

Some Reflections on the 'Revolutionary Communist Group'

Gerry Leversha

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."—HAMLET Act 1 Sc. 5.

The Revolutionary Communist Group—RCG for short—is a relative newcomer on the Trotskyist fringe. Yet few people who regularly attend left-wing discussions and meetings can still be blissfully unaware of its presence. The RCG has a remarkable ability to dominate public debate by means of its own carefully rehearsed speeches, consisting for the most part of a small collection of standardised assertions rearranged in various permutations. This insistence is certainly a conscious strategy on their part to gain a wider audience, especially amongst the working class, and it cannot be denied that it has paid off in winning them a certain notoriety.¹

I think that it is important to examine the arguments of the RCG and to learn something from doing so. I do *not* think that the *content* of RCG politics is particularly illuminating—in a negative or positive sense—for serious socialists, but I do feel that it is worth our perusing their *method of analysis*. There are few groups on the left who take methodology as seriously as the RCG do, and there are even fewer which display such a misunderstanding

¹ In recent months the RCG has not only suffered a breakaway—the Revolutionary Communist Tendency, or RCT—but also witnessed a further split within the breakaway—the Committee for a Communist Programme, or CCP. The rationale behind the splits does not seem to lie in any major disagreement on political orientation, but only over how sectarian the organisation should be towards other left groups, particularly the CPGB. For the purposes of this article, therefore, the three groups are treated as one. This is not unfair, for the three organisations share a common perspective on nearly all issues; for instance, both the RCG and the RCT publish a journal on Ireland called *Hands off Ireland* and the contents of the first issues of both journals are very nearly identical, the same signed articles appearing in both.

of what Marxist method consists. I believe that the RCG theoretical method is an extreme case of a phenomenon which I will describe as 'theoretical essentialism', a tendency whose roots can be traced back not to Marx but to Hegel. By studying the manifestations of this malady in RCG politics, we should find it easier to avoid falling prey to it ourselves in our own theory and practice. The negative example set by the RCG could thus turn out to be instructive for the evolution of a more mature and fruitful political understanding on our own part. I hope that that will be seen as adequate justification for what might initially seem to be a rather academic exercise.

Themes of RCG politics

A recent article in the RCG's theoretical journal began with an analysis of the crisis and of the cuts in the public sector.

"The crisis is not a peculiarly British crisis. Internationally capitalism faces a crisis of profitability. The profit rates of capitalists are falling."²

Connoisseurs will recognise here the quintessence of RCG theory. The crisis is caused by the long-term tendency of the rate of profit to fall. It can be solved only at the expense of either the capitalist or the working class. In attacking workers' living standards, the present Government has clearly chosen the latter alternative.

In order to force the level of wages below their value, unemployment is being encouraged. Unproductive state expenditure is being cut. These

² *Revolutionary Communist* No. 5, p. 2: *Women's Oppression under Capitalism*, by O. Adamson, C. Brown, J. Harrison and J. Price.

measures (if allowed to be successful) will restore the profit rate to its former level. Nevertheless, such a resolution of the crisis can only be temporary, for the irresistible dynamic of capital's central contradiction will reassert itself in further inevitable crises.

In its naked form the logic of this argument is undoubtedly quite attractive. After all, didn't Marx prove (in *Capital* Vol III Part I) that the falling rate of profit is an inescapable consequence of the fundamental contradiction between capital and labour in the process of appropriation of surplus value, in a determinate mode of production and of circulation—prove it, moreover, in an argument which relies entirely on conceptual steps and mathematical calculation, and which therefore cannot be disqualified by 'new' empirical data?³ Faced with such an *a priori* certainty, who would not eagerly grasp at it to explain the roots of all current phenomena of the society we live in?

Feminism

The RCG have no qualms about doing just that. All of their analyses, regardless of their differing objectives, set out armed with this fundamental truth. For instance, the quote above came from an article on women's oppression under capitalism. It proceeded by denouncing feminism as a form of bourgeois ideology which did not recognise that "the source of women's oppression is not lack of rights but the existence of capitalist relations of production."⁴ Slogans such as the equal division of domestic labour were then rejected as reformist on the grounds that the complete socialisation of housework was a Utopian dream under capitalism, and any short-term remedy would either sow illusions about the independence of the women's struggle from the class struggle, or lead to disillusionment. Against such confusing conceptions, the RCG maintained that "the political response of the working class, the ability of its leadership to combat the view of the bourgeoisie—these are the decisive factors for women in the present crisis."⁵ For their failure to grasp this conclusion, the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) and most left groups active inside it stand condemned for aiding and abetting the class enemy.

³ It is not my purpose here to enter the current debate over the falling rate of profit, although I personally think that Marx's argument is certainly wrong and that the truth of his assertion is quite dubious. However, my critique of the RCG does not rely on the outcome of this debate; had they chosen, say, the tendency towards relative impoverishment of the working class, instead of falling profitability, as their universal datum point, the criticisms I make would be equally valid.

⁴RC5:p.47.

⁵RC5:p.5.

The quoted passage also illustrates RCG's explanation of the current cutbacks in the social services. It is solely a question of the crisis of profitability. Socialists must oppose the cuts (in all conceivable circumstances) in order to defend the working class. The Italian Communist Party is thus clearly a 'reformist' party by its support for certain 'austerity' measures. No further analysis is necessary.

Ireland

As a final example, let us look at just one aspect of the RCG's analysis of the Irish situation. On what they contend (correctly) to be a key question for British revolutionaries, their approach has a familiar ring. On the failure of the power-sharing initiative, they have this to say:

"The need for 'stability' and the need in the coming period to restrain wages and increase profitability in the North point not to a 'withdrawal' but to intensified repression, directed against the majority in the North."⁶

The two sectors of capital operating in Ulster—British and Unionist—cannot both adopt the same measures to solve the crisis of profitability. Any form of power-sharing is thus doomed, *a priori*, to failure. The repression in the North, and the particular state-form in which it is organised, and the ideologies under which it is reproduced—all have at their root our old declining friend from the pages of Volume Three. In this context any intervention by British revolutionaries short of demanding immediate disengagement by British imperialism (equated by the RCG with British troops) is tantamount to social-chauvinism. No prizes for guessing where that puts the CPGB (not to mention all sections of the movement in Northern Ireland)!

The above examples are typical, and there is no point in wearying the reader by multiplying them. A single key suffices to unlock the secrets of any critical situation. How are 'they' trying to solve the crisis of profitability this time? How, in response, do we 'defend the working class'? All real political movement is the more or less adequate expression of the basic antagonism, and all class struggle is a matter of keeping your own end of the seesaw in the air. *Capital* serves as a talisman, the repository of all the mystery of the world.

This kind of approach has nothing original about it; it forms the basis of all elitist and idealist philosophies since Plato gazed upon the shadows in his cave. More particularly, Marx would have recognised it as the object of his own first political/philosophical polemics, his critique of the Hegelian

⁶ *Hands off Ireland* (RCG) No. 1, p. 5: *What will Britain do next?* by S. Palmer.

system. In what I hope is an instructive diversion, I shall now show that the RCG logic bears a very striking resemblance to the Hegelian logic which Marx subjected to such a vitiating attack. I begin by recapitulating the skeleton of Hegel's schema and the Marxian critique.⁷

Essentialism past and present

For Hegel the empirical world could be understood only by reference to something outside it, by contemplation upon a process taking place entirely within thought. This process, the dialectical development of the Idea, was sketched out in Hegel's *Logic*, which explained how the world as we know it was but the appearance ('phenomenal form') of a series of stages in the coming-to-be of the Idea.

"The ordinary empirical world is not governed by its own mind but by a mind alien to it; by contrast the existence corresponding to the real Idea is not a reality generated out of itself, but is just the ordinary empirical world."⁸

Marx had two objections to make to this philosophical method. On the one hand, it was 'uncritical idealism', since true reality resided only in the Idea, and knowledge of the external world was only accessible through *a priori* metaphysics. On the other hand, it was 'uncritical positivism', since the empirical object-world was re-introduced in an arbitrary, untheorised manner, and the assignment of 'real' phenomena to the stages of the Ideal essence was necessarily *ad hoc*.⁹ Hegel's dialectic therefore managed to straddle the twin chasms of empiricism and idealism only at the expense of falling one leg into each.

It doesn't take much acuity to recognise in the RCG position precisely the same structural features as are exhibited by the Hegelian schema. The sensuous world is allotted a meaning only inasmuch as it is re-interpreted in terms of a theoretical progression. Substitute for the Idea the basic contradiction of capitalist relations of production, expressed in the reconstruction of crisis and the falling rate of profit, and hey presto the other relations fall nicely into place. Naturally the self-same criticisms apply. On the one hand, an uncritical idealism: concrete analysis is superseded by

the study of *Capital* and by calculating the consequences of the contradictions formulated in Volume One. As its complement, an uncritical positivism: a universal explanation for all phenomena, which is necessarily no explanation at all, since it doesn't show why such and such a particular form is assumed by a crisis or why such and such a specific resolution—rather than any other—is adopted. Take, for instance, the RCG thesis that the crisis is international and therefore cannot be understood in terms of national specificity. How is this reconciled with the undeniable fact that the crisis has hit Britain later and harder than the rest of the capitalist world? The RCG tend to fall back on quoting Britain's relative advantage as a major imperialist industrial power. Not only does this reveal the *ad hoc* nature of what passes in the RCG for concrete analysis, but it is even inadequate in the most charitable interpretation: the nature of Britain's past as a world power is itself a static and eternal fact, and cannot function as a specific reason for a specific phenomenon. An ahistorical viewpoint is qualified by ahistorical corrections! Factors like changes in the nature of inter-imperialist contradictions—which require a specific, concrete analysis—are inadmissible if they cannot be taken merely as the transient appearances of some changeless underlying essence.

It is this methodological absurdity which I designate 'theoretical essentialism'.

A Politics of passivity

The RCG insist that incorrect theory has political ramifications. They are quite right, of course, but are themselves no exception to this rule, and being, to give them credit, a quite consistent organisation (in the sense of carrying through their theory to its conclusions), their political practice is, unfortunately for them, especially prone to negative consequences.

(i) Genuinely *specific* analysis is deemed unnecessary. A world whose explanation is perennial and whose development is unilinear always exhibits the same general characteristics. By definition, there cannot exist such animals as a 'national road to socialism' or a crisis which doesn't have its roots in profitability.

(ii) The political sphere cannot conceivably have any autonomy from the economy. A case such as the conflict in the North of Ireland between British and Unionist interests can *only* be the effect of the competition for profitability, and an explanation in terms of political structures or ideological institutions is no explanation, for the latter must be reduced to their economic preconditions before the analysis rates as 'Marxist'. For RCG essentialism, political and ideological factors have no existence or effects, and economic interests are directly represented or misrepresented in the political arena. Forces which

⁷ In what follows I refer to Marx's essays entitled *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* and the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, which are in Marx/Engels *Collected Works* Vol. 3. An able introduction by L. Colletti to the Pelican edition of the *Early Writings* is fundamental in drawing out the elements of Marx's critique.

⁸ *Early Writings*, ed. Colletti, pp. 61-2.

⁹ The phrases 'uncritical idealism' and 'uncritical positivism' come from the *Paris Manuscripts*.

seem to play a role in the movement, but which cannot be reduced to class forces (such as the WLM), are simply denied by the RCG. Whatever fails to pigeon-hole into prearranged categories is only an illusion.

(iii) A further consequence is the equation of ideology with *mystification*: the real world is but an appearance which conceals its truth from the (necessarily) blind subjects of historical experience. For the left, therefore, political intervention is a process of *de-mystification*, the result of reading through the appearance ('phenomenal form') to the essence of things, and of presenting the unvarnished truth to the masses. Ideological work is reduced to a sort of missionary zeal, conversion of the heathen. Struggle in the realm of ideology other than this is implicitly denied.

The RCG manifest this tendency especially strongly. They believe that ideologies such as sexism prevail in the working class because "the ruling class has no lack of apologists and academics willing to offer 'expert' advice on the desirability of women fulfilling their 'natural' role as mothers and housewives."¹⁰ The response of revolutionaries must be to explain to the victims the roots of women's oppression and combat the erroneous ideas of reformist leaderships and professional ideologues, as well as the rest of the left and the WLM. This explains the organisation's intransigence in repeating the same old harangues, and really precludes the possibility of effective dialogue with them. It is interesting that it is the *tactical* question of how one should divide one's time between preaching and action, rather than the *strategic* one of whether preaching is the road to socialism, which has underlined the recent splits in the RCG/RCT.

Parasitical

(iv) This explains the parasitical relationship which the RCG maintains to the rest of the left and democratic movement. They see themselves to be operating in a 'pre-entry' stage, in which the main thing is not participation in struggle but the elaboration of a correct programme for the working class. This programme is to be constructed outside the mainstream of working class life and experience, since the latter is irremediably tainted with reformist illusion and bourgeois ideology.

Since there can by definition be only *one* such correct programme, any disagreement as to what constitutes it must lead to a violent polemic, since one of the parties to the dispute must be abandoning Marxism. For instance, a recent polemical article in the RCT journal accused one of the leading RCG thinkers of presenting an analysis of Stalinism which

has 'nothing to do with Marxism'.¹¹ And yet the article referred to was very much within the tradition of RCG dogmatism and self-assurance. Internal debate in such a group is therefore just as acrimonious as the attitude to other left-wing organisations.

(v) Perhaps the most damning consequence of all of 'theoretical essentialism' is the *passive* role it allots to revolutionaries. The RCG constantly harp on the need to 'defend' the working class: a strategy of *reacting* rather than *acting*. There can only be defensive struggle within capitalism, and anyone who talks of elaborating politics to take the class forward *now* is an unrepentant reformist. To paint a picture of some future society after the downfall of capitalism is (correctly) denounced as Utopian if it has no connection with the present, and (incorrectly) labelled reformist if the seeds are to be planted now. No organisation is quite as extreme as the RCG in persisting in this attitude (ignoring Maoist loonies, of course) and it goes a long way towards explaining why the RCG will never succeed in leading anybody anywhere outside the confines of University libraries. They have succeeded in inheriting the mantle of Trotskyist fatalism without donning the complementary voluntarist cap.¹²

A politics of vitality

Theoretical essentialism is present to a greater or lesser degree in the practice of every group on the left (including the CPGB); being a constant danger, it would be miraculous if everybody didn't succumb to it every once in a while. What can be guarded against is the lapses in political work associated with this misconception, and in this respect it is useful to have some idea of an alternative theoretical method and political practice. I shall conclude by sketching out some guidelines in counterposition to the five tendencies enumerated above.

(i) Theoretical work *must* result in the concrete analysis of concrete situations; that is, it must isolate the unique features of a particular conjuncture and recommend a specific line of action which takes these into account. Such an analysis cannot follow from a universal method of explanation. In particular it requires a critical attitude to the texts of former revolutionary theoreticians, like Marx and Lenin; the 'cookbook mentality' must be discounted. Also it needs an appreciation of all the

¹¹ *Revolutionary Communist Papers* No. 1: p. 28: *A retrograde step for the Marxist movement: a reply to Cde. Yaffe.*

¹² For an analysis of the role of the couple fatalism/voluntarism within the Trotskyist tradition, see G. Hodgson: *Trotsky and Fatalistic Marxism*, Spokesman Books 1976.

factors operating in a given situation—the mood of the masses, the forms of political representation, the alternative solutions open—an appreciation which can only be gained by immersion in popular struggle and experience, and a respect for facts as well as for theory.

Autonomy

(ii) Politics is not reducible to economics. The various democratic movements active today for achieving diverse restricted aims cannot be simply assimilated into preconceived categories (and especially not into mere class categories). Rather they must be recognised as realities with their own dynamic and with noticeable effects, as forces which may bring about changes in the overall political framework. Revolutionary leadership must not despise these movements if they do not seem to conform to pure class interests, but must approach them with a certain humility and willingness to learn. It is history which will set up the court of inquiry on the contributions of revolutionary leaders, and not vice-versa.

A second aspect of this is that analysis cannot be confined to enumerating the economic forces at work (much less to reducing these economic forces to a class tug o' war over profits!). Political and ideological structures, cultural traditions, forms of mass organisation—all these factors are quite crucial in the description and the analysis of the current situation.¹³

(iii) The left must intervene in political and ideological struggle as serious and honest participants and not as opportunists wishing to gain a captive audience and maybe the odd recruit. A pedagogic attitude is not only arrogant and eventually counter-productive (as it makes people angry and bores them stiff instead of converting them) but it is also based upon a misunderstanding of the nature of ideology. An extreme example was supplied by a raw RCG recruit (evidently unversed in the litany) at a meeting in Manchester last year, who, when asked how reformist ideas got into the heads of the workers, accused the CP of planting them there. This howler contains the essence of the pedagogical attitude; true ideas and false ideas are spread by ideologues, pouring them into empty vessels. Who can shout loudest?

Contrary to this, we must recognise that ideology is a result of lived experience. 'Incorrect ideas' (in the sense of not being the ideas which will turn people towards socialism) are produced and reproduced in everyday life and hence can only be

changed in the course of active struggle. Once again this reinforces the necessity for the left to be genuinely immersed in the life of the people, and not perched on pulpits in the wilderness.

(iv) Parasitism both with regard to other left formations and to the mass movement is both unproductive and destructive. Nobody can lead anybody else unless they are honestly interested in the outcome of the immediate struggle and are prepared to listen and learn. This is a truism and I am astonished that the RCG cannot grasp it.

Passivity

(v) *Passivity* is fatal to the development of a left movement. Solutions to problems which affect people here and now in their everyday life cannot just be promised for the dim and distant future but must be proposed in the short-term. Such 'reformist' tactics must be inserted within the overall framework of a strategy which envisages the superseding of the present system of production and the construction of a communist society. This is not equivalent to repeating slogans about the impossibility of achieving anything under capitalism, much less to denouncing other people who are getting on with the job. In the context of such a strategy, the formulation of an immediate economic policy—for which the RCG vigorously denounces the CP—is essential, for without such a programme the left is projected as destructive rather than constructive. Our strategy must be both positive and *active*.

It is clear that the political attitude outlined above forms just as much a unity as does the RCG's theoretical essentialism. It is characterised by an appreciation of the real complex struggles affecting flesh-and-blood human beings and by understanding the necessity of an organic relationship between leadership and mass. It is a tribute to the CPGB that it is seriously evolving such a politics in contrast to the sterility of groups such as the RCG. Whether or not it is justified can in the end only be demonstrated by the course of events, and not by its correspondence to any conceptual system. Theoretical essentialism is essentially theoretical; politics is the condensation of social practice.

WOMEN, OPPRESSION AND LIBERATION—Part II

"STRUGGLE TODAY"

**Includes: At Work and in the Home
Sex and Sexuality
Women and the Labour
Movement**

**Produced by CP Education Dept.—50p
Obtainable from Central Books**

¹³ For some further comments on this theme, see B. Hindess: *The Concept of Class in Marxist Theory and Marxist Politics*, in *'Class, Hegemony and Party*, L&W 1977.