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A Critical Evaluation
May 11, 2017

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A Critical Evaluation

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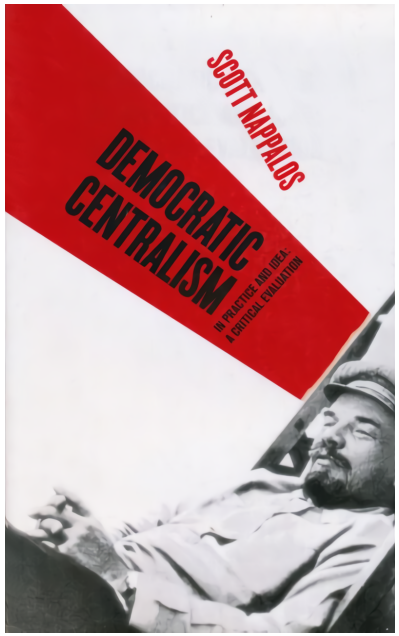

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through understanding democratic centralism and alternatives, we can better prepare for building our own.

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Contents

ship into a professional party class, anarchist communist organizations integrated an educational method into their work as rank and file social movement militants, and internally through trying to elevate all members and counteract the reproduction of class, race, and sex hierarchies transmitted in capitalist and statist relationships.

Second, this tradition offered the ideas of unity achieved through collective accountability. Recognizing the need for coordination and strategy does not imply necessarily specialized authorities either to impose or theorize it. Anarchist communist organizations developed practices around bottom up accountability and horizontal coordination of revolutionary struggle. Experiences in Spain, Uruguay, and Italy for example, showed both the power and necessity for overcoming the false dichotomy of the intervention of minorities in insurrectionary moments with the imposition of the will of a directive minority.

Lastly, anarchist communist organizationalists have shown the ability to create models for building revolutionary currents not just in heat of barricades during revolutions, but in our time, in the core and periphery countries, and to changing realities. Rather than seeing organization as a timeless method, there is recognition of different tasks (educational, movement, and insurrectionary) in different times. Distinctions between concepts like social work and social insertion, the battle of ideas, and questions of different conjectures and phases are spread across the literature.

Instead of a project of trying to resurrect a purified version of democratic centralism, we need our own theory that can break apart the ambiguities, and make elaborate the revolutionary process of mass struggle and revolutionary development. To do so in a time of low struggle, ruling class assaults and the alienation of the left from practice requires a theory for our own time. No such theory or practice will come prepackaged, and no critique will provide us with a perfect shield. Still

sions in their struggles. The Chinese Shifuists,[3] Korean Anarchist Communists in Manchuria,[4] the Uruguayan and Argentinian especifistas,[5] European platformists,[6] and Italian dual organizationalists,[7] put forward libertarian conceptions of organization based on the ruptures of from 1917 to the 1970s. Built from the deepest revolutions to have challenged capital in the 20th century, this broad tradition represents a global praxis of organization apart from reformist and authoritarian experiences. Common to all is a concept of libertarian organized action with common strategy, analysis, and goals that is at once strategic and based upon collective democracy.

Democratic centralism raises real questions for anti-authoritarians as well of course. In a revolutionary situation of repression, how can we address unevenness in our forces? How can we maintain the democratic decisions of collectivities, while uniting to create communism directly? Though the answers are flawed, it's dangerous to out of hand dismiss the problems. Here the anarchist communist tradition has a lot to give.

First, there is the concept of organization as a pole for the development of ideas in the struggle of the popular classes. Rather than a hierarchical conception of a directive minority, this tradition sees the very function of organization to multiply capacity, and that leadership is about a libertarian pedagogical relationship of developing praxis through the back and forth between ideas and action. Rather than institutionalizing leader-

[3] Dirlik, Arif. 1991. *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution.* University of California Press.

[4] Ki-Rak, Ha. 1986. *History of the Korean Anarchist Movement.* Anarchist Publishing Committee.

[5] Sharkey, Paul, ed. and trans. 2009. *Federacion Anarquista Uruguaya: Crisis, Armed Struggle, and Dictatorship 1967–1985.* Kate Sharpley Library.

[6] Skirda, Alexander. 2002. *Facing the Enemy: A history of Anarchist Organization from Proudhon to May 1968.* AK Press.

[7] Craparo, Saverio. "Anarchist Communists: A question of class." June 2005. *Italian Anarchist Communist Federation (FdCA).*

The terrain is changing beneath our feet. Since the collapse of the majority of the "official Communist" regimes, the world has witnessed both events and ideas that have undermined the former dominant thinking within the left. The Zapatistas, Argentina in 2001, South Korean workers movements, Oaxaca in 2006, the struggles around anti-globalization, and Greece's series of insurrectionary moments have increasingly presented challenges to traditional left answers to movements and organization. In previous eras Marxist-Leninism was the nexus which all currents by default had to respond to either in agreement or critique. Today, increasingly anarchist practices and theory have come to play this role.

As a member of an anarchist political organization, a friend once told me I in fact was practicing democratic centralism. This was perplexing, because the group had no resembling structures, practices, or the associated behaviors of democratic centralism. However, I was told that since we debated, came to common decisions, and acted on that collective democracy, we were in fact democratic centralist. This kind of productive confusion led to questions about the concept, and why the target of democratic centralism has shifted. This move, the shifting conceptual territory of core concepts of a certain orthodoxy, comes up repeatedly not only with democratic centralism, but also surrounding ideas like crisis, dialectics, the State, and class. The resulting cognitive dissonance caused me to investigate attempts at reinvigorating the concept of democratic centralism (democratic centralist revisionism), and understand truly what it is, where it came from, and how it has been practiced.

It can be reasonably asked why someone would choose to address democratic centralism in light of the catastrophic legacy that the so-called official Communist parties of the world (present and former rulers of the Soviet block and associated Marxist-Leninist governments), who popularized globally the concept of democratic centralism, have left us.

Indeed, the human tragedy that occurred throughout the old Soviet-aligned nations is so great that we can reasonably question whether we have gotten to the bottom yet, or whether more horrors are still to be discovered. From another perspective, for revolutionaries who find no connection between democratic centralism and these tragedies, we live in a different era from the birth or maturation of democratic centralism. Today is a time of dispersed movement, low-levels of struggle, and failure of the left to organize and sustain itself. The material reality and historical moment of democratic centralism's heyday could not be further from our own.

Because of the decompositions and changes both in movements and discourse, this has created twin pressures on the thinking around democratic centralism. On the one hand there is a current underway of reframing many such conceptions (likely at least in part as a response to the challenge posed by the failures of so-called official communism and challenges from new libertarian currents and events to such thinking). With the collapse of the Soviet Union attempts to reinvigorate democratic centralism and rescue it from its authoritarian and bureaucratic elements have been increasing. Here, democratic centralism is being remixed for new audiences either by the official communist orthodoxy (Stalinist, Trotskyist, Maoist, etc.), or by the oppositional Marxist-Leninist tradition that argued for a more libertarian interpretation of the concept. Many Marxist-Leninist parties and political formations now give verbal credit to concepts like participatory democracy, worker self-management, and other traditionally libertarian or anarchist concepts. The International Socialist Organization (US) for example while remaining adherent to democratic centralism frames its democracy beyond simply democracy in terms of participatory democracy. "There have to be formal

On the libertarian side, most of the Marxist ultraleft (except the Bordiguists who embrace a cousin of Leninism purged of its democratic elements) abandoned organization all together in favor of spontaneous revolution and/or determinist ideas of revolution as a form of revolutionary destiny. Political and mass organizations alike are seen to carry inherent reformist or reactionary potential which bars the door, or at least until the spontaneous emergence of revolutionary formations amongst the working class. Instead, ultraleft thinkers turn to the internal dynamics of capital itself to deliver revolution. Consequently amongst most councilists and the ultraleft no theory of organization remains, even the experiments with workers organization of their early eras has been abandoned.[1]

Leninist substitutionism (the party substitutes itself for the class) and ultraleft faith in spontaneous revolution illuminates the spectrum of the problem. Faced with the historical defeats of the 20th century, the present state of marxism reveals deep tensions in trying to construct answers building organization beyond substitution, bureaucratism, authoritarianism, or reformism. Faced with the dead ends of social democracy, the bureaucratic centralist tradition of Leninist inspired movements, and determinist faith of the libertarian marxist currents, marxism indeed today faces a crisis of organization.

There are other experiences we can draw from however.[2] Separated by continents and decades in time, the organized anarchist-communist movement often came to similar conclu-

[1] Perhaps an exception to this is the non-bordiguist Italian left communists represented by the International Communist Party – Battaglia Comunista. It's a worthy investigation, though not within the scope of this article to debate that current. Either way the tension between determinism and organization is obvious in this tradition, and though there is incredibly valuable lessons to be found there, the absence of either a theory or practice of revolutionary agency within demonstrates their path in thought.

[2] The treatment of the anarchist-communist tradition here will be necessarily surface level only for want of space. Still the references shared here give stepping off points for going into the lessons of this tradition.

Towards a Fresh Organization

To solve the tension of bureaucracy and repression endemic to democratic centralist practice, we need different concepts and different practices. Indeed this problem itself is bigger than democratic centralism. Like any section of human history, we can and must learn from the experiences that emerged from such movements. There are positive elements that speak to our situation today, but as we have seen democratic centralism carries with it inherent dangers that demand a critical departure.

Likewise the marxist tradition historically hit a fork in the road with organization. The four main currents of marxist political organization all ran aground by the end of the last century. Social democracy, which Marx and Engels helped found, eventually lost all illusions of revolution (if it ever had any). Much of the original social democratic forces moved to a reformist gradualism of change within the capitalist state, and in most cases came to embrace the market and capital from the halls of power. Indeed today it is social democracy that is amongst the driving forces of austerity and neoliberalism, even if apologetic, and this is true from Europe to India and Latin America.

Amongst organized revolutionary Marxist thought, foco or guerilla theory and Leninism remain which are the bastions of democratic centralism. The failures of foco theory in Latin American guerilla movements across the past decades appears to have aided in its waning. Marxist-leninism itself, while still significant, has suffered enormous blows with the decline of the Soviet block and China's embrace of Marxist capitalism.

mechanisms of democracy within the party, but more than that, democracy has to be active and participatory."[1]

The Socialist Workers Party (UK), which earlier was in an international organization with the International Socialist Organization, likewise frames workers' self-activity in terms of a relationship with democratic centralism.

> "The 'self activity' of the working class develops through a struggle against the enemy class. As part of this 'self activity' revolutionary workers have to be able to suggest ways of generalizing the struggle, tactics that can produce victory. They can only do so successfully by suggesting tactics, by offering leadership, that fits in with the leadership offered by revolutionaries active in other parts of the class. The question of coordinated direction, of centralized leadership, necessarily arises again. The existence of a centralized revolutionary party does not, therefore, form an obstacle to the self-activity of the masses—on the contrary, the latter is incomplete without it."[2]

Freedom Road Socialist Organization draws more explicitly from the anarchist influences within members of it's party, and condemns the practices associated with self-identified democratic centralist organizations as bureaucratic centralist.

> "Many of our revolutionary youth are under the organizational sway of various anarchist tendencies. Some are strongly influenced by what they believe is Zapatismo. They have also, perhaps rightly,

[1] Chretien, T. 2007. "Lenin's theory of the party." *International Socialist Review,* No. 56, November-December.

[2] Harman, C. 1998. "For democratic centralism." *International Socialist Journal,* No. 80.

> been soured by what they have learned of the bureaucratic centralism and vanguardism practiced by various Marxist-Leninist parties historically."[3]

Though in this moment such statements seem unassuming, it's worth reflecting on their significance. Even the fact that a group like the SWP (UK) would have to put forward and defend the concept of the self-activity of the working class is a sign of the times. Democratic centralist thinking is being pushed to defend itself against the critiques of both past democratic centralist movements and the growing dominance of anarchistic thinking that seems to contradict democratic centralism. Democratic centralism is seen either as an unachieved goal, or as a tool which can provide solutions to the new environment we find ourselves in. There are then multiple attempts to contest ownership of democratic centralism, craft a new revisionism about democratic centralism, break it from its most crass Stalinist form, and claim new lineages or practices.

As the Freedom Road quote shows such moves do not only come from within the Marxist-Leninist milieu, but also from ex-anarchists and anarchist sympathizers. This is not neither necessarily new nor solely monopolized by the Marxist-Leninist left. Perceived roadblocks and limitations of the broad libertarian or anarchist milieu have sent some in search of answers to real problems they face as revolutionaries in struggle. The series of protest movements which fueled anarchism's rise in the global north (anti-nuke, anti-war, anti-globalization, anti-austerity, etc.) have presented insufficient responses to the attacks of states and capital, and the unorganized or anti-organizational libertarian milieu is perceived as not posing sufficient answers to on-the-ground issues of how to respond to repression, how to push forward with

[3] BJ. 2004. "The Crisis within the Left: Theory, Program, Organization." December 31, 2004. *Freedom Road Socialist Organization/Organización Socialista del Camino para la Libertad.*

crisis of leadership of the left! Merely codifying that leadership with democratic centralism makes the problem worse. Historically we can see how this has not worked out in practice either, as the revolutionary leadership of Trotskyists in the unions in the US has yielded a reformist practice. Despite 80 years of attempts to capture and lead the unions, when that leadership was achieved usually the reformers became reformists, and in many cases repressed workers struggle just as the reactionary leadership of those institutions did. Whatever merit may be said of having left leadership of business unions (not much), it is clear that the leadership (in the few places it was successful) evaporated in positions of power, or at least left us little revolutionary legacy we can point to as successes. That strategy has left us merely with the same organs of reformism, repression, and stagnation.

and does fare miserably in our environment. Though countless publications today try to argue that practicing democratic centralism will solve gaps in consciousness and practice, disorganization, and failures of social movements, in practice we often see the opposite. That is if one is even able to do the mental gymnastics necessary to ignore its role in bringing about repressive state capitalist disasters.

It is totally unclear how this would be a useful method for building revolutionary organization now. Given that the left itself is deformed and isolated, and its theory starkly abstracted from praxis, democratic centralism stultifies that situation. Focusing on centralizing leadership when the leadership itself is isolated, lacks practice, and reflects all the problems of the dominant society is a recipe for malice. There's a difference between a political sect centralizing leadership and a revolutionary party doing so (not that that is less problematic either). It's a logical leap to assume that mimicking Lenin's party in our time will have a similar effect as the time it arose out of. In actual fact this approach risks (or guarantees) centralizing deformed leadership and making concrete the left's alienation from struggle. By fetishizing the institutionalized political center in a time of deep left alienation, democratic centralism intensifies the worst dynamics of isolated micro-sects. Democratic centralism in our time then is even more problematic.

Trotskyists' analysis of a crisis of leadership in the working class[2] makes this problem still worse, since there is already is a

[2] "All talk to the effect that historical conditions have not yet "ripened" for socialism is the product of ignorance or conscious deception. The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only "ripened"; they have begun to get somewhat rotten. Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. The turn is now to the proletariat, i.e., chiefly to its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership". Trotsky, Leon. 1938. *The Transitional Programme (The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International).*

revolutionary challenges, and how to build upwards across the peaks and valleys of struggle. Some anti-authoritarians (though likely a small minority) thus have begun to turn to democratic centralism as well as a cure for the perennial disorganization and out-organization of social movements at this time, and as a general response to low-points in struggle.

Framing Failure

It's worth noting though in both cases, there's thinking around organization that connects a theory of organization across the periods with specific problems of movement today. Many thinkers attempt this move, for example when people try to account for the failures of revolutions in terms of the actions, absence, or presence of specific revolutionary organizations. Surely those things are factors, but there is a larger elephant in the room.

Take the Spanish revolution of 1936 for example. One series of analyses relates to questions of organization either from Trotsky, the Friends of Durruti, factions in the CNT, or relationships to organized international movements. In other words, why weren't particular organized revolutionaries able to win the war, deepen the revolutionary process, or beat back sabotaging reformist tendencies? Another question though is why did the Spanish popular classes fail to intervene at key moments even when there were organized tendencies representing such positions? There are separate questions and elements in these situations. There are organizations, there are revolutionaries, there are reactionary forces, and there are the activities of the popular classes (as diverse and complex as they are). We should separate out then questions about organizations from large scale popular questions. The two are bound up together, but answers to one do not necessarily provide answers to the other. To be concrete, even if you have the perfect organization with the correct line in 1936 Barcelona, it's not given that the people would have destroyed the State and assumed popular control. This is just to say that the question of

Democratic Centralism in Our Time

Whatever may be said of democratic centralism (and it should be rejected), the motivations that led to its development are radically distinct from our situation. If we look at the birth of democratic centralism and its maturation, neither case is analogous to our own. We do not live in the political climate of Russia or Italy in 1905 or 1919, nor the economic climate of China in 1939 or 1950.

Taken in its most broad and dilute form, we can learn from the necessity of having an internal process and life of an organization of coming to unity, deciding on that unity, and being serious and committed to executing our plans based on our collective democracy. This is too general to be called democratic centralism without making everyone already democratic centralists, but it is a basic theory shared with non-authoritarian traditions and can be seen as the diamond we can extract from the ruff. Moreover, it's an insight lost on most democratic centralists, given the dangerous conflations of professional revolutionaries, centralization, and discipline.

The more crass (and most popular) form of democratic centralism, with its submission of the base of the party to the decisions of central committees with mandate powers[1] would fare

[1] "… All decisions of higher bodies shall be absolutely binding on lower bodies and on all Party members" from the 6th party congress of the R.S.D.L.P. in 1917. As reported by the Stalinist official history during the purges of the 1930's *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks). Short Course.*1939, p. 198.

disarms ourselves against those practices. It puts us only in a position to argue for the "real" democratic centralism against the "real" bureaucratic centralism that borders on religious or canonical exercises less than real revolutionary work. Since there are other concepts, other traditions, and work within the struggles of the proletariat that were outside, against, and beyond democratic centralism, there is little reason to keep flawed concepts and uncritically inherit the baggage that poisons the benefits. The ambiguity around the elements of democratic centralist theory creates real problems. These are not problems which can be merely avoided by refining the terms. We need different concepts and practices all together.

revolution is bigger (though not independent) than organization.

The project to revise, expand, or reframe democratic centralism arises from these instincts about organizational questions settling political problems. In trying to do so, democratic centralist thought is pushed in a number of directions that can not be reconciled. In opening up this discussion, the intention is not just to point the independent anarchist-communist organizational history, but rather to question the way in which the project of democratic centralist revision approaches organization in our conjuncture: today, here, and with our problems.

Defining the Debate

In Petrograd during the summer of 1917, the Sixth Party Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (Bolshevik) occurred. At this congress it was later reported that the Bolsheviks defined democratic centralism as follows:

1. That all directing bodies of the Party, from top to bottom, shall be elected;
2. That Party bodies shall give periodical accounts of their activities to their respective Party organizations;
3. That there shall be strict Party discipline and the subordination of the minority to the majority;
4. That all decisions of higher bodies shall be absolutely binding on lower bodies and on all Party members.[1]

The first three points are relatively uninteresting, whatever we think of directing bodies, elections, minorities, and discipline. The fourth stands out. The history the quote is draw from was written by a special commission of the Communist Party central committee under Stalin, shortly following some of the worst purges in the 1930s, and with the liquidation of much of the leadership of the Bolsheviks from the revolution having been murdered.

[1] Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks). Short Course. New York: International Publishers, 1939, p. 198.

Furthermore, politically this is questionable. First, why attempt to ahistorically reconstruct the theory at all? If there is a recognition of the need to pull the theory away from the tradition that elaborated it, why not abandon the problematic concept as well? Why is it better to keep democratic centralism, and try to argue against everything that it was separate from the history and people that developed it? Second, why do so without any attempt to engage that debate, instead merely castigating all the actual democratic centralist tradition as bureaucratic centralist? If we level attacks on the theory, it is better to engage that tradition and offer an alternative than it is to merely ex-communicate it or semantically change definitions. Third, can it even be taken seriously at all when someone attempts to put forward ideas which claim a historical concept but fail to engage or even acknowledge the context out of which it was born? It borders on being unprincipled or intentionally misleading. The response that the horrors of Russia or China were not democratic centralist is unsatisfying, it attempts to skirt real issues by creating semantic moving targets.

These are the problems inherited when we attempt to take up these tools uncritically, and attempt to brush real problems under the rug without confronting them. Merely using a label (bureaucratic centralism) to attack practices you don't like and democratic centralism for those you do fails to address the actual important debates that produced both insights and errors. This move is essentially idealist, and works against the best of the revolutionary movement, which is the attempt to ground our ideas in the concrete movements of the popular classes, its history, and its tendencies and traditions in struggle.

Worse, it seems to obscure the errors and failures of democratic centralism in a time when we desperately need to move beyond them, rather than to pass over them in silence. The fallout is that we would be inventing a new theory while using a name from another history. This gives legitimacy and space to that real the problems that exist within that tradition and

> by a decision that may harm the principles of conscience of one or more of its members."[4]

The dialectic between democracy and centralization supposedly would yield a more democratic organization than other methods because of the engagement of all in the decision, struggle, and the back and forth between practice, ideas, and unity.[5] Notably absent is the commitment to central bodies with directive powers. This would seem to solve some of the problems above by eliminating the conflations of power and position, centralism and unity, etc.

The problem is that this is not democratic centralism, and it fails to answer the problems of organizing by simply trying to cleave the historical baggage that surrounds the concept. This argument is fundamentally flawed because it attempts to take a material concept rooted in history, abstract away all context, and put into its place another. Behind every intellectual move like this, there's an objective reality. Democratic centralism did not come out of nowhere, but was a concept built in the struggle which developed its own tradition, theorists, and practices. An attempt to contest that tradition and argue for another needs to base itself not merely on asserting a different semantic meaning, but on real practices and engaging with how the theory developed, where it came from, and why this theory of democratic centralism is just that and not some other theory. Moreover, if ambiguities plague the theory itself, simply cutting away the bureaucratic elements of the theory doesn't necessarily guarantee that you'll avoid the worst of the centralizing tendencies. That is, if we do not offer a clear alternative to why democratic centralism tended to produce repressive bureaucratic structure, we may simply reproduce it.

[4] Movimiento Socialista del Trabajadores. "What is the MST and What Does it Fight for?"

[5] Mackandal, "Democratic Centralism."

Most of the content of this article arose from a debate with friends about the legitimacy of the fourth point above. There are a number of factors. Was it real? Is this actually what democratic centralism represents or merely a Stalinist aberration? To what extent did it actually represent Bolshevik practice? Is democratic centralism inherently Leninist, or is it a more fundamental concept? Did it represent it only for certain periods? Is there another way of interpreting it?

Critics from the libertarian left have often been content to merely attack the most obvious and egregious forms of democratic centralism. This leaves these critiques open to quick dismissal and wastes an opportunity to expose core political issues that can help our movement grow. It is useful then to engage the theory, take on democratic centralism at its best arguments, on its own terms, and provide a more nuanced understanding of the dangers of democratic centralism so that we do not face the same problems under a different banner.

Democratic centralism will be addressed on four fronts to provide a wider scope than is normally given to the concept. First, where did democratic centralism grow out of, and how did it develop in history? Second, what did oppositional revolutionaries who contested the ideas of democratic centralism outside the orthodoxy offer in understanding the debate? Third, moving to the US context, how did democratic centralist practice function in recent history? Lastly what does it look like if we abstract away all the history and practices, and look at it hypothetically as a theory of the process of the internal functioning of organizations?

Within democratic centralism we see for all the theorists, there are two components: a process of internal functioning, and a structural proposal for the interaction of centralized bodies with the base of the party. The interpretations between the two components vary. It is with the process of internal functioning we will find the main motivations for the theory and practice, as well as the best insights it has to offer. The struc-

tural proposal on the other hand has the least offered justifications and the worst implications. It is in the ambiguity within and between these two components, and the failure to demarcate the structural component from an authoritarian relation that gives democratic centralism its fatal flaws, and makes any reinvigoration from more democratic motivations unsustainable.

Though unfortunately broad, this investigation tries to reveal a fork created by democratic centralism. On one side is the material reality of democratic centralism as a living theory in the history of class struggle with inherent bureaucratic and authoritarian tendencies.[2] As Ngo Van, Vietnamese revolutionary and participant in various Vietnamese Leninist parties, states,

> "the so-called 'workers' parties' (Leninist parties in particular) are embryonic forms of the state. Once in power, these parties form the nucleus of a new ruling class and bring about nothing more than a new system of exploitation."[3]

On the other side there is democratic centralism as a liberatory concept abstracted from practice, yet so broad that nearly every form of organization from anarchist to market socialist becomes democratic centralist, and hence meaningless. The goal, as with any revolutionary inquiry, is not to merely castigate or to try and paint the adherents of movements or theories as one-sided pathological villains, but to learn from the mistakes and victories of humanity in pursuit of liberation from centuries of exploitation and oppression.

[2] A fair assessment would require a multi-volume book with extensive history and investigation of more theorists. I have strove to make this more accessible to radicals with some knowledge of the history and traditions so that it may help our movement think materially about our strategy and move forward. That is my primary motivation.

[3] Van, Ngo. 2010. *In the Crossfire: Adventures of a Vietnamese Revolutionary*. AK Press.

> part of an organization, it sacrifices the concrete contributions that the minority sector can make in those aspects where there is agreement."[2]

Unlike the Bolshevik conception where democratic centralism is a property of organizations (e.g. democratic centralist organizations), this argument holds that democratic centralism is merely a process or a method for the internal functioning of revolutionary organizations (e.g. organizations do or don't practice democratic centralism as a process, but there are no democratic centralist organizations). Under such a conception, democracy is the collective process by which we come to have unity, and centralism is where we develop a common course of action, position, or line.[3] The MST for example rejects the discipline of minorities to the majority traditional to most democratic centralist organizations.

> "Adherence to a socialist political organization is a voluntary act, freely agreed upon, that shouldn't be mediated by coercive threats or disciplinary measures. Discipline in a socialist organization is a conscious mechanism that allows the unification of individual wills to struggle for collective goals. We're convinced that once a decision has been taken, the majority (those who voted in favor) should have the main responsibility of putting it in practice; the minority (those who voted against) should have the option of standing by it or not. The organization should not force anyone, under threat of disciplinary measures, to stand

[2] Movimiento Socialista del Trabajadores. "What is the MST and What Does it Fight for?" 1999. *Movimiento Socialista del Trabajadores*

[3] Mackandal, Jan. "Democratic Centralism." 2009. Unpublished manuscript.

Democratic Centralism Outside of Time and Space

Not all democratic centralists embrace Leninism however. Some groups in Latin America have rejected their former identification with Marxism and Leninism, and instead called themselves democratic centralist and dialectical materialist without other identifications.[1] There is a possibility then of arguing that everything I described above is actually bureaucratic centralism and that democratic centralism was not practiced historically, even though people claimed it. For instance the Puerto Rican Socialist Workers Movement (MST) criticizes such a conception:

> "We socialists who aspire to contribute to unifying broad sectors of the working class and people in one or several mass organizations, fronts, or movements seeking political power, can't even ponder that possibility if we're wedded to an organizational conception according to which, in order to fight for a common goal, all members of an organization must obey a position even if a large sector doesn't agree with it. Such a conception not only attempts to homogenize, neglecting the existing heterogeneity, by means of a majority vote; even worse, converting "democratic centralism" into a fundamental criteria for being

[1] For instance el Movimiento Socialista de Trabajadores in Puerto Rico, and some ex-Maoist groups in Haiti and Latin America.

We will close not simply with the critique, but instead with a brief description of a different methodology for revolutionary organization. Called especifismo, dual-organizationalism, platformism, or at other times simply anarchist communism, this tradition developed it's way of thinking and acting in unity without the structures or concepts of democratic centralism. Coming to life independently in different moments in Asia, South America, Europe, and North America this tradition provides answers for the real problems that democratic centralism wrestled with and ultimately failed to address.

The Birth of Democratic Centralism

Today we can see that democratic centralism was to become the organizational theory of a rising ruling class. It became a tool of domination over all of Russia's laboring classes, and eventually across the globe. Struggles for liberation led by committed revolutionaries produced state capitalist dictatorships against the proletariat, though under a red banner.[1] The story of democratic centralism is more complicated than this however, and it is important not merely to condemn the mistakes but to attempt to understand what happened.

Democratic centralism lived and changed across its life beginning with Russian Social Democracy and evolved to become a dominant political class with a monopoly of power and illegalized all political opposition. We should say there are many democratic centralisms rather than a single unitary theory. It is easy to look back at its most characteristic form under Stalin and associated official Communist Parties wherein higher bodies had dominant powers and centralization trumped democ-

[1] For an introduction to the discussion on the state capitalist nature of the former-soviet states there are a number of sources. CLR James' *State Capitalism and World Revolution* is a good account from this perspective. Bordiga alternatively argued that the USSR was merely capitalism plain and simple, but unfortunately Bordiga's writings are notoriously obscure and infrequently translated. A good secondary source is Aufheben's discussion of the debate in their 1997 6th issue reprinted for free on libcom here: libcom.org. Recently some anarchist communists and participatory economics adherents have argued that such economies represent a unique type of organization centered around a dictatorship of a managerial or bureaucratic class.

While we should not conclude that such reprehensible activity seen above is automatically driven by democratic centralist theory, we should recognize that such tendencies reside deeply within democratic centralism as a potential, and in fact cannot be cleaved from it simply by critiquing bureaucracy and applauding democracy. While this browsing of recent history is inherently incomplete and selective, taking a broad view we can see that it raises serious challenges for anyone trying to revise democratic centralism away from it's bureaucratizing and centralist orientations. It isn't that such examples are the only type of democratic centralism, but rather that the fights and deviations occur around a central axis of democratic centralism that expose its inherent weaknesses.

It is not simply that these organizations failed to facilitate greater development, but that they were organized against such happening. There were systematic attempts to prevent the growth and independent thought amongst cadre, and a disciplinary regime that would respond to potential new powers. Obviously, a retributive or adversarial orientation towards the multiplication of leadership in the movement is reactionary and suicidal. That history raises the question around how democratic centralism can capitalize on the strength of such disagreement and development, given it's rotation around an axis of that political center.

Conclusions in Practice

> "A better way of political organization than Stalinist hierarchy needs to be found. But the underlying project – cohering revolutionary-minded activists into a collective body of cadre – remains a crucial task for constructing any effective left."[17]
>
> —Max Elbaum

For generations of radicals attempting to build revolutionary movements that can challenge capitalism, neither the legacy of communist movements nor its theories have been neutral. The challenges of building a revolutionary movement in our conjucture has a negative synergy with the centralizing impulses that drive democratic centralism. Simply put, the challenges of organizing outside of a time of movements and with little historical legacy passed on from previous generations are forces that push people towards centralizing shortcuts that they hope will generate the necessary struggle. In fact typically the opposite occurs, struggles are held back by the conservative and dominating tendencies of these groups.

[17] Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air,* p. 180.

racy, but both the theory and practice of democratic centralism never had such coherence or continuity.

The most broad and populist formulation of democratic centralism describes it as being a method for internal function, or how to act inside an organization, that goes through a process of democratic deliberation to form a unity, which will be carried out as a group. It is democracy in deciding, and unity in action. Allegedly, non-democratic centralist groups rejected unity in action, having discussion and then individuals and divisions acting as they pleased irrespective of decision. Still other groups have no democratic debate, and simply implement directives. Democratic centralism is supposed to unify these (dialectically) in a practice of internal democracy, and external unified action. But what were the motivations for this theory, and what relationship does it have to higher bodies, directives, internal oppositions, etc.?

The term was first used by a Lassalean named Schweitzer, who was a German socialist active in the General Association of German Workers. That group was organized under what he called "democratic centralism". Interestingly Marx and Engels criticized the strict organization practiced by this group in their September 1868 letters.[2]

The fleshed out democratic centralism as we know it came on the heels of a short period of openness secured by the 1905 revolution in Russian. Both the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks introduced the concept when they were in the common social democratic party. The Mensheviks were actually the first ones to put out the concept at their 1905 conference, with the Bolsheviks following shortly thereafter. At a unity conference in 1906 both factions adopted a resolution endorsing democratic cen-

[2] Bottomore, T.B. 1991. A Dictionary of Marxist Thought. Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA, pp. 134–136.

tralism.[3] The most common formulation however came from Lenin's report at that congress, and was "freedom of discussion, unity of action".[4] In the context of the congress this meant the engagement and debate of the party members, the coming together of branches in a coordinated cohesive organization, and implementing the decisions made in the open discussions.

The split in Russian social democracy that was to produce a fleshed-out democratic centralism occurred around a division on what membership constituted.[5] Lenin's conception of democratic centralism sought to respond to a context of illegality and the authoritarianism of the Russian monarchy. Democratic centralism was a proposal for how the party should function both for a level of commitment and unity, and for paid professional revolutionaries.[6] All of these issues were transformed first in the 1905 revolution, and later during the subsequent Russian revolutions. The kernels of this thought underwent shifts alongside the tumult of those struggles.

It is important to see that democratic centralism sought to address real issues. With democratic centralism, Lenin and his associates promoted the idea of revolutionary organization based on coordinated activity, an internal process for debating and trying craft and hone political positions around that activity, and an orientation of members to that work at a high level of commitment.

[3] Proyect, Louis. "Once more on democratic centralism."*Louis Proyect: The Unrepentant Marxist*. December 30, 2010. The author drew from Paul Leblanc's book about Lenin and the Revolutionary Party.

[4] Lenin, VI. 1906. Report on the Unity Congress of the R.S.D.L.P: A Letter to the St. Petersburg Workers. *Marxist Internet Archive.*

[5] See Lenin's Account of the 2nd Congress of the R.S.D.L.P. *Marxist Internet Archive.*

[6] For this time period see Lenin's collected works from the 1901–1903 era particularly his reports from the party congresses and *What is to be Done?*, Rosa Luxembourg's *Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy* for a sense of the debate from Lenin's left, and Trotsky's *Our Political Tasks* from the Menshevik side of things.

aspects of revolutionary theory and the relevant intellectual history. The Soviet identified communist parties actively discouraged any study of primary writings in the communist tradition – specifically Capital – and opposed any attempts to place major theoretical contributions and debates into their actual historical context. Instead, a list of 'good' and 'bad' authors, a few sanctioned pieces from Engels, Marx, and Lenin, and some terrible attempts at summarizations and popularizations from house intellectuals were presented as a finished and closed scientific system with simple lessons to be internalized and obeyed – but with nothing that challenged or was meant to be challenged.

(…)

In 1968, a group of us in the C.P.U.S.A. were disciplined by the National Board and a little later I was put on trial before the National Committee for "factionalism". A number of issues were involved, one of which related indirectly to Althusser. We were charged with engaging in "horizontal" discussions within the party and opening up those discussions to individuals and groupings outside of the party. (The historical precedents for this form of discipline in the Communist movement stretch back to the 10th Congress of the CPSU, but it was pretty much unknown before that time. d.h.) Our particular "factional" discussions centered around a document that challenged the Party's program which was then in a draft form."[16]

[16] Hammerquist, Don. "Althusser Comments." 2009. Sojourner Truth.

> "Lotta Continua's organisation prior to 1973 was rudimentary. Apart from decision-making at national conventions, it was run by a group of old friends (Sofri in his 1976 congress speech confessed to a "private patrimony"). Then things changed: "The theoretical and political formation of cadres, the election of leaders, the individual responsibilities of the militant in the framework of collective discipline, the division of tasks and specialisation …It is nothing else than the discovery of democratic centralism and the third-internationalist concept of the party" (Bobbio p130, translation Della Porta p88). As a result from 1973 onwards "the possibility of comrades contributing to the formation of the political line was reduced; the responsibility for the major decisions was ever more concentrated at the top of the pyramid."[15]

Though some are looking to democratic centralism as a way to move beyond the inability of the movement to develop people, facilitate greater creativity and strategy in action, etc., historically we see even in the autonomist wing of democratic centralism a tendency to reduce such. Don Hammerquist, again drawing from his experience in the Communist Party USA, describes a repressive campaign that ran against such development. Criticism and engaging the positions of leadership were seen as attacks, and interactions amongst the base to develop ideas were actively repressed and discouraged.

> "One of the impacts of the Soviet domination of the international movement in the prior decades was the cloistering and sanitizing of important

[15] The Big Flame. "Lotta Continua." May 3o, 2009. *The Big Flame 1970–1984.*

Stated in that way, these are important points that are not owned by democratic centralism, but are broad issues many revolutionaries (and their theories) try to grapple with. It was the particular ambiguities and marriages of these concepts to others that gave democratic centralism its historical significance and problems.

Lenin's conception of commitment was expressed as paid professional revolutionaries.

> "I assert: (1) that no revolutionary movement can endure without a stable organisation of leaders maintaining continuity; (2) that the broader the popular mass drawn spontaneously into the struggle, which forms the basis of the movement and participates in it, the more urgent the need for such an organisation, and the more solid this organisation must be (for it is much easier for all sorts of demagogues to side-track the more backward sections of the masses); (3) that such an organisation must consist chiefly of people professionally engaged in revolutionary activity; (4) that in an autocratic state, the more we confine the membership of such an organisation to people who are professionally engaged in revolutionary activity and who have been professionally trained in the art of combating the political police, the more difficult will it be to unearth the organisation; and (5) the greater will be the number of people from the working class and from the other social classes who will be able to join the movement and perform active work in it."[7]

There are a number of false assumptions here that led to dangerous paths. We can reasonably question (4) given the un-

[7] Lenin, V.I. 1902. What Is To Be Done. *Marxist Internet Archive.*

successful experiences of guerilla movements worldwide. Professionalism and training do not seem to have sheltered movements for example in the Southern Cone of South America from the resources and organization of local and international imperialism.[8] Today Lenin's assertions seem naïve

> "When we have forces of specially trained worker-revolutionaries who have gone through extensive preparation (and, of course, revolutionaries "of all arms of the service"), no political police in the world will then be able to contend with them, for these forces, boundlessly devoted to the revolution, will enjoy the boundless confidence of the widest masses of the workers."[9]

The ability of revolutionary movements to be immersed and supported within popular power under such repressive conditions provided a much better security than professionalism could hope to. Confidence in the workers comes less from professional training than the emergence of revolutionary currents in autonomous struggles. Lenin had no serious response to the alienation of paid professionals from those struggles.

Lenin also failed to see the distinction between seriousness and discipline versus the centralization of decision-making and power. He explicitly rejected such distinctions in fact. Lenin argued for a rigorously applied division of labor, and believed that workers and non-proletarian revolutionaries needed to be removed from wage labor in order to become a professional revolutionary. For instance Lenin argues that "a well-organised secret apparatus requires professionally well-trained revolution-

[8] This is true both of Guevarist inspired Foco groups and the Southern Cone urban guerilla movements that drew from the work of anarchist-marxist Abraham Guillen.

[9] Lenin, V.I. What Is To Be Done.

of competent creative organizers. Such a theme is repeated by across tendencies. Louis Proyect discusses the cultivated subservience of members to leadership in the Socialist Workers' Party.

> "I always remember one recurring type of incident from my days in the SWP leadership that symbolizes for me one of the biggest problems with what's come to be called Leninism. And that is when some big development would take place, and younger comrades —and disproportionately women comrades— would ask me what "we" thought of it. It happened time and again, around the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the overthrow of the Grenadian revolutionary government by the Coard faction (yes, in the name of "democratic centralism"), the Peruvian embassy "crisis" in Cuba and the subsequent Mariel boatlift, the Iranian Revolution. What do "we" think of it. That was the question. Acceptance of whatever truth was about to be revealed was assumed, automatic, unquestioned."[14]

The Autonomia, a broad movement of Italy's upsurges during the 1970s, was known for it's creativity and novel theory in social struggles both inside and outside the workplace. Yet, when one of the autonomia groups transitioned from a rather unformed revolutionary grouping to a Marxist-Leninist democratic centralist group, similar problems began to emerge. We see this discussed in a blog about Big Flame (an autonomist group from England in the 1970s), which drew from that tradition. Their analysis draws from Italian primary sources within Lotta Continua otherwise unavailable in English.

[14] Proyect, "Critical Comments on Democratic Centralism."

> In short: The party had adopted a new (and truly better approach) to homosexuality, but slammed the door hard on any real exploration of anti-gay bigotry among communists and its real-world consequences.
>
> What emerges from such methods is a party where discussions are maddeningly confined and ritualized. They generally take place only after positions (or even a whole new synthesis) have been formally adopted. Questions are "opened" so a new orthodoxy can replace an old one, and then discussions are slammed shut again. Throughout that process ready agreement is expected. Real dissent is assumed to be backward (or worse)."[13]

Rather than seeing a nuance around how a political center can facilitate great thought, discussion, and cadre development, we see the opposite. It isn't that a theory such as democratic centralism will resolve all on-the-ground problems for us. Yet democratic centralism makes itself vulnerable by claiming to be a theory, which does center around the political development of its members internally, and a vanguard force externally. That framing, combined with an institutionalization of a directive hierarchy creates a problematic environment in which the development of a culture of critical thinking, cadre development, and the ability to be flexible and adaptive is suppressed rather than facilitated.

Retardation of Development

Limitations on debate and a command-structure of party activity goes hand and hand with holding back the development

[13] Ely, Mike. "Nine Letters to our Comrades, Getting Beyond Bob Avakian's New Synthesis." December 2007. *Kasama Project.*

aries and a division of labour applied with the greatest consistency…"[10]

As Larry Gambone and Don Hammerquist point out, there is a difference between political unity and the centralization of power.[11][12] Many communists of the period conflated the two concepts, in terms of the form or structure of the organization and the content of the organization. The point ultimately was to ensure an effective and serious organization, but the professionalization of this work was to be transformed later in practice into party-bureaucracy officials. This division would eventually become one of the bases by which the party bureaucracies became the administrative ruling class, and sought to liquidate all political opposition in the masses and internally.

For all the talk of seriousness, paid professionals, cadre, etc., it can reasonably be questioned how accurate that was for the Bolsheviks at various points, and the causality of the revolution. It's often proposed that the Bolshevik's understanding and practice of democratic centralism, unlike the disorganization of anarchists say, secured their position at the vanguard of the masses, and made ultimately allowed the revolution to thrive, at least initially. Yet there's also a different defense of the Bolsheviks that contradicts these ideas. Some put forward the idea that the Bolsheviks were very democratic initially, to the point were the central committees could not have discipline over the party, which had an allegedly thriving democracy.

For example one author, Alexander Rabinowitch, makes reference to a well-cited event in which the central committee sup-

[10] Lenin, V.I. What Is To Be Done.

[11] See Larry Gambone's article "The State and Revolution: An Anarchist Viewpoint" June 16, 2009. *Porcupine Blog.*

[12] I am indebted to the comments of Don Hammerquist throughout this essay, though he would likely take issue with my account of history. For more on Lenin in general and objections to conflating unity and centralization, see Don Hammerquist's article "Lenin, Leninism, and Some Leftovers"September 23, 2009. *Sketchy Thoughts Blog.*

pressed one of Lenin's letters (Marxism and Insurrection) from the party's membership in 1917. Lenin criticized the party publicly. Similar disputes and disagreements in the Central Committee at that pivotal time are taken as evidence of the lack of cohesion and authoritarianism charged against the Bolsheviks under Lenin. In the July days of the Russian Revolution the military organization of the party and regional bureaus (something like locals) acted independently of the Central Committee in partly initiating the demonstrations that led to the July days. Perhaps most famous of all was the incident where Lenin argued for overthrowing the provisional government in an insurrectionary act by the party and revolutionary forces. Key to this for the purposes of argument is the fact that Lenin was in a minority concerning launching the October revolution, for which the majority of the Central Committee opposed even publicly.[13]

This poses a contradiction however. If the Bolsheviks were not a cohesive organization, with a robust democracy of sections acting independently of each other, a central committee unable to maintain the will of the majority, etc., it begs the question what role democratic centralism plays? If the party was not democratic centralist at that time, then it appears democratic centralism occurred with the rise of the bureaucracy and the death of the revolution. If it was democratic centralist during the chaotic period, in what sense was it centralist? As we will see these ambiguities plague the theory and become a moving target.

At some point even most Leninists would agree that party cadre were transformed from revolutionaries attempting to build initiative, accountability, and discipline into having military like obedience of party hierarchies. Surely the theory itself has a strong role to play in this, but the historical

[13] Rabinowitch, Alexander. 2004. *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*. Pluto Press.

essentially no open discussions of these views allowed within the party's ranks, though controversy and debate increasingly raged around the party's youth brigade (RCYB).

By the late 1990s, these anti-homosexual politics were so controversial (inside and outside the party) that it would have been impossible to create a new program without major changes. The question was opened briefly but then shut down when the discussion proved highly volatile.

The method used for cutting off this debate is revealing: The new party analysis acknowledged that homosexuality is not inherently counterrevolutionary, but insisted that the Party's long-standing condemnation of gay people had not come from any influence of anti-gay bigotry. The error, it was said, came from general problems of method and reductionism, not from anti-gay prejudices within the Party.

It was officially argued that the question of homosexuality itself had never been a cardinal question, but the method used to criticize the party's previous position had to be considered a cardinal question. Translated: The party would still not consider the previous anti-gay errors a huge deal, but it would consider any discussion of possible homophobia among leaders to be completely intolerable. Also considered hostile to the party: Any discussion of why the change in line had taken so long, any appraisal of the huge political cost to the revolution because of this error and any discussion of "the closet" within the party (i.e., ways that secretly gay or bisexual members may have been forced to deny their sexual orientations).

Party's homophobic positions shows in detail similar manipulations of debate and internal discussion by central bodies as was seen above. The secrecy associated with these parties makes such confessions of internal activity valuable in understanding how democratic centralist groups in our time function.

> "From 1970 until 2001, the RU/RCP held that homosexuality was incompatible with revolutionary communist goals and ideology. Gay men and lesbians could not be members. Formal programmatic statements held that homosexuality would be abolished under socialism through ideological struggle or "re-education." The party's wrong and backward views became rather notorious through the 1980s, as the AIDS crisis exploded and the Republican Right sought to exploit anti-homosexual bigotry.
>
> What is less well known is how such views were maintained. In the early 1970s it was said that gay people couldn't be communists because they were a security risk of blackmail. Then after the party's founding in 1975 the stress was on ways homosexuality was linked to "bourgeois degeneracy." Then after 1988, the argument was that homosexuality had to be rejected because male homosexuality was (supposedly) inherently hostile to women and lesbianism was (supposedly) inherently a manifestation of lifestyle reformism.
>
> In other words, over the first thirty-plus years of the RU/RCP, the end verdict (the incompatibility of homosexuality with communism) remained the same, while the public justifications for that position morphed with time. And there were

struggles of Bolsheviks and Russian peasantry and workers intrinsically shaped this ideology as well in the course of successive revolutionary waves. As history unfolded, what were once mere concepts in writings were later interpreted and found a voice in the post-revolution world of Russia and other nations.

Today we can see some errors in the theory that should be increasingly obvious, and which had practical consequences. There is a difference between voluntary commitment of militants and compulsory obedience to higher authorities with monopolies of power. This is not merely moralism either; without independent capabilities and assessment skills, revolutionaries will not be able to build anything. Under the soviet bureaucracies, such soldier-like functioning was able to function in accordance with the interests of the State, but in our situation replicating such is suicidal. Paid professional revolutionaries develop interests and perspectives separate and often against that of the working class they are supposed to serve. Through separating both in terms of work, physically, and organizationally from the classes they serve, bureaucracies develop independent perspectives, needs, and desires which they reflect as any class formation does. This should be clear from union bureaucracies that arise from the working class but grow to work against it, for example when union bureaucracies seek to secure a reliable existence through soft-ball contracts and appeasing the bosses. Though in theory they represent the workers, in reality their own interests as bureaucrats can turn them against their fundamental task, and put them in an antagonistic position in relation to workers. Left ideologies have no silver bullet to prevent that transformation.[14] Some claim that Lenin gets a pass, with Stalin taking the blame for the mechanical and repressive

[14] See Anton Pannekoek's *Workers Councils* from AK Press for a particularly lucid description of the separation of union bureaucracy from the interests of the working class.

structure of the Russian Communist Party following Lenin's death. The consequences of this professionalization and centralization proved disastrous in terms of repression against political and popular opposition before Stalin's rise however, and its role was solidified in the early 1920s in producing a bureaucracy vested in reorganizing capitalism within the revolution through attacks on the soviets and collectivization efforts, and eventually introduction of market reforms under the NDP period.[15]

The victory in the civil war against the counterrevolutionary Russian whites brought about new problems for the fledgling Bolshevik regime. Years of war and the backwardness of the Russian economy proved a challenge. Though the

[15] Bolshevik repression of opposition is now well known, but worth repeating. Internally, opposition was tolerated for a time but particularly under Stalin all such opposition was eventually destroyed. A famous case of this occurred under Lenin's authority and was the left communist Workers' Opposition, forcibly disbanded in 1922 before Stalin reached ascendancy. Perhaps Lenin's most reactionary and right-ward looking book dealt with such internal and external left communist opposition in *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. Externally, the Bolsheviks sought to consolidate power via the repression of the Makhnovschina in Ukraine, Kronstadt workers, and the illegalization of all political opposition socialist, communist, and anarchist. Much is already written on these topics. See Alexandre Skirda's *Nestor Makhno – Anarchy's Cossack: The Struggle for Free Soviets in the Ukraine, 1917–1921* or alternatively Makhno's own three part memoirs newly translated from Russian by Black Cat Press in Edmonton. For Kronstadt, see Paul Avrich's *Kronstadt, 1921* or his *Russian Anarchists*. Ian McKay also provides a detailed account in "Kronstadt 1921: The end of the Bolshevik Myth."

Trotsky's defense of the assault is in his *Hue and Cry Over Kronstadt* 1938. Alexandra Kollontai's *The Workers' Opposition* or the numerous histories available on libcom.org give a good background on left communist internal Bolshevik opposition. Maurice Brinton's *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control* covers in detail the struggles between the working class and the rising state-capitalist class which found its expression in the Bolshevik party. This work includes detailed discussion of the evolution of the soviets and the attacks on them by Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* is his rejoinder to those critiques at the time.

> '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."[12]

This is a good example of the infamous incoherence of the political line of communist parties, which people associate with the repressive times under the soviet bureaucracies and secret police. Again it is not isolated. It isn't the exception, but centers around attempts to manage information and perception of events. This is natural of course for people, but it is a different animal when a paid institutionalized hierarchy, armed with an ideology of self-appointed leadership of the future revolution, uses it to maintain their own dominance.

I hesitate to put a reference in to the Revolutionary Communist Party because of it's infamy for personality cults and a broad consensus amongst the left of it's questionable activity. Yet the quality, detail, and reflection given by Mike Ely from the Kasama Project concerning the Revolutionary Communist

[12] Hammerquist, Don."Lenin, Leninism, and Some Leftovers"September 23, 2009. *Sketchy Thoughts Blog*.

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 Khruschev'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:

whites were defeated, there was far from cohesion both inside the party and outside of it. Imperialist invasions, internal sabotage, and competition with other political currents all weighed heavily on the rising Bolsheviks. External to the party, prior political allies were viewed increasingly as a liability. Economically, Lenin and the party looked to capitalist theory of economic production through Taylorist management, factory time studies, and centralized repressive managerial powers in production. Autonomous workers and peasants movements provided a potential challenge to any plans to implement Taylorist production in Russia. Their direct implementation of collectivizations and proto-socialist experiments created a bulwark and organization of alternatives that would have to be restrained in order to move in that direction. The Bolsheviks believed that Russia needed to pass through a capitalist phase before graduating to socialism, and sought to increase the productive forces of Russia via state-capitalist measures. Allies of the revolutionary peasantry and working class thus posed a double challenge to Bolshevik power.

The Ukrainian anarchist worker and peasant movements were thus seen as a threat. Earlier, the Ukrainian anarchist militias (often called the Makhnovschina after the most famous of them, Nestor Makhno) saved the Bolsheviks during the White assault that nearly destroyed them. The Whites had advanced to Moscow, only to beat back when the Ukrainians destroyed their supply lines from behind bit by bit, and sent them fleeing. With the whites out of the way, the Bolsheviks turned on their former Makhnovschina allies and sought to destroy the power of the workers and peasants in Ukraine, Siberia, and elsewhere (let alone considering Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, etc). Likewise Left Social Revolutionaries party members would face brutal repression in the Bolsheviks' attempts to centralize power in a party dictatorship. The workers movements, inspired by councilist and anarchosyndicalist movements, faced military repression including the infamous

assault and murder of the communist and anarchist Kronstadt sailors, once amongst the front guard of the revolution. The mass movements were treated as threats to the power of a professional revolutionary force using the might of a centralized military to impose capitalism onto a rebellious and self-organizing peasant and workers movement. While these issues are external and democratic centralism only deals with internal manners, it is worth understanding the economic and political transformations the Bolsheviks initiated while consolidating their conception of internal functioning.

Whatever one may think about these external oppositional movements, internally as well the Bolshevik leadership turned its guns on its political opponents with Lenin leading the charge. Two internal factions (there were also other left communists that split from the party) sought to critique the relationship of the party to the mass movements as one of domination and repression, and question the role of centralization internally. The Democratic Centralist faction[16] and the Workers' Opposition[17] led this fight, and advocated something

[16] "The factional group of Democratic Centralists (Sapronov, Osinsky, V. Smirnov and others) opposed the Party line on economic development. Using phrases about democratic centralism, this group spoke against the use of specialists, against centralised state administration, against one-man management and the personal responsibility of managers of enterprise's; they insisted on unlimited corporate management." Lenin, V.I. 9th Congress of the R.C.P.(B.), 1920.

[17] Workers' Opposition was a group that proposed workers self-management and opposed party dictatorship to the rule of the working class itself. They collaborated with other groups inside and outside the party. "*Ignatovites* or "a group of activists of Moscow city districts" was an anti-Party anarcho-syndicalist group, headed by Y. N. Ignatov, during the trade union discussion of 1920–21. Its activity was limited to the Moscow Party organization, because it had no influence among the city's workers and rank-and-file Party members. Before the Tenth Party Congress, it came out with two platforms: the current tasks of the trade unions, and Party organization. The Ignatovites shared the anarcho-syndicalist views of the Workers' Opposition; they set the trade unions in opposition to the Soviet state, denied the

> the "healthiest" Trotskyist Leninist Party for a diversity of views as there is among the pro-Moscow Stalinists or Maoists, or as close to as makes no serious difference."[11]

Against seeing these issues as the inherited problems of one or another Leninist tradition, we see such experiences repeated throughout critical literature by Leninists. Don Hammerquist was a youth member of the Communist Party USA and a red-diaper baby. Hammerquist has been a lifelong revolutionary, and helped found the Sojourner Truth Organization on a Gramscian-Leninist basis after being expelled from the CPUSA. This next passage, though long, gives unique insight into the functioning of these groups as they attempted to manage the information members received, and to filter the responses and criticisms of party decisions through a tightly controlled central structure (whether this was effective or not).

> "It's a bit of a diversion, but a loosely related personal experience might highlight how the M.L. [Marxist-Leninist] 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

[11] Proyect, Louis. 2010. "Critical Comments on Democratic Centralism." July 16, 2010. *Louis Proyect: The Unrepentant Marxist.*

> bidding members from expressing disagreements to cadre outside their base unit."[10]

Unity in action here is interpreted not merely as democratically abiding by collective decisions, but is taken further. There is an imposition of organizational discipline against disagreement that in the most egregious cases isolated militants into cells, with the expression of dissent between cells being forbidden.

Louis Proyect is a well-known blog about Marxist theory and practices by a self-described a former Trotskyist and present Marxist. One such article describes his experiences with democratic centralism in the Trotskyist movement. There, he contests the idea that somehow Trotskyist groups were an exception to the centralization of Maoist and Stalinist parties.

> "[The Trotskyist] tradition has associated with it a plethora of intellectual strait-jackets, gag rules, norms about when freedom of speech is in order (for a couple of months even' couple of years, at least in theory!) and not in order (the rest of the time), and demonstrated inability to contain even minor differences within an organization.
>
> The specifically Trotskyist side of it has been plagued by splits, expulsions and the multiplication of sects, things which have degenerated more than once into spying on comrades, using other police-state tactics, goon squads and in the case of the Stalinists even murder.
>
> And there is no basis for separating the specifically Trotskyist tradition from the rest of it. History has shown that there is as little room even in

[10] Ibid, p. 175

akin to syndicalism and a communist critique of the Bolsheviks' repression and imposition of capitalist social relations on the insurgent working and peasant classes. Both factions were made up of old Bolsheviks from early in the party and were proletarian in character, making them more difficult to carry out character assassinations on. Their opposition movement arose specifically to the imposition of one-man rule in the factories and the administration of the economy by the party, and in fact the centralization of the Central Committee. These factions argued at the Ninth Party Congress of the Bolshevik Party that the soviets should remain autonomous from the party's rule, and that the management of the economy should be by the union and soviet organizations and not the party. They lost this battle with Lenin blasting them. Here Lenin is at his most candid in rejecting their demands:

> "I assert that you will find nothing like it in the fifteen years' pre-revolutionary history of the Social-Democratic movement.Democratic centralism means only that representatives from the localities get together and elect a responsible body, which is to do the administering [my emphasis]. But how? That depends on how many suitable people, how many good administrators are available. Democratic centralism means that the congress supervises the work of the Central Committee, and can remove it and appoint another in its place."[18]

Party's leadership in socialist construction: opposed democratic centralism; demanded freedom of discussions, and wanted the Party membership to consist of workers only. They also demanded the handover of the administration of the economy to an organ elected by the All-Russia Trade Union Congress". Lenin, V.I. *The Party Crisis*. 1921.

[18] 9th Party Congress of the R.C.P.(B.)

Immediately the Workers Opposition and Democratic Centralists were attacked for their alleged anarchist and syndicalist deviations. Lenin acknowledged that there were not Makhnovists, but that Makhnovists would use their positions against the Bolsheviks.[19] The response was to endorse the now infamous concept of one-man rule in factories under the banner of the militarization of labor.

This presents some difficulty for those who would seek to pull democratic centralism away from its historical centralization and bureaucracy. The democratic centralist faction tried to expand the democratic elements of the theory, but at what moment did this occur? What was happening was not merely an argument over terms. The emergence of a monopoly of power in a revolutionary situation transformed existing practices and concepts, and created new contradictory political currents within the same body.

This clash would lead to the ban on party factions, and sew the seeds of the imprisonment and murder of any left communist opposition thereafter. While moral and political critiques of this activity are emotionally resonant and meaningful, there are deeper lessons we should draw as well. The Bolsheviks were not merely great men of history greedy and lusting after power, but were revolutionaries who dedicated their lives to the cause of human equality. Here at these crucial moments, elements of the theory of democratic centralism (professional revolutionaries separate from the masses, subservience of mass movements to the party, and centralization) became ideological weapons of a (perhaps unconscious) ruling class in ascendancy. Far from being liberatory tools, these ideas were embedded in a productivist capitalist ideology that sought to bring the insurgent workers autonomy and peasant implementations of direct socialist production (such as in Ukraine, Georgia, and Siberia) under one-man rule of Taylorist capitalism. The liqui-

[19] Ibid.

stood as "all members were required to belong to and take assignments from a party unit [my emphasis]."[9] All of this is a far cry from building organizations which can help create creative, independent, and competent organizations. Contrary to what Harnecker argues, the military model of directives and assignments is here reproduced not merely in military contexts such as perhaps Russia, but rather in wholly dissimilar situations. We can imagine the reason for this lies not only in authoritarian currents in society, and class contradictions within capitalism, but more importantly from the reproduction of democratic centralist ideology and its inherent tensions.

Suppression of Dissent

Directives were not simply an activity of central bodies in isolation. Mechanisms for securing the activity of party members required having means of ensuring internal discipline. Many groups effectively self-censured and implemented policies aimed at suppressing dissent and debate within, especially outside the control of the central leadership. In the New Communist Movement, tasks were assigned as stated before, however there were also policies aimed at limiting disagreements inside and outside the parties.

> "Members were accountable to conduct their work on the basis of group policy and to follow through on all their assigned tasks… But group discipline went beyond such sensible arguments. Cadre were also responsible for defending their organization's positions in all circumstances and usually prohibited from expressing differences or reservations to any nonmember. Some groups even had rules for-

[9] Ibid, p. 173

pants in democratic centralist groups reference a sense of carrying out orders rather than being empowered and developed to think and act as creative cadre. This was also referenced above in the quotation aimed at the International Socialist Organization from the New Socialist Project. Coming back to the New Communist Movement, Fred Ho edited a book of interviews documenting the histories of some of these groups called Legacy to Liberation. In one such interview, Chris Kando Lijima describes the role of party members under the directives of the central leadership.

> "FH: Most people don't know what [democratic centralism] was like. Describe it some more.
>
> CI: Here's an example from doing cultural work. Here's the line, write a song with the line. Period. You don't write anything else that's not the line. It's your job to write songs, perform songs, that illustrate the line. That was my understanding of [democratic centralism] when it came to cultural work.
>
> FH: So it really wasn't democratic, but directives.
>
> CI: It was a lot of centralism, but not a lot of democracy, which was true of most groups."[7]

This assessment, that democratic centralism meant in many instances central directives rather than an active and participatory democracy is repeated in many places. Max Elbaum writes that "democratic centralism also meant that central bodies were given a great deal of power to direct the work of every other party committee."[8] This direction of work was under-

[7] Ho, Fred, Ed.. 2000. *Legacy to Liberation: Politics & Culture of Asian/ Pacific America.* AK Press. Pp. 249

[8] Elbaum, Max. 2006. Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che. Verso. Pp. 150

dation of those revolutionary experiments would span three decades, and would cost the peoples under Bolshevik regimes countless lives and suffering.

Democratic Centralism Beyond Lenin—Hope in the West?

Even before Lenin fell and Stalin rose, the Bolsheviks lost allies. A growing amalgam of left communist opposition (councilist, ultra-left, and anarchist) built upon their non-Leninist traditions in the struggles and revolutions across the globe. Still some want to have their cake and eat it to. What about those inspired by democratic centralism, but who either had critiques of or broke from the practices of the Bolsheviks? I will look at a few figures to get a sense of the field. Though one can't possibly look at everyone who wrote anything about democratic centralism, I hope that by spanning theorists as diverse as Gramsci to Bordiga we can get a sense of what role the concept has played.

Antonio Gramsci is one with credentials that would aid democratic centralism. Gramsci came of political age in the libertarian milieu of industrial Turin. Gramsci, though fond of some rather unenlightened critiques of anarchists, he cooperated with the anarchist workers movements in Turin during the Red Years.[1] Of all the Leninist figures, Gramsci is perhaps one of the most thoroughly libertarian leaning, or at least problematizes a narrow reading of either tradition. Gramsci surprisingly wrote very little explicitly about democratic centralism. The one place he takes it up in some detail is The

[1] For more on early Gramsci's relationship and work with the Italian anarchists see Levy, Carl. 1999. *Gramsci and the Anarchists*. Berg Publishers.

develops with the growth of the full-time apparatus."[5] More recently a group of young members from the International Socialist Organization split and formed a new group called the New Socialist Project. Part of their experiences was shaped by their experiences with such organizations, and a desire to move beyond it.

> "There have… been subjective weaknesses and factors that we must face up to. In a good year, the socialist micro-sects recruit a handful of students and intellectuals without training them and without any systematic development process. These sects are usually ruled by an unaccountable bureaucracy that runs its micro-empire of mini-branches with an iron-fisted combination of elitism and myopia, whether or not they have any internal ideology or rhetoric to the contrary."[6]

While we can dismiss fights and harsh words within an often-fractured milieu, these experiences and feelings are not isolated, but are pervasive in the democratic centralist organizations. Without taking sides on who is in the right, we see a repetition of the struggle around unaccountable leadership with monopolies of power holding back membership, and contestation around those centers of power. The debate is framed around these questions, even if different factions don't agree on who is in err.

Directives/Lack of Critical Thinking

Corresponding to the empowerment of the central bodies and the shifting power away from membership, many partici-

[5] Oxford Communists. "Bureaucratic Centralism and Ineffectiveness." March 2, 2010. *Oxford Communists.*

[6] Kwoba, Brian. "New Beginnings For a New Time." October 8, 2010. *Unity and Struggle.*

from the peaks of history, but also is evident in smaller examples from the New Communist Movement as Elbaum demonstrated.

Unaccountable Professional Leadership

While the formulation of democratic centralism traditionally promoted election of all positions, this has not always been utilized. In fact the convergence of power and centralization, created a situation in which the method of determining leadership became murky in practice. For the New Communist Movement, "in practice, central committees were chosen in a variety of ways, sometimes by members in each local area electing their representatives without an organization-wide congress, and sometimes without elections at all."[4] The deep sway, culture, and politicization of institutional leadership clearly facilitates this situation. The importance and power of leadership contributes to an atmosphere of both withdrawal from and manipulation of the direction of the organization. While the theory may promote elected leadership, the professionalization and unilateral power of directive centers makes the maintenance of that democracy problematic. Historically, there was a similar repetition where that structure began to undermine the theoretical commitment to democracy.

These practices were not merely isolated to groups inspired by Mao however. In fact they ran the gamut from Trotskyists to Lotta Continua, an Italian autonomia group that moved eventually to a variant Marxist-Leninism. In England, one participant in the Trotskyist movement of the same time period discusses the relationship between full time party leadership and the factional splits characteristic of that movement. Speaking of the International Marxist Group, he said "bureaucratic centralism

[4] Ibid, p. 176

Modern Prince during his internship in fascist prison. There a few unique elements of Gramsci's interpretation of democratic centralism that set it apart from the Bolsheviks. Gramsci sees democratic centralism not merely as a set of characteristics of an organization, or a method for internal decision making, but additionally a process embedded in and shaped by history.

> "'Organicity' can only be found in democratic centralism, which is so to speak a 'centralism' in movement-i.e. a continual adaptation of the organisation to the real movement, a matching of thrusts from below with orders from above [my emphasis], a continuous insertion of elements thrown up from the depths of the rank and file into the solid framework of the leadership apparatus which ensures continuity and the regular accumulation of experience. Democratic centralism is 'organic' because on the one hand it takes account of movement, which is the organic mode in which historical reality reveals itself, and does not solidify mechanically into bureaucracy; and because at the same time it takes account of that which is relatively stable and permanent, or which at least moves in an easily predictable direction, etc".[2]

Though Gramsci's language is somewhat abstract he appears to open the party up to being accountable to history and the proletariat as well as internally democratic. That is to say that for Gramsci, a democratic centralist organization is such only when it is able to adapt and reflect the real movement of the working class in struggle. This is moreover internal to his concept of democratic centralism.

[2] Gramsci, Antonio. Translated by Quintin, H & Smith, GN. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. International Publishers, NY. 1992. Pp. 188–190

> "Democratic centralism offers an elastic formula, which can be embodied in many diverse forms; it comes alive in so far as it is interpreted and continually adapted to necessity. It consists in the critical pursuit of what is identical in seeming diversity of form and on the other hand of what is distinct and even opposed in apparent uniformity, in order to organise and interconnect closely that which is similar, but in such a way that the organising and the interconnecting appear to 'be a practical and "inductive" necessity, experimental, and not the result of a rationalistic, deductive, abstract process- i.e. one typical of pure intellectuals (or pure asses). This continuous effort to separate out the "international" and "unitary" element in national and local reality is true concrete political action, the sole activity productive of historical progress."[3]

Democratic centralism for Gramsci is both an objective measure of judging the co-evolution of the party with the dominated classes, as well as a methodology utilized by the party to ensure its connection and development within resistance to capitalism.

This is an advance over the Bolshevik model for the theory since it requires that the political organization be judged objectively both in terms of its role in history and its role for the class. Again somewhat obscurely, Gramsci seems to imply a more pluralistic operation of political organization through the engagement, co-existence, and synthesis of political opposition as opposed to authoritarian practices.

Unfortunately Gramsci does not fully break from the Leninist model, though perhaps he lays down the paving stones for an exit route.

[3] Ibid.

concentrated not merely decision making in the hands of the central bodies, but also the positions of the organizations as a whole were set by a small group of leaders.

> "…The new Marxist-Leninist groups functioned with a sophisticated division of labor and pronounced hierarchy [emphasis is mine]… To exercise week-to-week leadership, the larger groups generally had some kind of central body of five to twelve people located at the national headquarters-usually termed a political bureau or executive committee. Sometimes real power rested with an even smaller subgroup dubbed a standing committee or co-chairs collective… In theory all executive committers were subordinate to the larger central committee, but in practice central committees were relegated to a relatively passive role except in periods of upheaval. Executive committees typically retained authority to choose which individuals would be assigned to the most important organizational posts, including the newspaper, theoretical journal and internal bulletin editors. Those individuals (usually members of the executive committee themselves) shaped the way an organization's views would be present…"[3]

While perhaps in theory institutionalization of leadership could try to spread that leadership, in practice it creates a bureaucracy with interests in preserving their control over the life of the organization. Rather than resolving the question of building more capacity, this institutionalized political center problematized it as struggles emerged to retain political control over the organization. This is clear in revolutionary moments

[3] Ibid, p. 175

accountable leadership/professionals. Whether deviant or not, recent US democratic centralist practice reflects the acceptance of centralized directive hierarchies rather than showing them to be contested in thought or struggle.

Central Bodies

One of the core elements of democratic centralism is the relationship of central bodies to the party as a whole. Likewise as in the theory, in practice this led to strong central bodies with distinct powers and direction of the party as a whole. Max Elbaum discusses democratic centralist practice in the party and pre-party democratic centralist organizations of the New Communist Movement, a collection of Mao-inspired communist groups formed in the 60s-80s:

> "…All sections of the New Communist Movement drew heavily on selections from Mao when trying to define democratic centralism, especially his concise stricture that: '(1) the individual is subordinate to the organization; (2) the minority is subordinate to the majority; (3) the lower level is subordinate to the higher level; and (4) the entire membership is subordinate to the Central Committee"[1]

With the entire membership subordinated to the authority of the central committee, these groups "…gave far more weight to centralism than democracy."[2] In an environment of such concentrations of control, questions surface concerning where power lies and how the membership sets the agenda for the organization. Elbaum, speaking broadly across the various groups, reflects on how this structure proved mystifying and

[1] Elbaum, Max. 2006. *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*. Verso. Pp.159

[2] Ibid, p. 173

> "This element of stability [see first quote] within the State is embodied in the organic development of the leading group's central nucleus, just as happens on a more limited scale within parties. The prevalence of bureaucratic centralism in the State indicates that the leading group is saturated, that it is turning into a narrow clique which tends to perpetuate its selfish privileges by controlling or even by stifling the birth of oppositional forces-even if these forces are homogeneous with the fundamental dominant interests (e.g. in the ultra-protectionist systems struggling against economic liberalism). In parties which represent socially subaltern classes, the element of stability is necessary to ensure that hegemony will be exercised not by privileged groups but by the progressive elements-organically progressive in relation to other forces which, though related and allied, are heterogeneous and wavering."[4]

Gramsci understands the problem of rising bureaucracy and their antagonism to the subaltern classes, but retains the division between rulers and ruled, between centralized power and the class organized. This is not merely an issue with some forces being better organized or having advanced ideas, but the existence of a political class with special organizational powers and in a position of authority in relation to the subaltern classes. In other writings Gramsci argues that the proletariat can develop only embryonic consciousness, which lacks full development without the revolutionary communist party.

> "[Democratic Centralism] requires an organic unity between theory and practice, between intel-

[4] Ibid.

> lectual strata and popular masses, between rulers and ruled. The formulae of unity and federation lose a great part of their significance from this point of view, whereas they retain their sting in the bureaucratic conception, where in the end there is no unity but a stagnant swamp, on the surface calm and "mute", and no federation but a "sack of potatoes", i.e. a mechanical juxtaposition of single "units" without any connection between them."[5]

Likewise, in other places Gramsci speaks of organization which seems to suggest a belief in the sufficiency and necessity of presumably revolutionary vanguard leadership."…In reality it is easier to create an army than to create generals. It is equally true that an already existing army is destroyed if the generals disappear, while the existence of a group of generals, trained to work together, amongst themselves, with common ends, soon creates an army even where none exists."[6]

Reading Gramsci charitably, perhaps we could excuse or read out the more authoritarian interpretations of that division. Indeed it could be seen as fluid and more historical than organizational. These readings may in fact be unfair to Gramsci, but it creates a dilemma. Take Gramsci at face value and he accepts the problematic divisions in democratic centralism which threaten the more liberatory elements he puts forward.

If on the other hand we find the more liberatory elements in his thought, his stress on praxis, the movements and ruptures of history, the necessity of federation, organic intellectuals, etc., it should be reasonably asked in what sense it is democratic centralism?

[5] Ibid.

[6] Gramsci, Antonio. 1968. *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*. International Publishers.

In Practice

Democratic centralism as a theory revolves around theses about centralization, higher and lower bodies, and internal processes for revolutionary organization. What about the practice? What about recent practice, near to our own situation here in the United States in the conjuncture we find ourselves in? Luckily we have accounts of people in these movements reflecting on their participation in and construction of democratic centralist political organization not merely from one sect or tendency, but from a number of different tendencies, communities, and moments. The length of some of these passages is justified, because such accounts are not always readily available, and provide direct insight into these groups from first-hand participants.

Honing in on a few of these, we can see trends in the practice that mirror the problems in the theory. It isn't that democratic centralism automatically creates bureaucratic or authoritarian practices. This is not a survey or a quantative study of these parties. Theories are not computer programs that spit out copies of their instructions. Practices diverge, struggle, and evolve in a historical context. Yet looking across disparate traditions and moments we do see some regularity of such practices, and when contextualized with the internal conflict in the theory of democratic centralism, we gain tools for understanding both the theory and the practices, and perhaps a way beyond them. From these reports we find themes of the suppression of critical thinking amongst cadre, directive-command structure from central bodies, suppression of debate and dissent within, holding back the political development of cadre, and un-

on how the dialectic is understood, how the structure is produced and relates to the masses, and how it all stands via the party and the question of externality. Yet we can see the ambiguities present at the birth of democratic centralism carry through the theory into its later incarnations. Gramsci came closest to breaking with that tradition, but without the ideological apparatus to climb over that wall. In his case, it may have been both the fascist prison walls and the Stalinist wall of communication surrounding him that prevented his escape or elaborating a separate conception.

The problem is that short of that division, it's unclear what would distinguish democratic centralism from other organizational methodologies, forms, and histories with completely distinct practices and concepts. Anarchist and socialist practices mirror some of these elements Gramsci describes, but fail to take up the democratic centralist call for the "orders from above". We are not interested in Gramsci here, but whether Gramsci provides a basis for reclaiming or revising democratic centralism. It is quite possible that Gramsci indeed broke with the Bolshevik's theory, but such a break would hardly leave democratic centralism as a coherent concept intact.

Though merely a side point here, it should be noted that Gramsci does something unique with organization. By attempting to understand and develop organizational theory as a dynamic within history, he puts it on a footing which goes beyond mere structural proposals. This points to need for historically specific strategies for organization, and for our organizations to evolve with their practices in the struggles of the popular classes. While easy to understand, this conception of praxis and historically rooted theory is generally absent or under utilized from most traditions of left thought.

An opponent of Gramsci provides an interesting counterpoint. Amadeo Bordiga, once a large figure in Italian socialist and communist leadership, and later a leading figure of the left communist current, rejected democratic centralism outright. Gramsci is replying to Bordiga in part when he addresses "organic centralism", which the Bordigists counterposed to democratic centralism. Bordiga had a thorough critique of democracy in general as a product of bourgeois society, and contrasted it to communism which would have no such corollaries (since communism implies the abolition of classes and the state). Bordiga agreed with Lenin's argument for tight centralized parties, but rejected the democratic portion for somewhat related reasons.

Bordiga said,

> "…the meaning of unitarism and of organic centralism is that the party develops inside itself the organs suited to the various functions…" and called for the party to "…[eliminate] from its structure one of the starting errors of the Moscow International, by getting rid of democratic centralism and of any voting mechanism, as well as every last member eliminating from his ideology any concession to democratoid, pacifist, autonomist or libertarian trends."[7]

Bordiga was prone to polemics and obscurity, and the last quote comes from his left communist period following WWII. Looking to an earlier time when he was opposing the Bolshevization of the communist movement (he was the last to call Stalin the gravedigger of the revolution to his face and live) we gain more insight.

> "Democracy cannot be a principle for us. Centralism is indisputably one, since the essential characteristics of party organization must be unity of structure and action. The term centralism is sufficient to express the continuity of party structure in space; in order to introduce the essential idea of continuity in time, the historical continuity of the struggle which, surmounting successive obstacles, always advances towards the same goal, and in order to combine these two essential ideas of unity in the same formula, we would propose that the

[7] Bordiga, Amadeo. 1965. "Considerations on the party's organic unity when the general situation is historically unfavorable." *Marxist Internet Archive.*

Moving to the second facet of democratic centralism, Harnecker presents a different perspective. Unlike Gramsci who sees the role of democratic centralism as a movement in time of the relationship between the masses and party, Harnecker sees the same movement and dialectic between levels of struggle and the party.

> "It is a dialectic combination: in complicated political periods, of revolutionary fervour or war, there is no other alternative than to lean towards centralisation; in periods of calm, when the rhythm of events is slower, the democratic character should be emphasised."[5]

Gramsci seeks to use democratic centralism as a method for building a unity of democracy and centralization, or perhaps centralization is a democratic process of bringing together the diversity in the mass struggle within revolutionary organization. Yet Harnecker is closer to Bordiga in seeing them as polar opposites. Taking them dialectically in this fashion, we would wonder when the dialectic is overcome and what comes next (the synthesis)? The implications are not comforting as increasing struggles negate democracy and that does not give us the tools to understand how to avoid the errors of the official communist nations, in all their barbarity. This must be contextualized coming from an intellectual of the party elite writing from Habana.

The deeper point is not about the extent to which Harnecker has come to question the legacy of the Bolshevik inspired national experiments. Rather it is that the debate about democratic centralism by its adherents revolves around two poles: the issue of structural centralization, and the dialectical movement of the process of democratic centralism. Positions differ

[5] Ibid.

> without the participation or debate of the membership, who were limited to following orders that they never got to discuss and in many cases did not understand. For most people, such practices are increasing intolerable."[2]

Unfortunately against these experiences, she makes a caricature of its critiques by contrasting it only to largely anti-organizational perspectives such as excessive faith in consensus decision making procedures alone. Ignoring the crass straw men in her arguments, she promotes democratic moves such as supporting positions of minorities, and encouraging full debate while discouraging majorities from dominating and crushing opposition. At the same time she quite explicitly embraces the binding authority of decisions by higher levels on the base and all the baggage that brings with it.

> "For the sake of a unified course of action, lower levels of the organisation should respect the decisions made by the higher bodies, and those who have ended up in the minority should accept whatever course of action emerges triumphant, carrying out the task together with all the other members."[3]

Again, she makes an identification between democratic centralism and unification not merely of positions but rather of a centralized decision making authority.

> "This combination of single centralised leadership and democratic debate at different levels of the organisation is called democratic centralism. [emphasis is the author's]".[4]

[2] Harnecker, Marta. 2002. "Should we reject bureaucratic centralism and simply use consensus?" *Links, International Journal of Socialist Renewal.*

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

> communist party base its organization on 'organic centralism.'"[8]

For Bordiga then, democratic centralism borrows from bourgeois society democratic formal mechanisms (voting procedures, layered semi-parliamentary structure), and merges them with a centralist orientation of unity around a communist program. This is a rather crass formulation of Bordiga's quite insightful distinction between content and form.[9] For Bordiga the content of communism was primary, and the party was rigorously centralized around that content. Though he opposed Gramsci, we see a few areas where they differed and others of apparent agreement.

Bordiga was for continuity and a trajectory, while Gramsci was for movement and induction. Bordiga was against democracy, Gramsci roughly for it (obviously not the bourgeois form). Bordiga raises the issue of centralism though in a way which demonstrates the field of contestation. Bordiga's critical intervention maintains centralization and places it as a point of agreement, even if an artificial, stagnant, and mechanical one.[10] In otherwords, Bordiga and Gramsci disagree on the meaning and practice of democracy, but agree partly on centralism. That agreement problematizes any attempt to make centralism more innocuous. Centralism is not merely doing what you say you do, but rather a more fundamentally hierarchical power of minorities over majorities.

[8] Bordiga, Amadeo. 1922. "The Democratic Principle." *Marxist Internet Archive.*

[9] See Dauve, Gilles. 2008. "Contribution to a Critique of Political Autonomy." *Libcom.org.*

[10] It should be said that Bordiga was no ultra-left version of Stalin. One of his main contributions is the critique of the Soviet Union as capitalist, and understanding revolution in terms of the abolition of capitalist social relations. He rejected democracy, but instead called for fairly radical abolition of the basis of all oppression, and though unable to break from the Bolsheviks' rigid centralism went beyond most communists in demanding socialism in an era of state capitalism and theories of productive forces.

Jacques Cammatte, an ultra-left figure once close to Bordiga, but who split from the Bordigist movement, criticized these positions on democracy and centralism.

> "The central committee of a party or the center of any sort of regroupment plays the same role as the state. Democratic centralism only managed to mimic the parliamentary form characteristic of formal domination. And organic centralism, affirmed merely in a negative fashion, as refusal of democracy and its form (subjugation of the minority to the majority, votes, congresses, etc.) actually just gets trapped again in the more modern forms. This results in the mystique of organization (as with fascism). This was how the PCI (International Communist Party [Bordigist]) evolved into a gang."[11]

It is interesting that here, amongst the extreme of the ultra-left it is again taken without question that it is the role of the center that is in question. The question of centralism then from Leninism to left-opposition to ultra-left rejection do not contest that concept of centralism during the heyday of the theory. Unless we grant Gramsci a level of exceptionalism,[12] however we construe it the debate around democratic centralism involved an understanding of the role of an organized hierarchical center with directive powers.

[11] Cammatte, Jacques. 1972. "On Organization." *Libcom.org.*

[12] I am friendly to the idea of this as a historical move, or in trying to understand the thought of a figure. To understand Gramsci we could try to give him some more line. From the perspective of trying to reconstruct democratic centralism this would obliterate any material or historical basis of the concept, and be mere semantics. That is, assuming Gramsci is a saint won't help us understand democratic centralism outside of it's directive authoritarian role.

A Dialectical Alternative?

Moving now to a different tradition, some have looked to the structuralists that came out of Europe and Latin America for alternative tools for reconceptualizing Marxism. Though infamous for becoming apologists for the worst of Stalinism under Althusser, some of the structuralists (such as Poulantzas) embraced seemingly libertarian positions such as the autonomy of the state, if only from a problematic revisionist Marxist political economic perspective. These thinkers (Balibar, Poulantzas, Marta Harnecker, etc) inspired a generation of revolutionaries in Latin America and the Caribbean who sought more liberatory forms of Marxism and were more pluralistic in their influences.[1]

In the article Should we reject bureaucratic centralism and simply use consensus?, Marta Harnecker presents arguments for democratic centralism against bureaucratic centralism. Correctly she asserts that

> "For a long time, left-wing parties operated along authoritarian lines. The usual practice was that of bureaucratic centralism, influenced by the experiences of Soviet socialism. All decisions regarding criterion, tasks, initiatives, and the course of political action to take were restricted to the party elite,

[1] Specifically the urban guerilla movements in the southern cone of South America drew equally from anarchist theorist Abraham Guillen as they did the structuralists, Maoists, and Guevarists. This is evident in diverse groups from the Federacion Anarquista Uruguaya pre-1980s, the Tupamarus, and various Brazilian and Argentinian guerilla groups.