

DISCUSSION
BULLETIN

JOHNSONISM: A POLITICAL APPRAISAL

APRIL, 1956

2467

7 4 6 8

JOHNSONISM: A POLITICAL APPRAISAL

The first thing to determine is why it is necessary to make a political appraisal of Johnsonism. If Johnson had abandoned and renounced Marxism openly, as he has in practice, then we could all forget him. But he continues the pretence and dabbles about in European Marxist circles. This constitutes a real danger to the movement internationally. It is up to the American movement to expose this adventurism.

There is no one in the organization who does not bare the scars of Johnson's totalitarian hold over the group. Each will tell his own story in his own way. But just as it is necessary to expose Johnsonism, so it is necessary to come to grips with the duality in the organization itself which made possible such overlordship.

The duality and ultimate betrayal by Johnson can be traced in three crucial and inter-related questions: 1) War; 2) The Transformation of the Marxist Method into its Opposite -- the Totalitarian Method; 3) Organizational Irresponsibility. In these three points, the American experience with Johnson can be summed up, both as a guide and as a warning.

I. WAR & JOHNSONISM

War has its own dialectic. At the moment when war clouds gathered over Formosa, J. as the titular head of the state capitalist tendency forced a split and abandoned the co-founder of the tendency to the mercy of the class enemy. Although he has ever been organically disloyal to all his colleagues, there was nothing personal in this. This is clear from the fact that at the very same time he suddenly re-introduced pacifist slogans long since rejected by Lenin and the entire movement since World War I: "While the struggle for peace," he wrote in January 1955, "at any other time in history is utopian and reactionary, now is the one time we can really stop it (the war)." He must answer to the movement: what, in the total crisis of today transforms the reactionary slogans of imperialism into revolutionary slogans against state capitalism?

He must answer to the movement why he introduces these slogans now? If the "Struggle for Peace" could do nothing but sow illusions among workers during World War I, how does the advent of totalitarianism and the H-bomb make them more acceptable today?

When the struggle against Johnsonism first broke out, the REB wrote:

"War has been the test question for any workers organization. It has meant their collapse when they did not remain in uncompromising opposition against the society which brought on the war and did not oppose to it the new society.

"In this country it was clearly seen that the old organizations collapsed for one reason and one only: They no longer looked to the American workers to establish the new society in their lifetime. We made that basic to our own separate existence in the 'Letter to Harrison'."

Although this was made basic to us in the afore-mentioned "Letter to Harrison," that document was never published and it was never published at J.'s insistence.

His present position makes it possible to see why he prevented this letter from ever being published. Fundamentally, it was an anti-war statement. It analyzed the old Trotskyist organizations and their preparation for capitulation in the event of war.

It contained an exposition of Shachtman's position, who, despite all pretensions of calling for a Third Camp of socialists independent of the cold war antagonisms of Russia and the U.S., nevertheless wrote:

"To maintain political opposition to war is correct. To continue to prosecute the class struggle is correct. But to prosecute the class struggle in such a way that it would clearly imperil the military position of the government, even to the point where it may be defeated by the enemy and lose the war' -- that, in the conditions of the Third World War, would be disastrous to the working class and to socialism."
(New International, July-Aug, 1951, p.205)

Clearly, the basis of Shachtman's capitulation to the American pole of state capitalism has been laid.

The appearance of "revolutionary" may still cling to the Cannonite wing of Trotskyism because they oppose the American pole of state capitalism. But they chose the opposite pole, Russia. Thus, their statement, at about the same time:

"The World Congress of the Fourth International greets the workers, peasants and soldiers of the USSR and of the 'Peoples' Democracies.' It assures them of complete and unconditional support by the whole world-wide revolutionary movement in the coming war against the restorationist efforts of the international bourgeoisie. Defense of collectivized property, planned economy and of the workers states, even though deformed and degenerated, is an imperious duty of the world proletariat."

The Trotskyists are quite ready to lead the workers to war, each in a holy crusade that scarcely hides their support of one or the other pole of state capitalism. Whether they will be allowed to lead is another question, but they are ready to lead. So is Johnson. The only thing that is new as compared to World War I, is that each has laid the premise for capitulation before actual war.

Where, in September 1953, J. exposed the Trotskyist premises for capitulation to either pole of state capitalism, by January 1955, he laid the basis for his own capitulation by stating categorically that now is the time to "Struggle for peace."

J. is organically disloyal even to the political positions he has worked out. Fourteen years' stay in America and pronouncements about the state capitalist position and the revolutionary nature of the American working class, meant nothing to him when he was at the dock.

With a flip of the pen he presented himself only as a literary man and not at all as a revolutionary leader. Chapter 7 of MRC is as good a summation of his adventurism as any and exposes his underhanded abandonment of the class struggle for "original" characters and of Marxism for literary criticism.

If any doubted this then (1953) -- as we did -- no doubt can remain now, when from his safe refuge in England he still remains "the underground man" who directs the break-up of the American group in the most unprincipled split yet seen, during which he had his henchmen all talking about "war as a way of life." They made very clear what they meant by "war as a way of life" by their irresponsible insistence that the Marxist anti-war position is not what distinguishes revolutionary Marxists since the Jehova's Witnesses are also against war.

II. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MARXIST METHOD INTO ITS OPPOSITE --
THE TOTALITARIAN METHOD

So anxious were we -- and rightly to be done with Trotskyism -- that, in 1951, J. was allowed to get away with his basis of the break -- a personal situation in which he found himself.

Regardless of that duality, once out of the Trotskyist movement in 1951, we correctly analyzed their capitulation to war and summarized our over-all conceptions in what was known as the "Letter to Harrison." No sooner was this completed, than J. decided that it was only for "our own internal education."

The basis for this type of one-man decision was laid at our very founding convention, where everything was set up on such a tight, foolish security basis that everyone was afraid to ask any questions.

Without any previous presentation of fundamental positions with co-leaders, far less with ranks, J. presented his thesis -- for the first time on the convention floor itself -- that this is only a period of "examining ourselves" and sometime in the undefined future we would face the public and actually return to "traditional Marxist politics." After this, he was hurried out "on leave" for the remainder of his stay in America.

As life proved, we were to return to Marxism only after our break with Johnsonism.

Throughout, there was the tendency suddenly to simplify the analysis of state capitalism to mean nothing more than inward contemplation of ourselves with a total disregard of objective developments. In the same way, the concept of three layers was transformed into fighting abstractly against "all" bureaucracy. Yet this tendency was born in the struggle against the concept of bureaucratic collectivism with the fundamental insistence that that was a cover-all for finding "new societies" and losing all concept of class.

While we were together, what hid the beginnings of the totalitarian method? That is the question which we must face objectively.

It is a two-fold problem: 1) historical; and 2) concrete.

1) Historically

There is an objective contradiction in Marxist organizations. Lenin showed its depth in 1922, when he said, at one and the same time:

"We must, without fail, in order not to deceive ourselves and others, define the term 'worker' in such a way as to include only those who could have acquired a proletarian mentality from their very position in life. This is not possible without having worked in a factory for many years, not for ulterior motives, but because of general conditions of economics and social life."

And --

"If we do not close our eyes to reality, we must admit, that at the present time the proletarian policy of the Party is not determined by the character of its membership, but by the enormous undivided prestige enjoyed by the thin stratum which may be called the old guard of the Party. Only a very slight internal struggle within this stratum would be sufficient, if not to destroy this prestige, then at all events to weaken it to such an extent that it would lose the power to determine policy."

(Lenin, Selected Works, Vol.9, p.322)

He warned of the dangers and transformations within the party once it was in power, just as he warned of the dangers of the state going to state capitalism. But it must not be forgotten that the prestige of "the thin stratum," of which Lenin spoke, was based on a great historical movement that transformed the world. Taken out of this context and made into an abstraction, the relationship of leaders to ranks has just enough of a grain of truth to cover up a complete lie. This was already apparent in the Trotskyist organizations.

2) Concretely

a) We inherited the old rubbish of the relationship of leaders to ranks from the old organizations. Thus, in 1941, one established leader, J., elaborated the theory of state capitalism. Independently of him, however, and at the same time, one rank-and-filer, F., had presented the same thesis which she followed up, two years later, with the only serious study yet made, from original Russian sources. Yet so ingrained was the old tradition of leader to ranks, that she never questioned his posing as the "founder" of the state capitalist tendency.

The inevitable result was that he lived by that artificial and bureaucratic division. We did too. When, in 1947, the two names were suddenly linked, it appeared as a gratuitous and generous gesture on the part of J. The fact is, not until 13 years later -- in September 1954, after J. had already left these shores -- did the organization officially learn of F.'s role. J. himself referred to "co-founder" only during the actual break for purely show purposes.

b) With a historic sweep, J. transformed personal concerns into political matters (all his marriages and divorces became a matter of general concern) while the political was degraded to personal.

Thus, in 1953, when we were preparing to face the public with a printed paper, "Correspondence," and thereby to be checked by the public, the national chairman made an objective analysis of Stalin's death. Kaufman rejected any attempt at analysis and proposed that instead of analyzing Stalin's death we show a cartoon of a factory line where one girl -- indifferent to the loudspeakers blaring forth the news of Stalin's death -- asks the girl next to her for a recipe of how to make hamburgers.

J. began by saying that a serious analysis was our proper concern and he rejected Kaufman's counter-proposal. At the same time he transformed this political question into a widespread personal attack against the chairman for having allegedly used too harsh a tone in rejecting the counter-proposal. The inevitable result was that 14 years of hard work on state capitalism and workers revolt went down the drain.

c) J., quoting Lenin, put forward the theory of the role of the "third layer" -- that is, the proletarian element -- in the organization. At the same time he prostituted the theory by designating college girls, or anyone whom he wished, as "third layer elements."

III. JOHNSON'S ORGANIZATIONAL IRRESPONSIBILITY

Finally, there is the record of J.'s organizational irresponsibility.

1) From the time of the break with the SWP until his departure for England, August 1951 to July 1953, J. rested and did not actively participate in the building of the independent organization. The bulk of the work, the financing of his schemes, all were in the hands of the chairman who also bore the brunt of his attacks. Because his "illness" was made into politics, no one questioned this either. J. never chose to accept any formal "post" during the 14 years in which he held undisputed top leadership in the organization.

2) It is true that only with the gift of hindsight is it possible to make the following conclusions. But that is no reason why any other movement must repeat our experiences:

a) That he practiced totalitarian methods as witnessed by his conduct within the organization over 14 years;

b) That he was at no time interested in building a serious working class organization that would guide its own destiny. He was, on the contrary, interested only in assembling around himself as the center, a group of lieutenants whose money and energy could be used to carry out his edicts.

3) The differences which reached the final peak in the break a little more than a year ago, began to show openly between 1950 and 1953. In 1950,

under the impact of the miners' strike, sparked by the first introduction of automation in mass production industry (the continuous miner in coal), the chairman returned actively to a fundamental study of Marxism. This was to express the most profound ideas of our epoch in such a way that the average worker could find therein the new impulses which can come from nowhere but the struggles, thinking and aspirations of the working class -- especially of the American workers.

J., the titular founder of the state capitalist tendency, however, had other ideas. He never bothered to inform anyone what these were. He failed to grasp the new stage of production and the new stage of workers revolt because, at that very time, he became altogether preoccupied with probing the "social personality" of "original characters" and the "uniqueness" of the great literary writer and the greater literary critic. The new humanism of the great East German Revolt played a secondary role to the humanism of "the great writer."

It is clear now, that the longer the association with J. continued, the deeper grew the divergences, until these divergences forced his totalitarian transformation to burst forth as the completion of his development and the completion of the break from his totalitarian methods.

4) J.'s disregard and disrespect of the organization, stemmed from his own concept that somehow, overnight, in some mystical manner, he would be able to rally hundreds if not thousands of people around projects which were devoted to a single point of interest. He would then, at some future time, unite the various groups which supported these projects, into a single united organization around his total conceptions. Much was written against "small mass partyism" elsewhere, but no one questioned this "small mass party" conception of getting to a mass following. The most fantastic of all these schemes was his stubborn and unyielding proposal that, at the same time as we launch our public existence with a printed paper, the few of us also pour all our energies into publishing and circulating no fewer than 50,000 copies of a woman's pamphlet which, on its own momentum, sold less than 2,000 copies.

5) His main concern, from the start of our independent existence, was not the building of the new organization, but the writing of MRC, the book which he thought would establish him in his new environment. He told the organization here, time and time again, that this would be his "parting blow at the class enemy"; that it would help establish the tendency as an all-embracing group that had vision and could embrace the entire past of the country of its origin and could go beyond so-called narrow class aims. He professed that the book would be thoroughly readable and understood by every worker.

Yet, as it emerged, rather than the book being an acknowledgement of the political ideas he professed to hold, it was his bid for personal recognition as an "American Authority" and as a literary critic in his anticipated new role abroad.

The organization strained itself physically and poured, what for us were, enormous sums of money into the publication of the book which was no more than a personal testament and bid for recognition by the author. The actual result was that 20,000 copies were published. Some 8,000 were distributed free to Senators, Congressmen, Governors, Mayors, Judges, plus

intellectuals, professors and scientists of prestige, etc. Postage alone, on this big give-away, cost the organization over \$1000. Actual sales of the book amounted to less than 2,000 copies. Whenever a person would send in money for one copy he got eight or ten copies from the author, who handled all these matters personally and pocketed all cash receipts. The response from workers, to whom the book was presumably addressed, was nil. The financial loss to the organization was tremendous. The political and social gains were non-existent.

6) He destroyed the effectiveness of the youth organization by creating a fraudulent "reign of terror" issue which served only to disorient and destroy the youth and its leadership. The "reign of terror," in fact, was all the political "will" he left us as a theory with which to cope with the problems of the youth.

7) He succeeded in standing everything on its head under the campaign to "abolish the old and respect only the new." His re-writing of our history stands on a par with that of Stalin. The ferocity of his attacks against individuals, the duplicity of his activities, all underline his basic, organic disloyalty to each and every member of the organization. One element will illuminate his fundamental duplicity: He wrote letters which he left in sealed envelopes, to be opened only on the deviation of "X." These were time bombs, left to destroy individuals, but written at the very time when he pretended to maintain great friendship for his intended victim.

Such was the organizational method of Johnson and such his organizational irresponsibility. As a young woman worker summed it up, "He spent all his time fighting people inside the organization, none in fighting the bourgeoisie."

The Man and His Cohorts

There are three who associated themselves with J. as his lieutenants and carried out his line in attempting to destroy the movement. These three are Kaufman, Noff and Pound. They were dealt with sufficiently during the period of the break and at the Spring conference after the break. Only one point needs adding here:

Where it wasn't the question of being an "angel" -- as one of them is -- it was their concept, as with Kaufman, of one-man party and one-man international rule. Her storm-troop tactics of achieving this in 1955, were foreshadowed by her actions, during the absence of the chairman, in August 1953. It was then that she made her first attempt to seize the REB and to bombard the NEB and membership simultaneously with this statement as an accomplished fact: "We have to work out the new form of international relations in this epoch...and create a new concept of international political leadership, not by the American movement but by the representative of the world movement."

The designated "representative of the world movement" was, of course, J. the individual. It wasn't only that he was to be the leader of leaders, but the substitute for the American movement.

The havoc J. wrought with "Correspondence"; the ease with which he moved to destroy it when it did not unquestioningly obey his commands; his loud announcements for a four-page weekly and the actual publication of a some-time bi-monthly; all write the fitting American epitaph for this adventurer. He never tried to build an organization which, of course, he couldn't have done seeing that his whole concept was to smash all working class political organizations. We, on this side of the ocean, have finished with him. But this vampire will first now seek to fasten himself on to the European movement.

Despite Johnsonism, the organization faced attack by the bourgeoisie politically and steadfastly; and in so doing also rejected Johnsonism which broke away from the movement on the threat of war. Particularly, it was the working class core of the organization who finally broke their silence and unmasked the totalitarian methods and conclusions of J. and showed the differences between I and F. to be on fundamental class lines.

Despite Johnsonism, we nevertheless succeeded in establishing a printed paper. That speaks of how solid was the original theoretical and organizational basis of the tendency that it did not give way before all these deviations.

Despite Johnsonism and his pretensions to philosophy, the state capitalist tendency had remained economist and incomplete until after the break with Johnsonism, when we returned to Marxism and re-established its philosophic foundations on new beginnings.

We are the luckier that the war clouds over Formosa looked sufficiently serious that we could smoke out this deceptive capitulator before actual war.

— O'Brien

April, 1956