

Introduction to 'Ideological Intransigence, Democratic Centralism and Cultism'

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I WAS a member of the Committee for a Workers International (aka CWI, Militant Tendency or now the Socialist Party) in Ireland from 1974 to 1985. For six of those years I worked for it full time. After leaving, in circumstances that would be boringly familiar to those who have either studied or experienced the Trotskyist party building milieu, I became a full time student and then an academic. I am now a Professor of Communication at a Scottish university.

The piece that follows is my attempt to understand the rise, fragmentation and fall of the CWI in the context of similar processes across the entire far left. In particular, it seemed to me that all such organisations share some common organisational traits. There has been much study of group dynamics, conformity, dissent and cultic organisations by social psychologists, sociologists, political theorists and communication scholars. Sadly, Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky did not write about such issues, and therefore the knowledge that has been accumulated remains a closed book to the leaders of Leninist organisations. Since such leaders encourage their followers to concentrate their reading on a set canon of Great Works, these theories and empirical findings are also largely ignored by their followers. I felt that it would be fruitful to apply some of them to the CWI, and by implication to the entire far left.

I stress that this is not intended as a complete analysis. No one individual could do any such thing. But it is noticeable that Trotskyist leaders often seek to divert attention from their dysfunctional organisational practices by rehashing old speeches about the crisis of capitalism, or the fall of Stalinism. They assert that those focusing on organisational questions are ignoring the wider political issues, and argue that it is these which ultimately explain their party building problems. I am not impressed by this response.

Whatever political conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of the world in the 21st century, how activists organise and fight for social change also raises issues about their organisational practices that are not without importance, and which cannot be dispensed with simply by reference to "objective" conditions. Trotskyist organisations themselves stress the importance of what they call "the subjective factor". My intention is to critically apprise precisely this issue, in how they conduct their own affairs. If it is so irrelevant or secondary, then there is by extension no point whatever to the party building projects in which they are so energetically engaged. Alternatively, they might just have something to hide. In either event, their aversion to serious discussion strikes me as revealing.

Thus, I maintain that the CWI and kindred organisations share an expectation of fairly imminent economic catastrophe, out of which they think a revolutionary party will emerge. Parodying the soothsayers of old, they not only predict disaster but each day go on bended knees and pray devoutly for its arrival. I believe that a number of destructive consequences flow from this:

1. A premium on doctrinal orthodoxy rather than critical reflection and innovative political thought.
2. Illusions in the absolute correctness of the party's programme, its indispensability for social change, and the superiority of its analysis – what has been dubbed "groupthink".
3. A pathological fear of dissent, seen as imperilling the purity of an analysis held to be essential for success.
4. The demonising of dissenters and the suppression of critical opinion, leading also to the illusion of unanimity and agreement.
5. The over-working of a tired cadre, part-

icularly the full time apparatus, as a means of extracting more commitment while providing minimal time for critical reflection.

6. A sectarian, ultimatist and frequently manipulative attitude to the rest of the left, and the labour movement.

7. The concentration of extraordinary power in the hands of a party elite, to determine ideology, actions, tactical alliances, and above all whose opinions remain consistent with the pure ideology ordained by the centre.

The overall effect is a process of sectarian splitting; the development of programmes and demands of only marginal relevance to actually existing struggles; ideological decline, in which nothing much of interest has been written since the demise of Trotsky; and a general climate which puts most people off socialist politics.

The paper that follows analyses these problems in some depth. It was originally published in what was then *Cultic Studies Journal*, in 1998. Since then, it has appeared on a few websites and stimulated both some discussion and controversy. I also developed the arguments in more detail in a book co-written with the veteran former US Trotskyist Tim Wohlforth (*On the Edge: Political Cults Right and Left*, M.E. Sharpe, New York, 2000). Those further interested in the topic might find it worth exploring.

But a word is also in order about the controversy that the paper has evoked. Some people have objected to the term “cult”, even if they agreed with the substantive points that the paper makes about the CWI’s internal regime. This is unfortunate. The word cult is not a term of abuse, as this paper tries to explain. It is nothing more than a shorthand expression for a particular set of practices that have been observed in a variety of dysfunctional organisations. To one degree or another, many of these practices can also be seen in all of the party formations that have emerged out of the Trotskyist, Leninist or Maoist milieus. It is the nature of these practices rather than any one label to which we really need to pay attention. I personally would agree that whatever is now going on in the cinders that remain of the CWI, while deplorable, is less destructive than what occurred in Gerry Healy’s Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). The latter organisation, which Tim and I also discuss in our book, stands as one of the worst examples of political cultism that we know of. However, this does not exonerate the CWI’s leadership. Nor does it mean that their internal regime is free of cultic traits. I would argue quite the opposite, and do so in what follows. The difference between the CWI and the WRP is a difference in degree rather than in kind, like a man who abuses his partner once a week rather than

once a day.

These issues have an importance beyond the shrunken ranks of the CWI, or indeed the left as a whole. Political activity and social change remain vital projects, though I do not pretend to have absolute answers to either of these challenges. Astrology remains beyond me. Those seeking certainty will find plenty of it in the writings of Ted Grant, Peter Taaffe, or their kindred thinkers – people who, though they are often wrong, are never in doubt. But many thousands of people have been through organisations like the CWI, and many of them have been so disgusted by the experience that they have been put off active political engagement for life. I think it is important that all of us reflect critically on the lessons to be drawn. This is the first step towards wisdom. Having taken it, we may then find ourselves better positioned to pose and eventually answer the question: “what next?”

Some respond to this challenge by urging a return to what they perceive as a pristine version of Leninism known as “democratic centralism”, as distinct from the bureaucratic centralism said to disfigure the CWI, the SWP in Britain, the DSP in Australia, the SWP in the US and all other such organisations that I know of. It will be clear from what follows that I take a different view. When a certain kind of ship sinks in fair winds or foul, across the decades and the oceans, it is time to conclude that the model from which it is built is inherently flawed. This paper, and my book with Tim Wohlforth, discuss some of the ways in which these flaws are manifest.

It is intended as a contribution to the discussion about the need for a new beginning. ■

STILL AVAILABLE

ON THE EDGE

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by

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