

## A Disconcerting Thought

In our recent discussions a lot of things were brought out about how screwed up many individuals in the RCP have become. One person talked about the “Behind-the-Curtain” problem at the Party center, the dysfunctional Central Committee, and so forth. Another person talked about the bureaucratic approach of many individuals in local leadership, how they issue orders but don’t pay attention to ideas and complaints from the rank and file, how they de-emphasize or even oppose study, including serious study of the Party’s own documents and line. And perhaps worst of all, how people have become so afraid of being jumped on that they won’t express opinions, they lie to their leadership about their work, about how many newspapers they sell and so forth.

We tried to understand how such a state of affairs could come to be. One thing pointed out was that the “80’s analysis” led to an air of such excessive urgency and desperation that the Party felt that there was “no time” left for study, for discussion, for democracy, for investigation, or for anything but putting things on a militaristic footing in preparation for imminent war and/or revolution. At any rate the political culture in the Party seemed to change drastically in the 80’s, perhaps for a variety of reasons, and it does not seem to have improved much since that time. Compared to the period when the Party was formed, the political culture shifted towards being rather like that of a religious cult, and it has apparently remained that way ever since.

A thing to think about seriously here is how this horrifying cultural change within the Party tended to affect *all* its members. Any member of a group is enculturated—to one degree or another—by that group; they are gradually *changed* by it. This is especially apt to be true of a tightly organized, democratic-centralist organization which a Marxist revolutionary party needs to be. And if the group itself changes, if its culture changes, then all the individuals in the group are also changed. Some more than others, certainly. Some resist the changes, some enthusiastically embrace them. But everyone who stays in the group is affected, is “infected” we might say, if those changes are bad ones, even if they do drag their feet when the changes are first imposed.

And moreover, even those who eventually say “enough!” and drop out of the group are bound to have been themselves “infected” with the bad socio-political culture to one degree or another. Even if a person does eventually shed all the bad habits of thought that they pick up from a screwed up organization or milieu, it may take years to do so, and require the participation of other people.

I know in my own early political development I had to go through a whole series of stages to fully break away from utopian thinking (I was once a utopian socialist and member of a commune). Similarly, I had to go through a prolonged series of stages to entirely discard all aspects of religion, first just doubt, then agnosticism, then atheism, then years later and as I studied Marxism, an appreciation for the negative social role of religion, and finally, maybe 15 or 20 years after my process of shedding religion began, a real understanding of the anti-scientific, idealist philosophical nature of religious conceptions.\* It takes time and struggle to fully shed all the erroneous ideas we pick up when we are under the sway of elaborate, but mistaken, ideologies.

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\* I have elaborated a bit on the multi-stage processes I had to personally go through in breaking away from religion and utopian socialism in the beginning of my article, “The ‘Higher Criticism’ Revisited”, which I have posted on my web site [<http://members.aol.com/ScottH9999/essays/highcrit.htm>].

And, bringing the general point home, when people belong to a political party which indoctrinates them with a seriously wrong political line or culture, it will take time and struggle to break away from all that, to shed the excess baggage without throwing out the correct aspects of that party's line which must still be upheld.

So the "disconcerting thought" I want to raise is this: as alumni, as people who were ourselves all enculturated to one degree or another by a very screwed up political culture (and line reflected by that culture), and recognizing that people can only fully break away from such a condition over a prolonged period which involves considerable struggle, *can we be sure that we ourselves have yet completely broken with all aspects of it?* Could it be that we ourselves, even after being out of the Party for years, are still "infected" with some of those screwed up assumptions and approaches? And suppose our efforts to help build a new revolutionary group or party are successful; could our own possible infection with the "RCP disease" end up leading the new group to the same sad result we have seen there?

A worrisome thought indeed! And the answer in the abstract has to be that this is actually a possibility. We criticize the RCP, and justly so, but we also still agree with the Party on many (probably most) issues, and our approach is still the same in many ways, perhaps even in ways we have not consciously recognized and critically examined.

But discussing this worry in "the abstract" will not get us very far. In the abstract, no one can ever be *entirely sure* that they have shed all their excess baggage from an earlier ideological milieu, and so we have to try to examine the matter concretely. But even to do that we must first be alert to the *possibility* that we do still carry some excess baggage ourselves, remain modest in our tendency towards certainty that we always know the best way to do things, and continue to examine our own outlooks and actions in light of our study, and in light of the criticisms by others whether open or implied.

Where should we look for concrete criticisms and ideas which could expose or counter this possible excess baggage? Well, what about this principle: pay more attention to the criticisms of those with *less exposure to the culture we now see as dangerously incorrect*. I suppose this means—very "conveniently" for me!—those who left the Party earlier rather than later. But it also means those who were never in the Party, but only on the outskirts, and probably most important of all, those who were really never associated with the Party even on the fringes, but who are still (truly) within the revolutionary communist, or Marxist-Leninist-Maoist milieu. (Of course I don't mean nut cases, of which there are more than a few!)

On the one hand we want to expose our own ideas to criticism; on the other hand we want to evaluate those criticisms in light of our own ideas! It sounds impossible, but it isn't. This is simply a reaffirmation of the Marxist theory of knowledge. A fine judgment is needed, yes. Politics always demands a fine judgment, and nowhere more so than in questions of criticism and the evaluation of criticisms.

So let's confront the question directly: Are there any specific reasons to think that *just maybe* we still do carry some pieces of excess baggage of incorrect ideas and approaches to political work from our RCP experiences? Actually, there are. There are specific criticisms that others make of the RCP that we happen to disagree with, and sometimes perhaps dismiss too readily. And there are some of the criticisms we make of each other, those that reflect in the critic's mind a continuation of erroneous RCP culture and/or line. Of course these criticisms might all be mistaken; but, just perhaps, some of them may be correct, or partly correct.

Our group is still struggling to sum up our collective attitude towards the RCP, and it will take us a long time to finish that task. Although we agree on a number of points, it is a fact that some in our group are much more critical of the line and actions of the RCP than others are. The more critical people are not *necessarily* correct, but at least it does appear that they have broken more with the line and outlook of the Party. Maybe they've gone a bit too far; or maybe the other people haven't gone far enough. We have to thrash this out on an issue-by-issue basis.

Our group originally came into being because we shared some bad experiences with the Party, and agree that there are some serious problems with it—probably sufficiently serious to prevent the Party from ever leading a revolution. At the same time we all still have a lot of agreement with the Party on many aspects of its line, and with respect to many of its methods of work. So we need to continue to examine and discuss the Party in order to be able to sum up what its mistakes really were and are. But we also need to continue to examine ourselves, and correct whatever mistaken ideas and methods that we may still uphold. We are by no means free of the RCP yet.

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Next I want to discuss one possible concrete instance of how our group's conception of how to do mass work may still reflect the mistaken approach of the RCP. Of course people are free to disagree with this particular example, and try to show that I am wrong about this specific case (or my overall thesis for that matter).

At our last session A.M. described a very interesting little incident from his RCP days, where a woman who had just returned from Iran (after the fall of the Shah, I guess) was scheduled to speak at a public meeting organized (mostly or entirely) by the Party. But when the time for the event came, there were only a handful of people from the Party there, and no masses. What to do? It seemed to the woman that the only thing to do was to cancel the event. But instead A.M. led the handful in an attempt to go door-to-door and drum up an audience on the spot. Amazingly—especially to the woman just back from Iran—they were successful in doing this. A small audience, at least, was corralled, and the woman gave her speech. This story is really kind of inspiring!

And yet, and yet... what exactly is the moral of this story supposed to be? To me, the implicit moral seems to be that *the key to making revolutionary advances among the masses is simply for the revolutionaries to have an unshakable determination to do so*. Perhaps A.M. or others think there is a different moral here, but my interpretation at least seems to be a pretty straight-forward inference. So let's think about that moral a bit.

First, it is certainly true that a tremendous dedication and determination on the part of the Party and the revolutionary forces is necessary if there is to be a revolution. Nobody can deny that. But it is also clear that this determination cannot be the *whole* story. That would be a very subjectivist, idealist standpoint. There is also the little matter of the objection situation, for example. And the objective situation for the Party and revolutionary forces, as Bob Avakian once pointed out, includes the subjective interests and desires of the masses at the given time.

So let me put it this way: *Given* the existence of a revolutionary party, and *given* that this party and its members have an unshakable determination to lead the masses in revolution, *then what is key to making revolutionary advances among the masses?* How, in other words, should you go about bringing revolution to the masses *given* your presumed and required determination to do so? The basic answer of Marx, Engels and Lenin to this question was simply that you

should join up with the masses in their struggles, the struggles that they are already engaged in, and bring to them the light of revolution as you do so. *That is the real key to bringing revolution to the masses* (the first and most essential point of the Marxist strategy for making revolution, as Lenin said). I have talked about this quite a bit in my mass line manuscript (especially chapter 19), so I won't go into it any further here.

There is something very wrong about putting an *undue emphasis* on the Party members being sufficiently dedicated and determined, while at the same time denying or ignoring the need to join up with the masses and bring the light of revolution into their existing struggles. And that is exactly the approach of the RCP at least since its Second Party Congress and the adoption of its New Programme in 1981. This marked a subjectivist lurch for the Party.

We criticize the Party for taking on aspects of a religious cult, but this is the real origins of it. It is not simply a matter of some individuals in the top Party leadership starting to behave all of a sudden like cult leaders, and the Party members meekly going along. Cultism, like all political sins, is an outgrowth and reflection of a wrong political line.

Goals get determined arbitrarily. The key to achieving every goal becomes whipping up the comrades into a frenzy. The whole Party tries to hide its consequent failures. And where shortcomings are all too obvious, the explanation becomes the insufficient determination of the Party members to get out and get the job done. The members get the blame for all failures (never the leadership), and more and more pressure gets put on the members. People get driven away, but this is "good", because, you see, it was "people like that" who were to blame for the Party's shortcomings in the first place.

Now I want to make it very clear that I am not accusing A.M. or anybody else in our group of defending a situation like this! He is as appalled by it all as I am. But what I am suggesting is that he and perhaps most of the people in our group may, under the lingering influence of the RCP, still agree with some of the conceptions of how a revolutionary Party's work should be done which in fact inevitably leads to such miserable results. And specifically, he may be putting too much emphasis on pressuring individual comrades to "be more determined" as *the key* to making revolutionary progress.

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It has been interesting to me to see the reactions of several people in our group to suggestions (from me and others) that we should be trying to build a new communist organization. Several people seem to have a real fear and reluctance to proceed down that path, at least any time soon. As I have come to recognize that, I've backed off on my proposals as to what I think we can and should do. The plain fact is, at present we are just a discussion group, and I doubt that we can become anything much beyond that at least over the next couple years. (Not that a discussion group is bad! I've been desperate for one for years.)

But why the fear and reluctance to go further? I think that a considerable part of the reason for this is the conception that these folks have about what would be required of them as members of a communist organization. Their conception of what it means to be a member of a communist organization comes from their RCP experiences. To be a member of a communist organization means for them to be "totally dedicated", to have their entire lives determined for them by an organization (and by an organization in which they have little or no input themselves). That is scary! I don't blame people at all for not wanting to join another cult!

Some people have said that we can't proceed in any way toward building a communist organization or even toward engaging in any collective work (even such as putting out a publication) because we don't have sufficient unity. But where does unity come from if not through engaging in collective work, and struggling things out as you do so? The demand for extremely high unity before beginning any work is in effect the demand that no collective work be done at all.

And the demand for extremely high unity, unity approaching total unity perhaps, again reflects our RCP experiences. Diversity of views was never really valued in the RCP, not even in the early days. It was always considered an evil to be suppressed. *Total* unity was the goal, and apparently as time went on, even small manifestations of disagreement or independent thinking were pounced on more and more.

But, you know, that's not only undemocratic and oppressive, it's also undialectical. Even in the mind of a single person there are thoughts that are somewhat conflicting. And it is from conflicting thoughts that new ideas arise, that progress is made.

Could the chain of thought go like this? "Becoming a member of <sup>A</sup>a communist organization means putting yourself under its total and absolute control. I can only agree to do that if the organization and I have close to total agreement."

However, it just might be that such conceptions of what a communist organization is, and what the demands on its members are, are themselves factors which are slowing down the development of our own group, and preventing us from making as great a contribution as we could toward rebuilding a significant revolutionary movement in this country and a new communist party to help lead that movement.

You might think that when a political party gets hopelessly screwed up, at least many of its former members who have dropped away in disgust would organize themselves into a new organization (or two or three) that might eventually build a new party that wouldn't be stuck in the old hopeless rut. But historically, quite often that doesn't seem to happen. It didn't happen with the CPUSA (unless you want to count outfits like PL), nor with the Black Panthers. Perhaps some parties are like certain plant species, which so poison the ground around them that nothing else can grow—not even their own viable offspring. Could it possibly be that all ex-RCPers are so turned off by their bad experiences, and yet still so infected by aspects of its bad culture and line that they can't conceive of doing anything fundamentally different and better themselves? Now there is another really disconcerting thought!

Personally, I think we will gradually start to get our act together, both our own group, and the broader revolutionary movement. But because of our negative experiences with the RCP, and the probability that we (including me) have not yet shed all the negative influences from that experience:

- We are being slowed down more than we would like.
- We will have to continue hashing out our RCP experiences over a long period.
- We will have to undergo much more struggle, and mutual criticism, than we would prefer, to bring out the remaining erroneous residue of our RCP experiences.
- Those who want to push forward with a group web site, or a journal, or other collective projects, will have to accommodate those who fear a return to the oppressive membership conditions of the RCP, and allow them to participate only as members of the study group.

(In the real world not everyone is equally active, or they may choose to be active in their own way rather than fully collectively.)

- On the other hand, those who only want a study group at this time will have to allow the others who want to tentatively push forward to do so on their own, see how things are developing, and see if they want to personally participate in any of that work as it develops.

--John  
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