

Revisionism project 11/9/81

Readings: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Socialist Strategy."
Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and ideology in Gramsci!"
Ernesto Laclau, Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory,
pp 98-115, 158-76, 194-98.

The session centered around two presentations dealing with class reductionism in communist strategy in the 1930s and the alternative posed by Gramsci's conception of hegemony. The first dealt generally with the critique of class reductionism and its implication for communist strategy. The second dealt more specifically with CPUSA strategy in the 1930s from the perspective of the struggle for hegemony.

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How does the critique of class reductionism fit into our analysis of revisionism? Any analysis of revisionism amounts to an analysis of general political line. General political line has 3 parts: a)conjunctural analysis, b)strategic and tactical line, c)party work plan.

- a)conjunctural analysis--analysis of major contradictions in social formation, their relation to one another. Main error has been economism: treating all contradictions as manifestation (reflection) of economic contradiction.
- b)strategic and tactical line--plan for intervention in struggles produced by contradictions identified in conjunctural analysis. Includes: who are our friends and who are our enemies in relation to those struggles? What is the basis for unity among allies? Main error has been class reductionism: reducing all social forces to a manifestation of economically determined classes with immutable class interests.

Class reductionism in the realms of politics and ideology is the strategic counterpart to economism in conjunctural analysis. The project of Laclau and Mouffe is to clear the decks of the effects of economism in strategy (class reductionism).

(See summary, p1a)

The significance of the critique of class reductionism and the gramscian alternative is that it poses in a new way the tension between the two requirements of communist strategy: to provide broad and effective leadership in the struggles at hand; to maintain the political independence necessary to avoid sacrificing the goal of communism on the altar of the immediate struggle. Within the communist movement, this tension has been posed as the problem of united front tactics. The united front is the way communists always have thought about strategy (well before 1935) and always had the following features:

- the united front always consisted of pre-constituted class subjects united on the basis of their fundamental class (economic) interests.
- on the political level, the united front consisted of political subjects (normally political parties) that were thought to be directly reflective of class interests.

Thus the united front was a coalition of classes and their political representatives.

Defining features of class reductionism in ideology: (Mouffe)

- 1) all subjects are class subjects
- 2) social classes have their own paradigmatic ideologies
- 3) all ideological elements have a necessary class belonging

Does not imply (necessarily) the opposite pole:

- 1) no political/ideological subjects are class subjects (only "the people" exists on the political terrain)
- 2) classes have no paradigmatic ideologies
- 3) no ideological elements necessarily belong to a particular class.

Mouffe's definition of non-reductionist view of ideology:

- 1) the unifying element of an ideology is the hegemonic principle which articulates all the ideological elements
- 2) hegemonic principle is a system of values whose realization depends upon the central role played by a fundamental class at the level of relations of production. Thus, the unifying principle is always the expression of a fundamental class.
- 3) the class character of an ideology or of an ideological element stems from the hegemonic principle which serves as its articulating center.

Implications for strategy:

- 1) Political subjects are produced by the full range of capitalism's contradictions and forms of oppression. It is these groups, taken as a whole, that comprise the popular masses ("the people")
- 2) The class ~~nature~~ ^{location} of these subjects is not necessarily determined by the class location of its members, but by the fundamental class (bourgeoisie or proletariat) that is able to articulate that subject's struggle within its ideological discourse and political practice.
- 3) The dominance of bourgeois ideology and political goals within popular movements (labor, women's lib, black lib) is explainable not by the bourgeois class position of its leaders, but by the hegemony of bourgeois ideology within capitalist society: the proven ability of the bourgeoisie to articulate (in narrow terms) the hopes and frustrations of the popular masses within the limits of bourgeois ideology and political practice (reformism).
- 4) The goal of communist ideological and political practice is to disarticulate the interests of the popular masses from bourgeois ideology and politics and to rearticulate those interests to proletarian discourse and socialist revolution. Disarticulate by exposing how bourgeois ideology and politics compromise popular struggles; rearticulate by projecting a socialist politics and practice that embrace and deepen those struggles for liberation.

The contradiction between effectiveness and independence has traditionally been posed as the key problem of the united front. Charges of opportunism or sectarianism have normally been couched in these terms: opportunism is the failure to give sufficient weight to the task of maintaining political independence; sectarianism is not taking seriously the need to maintain an effective fighting front. Al Richmond captured the two extremes by reference to the Chinese: a united front can be "all unity and no struggle" or "all struggle and no unity." Implicit in all treatments of the united front, however, is that there is a correct balance between these two requirements. But within the framework of class reductionism, this problem of the united front becomes an absolute contradiction.

United Front in the 1920s--

The united front approach to strategy was developed in the Comintern in the 1920s. The united front was thought of as a policy for a non-revolutionary conjuncture--the period of the "relative stabilization" of capitalism.

- the united front was originally a front of the working class alone: an alliance of communist and non-communist (primarily social democratic) workers.
- united front of working class parties: CPs and social democratic parties and their associated trade unions
- never incorporated in any systematic way Lenin's insistence (WITED) on the need for communists to provide leadership to all classes and strata struggling against oppression.

The original united front was internal to the working class. While the working class was divided politically, the communist parties alone represented the fundamental interests of the working class. Within the "united front," the orientation of the CPs was to expose the social democratic leadership in the eyes of the social democratic rank and file. The CPs' approach to political independence earned them the reputation of sectarian, unfaithful allies. It seems safe to say that the CPs maintained their political independence at the expense of maintaining an effective united front.

Third Period--

Predicting the end of the period of "relative stabilization" (declaring a "third period of capitalist development"), the Comintern expected a new wave of revolutionary struggle. The united front was ~~therefore~~ abandoned, for in a revolutionary situation there could be no basis for unity of the proletariat except communist politics. The problem of political independence/effective unity was collapsed into one, because in a revolutionary conjuncture there could be no distinction between effective unity and communist unity.

United Front against Fascism--

In 1935, the united front was resurrected, but under radically different circumstances:

- applied to a crisis conjuncture, but not a revolutionary conjuncture. Maintaining an effective front became a real priority, because the stakes of the class struggle were high.
- united front across class lines. The united front became an alliance of classes with an interest (derived from fundamental class interests) in the defeat of fascism

--on the political level, the class alliance translated into an alliance with bourgeois and petit bourgeois political parties, which were assumed to represent those classes. Since the political subjects united in the struggle against fascism were defined by their class interests (as was their opposition to fascism) any threat to the class interests of any ally risks a reversal of the alliance, and therefore jeopardized the anti-fascist struggle. Any attempt to raise proletarian politics was seen as adventurist and objectively serving fascism. In the interest of defeating fascism, no threat - political or ideological - to the "non-fascist" wing of the bourgeoisie could be tolerated. In the interests of anti-fascist unity, the political and ideological terrains of the class struggle were bit by bit relinquished to the bourgeoisie: first, by abandoning the struggle for proletarian politics and ideology in the working class movement against capital, eventually by abandoning the struggle against capital itself, except for fascist capital.

Rejecting the Comintern analysis of the 1930s raises the question of how we look at it. What was the relation of fascism and the anti-fascist struggle to the restructuring crisis?

The 1930s is best characterized as a structural crisis of capitalism on the international as well as national levels. The various possible outcomes of the restructuring struggle were not all visible from the outset, but three broad categories of changes were likely to occur:

- there would be a new world structure of imperialism (articulated hierarchy of nation-states)
- there would be a renegotiation of the terms of bourgeois hegemony in the capitalist countries (new balance/alignment of class forces)
- there would be a new relation between capitalism and socialism worldwide (perhaps socialist revolution in the weak links of the imperialist chain; perhaps an imperialist rollback of the socialist victory in the Soviet Union)

By 1935, certainly, fascism had become the most likely regressive restructuring in a variety of European nations and was the main bidder for hegemony within an imperialist restructuring. So the error of the Comintern strategy was not in giving the defeat of fascism first priority. The error was in assuming that the anti-fascist struggle would consist of pre-constituted subjects with immutable class interests. The Comintern failed to see that the anti-fascist struggle could be articulated to either capitalism or socialism. The task of communists should have been to demonstrate that proletarian class interests provided the basis for the most resolute struggle against fascism. This orientation would have also held within it the possibilities of more progressive restructurings (where the progressive movement was strengthened by the influence of proletarian politics) and even socialist revolution (where the struggle against the most regressive restructuring could be directly articulated to socialism).

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The class reductionism of 1930s communist strategy and its failure to struggle for hegemony can perhaps best be seen by contrasting the strategy of the Third Period with that of the United Front against Fascism.

The third period was characterized by an ultra-left class reductionism. Strategy was dominated by the imperative of "proletarian purity:" purity in composition, purity in politics.

In the workers' movement, CP strategy was to build dual unions, communist unions.

--working class politics is Marxism-Leninism (paradigmatically)

--working class organizations should be Marxist-Leninist.

This left reductionist strategy abandoned the working class as it actually existed and abstracted the struggle for socialism from its American context.

--Wm. Z. Foster, "Toward a Soviet America:" vision of US socialism was completely Bolshevized--the implantation of entirely Bolshevik forms; making no allowance for uniquely American developments to evolve from the revolutionary movement.

By the mid-30s events forced the CP to abandon dual unionism. The industrial union movement provided a basis for considerable political, as well as economic and organizational, progress in the class struggle. There developed within the working class a greater sense of class identity, as well as class organization, than had ever existed before. (Though we should note that, compared to Europe, the development of class identity within the US working class remained incomplete and impermanent. The constitution of class subjects in the US remains as much of a task as the constitution of revolutionary political subjects.) In Gramsci's terms, the working class had moved toward political economic consciousness--recognizing the need to defend its interests as a class against those of the bourgeoisie. But there was no movement toward the development of hegemonic consciousness--neither within the working class nor, as we shall see, within the party.

The United Front against Fascism was the mirror image of the third period. Where no alliance with non-proletarian classes had been allowable, now all anti-fascist classes could be united. Where the movement for socialism had previously been thoroughly Bolshevized, now there was an open appeal to national traditions (20th Century Americanism). Where any reference to democracy had been seen as bourgeois, now there was a direct appeal to democracy and the revival of the electoral process.

But this total reversal maintained its class reductionist basis. Embarking on a political terrain that it had previously conceded to the bourgeoisie, the party now refused to challenge the bourgeoisie within that terrain. It took the appeal to national traditions, democracy on a bourgeois platter and made no attempt to articulate these elements to proletarian interests.

The New Deal evolved into a left bourgeois populism: it appealed to the unity of the people against the "interests," the selfish "economic royalists." The CP never struggled to articulate that populism within a proletarian discourse and instead allowed the New Deal to incorporate the populist sentiments produced by the popular struggles.

Indeed, the CP seized upon every opportunity to capitalize on bourgeois prestige within the mass movements ("the President wants you to unionize"). It seemed all too happy to have the New Deal ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ incorporate "the right to organize" and "the rights of the unemployed," even within the most bourgeois discourse and state apparatuses.

The absence of communist intervention left the bourgeoisie to effect its "passive revolution" from laissez faire to the Keynesian welfare state without hindrance. This passive revolution politically neutralized the struggles of the popular masses by incorporating their expressed interests on a basis that robbed those struggles of their activist nature and undercut their challenge to the state.

This view of CP strategy in the 50s leaves us with a number of unanswered questions:

- how to build a socialist populism
- how to gain proletarian hegemony prior to seizing state power
- how to maintain cross-class movements while building class consciousness

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In discussion, we noted the problems of applying a conception of strategy (Laclau and Mouffe's) rooted in the European context in the United States. For instance, the elements "democracy" and "nationalism" are more thoroughly rooted in bourgeois politics in the US than they are in Europe, let alone the less developed countries.