatti as a completely Stalinist party after the war. It dropped the old name of the Communist Party of Italy as a symbol that it no longer had internationalist pretensions.

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