The Congress and After

Dan O'Neill

IN THE NEXT COUPLE OF YEARS there will be a theoretical-practical crisis like nothing so far. I read an article of Robin Blackburn's from the American *Leviathan* on the rebirth of Leninist strategy in European movements, etc., but I think the only way to keep pace both theoretically and strategically with the capitalist-technological concentration-acceleration, is by exactly the antithesis of the methodology of venerating Lenin — even the "real" Lenin.

What I'm waiting for is a batch of revolutionaries that prove they are revolutionaries in thought, word and deed, that people would be hard put to show weren't revolutionaries, who read Marx and Lenin harder than most of their present so-called critical adherents, use Marx and Lenin whenever they find them relevant, and say screw Marx and Lenin when people try to turn them into demigods above history, demonic forces within history, or super-human embodiments of history. They were just a couple of men, intelligent, mostly good, quite brave, possibly over-arrogant, and an important pair of contributors to one of the main traditions we now need to continue and transform and bring into connection with other traditions, such as, for example, the incredibly important one discerned emerging from Romanticism and a whole lot of other responses to the capitalist-industrial revolution giving rise to the notion of a common culture. In itself this whole tradition is an important corrective to any single class-conflict analysis, both as to the process of which we're a part and the goals to which we hope to move, and also the strategies that will get us there.

What I'm trying to say is that we have to go on being activists, revolutionaries with the consciousness that the relations between theory and practice are possibly now specifically and irreversibly different from what they were. Before, marxism-leninism was the theory to which one converted from other traditions, if one decided one was going to become a revolutionary. But now the activism cannot, should not, will not, be contained by means of being

Dan O'Neill is a lecturer in English at Queensland University and an editor of *AILR*.

56 AUSTRALIAN LEFT REVIEW—JUNE-JULY, 1970
directed, even guided very much by the resources of one tradition. Carl Oglesby puts the point by saying that in the advanced capitalist West our practice is far more revolutionary than our theory, and that the theory (only marxism-leninism is available as a coherent going concern) often simply hampers the revolutionary potential of the practice. Another way of coming at it would be to wonder whether we weren’t on the verge of a period of revolution so profound that many western traditions, under the pressure of new demands for sincerity in their adherents, undergo transformation to the point where their categories burst and those who live in and by them suddenly find themselves divested of them in all but habitual profession, standing in a new open space of intellectual liberation, side by side and face to face with people from other traditions, people they never expected to meet there, with whom they share sensibilities, aspirations, currents of feeling and the deeper elements of the mind for which there is no tradition.

Once there was a situation where “theory-was-put-into-practice”. That’s still done some of the time, to good effect. But often it’s to bad effect. Because in some ways it’s now true that often theorising has the function that practice formerly had and practice has the function theorising formerly had. We now could work on a theory of theory. We could also work on a theory of strategy, for it’s not enough to come up with the old syllogism of cliches: the revolutionary theory gives rise to the revolutionary analysis—gives rise to the revolutionary strategy—gives rise to the revolutionary party—gives rise to the revolutionary tactics—gives rise to the revolutionary situation—gives rise to the revolution. It’s all too linear. We need a specific theory of strategy. Even if that would only show the problematic nature of both “theory” and “strategy”.

At present the prospect for creative “strategies” has probably never been brighter in Australia. The revolution seems to be about liberating people from what Raymond Williams calls the dominative mode, and there is a sort of last bastion of this deep in the conceptual underpinnings of those revolutionary theorists whose formulas, ideologies, structures and schemes, programs and analyses are various expressions of a profound desire to master and marshall the energies that are latent in the potentially revolutionary people. It seems to me that this dominative mode of thinking, feeling and willing can be operative even in the most anti-elitist theories and strategies. Theory needs to be seen anew as a part of strategy almost, namely the most articulate form taken by the energies liberated in people by their own dialectical interplay with one another in both action and discussion, in the context of their solidarity in the struggle against the forces repressing them, both
the forces outside them and those they have internalised. Thus the
groups of revolutionaries don’t gradually appropriate the “correct”
theory and then adopt the “correct” praxis. Rather, in a whole
process of co-operation and interaction, individuals develop both
mutually in each other and commonly in the group the theory they
need to understand past action and liberate further action. Then
the action liberates further intellectual-moral energies of creative
self-liberation and self-redefinition that we each then go on to talk
about as our latest theoretical position. Position to blazes! Things
are going too fast for that, and they’re too complex and subtle
for any version of correct line on however sophisticated a level of
abstraction. The poor bastards who can’t see that—those people
who have the enormous pretension, based on their historical ignor­
ance, to go around regarding others as “objectively counter-revolu­
tionary”—are going to have to catch up.

I’m getting more and more annoyed by the facile escalation of
fairly abstract internationalism along with visionary-schematic
notions of perfectly uniform systems of soviets, workers control in
everything everywhere, brought in as soon as the workers can have
the word of the new correct theory and strategy moved over their
alienated spontaneity, etc., exorcising them from their racism,
embourgeoisification, nationalism, etc., etc. The more grandiose
and rhetorical all that gets the more I feel the need of something
that’s probably anathema to the instant revolutionaries, namely a
new kind of love of the country and the people of the country, a
bursting out of the alienation (in the non-marxist sense) from
everything in “square” Australia that’s almost become the bitter
little badge by which the university leftists recognise one another.
It seems to me we’ve been through the possibly necessary phase of
breaking away from, repudiating a lot of the pasts out of which
we’ve come, and it’s been painful enough for a lot of us, in terms
of family disagreements and the rest. But that can become and
has become a bit of a fetish. We’re fools if we think we can reject
the past rather than totally recreate our connections with it, emergences from it and modes of repudiating it. The time has
come, it seems to me, to realise the sober fact that we live and
will live for some time in a nation-bloc, a historical nation-bloc,
an epoch which won’t and can’t transform itself into an internation­
alist one until huge masses of people are prepared for such new
attitudes. They’re the people who live in country towns and
suburbs, and in provincial mentalities wherever they live. Gramsci
talks about “passionate bonds” and it seems to me we don’t have
enough passionate bonds with the country or the people. We don’t
really love the people in any tough realistic sense that can
survive actually meeting them, arguing with them, organising with

58 AUSTRAI 'AN LEFT REVIEW—JUNE-JULY, 1970
or against them. I'm not talking about nationalism or even about patriotism, but about something deep in the instinct for social change and in the motives for desiring social change, something that can't be organised into existence, something that exists under alienation whether in the marxist or the vaguer contemporary sense, the sort of thing that led people to feel that Lenin was somehow very Russian, very much of the Russian people; that obviously permeates the spirit of the Cuban revolution, and Mao, and quite obviously the Vietnamese revolutionaries. Perhaps in countries as corrupt as ours and America things have got to the point where the disgust with the so-called "representative" people and institutions is so profound and so subtly interpenetrated with daily life that it seeps into one's feelings about the very look, smell and feel of one's fellow countrymen and the countryside itself. But if so, this is a condition that can't simply be accepted as the state we're all in or as some kind of highly appropriate response to the situation.

The time's come to stop using our convenient abstractions for the real world in either the universities or the trade union movement. How many of us have any real sense of the social and economic topography and the institutional geography of this country, the way a country town operates in terms of its channels of power and influence, the role now played by its floating "intelligentsia" of school-teachers, radio (or TV) young-men-going-places, reporters on the country newspapers, etc., different powerful social pressure groups, exercising power almost by default (RSL's, etc.). Perhaps this kind of nation-wide infrastructure of revolution can't be built up until issues actually take lots of us into the breadth and extent of the country. It's an interesting difference between our student movement and America's that we didn't begin, as they did, with some hard facts to digest about the attitudes of provincials (voter registration, freedom rides, lunch-counter sit-ins, community organising). Not that we haven't got the sort of issues that might take us into the thick of that kind of thing both in the towns and in the country.

On the more specific issues concerning the CPA*: Maybe the major questions of strategy cut right under the present or any foreseeable organisation of the CPA. I think we ought all to restructure (and decentralise) into socialist-anarchist oriented nuclei in all the major matrices of the socio-economic and educational and communications centres, the role of which would be (i) to facilitate people's awareness of their present condition under

* Questions posed by ALR included: the main theoretical problems for marxists today; strategy, and those issues unanswered in the CPA decisions; the concept of counter-hegemony; organisation of revolutionaries in today's conditions; revolutionary responses to reformism and the united front; the political practice of the CPA, past, present and future; attitude to the opposition in the party; attitude to the USSR.
neo-capitalist industrialised nation-blocs in an increasingly economic-imperialist system (ii) to educate and learn from them as to how to liberate ourselves from the complicated involvements we all have in the present set-up (iii) to make available the theoretical and strategic resources of the whole left tradition to contest the animating ideas, habits, structures, etc., of the present order.

Things of obvious importance, especially now, are topics like dual power, the commune, democracy, recall, counter-culture, counter-institutions, etc. But these should be presented to people with more trust for what used to be called "the spontaneity of the masses". (I'm a bit unsure that "masses" is a useful concept—see concluding chapter of Raymond Williams *Culture and Society*.) At the very least they shouldn't be presented, as they currently are, as half-understood formulae. Much of the workers' control, self-management stuff is being presented in an incredibly boring and repellantly schematic "we'll save you with this handy ointment" kind of way.

I don't know how consistent those suggestions are with the way the CPA now works, is organised, distributes its intelligence and militants, organisational skill and physical plant. Or with the rather odd mixture now apparently emerging of electoral-suburban and "interest" regional groupings. I feel as though the CPA might be coming up to new organisational crossroads overlaying deep theoretical questions going to the root of marxism. It seems to me that up to now most left strategies have been based on the premise of a disjunction in the revolutionary forces between an elite and a mass of people who don't really have to be highly individuated or profoundly conscious of much more than the need to take part in the process leading up to and effecting "the" revolution (takes a number of days, weeks or months). After "the" revolution the leaders begin the process of making the mass into people more like themselves, the leaders, i.e. more individual — by better feeding, housing, education and hopefully better freedom, justice, communal control, etc., — till the state withers away, etc. From that position it was a five-finger exercise in "scientific socialism" to pick off the woolly-headed anarchists who thought you could ignore the state and over-estimate the people from very early on in the process.

I'd say the basis for that disjunction has probably already begun to be eroded. I don't think there'll be elites who have any more total knowledge of society than anyone else. There'll be, if you like, a number of different competing kinds of "total" knowledge, all inadequate (both methodologically and in empirical and structural detail) that will only transiently and precariously define one elite off against another. A breath of intellectual fresh air will be enough
to blow down the walls between them (call them factions or tendencies or whatever you like) and constitute (i) a squabble if we're unwise and unlucky and ungenerous or (ii) a communal heart or centre for a powerful revolutionary movement if we can only come of age conceptually. What the groups composing this centre (community, heart of mind and will towards permanent revolution, switchboard, focus, synthesis or whatever you want to conceptualise it as) will mainly have to offer is not the old style teaching, leading and master-minding element but rather a set of valuable past experiences within one tradition now hopefully merging with others towards constant revolution (Che's society and great school, etc.); these past experiences translated by much deeper reflection than we've yet made on them into usable contributions about strategy and tactics, particularly concerning the more traditionally political and social framework-type questions, including (a) how to build up consciousness of the straight out class-as-process and power elements of the preparation for decisive take-over phases in various areas and stages and (b) organised insurrection, non-compliance on a mass scale, etc.

That's the elite side of the disjunction. The thing about the masses is that there now aren't any. Except at football matches, in certain frenzied periods of war encounters, riots, etc. For the rest, there's the many different processes of "massing" people that Raymond Williams has spoken of at some length in his books. (I'm talking about revolution in the advanced countries, of course.) People are reduced to "masses" for the convenience of consumer-individuals by the many institutions of technological-capitalism (and technological-bureaucratic-communism) e.g. department stores, industry methods of production, communications media, government departments and so on. If there are masses they result from the fact that there are powerful classes who need to limit human communication and the consequent individuation in their own interests.

Likewise if there are masses they occur (in "advanced" societies) not in times of revolution but in times of managed social stability under the system that needs the revolution. The fact is, if there is going to be revolution, it will be made not by a crowd of foxes getting the horses to stampede but by a release, on a widespread scale, of people's already present individuality, creativity, personal capacity for controlling their own lives, etc., developed even under the present system to a point that is "unmassing" more and more people daily. No vanguard is going to be able to pull the wool over these kind of people's eyes. For one thing they've been on the sheep's back for too long. For another, the range of active interests that has been politicised in a healthy and communally contributory way has been so enlarged that once the present
definers of politics and the unrepresentative institutions they've defined as politics begin to come under really immense attack, virtually everyone conscious and articulate in any major field of human endeavour will be having a say about and consequently acting to bring about the manifold re-definition of politics. No vanguard strategy, however sophisticated, will work because as soon as the revolutionary process begins to accelerate (perhaps this is already true) it will be by its very nature anti-elitist — from the impulse up to the theory — and implicitly anarchist in its every move towards socialism. No-one will be able to be a socialist without being an anarchist and no-one will be able to be an anarchist except in his own fantasies without being a socialist.

That brings me to the concept of counter hegemony. This is obviously important but insofar as it's based on Gramsci as we've had him presented so far in Australia it's merely sophisticated Leninism based on (i) illusions about the nature of interpretation of various kinds of interests with various kinds of ideas and with the socio-economic set-up, and (ii) the most incredibly naive view of the nature of and pursuit of intellectual life in its more intimate connection with people's emotional needs and other needs for world views, etc., and (iii) a really impoverished notion of the specificities of capitalism and industrialism as huge features of concentrated human systemising of attitudes, processes, structures and inter-relationships within human traditions that began before them and will endure after them. These traditions of human community go back at least as far as the agricultural revolution (as its main enduring substructure), and incorporate elements of feeling and thought that have achieved definition as "human". They are now facing the more enormous task of transformation to incorporate industry and technology and organisation as elements of the human tradition rather than as obstacles to its continuance and self-transcendence in a new renaissance of unparalleled creativity and humanity. We have to do a lot more thinking about Marx's notion of the transforming of the world of necessity into the world of freedom. There are other traditions that could contribute to this discussion too, like the whole Christian eschatological tradition.

One final word. I think it's not a matter of replacing "capitalist" ideas with "socialist" ones in minds (of workers especially). To amount to anything it must be more like releasing in people the power to unleash their self-liberative energies in their own spontaneously-arising categories and ways of thinking and feeling, allowing them to sophisticate themselves in the process of dialectic that would emerge in a movement in which there were not intellectual headquarters and socialist-thinker-leaders and converted disciples.
but rather thoroughly and constantly improving educational relationships, with no roles like teachers and learners, but role-dissolving elements built in by the organisational demotion of any castes that tended to arise. Especially given castes with their implicit socially-conditioned over-valuation of cerebral consciousness and its modes of over-understanding and over-explaining the world at the expense of releasing those forms of consciousness and feeling that accelerate change, and those rapid qualitative intensifications of community that tend to break down outdated social divisions, e.g. intellectuals or students as against workers.

What revolutionary practice is can no longer be defined by reference to any very clear revolutionary theory. The most incredible things (previously not even seeming to be action — as distinct from what? — contemplation, meditation, thought?) may now have revolutionary implications. The whole concept of praxis needs to be re-thought — maybe along similar lines to Marcuse’s early assertions (’66 or thereabouts) that in present conditions any kind of theorising was potentially subversive, or Sartre’s view of literature as a secondary form of action in the world, action by re-description or re-definition. But not only is there no adequate revolutionary theory to serve as the criterion of “revolutionary this” or “counter-revolutionary” (or “reformist”) that: there is also the need to out-grow our native tendency to talk as if certain issues were revolutionary by their very nature and not others. One’s almost tempted to echo the piety of a bygone age and say to the revolutionary that all things are revolutionary.

On the organisation of revolutionaries I haven’t got much to offer apart from all the implications of the above except to suggest that organisation should more and more be deliberately conceived as probably a temporary adjustment to a fast changing set-up, and it should be underpinned by an acceptance of the principle that the movement is more important than any of its organisations and that its least important organisations are those that identify themselves too readily with the movement and the movement too readily with themselves. A function of the above is the proposition that the theory of an organisation is not something to which all its members subscribe. The theory of an organisation is the foliage, or rather part of the foliage, not the root. I could conceive of an organisation producing a dozen manifestoes, rather than one that took months of re-hashing, haggling, increasingly uncreative concession and counter-concession to produce. That seems to me to be the same kind of choice of creativity or conformity that we’re saying should be made in so many other fields. Why preserve conformist ways of saying “don’t be conformist” or routine ways of organising for a spontaneous society?
Don't waste time **attacking** reformism, except at times of crisis and needful choice. Rather invade intellectually and practically the areas of social theory and action where reformist theorists now hold almost undisputed sway, and integrate those concerns with concerns already included in revolutionary perspectives. I mean things like housing, underprivilege, education, local government, urban problems, etc., etc. Snedden's new ACTU approved anti-strike procedures, all the areas where the creative thinking is now being done mainly by people like Gough Whitlam and Bob Hawke.

On the united front and lowest common denominator politics, I think they should be eschewed if it means any form of soft-pedalling or disguise or manipulation. But I think a lot of naive bullshit is talked about ventures misdescribed in those ways by left-left-leftists (or fools as they used to be called). I mean ventures in which any numbers of different kinds of people are involved and in which revolutionaries too could be involved, raising explicitly and publicly, undisguised, the question of the need for revolution and the connection of the issues at hand to revolution.

The CPA's future possibilities seem to me to depend on looking at the advantages it has:

1. Australian idiomatic presence and history within the life of this country since the 20's.
2. Rootedness in the trade unions and economic life generally.
3. Good regional and cross-institutional link-up, especially the urban-country spread.
4. **Tribune** has the makings of a focus of revolutionary agitation, publicity, organisation across the country.
5. Experienced militants and theorists capable of contributing to the emergence of a new and qualitatively superior synthesis and dialectic with the new revolutionary forces. But you may have to go deeper down and further out than many of you seem at present to anticipate. You may have to go further than being the most open Communist Party in the international movement and become the most open ex-party or something likely to risk being called that by the rest of the international movement.

I can see how loath to risk the secular equivalent of schism or heresy many may be, but it may even within the "liberal" or "revolutionary" communist international get to the hard choice between principle or convenience of remaining within some
sort of "family" or even a very hard strategic choice that would split the party again, giving rise to a new grouping that doesn’t care much whether it's called communist or not. But, of course, this is all a bit speculative.

6. The best physical plant and with it the kind of natural “home of the homeless left” authoritativeness that everyone’s almost constitutive materialism even on the “idealistic” left gives to it.

After looking at these advantages I think you ought to decide how to re-arrange them, starting without certain preconceptions that seem up to now to have inhibited the reform of the party, including belief in the need for a party, however newly defined. I can see, however, that decisions as radical as some on the rearrangement might be, might possibly have to await further clarification of the nature, strength and permanence of the non-CPA revolutionary and radical movement in Australia.

Attitude to CPA’s present opposition: “I’d say let the thousand flowers bloom. In which I’d include things like the majority of the party (the “goodies”) talking to the many other left groups in the country and the real concerns of the living movement far more than to the dissident one-third. I wouldn’t rule out public and vigorous disagreement on principles, strategy and tactics by the majority liners and the minority liners before any and every kind of audience, including the press, the university campuses, the high schools (ha ha), but most importantly the man on the job and the rank-and-file in the trade unions. Screw unity based on anything but (at the least) fundamental humanist and libertarian socialist assumptions and the ability to stomach one another’s attitudes to the human spirit. As embodied in the Vietnamese people and the Czechoslovaks.

If the majority of the party is going to use its power against the minority let them use it to determine the issues to be debated and the people to debate them with, not to machine-politik the minority into an insignificance that will produce a set of emotional cross-currents sucking the party back down into the swamp of ideological-rationalising infighting and vindictiveness. Surely the whole exercise has not been to produce a majority saying the right things in an Aaronite chorus, but rather to facilitate talking about and organising around the issues of the 70’s rather than the non-issues of the economic-determinist non-history or the pseudo issues of the exhumed 30’s. Let the dead bury their dead and talk to the living (or at least half-living) movement.

As for the USSR, I hope they get to the moon, especially the bureaucrats.