

Althusser  
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## The Critique of Eurocommunism and the Party Building Movement

An examination of the polemics and articles produced by the anti-revisionist communist movement in the USA on the subject of Eurocommunism reveals three features common to nearly all of them: a) the identification of Eurocommunism, as opposed to other kinds of revisionism, by its open abandonment of certain key Marxist-Leninist principles, b) the definition of Eurocommunism as social democracy pure and simple, and c) the treatment of Eurocommunism as a foreign problem, a problem for Europe and Japan.

Posing the problem of Eurocommunism in this way invariably leads to a complacent and politically sterile polemic. Complacent and politically sterile because we, of course, are communists not social democrats, we have not abandoned Marxist-Leninist principles, and Europe is far away. Eurocommunism is a problem for *them*, for us it is merely an opportunity for self-congratulatory reaffirmations of our Marxist-Leninist principles and our opposition to revisionism and opportunism.

Such polemics are politically sterile because this manner of critiquing Eurocommunism is wrong. It is not enough to point out that the Eurocommunists have abandoned certain principles of Marxism-Leninism in their political resolutions or in the writings of their leaders, thus becoming "social democrats." Louis Althusser has argued elsewhere in this issue<sup>1</sup> that political errors and deviations are manifestations, indicators of weaknesses in party theory and practice. To only see the manifestation and not its causes is to fail to confront the deviation, to be unable to overcome it. Or as Althusser puts it: "To recognize, to analyze an error in the strict sense, is to go behind its appearance, to seek out its causes and to attack them and finally to overcome them."<sup>2</sup>

### Identifying the Underlying Theoretical and Political Causes of Eurocommunism

Therefore, to understand Eurocommunism a change in terrain is required, a shift from an examination of appearances to an analysis of causes. To answer the question of what material causes enabled Eurocommunism to triumph in the leading communist parties of Western Europe we must pinpoint the specific ways in which the theory and practice of these parties have failed to come to terms with the requirements of proletarian class struggle in Europe and in the international class struggle.

First and foremost, there are theoretical weaknesses. Capitalism is not a simple or static system, on a world scale or in the developed capitalist countries. On the contrary, the class struggle in the advanced capitalist countries is increasingly complex and contradictory. Yet, at least since the

second world war, Marxist-Leninist theory has not kept pace with these developments, nor has the theoretical practice of the western communist parties produced a concrete analysis of the social formations or the balance of class forces in Europe. This weakness, the lack of a concrete analysis of advanced capitalism and the absence of a strategic and tactical program for a revolutionary economic, political and ideological struggle of the proletariat, has been central to the rise and consolidation of revisionism in general, and Eurocommunism in particular.

The second area of weakness is in political practice. The contemporary European communist parties did not fall from the skies fully blown Eurocommunists only yesterday. They developed out of the world communist movement as it was shaped in the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's.

As a result of the struggles of the great depression and the anti-fascist resistance movement, the European and Japanese communist parties became mass parties of the working class, based in and having a real influence in the class. Yet at the same time they were developing a particular kind of political practice, which continues to this day. What are some of the features of this political practice which the contemporary Eurocommunists have inherited from the past? The absence of a real *communist* mass line, the isolation and stifling of the membership, bureaucratic centralism, the manipulation of the membership and the masses, are all features of traditional communist political practice severely infected with bourgeois political elements.

That there was anything wrong with the political practice or the theory of the communist movement while Stalin was still alive is a fact that has escaped the notice of some "critics" of Eurocommunism. The Albanians, for example, continue to blame Khrushchev for all the errors being made by world revisionism. And, as we shall see, they are not alone in propagating the myth that all our woes began in 1956.

Yet, the contamination of communist political practice with bourgeois elements was not invented by the Eurocommunists anymore than they invented theoretical poverty. On the contrary, both are a product of the crisis which has gripped the world communist movement for at least the last 25 years, and which has its roots in the theory and practice of world communism in the era of the Third International.

These two weaknesses, in theoretical and political practice, which have an historical basis in the Third International of the 1930's and after, have been characterized together as elements of the "Stalinian deviation" by Louis Althusser and others. The term "Stalinian deviation" is used to sharply demarcate a scientific critique of the problems and errors of the world communist movement in the Stalin period, from the ideological (bourgeois) critiques of the revisionists, trotskysts and anti-communists.

This deviation is, as Althusser and Bettelheim have pointed out<sup>3</sup>, characterized by economism, and the abandonment in theory and practice of proletarian class positions and proletarian class struggle. With regard to the masses, it represents not the fusion of communism with the workers' movement, but another kind of fusion, the fusion of the workers' movement and bourgeois ideology.

This deviation had its origins in the Second International, and in this sense the failure of the Third International can be understood as the failure to make a break with its historical antecedent. This is also the sense in which Eurocommunism can be compared with social democracy. But to ignore the fact that this deviation, present in social democracy, reappeared in the communist movement, is a serious oversight, an oversight present in the writings of those who see Eurocommunism as social democracy pure and simple.

Yet, the existence of these two factors, a faulty political practice and theoretical poverty, taken together in the particular conjuncture of class struggle in contemporary Europe, have combined to insure the triumph of Eurocommunism. Theoretical poverty because it robbed the proletariat and the party membership of the science and the corresponding political strategy which would provide a revolutionary alternative to the revisionism of the party leadership. Bourgeoisified political practice because it isolated, stifled and trapped the membership in a situation in which they were powerless to effect the practice and line of the party.

Once the underlying causes of Eurocommunism are identified, there is no longer any room for complacency. For these factors, which in the European context combined to give rise to Eurocommunism, are at work in the US communist movement as well. As such they may not manifest themselves in the same way (i.e., produce Eurocommunism), but whatever form they take they constitute a grave threat to the development of a genuine communist party in the USA.

#### Analyzing the Past of the US Communist Movement

Unfortunately, however, the US communist movement has analyzed its own past the way it has critiqued Eurocommunism - ahistorically and superficially. Anti-revisionists, for example, have given more weight to public adherence to certain principles, than they have to the *actual theoretical and political practice* of their predecessors.

While Lenin said a party must be judged by its practice, not by its declarations, the critique of the CPUSA, like that of the Eurocommunists, all too often proceeds from the point when principles were openly abandoned, rather than from the period in which the practice of the party had already rendered those principles meaningless. How many critiques of the communist parties of France, Italy and Spain have appeared in the US left press which have concentrated on the celebrated abandonment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and blind allegiance to the Soviet Union? But our approach to our own past and present is not much different. Recently the leading center of the anti-dogmatist, anti-revisionist forces wrote:

The US working class has not always been without its vanguard. The Communist Party, USA fulfilled this role for nearly forty years. However, in 1957, this organization abandoned the interests of the proletariat by consolidating a thoroughly revisionist perspective as the core of its general line.

Here the critique begins where it should end; left unanswered (indeed, unposed) is the question: what practices (and theory) led the party to such a



point? Lacking is any conception of the critical weaknesses of the political and theoretical practice of the CPUSA, and consequently, of our own heritage, still present in the contemporary movement.

We can also find examples of this in analyses of the history of the new communist movement. The great number of polemics against this or that opportunist line contrasts with the dearth of critical study of the political, organizational and ideological practices of the organizations and trends to which these lines correspond. It is easy to say that the CP(M-L)'s trade union line isolates it from the workers. How much harder it is to examine how the theory and practice of the October League, internally and externally, enabled this line to triumph.

To this style of analysis we must counterpose the Marxist one. As Althusser says, paraphrasing Marx: "History is a theater and to understand it, it is necessary to look behind the masks, behind the leaders and their discourses, and above all behind the scenes: into the political stakes of the class struggle, its causes and its effects."

Althusser has contributed to this analysis for France. How long before US communists begin to do the same for the USA?

How would we evaluate the strength of these causal factors in the US communist movement? Theoretical poverty, pronounced in Europe, is even more serious in the USA. There seems to be a definite dialectic operating here: the most advanced form of capitalism is coupled with the most backward forms of theoretical analysis. Not only is the US communist movement lacking a scientific theory of the present stage of capitalist development, and the classes and class struggles organic to it, we are lacking even the beginnings of a concrete analysis of the present conjuncture necessary for the rudiments of a political strategy and program.

#### Developing an Understanding of Political Practice

The strength of bourgeois contamination of communist political practice is likewise pronounced in the United States. Political practice has two main aspects, internal and external. Internal: the organizational consolidation and development of communist cadre; external: the intervention of communists, guided by Marxist-Leninist theory, into the economic, political and ideological struggles of the working class. *Organizationally* the political practice of the majority of US communist organizations is characterized by bureaucratic centralism. Leaders are elected through "democratic consultation" which means that a higher body dictates to a lower body who its leader will be. All decisions are made from the top down, with little or no consultation with the rank and file. Members are isolated in local party organizations and forbidden to engage in political discussion and debate with members in other locals. Finally, members are manipulated in the secret power struggles of various leadership factions and in sudden changes in line. The best illustration of this is the recent split in the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), the largest new communist organization, but it is by no means the only example.

The external practice of most US communist groups is not guided by a communist mass line of learning from/teaching the masses, but rather one of pat-

ronizing/talking at them. Rather than breaking down the isolation of communists from the working class, the dogmatists are reinforcing it by driving away the workers, while the revisionists are doing it by abandoning communism in their work with the class. In neither case are the workers being exposed to the theory and practice of communism.

*Ideologically* the political practice of many US communist organizations is a caricature of Marxism-Leninism. The membership and supporters are encouraged to read only what the leadership determines to be correct: the classics and its own documents. But more significant than the narrowness of this approach is its corresponding style of studying and reading. It is a style which denies the reader his/her critical sense, encouraging only faith and memorization. There is no arena for struggle and debate; that is reserved for the line of other groups. Collective study becomes the enumeration of invincible truths, the praise of one's own organization, and the derision of its rivals. This kind of political line presents a paradox: the narrowest sectarianism at the organizational level is coupled with the most general and abstract political principles. Political principles become a catechism; a list (dictatorship of the proletariat, armed struggle, etc.) coupled with a naive faith in the inevitable collapse of capitalism.

*Theoretically* the majority of US communist groups have reversed the correct relationship between theory and practice. Instead of guiding practice, theory is a justification after the fact of whatever the current line happens to be. It is as true of the revisionist theory of the anti-monopoly coalition as it is of the dogmatist strategy of a united front against imperialism. What is lacking is not only the theoretical training of cadre in the concepts and methodology of Marxism-Leninism, free of vulgar and mechanical notions, but more importantly, the practice of this theory in open and concerted efforts to develop a concrete analysis of the US social formation and contemporary forms of class struggle.

All these aspects of political practice, organization, ideology and theory, taken together, must necessarily be developed harmoniously under the direction of scientific theory if the communist movement is to go forward. In reality, the weaknesses and errors in contemporary political practice have given rise to a variety of deviations - ultra-leftism and economism, empiricism and workerism. They have produced another effect as well: the blockage of the means necessary for a genuine communist party. They prevent the development of genuine theory and a revolutionary political strategy and program; they block the nationwide consolidation of communists and communist organizations; they deprive us of the means to intervene and actually lead the working class movement; they have deprived our movement of scientifically guided agitation and propaganda.

This is the significance of shifting terrain in the analysis of Eurocommunism: it leads to the recognition of the universal features of the crisis of world communism, the common sources in the 1930's of both Eurocommunism and the present situation of US communism. Uncovering the underlying causes of Eurocommunism means shifting terrain from a politically sterile polemic to one of immediate political significance. Not only because of the presence of a Eurocommunist current in the USA, which the groups around the newspaper *In These Times* and the journal *Socialist Review* aspire to develop, but because

whatever forms of opportunism will arise, the same causes and crises are operative in Europe and the USA.

From a critique of European revisionism we must shift the debate to a theoretical/political critique of the obstacles to party building. Until we go behind the appearances of Eurocommunism and American opportunism, to their material causes, we will neither be able to understand and critique Eurocommunism as part of our contribution to the international class struggle, nor will we be able to help our own movement establish its theory and practice on a new foundation. Of course, this task requires a long and protracted process of work and struggle, theoretical and practical. Yet this effort is central to party building, now and in the future.

#### Endnotes

1. See "A Fundamental Critique of the Communist Party of France."
2. Ibid., p.19.
3. See Althusser's essay, "Note on the 'Critique of the Personality Cult'", in his *Essays in Self-Criticism* (NLB, 1976). See Bettelheim's introduction to volume 1 of his *Class Struggles in the USSR* (MR, 1975).
4. DML0, PSO, SUB, PWOC, "Draft Resolution for a Leading Ideological Center,"
5. "A Fundamental Critique of the Communist Party of France," p. 16.

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