Old Problem — New Expressions

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The Yugoslav periodical for social studies, Survey, recently held a "round table" discussion under the heading "Dogmatism and Contemporary Socialism." (No.2, 1975). From it I take three themes: the political content of the struggle against dogmatism in Yugoslavia today; the social and other roots of dogmatism, and some features of dogmatism in the Australian left today. I do not propose to begin with a definition of dogmatism, as it will emerge sufficiently in what follows.

1. The political content of the struggle against dogmatism in Yugoslavia today.

The general point is made that whereas social struggle formerly was connected mainly with the issue "capitalism or communism", it now centres on the more advanced ground "what socialism should or should not be." Contemporary dogmatism thus finds a focus here, with Yugoslavia a most important battleground.

The two main contending standpoints are the bureaucratic-technocratic and that based on self-management. There is also a third, the old bourgeois-proprietary standpoint, which seeks a base not in projected open restoration, but by trying to turn to advantage difficulties in the development of self-management.

The old pro-CPSU stalinists, or "neo-cominformists" as they are called, recently reorganised at a secret congress. They openly deny the socialist character of self-management, and call for a bureaucratic restoration based on the complete dominance of the State in economic matters and of the party in political and ideological matters.

This might seem to represent a discredited dogmatic re-affirmation quite unlikely to succeed. But it feeds on two other social streams. The most important is the technocratic-bureaucratic.

An extensive division of labor with rigidly allotted functions, a hierarchical chain of command backed by rules, sanctions, files and records, like the assembly line, are held by many to turn out more goods, "process" more people etc., than other systems. The primacy of technology and the compulsion to bow to any technological development, whatever its social consequences, are regarded in the same way. "Collectives", self-management, seem "messier", more difficult, less "efficient." Perhaps they are, especially in their initial stages before the habits and outlooks appropriate to them become second nature.

Even supposing this were the case, however, what is the output for? Socialists regard its purpose as being to serve human needs in both their individual and social aspects. What point is there in producing (perhaps) more goods, if this is done at the cost of pressures and suffering which distort human development?

In fact, however, there is evidence that efficiency in production is actually increased as a by-product of the greater human development and well-being achieved through self-management.

But technocrats and bureaucrats do not concede either point, though their motivations do not necessarily always stem from a theoretical dogmatism. They are frequently enticed along their chosen road by the power and privilege which accrue to them when things are done their way. Against self-management they plead the case of "strong hand" rule and an ideological monopoly or
compulsion, seeking in that way, to put the best face on it, also to overcome such problems in the development of self-management as the unification of individual, enterprise and social interests.

Another source of dogmatism has arisen from the disintegration of the "new left" in the Yugoslav intelligentsia. Similar to the new left, in some capitalist countries, one trend has been towards anarchism, "anything goes". This group propounds "criticism of all existing conditions", but with no positive practice and criticism of all possible praxes. It advances an abstract humanism which specifies what the world should be like, independent of what it is now, or of how the transition is to be made.

Another trend in the "new left" however has been towards a reaffirmation of "democratic centralism", but without the necessary keen appreciation of the need to combat bureaucratic centralism. One strand in this trend has been the Maoist, for a time prominent in Australia, for example, though this does not seem to have been a great problem in Yugoslavia, according to the Survey report.

There, in the theoretical field, the trend tries rigorously to embrace all marxism into a complete unitary intellectual edifice, excluding new development and alternatives. If this trend succeeds at all, it is only in creating the illusion of a completely integrated theoretical structure. In practice it reinforces the bureaucratic-technocratic trend against the development of self-management.

2. The social roots of dogmatism.

Dogmatism, understood as unquestioned beliefs, theories, decrees of authorities and institutions is regarded by some of the participants in the "round table" as going right back to the earliest human societies, before the development of classes.

Franjo Kozul, for example, says "Dogmatism ... constantly found strongholds and firm support in human impotence." Unable to understand and explain natural and social phenomena, human beings had still to "get along". They developed in an evolutionary process bodies of beliefs, taboos, customs, religions which "worked", but which were dogmas because they were not open to scientific investigation, rational discussion or any but imperceptible change.

"Throughout the whole of history, humanity has been compelled to accept dogma as thinking and an a priori principle, to believe without inquiry, without experience. Belief was, then, a prerequisite for living for otherwise, at that level of knowledge, in their encounters with inexplicable forces, human beings would have remained incapable of survival, both as social, and especially as moral creatures."

Perhaps the writer is a bit cavalier in his treatment of the sense and ingenuity of our ancestors, but the general point has validity.

Kozul goes on to say that dogma often becomes "a consolation for a reality that is not". This is the religion as the opium of the people of Marx, but extended - and I think correctly - to other, "secular" dogmas like those that form a large part of stalinist "Marxism-Leninism".

He points out that people often gravitate to dogma because it meets the desire for tranquility which most people have, and fosters simplicity in the carrying out of obligations, with little effort. It nurtures passivity in thought since, under dogma, everything is pre-determined anyway.

I am reminded here, among other things, of the baneful influence in the Chinese revolution of belief in "fate." Reformism (for example) was not the problem it is with us, but regarding one's place in life as being determined by fate from birth was a great hindrance to the revolution. Why act, if that is how things are? Much ideological work went into combatting this idea.

Of course these habits of accepting dogma, while having deep roots in life, do not depend only on that. Particularly as class society develops, powerful groups of people form, having a vested interest in fostering and preserving those dogmas which help maintain things as they are, and consequently their own dominant position.

The dogmas are then, as the State develops, increasingly reinforced by both "moral-social" and legal-political sanctions. The weight of this combination of compulsions and pressures to maintain, for example, the position of women and the hierarchical-bureaucratic structures of society is only too apparent.

Kozul makes another good point, I think, when he says that those who initially take up
the struggle for change are, more or less by definition, rather small groups in such circumstances. There is thus considerable attraction for them to take their own different views to extremes and often to counter the prevailing dogma with the “inevitability” of the victory of the cause they espouse, thus planting the seeds of a “counter-dogma” of their own.

We know from experience how powerful the attraction to do this is, and should have some appreciation of its relationship to “proving” from a systematised edifice of Marxist theory that “it must be so”. “Impossibility”, however, has a habit of recurring almost as frequently as “inevitability”, so the attractions of such a “counter-dogma” should be resisted.

Other sources of dogmatism.

But though these social, and especially class roots of dogmatism are generally of dominant significance, it would be a mistake to under-estimate the importance of other sources of dogmatism which lie in the very processes of getting to know (cognition), and of theorising.

Muhammed Filipovic recalls that, according to Marx, there is always an element of dogmatism in theory as such. This is true of any theory in any field, but is particularly true in the social field, and most especially in the field of revolutionary political struggle which can have reality only in the activities and felt needs of millions of people.

“Only when theory passes into practice, when theory is no longer theory, when it is not an explanation, when it is actually the practical resolving of a problem, then it has the possibility of transcending not only the theoretical form of existence but also its social historical forms.”

Miloje Petrovic quotes Engels on Communists and Mr Heinzen: “Mr Heinzen seems to imagine that communism is a doctrine proceeding from a given theoretical principle as from a core, deriving from it all further consequences. Mr Heinzen is quite wrong. Communism is no doctrine but a movement.”

Lenin was expressing the same thought when he said “Practice is higher than (theoretical) knowledge because it has not only the dignity of universality, but also of immediate actuality. (Collected Works, Vol. 38, p.212).

He also gave a vivid description of the source of dogmatism in what the Chinese call an incorrect “method of thinking.”

“Human knowledge is not (or does not follow) a straight line, but a curve, which endlessly approximates to a series of circles, a spiral. Each fragment, segment, section of this curve can be transformed (transformed one-sidedly) into an independent, complete, straight line, which then (if one does not see the wood for the trees) leads into the quagmire, into clerical obscurantism (where it is reinforced by the class interests of the ruling classes).

“Rectilinearity and one-sidedness, stiffness and petrification, subjectivism and subjective blindness - there you have the epistemological roots of idealism.” (On Dialectics, Selected Works, Vol.II).

In contrast to this type of dogmatic thinking and theorising, Lenin posed the dialectical approach, which seems less “rigorous” and definite to those who have a mistaken attitude to theory.

No adequate exposition of dialectical thinking, in my view, yet exists. But I like particularly Lenin’s treatment in the midst of a crucial struggle in the party in 1921:

“In the first place, in order really to know an object we must embrace, study, all its sides, all connections and ‘mediations.’ We shall never achieve this completely, but the demand for all-sidedness is a safeguard against mistakes and rigidity. Secondly, dialectical logic demands that we take an object in its development ... Thirdly, the whole of human experience should enter the ‘definition’ of an object as a criterion of the truth and as a practical index of the object’s connection with what man requires. Fourthly, dialectical logic teaches that ‘there is no abstract truth, truth is always concrete’...” (Once Again on the Trade Unions, the Present Situation and the Mistakes of Comrades Trotsky and Bukharin, Selected Works, Vol. 9).

I felt that the “Round Table” treatment of this side of the subject (the nature of theory, etc.), insufficiently recognised the importance of developments in philosophy in recent times, especially in the history and philosophy of science. (For example, Contemporary
Schools of Metascience, by Radnitsky, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, by Kuhn, Against Method, by Feyerabend, and other works).

3. Dogmatism in the Australian left today.

While the dogmatic habits characteristic of the past are still strong, in Australia today (and Australia is not alone in this among the developed capitalist countries), a new strain has arisen from the evolution of the student movement, which formed the core of the "new left." Since these forces are young, energetic, often theoretically minded and potentially a powerful aquisition to the revolutionary movement, the direction their development takes must be of concern.

Lenin pointed out that the enlistment of large numbers of new recruits is usually accompanied by wavering in the sphere of theory and tactics, by repetition in a new guise of old mistakes. This is reinforced by the "dialectical nature of social development, which proceeds in contradictions and through contradictions ... therefore certain individuals or groups constantly exaggerate, elevate to a one-sided theory, to a one-sided system of tactics, now one and now another feature of capitalist development." The movement, he concludes, must periodically spend time on the training of its recruits. Not mere "instruction", of course, but also helping them to draw the lessons from experience in practical political life. (Differences in the European Labor Movement, Selected Works, Vol. II).

While the student movement of the sixties had a number of strands, overall it was characterised by a semi-Marxist humanism, of which Jean-Paul Sartre and Herbert Marcuse were major - though different - exponents. Marcuse especially became quite a symbol of the movement.

The accomplishments of the student movement were considerable. It challenged the existing bureaucracy and hierarchical structure of society and institutions, including the "old left", associated itself with powerful struggles against the Vietnam war, and with new social movements such as women's liberation and defence of the environment. It reached a peak of activity and influence in 1968-69, in France especially, through most of Europe, and in the US and other countries. After this peak, however, it began to run out of steam, and was unable to devise a way forward. A section of the most radical and thoughtful over-reacted against the previous humanism and reserve about the working class movement.

There developed an idealised and unreal view of the working class and the socialist purport of its economic struggles, first among the Maoists, and in another strand a penchant as well for rigorous "science" as against the previous rather diffuse and often non-political theorising. As Marcuse had become the hero of the previous trend, so the French communist philosopher Louis Althusser became for many the hero of this latter group.

Althusser, seeking to restore on a new basis the previous apparently "unitary" marxism which had come to be seen as dogmatised and "ideological" rather than "scientific", undertook what was in fact the most radical revision of marxism yet attempted in the theoretical field. This is said not to condemn him for boldly tackling problems of marxist theory after the long period in which it became congealed and dogmatic. On the contrary, the need to do so was and still is there to do so. His undertaking of the task is not what is in question, but his overall results. (Individual results are a different matter, and there is a good deal to be learned from some of them).

While Althusser is also very diffuse (despite claims to "rigor") his main theoretical fault, I believe, is that he cuts the link between theory and practice. From a criticism of the defects of empiricism and of the simplistic view that theory arises in a straight line generalisation from empirical facts and experience, he developed a view of theory and of science which cut them right off from the latter. This is so despite his attempt to in part, avoid such a criticism by inventing the dubious category "theoretical practice."

What is "true" theoretically, according to Althusser, is not established by whether it accords with what is found in practice, however that might be assessed, but by how the theory itself is produced. If the "proper forms" of "theoretical production" are there, the resulting theories must be true, by definition as it were.

"... theoretical practice is indeed its own criterion, and contains in itself definite
protocols with which to validate the quality of its product ... the criterion of the ‘truth’ of the knowledges produced by Marx’s theoretical practice (as radically re-interpreted by Althusser himself - E.A.) is provided by his theoretical practice itself, i.e., by the proof-value, by the scientific status of the forms which ensured the production of those knowledges.” (Reading Capital, p. 59).

This is not quite as mystifying as it sounds here, for, as the quote from On Dialectics above shows, “the truth” is not so easily come by. Lenin also says “Of course, we must not forget that the criterion of practice can never, in the nature of things, either confirm or refute any idea completely. This criterion also is sufficiently ‘indefinite’ not to allow human knowledge to become ‘absolute’ ...” (Materialism and Empirio-criticism, p. 141).

But Althusser’s severance of the link between theory and practice, and locating the criteria of truth in the theoretical “practice” itself, inappropriate in every field, is especially dangerous in the political field. For, to recall Engels’ statement, communism is more a movement than a theory (of course it is both). It is a union of socialist ideas with the mass labor movement. But even this is not a simple union, with all the “ideas” on the one side and only the force of numbers and organisation on the other. How many times have “the masses” shown better sense than the “theoreticians”?

The ideas of communism can never take final shape in isolation from the mass movement, nor can they exert an influence to advance the thinking of masses of people unless they “mesh” with them, that is come to them on a level and in a form to which they can relate. Similarly, those promptings which spontaneously move into action numbers of people is already consciousness even if in embryonic form. “Theory” ignores it at its peril.

A further feature of Althusser’s theorising is its undecency and complexity. Chasing after a major which forever eludes them, he and his followers introduce a multitude of new and complicated categories and sub-categories. Even were it all “true” in any sense (and of course it does contain important insights and truths) it is difficult to see how it could become the property of any but a small elite, dispensing their “truths” to a hoi-polloi in awe of their erudition.

A considerable proportion of the new people entering the Communist Party and the left movement at present are university students or young graduates. This is a significant and welcome development. It is not a revival of the traditional anti-intellectualism in the Australian left and working class, however, to point out that the nature of their life and training generally denies them initially an all-round revolutionary development. This lack they share with everyone young or newly come to politics, but in their case it comes mainly from the practical side. This is true even should one concede that their theoretical studies count as a kind of practice, which is at least debatable.

Practice of course, takes time. There is no lack of opportunities which many are sincerely taking up and learning from. What is in question with others, however, is not so much the quantity of their practice, but their theoretical-ideological attitude towards it.

Another circumstance is that, following significant struggles in a number of universities, aimed at undermining bourgeois ideological dominance, courses in marxism were established. This, along with tremendous publishing programs and the general interest in marxism, is part of a world wide phenomenon. It has its positive sides, but on the other hand “marxism” is now becoming an academic discipline, and even almost an “industry.” Such institutionalisation is particularly unsuited to the actual development of marxism and of a revolutionary practice appropriate to the conditions of a given country. The Althusserian strain has, understandably it seems to me because of its separation of theory from practice, been prominent in some of these university courses.

In Australia today both need and possibility exist for progress by the left and for socialism to become a presence which can exert a growing influence on the course political struggle takes. As one of the things that hold back the development of revolutionary theory, strategy and tactics, dogmatism of whatever kind and from whatever source, needs to be combatted. In the case of the section of new people broadly referred to here, this is necessary also to enable their undoubted theoretical interests and possibilities to come to fruition, and be the important aid it potentially is to the development of the revolutionary movement.