DISCUSSION

Colin Beardon’s succinct and sympathetic review of the new draft “British Road to Socialism” provides an important initiative for consideration of a vital aspect of theory. The British party is, small, by comparison with the French and Italian, and commands a following in the workers’ movement, and electorally, comparable to that of the CPA.

The “British Road” is eurocommunism flying the Union Jack, an apposite metaphor since the party used that symbol as part of its “people’s campaign” against the Common Market.

The program reflects the three key aspects of eurocommunist theory:

1. Rejection of the leninist notion of the party in favor of a broad coalition/movement which will be the vehicle for the obtaining (no long “seizing”) of state power.
2. The elevation of bourgeois democratic institutions, in this case Parliament (“the sovereign body of the land”), to the stage where they can, it is claimed, act as the organs of socialist political power.
3. The abandonment of the embarrassing and discredited model for socialism and the affirmation of the national independence of the party.

Along with this, the “British Road” seeks to eschew any concept of confrontation with the class enemy and appeals to the spirit of marxism-leninism with an ingenuousness which can only be thoroughly dishonest.

For while it may be possible to locate this new theory in terms of the dictatorship of the proletariat, it is impossible to do so in terms of the leninist notions of the state, of revolution and of the revolutionary party.

And rightly so. The two dead hands of Stalin and Trotsky have for too long constrained the movement within an action theory of revolution which offers only the most limited application to advanced democratic countries.

Had the new draft “British Road” been willing to confront that question it might have earned itself some validity. But it has broken from the frying pan into the fire without accepting that a break has been made. Rather than being mutton dressed as lamb, it is offal posing as mutton dressed as lamb.

“Revolutionary gradualism” - as a prominent CPGB theorist described it to this author - may offer an attractive way out of the hidebound and discredited theories of the ’fifties (although one could claim with some justification that it is simply pushing the logic of these theories to their limit), but it is the way out offered nearly a century ago by another discredited theorist - Bernstein.

At the core of the eurocommunist theory is militant, proletarian-based reformism. Not the conscious reformism of social democracy but a theory which assumes the possibility of reforming the non-democratic structures of capitalist society - most clearly the means of production - in line with the presently existing democratic structures, most notably parliaments.

To state that position is, for a marxist, to discredit it.

Capitalism is not a coalition of contradictory institutions within which we can take sides, it is an organic whole within which antagonistic contradictions are reflected differently in the various institutions. Thus the apparent democracy of the parliamentary arena and the palpable lack of democracy in ownership and control of the means of production are functionally linked expressions of the ideological contradiction of bourgeois freedom. Parliament is as much a phoney representation of democratic freedom as private capitalism is of economic freedom.

The “British Road” posits the possibility of playing off one institution against another - the exploitation of a non-existent contradiction. Certainly parliament, like the media, the education system and even occasionally the law, possesses a degree of latitude which presents socialists with the opportunity to raise the level of struggle. But there is a world of difference between raising the struggle, positing transitional demands and assuming state power. The history of Italy, Spain, Germany, Greece, not to mention Chile, should be lesson enough of the fragility of democratic structures when capitalism comes under stress.

Beardon states that the new draft “provides a firm rebuttal to those who think that European Communism is based upon a lack of analysis or a lack of theory”. The point is not a lack of theory but a theory which is lacking, which claims antecedents to which it has lost any relationship and which denies the nature of the era within which it is located.

The leninist theory of the party has clearly failed - not because those who, for decades, attempted to implement it were, or are, “traitors to the class”, but because the theory itself was not applicable.
Eurocommunism has attempted, unsuccessfully, to construct a post-leninist theory. Neither the libertarians nor the trotskyists are capable of making adequate critiques because they base themselves on pre-leninist and quasi-leninist formulations.

The task of construction is still ahead of us and it would be impossible for a discussion of this type to do more than sketch outlines. But three of the most obvious principles can be noted:

1. Recognition of capitalism, foundation and superstructure alike, as a system from which stems the conclusion that socialism is not a modification of structures and revolution is not the capturing of institutions. Socialism is an alternative system and revolution is the creation of the institutions of that system in embryo.

2. Recognition that capitalism will fight, through democratic institutions when it can, and through armed repression when it must, to preserve its existence.

That doesn't mean we should start drilling in the streets but it does mean facing the fact that at some stage of the game, military force, whether from the establishment forces of police and army, or from para-military groups, will have to be countered. You cannot choose "for a transition to socialism ..., without civil war" any more than you can choose to make an omelette without breaking eggs. Beardon recognise this in saying that the program is "weak on this crucial point" but seems to consider the issue peripheral. In fact it is central, going to the heart of the issue of organising the form of party/organisation necessary to combat the violence of the state.

3. Clarification of the party/movement/class inter-relationships. Whether it be Coalition of the Left, Historic Compromise, Broad Progressive United Popular People's Movement, or whatever, the post-leninist theory of the party is the central problem.

It will suffice to establish at this stage that no theory can be valid while it denies the nature of the epoch within which it is located.

The epoch of mass movement political struggle (which has, it must be admitted, only spasmodically generated either mass or movement) has precipitated long overdue modification of the conventional self-proclaimed monolithic party claiming to be the exclusive political expression of the class. We recognise that we do not have a monopoly of wisdom and have ceased to function as divine interventionists injecting the political concepts which the workers, poor dears, can never understand for themselves.

Recognition, and clarification of the nature of the epoch is the starting point for the reconstruction of marxist theory.

It is unfortunate that the "British Road" offers little towards this reconstruction.

- Pete Cockcroft.

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