

NOTES ON DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM

(for internal use only)

The term "democratic centralism" does not describe some list of precise, detailed, and encompassing organizational rules which can be applied uniformly to any cadre formation arising in any historical context. The very notion of such a list is un-Marxist. The Bolshevik Party, the Chinese Communist Party, the Workers Party of the DRV, Fidel's band in the mountains, the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party in the USA, and the Black Workers Congress all are examples of democratic centralist organizations, but their internal governance and structure obviously could not be reduced to any uniform code of "laws." Differing historical situations, differing tactical and strategic tasks, differing conclusions about the history of the communist movement, and many other conjunctural differences are all reflected in the dissimilar organizational characters of these groups.

But neither is democratic centralism some vague slogan. The concept has definite ideological content. In these notes I'll try to present my general understanding of democratic centralism and some of the critiques which are commonly brought against it.

Democratic Centralism

1. The necessity of a vanguard formation

Marxists are not determinists. We believe that people make things happen, that within the limits of a given historical situation human agency can effect the course of events decisively. We revere those who have organized progressive human forces, recognized the arrival of a period when the possibility of transformation was immediate, and seized the time. Because of the inevitable uneven development of consciousness, will, and discipline in the working class and its allies, and because of the requirements of revolutionary activity, the "spontaneous", relatively unorganized opposition of the proletariat has never even come close to permanently defeating any national bourgeoisie. Every socialist revolution has been led by a vanguard force which cohered the most advanced and disciplined individuals from among the progressive forces and forged them into an organization capable of entering into the battle between capital and labor with one powerful will. The vanguard force, the cadre party, is the highest expression of the capacity of human agency to make history. It does not "make" the revolution, but without it the revolution cannot be made.

2. The organizational character of the vanguard formation: democratic centralism

To achieve an organization which can act with one will, the authority to make fundamental decisions must be centralized in a body whose directives are carried out by the cadre. To maximize the possibility of the central body making correct decisions and to pre-figure the kind of society we are building even as we struggle, the governance of the organization (including the generation of the central body) must be organized democratically. The working out of the tension between centralism and democracy will vary with the historical context (taking one form for a temporarily isolated band of thirteen guerillas in the high Sierra and quite another for a party of several thousand spread across a continent and fighting the class struggle on many fronts simultaneously) but there are certain norms which are fundamental. Perhaps the three most important are, 1) that at regular congresses of the party the central body is elected directly by the membership or by their directly elected representatives and that certain fundamental matters of perspective or "line" are endorsed or rejected by the membership, 2) that between such congresses, the authority of the central body is supreme: it makes the basic decisions, it commits forces, it governs itself and the party as a whole, and 3) that all significant changes in strategy and program made by the central body are preceded by a prolonged, open discussion which involves all members of the party. The central body may not dictate arbitrarily. For example, in matters such as expulsion, there must be a due process available to the cadre charged which the central body or its delegates must follow. But between congresses, all decisions are made by or can be reversed by the central body, which governs itself. Concepts such as referendum and recall have no place in a cadre party. Should a member of the central body commit a serious breach of discipline, it is the central body which must consider the case. Should a crisis arise, it is the central body which must decide to call an extraordinary congress. Party statutes may shape the method by which the central body makes and exercises decisions, but they cannot compromise its authority to decide.

These rather simple observations by no means exhaust the structural refinements necessary to meet the problems which arise from the tension between centralism and democracy. The constitution of the party we wish to build will not be a matter of a few paragraphs. In his essay, "the Leninist Theory of Organization", Mandel lists some of the procedural norms which would characterize a fully developed democratic centralist organization: "the right of all members to be completely informed about differences of opinion in the leadership; the right to form tendencies and to present contradictory points of view to the membership before leadership elections and conventions; the regular convening of conventions; the right

to periodically revise majority decisions in the light of subsequent experiences, i.e., the right of minorities to periodically attempt to reverse decisions made by the majority; the right of political initiative by minorities and members at conventions." Each of these provisions seems correct to me, though their concrete application both as constitutional principles and in practice obviously require careful thought.

Further, the organizational character of a revolutionary cadre party is not only a matter of formal statutes and procedures. The real spirit of egalitarianism among all comrades, the consistent practice of criticism/self-criticism, and the depth of our mutual commitment (we are prepared to die in each others defense) all condition the life of a party in a manner profound if difficult to define.

Four Common Objections to Democratic Centralism

Not everyone thinks democratic centralism is good! The theory and practice have been attacked from several positions, among them:

1) Ultra-democratic

This position has been common in youth culture "organizations" and in certain new left forms. Any structure is viewed as "elitist" and "non-participatory". The concept of leadership is rejected. Business is taken care of informally as it arises. Meetings, if ever called, are for the purpose of exchanging vibes and smearing "love" on one another. What really happens is that an informal, uncontrolled, and thus very powerful leadership always emerges. These formations reject democratic centralism (if they've heard of it) because they fear it to be manipulative. Those who are in fact manipulating reject democratic centralism because they know, consciously or not, that it is a democratic threat to their own illegitimate and uncontrolled power.

2) Liberal or Sentimental

Certain formations which often arise from petit-bourgeois or culturally middle-class elements may have elaborate systems of accountability yet remain in reality hostile to leadership. Constant and mechanical rotation of offices, the continual and petty revision of organizational principles, an excessive fascination with the superficial process of meetings, and a concentration on the "development" of one another to the exclusion of really doing anything else -- these are some of the characteristics exhibited by such groups. They reject democratic centralism as "authoritarian" and "stifling" because they view

the "revolution" in terms of their own personal transformation. They have very little if any understanding of how the external tasks of an organization necessarily condition its internal structure, for often their organizations simply do not have external tasks.

3) Syndicalist or Anarcho-Syndicalist

This position holds that the transition from capitalism to socialism can be achieved by the self-organization of working people without the aid and direction of any vanguard formation. Syndicalists believe that soviets or workers' councils at the level of the individual plant can wage the struggle and administer the victory successfully and that certain minimal state functions can briefly be exercised by voluntary federations of soviets until full communism is achieved. Rejecting the theory of the vanguard party, syndicalists also reject democratic centralism. In my opinion, their critiques are usually based upon indelistic conceptions of the working class and the requirements of socialist construction. Nevertheless, many syndicalists have been courageous proletarian fighters and in its most developed form the ideology of anarcho-syndicalism can be a good watch-dog for the possible degeneration of democratic centralism and proletarian dictatorship.

4) The theory of "inevitable degeneration"

Among socialists, this is both the most wide-spread and the most serious critique of democratic centralism and the vanguard party. While highly centralized vanguard formations may have played a crucial role in defeating the bourgeoisie, the critique runs, by their very nature they inevitably begin to substitute themselves for the working class in exercising the dictatorship of the proletariat. Still worse, the pressures of this substitution destroy the internal democracy of the party, and the central committee is substituted for the party, the dictator for the central committee.

Those who hold this belief are not without historical evidence. Clearly something like "substitutionism" occurred in the Soviet Union, culminating in the the horror of the Stalin regime. Just as clearly, it is the communist parties and not the independent representative bodies of the proletariat and peasantry which exercise decisive influence in People's China, the DRV, Cuba, and all other extant socialist states. While there are profound political and cultural differences between the situations, say, in contemporary China and Stalinist Russia, a Leninist is still confronted with a basic question: is it the inherent nature of centralist vanguards to substitute themselves for the working class in the proletarian dictatorship?

Only the rudiments of an answer can be suggested here. First, any ahistorical cant about the "inevitable" social consequences of an organizational form must be rejected. How should Marxists analyze the sources of Stalinism? Surely we would look beyond the dangers inherent in the high centralism of the Bolshevik Party. We would ask how the underdevelopment of capitalism in tsarist Russia effected the capacity of the proletariat to play the leading role both in the October Revolution and in the initial attempts to construct a socialist economy. Surely, too, the effects of the Civil War and the deaths of thousands upon thousands of workers would be considered. Nor could one ignore even so particular a matter as the time of Lenin's incapacitation and death. The centralism of the party was only one of a number of conditions which made Stalinism possible. It was certainly not decisive, as the history of subsequent revolutions should indicate.

Imperialism breaks at its weakest link. In the unfolding of the dynamics of uneven and combined development in the 20th century the weakest links have been, up to the present, the imperialized nations of the so-called underdeveloped world. Here the national bourgeoisie has been weakest, here imperialism has been least able to contain and suppress insurgency, here the first victories of world revolution have been won. But the very circumstances which have made possible the victories in China, Vietnam, Cuba, and elsewhere have also placed limitations on how far these revolutions can advance toward a fully developed socialism. Capitalism in the imperialized countries did not develop a mass proletariat with high technical and cultural levels, and only on such a foundation can full socialism be built. In the absence of such a mature proletariat, the vanguard party has had to play an even more crucial role than it will in the coming revolutions in the advanced countries. It has been the only force organized on a scale sufficient to meet the imperatives of a post-revolutionary yet still primitive society. For the revolution to survive, it has been necessary that the party temporarily become the state, or at least the dominant element in the state. But this does not mean that the party must become Stalinized. The dangers of degeneration into bureaucratic collectivism are always there, but it has been possible for the state-party, itself, to initiate and lead offensives which check and defeat such tendencies, as the cultural revolution in China seems to confirm.

What will the future of the state-party formations in the partially completed socialist revolutions? Will they rigidify into proto-ruling classes who administer in their own narrow interests and thus place on the agenda an inevitable confrontation with the working masses of their own societies? Or will the completion of the world revolution rapidly exasperate their liberation from underdevelopment and the consequent deformations of the proletarian dictatorship? History will not be forced into such a neat either/or, but which tendency is dominant will depend in large part on the ability of revolutionaries in the West to succeed. It may not be overstatement to say that the future of the present socialist states will be settled in the streets of America.

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