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ON ORGANIZATION  
 & VANGUARDISM

Syndicalism - Is the  
 Leninist slur that we  
 syndicalists are contrist  
 justified?

- Or are  
 the Leninists incapable  
 of understanding a type  
 of organizational theory  
 which differs from their  
 own?

- Have we  
 (as anarchists) anything  
 to learn from the Leninist  
 conceptions at this point?

Well really, are we syndicalists Centrist' ?

Vanguardists frequently allege that syndicalists are centrist; that is that we advocate a mass movement which is neither clearly reformist nor clearly revolutionary but lies between these, containing revolutionaries who are not prepared to break with reformists. Given their definition, it is arguable that there is a certain measure of truth in the claim, but the allegation is simplistic, & our situation needs a fuller consideration.

Let us first - even if to begin with one must be of necessity over-simple - look at what they mean by centrism; - according to vanguardist theory socialists fall basically into four kinds:-

- The "ultra-left" ,
- The "scientific"/"Marxist"/Leninist Left ,
- The Centrists ,
- The Reformists .

Whereas for us reformists are anyone who advances partial demands, the vanguardists - who themselves, for the most part, advance 'transitional' demands - see it as anyone who demands reforms which would themselves strengthen the system.

Revolutionaries are obviously for vanguardists members of their own group and of any group with which they might merge in the immediate future and none else.

The rest are either "ultra-left"; (that is they reject the transitional demands that the "revolutionaries" advance; ((All groups claiming to be Trotskyist pay lip service to a "Transitional Programme" that Trotsky produced, but some think it "ultra-left" to insist on the whole programme here & now; while others would claim that the development of capitalism since Trotsky means that demands that go beyond the Transitional Programme must be advanced to avoid centrism; and quote Lenin's attack on Kautsky, that one of the most pernicious forms of reformism is to continue to cite what were revolutionary demands after these have lost their full meaning;)) ) or they are centrist.

Just to complicate matters the vanguardists frequently allege that the ultra-left is merely a centrist disguising himself with left verbiage.

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They hold that reformists are bound by their reformism because they have not shed bourgeois ways of thinking. Obviously they are right in seeing that the capitalist system sets out to brain wash its subjects, and that it is particularly concerned to see that the working class accepts the social orthodoxies; - while "eccentric" members of the "intelligentsia" may be allowed to escape this brain-washing, since it is necessary for the development of capitalism that the "intelligentsia" exercise independent thought, since such independence is necessary to the development of industrial enterprises. (Comrades will remember that it is a cardinal point of vanguardist theory that the working class cannot of itself reach beyond a trade union level of consciousness, without ideas being brought to it from the intelligentsia.)

(Differing Vanguardist theories make it impossible to state that in the vanguardist analysis reformists should or should not include "mere trade unionists"; but it is obvious that Lenin when he said workers could not go beyond trade unionism without the intervention of the external influence of the intelligentsia, regarded reformist social democrats as workers who had gone beyond trade unionism. This however was before the polarisation within the Second International.)

The true revolutionary for the Leninist is therefore either a worker who has gained ideas from outside his class - directly or mediately - & liberated himself from class prejudices; or a member of the petit-bourgeois derived intelligentsia who has become socialist & has made a serious effort to subordinate his petit bourgeois nature to the needs of activating the working class and leading it to socialist consciousness.

Frequently in Leninist eyes the centrist or ultra left is similarly a member of the intelligentsia who has either failed to make a serious approach to the working class, or has fallen into the heresy of cuvierism (believing that the workers can liberate themselves without external leadership, or abandoning their present class-originated "prejudices".)

Otherwise the centrist is seen as a reformist moving leftwards who has come to accept a revolutionary objective without abandoning reformist prejudices, and so being unable to adopt a serious revolutionary perspective and strategy of action. Imprecise thinking is apt to lead the Leninist into confusion here; the latest definition I read having defined the reformist as being reformist because unable to shed bourgeois-imposed modes of thought, then defined the centrist as one not able to shed reformist-imposed modes of thought. ... ..

However if one limits oneself to the specific; - mass centrist movements; - one has a fairly precise definition. A large section of the working class, first politicised by the reformists, which has become disillusioned with the limitations imposed by reformists on activity, through the failure of traditional reformist solutions & organizational forms; and who are therefore in process of adopting revolutionary means, organizational forms & slogans, without shedding a predominantly reformist (i.e. bourgeois-imposed,) ideology.

We would criticise much of the theoretical system that has produced this analysis. While we might accept the thesis that capitalist conditioning allows for the emergence of a relatively privileged caste able to exercise an independence of thought, (c.f. Keestler's chapter on the Intelligentsia in the "Yogi & the Commissar") we would stress - more than the Leninists do - the limitations of that independence and the fact that the intellectual is as much a creature of his own conditioning as any other worker.

We therefore cannot accept the elitist implications that the Leninists draw from their theory of the intelligentsia.

We do not therefore accept the inflated (and near superman) estimate of the individual revolutionary, which - despite their denials - we find implicit in Leninist argument. (To be fair to the Leninists this estimate depends on the revolutionaries adherence to the revolutionary party, the concept being that outside this, petit bourgeois influences and characteristics will continually reassert themselves in the make up of the revolutionary party, & it is an subordination to the proletarian party that the petit bourgeois becomes intellectual. But as the vanguard party, has to have petit bourgeois influenced or originated leaders, this would seem to be an uncertain corrective.)

We have other and basic anarchist criticisms of the whole perspective, which are too obvious to need enumeration. (Many marxists - i.e. Dunayevskaya, Cardan, Pannekoek, Korsch, or the SPGB - would claim that the whole vanguardist perspective infringed the basic premises of Marxism; but obviously it is not for anarchists to judge that issue.)

Having entered these necessary caveats we can for the sake of argument accept that moving between revolutionism and reformism there is a body of thought, normally small but which grows under certain conditions, which can be called centrism. That such centrism is inherently an unstable position, and people will have to move from it one way or the other.

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There are however other factors that need to be considered. The Vanguardist - for the most part - does not view the elites of the stalinist states as being a ruling class and therefore does not include the Stalinist variant of Marxist-Leninism as a form of capitalist ideology.

The Vanguardist does not for the most part trouble to analyse the differing currents within reformist thinking, (often doesn't within bourgeois thinking) and does not accept that while all capitalists are of the same class different sectors have differing particular interests and so impose differing views on differing sections of the working class.

Finally the Vanguardist has extended the word reformist too widely rightwards to include people who not only postpone social transition indefinitely by advocating minor reforms which serve to repair the fabric of capitalism, but also people who don't even want such a transition ever, though they may want some minor reforms for their own sake. Those Labour Party dignitaries who advocate a "mixed economy" are not strictly within Lenin's usage of the term, even reformists; and only when one has taken this for granted is it possible to understand that he considered reformists at least to be one stage better than "mere trade unionists".

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It is true, looking back to the formation of the French CGT, that the foundations of syndicalism lay in workers in large masses

nevertheless insist: "we can only now tentatively suggest a revolutionary strategy and post-revolutionary objective and that the workers will have to adapt such strategy and objective to fit their desires when the revolutionary upsurge comes.

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Can we then learn something from the Centrist tag?

Once the fervour of a revolutionary upsurge declines it is inevitable that revolutionaries will become isolated, and so doing turn inward-looking, or that they will water down their views in order to maintain some contact with wider movements, and so doing accommodate to reformism, or that many will flatly sell-out. The vanguardist will assume (at least in theory) that only centrists are capable of selling out, making such accommodation to centrism, or so turning inwards; and they will waste considerable amounts of energy tracing elements in the thinking of their erstwhile comrades to explain their present actions.

The inward-looking former revolutionary can often learn to coexist with capitalist society and behave as if he were a conventional, indeed conservatively orthodox, supporter of capitalism. The obvious examples of this are the various religious millenarian sects which started off calling for a chiliastic revolution here on earth and then after the hope of this faded, retired into other worldly pietism, refusing to allow their members to take any interest in political events. However the same could be said to be true of say the SPGB during the fifties, fervently preaching the coming of socialism, but drawing its skirts away from the contamination of any movement that attempted to change anything here & now or tried to build the consciousness of the working class in order to attain that socialism. It is an attitude not unfortunately totally unknown in the anarchist tradition.

Certainly the term centrist can validly be applied to those who accommodate to reformism, when they have so accommodated, though it does not necessarily follow that they always were centrist. The cause of the compromise may well just be weariness and old age, & every leftist is subjected to an host of family & employment pressures to make such accommodation. (If it were not so, economic determinism would be either a myth, or the mere mechanical determinism it is painted in capitalist caricature.)

These ex-revolutionaries (and ex-centrists) contribute elements to the nature of the working class, and therefore to all reformist movements (and so, whether by vanguardist or libertarian theory, to all reformist-originated movements.) Elements that revolutionary theorists ignore at their peril.

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Libertarian anti-vanguardism embodies a subtle paradox. It is inherent in all libertarian theory; whether traditional anarchist like Bakunin, Kropotkin, Pelloutier, Lagardelle or Malatesta;

turning from the leadership of their old reformist leaders and setting up new organizations. It is true that the workers who set up the Bourses de Travail & the pre-fusion CGT brought with them ideas derived from such reformists as Louis Blanc, elitists like Blanqui, reformist variants of Proudhonism & of Marxism. It is true moreover that they did not shed these philosophies, nor did they adopt the views of some pre-existing clearly revolutionary group; but instead they forged out of these a new philosophic synthesis.

The same is equally true when one looks at the IWW; the British shop stewards movement & numerous other instances of early syndicalism. (Though the Spanish CNT was formed from the older Bakunin-Guillaume inspired anarchist federation, that had arisen from the working class sectors of the Pi y Margall proudhonian "Federalists", so that mediately the CNT could be said to have had similar origins.)

This the Vanguardist would see as the classic pattern of centrism; the fact that the syndicalists did not accept entire and unscathed a pre-existing revolutionary philosophy as evidence that they remained syndicalist.

However the picture is equally true of the German workers' councils & those of Northern Italy in the early Twenties. Of the Russian soviet: themselves, until after the October revolution. Of the neo-council communism of East Berlin 53, of Hungary 56 & the post-intervention workers' movement of Prague 68; of the reawakened negro movement stemming from the bus strikes of 56; & while there was a fundamental difference - in that the rising was sparked off by different issues and the forms of leftism were consequently different - there were parallels, though faint ones, in the Paris 68 rising.

The Vanguardist would not of course be put out by this. He would argue that the revolution in Russia succeeded, not because of the militancy of the soviet masses, but because of the leadership of the bolshevist party; and he would point out that the rest failed. He would of course, here, be directly contradicting Lenin himself, who said in the Summer of 1917, both from exile and on his return to Russia, "the party masses are ten thousand times more revolutionary than the party leadership, and the non-party masses ten thousand times more revolutionary than the party masses," a view which in effect cast aside as valueless the whole concept of the "party to lead", the basis of vanguardism.

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The whole reflects a fundamental difference between not just the overt theories of libertarians and vanguardists, but of underlying analyses. We hold that the pre-existing revolutionary group can only act (at most) as a catalyst to the self-activity and the autonomous development of the working class mass movement. If, even our most dogmatic advocates of spontaneity, all nevertheless bely total spontaneity by doing propoganda work here & now; even our most decided opponents of spontaneity as beall and endall

Marxist anti-state socialist like  
De Leon, Pannekoek, Korsch, Cardan or Dunayevskaya;  
ultra-Ghandian radical pacifist  
like Tolstoi, Thoreau, Muste, Skinner & Fromm;  
that revolution can only come a mass change of  
consciousness & the adoption of a totally new ethos by the working  
class.

Libertarianism therefore does not, (however much some libertarians  
may stress the danger inherent in all organizational forms of deg-  
eneration and bureaucratisation,) mean the rejection of the need for  
pre-existing agitational and propagandist groups.

The traditional syndicalist theory of the militant minority moreover  
stresses that some revolutionaries, even after the initial creat-  
ion of mass syndicalist movements will have a more revolutionary  
consciousness than the rest, and have a duty to act in such a way,  
(through their own direct action,) as to continually expose the  
nature of the state and class society. (Propaganda by deed.)

Moreover the concept of the political myth; an inherently desirable  
end & means to an end which can be advocated in simple terms,  
when the advocates know full well that the movement to attain the  
ends or means will be such as to make the end/means unnecessary,  
since they will make possible its attainment by other less demand-  
ing efforts; again partakes of some of the characteristics of  
vanguardism while avoiding its central manipulative nature. The  
worker is told that a social general strike would be the ideal  
way to bring down capitalism - true - he is told that the best  
possible way to prepare for it here and now is to build libertarian  
& direct actionist rank & file industrial organizations - true -  
if he decides to consider the case for these, he will immediately  
see for himself (though he told if necessary) that if he had such  
mass healthy organizations he would not need to resort to the  
general strike to attain the ends of socialism.

It is a dialectic that underlines the essential distinction between  
centrism and spontaneous workers' self-activity. The libertarian  
sees the revolutionary propagandist as acting as a catalyst;  
necessary to the compounding of disparate elements into the new  
revolutionary synthesis, but not the decisive factor therein.

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The SPGB calls syndicalism reformism by blows; (reformism to them  
- unlike the vanguardists - means the advancement of any specific  
demand, short of total social transition, for which they insist  
there can be no blueprint.) It would be at least accurate to  
accept the description of "making transitional demands by blows",  
as a description of the syndicalist aim; and accepting that until  
a revolutionary situation arrives, syndicates must make reformist  
demands by blows. (By the same token, and with the same qualif-  
ications anarchist influence in libertarian psychology, free schools  
etcetera can be called transitionalist reformism by construction.)

Remembering that Marx died before the invention of the conveyor belt,  
(or at least before its widespread use, since it is claimed that

it existed in Birmingham before the days of Taylorism,) and before that of wireless or the motor car; remembering that his first premise was that differing stages of technological development made inevitable differing economic infrastructures, reflected by differing socio-political superstructures; which in turn must be opposed by radical demands which in turn differed from those of the preceding social stage; we can claim to be more orthodox marxist than the "Marxists" in rejecting the demands Marx made in his lifetime as an inadequate basis for a socialist platform today.

The changes wrought by the Russian & Chinese revolutions and the two World Wars in the political superstructure of the world are at least as far reaching as those introduced by the French Revolution & the Napoleonic Wars and the rush for colonies in the 19th.

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It is not for nothing therefore that the majority of issues which have sparked major leftist movements since the Second World War have been - in the West - non bread & butter issues. (In the East the fundamental issues have been freedom from despotism, which was of course as much a major issue in Marx's time as sheer matters of economic survival, and were treated by Marx as being of major significance; while the former colonial world has been moved by issues of national independence, issues which Marx saw as important in Ireland, Poland & the Balkans.)

Many issues - notably alienation - which Marx mentioned in considerable detail, - so much so that modern marxists such as Dunayevskaya & Thomsen see them as central to Marxism, (earning Hobsbawm's rebuke that the central core of Marxism is not opposition to alienation but to economic exploitation,) - were nevertheless seen by Marx as secondary issues and have become primary since his day. War is obviously a case in point, Marx saw it as endemic in capitalism, and it was undoubtedly an additional reason for wanting to abolish capitalism; but the days of the permanent arms economy, of prestige weaponry, or of weapons capable of destroying the world were far in the future and the issue was far from central.

Marx undoubtedly wrote about the way the bourgeois relationships, reduced bourgeois women into possessions and proletarian women into commodities for the bourgeois's pleasure. Nevertheless it would have struck him as absurd that a significant blow against capitalism could be struck by attacking accepted sexual mores. Finally of course his view of the state. It should be noted that when he called it the executive committee of the ruling class, he used the term literally as an "implementation committee" which would put into effect policies decided by others. It is the measure of the growth of managerial importance since his day that one no longer thinks of a mere executive committee; and as the state has become central to the nature of modern capitalism so has the managerial-executive stratum.

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We therefore find new areas of resistance to capitalism; issues which were formerly only raised by a few middle class protestors



have a mass appeal, and issues which were central to the mass movements of the past are kept alive only by a few middle class theorists. Resistance normally springs up spontaneously where actual circumstances bely the humane aspects of the prevailing ideology, - that is the ideology (or "anti-ideology" as ruling classes in the older settled states decry ideology & pretend to have none) that the ruling elite imposes through the orthodox media, educational system, etc. (The Western "democratic mixed economy & rule of law" is obviously belied by racialism, by the overt remains of imperialism, by too overt militarism, by Maggie Thatcher's larder, by £26,000 cruises & too crude attempts to legislate against wage increases without similar action against profits.)

The movements of protest so created are in large measure disjointed. They are not of course divorced from bread & butter issues, one has obvious cases, such as the homeless-squatters, homeless half-way-house hostel residents, unemployment & redundancies or factory closings. One has residual classical bread & butter issues at work, though conditions are as much an issue in most factories now as wages, and where wages become significant is precisely where the preservation of the liberty of the worker to strike or to join trade unions is at issue.

Besides these fragmented issues, one gets overall campaigns, such as for instance CND, where large numbers support demands which cannot be met within the context of class society. (It is inconceivable that any major national power would abandon its greatest weapon of coercion; and if it were possible the change could only be maintained if the state's power to remake the bomb was abolished.)

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This has meant a change in the nature of reformism. One has the Left of the traditional reformist party engaged in one or other liberal campaign or in militant trade union activity, in tenants' associations and so forth. Their activities are fragmented, but they do not see this as the case as they see their actions & links in the Labour Party as uniting their other activities; even though they would agree that the Labour Party is not socialist. The same is true for the most part of the rank & file of the Communist Party & the radicals amongst the Young Liberals; and with minor qualifications it is also true of the Trotskyists and other left Leninists, and the communitarians, alternative society, counter-culture factions.

It is a tradition that has sometimes flirted with anarchism, and frequently so been labelled by the orthodox; but is more anarchic than anarchist. It can only find an unity (other than the spurious offered it by those who work within the Labour Party and call the rest to join them) on a decentralist, federalist, anti-state, internally libertarian basis. Linking itself to industrial struggle and appreciating that fundamental change can only be attained by action at the point of production without - in so orienting itself to industry - losing its other concerns. Such an unity needs an upsurge passing beyond the existing reformist limits &

creating its own new synthesis. It will embrace classical syndicalism without apeing it.

Just as in the past the classical syndicalist movement could only arise with the catalyst of revolutionary anarchists deepening the consciousness of socialist industrial militants, putting fire back into the theories of Broussists, Proudhonians and other ex-anarchists; so I believe the new synthesis will need an anarcho-syndicalist catalyst.

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Like the Libertarian, the Vanguardist (& the true Centrist) will be working for an united movement, to tie the fragmented parts into one body. The difference lies with the nature of power in such movements, reflecting the differing aims, the vanguardist centralised and heirarchical, the libertarian decentralised and egalitarian.

The touchstone in the first instance is whether a campaign which is launched is subordinated to the interests of the founding group. The pattern is well illustrated by a recent division of opinion within IS (the authentic vanguardist body in Britain) over rank & file industrial organization. One faction wanted to concentrate on building "rank & file" committees tied to IS, as IS fronts. The other said no one should leave the formation of such organisations to the workers themselves and concentrate on putting the IS case to them. The second at first sight sounds libertarian, it wasn't, it was traditional centrism "tail-ending" the masses; - though a more rigidly bolshevist group would have pursued a similar line, with the addition of setting up IS-dominated caucuses within the spontaneously created rank & file groupings.

A libertarian "militant minority" on the other hand would take the initiative in pushing for the creation of rank & file movements, but would not try to control it once created, (though it too might well create a factional caucus within the grouping created,) & would accept the fact that movements it creates would pass out of its sphere of influence into the orbit of one or other of the state socialist groups. It would draw comfort from the fact that while there is healthy rank & file democracy within a workers' group, that democracy will always militate against the domination of an heirarchical and bureaucratic party; so that though it may accept the ideology of the party (as the reformist organization accepts that of the bourgeoisie) its immediate interests will - while it remains democratic and militant - make for a perpetual clash of interests.

It is out of just such clashes (whether among the followers of the reformists, or of the elitists) that the springs of the new revolutionary upsurge will come.

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