

Indispensable or irrelevant: Which way for communists?

A response to the Nelson Peery interview

Luis J. Rodriguez



Chicano Moratorium Against the Vietnam War, 1970, was the largest anti-war protest in a "community of color" at the time.

THE PLATYPUS REVIEW PUBLISHED an interview with Nelson Peery on December 6, 2015, not long after his death.¹ Nelson was a 92-year-old revolutionary communist with more than 75 years experience in the political growth of Marxist study and organizing in the United States. He was for almost forty years my teacher and guide. I helped found with Nelson and hundreds of other revolutionaries the Communist Labor Party (CLP), the National Organizing Committee (NOC), and the League of Revolutionaries for a New America (LRNA). Nelson was a brilliant visionary and theoretician who brought essential knowledge to all the organizations he helped create. I honor my time with these organizations and Nelson's stalwart leadership.

However, in the aforementioned interview, Nelson misrepresents the facts and circumstances about my resignation in 2011 from LRNA. There's a deep disconnect from the man many knew and loved and the one who in that interview dismissed my contributions and sullied my understanding. Up until now, I have not addressed these issues in public since they were internal to the organization. I harbored no open animosity toward Nelson or LRNA, even when members were told I disagreed with the political line or that I should not be worked with politically. I never disagreed with LRNA's program or political resolution. And I worked hard to build LRNA, make breakthroughs, study, teach, and recruit.

Still I was targeted for removal, being pushed out, after I happened to disagree with Nelson and a couple of leading members. Not in a hostile manner, yet this in itself was "intolerable." LRNA's National Office could not maintain their integrity in the face of the issues I brought openly to them. They resorted to what you see in Nelson's statements, which, regrettably, are on the Internet for the world to see.

The most principled thing now is to clarify what happened. I would have preferred for Nelson's interview and my response to appear while he was alive. To be clear, there are LRNA members who are brave, active, and conscientious thinkers, teachers, writers, and organizers. Nonetheless, what I have to say should have lessons for all of us, beyond Nelson, LRNA, or me. I offer this in the spirit of the ongoing maturity of anyone who claims the mantle of conscious revolutionary.

"Purged"

In early 2011, I became aware that Nelson told at least two LRNA members that a "purge" would be initiated against a couple of other members and myself. Yet despite Nelson's declarations outside of collectives, although doing so was against LRNA's own precepts, I was never presented with any charges for violations of my membership.

Concerned, I wrote a series of internal emails to LRNA's National Office, with copies to other leading collectives, insisting on a response to what I had heard. Instead I was attacked with claims I was slandering Nelson by making my inquiries. Members of other collectives stayed silent, including those in the Los Angeles area and in the committee I was responsible to. This went on for months, with written exchanges back and forth, but to no resolution.

This talk of a purge aimed at me felt like a betrayal and totally unjustified. I was a member in good standing. In 40 years, I had contributed immensely and tried to step up whenever possible. At age 22, I ran for the LA school board in a "Vote Communist" campaign. In the mid-1980s, I served as editor of the *People's Tribune*, traveling around the country, conducting interviews, speaking, fundraising. I used the newspapers widely and had study circles wherever possible. A talk I gave in Chicago in the early 2000s for the *People's Tribune* brought some 200 people and garnered more donations than LRNA had ever done previously in that city. In another event in LA where I spoke, 75 people signed up to join. When Nelson spoke in LA in 2011, I helped bring about 15 people from my community. At the time I had a study circle of around 20 people. I paid my dues, stayed active in many struggles, including in culture and the

cannot meet their needs and intrinsic aims without the strategic influence of conscious revolutionaries. And this can only happen when the objective movements of society, based on the exacerbated economic conditions, and its subjective expression, the conscious revolutionaries, are one. Integrated. Unbreakable.

I also never claimed, "Powerful individuals determine what happens in history." Marx is clear—everything depends upon the course of social development and on the relations of social forces, even the role of the individual in history. But Marx also pointed out that under certain circumstances outstanding individuals are necessary for history to be made (Nelson says as much when he talks about Abraham Lincoln). Human beings are imbued with brains, souls, bodies, and creative potency. I am for liberating these powers, for the most creative and imaginative capacities to be brought to bear for revolution and a new society.

In the interview, Nelson also made an interesting statement about Madison, Wisconsin and the 2011 protests against Governor Scott Walker's plan to take away public employees' bargaining rights. "Madison is a trade-union struggle," according to Nelson. "It's important but very limited—a question of maintaining their rights. They [presumably me and others who either quit or were expelled from LRNA at the time] say that the trade unions are important. The trade unions have never been important." Really? This is something Lenin, if he were alive, would contest ("trade unions are a school of communism"). Marx and Engels would as well. I understand Nelson's points that trade unions cannot play a decisive revolutionary role, as well as their long history against Blacks in this country (although current-day public employee, food industry, and service employee unions have large numbers of black and brown workers). But again everything depends on the actual objective conditions.

At the time, what the Tea Party and other conservatives were doing was laying the basis to make Wisconsin a Right-to-Work state. Wisconsin was the birthplace of the Progressive Party under Robert La Follette in the early 20th Century. In the 1960s, the University of Wisconsin at Madison became a hotbed of student protests against the Vietnam War and for civil rights. And Wisconsin was the first state to provide collective bargaining rights to public employees in 1959.

Now reaction—arising from the Deep South, where Right-to-Work states were born in the 1940s—set out to turn Wisconsin workers into an unorganized cheap labor source. The revolutionary revolutionaries did not know to concoct a national campaign against this. Tens of thousands of people were mobilized, mostly in the unions, but also others from across the state and the nation. They surrounded the Madison State Capitol Building over several weeks, at various times taking over its stairways and chambers. I had seen this before, in Mexico, when I served as a journalist in the 1980s. Indigenous people and campesinos took over several city halls in protests during terrible peso devaluations and their worst economic crisis since the Mexican Revolution. At one point in Madison, more than 100,000 people [I was there] marched with signs against capitalism, exposing the class nature of the struggle, and, yes, for collective bargaining rights.

Once I criticized Nelson in a collective meeting of the National Office, curiously around a year before talk of a purge emerged. I may have been confused, right or wrong, yet nobody said anything. The message was plain: Do not criticize Nelson. Later, during the exchange of emails, Nelson wrote me only once to say he sat on no leading bodies, had no internal responsibilities. Yet he was at every meeting at the central office I attended, including with the *People's Tribune*, the last word on most decisions.

I finally resigned because the National Office would not do the principled thing: write me up and give me a hearing, to disclose any real violations on my part, and/or hold Nelson accountable for what he was telling others outside of collectives. A long-time member who spoke out against what happened to me was later expelled. This is not the conduct of a dynamic and healthy democratic centralist organization.

Ironically, Nelson says in his interview that something similar happened to him in the Communist Party, USA:

"My differences with the Party were based on internal legality. As the pressure against the Party increased,

it became necessary for decisions to be made by a very small group of people, on the spot more or less.

This tendency to have people not responsible by law to the apparatus arose out of necessity and finally ended up destroying the Party. It was expressed by the ability to throw people with whom you disagreed out of the organization [emphasis mine]."

This is no way to treat leading and active cadre. People are an organization's most valuable resource. There has to be criticism, self-criticism, and a place to examine disagreements. Study, analysis, debate, and the interchange of experiences and ideas are how we grow, how we arrive at agreements. The shared agreements—based on a common theoretical foundation—are our collectivity. I never acted against these agreements or undermined collectivity. Yet, I was treated as a pariah, an "enemy," and then lied about. Cadre deserve better than this.

To all revolutionaries, let's work together to make this happen. It is time to fulfill this momentous calling, to be beacons for where society needs to go, to be the midwives of a new world straining to be born. **IP**

¹ See Edward Remus, "The Most Revolutionary Weapon: An Interview with Nelson Peery," *Platypus Review* 81, November 2015, available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2015/11/29/revolutionary-weapon-interview-nelson-peery/>.

A new epoch

For my part, since leaving LRNA I have helped establish the Network for Revolutionary Change (NRC) in late 2011. I quit LRNA, but not the revolution. I am training other leaders and impacting social motion as widely and deeply as possible. I resolved not to stop my long commitments, to stay disciplined, and to keep tilting ground in this country for conscious revolutionary teachings and actions. I keep striving for this among the millions of potential revolutionaries being thrown out of their jobs and homes and impacted directly by police killings, environmental poisons, war, and by the most acute capitalist crisis to date.

Again, LRNA's program points out: "The United States of America—indeed the entire world—is in the throes of epochal economic revolution." It is an epoch wherein revolutionaries in a variety of associations and with all their diversity can unite along short and long term lines marked with intense scientific study (including, of course, Marxism), well thought out strategies and tactics, and advanced levels of organization.

To do otherwise—for revolutionaries to remain ineffective, scattered, and detached as they are today—is allowing the worst forms of fascism to gain the upper hand, either with Donald Trump mobilizing an alienated, mostly white, and economically ruined section of society, or Hillary Clinton, who will sound progressive and even pander to the Left, but will open doors to more war, more terror, more deprivation, and even fascism. Bernie Sanders's campaign is helping gather much

progressive and anti-fascist sentiment in this country. This is a key development, and at the same time it has to go further.

Today capitalism, largely due to electronics, is global. Immense wealth is being made daily, although poverty worldwide is growing and the gap between the poorest and richest is wider than ever. Most of these "profits" are not worth the computer chip they are counted on, but a massive military machine keeps them "viable," intertwined also with the illicit drug trade, black markets, cheaper and cheaper labor, and modern-day slavery. War is everywhere and it has become a permanent feature of U.S. governance and dominance. The so-called War on Terror has created more terror, and as we have seen, this terror is now on our front steps. The rulers are less and less able to rule—their every move makes our world unsafe, unhealthier, and less free. Thus any conscious revolutionary can conclude that an environmentally clean and green world, a just and equitable society, an economy that aligns social resources to social needs, and peace at home and abroad are *incompatible* with global capitalism.

The circumstances, therefore, are ripening for the possibility of a new and re-imagined economic and political system run in the interests of the whole—whereby every person, regardless of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or migrant status, can have their demands for food, homes, and health met not only by aligning all resources to human and earth needs, but also by liberating everyone's mental, physical, and spiritual attributes to be full and complete human beings.

Yet, today, where are the communists in this country? The few entrenched communists notwithstanding, too many are hard-pressed to be found, and when they are, they are generally isolated, insulated, or at each other's throats. They are either tailing the social movements, with no significant role to play, or they are sectarian: in their narrow confines, cultish and arrogant, above the fray, or as Nelson says, "impacting nothing."

My challenge to LRNA is to wholly and emphatically carry out the words of its own program: "The battle is class struggle. The war is for the existence of humanity. We in the League face the future with confidence. We call upon all revolutionaries to abandon sectarian differences, to unite around the practical demands of the new class and to secure humanity's imperiled future." Nelson is gone, but what about the other National Office members who assisted in his deceit, from the shadows, maligning those in the throes of actual struggle and strategy making. Attack me? What a waste. Yes, I am good for it—I push back. But who cares? The class struggle is bigger, in all manner of turmoil, yet with historical and other resources for what is possible, hungry for what you all have to bring. Let's end this.

W.B. Yeats wrote in his famous poem, "The Second Coming":

...Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

We are in such times. So as not to leave the "passionate intensity" to the worst, I say this is *not* a time to think small, push petty points, and escalate the discord.

What is missing is a structure, coherent and also organic to various communities, to pull the revolutionaries together in a consequential manner and to gather the energies of the working class and everyone adversely affected by the worsening conditions with vision, language, and orientation. This includes shaping the real unity of objective and subjective, merging theory and practice, and moving decisively toward the challenge at hand: political, economic, and social realignment. This is not a time for one leader, one guru, one way of thinking. It is time for each of us to engage with where society is going by our own means—to contribute from our competencies and geniuses, thoroughly prepared for the tasks at hand, each with innate authority and responsibility, to be seeds and nurturers of both the immediate demands of social motion, as well as to represent, clarify, and pave the way for the future.

To all revolutionaries, let's work together to make this happen. It is time to fulfill this momentous calling, to be beacons for where society needs to go, to be the midwives of a new world straining to be born. **IP**

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Elections, continued from page 1

Fight against extremism

The CPUSA was one of the first organizations to raise the alarm over the rise of the extreme right in 1980. We called for an "all-people's front" to combat it, a modern day version of the united front policy first articulated by the Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitrov.

This battle has been waged over 35 years through election cycles, in the legislative arena and the battle to sway public opinion. Since 1980, several new factors have emerged, raising the level of danger and urgency of defeating the right. First, the re-emergence of oligarchy and extreme concentration of wealth, and its impact on politics resulting from the Citizens United decision. *The New York Times* reported in October that 158 families provided half the early money to presidential candidates. Of that, 138 supported GOP candidates. The radically magnified influence of a relative handful of billionaires greatly increases the threat to existing democratic institutions, imperfect as they are. Secondly, the emergence of the planetary ecological crisis and its existential threat to humanity and nature. The fossil fuel industry is a main bulwark of the extreme right.

We see the role of our Party in helping to build maximum unity of the diverse forces in the democratic part of the coalition, build its breadth by helping bring in new activists and movements, deepen its consciousness by promoting the most advanced positions and candidates and arguing for the strategic aim to defeat the extreme right and its connection to longer-term more fundamental change.

The role extends to the grassroots, engaging with voters, particularly white working class voters and men, who may be influenced by racist, sexist, and reactionary ideas.

Broad unity and multi-class alliances

What has emerged in the course of this struggle is a broad understanding of the danger posed by the right and with it a loose multi-class alliance which includes the labor movement, communities of color, women's, immigrant and LGBTQ rights, students and environmental movements, is in constant motion, changing in response to real life experiences.

Intertwined with the fight against the right is the ongoing process of political independence. Here I disagree with both Doug Henwood and Gregor Baszak. Far from being liquidated into the Democratic Party, I see the labor-led democratic movement increasingly assertive, growing in influence and establishing politically independent structures in and outside the Democratic Party. The AFL-CIO no longer gives directly to the DNC but funds its own voter education and mobilization efforts, develops its own strategic outlook and is increasingly training and running trade union activists for public office. There are rich examples of the growth of independent structures including MoveOn, Democracy for America, Progressive Democrats of America, and Working Families Party.

Politically independent movements are beginning to take root in Chicago. Developments include the establishment of several independent political organizations working in and outside the Democratic Party and an increased number of independent challenges to machine candidates. This process is in its early stages and foreshadows the eventual establishment of a real people's party.

A defeat of the right and especially winning the Senate and House could constitute a political turning point, creating new possibilities for advancing the struggle. It would create more favorable circumstances to reform the electoral system itself, build the labor movement, broader and deeper coalitions, and bigger and expanded movements.

Out of decisive turning points come new stages of struggle, including for more radical reforms.

Class struggle within

We have to play the cards dealt as we fight to change the rules of the game. Politics is conducted in a two-party, winner-take-all system, institutionalized since the Jacksonian era. Third parties have arisen during times of sharp crisis or political realignment, as the Republican Party did in the fight against slavery. In such instances the splits in the ruling class lead to defeat in the 1930s and 40s.

Today, splits in the ruling class have appeared over the climate crisis. A section of capital who sees an existential threat to capitalism is objectively aligned with the environmental movement.

So this is nothing new. And in fact, for Lenin, multi-class alliances and exploiting fissures in the ruling class was a given. The Bolsheviks advocated alliances between the nascent proletariat and vast peasantry and with the small bourgeois class to overthrow the czar.

Until radical reform allowing parliamentary democracy or fusion politics, the prevailing circumstances do not allow for more than two viable national parties.

All parties reflect coalitions of class and social interests and the Democrats and Republicans are no different. They are vehicles through which these forces fight for their agendas. In the battle being fought in the political realm, some see no difference between the Democratic and Republican parties, painting them with a broad brush as creatures of Wall Street. For sure, both are dominated by corporate interests.

But we can't leave it there; real life is far more complex. For starters, both have vastly different social compositions. While the Republican Party is led by the most reactionary sections of Wall Street, including the energy extractive sector and military industrial complex, it also consists of extreme right-wing elements including the Tea Party, white supremacists, social conservatives, right-wing evangelicals, climate deniers, anti-reproductive rights groups, etc.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party is at this moment home to organized labor, African Americans, Latinos, other communities of color, the women's equality movement, many young people, and a wide range of other social and democratic movements. A wide political spectrum exists in the Democratic Party including a substantial current of self-described democratic socialists. These constituencies exert influence and hold leadership positions at various levels. They see the Democratic Party as the most viable means within the two party system to advance their agendas at this moment. Any establishment of a people's party requires these very forces at its core and until they are prepared to bolt, it is not yet a viable prospect.

Because Democrats embrace a multi-class constituency, it is beset with internal contradictions. The class struggle rages within, between what are loosely the Wall Street and the progressive or pro-labor wings. Establishment and machine elements clash with independent forces.

This is reflected in part in the competition between Clinton and Sanders, but similar clashes play out on a local level. For example, the 2015 electoral challenges waged by Chuy Garcia against Mayor Rahm Emanuel and independent candidates seeking to unseat machine incumbents.

There may be cooperation in the fight against the extreme right, but the class struggle is never suspended; these same forces battle daily on economic, political and ideological fronts. This is seen in many cities where Democratic mayors seek to impose neoliberal policies like privatization and gentrification.

Extreme wealth concentration is and will continue to deepen class divisions and tensions within the Democratic Party.

A "political revolution" can transform politics if labor, its allies and the broad left put their stamp on the multi-class alliance, shape its politics and frame the issues debated for the elections. Such is the nature of class contradictions!

Majorities make change

Any "political revolution" will be fueled by ongoing shifts in public attitudes. Majorities of Americans now favor taxing the rich, raising the minimum wage, immigration reform, abortion rights, marriage equality, criminal justice reform, and action to curb the climate crisis.

A political revolution is based on the idea that majorities make change. It is not enough for majorities to believe in an idea, they must actively fight for it. While important shifts against the ultra right have taken place on key issues, the electorate is still deeply divided, with a substantial section misled, disillusioned and disengaged. To be transformative, a movement must have an organized expression in every community. It must fight uncompromisingly against racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant attacks and all efforts to divide.

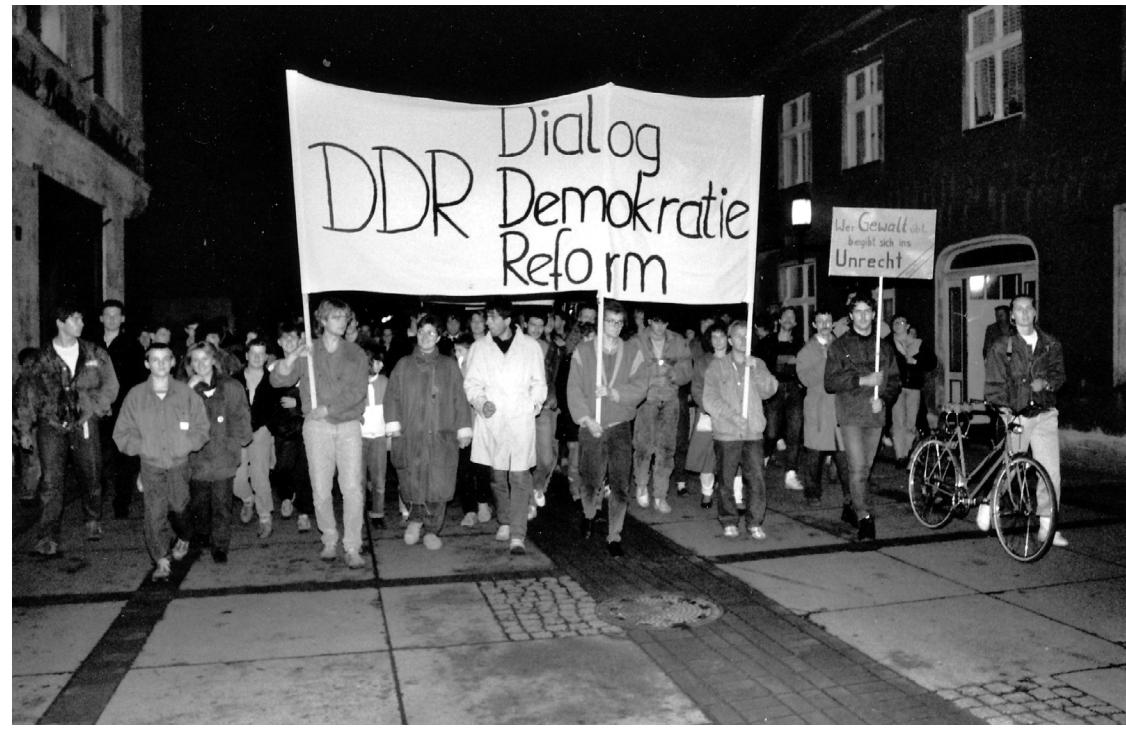
White working-class communities are considered a key demographic for the GOP and are targets of the worst kind of racist and reactionary ideas. They cannot be abandoned to the embrace of the extreme right and its ideology of hate. A political revolution calls for a 50-state strategy including turning red states and districts blue and defeating the GOP in its stronghold—"the Deep South."

Political independence</

After the fall: The inheritance problem of democratic socialism

An interview with Stefan Bollinger

Jerzy Sobotta



Demonstration in 1989 from Greifswald: DDR - Dialog, democracy, reform.

On July 13, 2015, Jerzy Sobotta spoke with Stefan Bollinger, member of the Historical Commission of Die LINKE (the Left Party) and former political scientist and historian at Humboldt University, Berlin. Their discussion concerned the end of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the transformation of its formerly governing party, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or SED) into a new political entity, Die LINKE. An edited transcript of their conversation follows.

Jerzy Sobotta: Let's begin with some background about Die LINKE and its predecessor, the SED. How did people in East Germany, and in the SED in particular, react when Gorbachev announced a new course for the Soviet Union, under the banner of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness)?

Stefan Bollinger: Gorbachev came to power in 1985. The expectation of the SED leadership was that relations with the Soviet Union would be stabilized. It had become clear that action needed to be taken in the USSR concerning economic development. In Gorbachev you had a General Secretary who was perceptibly more flexible, modern, and radical in his demeanor and political claims. He got across to you. His willingness to call out flaws in the Soviet Union's economic policies was welcomed by many.

The problems began in 1986, when it became apparent that the plans for reform were vague. Parts of the SED leadership were unconvinced. Gorbachev emphasized that economic changes needed to be coupled with democratization of the party and of society, but what exactly he meant by this remained unclear. Accordingly, the SED leadership withdrew their support. Memories of Czechoslovakia, 1968—the Prague Spring—resurfaced. When you open things up, unpleasant matters can quickly come to light. Most of all, the SED leadership worried that reforms would render the historical self-understanding and legitimacy of the party vulnerable to attack. However, among the people, including many rank-and-file comrades, you saw a more positive reception.

Any hopes for a trouble-free German perestroika were soon dashed. If anything, there were a number of regressive developments: ethnic conflicts (particularly in the Caucasus, the Baltics and Central Asia), obvious disorganization in the national economy, strikes, and standoffs. The situation came to a head in 1987, when the SED leadership openly set themselves apart from Moscow. Soviet films, plays, and newspapers were censored in the GDR, including the magazine *Sputnik*, which had criticized the line of the Communist Party of Germany in the 1930s. Meanwhile, all the problems were becoming more obvious to everyone: The economy was stagnant, citizens were excluded from decision-making processes, and you couldn't drive to the West. Many saw in glasnost and perestroika an alternative to the GDR. In October of 1989, Gorbachev came to Berlin and was enthusiastically received by citizens of the GDR, some of whom were organizing in civil movements for reform.

JS: Who were the people who wanted to reform the SED? How would you characterize their political orientation?

SB: The agents of these reforms came from different groups. For one, there were people within the Party who, partly out of insight, partly out of self-interest, called for the removal of Erich Honecker as General Secretary of the SED. This group, which included Günter Schabowski and head of the secret police Erich Mielke, had decided to back Egon Krenz as the new General Secretary. They replaced Honecker in October.

Other reformers came from a group of district secretaries, mid-level party functionaries, and intellectuals who had internalized the ideological demands of the situation a bit more. This group wanted to advance the opposition movement outside of party talk and political proposals. Driven by a group of young intellectuals inside the SED, this group had tried since Moscow's announcement of perestroika to develop alternative concepts of society. What emerged from this was the concept of "modern socialism," an idea developed by Andre and Michael Brie, Dieter Segert, Rosi Will, and Rainer Land, among others. At the prompting of the Prorector for Social Sciences at Berlin's Humboldt

University, Dieter Klein, they sought to work out how to reform socialism. They set as their goal a democratic socialist society that did not depart too much from the already existing GDR system; their task was to articulate a democratic alternative, but still under the leadership of the SED. They had the idea that the economy should be reformed in the direction of a socialist market economy, based on analyses of Eastern European development of the preceding decade. Their approach was a kindred spirit to the Prague Spring, the set of reforms attempted by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KPC) in 1968. So there is a deeper history to these reformers' ideas. There were also smaller pro-reform circles at the Academy for Social Sciences, at the central committee of the SED around Rolf Reissig, and around Bernd Okun at Karl-Marx University in Leipzig. Meanwhile, journalists such as Thomas Falkner sought to popularize various reformers' ideas.

This network was crucial during the upheaval between October and December 1989 and during the SED's conversion into a different political entity, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). In September, demands for reform were quickly gaining influence and support, not least via pressure on the streets. On the third of December, 1989, the old politburo was disempowered; Krenz and Schabowski were booted out. The party's new power centers, the democratized district secretaries and party activists, constituted a working committee out of their ranks. One can also view this as the revolt of the new first district secretaries, who until then had wielded little influence. In other words, the task of actually implementing any reforms fell to the next tier of the party apparatus. The reform intellectuals played a rather secondary role; they were not "real politicians." The ideas had to be implemented in laws and policy decisions, and the reformers failed on that point.

JS: When and how did the citizen movements emerge? What role did they play in these changes?

SB: The SED was a microcosm of 2.3 million people. Initially, the questions of mass emigration and of a guided reform process were discussed at some remove from most citizens. This changed in the summer of 1989, when the social crisis dragged these questions before the masses of people. Prior to this, the citizen movements were small and marginal. The crisis of 1989 had different causes, though the roots of the problems that led finally to the downfall of the GDR were not all so deep. There were economic problems, complications in the world market, and a latent frailty in the Soviet Union, which was becoming increasingly unreliable. Furthermore, there were huge debts the GDR had taken out since the 1970s from the West in the form of credits, which carried a political price. These were all manageable issues that could have been resolved. However, in addition to all of this, the GDR apparatus was susceptible to blackmail and incapable of action. While the West appeared outwardly ever more glamorous, individualistic, and consumer-fixated, the attractiveness of socialism in the East had diminished, particularly in the minds of younger people. The Polish were "stirring up trouble," and in Hungary the opening toward the West was contrasted with growing social problems and ideological decline. Identification with "actually existing" socialism was rapidly degenerating. Because of the weakening economy, you could no longer counteract these mood swings with social policies and consumption hikes.

JS: How did the crisis of 1989 unfold?

SB: The civil movements were in the beginning marginal forces. The ministry for state security estimated them in the summer of 1989 to be around 6,000 people, half of whom reported to State Security. However, a relatively large group of younger people was coming to believe that the country would not let itself be reformed. They wanted to live now, to experience something. Thousands applied to leave the country. In the summer of 1989 they made use of new means of escape, via Hungary in particular. Emigration increasingly characterized the social climate, triggering widespread politicization. As the crisis deepened, the SED responded with repression, trying in vain to hush up the topic. From July on, the party was saying nothing. Then, all at once, it went badly for General Secretary Honecker.

The position of the civil movements was that one should at least be able to discuss all these problems openly. Initially they held events in the churches, the only space not controlled by the state, and won more and more influence. In August and September these groups demanded an open dialogue. The movement offered a public sphere to discuss these issues, but mostly with the understanding that the GDR would be developed further as a sovereign state. At this point, these discussions had nothing to do with reunification. The movement wanted to change the GDR, not abolish it. Many had seen the problems with West Germany and did not want their model; they were against profit-oriented policy, stark individualism, and so forth. In any case, their weak point was their relation to political power: The reformers wanted discussion and democracy, but did not want to take formal political responsibility. They could offer themselves as an actual alternative to the SED only conditionally. On top of that, they had absolutely no competence when it came to matters like economic policy. Their link to the greater masses of the people could only work in the short term. After the opening of the borders in November 1989, any sense of widespread agreement was soon lost.

JS: What was happening in the SED as it became clear that the crisis was leading to reunification?

SB: The depth of the crisis became apparent in October. Protestors had been holding demonstrations every Monday through most of 1989. On the ninth of October, the largest such demonstration to that point was held in Leipzig. The gathering was not dispersed, as intended, but rather a security partnership was struck up between the demonstrators and the SED functionaries. In the meantime, discussions that had taken place only inside party groups now occurred in the open. Party members demonstrated in front of the doors of the central committee conference.

Parallel to the opening of the wall there was a central committee assembly from the eighth to the tenth of November, 1989, which aimed to set the program for regenerating the SED. Egon Krenz tried to restructure the politburo with new as well as old personnel. When this proved controversial, Krenz pressed for a party congress, which occasioned an enormous conflict inside the party, through which the party administration was replaced. The new people came up out of second and third rows, if they weren't new to politics entirely. The bulk of the circle, and the district administrations, were replaced. So, within 26 days between November and December, a radical shift took place: There was a *de facto* overthrow of the politburo and of the central committee. The party aspired to a new politics of reform, in the sense of renovating the GDR. Many comrades were ready to hit the streets and organize in support of that. In the party organization circles, there were conferences and the election of delegates for the party congress. Yet, during these upheavals, every day the party was losing members by the thousands. Most exited after a sobering assessment of their own biography and prospects. One repositioned himself politically or left politics entirely for the sake of his career.

At this time, you began to see lots of schemes for reform in state politics. Hans Modrow, who was elected chairman on November 13th, tried for the first time in the history of the GDR to form a real coalition government on the basis of a program to which they could all agree. The central point was the question of how to revamp development by means of a hybrid socialist-market economy that decentralized the economic administration. Until the middle of December this was still being worked out in some detail, even as overall political developments superseded such plans.

After the wall opened, the sentiment changed dramatically. The big democratic debate was now displaced by the possibility of travel. That was the wish of many people, which the SED had long struggled with. People drove to the West and saw a functioning and wealthy capitalism. They did not see the hooks and the problems that come with that. The people wanted to have this capitalism, too—not just a policy shift in the GDR. The idea of a German reunification was met with increasing sympathy. Out of material interest people decided that they did not want the GDR's system any longer. Here the sentiment in the masses shifted fundamentally. The Federal Republic of Germany and the Western media encouraged them. By that point in time, the reunification could hardly be stopped.

JS: What was the role of the civil movements in this phase and what was the influence of the Federal Republic (West Germany)?

SB: The movement had continued to function in the meantime, even if their support in the masses was not nearly so large as it had been. They demanded round tables for discussion, which had been so successful in Poland. At the beginning of December came the first set of these discussions. The political ideas of this movement can be summarized on the basis of three points: hold new elections; adopt a new constitution; and provide checks on the government, preferably through veto power. The disputes between the citizen movements and the party came to a head with the question of dissolving the ministry for State Security, which demonstrators stormed a short time later.

The opposition movement participated in the government and achieved partly good results. In addition, democratic measures for trade unions, including the possibility of elections, were enacted. This was battled out in the social charters and the constitution, which, as a draft for a renovated GDR, stands as a testament to what had taken place in autumn 1989.

The Federal Republic of Germany involved itself in all these processes covertly, just as the West German media had a significant influence. By the time the wall fell, at least, the Federal Republic was striving to force the party back by awakening expectations of reunification. From this point on, the West German parties established contact with forces in the East that they saw as future partners. Only the leftist forces in the GDR remained without support. After reunification, entire law texts were adopted from the Federal Republic while the West parties sent their consultants, who found the round table process to be profoundly "undemocratic" and suspect.

The question as to how Gorbachev would react had a great deal of influence on reunification, as well. The USSR pursued its interests as a big power. The Soviet Union was willing to relinquish East Germany and to be satisfied with a neutral, unified Germany. With this attitude, these processes were pre-programmed, as can be seen in Yugoslavia and recently, somewhat, in Ukraine.

JS: How did the transition of the SED to the PDS take place?

SB: All the radical changes in the party that we have been discussing amounted to the admission that the social system in the East Bloc had definite, genetic defects such that socialism could not be democratically realized. Suddenly, everyone wanted "democratic socialism," which is what was always supposed to be the goal in the first place.

The party functionaries wanted to keep on doing politics. There was a very painful process of cutting the umbilical cord to power. You had to find yourself again in this new role as an opposition party. The most important thing was to survive politically in the new realities, when there was a strong pressure to ban the communist parties.

At the party congress the details of a new political formation were discussed. Are we founding a new party? Or should we establish two parties, one communist and one social democratic, salvage this party under a new name, for the new times? These were harsh disputes. Many wanted to dissolve the party, but two arguments for continuing it proved decisive. First, Hans Modrow, who stood at the peak of this transition regime, demanded that the transition process be anchored in the political party. He feared a total forfeiture of control. Second, Gregor Gysi stressed that, if the party were dissolved, this would mean losing party funds and leaving comrades jobless. What should you do with the party assets?

We resolved to re-brand ourselves as the "party of democratic socialism" and to keep on going. Strife over money continued for many years. Many party functionaries and a lot of political work were needed in the aftermath of reunification. A lot of the money also landed in private pockets; there was a great deal of profiteering. Some tried to transfer funds to the Soviet Union, but most of the money was publicly released. The party apparatus had to be drastically dismantled. The possibility of surviving inside the party structure was severely reduced. However, even up to the present day, there are still colleagues and elected functionaries who have backgrounds in the SED. But that will be settled in ten years, at the latest. A new generation is growing up—a generation of people who also must earn their money with politics.

JS: What does this history mean for the program and ideological orientation of Die LINKE, today? In many countries in the East Bloc, the post-communist parties were utilized to keep the old clientele and the apparatus afloat by mobilizing those who lost out during the transition. How did that play out in the GDR?

SB: In the GDR there was, starting early in the year 1990, a relatively rapid decoupling of the party from the economy. Most captains of economy resigned from the party. The economic elites, combination directors, company directors, leading economy functionaries, and managers had a very good chance at surviving in their realms of responsibility. They knew the enterprises, had competence, and were needed as experts. In any case, Western cadres were quickly set before their nose. In the scientific realm, relatively few professors owned up to their former party affiliations. Radical cleanings occurred, in particular, in the realms near to the state: Around 90% of the philosophers, law theorists, and historians were replaced. The upheaval of 1989 and 1990 also had a generational dimension; many older people were pensioned off and could weather the process with some degree of composure.

Ideologically, the PDS had to be active in many fields. This was also to be true of its successor, Die LINKE. To start, the "democratic socialism" of the party had to be defined: a social/welfare state, which must be democratically bound with society and with the economy. There had to be a strict demarcation of democratic socialism from the GDR and from what one, in a broad sense of the word, could call Stalinism: an administratively centralized and dictatorial regime that often served as a substitute for the working class. That was the consensus in the PDS.

With this demarcation comes the question of how one is to grapple with the former history of the PDS and later, Die LINKE. Since the beginning of the 1990s all the way to the last party program in 2011, there have been disputes concerning what "actually existing" socialism *actually* was. To be sure, one can say that Stalinism was not real socialism; nevertheless, one must take a position with respect to that and say, despite all that, it was an important attempt. The GDR facilitated social development and advancement for wide swathes of the population.

Any left party that identifies itself with the past grapples with this problem of inheritance, which generates its inverse: people who want to have nothing more to do with that past. They no longer ask after what was once possible. There were crimes—that is uncontested. But you cannot keep reinventing socialism *ad infinitum*. Socialism has its history and its prior experience. So we have to grapple predominantly with negatives. This means we need to understand what the GDR was. After all, there have also been many attempts to erect a more just society through the reformist path of social democracy, but these efforts have only been successful to a limited degree. You have to conduct a wide examination on these questions. Unfortunately, such examinations today have tended to be rather feeble.

For the most part, the road that was taken involved pragmatic and unorthodox solutions that were at least minimally acceptable by the Left. In practice, this meant neoliberalism, especially wherever the Left found itself in the government. This raises a number of controversial questions about how you can act in this society. Are you only an opposition party, as was largely the case in the 1990s, or do you attempt to intervene creatively in politics? Should you enter the government via elections, as happened in some federal states? How

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