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The "Struggle for Organizational Hegemony" on the Left— A Formula for Failure

by Steve Bloom

It is hard for anyone to avoid noting the fragmented condition of the revolutionary left: multiple small groups each competing with all others for influence and recruits. There are many and complex reasons for this state of affairs. To some extent it does represent genuine and important political disagreements on questions such as how to orient toward contemporary struggles, what strategic path to follow to promote revolution, what forces constitute the revolutionary subject in contemporary society, who are the primary allies, what ideologies should be promoted and which ones combated, plus many similar issues.

But there is one factor which has generated considerable fragmentation and which, in my view, ought to be theoretically discarded: The idea that there can be one, and only one, organization that has a truly revolutionary outlook, that this organization with the correct revolutionary outlook is the one I belong to, and that the most essential goal, therefore, is to battle for the organizational hegemony of my group. All other organizations on the left represent the enemy, either actively or by default.

This theme runs through more than one historical tradition—including the Trotskyist movement, the “Marxist-Leninist” current that looked to Maozedong thought, and even those Communist Parties that looked to Moscow for leadership. The "struggle for organizational hegemony" was one of the driving elements in the internal life of the groups to which so many of us belonged. Where did this idea come from? Why did it run so deep in our political consciousness? Why is it so tenacious, still shaping the actions of so many who imagine themselves to be charting a revolutionary course today?

Revolutionary ideas and revolutionary organizations

First let me state that there is a struggle which we ought to consider essential: a struggle for the hegemony of revolutionary *ideas*. This I still firmly believe in.

Second, note that a valid element exists even in the thought that we may need to promote the hegemony of a single revolutionary organization: There are *times* when this does, in fact, become a decisive factor in the class struggle, decisive in our battle for the hegemony of revolutionary ideas. One such historical moment occurred in Russia in 1917. And because an understanding of what happened in Russia in 1917 constituted such an important element in the development of all three of the historical trends mentioned above, the idea of *organizational* hegemony which proved decisive in that *specific* case transformed itself into a theoretical over-generalization which has maintained its hold down to the present day.

It would be a mistake to suggest that in the Spring of 1917 in Russia only the Bolsheviks conceived the idea of "All Power to the Soviets." But the Bolsheviks were the largest and most influential force to adopt this as part of their program (in April of that year), and the only political party to do so. The entire struggle in Russia from April to the time of the insurrection in October can reasonably be boiled down to a struggle for the hegemony of this idea: "All Power to the Soviets." And since the Bolsheviks were the biggest and most consistent force engaged in that struggle, there was a strong tendency for others (left Social Revolutionaries, left Mensheviks, Trotskyists) who agreed with this slogan to gravitate toward and join the Bolshevik party. The struggle for the hegemony of the revolutionary idea ("All Power to the Soviets") soon began to take the *form* of a struggle for the hegemony of the Bolshevik Party, as an organization, within the Soviets themselves.

In the years immediately following the October insurrection, when the battle became one for the maintenance of Soviet power against the counterrevolution, it was once again only the Bolsheviks who stood firm in defense of this revolutionary task (idea). Throughout this period, then, (1917 through the early 1920s) the struggle for the hegemony of revolutionary ideas in Russia/the USSR did, in fact, coincide, at least for the most part, with the reality of hegemony for a single organization.

And so, what was true in Russia during this period of time began to be envisioned by subsequent theorists not as a particular historical moment or specific case study of revolutionary events, but as an absolute iron law of history: There will and can be only one revolutionary party with the correct set of revolutionary ideas (and not only in the most revolutionary of times, as in Russia in 1917, but at all times and in all places—see more below). The struggle for hegemony of *our* organization became one of the guiding principles of *every* organization—whether it considered itself Trotskyist, or Maoist, or part of the Communist movement that looked to Moscow for guidance. Each group felt pretty much the same way about itself. This led to a struggle for *organizational* hegemony not only between these three broad currents but within them as well. Both the Trotskyists and the Maoists (but especially the Trotskyists) split into smaller and smaller factions as new political questions, and therefore different political assessments, emerged—each claiming to be *the* organization with *the* correct set of revolutionary ideas whose task was to struggle with *all* others (most importantly those who were closest to themselves ideologically) for hegemony. The only reason this did not also happen among those who looked to Moscow was that the Kremlin always hand-picked one specific national grouping, anointing it as Moscow's official representative, thus cutting short the development of a struggle between different currents.

We should note another nuance which seems important here, already referenced above. What happened in Russia during 1917, with all of the revolutionary forces gravitating toward a single organization, may well be a universal law of historical development *in the context of genuinely revolutionary events*. Though our base sample of experience is too small to make this a definitive theoretical generalization, it does have a certain logical appeal. It would make sense that in the heat of a proletarian revolutionary struggle those who begin thinking along similar strategic lines are likely to want to work together in a single political party. But even if this does turn out to be a universal development *during the most revolutionary moments*, it hardly implies the iron necessity for a single

hegemonic party at other times, when the tasks are less clear-cut and a greater diversity of revolutionary thought is even more essential.

In its worst forms, the battle for organizational hegemony, post 1917, turned into murderous violence against others on the left. Stalin was the one who initiated this kind of "political struggle," against the Left Opposition--in Russia and in exile. The assassination of Trotsky in Mexico is one example, but only one. Many Maoist groups, and a few that came out of the Trotskyist tradition, also engaged in violent assaults, up to and including political assassinations, against other organizations with whom they were contending for hegemony.

Today there is a general (though still not universal) understanding that violence within the left is not the way to address our political disagreements. But other forms taken by the struggle for organizational hegemony, pursued as a necessity (as an iron law of history), have not yet been decisively overcome. It is an approach that still runs very deep, is still embraced by most formations that think of themselves as revolutionary.

There are a few exceptions to this, such as the socialist organization Solidarity to which I belong. Also, on an international level, the Fourth International (that wing of it that Ernest Mandel was the leader of until his death) has also abandoned this self-conception. There are others which have emerged, especially in the last decade. So it seems important to note, once again the other side of our dialectic: I would argue that there is a certain tendency for groups and currents which give up the struggle for organizational hegemony to simultaneously give up the struggle for the hegemony of revolutionary ideas, as if these two distinct elements were one and the same. We should insist, however, that it is essential to continue the struggle to understand and define revolutionary ideas, to disseminate them to a mass audience as well as on the left, and to attempt to win a substantial layer of activists to them—without, simultaneously, falling into the trap of believing that every other group, who may have a somewhat different take on what it will take to make a revolution, thereby becomes our enemy.

Some questions to consider in this context

1) Marxism is part of a Western tradition of rationalism and positivism. Less sophisticated versions of this general philosophy will often act as if, and sometimes even actively affirm that, there is one, and only one, "scientific truth." Most, or at least the best of, Western science does not actually restrict itself based on such a narrow premise. But it remains the way many kinds of inquiries are structured, the way survey classes are generally taught at universities, the way popularizations are most often presented, etc. It therefore has a prevailing influence in society, including on left groups. Other approaches to truth in the bourgeois tradition, such as monotheistic religion, also assert a "one-ness" or singularity of that which is real, correct, truthful (thus all of the competing Christian sects, for example).

For Marxists, an appreciation of the dialectic is, or at least ought to be, an adequate antidote to this mistaken insistence on one, and only one, truth. But a genuine appreciation and practice of the dialectical method is, unfortunately, extremely rare. And so the prevailing modes of discourse which exist in society at large have a profoundly detrimental effect on the revolutionary left, contributing to the sense that there is some

manifest destiny embodied in the ideas of *my* organization, which has discovered the one and only genuine truth.

Further, the *more schematic* notions (please note emphasis) that see Marxism as striving for "scientific truth" also often fail to understand that when we are dealing with human society and social struggle "truth" is far more complex than it is in an experimental science. Often it is not a matter of which approach is right and which is wrong. More than one road might, for example, get us to the same goal, but with each also extracting a certain cost, a certain level of sacrifice (that is, entailing a certain level of contradiction). It is then a matter of deciding what price we are willing to pay, exactly what sacrifices we are, and are not, willing to make, etc.

2) It is, nevertheless, possible and necessary to talk about correct and incorrect ideas. These categories do exist. Further, correct ideas often emerge from the struggle against incorrect ideas. We cannot become relativists who believe that all ideas are valid from some point of view, that it is therefore wrong to try to judge whether a particular approach is correct at all. We have already begun to consider this aspect of the question above, when we affirmed the struggle for the hegemony of *revolutionary* ideas.

But there is another element that must be added in order to make this thought truly useful. The test of whether a particular idea, which presents itself to us as a "revolutionary" idea, is correct or not isn't how brilliantly the polemic in favor of it was written. Nor is it who might win a majority of the vote in a specific organization at a particular moment. Even less can this be measured by who is more physically powerful and therefore able to impose their will in a violent confrontation. The test of whether a revolutionary idea is correct or not comes only from trying it out in the actual world of the class struggle and seeing what the result turns out to be.

If the revolutionary left, as a collective, understood this and undertook a project of honestly testing all ideas, their own and those promoted by other organizations, seeing what happens when these ideas are applied in some way to real events, then considering again after the results can be (at least partially) measured—rather than applying the test of whose polemic is most brilliantly written, who wins a vote, or who can impose their will in a physical contest—the worst aspects of the struggle for organizational hegemony would disappear almost instantly. Who has a majority only decides what specific ideas will be tried out first (or most vigorously) to see if they work, or how well they work. It determines nothing else.

3) Carried to the extreme (when applied with the fervor of Christian evangelicism or a crusade, for example, as it sometimes is), a struggle over ideas becomes so profoundly intolerant of difference that it turns into a malignancy—spawning groups like the Spartacist League, to cite a worst case. Such political currents consider others on the left to be not only mistaken, but an enemy worthy of being destroyed. Organizations of this type represent something more than mere "sectarianism" (little sects fighting with each other). They become a metastatic malignancy that will spread, if not actively combated (through a struggle against their ideas and ideology), and physically destroy the body within which they are growing.

4) The nature of politics as it is generally understood under bourgeois democracy (not what bourgeois politics really is in substance, of course, but how it is taught and presented in popular discourse) actually prefers and engenders the kinds of competitive machinations, rather than collective collaboration and objective consideration of what is right, that is so often reproduced in the left's struggle for hegemony. True, bourgeois politicians do not attempt to win via brute force or fisticuffs (unless we are talking about a genuinely fascist force, but that is another question since we are discussing what happens in a bourgeois-democratic context). Still, bourgeois politics only rarely measures the value of ideas by their actual effectiveness in generating positive social results. Most often bourgeois politicians win by cleverly out-maneuvering (out-debating, out-spending, and especially out-falsifying) their competition. The struggle for organizational hegemony on the left, unfortunately, often mirrors all of that, its worst elements in particular.

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