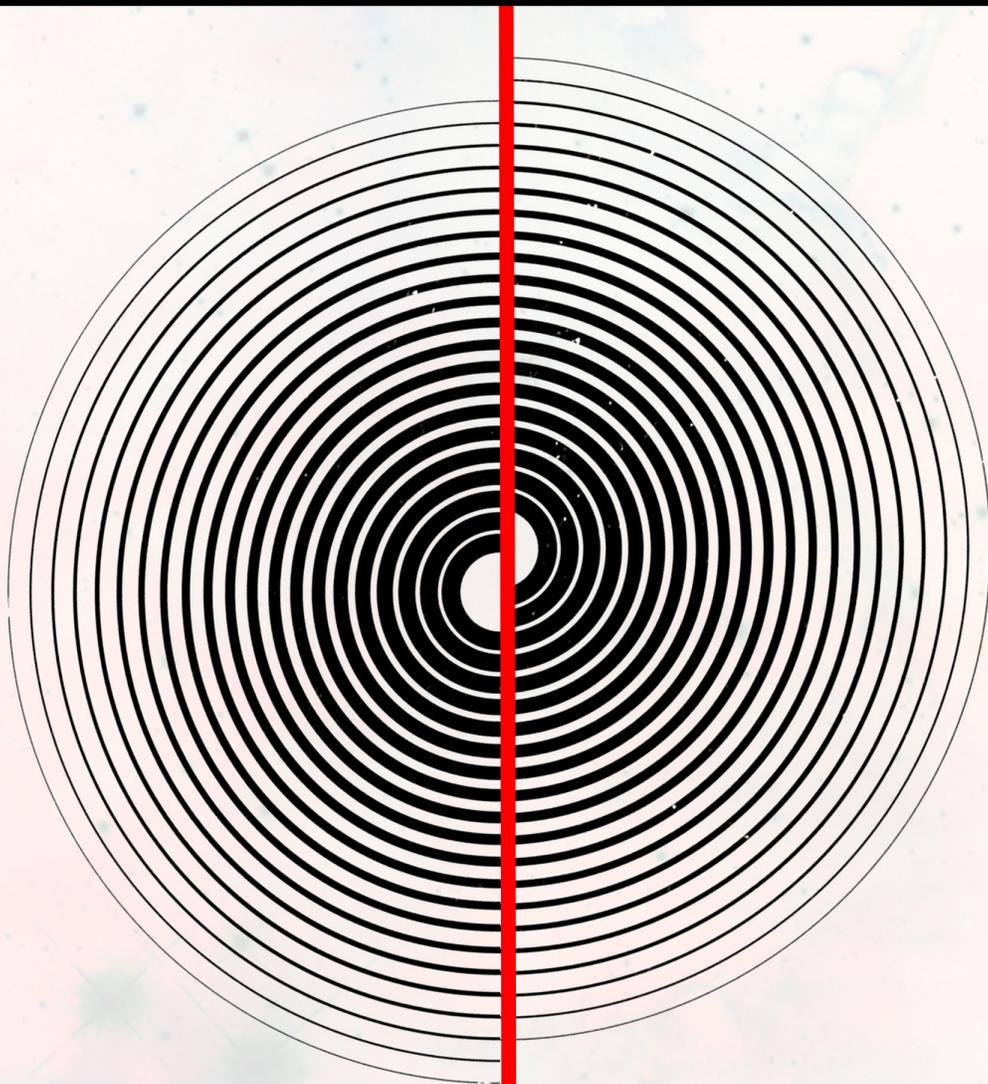


SITES OF A COMMUNIST BEGINNING

by
Mike Ely



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PART I

ARE COMMUNIST OPENINGS STRUCTURAL OR EVENTAL?

by
MIKE ELY

LPA¹ writes on something that preoccupies me:

I wonder if some of this discussion isn't being influenced by where the participants live, and the character of the community they are a part of. I think [it is a very relevant point] that we should be thinking about where to focus our energies. However, this may be different depending on the cultural context. A strategy for Europe may be very different than one for the US, rural vs. urban etc, campuses vs workplaces.

Where should communists dig in? And how?

For various reasons, those are sometimes not even considered real questions. They are often blotted out — because there is a sometimes hegemonic view among radical people that we should dig in “in our own communities,” which often means we should “relate” to what is spontaneously happening in the neighborhoods and

workplaces right around us. It is an often-unspoken strategic choice based on very particular assumptions about identity, mass line, and popular agency.

Stepping Back

There is a difference between a structural and an evental view of revolutionary opportunity.

If our opportunities are structural then they might emerge wherever the interface exists between the oppressed and the oppressor, the rich and the poor. And so we can each disperse to our local site of that interface.

But if revolutionary opportunities are evental (i.e. conjunctural), then we could disperse ourselves all along that interface and nothing will happen (at least nothing revolutionary). And we will be trying to make local issues and concerns into something they refuse to become. And we may find ourselves entrenched, pinned down and dispersed there along that interface when some major opening pops up in a concentrated and unexpected way.

I am a believer in the evental (conjunctural) view. The eruption is in sites that are not simply defined by the

¹ We've opted to keep much of this piece in its original form. Since it emerged from an online discussion, we have colored red the names of each of the discussion's participants.



Freedom riders in the Deep South confronting Jim Crow and the Klan

class structure of society or the structure of national-racial oppression. These sites (which are not merely locations geographically) are often unexpected, and even shocking in the forms the eruption adopts.

Put another way: The underlying class and racial structure of this society defines many things. It shapes experiences and possibilities. It frames the future (and future alliances) we can create. But the class and racial structure of this society does not dictate the specific sites of eruption and opportunity. Their appearance is much more contingent and unpredictable. (And by appearance I mean their arrival into our field of view.)

Organizers + The Oppressed = A Movement? Or?

An historical example: Mississippi Freedom Summer² (1964) was an example of a moment that concentrated a world of conflicts. The grinding and sparks arose

² For more on this, see: Steele, John, *Where's Our Mississippi? Memories of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964*, Kasama publications

from deep contradictions and lit the darkness. People streaming to Mississippi as “organizers” were forged into something new — and in many ways, their work and experience forged the times we lived in. They became a model of “outside agitator” that inspired the best of a generation.

And it is worth noting that many radical forces did not go to Mississippi — they abstained. That includes Malcolm X’s forces and also much of the “old Left.” They could not foresee its power. They felt it was a distraction from their ongoing work and commitments. They largely missed a breaking point and a turning point that defined subsequent history.

It meant that what emerged was often unmarked by them — which was both good and bad.

A different historical example: A decade later, at the other end of the 60s, i.e. in the early 1970s, there had arisen a new communist movement of about ten or twenty thousand youth. We dispersed ourselves from campuses (precisely!) into surrounding communities and factories³

³ For a detailed explanation of the nuts and bolts of how this

— and we thought that the simple addition of “ourselves + the oppressed” would equal a new popular revolutionary movement.

It followed a structural conception of opportunity (even though everything that had produced us was so very eventual). And the reality was that for the vast majority of those young communists entering the factories nothing happened. Zero.

There were not conditions for eruption everywhere, and we could not just force them to emerge by our will and work. And this is true even though people were oppressed and discontent (as they are today all around us).

Mao quips you can't pull a sprout to make it grow.

Our highly structural view of class and of radical potential was mistaken. And we should (today) learn the lesson of that — or else we may repeat it with far fewer and more fragile forces.

A third historical experience: My personal experiences “going to the working class” (in the 1970s) were (ironically) different from most members of the New Communist Movement — because my particular small team of communists went into one of the few places that did erupt, i.e. the coalfields — which saw the largest wave of uncontrolled working class struggle in the last half century⁴.

But that exception was precisely contingent and its reasons for existence were external to us. It was not because of the quality of our work, or something that could be reproduced or exported to other working class sites. Some sections of the RCP, especially the more trade unionist circles, did try to promise precisely such reproduction in the buildup to the 1977 National United Workers Organization (NUWO) conference.⁵ They

was done, see the Kasama post: “On Communist Work: That Feeling of Stage Diving in the Dark,” available here:

kasamaproject.org/2009/07/25/on-communist-work-the-felling-of-stage-diving-in-the-dark/

⁴ For more see: Ely, Mike, *Ambush at Keystone No. 1: Inside the Coalminers' Gas Protest of 1975* <mikeely.files.wordpress.com/2009/07/ambush_at_keystone_coal_miners_protest_kasama_pamphlet.pdf>

⁵ In the late 1970s, the RCP sought to build a national organization of militant workers (the NUWO). In the pre-convention speaking tours, the more trade unionist forces inside the RCP deliberately gave the impression that workers entering the NUWO might be able to reproduce militant struggles emerging from the coalfields. This was wrong in two ways: first the level of political consciousness was often higher among workers in some other ar-

were peddling illusion (including to themselves).

I recently read a paragraph posted in the anti-revisionist archive project from the Revolutionary Union's national pamphlet on the 1974 Boston busing controversy. It starts:

“The U.S. workers movement is surging forward. Every day our ranks swell, our unity strengthens, and our political awareness of our great revolutionary tasks further develops. And with each passing day, the need for us to further deepen our unity and awareness becomes even greater, as the collapsing monopoly capitalist system comes down on our heads.”⁶

This reminds me of a quip Alain Badiou makes about a leading Maoist group in France (the one he chose not to join):

“Almost everything put out by GP propaganda was half untrue — where there was a kitten, they described a Bengal tiger.”⁷

Often our movement fantasized what would happen — and then (prematurely) announced it was happening.

And even in the coalfields, where there actually was such militant struggle of many thousands of workers over several intense years — the mix did not prove fertile ground for communist recruitment or beliefs. It was Jerry Falwell and Ronald Reagan who politically dominated that particular Appalachian playing field by 1980, not us.

That too is a lesson worth summing up — so we don't reinvent the same illusions again.

reas, and second it was not (in fact) possible to reproduce coal mine militancy outside its particular context

⁶ Revolutionary Union, “Main Lesson of Boston Busing Struggle: Workers, Unite To Defeat Divide and Conquer Schemes,” December 1974

<marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-2/ru-main-lesson.htm>

⁷ Wolin, Richard, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s*, Princeton University Press, 2012

Investigate and Concentrate

To be clear: That doesn't mainly mean that we should not do communist work where we are — where we live and work. It doesn't mean we shouldn't go deep among the people. How can we not?

But I am (tentatively) speaking against simply dispersing our young loosely connected revolutionary currents into local communities in an unplanned way — with the intent of merging with whatever is spontaneously happening right around us. Despite sincere expectations that our politics could take root in that way, they won't.

An unplanned dispersal would instead diffuse our fragile movement into sites that are not promising. It would encourage a generalized abandonment of concentrated country-wide political campaigns — including those around internationalist tasks which rarely emerge linked to local struggles.

The pull toward localization is related to a view that sees the “activist” as the only serious model for communist engagement. That pull is also associated with a view that believes revolutionary ideas and potential exist wherever and whenever people organize themselves for conflict.

Generalized local dispersal, without careful decisions about sites of concentration, would pull strongly against the consolidation of a country-wide communist movement — and has done so many times. By contrast, we need a policy of organized national investigation, careful selection of sites for concentration, and a developing division of labor that can generate larger media and theoretical projects.

The work we do should be connected to a common revolutionary approach that may not resonate in all communities — and may find footing only under unique circumstances (initially).

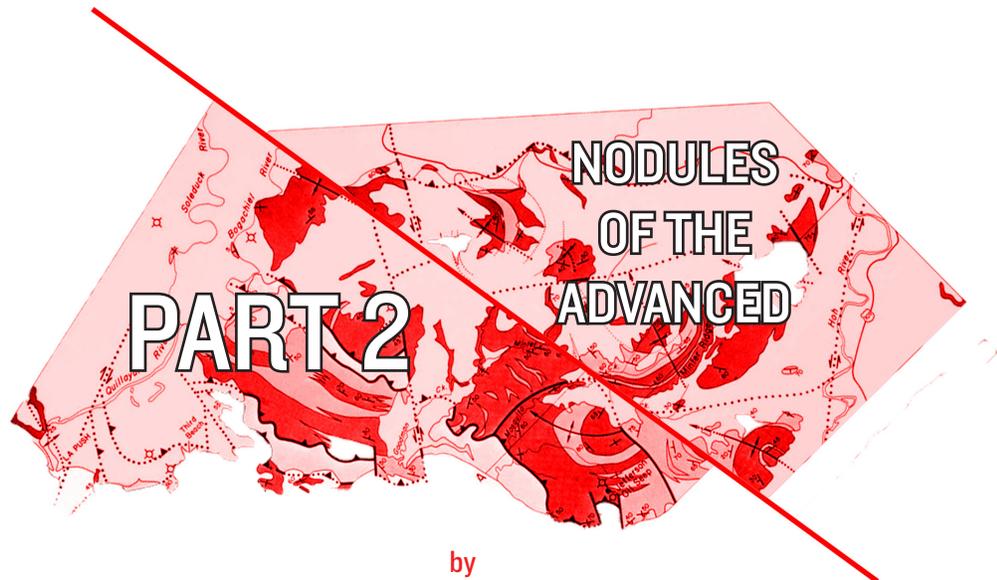
I'm studying the communist philosopher Badiou these days. Our study group just touched on his chapter on the Paris Commune in “The Communist Hypothesis” which digs into — precisely — one of his explorations of how unique events rupture the old. And (as I mentioned before) Bruno Bosteels' essay “Post-Maoism: Badiou and Politics” works on the Maoist approach to active focused investigations in a way that had me buzzing.

We need to do serious investigation (collectively) of places to concentrate — we need to feel our way along the faultlines of this society to identify where best to dig in — because (and this is serious) not all places or moments are equal.

In addition, we should be flexible and alert for new

things suddenly on the wind, especially for those that could be earth-shaking — for “our Mississippi” — and which will need us able to perceive, adapt and move. Such things may take strange forms that are hard to interpret, and they can come and go before communists even have the wisdom to see and respond. (The characters in the movie *Dreamers* almost miss the days of Paris May 1968 completely — cuz they were just wrapped up in something else.)





by
MIKE ELY

Let me start here: I listened to someone explain the formation of the Zapatistas. The process involved understanding that there were nodules or pockets of the very advanced in very particular conjunctural places among the oppressed people.

And those nodules — concentrated in particular regions, and in this case, within the Catholic lay structure — involved the emergence of literate, energetic and very radical circles within the people themselves, who were able to “hook up” with organized revolutionary intellectual forces (from outside) in ways that were mutually transformative.

I think that the previous communist movements have not been able to find or connect with such advanced forces (in the U.S., in several decades.) I think our previous communist movement was perhaps able to “see” them sometimes, but not know what to do with them.

Particularly: I don’t think our movement was able to transform itself in order to fuse with the advanced (in those specific moments over decades where they emerged and the movement ran across them). Certainly our movement was not able (through and with them) to develop a partisan connection to the broader people (which would need to happen in the course of powerful moments of struggle).

Seams or Veins?

Let me sketch a mining metaphor: Coal is a sedimentary layer of fossilized wood — so it is concentrated in a seam that spreads over a large area. You can dig straight down in southern West Virginia — and any hole has to pass through the major horizontal coal seams sooner or later.

But rock mineral mining is very different: diamonds, gold and silver exist in nuggets that are embedded along the fissure lines in the hard rock in the crust — in occasional and irregular cracks where lava once forced its way upward. You can go to Nevada and randomly dig a hole straight down and are very unlikely to hit a pocket of gold or silver. You have to find those old fissure lines, and follow the veins of quartz along those fissures, and explore them until you find the nuggets and nodules.

I’m saying that the most advanced forces in society are not simply a “layer.”

Of course, in any situation, anywhere, you can find relatively advanced and relatively backward — but that is a different matter. Those people advanced enough to (1) connect with a revolutionary movement, and also (2) help connect that movement to sections of the people are rare in the U.S. — and are dispersed in cohorts along social fissure lines where they have experienced special pressures and heat.

And if you just go “dig a hole” where life has placed you — looking to connect the revolutionary movement to people there randomly — you are unlikely to trigger a process of fusing socialism with the people, because the necessary ingredients for initiating that fusing are not evenly distributed everywhere.



Zapatistas in Chiapas, Southern Mexico

The location of such cohorts of people is not necessarily geographic. In 1994 the anti-immigrant Proposition 189⁸ gave rise to a radicalized section of Latino high school and college students scattered across the state, part of a larger radicalization that has gone on among second generation immigrant youth. In the 1960s, something was happening among Black students and workers that made it possible for the Black Panther Party to suddenly “go national” and gather thousands of members (seemingly overnight)—Black students had been forming “black power” organizations everywhere and developing training as militants and organizers. Returning Vietnam vets were such a force in the 1970s—as many returned embittered and conscious, and in networks of co-thinkers.

⁸ California’s notorious “Save our State” (SOS) proposition was passed in 1994 and then overturned in federal court. This proposition sought to prevent undocumented immigrants from using health care, public schools, other social services, and to turn medical and social workers into immigration informants. Since its passage, anti-immigrant forces in other states have tried to push through similar propositions.

Connecting well with such networks before they disperse takes very active work, creative fusion, communist training... and a bit of luck.

To be clear: I talk about cohorts — using the old Roman word for bonded co-fighters, a brother/sisterhood that emerges (including generationally).

In political work, we often run across very advanced and communist people as individuals — whose special life experiences have brought them a particular consciousness. And that is a good thing. But often the few recruited by previous communist organizations have been the relatively rootless — who are able to adapt themselves into a rigid pre-existing structure, and who were generally not able bring that structure into deep connection with broader sections of people or help transform that structure in needed ways. The RCP summed up that when it trained occasional communists from “among the masses” they often went back “home” to have great difficulty hooking back up or communicating what they now understood. The RCP’s hope of developing them as levers shows that this process will hardly be easy. The point remains, however: the advanced who emerge in important cohorts, can in their interactions — with

each other and the communist movement that some of them may join — (potentially) help creatively press forward the process of fusion.

We have to seriously talk about how that can happen. Since we don't yet know how to make that work — and since the actual details of that need to be worked out in practice, in the concrete, in the act.

Linking Partisan Communist Work with Strategy

Chicanofuturet is righteously passionate about representing communism among the people.⁹ He argues hard with those among us who think that can't be done. And many of us have a deep unity with him on this point — a unity that goes beyond words into practice. Promoting communism, talking creatively and coming from within are extremely important parts of our communist work.

But let's also situate those necessary discussions Chicanofuturet has among the people (discussions of communism's accomplished past, of our common inherited ideas, of our visions of radical change) within a new strategic plan for an actual movement (a communist movement with a partisan base among the people).

How do we communists arrive (among the people) as the beginnings of a movement (in the present, within *this* situation) — not merely as a disembodied idea about either the distant past or the distant future)? How do we organize a communist base (and a larger revolutionary current) among the people?

Where the Gaps have Narrowed

One issue (I believe) is that there is a large gap between thinking of the relatively advanced in most places and the ideas that defined a communist movement.

And further there is a relatively large objective gap between the activity of the relatively advanced in most places, and the forms of engagement that the previous communist movement allowed.

People from among the oppressed have had great difficulty bridging those two gaps — becoming communists (in the way that we chose to model it).

And I think we need to find the places and ways to close that gap:

- by finding those distinct sites (in space and time) where the advanced are actually open to our vision of a revolutionary movement, and
- by creating a movement that can creatively connect with such forces.

This will need a mutually transformative process, and a resulting fusion will mark the beginning of a new kind of "subject" — and give shape to the kind of communist movement we create. It will (in some ways) mark its real appearance.

And I think that contact-and-fusion needed to be initiated by now-scattered communists doing new deep investigation into the highly complex geology among the people.

The Problem with Forays

Let me put it this way: Talking to the people is not enough. I have been in countless "forays" to talk to the people about communist politics. I was part of an organized trend that did exactly what Chicanofuturet describes — nationally and daily for many years in many cities.

Door-to-door in housing projects, dorms and coal camps. In demonstrations. In campus talks. Weekly newspapers with communist agitation. etc. And over and over, lots of people express interest (and respect). Probably hundreds of thousands of people. That is important to note — communist politics has been controversial, but not automatically been self-isolating. It has always found interested people in significant numbers.

But then.... there has remained those gaps — and an inability of more people to make the leap from a kind of interested "listening" to an organized and partisan participation. The interest has not ever congealed as a partisan base or network.

And for me the question is: How do we bridge that gap (from the interested to the networks of organized partisan participants)? What are the stages of that process? What are the adjustments in form and speech that would help? What are the forms of organization that would move from "energetic propaganda sect" to an organized network of revolutionized working people themselves?

Connection Without Mutual Transformation

A historical example: In our ten year project in the U.S. coalfields (during the 1970s) — we only recruited one

⁹ Chicanofuturet, "Taking Our Communism to the People," November 2010, kasamaproject.org/2010/11/17/taking-our-communism-to-the-people/

person who was a native coalminer (even though we worked closely with dozens, perhaps hundreds of men and women over those years).

This brother was unusual in many ways — including in that he had left the coalfields and worked with the farmworkers union in California etc. — and in other ways had become opened to a large world of ideas and organizing outside the immediate world of the coalfields.

Years later I went back to West Virginia, and met with him on a writing trip — and he said to me,

“I wanted socialism and I wanted to wage the class struggle — but really 80% of what the party was talking to just went by me. I had no idea what all that was about, or why it mattered.”

That speaks to weaknesses in our work more than it speaks to his weaknesses. And I’m saying that some of this is objective — that the political life among working people in the U.S. and the general level of political discourse in the U.S. leaves even the most radical and discontent people rather distant from discussing the complexities of radical transition.

And some of it is subjective — i.e. it speaks to the rather particular conception of “being a communist” that dominated the communist trend I was in (including its always-marked “fetish of the word”).

Part of the problem here was that we connected with the people, but there was not enough mutual transformation. As individuals we communists transformed by adopting some of the local working class culture (dress, speech, lifestyles, etc.) — but as a movement we did not remake ourselves to be able to fuse with the advanced — and through them connect politically with the people more broadly.

For one thing, we need a movement radiating its ideas — but that isn’t over-intellectualized. And we need a movement capable of listening and seeing — and then continually transforming itself (without losing its goal, and the road to radical change). That is a very hard mix.

A Method of Starting

Obviously there is an element of uniting a critical mass of revolutionary forces to even initiate an organizing project. Some people express impatient frustration that our discussions (here on Kasama) are mainly among those already socialist. But in fact we need to have some regroupment of revolutionaries — along common lines

and ideas — to start anything. And in many ways, we have barely started that process (and the necessary theoretical reconception).

As a key part of initiating practice: I think we need to look closely at the most advanced among the people — because they are the link to everything else.

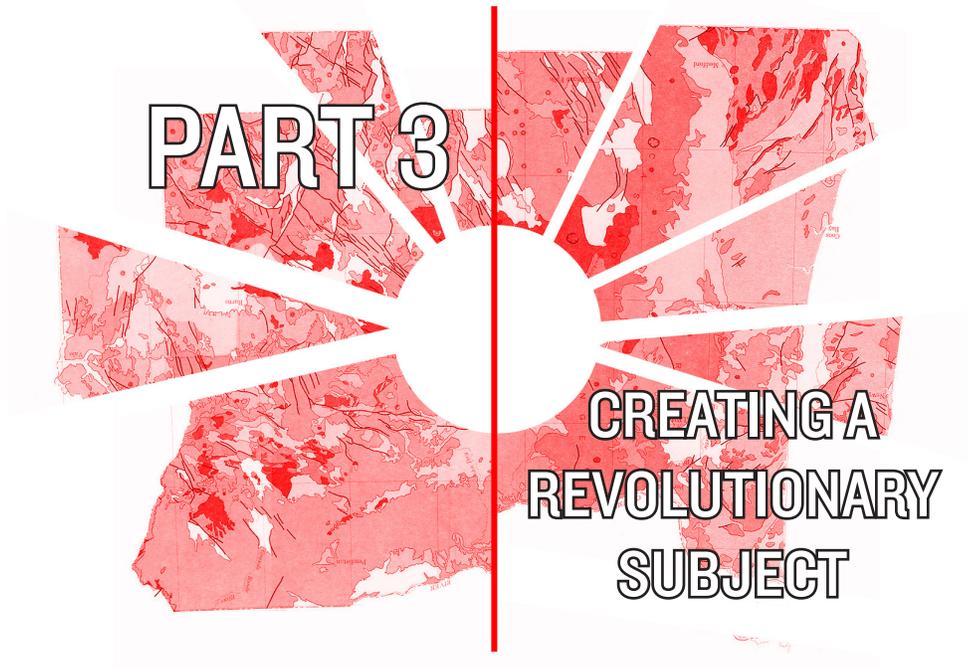
Some think of the advanced as a layer dispersed uniformly among the people (along the interface between the oppressed and oppressor). Some think our main audience is the intermediate (or typical) worker who is not (yet) socialist or political.

But, by contrast, we need to see radicalization as conjuncture followed by contagion. Those advanced capable of fusing with a communist movement (and being its links to larger communities of people) emerge in circles and scenes — in a conjunctural way along often unappreciated fissures. They are formed in moments, and come in waves. They try to change the world and often sink back into the grayness out of frustration.

We need a serious discussion of “where are the advanced, who are the advanced, what do they believe” — that is based on organized investigation among different sections of the people.

What we learn and decide will determine what we do, where we go, and what we say — and how our movement appears when it is born.

**We connected with the people,
but there was not enough
mutual transformation.**



“Only the fusion of socialism with the working-class movement has in all countries created a durable basis for both. But in every country this combination of socialism and the working-class movement was evolved historically, in unique ways, in accordance with the prevailing conditions of time and place. In Russia, the necessity for combining socialism and the working-class movement was in theory long ago proclaimed, but it is only now being carried into practice. It is a very difficult process and there is, therefore, nothing surprising in the fact that it is accompanied by vacillations and doubts.”

- V.I. Lenin

Nat Winn

I do understand now the point Mike is making about eruptions not always being geographic.

Though it is also stated we need to find these distinct sites in space and time, I think it is also important that we understand the finite nature of these sites (the time is not infinite), when they do erupt. If we are lucky enough to be able to dig in and build roots, to figure how to do this, the need to think about what (revolutionaries and the partisan advanced they have successfully linked up with) to do to push that momentum forward.

In other words, once we “go” to the site of the eruption and forge relationships among the advanced and create some type of a movement, how do we create a movement that is truly revolutionary and can see and

take advantage of the opportunities to forcibly smash the old order?

When the eruption takes place in one (or a few) significant spaces or in scattered sites all over the country or continentally or throughout the bi-continental region, it is true as you emphasize that new forms of popular power and activity will emerge spontaneously from the masses, a lot of it led by the most advanced who we will have forged ties with (in this specific scenario, we have assumed we have learned how to forge ties and work with the advanced).

It is also true that wherever this has been done successfully, whether in Vyborg or Hunan or Rolpa,¹⁰ the forms

¹⁰ Vyborg was the workers district in St. Petersburg that became a partisan base area for the most radical socialists during the last days of the Tsar. It was the neighborhood where the newspaper Pravda had its most enthusiastic audience. Hunan is the province where Mao Zedong led the creation of a key communist base area

of popular power and movements that were creatively developed were ultimately altered through the leadership of a party to meet the needs as the communists generally saw them, of seizing power first and then administering society. I think that along with understanding how to connect with the advanced, there also must be some clarity about our role as communists and how we react to contingent events in order to prepare for and then execute the seizure of power through leading the masses in feeding off their creativity in transforming their creations into organs fit to seize and exercise power.

In that regard the work Mike E is doing around the history and contradictions of the vanguard party in cohesion with **TNL**'s work on Chiapas are of vital importance and eagerly anticipated.



RW Harvey

Mike writes:

This will need a mutually transformative process, and a resulting fusion will mark the beginning of a new kind of "subject."

This could be the heart of the matter: what goes into a new kind of subject, a revolutionary subject? This is where our existential comrades have a leg up regarding the process of transforming consciousness.

The two questions that begin to break the ideological ice that surrounds most of us in America are: "Who am I?" and "How do I choose to live?"

Or to put it another way, the advanced are those who have these questions and are constantly interrogating the world in which they live and the way they are living in it. It's like that part of what constitutes a revolutionary situation: "the masses can no longer live in the same way." The advanced are at this point but usually individually:

-- after the Autumn Harvest Uprising in 1927. Rolpa is the remote rural district in Nepal where a historic fusion developed between the Maoist party and sections of revolutionary-minded peasant youth -- their connection formed the jumping-off point and heartland for a decade-long peoples war.

they ache from the hypocrisy, the madness, the suffering this system lays down, and they ache to do something about it. Without revolutionary consciousness there is only life in the grayness where they either seethe or stuff it.

So it is not primarily an intellectual dimension that has brought the advanced to this place; it is typically passionate, empathetic, and humanistic. To the degree that our communist work transforms the advanced into dogmatic (and oh so learned) robots, it is we who create the aliens that cannot function in the very communities that they came from! That we've turned them into "communists" in the worst sense of this word is a crime and a shame...

This is where Mike's ongoing hammering on the role of imagination, creativity, "radiating our ideas and not overly intellectualized," is so vital and potentially fruitful.



Liam Wright

I think there are important questions that are being grappled with here. Also different methods and ways of looking at how to understand what are the "advanced" and what are the kind of events that we must seize upon. I'll try to take a stab at what I think are some of these different approaches and my own thinking on these things.

On the question of Mike's piece on fusion of the advanced with the revolutionaries:

I agree with what he's fighting for here. It's important for developing an approach of "coming from within." Of being a force that becomes the representatives of the interests (and increasingly understood by the advanced and people broadly) of the felt needs of the masses of people, through revolution.

I think however, that we need to understand more thoroughly the relationship between the different components of this.

What is the relationship between the main aspects of the fusion: The revolutionaries and the advanced. Which is primary? Which is secondary? How does that get expressed? What are the key aspects that make a revolutionary a revolutionary that must not be lost in this

fusion, that we must also pass on to the advanced? What do we want to learn and absorb from the advanced masses?

I think this is a way to come at what the FIRE Collective has been advocating for, a way of being “deeply rooted and deeply revolutionary.”

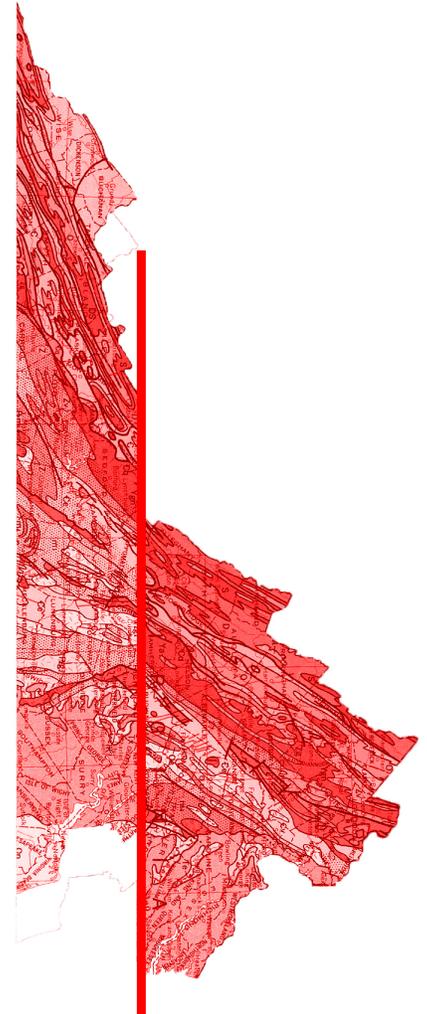
I think the answer to the first question is obvious, or should be, the revolutionary aspect has to be primary. The question of revolutionary consciousness and ties to revolutionary organization are the most important part of this equation. However, without the secondary aspect that revolutionary consciousness and organization will be alienated from the advanced masses.

There is also a question of seeking to integrate while not tailing. This is going to be a tricky contradiction to handle. We must use the mass line through all of this; with a culture of listening, grappling, as well as being thoroughly unapologetic and unliberal about our goals and analysis.

We have to fulfill the role of being tribunes of the people and of actually leading them to take state power away from the capitalists. Or as Lenin talks about in *State and Revolution* of being “teacher, guide...” of the proletariat. Without all of these components the revolution part gets lost and it is meaningless.

I think too, we need to elaborate further on the question of how to be tribunes of the people in the 21st century. In line with the development of the productive forces (in particular technology and means of communication) how do we do this? This is inextricably linked to the question of how to integrate into and relate to resistance from the masses of people as a part of a strategy for revolution.

This requires serious, ongoing thought.



We need to elaborate further on how to be tribunes of the people in the twenty-first century.



PART 4

WHAT A COMMUNIST BEGINNING MIGHT LOOK LIKE

by
MIKE ELY

A Three-Tiered Model: Iskra project, Pravda project, Faultlines projects

My own view is (to put it very very crudely) that we need a three tier model — one that distinguishes three very different levels of projects — in order to accomplish the work we face:

1) **We need an Iskra project** — i.e. a process by which communists and revolutionaries engage and clarify their levels of unity and their forms of organization. It would both be a space where this work gets done — and a pole within a much larger terrain serving as an attractive force for those most radical. It is dangerous to make the sausage right in the middle of the restaurant, but i think that's the kind of public transparency and access that is needed (especially given the particular contradictions of *our* regroupment process).

This creates a space within which we attract, create, unite, organize and train communists (even as political practice impacts each of these things in its own way). The Iskra audience is conscious or aspiring revolutionaries. It provides a scaffolding alongside which organization can be developed. It starts as a process of discussions among revolutionaries — within which a communist pole can be seen and out of which distinct trends can develop — where radical views can be seen in engaged contradiction to each other, and where such clarifications can (hope-

fully) help a whole new generation of radicals develop their views and build organized formations to implement and test those views.

Iskra (Spark) was a newspaper written by exiles and smuggled into Russia that helped define and organize a skeletal communist organization that prepared for more revolutionary times. This involves engagement of theory, revolutionary strategy, questions of organization and approaching macro-events with the intent of clarifying line controversies among communists. Since we live in such a post-newspaper world, the early 1900's *Iskra* newspaper is not an example about form, but about function.

2) **We need a Pravda project** — we need to develop a popular way of delivering news and analysis to large numbers of people in a way that connects with them and helps bring them to an increasingly revolutionary understanding of the world and their own role.

How to do that, whether it is possible to do right now, what it would look like, how it would be different from the media of other political trends (Democracy Now, the Nation, etc.) — these are issues we have not even scratched yet.

This is a quite difficult project to conceive and initiate — and one that has not been seriously attempted in a country like ours in a long time.



Masthead of Iskra

The revolutionary writer Lu Xun¹ once argued that to produce truly great work you needed a truly great audience.

The discovery of a really-existing potential audience is one of the preconditions for a successful Pravda project – in ways that will shape its media form, its vernacular style, its focus, its levels of unity, its graphic vibe and so on. In other words, you can't start to apply the mass line on a broad scale without the accretion of a revolutionary people out of real cracks, pockets and radical divergences within the political landscape.

Pravda (Truth) was a daily communist newspaper in St. Petersburg's 1912 working class upsurge that helped forge a revolutionary core for the events that followed World War 1 — it played this role of connecting people very broadly with a communist view of events and politics. In our conditions this has to be many-to-many, not the traditional one-to-many of newspapers — which means we have a heap of creative thinking to do about forms and methods.

3) We need a series of Faultline projects — in which communists and revolutionaries organize (and reorganize) themselves to deeply engage the struggles of oppressed people along key (objectively existing) faultlines of society. And this is obviously not just/mainly a matter of commenting on those struggles, or announcing “If we were running this show, this is what we would be having people do.” It is a matter of actually engaging, par-

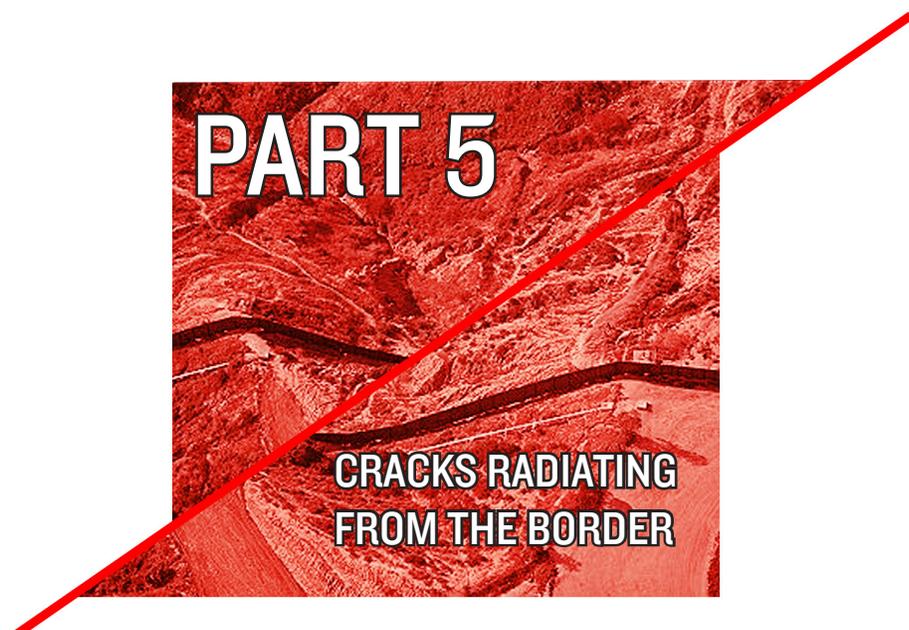
ticipating in, building, where necessary initiating and helping to transform the struggles against key crimes of this system — especially those that have the potential for actually drawing significant sections of the people into political life (in ways that collide with this system and its status quo). Revolution requires material force overthrowing material force — and revolutionaries need to actually organize material forces even in a non-revolutionary situation. Preparation for future crisis is not solely (or even mainly) a mental/theoretical preparation among revolutionaries — but also involves preparing networks, connections, alliances, core forces, as well as ideas that can bind millions under unforeseen new situations.

A key issue for an Iskra project is discussing “how to do revolutionary work in our time and place.” And that revolutionary work involves precisely a Pravda project and faultline projects.

We have previously talked about “reconceiving as we regroup” — where reconception involves a critical reworking and creative development of communist theory, and regrouping involves the emergence of a new revolutionary movement in preparation for future conjunctural events. A great deal of this reconception is focused within the “Iskra” side of this schema — though clearly once we succeed in developing faultline projects (out of the current local work that most communists are engaged in) there will be a great deal of testing and struggle over how to apply and revise what we have theoretically developed. As soon as possible, the Iskra side needs to start to discuss and sum up communist work (both the rich work of the past, and the beginnings in our present).

A THREE-TIERED MODEL:
Iskra Project
Pravda Project
Faultlines Projects

1 Lu Xun (鲁迅) was a leading figure in modern Chinese literature. His works first gained popularity after the May Fourth Movement of 1919, which was followed by the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party.



PART 5

CRACKS RADIATING FROM THE BORDER

by

MIKE ELY

Radical Eyes wrote:

Mike, a number of your recent posts suggest that you have some opinions—as of yet unstated as far as I can tell—about where where you *anticipate* these faultlines and conjunctural events emerging...I would be interested to hear more about where you find “our Mississippi”¹ emerging...I’d be interested to hear from others on this question too, of course.

Not all “issues” are equal. Not all conflicts have equal potential for radicalization. The future can be expected to have different features from the past. And we have to conceive of radical upsurges *conjuncturally* (not as a linear outcome of patient “organizing”) In other words, I think we need to pick, and pick well. And we need to take some time to do that, think it through, pick our place to dig in, identify our best methods and approaches strategically.

In the 1970s, the New Communist Movement sent thousands of young communist organizers into workplaces — but for most of them *nothing happened*. In a very few places, all hell broke loose – and even then

that could have been foreseen. Very precious forces were squandered in a series of bad strategic choices. No one would argue that some of those industries shouldn’t have had communist “colonization” by organizers. But a more mature strategic view would have led to a very different spectrum of decisions. And a more sophisticated sense of what communist work should be.

Again: Not all struggles and mass movement are equally amenable to radicalization. Not all just struggles (and faultlines) have an equal potential for shaking up a country and a system. (The anti-Jim Crow movement and Black Liberation struggle generally involved a main vein in how this fucking place works — they were struggles where a truly profound *systemic and historic* injustice of this country was there to expose and oppose.)

Radicals (like everyone else) have a terrible habit of assuming things will repeat themselves, and of seeing the future through the patterns of the past. But we have to understand how things have changed, and how some favored forms of struggle have become exhausted. (Just one example: Those throwing their life’s work into the existing “labor movement” are running on serious nostalgia. Though some very *specific* corners of the trade unions do have potential for radical work and serving the people.)

¹ Steele, John, *Where’s Our Mississippi? Memories of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964*, Kasama publications



Construction of the US-Mexico border fence

A Rumbling Faultline with Historic Potential

To answer your question, **Radical Eyes**: I have thought for a long time that the struggle of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. has tremendous potential for shaking things up. Especially if it erupts further in the context of a meltdown of the current order in Mexico.

The question of class and national contradictions has always been complex and fluid in the U.S. — and (for many reasons) the struggle of oppressed peoples (Native people, African American people, Puerto Rican people, immigrants and Chicanos) has always been a burning core of the revolutionary movement and its moments of mass influence.

There is an element of guess and chance in this... and (in some ways) the dynamics have been greatly affected by the rise of the Obama phenomenon, and the economic crisis. But I believe that there is a real possibility of a movement of undocumented people demanding both living wages and social equality (legalization, a share of power, respect, end to persecution etc.) And the complexities of that have the potential for giving rise to broad radicalization (including radiating among the

African American people, traditionally progressive strata and poor working class whites.)

I was deeply struck by the intensity of what is happening when I went down to Lumberton, North Carolina and (thanks to an important Workers Center and its work) interviewed undocumented workers from Guatemala and Mexico at the Smithfield pork processing plant. These workers were, as the article lays out, no longer willing to hide. And the second article explains some of the ways that has happened.²

In many situations, first-generation working class immigrants are like “fish out of water” — and often are just trying to hang on, and send a little money home.

But their kids (growing up here) have an acute sense of the injustice — since they compare their lives (and their parents’ lives) to the society around them (not to

² These two Kasama articles are located here:

kasamaproject.org/journalism/strikers-at-smithfield%E2%80%99s-tar-heel-slaughterhouse/

kasamaproject.org/journalism/strike-at-smithfield-workers-under-a-changing-sky/

the one they left). And those with their feet here, and a sense of how this place works, are often a powerful force for stepping out. This is where a layer of passionate articulate determined revolutionary working class activists can potentially be congealed. (The whole experience of the struggle over anti-immigrant propositions in California revealed that — as an intense new generation of self-confident and defiant radicals emerged from the families of immigrant workers.)

I think the recent recession has affected all this — in part because some immigrants have been forced out of jobs and even forced back to their home countries. There are some ways that the Obama administration has “throttled back” on the ICE offensive. There are new bubblings of an amnesty compromise in Congress. But I suspect these may be surface phenomena that may well not touch or resolve the underlying contradictions.

I went with some close friends to travel along the border with Mexico recently — and investigate a number of projects in Arizona that attempt to reach out to undocumented workers (who are dying in horrific numbers at perilous desert crossings.) There is a growing mass movement of students to go down to that border and help lay out water for the migrant workers... and they are facing federal arrest for leaving water in the desert. So there are projects and flashpoints emerging at the border, and a great restlessness in the urban centers where immigrants are concentrated. (which is now truly countrywide, and not restricted to LA or the Southwest.) This is not an argument for a Southwest regional strategy — here (as always) places like New York, the Bay Area, and newer centers have strategic importance and possibilities.

Up From the Deep South — the Very Far South

So, my guess has been that future radical shaking of the U.S. would “come up from the South” — because of a growing collapse of Mexico, because of possible radical movements in Latin America, and because of the desperation and demands of immigrant people here. The existence of a 2-tier working class (legal and undocumented) is an outrage on many levels — and one as starkly immoral and controversial as Jim Crow (and as fiercely justified by the ruling class!)

So, if I had to guess, I would think that regrouping communist forces should adopt a long range strategy of linking up with the people and resisters along that faultline. We should all learn Spanish fluently, per-



A migrant laborer tends a ranunculus field in Carlsbad, CA.
Photo: Sandy Huffaker.

haps move, send and train people for work in support of specific movements, strain to cover and understand developments, learn more about the situation and role of women in this contradiction, encourage people to do some research and writing about that faultline, work to understand the current unfolding dynamics between immigrant people and other oppressed groups, and so on.

Even as I say that, I also believe there is a special importance to do work in internationalist support for the major living revolutions in India and Nepal — both because we have a real responsibility (here in the belly of the beast), and because these events have a potential to put “communist revolution back on the main stage” and get many more progressive and radicalizing people to “give communism a fresh look.”

I have argued (here and elsewhere) against assuming that your local workplace and “day-to-day struggle” is the best locale to initiate communist work.

But, it is also true that the struggles along this faultline of undocumented immigrants will inevitably have both an economic and social character. Like the farmworkers movements of the 60s-70s, and the “justice for janitors”

work more recently, immigrant people today are likely to form (and revitalize) certain trade union struggles. And there are ways that a demand for basic civil rights (legality, ending of persecution, equality of language, education for children, health care) will likely be connected to economic demands (protection against firing, wages, benefits, access to the common social contract etc.)

The Capitalist Logic and Necessity

In the current world situation, it is a great advantage to the U.S. that it (more than any other imperialist country of the West) has direct access to millions of workers from the third world. The U.S. Mexico border is a unique interface between an advanced imperialist center and an impoverished third world country. And the U.S. ruling class is very unlikely to give up its current ability to have a semi-legal lower tier within its working class. The last years of border persecution have already driven up labor costs in industries relying on undocumented immigrant labor (i.e. agriculture, etc.) At Smithfield, the ICE threats caused this pork plant to shift its workforce back to African Americans from the surrounding areas. But for very important and strategic economic reasons, the competitiveness of U.S. capitalism (i.e. its domestic competitiveness with other centers of capital and manufacturing) rests on lowering the cost of labor drastically, and keeping it low.

One way they have done that is by “exporting jobs” — i.e. by moving capital to low wage areas. But some industries can’t move — you can’t move meat processing to Bangladesh, or apple harvesting, or urban transport, or hotel service. Those industries are inevitably local. So instead of moving the facilities, the U.S. has cheapened labor costs by moving the third world workforces inside.

I foresee an objective clash between the just and forceful demands of immigrant people (for equality and legalization) and the needs of U.S. imperialism for a bitterly poor internal lower tier. I don’t have an “inevitabilist” sense of how it “must” be resolved. But I believe it is explosive, and will both divide and energize other sections of the people. (Imagine the complex currents among African American people if a real movement of undocumented workers takes hold, and takes the stage.)

Anyway... yes, I think there is some urgency in thinking through what it would mean to do communist work along such a faultline — exactly in preparation for new leaps and future conjunctural movement.

Our watchwords need to be: Investigate. Reconceive. Regroup. Dig in. Hasten and Await.

I foresee an objective clash between the just and forceful demands of immigrant people and the needs of US imperialism for a bitterly poor internal lower tier.

PART 6

NO PLAN

SURVIVES

CONTACT WITH
THE EVENT

by
MIKE ELY

RW Harvey raises a number of important points... including:

Nothing, I repeat, nothing opens the doors of revolutionary change until the system fundamentally ruptures — you know, until [as Lenin famously argued] the rulers cannot rule in the same way, the people cannot live in the same way, and there is an organization to lead them beyond either simply reconstituting the old or being subsumed by paralysis and thereby rendered mere carrion for whatever reactionary forces are attempting to reorganize.

It behooves us to ponder/imagine what “the same way” really constitutes, how elastic it is in the U.S., and what “not in the same way” might involve.

And I agree with **RWH** that the “same way” may end up referring to things we don’t expect, and may involve demands for changes we didn’t anticipate.

RW Harvey also wrote:

What we theorize today will not, I repeat, will not look anything like what a revolutionary situation will present.

I think this is true... and has repeatedly been true in the past. But I think there is an analogy to planning before a battle:

All military science points to a paradox: No plan survives contact with the enemy, and yet victory is often dependent on the quality of your planning.

You need a logistical plan, and you need to implement it to gather logistical supplies. You need a plan for deploying your forces. You need a tactical plan, etc. But then, once any major battle starts, the combatants discover that important details are unanticipated. Things often spin out in ways that no one expected. That’s why intelligence leading up to a battle is so important, and why command and control is so important in the battle—and that’s part of why warfare is both science and art.

You *needed* that series of plans based on your best guess of the coming situation. And you *needed* to align forces and resources based on those plans. And THEN the colliding commanders *need* to adjust EVERYTHING rapidly as the new situation unfolds in the concrete.

RW Harvey writes:

Theoretical demarcation and grounding? Excellent. But if this inhibits apriori the ability to respond to and lead in an emerging, rapidly changing situation, then what is the point?

I don't think that theory need inherently lock us into verdicts and patterns. But we do need to fight for a flexible mind, a truly dialectical method, and a critical and self-critical theory. And all of that is part of our theoretical process — developing a theoretical method that does not operate as a series of blinders.

And, further, we need an analysis and we need to act on the analysis — even if it ends up being “wrong” in this-or-that aspect.

(Lenin's major 1905 analysis of a coming Russian revolution, “Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution,” proved to have major problems as the real-world alignments emerged.)¹

To return to the military analogy for a second: No one should use the unpredictable nature of a *coming* battle as an excuse NOT to formulate detailed logistical and tactical plans. Any force that did that would *always* suffer defeat. And that is part of why irregular forces (mobs or local militia) are almost always beaten by regular forces.

Acting on such plans is part of seizing the initiative — which is crucial to victory. And (not surprisingly) much hangs in the degree to which plans foreshadow reality — even if not perfectly.

An “oops” example: When different left forces sent cadre to “salt” the coalfields at the end of the 1960s, some NCM² parties assumed that the cutting edge would be in areas where the miners were still unionizing (i.e. Kentucky and Harlan County)... so they sent their cadre there. In fact, this was exactly wrong: the struggle became most intense in the most highly unionized coalfields of southern West Virginia (where the RU/RCP had sent their forces in 1972).³ That is why the movie “Harlan County” (made in 1976) starts focused on the unionization struggle of one small mine in Kentucky, but suddenly veers and “discovers” the much more significant and illegal struggles of tens of thousands happening next door in the central unionized coalfields. Other left parties ended up moving their people from Kentucky to West Virginia, after the first massive wildcats had come and gone. It was an example of diverse forces making very different predictive analyses about

the nature of the class struggle and its likely points of eruption (based on different ideological and political lines).

And to bring the military analogy back to politics: This is why we revolutionaries need perceptive analysis and creative preparation now, and we also need brilliant innovation as things unfold. Anyone who limits themselves to non-revolutionary work during non-revolutionary times will simply be lost when something else becomes possible. Part of the challenge is to do revolutionary work in non-revolutionary times -- i.e. to gather and develop, through conscious preparatory work and mutual transformation, a significant backbone of forces that are restlessly impatient with non-revolutionary times, and that are prepared to switch toward a literally revolutionary politics when a crisis makes that possible.

In reply to this essay, RW Harvey wrote:

I wonder what people even think might possibly happen when a revolutionary situation thrusts itself upon the U.S.? At the risk of being charged ahistorical (or worse, exceptionalist), Russia 1917, China 1949, and Cuba 1959 will be of no use to wrapping our heads around what we will face.

There will be no Winter Palace to storm, no Sierras from which to make forays, and no regular “Red Army” to take the field (except perhaps in the final phases, if we are victorious). Perhaps we had better study the conditions within failed states, or present-day Iraq to better represent what we may be facing. Seizing/controlling D.C. or N.Y.C. will unlikely mean the entire edifice will fall into our hands.

Historical analogies are helpful when they truly are analagous; dreams and fantasies must be measured against some semblance of reality...

TNL responded:

History isn't only valuable when it offers analogies. Russia, China and Cuba have much to teach us not because a revolutionary situation in the US will follow any of those patterns but because, along with other revolutionary experiences, they reveal persistent common problems as well as underline the need of every revolution to innovate.

Each of those revolutions, for example, had to

¹ V.I. Lenin, “Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution,” 1905

<marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/tactics/index.htm>

² New Communist Movement

³ Ely, Mike, “Writings on Coal Miners, Disasters, Strikes, God & the Future,” 2010

<kasamaproject.org/2010/04/07/mike-ely-writings-on-coal-miners-disasters-strikes-god-the-future>

deal with the problem of developing its own military capacity. The specific conditions and solutions varied considerably, but its a good bet that any revolution in the US will confront a similar sort of problem, though of course involving very different scales and military technologies.

Studying historical experiences helps us appreciate the sorts of problems that might be thrown up and the range of responses to similar problems. This gives us a departure point for asking how such problems would look in a revolutionary situation in the 21st century United States. Imagining such scenarios in turn helps us begin to formulate plans which, as Mike has pointed out, are both crucial and likely to fall apart in a real revolutionary situation.



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