Primacy of Theory Consolidation Study

Session 1: The Roots of the PoT Line and the Struggle Against Revisionism: An Introduction

Primary reading: Toward a Genuine Communist Party, Ann Arbor Collective(ML) November, 1976

Secondary Readings: Developing the Subjective Factor, pp. 11-15, NNMLC, May, 1979

Line Of March, No. 1, May-June 1980, pp.47-62

Party Building: Against Revisionism and Dogmatism, PWOC,1975 pp. 5-7, 16-24

Introduction:

The first Ann Arbor pamphlet, Toward A Genuine Communist Party, placed our line in the context of the world and US communist movements both theoretically and politically, even if only in a rudimentary way. While its overall strategy for building a new party is weak, its presentation of the key errors of the past & the nature of the array of tasks before us remain its strength. In this pamphlet we can grasp the roots of the line and reflect on how those roots have grown in the past four years; our study and discussion can present Ann Arbor's conception in a conjunctural and political fashion.

From its inception, Primacy of Theory embodied three interrelated aspects. Each aspect, taken alone, can distiguish us from one or another group on the Left. Taken as a whole (a whole we are just beginning to put together), they represent a qualitatively different conception of Marxism-Leninism and party building than exists anywhere in the US M-L movement.

The first aspect is our interpretation of world and US communist history. We now sum up this appect as the domination of the Stalinian deviation. The second aspect is the recognition that the primary task in the development of a party in the US is the production of theory; Marxism-Leninism is in crisis, theoretically and politically. The third aspect consists of our assessment of the conjuncture: the communist movement is in a primitive stage, it is unable to fuse anything but bourgeois ideology with the workers' movement. To break out of this mire, we need to take hold of the theory which represents anti-dogmatism/anti-revisioism, and proceed consciously from the limited unity that it presently possible.

Historical Interpretation

From the first line of the pamphlet, Ann Arbor speaks to the qualitative break that we must make with our past to build a revolutionary communist party. There is no illusion of a mere "rectfication and reestablishment" of our one generally correct line; rather, a different view of our "glorious" past is implied. Even if only in a limited way, the pamphlet establishes our break with dogmatism & revisionism.

The first break is with dogmatism in the form of flunkeyism. From the Socialist Party and its relations with the German Social Democrats, to the CPUSA and the CPSU, to the New Communist Movement and China, US communists have historically looked for their political guidance to come from afar. This, combined with the ideological hegemony of the US bourgeoisie, has deprived our movement of the organic intellectual leadership it demands.

In many ways, this first break, with flunkeyism, is

the most understood in the anti-dogmatist/anti-revisionist trend. The break with flunkeyism toward the Soviet Union was effected in 1956; the break with flunkeyism toward China was effected in 1976 around Angola. Whether the Rectification forces will resurrect a flunkeyist relation to the Soviet Union, in its mounting defense of "actually existing socialism" (eg Poland), remains to be seen.

Yet even this break with flunkeyism is a superficial break with dogmatism, for it is a failure to break with the degenerated orthodoxy of the Stalin era--the root of both dogmatism and revisionism in the modern period.

This latter break, with Stalinian Marxism, is the more significant one, and the one that distinguishes our line. Looking back at the A2 pamphlet, however, it is clear that the concept of the "Stalinian deviation is not yet articulated. In addition, it was Ann Arbor's view that to focus heavily on Stalin in its first publication, while attempting to reach the young ader trend, a trend which was still rooted in the Stalinian myths, would only have promoted "Trot-baiting" and isolated our line before it had a chance to develop.

On the other hand, the Stalin era is clearly targetted as the period of theoretical complacency and degeneration. The roots of modern revisionism are explicitly grounded in this period with the analysis of the united front, the liquidation of the party, the capitulation to anti-communism in the labor movement, and the existence of the "peaceful transition" line before 1956. Unlike all others developing their line in the new party building movement, pre-1956 CP and world communist history were not "holy grounds". Similarly, the practices of the CP are subject to severe criticism: inner party democracy, theretocal development of cadre, and party-mass relations are all shown to be incorrect lines against which we must develop correct lines.

This preliminary analysis began to demarcate us not only with regard to our location of the roots of revisionsim but for the implied definition of revisionism itself. As can be seen from the other readings for this week, the PWOC and LOM strictly define revisionism in terms of three or so contemporary political lines of the Soviet Union (peaceful transition, detente, main contradiction in the world). According to these groups, since these 3 theses were not concolidated until 1956 (a proposition which itself is dubious) revisionism's real beginning, no matter what elements may have existed before, is in 1956. Recently, LOM has "broadened" its analysis of revisionism, as a result of the crisis in Poland; but it is still described as a series of right errors. Revisionism is still, for all trend forces, "Kruschevite revisionism". And, at least for LOM, it represents only a line deviation which must be combatted at the ideological level alone. Moreover, the struggle against revisionism is limited to communists and not a task of the working class as well.

If Ann Arbor doesn't yet give a definition of revisionsim, it does describe numerous lines with roots in a particular problematic as revisionsit--and these lines/problematic were consolidated in the 1930's. These very different conceptions of revisionism--conceptions we will elaborate more thoroughly in the rest of the study--constitute the starting point of the analyses of the distinct positions taken today on issues such as Afghanistan, Poland, China, and party building itself.

For us, revisionism is not merely an incorrect line; it is the abandonment of the class stand of the proletariat in theory and practice. Revisionism is the liquidation of the primacy of class struggle as the motor force of history. Class analysis is sacrificed for economism, which is the theoretical basis of revisionism. As this view is developed and practiced in any particular period, an entire set of political/ ideological relations consolidate in accordance with the concrete conditions.

Within a revisionist party, revisionism consists of a set of ideological/political relations which maintain the separation of the leaders from the rank and file; bureaucratic centralism is substituted for democratic centralism. In relation to the masses, the party cannot develop its vanguard role in the class struggle for it neither functions on the basis of a class analysis, nor is able to win the working masses to socialism. In a society dominated by revisionism, the entire society functions on the basis of revisionist social relations. These are characterized by a deepening separation between the party/state apparatus and the masses. Instead of socialising the means of production, and cultivating proletarian democracy, revisionism fosters captialist social relations, leading toa full restoration of capitalism.

So we see that the struggle against revisionism is not limited to the ideology of a few party bureaucrats. It is a crucial struggle which must be waged on all levels: political, ideological, theoretical, and where revisionism holds state power, the economic level as well.

At a superficial level, all forces in the US communist movement agree that the 2d International was revisionist; all agree that the Soviet Union and the CPUSA since 1956 are revisionist. But TR holds that from 1929 onwards, the Stalin era also represented a form of revisionism--perhaps different in some of its right and left forms, but a consolidated revisionism nonetheless. We have called this revisionism the Stalinian deviation. From this analysis, it becomes clear that for PoT "anti-revisionism" constitutes a qualitatively different political task than for others in the party building movement.

The Theoretical/political crisis

These two different conceptions of revisionism lead us to the second major thrust of the PoT line: the primacy of the production of anti-revisionist/anti-dogmatist theory.

While Ann Arbor formulated this task in a somewhat theoreticist way (p.1: basis of the problem=errors in the domain of theory), the Collective was the first group to articulate a party building line with an emphasis on theoretical work, as opposed to mass practice. This line was basically developed as an alternative to both the party building strategies of the NCM groups and the fusion groups. In this struggle against "fusion", primacy of theory found itself in an alliance with the Guardian's Irwin Silber. The debate as it was then articulated was "theory vs. fusion".

While the struggle was waged by Ann Arbor, the TMLC and the Guardian, the ideological and political limitations of the formulation soon became apparent. Because, in time, the political differences were more important than the agreement on the primacy of theoretical work. The original alliance was not incorrect, it was simply that in the earlier periods, the "theory" forces had not yet developed political lines to the point where they could be distinguished.

Still, combined with the historical interpretation of our movement, we can see that Ann Arbor presented the beginnings of that political analysis of the nature of theory we must produce. The first element was the basic premise that we needed to approach theory in a new way: we had to recreate the living science through the development of a critical spirit toward "orthodoxy". The production of theory, rather than its mere "application" is key.

Second, while targetting the right-left errors of the past, Ann Arbor recognized the primary aspect was their common root in a bankrupt theoretical framework (problematic). These two elements are the basis of our present position in the debate with Rectification that the communist movement suffers froma crisis in theory, as well as in political line; that is, line deviations are themselves rooted in an underlying problematic with which we must break. Mere line changes within the same problematic will not mean anti-dogmatism or anti-revisionsim.

Ann Arbor presented this notion of the theoretical crisis as "the dogmatist/revisionist problematic". We can see now that this formulation was somewhat mechanical, at least as it was developed then. Dogmatism was the general principles of ML, while revisionism was the bourgeois pragmatism in the practice of communists; these two aspects were neither linked organically nor very well defined. They remained at a descriptive level of the relation between Marxism and its practice in the 30's.

The A2 Collective grasped the ossified nature of theory, its sterility in its application to concrete conditions. They also recognized the blatant capitulation to the bourgeoisie of right revisionism (the United Front) and the sectarianism of left forms of revisionism (eg 3d Period). This "gap" between the professed goals of Marxism and its practice was the essence of the dog/rev problematic.

Today, we can make a couple of extensions to our conception of the dogmatist/revisionsit problematic, without yet approaching a whole re-analysis of the concept. The roots of modern revisionism are in the Stalinian deviation. Dogmatism is the blind acceptance of this Stalinian Marxism (and not simply the "general principles of Marxism") and its application to today's conditions. With the essentially revisionist premises and economist underpinnings of the Stalinian deviation, it is no wonder that a continuing dogmatic application of this degenerated Marxism continually breeds new and varied forms of revisionism. Here we see how dogmatism breathes life into revisionism, and vice-versa, because neither represent the science of Marxism-Leninism. This makes clear the necessity to break with the entire problematic as the only resolution to the theoretical crisis.

With this view, the A2 Coll. put forth a set of theorists as those leading the theoretical break with the dog/rev problematic. Before that time, these theorists were unknown figures in the party building mov'ts from the NCM to the ADAR, and to a large extent they remain so today. What was unclear in the pamphlet however was what these particular theoreticians had to offer our movt--what is their political importance for party building?

Despite this ambiguity, PoT forces maintained an adherence to these theoreticians; the political analyses and lines taken were premised on their works, and in general, on their problematic. Yet, our continuing ambiguity on the political thrust of these theorists plagued our forces. Without this political context, we remianed vulnerableto the charge of theoreticism,&specifically, "methodologism".

That is, we appeared to be only interested in developing a correct methodology, expecting correct political lines to flow automatically. This theoreticist lapse was compounded by our failure to articulate in this pamphlet (and for quite a while afterwards) the relation between theory and political line, and the importance of developing political lines.

The latter gap, regarding the role of political line, was rectified most clearly in the BPC's points of unity (point 1). The problem of the political role of the "advanced theoreticians" was most consciously articulated in TR 18, Notes on Trotskyism. From this and recent articles, we can more clearly see why Gramsci, Althusser, Bettelheim, et al provide the theoretical basis for a resolution to the theoretical political crisis; that is, why they are the adar theoreticains. Basically, they are the leading fighters in the attack on theoretical economism which provides the foundation for all forms of revisionism historically.

By doing this, they are carrying on the long legacy of the fight for a living revolutionary Marxism. Historically, Marxism has degenerated into Social Democracy, Trotskyism, and the Stalinain deviation (in the pre-'56, post-'56, and Eurocommunist forms). And as each of these economist/revisionist deviations developed and consolidated, there arose theoretical leaders in the fight for a rectification. These include Lenin, to a certain extent Bukharin, Gramsci, & Mao. Today, Althusser etal represent the theoreticians once again taking up the struggle against the economist problematic which dominates the international communist movement. Thus, while their <u>theoretical</u> assault on economism cannot guarantee correct <u>political lines</u>, these "advanced theorists" are the cutting edge in the development of a scientific understanding of revisionism and dogmatism. We'll discuss their role more in a later study session.

<u>The State of the Party Building Movement</u>

Recognizing the continuing belief in "orthodox" history, the stranglehold of the dogmatist-revisionist problematic, and the continuing isolation of communism from the workers movement, the A2 Collective could only conclude that party building was in a very primitive stage. Virtually the most basic tasks remain before us: developing genuine anti-revisionist/anti-dogmatist theory, producing conjunctural analyses of the US and the nature of the various forms of oppression (race, class, sex) rectification of democratic centralism, training of cadre at all levels in the science and practice of Marxism-Leninism, etc. Without these foundations, our practive in the mass movements remains economist and reformist.

Ann Arbor laid out three bases for the building of a genuine communist movement: 1) the recognition that there is no undisputed center of world communism to which all are bound for leadership; 2) the recognition of the bankruptcy of the sects of the New Communist Movement, and 3) the recognition of the need to grasp the adar theory of Althusser et al. However, we can now see that these three bases did not combine to form a genuine communist movement.

Basis 1 and 2 were somewhat understood: it is well agreed that there is no international center of world communism; each adar group also announces is recgonition of the bankruptcy of the dogmatist sects. But, by themsleves, these two bases have not prevented the fast decline of adar forces into dogmatism and revisionism.

In the first place, the break with the international centers has meant only the shallowest ahistorical critique of the international lines of the SU and China. Similarly, the break with the dogmatist sects has occurred over this or that line, without challenging the roots of their deviation --Stalinian revisionism.

The cause of this fragile break with dogmatism and the international centers can be found in the failure of adar to grasp Basis #3: the need to look to the "advanced theorists". Without consciously developing a fundamental break with economism, and in particular, the Stalinian deviation, all other advances will necessarily be superficial and temporary. In fact, to hold that there is no int'l center and that the sects do not provide the path forward can no longer be said to represent advanced positions in the present conjuncture.

In 1976, the A2 Coll. saw that given the crisis of our movement, the only broad basis of unity which could be forged was around the few poilitical lines we had developed and around our "direction of development." In many ways we still stand in that very same political conjuncture.

PoT has developed more political lines through the ensuing years. At the same time, we have more consciously articulated our "direction of development" in a political fashion: a thorough-going anti-revisionsim which is based on a ciritique of economism. While both aspects are somewhat more advanced than in 1976, our major tasks remain undone. Therefore, the key to moving ourselves and all those who agree with our existing lines forward is to consolidate ourselves around that "direction of development". That is the purpose of this study.

QUESTIONS:

1) Why is the break with outright flunkeyism only a superficial break with dogmatism? 15

2) What do we mean that revisionism is not just an incorrect political line to be combatted only at the ideological level? What is the political importance of this understanding for party building? 20

3) How has the concept of the dog/rev problematic been useful in the development of the PoT line? Is it useful in defining our current tasks 25

4) Why is it that Bases 1 and 2 could not by themselves give a foundation to a genuine communist movement? 15

5) How has our line become less theoreticist since the first A2 paper? What tasks remain in the struggle against theoreticism? 15

6) This is an open-ended question which will probably raise 25 problem areas we hope to cover in the study plan: What is your current conception of revisionism; how does it differ from other groups' positions on revisionism? Most importantly, what is still not clear about our position on revisionism and its roots?