

Death of a Communist

One of the many personal and political tragedies from the experience of the last revolutionary wave is the way in which the rise and fall of the consciousness of the proletariat and their capacity to destroy bourgeois society and to replace it with socialism was mirrored by the rise and fall of political clarity as represented by some of the individual militants who took part. In the same way that, through the experience of the working class itself, there developed a greater and deeper understanding of the period, of what had to be done to destroy the rule of capital, of how and what forms of organisation were required to succeed in this, the first stage of the socialist transformation, so too these understandings, these theoretical and practical gains were progressively lost as the revolutionary wave faltered and was defeated, obscured beneath a resurgence of bourgeois ideology whether of liberal or Stalinist hue. Even more clearly we can see redundant political positions which the new era threw onto the scrapheap of history reappear with the downturn, used to justify the retreat, and subsequently become the ideological underpinnings of the betrayal of the proletariat.

These political positions, denoting at one extreme the highpoints of the revolutionary experience and at the other the resurgence of counter revolution, are best identified in the political stances of individual revolutionary organisations - indeed individual revolutionary militants in some cases. As an example Trotsky is the most obvious, but perhaps Bukharin is the best. Here was a revolutionary who, as the world lurched towards the abyss, developed an astonishingly clear understanding of the nature of state capitalism and of the fact that the war had propelled capitalism into its decadent phase - and what that implied for the working class and humanity. These are theoretical gains which remain central to the understanding of revolutionaries today. Through the developing revolutionary experience he stood at the left of the communist movement, bitterly criticising any concession to bourgeois ideology, exposing the reactionary nature, in the new period, of such as nationalism and arguing for the development of organisational forms which allowed the consciousness of the class to develop, and for the extension of the revolution as far as possible at all hazard.

And yet, with the defeat of the revolution and the slow death of state capitalism in Russia, this Bukharin, one of the clearest of militants, became the arch proponent of the reintroduction of capitalist forms and capitalist relations. Standing at the very right of the new bourgeoisie in Russia he was a key figure in the destruction of the proletariat as a conscious class, a key figure in sending thousands of workers and revolutionaries to the living death of the concentration camps and one of the shrillest in his denunciation of those revolutionaries still free, demanding their execution whenever their arrest gave him an opportunity.

The paradox we have to confront then, is how someone so clear could fall so low. Any historical assessment of Bukharin has to take into account both high and low, good and bad, how it was the

period and his experience of it which changed Bukharin and how and to what extent the seeds of degeneration already existed in his theoretical armoury, upon which this defeat could act to transform such a vital individual in the development of clarity into a murderous capitalist executioner.

At one level it can be argued that Bukharin merely took the fact of the defeat of the revolutionary wave to its logical conclusion in the same clear logical way in which he had discerned the rise of the proletarian opportunity. This, unrealised by him however, necessitated moving out of the proletarian camp into that of the bourgeoisie. In that sense we can say that Bukharin had an excuse. This does not of course excuse him but we can see here the enormous weight of the counterrevolution on even the clearest of revolutionary militants. At another level we can say that some of the detritus brought into the new period from social democracy was able to come to the surface precisely because of the downturn in the revolutionary wave, just as the progressive elements of theory came to surface as the class moved forward. In this sense we can see how the reality we operate in as militants encourages the quality of the theoretical analyses we make.

The Death of MC

But what is true for such a giant of the proletarian experience as Bukharin is also true for lesser mortals.

We have recently been made aware of the death of MC, one of the founders of and leading light of the ICC. Of his immense contribution to the development of a revolutionary milieu in the early seventies after all organic links with the last revolutionary wave had been cut, and after fifty years of counterrevolution, there can be no doubt. In Britain, for instance, the end of the sixties saw a milieu tentatively groping towards a communist understanding, not only of the present, but also of the history of the proletarian movement. Predominantly formed from the libertarian movement of the early and mid Sixties, there was little appreciation of any historical perspective to the essentially moralistic positions we defended. The long night of counterrevolution had extinguished any contact with the proletariat's revolutionary past and our understanding of proletarian politics was essentially an selection of rights and wrongs, good and evil, from our own direct political experience, without any understanding of how these might fit together coherently or where they had come from in the history of our class. Into this confusion the clarity of Revolution Internationale came like a thunderbolt. The dynamic of the last revolutionary wave and, most crucially, the concept of decadence, immediately allowed many disparate conceptions to fall into place to form a coherence which was to be at the root of all the regroupments which took place in the Seventies.

Ascendance and Decadence

The most crucial concept was to understand that, like any other mode of production, capitalism had

an ascendant and a decadent phase. An understanding of what this means, has been, and still is, crucial to the proletarian movement's understanding of capitalism and its revolutionary transformation. But this was, and is, not some vague, grandiose theoretical construct. On the contrary it is in the explanation of real events and social processes that the notion of decadence stands or falls. With the emergence of imperialism, national capitals, having extended the capitalist system throughout the world, were forced to compete with each other militarily and economically for mastery of the globe. Unable to expand further except on the basis of destroying competing capitalisms, the system had entered its phase of historic crisis, its decadent phase. The interests of the bourgeoisie forced them to use the resources at their command in unproductive competition and war rather than in further extension of the system. The capitalist mode of production therefore had reached the point where it contradicted its own dynamic, where it could expand further only by periodically destroying part of itself. The history of the capitalist system this century therefore, has been the struggle to combat, escape from its inherent contradictions - contradictions which have led to massive destructions of capital, and of humanity, in World War One, World War Two etc., etc.

Social Democracy

In the Sixties and early Seventies we had cut our political teeth on the realisation that Social Democracy, the Labour party etc., was an agent of bourgeois rule as it attacked the working class. In or out of power it merely competed with the Tories for the defence of the capitalist economy. Similarly, our experience on the picket lines had demonstrated once and for all the anti-working class activity of the Unions, selling out workers whenever they got the chance - at best traitors to their class, at worst, in Russia for instance, a part of the ruling echelons of the bourgeoisie itself. The belief that they and Social Democracy were enemies of the working class, divorced from any historical understanding of whether they had always been so, meant that we failed to have any historical dimension to our understanding of these concrete conceptualisations.

We saw the world divided into competing capitalist states. One of these, Stalinist Russia, despite the protestations of such as the Trotskyists etc., was clearly seen as a capitalist state with a capitalist ruling class. Without any historical perspective we were led inexorably to the conclusion that Stalinism was a direct consequence of Leninist substitutionism and that there could not have been a proletarian revolution in Russia in 1917 since what had occurred had been led by a bourgeois organisation. We were inextricably left with, therefore, no coherent historical point of reference for the history of our class this century. The concept of decadence, with its ability to show that with the onset of World War One and the inability of capitalism to survive thereafter except by periodic destruction, gave us the understanding of how decadent capitalism and its internal logic had transformed hitherto proletarian institutions into organs of capitalism. Without that we could envisage no class content in Social Democracy, the unions or the revolutionary experience in Russia. We were thus left with no historic examples of our own class in action on its own class terrain this century, except for episodic experiences of industrial strikes etc.

Proletarian Revolution

R1 laboured long and hard to bring about the key understanding that what had occurred in 1917-21 or so had been a proletarian revolutionary wave that had threatened to engulf bourgeois Europe and within which the events in Russia had been a specific example, a wave predicated upon the collapse of the capitalist economy into its period of decay consequent upon reaching its apogee at the turn of the century, a transformation epitomised by the descent of capital into the bloodbath of World War One. The proletariat had attempted to destroy this rotting carcass in Russia, Hungary and Germany in a wave which was initially successful in Russia, but which, with the failure to destroy capital elsewhere, was doomed to defeat.

The Bolsheviks

This was of crucial significance for a comprehension that the Bolsheviks, for all that they had trailed behind them from Nineteenth century Social Democracy, had been a proletarian organisation, an expression of proletarian consciousness which had, with the defeat of the proletariat, and just like Social Democracy and the unions earlier, been transformed into agents of capital. This had taken place as a historic process rather than a once and for all time essential characteristic. This led directly to a clearer understanding of the role of revolutionary fractions both then and now, taking into account both negative and positive lessons from what was now clearly seen as the flawed, but highest point of proletarian revolutionary expression. In attacking the leftists for their support of the unions, of social democracy and, however critically, of Stalinist Russia, we had zeroed in on substitutionism as an explanation of why they were enemies of the proletariat. Only with the realisation that this had been a specific error carried over from social democracy, an error actually identified by elements of the proletarian movement at the time like the KAPD, and not the source of any essentially bourgeois nature; only with the realisation that proletarian organs can and do become transformed into bourgeois ones, did a crucial barrier to our understanding of the role and history our class and its fractions fall away.

Moreover this real historical experience of our class illuminated yet further areas of theory. Decadence explained why national liberation struggles, which had in certain circumstances, been progressive in the period of ascendance, had degenerated into becoming the lackeys and assassins of this or that bloc this century, unable to escape from the thralldom of one or other of the Imperialist blocs.

Regroupment

MC and his contribution to the clarity of Revolution Internationale and their intervention in that milieu gave us this critical dimension which allowed vital regroupments to take place. The high point of this process was the creation and development until the late seventies of the International Communist Current. Even those who did not regroup within the ICC, the elements for example which formed the CWO, then based on the experience of the German left, were what they were as a direct result of taking up a stance vis a vis the ICC and the intervention of R1. The fundamentals of the proletarian political platform were agreed by all, only parts of the assessment of our history were in dispute.

If the appearance of the new proletarian milieu in the Seventies was to a large extent due to the developing clarity of RI, then, at their own admission, much of that clarity came from MC and his experience within the Italian Left before World War Two. For this the revolutionary milieu had, and has, much to thank him for. But we must remember that MC was in no way a direct organic link with the revolutionary wave of 1917. Certainly he was a direct link with the Italian Left and tragically brought into the new period and milieu not merely the gains but the catastrophes on that period at the end of the Thirties. Clarity comes from the self activity of the class and the reflection of revolutionaries on that activity. By the Thirties the working class was defeated and while the Italian Left developed some understanding of that period and of how to survive it it would have been impossible for them not to have been scarred both theoretically and organisationally by having survived such a period. MC, naturally, as a militant of the Italian Left, exhibited all their degenerations too, both theoretically and organisationally.

Organisation

In an organisational sense he did represent an organic link with the past but it was to a Stalinised past and to a Stalinised practice of the Thirties and Forties. At a formal level he was instrumental in forming the ICC into a parody of a huge bureaucratic organisation with a plethora of Bureaus, Commissions etc., more suited to an organisation with hundreds if not thousands of members, but which were totally inappropriate for national sections of the ICC whose numbers lay in the low tens at most. Members would find themselves on two or three Commissions at once and this undoubtedly contributed to the burn-out of a whole generation of revolutionary militants in the ICC. It was a clear case of wishful thinking; the assumption that these elaborate structures were necessary before the huge influx of members appeared in the period prior to the massive rise in class struggle and class consciousness which would presage a revolutionary outbreak. A failure to understand the present period and the isolation of revolutionaries from the proletariat meant of course that these structures were in most cases complete frauds. In real life these structures were hollow shells; the reality of the ICC was completely different. What really existed was a sect-like organisation built up of a submissive membership dominated by and controlled by a 'Holy Family' clustered round MC, the Guru of the sect. The membership was able to cope with this, indeed trivialised its relevance, partly because there was an anticipation that the revolutionary situation was rapidly developing and so either the formal structure would then become more appropriate and eliminate these personal excrescences and partly because that kind of sect is a self fulfilling prophecy in the sense that it attracts precisely the kind of membership which need such paternalistic structures and will support them, eliminating any thinking response to the dictates of the Holy Family and the Guru in exchange for a reason for existing, an escape from the nothingness of their lives.

The Decline of the ICC

Of course all members of the ICC, as it expanded during the Seventies, weren't unthinking drones. But as the reality of capitalist survival became clearer and clearer and the collapse of the system more remote, any voice critical of the monolithic sectarian aspects of the organisation were

virulently attacked by the Holy Family in a conscious attempt to drive them out of the ICC, if possible out of political life altogether; to ensure that what was left was the Guru, his Holy Family and a collection of accepting, adoring acolytes who would do as they were told. The success of that effort is clearly seen today in the debris that is the ICC in 1991 at the point of the Guru's death. MC played a crucial role in this destruction of an organisation which, at its highpoint, represented the greatest gain of the revolutionary movement since the last revolutionary wave. Its transformation into a whining degenerating corpse must, to a very large extent, be laid specifically at his door, and at the door of the poodles he surrounded himself with, poodles who were happy to act as the GPU of the organisation, sniffing out dissent and eliminating all opposition. Tragically they have been all too successful. The world is littered with good militants driven not merely out of the ICC, but out of political life altogether. These Chekists have much to answer for. Those who survived this assault and have determined not merely to remain revolutionaries, but to go beyond the ICC and its Stalinised behaviour are, of course, reserved for special treatment, insulted at every turn.

Such has been the negative side of the organisational legacy of MC who turned into a parody of a Stalinist gangster, presiding over an ICC which was, in the words of one ex-founder member:

" the complementary, symbiotic product of an atomised and dispersed membership. A membership which has been trained to accept the rules of the game in a sectarian structure . . . a membership that needs a set of bureaucrats to organise them and chastise them; a membership that feels thankful when others get the full works from the enraged and vindictive bureaucrats! A membership that wants at all costs to belong because 'out there' there's 'nothing but the void' . . . A membership whose real life is a permanent altered state of alienation and anxiety. A membership made indifferent to the inner, and moral, meaning of proletarian socialism."

Theory

But it was not only at the organisational level that MC did enormous damage to the post '68 revolutionary movement. Theoretically too he could not help but bring theoretical confusions from the Thirties and Forties into the movement. Theoretical clarity, it cannot be too often stressed, comes from the real experience of the proletariat. It is no accident that the correct line of march is almost always demonstrated by the class taking it rather than by revolutionaries showing it to a class which meekly follows. This latter misconception lies at the very heart of the substitutionist myth. Certainly a theoretical assessment often comes only with the mature reflection by revolutionaries on the activity of the class but it goes without saying that theoretical innovations and 'gains' from periods like the Thirties and Forties, from the depths of defeat, from the very nadir of the period of counterrevolution, are far less likely to be

correct than reflections on revolutionary events taking place then and there or in the recent past. When we look at the experience of the Italian Left, isolated from the proletariat, cut off from the massacred revolutionary fractions of Russia and Germany, battered by exile etc. we can understand the confusions that abounded. But when these confusions are introduced into the revolutionary movement today and are uncritically taken on board they become dangerous parasites which hamper the development of clarity. MC dragged a number of these with him into the movement in the Seventies.

Machivellianism

The notion that the capitalist state was so powerful that it could mystify the proletariat at will in the political sphere via political parties which were really state constructed fakes, organising which would take power and which would consciously stay in opposition with, when required, fractions of the bourgeoisie voluntarily choosing suicide on occasion as part of some gigantic integrated bourgeois plan; this was a clear leftover from the horrendous experience of forty years of defeat when the defeated proletariat looked impotent before the power of the victorious bourgeoisie.

The Period of Transition

So too with the State in the Period of Transition. This is probably the best example of a theoretical stance derived from the very nadir of the period of counterrevolution. When we look at the Italian Left and see that it was only very late on that they even accepted that Russia was capitalist at all, something the KAPD recognised during the revolutionary wave itself, and that most of what remains of it today still have substitutionist positions not only on the role of the Party but on its infallibility, it comes as no surprise to us that they failed utterly to comprehend the role of the Bolsheviks in the transformation of proletarian Russia into a capitalist state. The fact that the Bolsheviks, in defeat, were transformed into the new bourgeoisie could not in the slightest way be blamed on their misconceptions about the relationship between party and class. Thus a complex theoretical edifice about the need to separate the proletariat, (and ipso facto the party of the proletariat) from the "proletarian" state, and about the "essentially reactionary nature" of all states, was constructed. This may have got round this problem for the Italian Left, but it did so at the expense of clarity. The failure of the ICC to jettison such a theory, absolutely stinking of the depths of defeat, has produced an incalculably damaging effect - and a potentially counter-revolutionary one in the event of a proletarian revolution. The notion that the problems of the proletarian state cannot be understood as being proletarian problems but must be identified as problems outwith the working class, problems of an alien entity, is a deeply mystifying one and its importance, if only as a dangerous obstacle, must be laid principally at MC's door and at the door of those who so uncritically accepted everything he said, good and dross, as gospel.

Decomposition

The most recent example of this paramountcy of MC's though is the astonishing way in which the ICC, over night, and without seemingly any internal opposition, has adopted the notion that Capitalism has entered its final phase, the phase of decomposition. This has prompted the ideologues of the ICC into a veritable frenzy of history rewriting and we shall no doubt see the fruits of this in the months to come. Recent statements in the press of the ICC show that this was MC's latest contribution to the ideology of the ICC.

Assessment

In assessing a militant we do not simply tot up the good and bad, the positive and the negative, and come out with a score. Nor do we, as the bourgeois do, try to reach a balanced picture encompassing good and bad. For the revolutionary movement what is important is what the effects today and tomorrow are of his militant and theoretical contribution. These have still to be tested on the case of MC and in very large part it will be the direction, post Guru, that the ICC takes, that will provide us with the true balance sheet of his contribution.

Last Chance for the ICC?

For his death provides the ICC with a unique opportunity, probably their last opportunity, to take stock of where they are and what they are - an opportunity to either descend deeper into the pit they have dug for themselves or to stop in their tracks and think again.

The most likely course is that in the months and years to follow we will see a most unholy struggle within the ICC's bereaved Holy Family, a bare knuckles fight for the mantle of MC, just as in any other religious sect once its Guru has died. Though the struggle is unlikely to destroy the ICC it will certainly jettison more militants into the void and leave the ICC even more isolated and politically and morally bankrupt than it already is.

But another option is available - for the ICC to critically reappraise their past in the light of the reality of their present. To clear away the cobwebs that their Guru inspired collective trauma has held them in and to reassess - everything. To put their money where their mouth is, to act openly both internally towards their own membership and externally towards the rest of the proletarian milieu. The coming to terms with a reality that has long since escaped them and a conscious effort to abandon the sectarian practices MC bequeathed them.

The choice is theirs: in all honesty the prognosis for the patient is not good but this is the only thing that will save them from their continued slide into confusion.

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