
Hillquit Repeats His Error

by Max Eastman

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Morris Hillquit complains that the discussion caused by his manifesto on the Communist International “has tended to obscure rather than clarify the issue.” I think this is true, and I think the fault lies entirely with Morris Hillquit. Either he does not know, or else he is unwilling clearly to state what the Communist position is. His method of attack is not to mark out his enemy and then go for him but to raise a great cloud of dust over him and then exhibit brilliant feats of arms in the same general vicinity.

In order to lay this dust a little, I am going to state what seems to me the real point at issue between Hillquit and the Communists. I hope the reader will not think that I am attempting to prove that I am perfect, or that *The Liberator* is the sole hope of the revolution, as he might imagine from some of Morris Hillquit’s replies to my previous article. I have committed egregious errors, and so has *The Liberator*, although I do not acknowledge that either its spirit of serious play, or the variety of its interests in the world of ideas, is one of these errors. Neither of those characteristics makes it unlikely that a wise word might come out of our magazine. And as for mistakes — it is not a sin to have made them. It is a sin to be making them.

The essential point of the Communist position, in contrast to the position of the “Centrists,” is its absolute and realistic belief in the theory of the class struggle, and the theory that all public institutions — whether alleged to be democratic or not — will prove upon every critical occasion to be weapons in the hands of the capitalist class.

All the other “peculiar features of our Commu-

nist friends” flow from this general hypothesis. And all the confusion and lack of clear deliverance, as well as the positive errors, in Hillquit’s articles, flow either from his failure to grasp this cardinal point of the Communist belief, or else his failure to see how actually and completely the Communists believe it, or else his unwillingness to face and confess the truth that he does not actually and completely believe it himself.

Immediate Realization.

His assertion that the Communists demand in all countries “an active struggle for the immediate realization” of Soviet governments, for instance, is but a way of expressing his incomprehension of their belief that such a struggle will really come. The difference is not about what we should do, but about what we should teach. The truth is that the Third International not only does not call for the immediate formation of Soviet governments, but it expressly deprecates the formation of any soviets at all except under extreme conditions which it very clearly defines.

In my previous criticism of Morris Hillquit I made the statement that the Third International had ceased to stress the necessity of forming soviets.† I inferred this from the fact that the subject is not mentioned in the 21 “Conditions of Affiliation,” which were the only utterance of the recent Congress of the Third International [2nd: July 19-Aug. 7, 1920] then in my hand. Now that I have a full text of its resolutions and statutes, I learn that my inference was wholly incorrect. The Third International has not ceased to stress the idea of the soviets, but it has decided that

†- Max Eastman, “Hillquit Excommunicates the Soviet,” *The Liberator*, whole no. 32 (Nov. 1920), pp. 22-25.

soviets ought not to be formed artificially and in advance of a revolutionary crisis. They are to be regarded as instruments of the active struggle, which appear spontaneously when the masses are filled with revolutionary enthusiasm, and when the economic and political crisis is so sharp that power is actually slipping from the hands of the preceding government. But “in cases where these conditions are not fulfilled, the Communists can and should propagate systematically and stubbornly the idea of the soviets, popularize it, demonstrate to the deepest layers of the population that the soviets constitute the only governmental form which answers to the needs of the period of transition to total Communism.”

Newness.

“Astounding” is the answer Morris Hillquit makes to my assertion that there is nothing fundamentally new in the Communist position but the idea of soviets. The assertion is true, however, and it can not be too often repeated. The actual experience of a successful revolution has only confirmed the opinions of the revolutionary or thoroughgoing Marxian factions in all the Socialist parties of the world. It is transforming these factions from weak and seemingly “academic” minorities into powerful and active majorities everywhere. Their opinions seem “new” only to those of the old majorities who were too indolent or too scornful to pay studious attention to them when they were weak. The new thing about them is their power.

Here again if Hillquit were a little more familiar with the literature of the matter, he would have a different reaction. He would hardly find my statement “astounding,” for he would know that Kautsky had already tried the device of calling Bolshevism “the new theory” and been ridiculed by Lenin, and effectively backed out of the arena by the simple method of daring him “even to approach the analysis of the Commune of Paris by Marx and Engels.”

And the Communist program and policy is not more “Russian” than it is new — except as it happens that the ablest and most devoted of the leaders of the Left Wing are Russian, and Moscow is the place where the revolutionary delegates from 34 countries could most freely and effectively meet together. The reply of these delegates to some French and German Socialists

who objected to Moscow as a seat for the executive work of the International was as conclusive as it was clever. “Just arrange things so we can have the same facilities in Paris or Berlin,” is what they said.

It is sad indeed to see Eugene Debs duped by the ingenious pretense that the Left Wing position is a “Russian” thing, the Communist program an “emanation” from Moscow.

“The Moscow comrades,” he says, “have arrogated to themselves the right to dictate the tactics, the program, the very conditions of propaganda in all countries. It is ridiculous, arbitrary, autocratic, as ridiculous as if we were to dictate to them how they should carry on their propaganda.”

The thing that is ridiculous, arbitrary, and autocratic is the assumption that “we” — that is Debs and the rest of the Center and Right — constitute the American movement. Has Debs forgotten *The Revolutionary Age*, edited by Louis C. Fraina, succeeded in organizing an actual majority of the American Socialist Party, and that this majority (expelled by the officials of the minority) is participating in the “dictatorship” of which he complains, through its natural delegate, Louis C. Fraina himself, as well as two other delegates?

Comrade Debs, it is not Moscow that is dictating to you and your friends of the Right and Center. It is the Left Wing of the Socialist movement of the whole world that is dictating to you. And they are dictating in the very language of the most vigorous and realistic writings of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, their Communist Manifesto and their analyses of actual historic events. And this “dictation” amounts only to a simple and practical statement — if you do not believe in our principles, you can not come into our organization and dilute and corrupt them, as all principles always have been diluted and corrupted in the past, by near-believers of every description, from conscious hypocrites to accommodating interpreters.

Dogmatism and Opportunism.

Akin to the charge of newness and nationalism is the charge of “dogmatism” which Hillquit brings against the Communist leaders. Or rather, he brings against the Russian leaders a twin charge of dogmatism on the one hand and opportunism on the other.

The peculiar features of our Communist friends [he says] is that, while they seek to force the Socialist movement of all countries into a rigid mold of dogmatic formula, they themselves have never hesitated to change their program and policies to suit the changing conditions of their country, and it is this political opportunism to which they very largely owe their practical successes.

Here again Hillquit reveals a failure to grasp the essence of the Communist attitude. It is a failure to understand the energy and practicality and realism with which they conceive and conduct the class struggle. There can be no flexibility in the minds of the people actually conducting such a struggle as to the existence of the struggle itself, nor as to the presence of the enemy, and of his weapons and fortifications. It is either a struggle or not a struggle, and if it is a struggle, then — call it dogmatism if you will — there is no use parleying, collaborating, compromising, and in a million little ways of speech, action, and idea, obscuring the issue and clouding the line of battle. Better conceive it more definite than it is, than more indefinite. That is the mentality of action. And that is the attitude of the Bolsheviks toward their own movement, as well as toward that of foreign countries.

But on the other hand, since it is a battle, and not the demonstration of a thesis — grab every advantage, every probability of defeating the enemy that comes to your mind. Be an opportunist of the most extreme flexibility, only so your goal is clearly defined and your compromise is for the sake of that goal, and not for the sake of some personal end that leads away from it. It is the compromises of the will that are despicable. The compromises of practical intelligence, when the will is inflexible, are of the essence of great generalship. And it is such compromises that have characterized the Communist leaders in Russia. What Hillquit calls their “dogmatism” is the inflexibility of their will to victory in the class struggle, and what he calls their “opportunism” is their agility and intellectual freedom in the conduct of that struggle.

Historic Facts.

It may be his failure to grasp this distinction between dogmatism of mind and resoluteness of purpose, which caused Hillquit to give the erroneous account of the history of the Bolshevik Revolution that he did give, and still insists on giving. He thinks the

fact that the Bolsheviks *participated in the elections for the Constituent Assembly*, trying to capture as many seats as they could, is a ground for asserting that they had not at that time conceived the idea of forming a government of the soviets. At least this fact is the only ground he has for his assertion.

It will be remembered that in reply to his original statement that it was not until the Bolsheviks discovered themselves to be a minority in the Constituent Assembly and in control of the soviets, that they coined the slogan, “All power to the Soviets,” I cited him several issues of *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* for June and July 1917 (they are in the public library); which proved, beyond the possibility of doubt, that Lenin advocated the transfer of power to the soviets in the All-Russian Soviet Convention on June 17th, that Lunacharsky introduced the Bolshevik resolution demanding “the transfer of all governmental authority into the hands of an All-Russian Soviet” a few days later, that on July 1st the Bolsheviks carried in their section of the demonstrations the slogan “All power to the Soviets,” and that the extent of their “control” of the soviets at that time was manifested in 126 votes for their resolution as against 543 votes for the Menshevik resolution.

Hillquit’s reply to my citations of fact is to admit that he was wrong in saying that the Bolsheviks “coined the slogan” only after the elections to the Constituent Assembly, but to assert that at this earlier time the slogan had a different meaning — it meant that the provisional government should be *made up entirely of soviet members*. The Bolsheviks were still at that time intending, he asserts, that the power should go to the Constituent Assembly when it should be convened. “Otherwise,” he says, “why call an Assembly, participate in the elections, and contend for its control?”

That is to say, it is inconceivable for Hillquit that a party believing in the transfer of governmental power to the soviets, and yet knowing of the popular demand for a Constituent Assembly, would join in the call for an Assembly, participate in the elections, and try to win as much power there as possible. And yet, if he would get out of the mood of academic inference and into the mood of political action, he would see in a moment that as good generals they could not possibly do otherwise. Every additional delegate that they had in the Constituent Assembly — as well as every one they had in the Congress of Soviets — made

it that much easier for them, when the time came, to tell the Constituent Assembly to go home and go to bed. It made the success of the transfer of power which they had been long contemplating more certain.

Does not Morris Hillquit know that Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg advised the German Communists also to participate in the elections to a Constituent Assembly, although they were at that time the uncompromising advocates and organizers of a soviet government? Surely he knows that. But does he also know that Lenin has expressly commended them upon that point, and that the Third International as a whole has repudiated the German party of so-called Left Wing Communists [Communist Workers Party of Germany], who opposed their policy, and still oppose the general policy of political action. If the attempt of the Bolsheviks to win seats in the Russian Constituent Assembly proves that they had not at that time “conceived the notion” of a Soviet government, how do you account for their advocating the very same step in Germany two years later, when they *had* a Soviet government in Russia, and the one purpose of their minds was to produce another in Germany?

If Morris Hillquit would go through those copies of *Izvestiia* which I cited to him, in which Lenin speaks of the soviets as a “type of state,” and in which the Bolshevik resolution is introduced and discussed, he would be compelled either to shut his eyes altogether or else acknowledge his error. But since that is not enough for him, I will carry the proof still farther back into the past, and make it still more convincing.

Zinoviev, in his speech about Lenin on the occasion of his recovery, Sept. 6, 1918, said that he believed Lenin conceived the idea of a Soviet state during the revolution of 1905.

He only saw the Soviet in 1905 once or twice, but I am firmly of the opinion that even then, when he was looking down from his seat in the balcony upon the first Labor Parliament, the idea of the Soviet state must have already been dawning upon his mind.

Inasmuch as Zinoviev worked with Lenin and under his guidance for the whole 15 years during the revolution of 1905, we could hardly have a better authority for the date and place of the birth of this idea. It is certain that the idea was dawning in Lenin’s mind by the year 1907, when the All-Russian Congress of the Social Democratic Labor Party (Bolsheviks and

Mensheviks) was held in London. For in a speech before that convention on the Bolsheviks’ “Attitude Toward the Bourgeois Parties” (pg. 272 of the Proceedings) he spoke of the “Soviets of Workers’ Deputies, Soviets of Peasants’ and Soldiers’ Deputies” as “the organs of revolutionary power,” and he described how at the height of the insurrection against the Tsar’s government, the bourgeoisie were already dreading and beginning to fight against these proletarian institutions. “They saw in them,” he says, “the revolution going too far for them” and tried to divert its energy “into the channel of police-constitutional reaction.”

These citations, whose existence I was sure of, but which I could not get my hands on at the time of my previous reply to Hillquit, make it fairly certain that Lenin understood the role that the soviets were to play in the revolutionary state many years before he came to Russia in April of 1917. But that he understood it, and preached it without the slightest qualification the very moment he came here, is beyond any doubt. And since Hillquit is contented to be only a little ironical about my citations of *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* — which he says are not on sale at his newsstand — I will now cite him something that has been on sale at least on the newsstands of the Rand School for over 2 years. That is the “Theses of Lenin” presented at a meeting of the leaders of his party in St. Petersburg the day after his arrival (April 4th [17th]). These theses were published in No. 26 of *Pravda* for April 7th (20th), 1917, and are to be found in Louis C. Fraina’s volume, *The Proletarian Revolution in Russia*, published by The Communist Press in New York in 1918. Even if we assume that Lenin first “conceived the notion” of setting up the soviets as a permanent governmental institution” at that time, it will be instructive to Morris Hillquit to see how clearly he conceived it, and how well he was aware at the same time of the petty minority that his party could command in the soviets, or anywhere else. I quote a few sentences from numbers 2, 3, 4, and 5 of these Theses.

(2) The peculiar character of the present situation in Russia lies in the fact that it represents the *transition* from the first stage of the Revolution, which has placed power in the hands of the capitalist class as a result of the insufficient class-consciousness and organization of the proletariat, to its *second* stage, which must transfer power into the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasantry.

(3) No support of the Provisional Government:

demonstration of the utter mendacity of all its pledges, especially concerning the renunciation of annexations. Exposure as a policy, instead of the inadmissible and illusion-sowing “demand” that the government, a government of capitalists, should *cease* to be imperialist.

(4) Recognition of the fact that, in the majority of Councils of Workers’ Deputies, our part is in a minority — in a weak minority as yet — as against the *coalition of all* the lower middle class opportunist elements which have succumbed to the influence of the capitalist class and which transmit this influence to the proletariat, from the Populist Socialists and Socialist Revolutionaries down to the Organization Committee of the Social Democratic Party (Chkheidze, Tseretelli, etc.), Steklov, and others.

Enlightenment of the masses as to the fact that the Councils of Workers’ Deputies are the *only possible* form of revolutionary government, and that therefore our duty, while the government is still under the influence of the capitalist class, can only be patiently, systematically, persistently, in a manner adapted to the practical requirements of the masses, to *explain* its mistakes and tactics.

While we are in the minority, we carry on the work of criticism and explanation of mistakes, urging at the same time the necessity of the transfer of all power to the Councils of Workers’ Deputies, in order that the masses may free themselves from mistakes by actual experience.

(5) Not a parliamentary republic — a return to it from the Councils of Workers’ Deputies would be a step backward — but a republic of Councils of Workmens’, Laborers’, and Peasants’ Deputies throughout the country and from top to bottom.

At about the same time that these theses were published, Lenin published an analysis of the different political parties in Russia, and their attitudes to the leading questions of the day. And in that analysis Hillquit will find, side by side, the answers of the Bolsheviks to these two questions:

*Are we for a single authority or a dual authority?
Shall a Constituent Assembly be called?*

The answer of the Bolsheviks to the first question was:

“For sole power in the hands of the Councils of Workers, Soldiers, and Peasants, from top to bottom over the whole country.”

And their answer to the second question was:

“Yes, and as soon as possible.”

I do not think any further citations ought to be necessary, but I will add these words from “A Letter on Tactics,” which Lenin published in Pravda at the same time with the theses which I have quoted. (This letter has also been in the Rand School since 1918.)

Apart from a capitalist government there can be no government in Russia outside the soviets of Workers’, Laborers’, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ Deputies.

Now I ask Morris Hillquit to lay aside all his pride of authority and acknowledge that he was flatly and absolutely wrong, not only in asserting that the Bolsheviks “coined the phrase” All power to the Soviets after they had captured a majority in the soviets; but also in asserting that “it was then and then only that they...discovered that the Soviets were the only logical instrument of proletarian rule”; and also in repeating that assertion in his reply to me in the following words: “It was only When the Bolsheviks found themselves in a minority in the Constituent Assembly that they conceived the notion that the Soviets must supplant the Assembly and be set up as a permanent governmental organization.

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