

Self-Criticism: Unprincipled Struggle and ‘The Externalization’ Piece

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Figure 1:

In April, following the dissolution of the New Communist Party - Liason Committee (NCP-LC), the Boston and Richmond branches of the Maoist Communist Group (MCG) published a document titled "The Externalization of the Anti-Revisionist Struggle is the Negation of Proletarian Politics". This document was an attempt to sum up the disagreements that the Boston and Richmond branches had developed with the New York branch. Since the document's publication, the Boston branch has become increasingly concerned with the politics being put forth by the VA branch, and in recently reviewing the document, we noted many articulations with which we do not agree. We've come to the deter-

mination that we need to publish a self-criticism of our endorsement of some of the positions put forth in the document. To be clear, we still uphold the criticisms of the NY branch with whom we have since split. What is at stake in this self-criticism is not reneging on the critiques of NY and their small-clique politics of supposed purity, but rather clarifying our opposition to left-adventurism. For a succinct definition of left-adventurism we turn to Mao:

“We are also opposed to”Left” phrase-mongering. The thinking of ‘Leftists’ outstrips a given stage of development of the objective process; some regard their fantasies as truth, while others strain to realize in the present an ideal which can only be realized in the future. They alienate themselves from the current practice of the majority of the people and from the realities of the day, and show themselves adventurist in their actions.”

A point of clarification: an opposition to left-adventurism is not an opposition to militant politics or to the use of violence in revolutionary sequences. It is instead an opposition to actions which are out of step with the development of the objective situation and do not serve to advance the cause of proletarian revolution.

In our self-criticism we attempt to explain how and why we made these errors, so that we (and others) do not repeat these mistakes.

On the Two-Line Struggle

In our determination, the primary error we made in the process of drafting the “Externalization” piece was failing to pursue the two-line struggle. That is, the necessity of struggling for proletarian advances against the capitalist mode of production and the various external class enemies who work to reproduce it, while simultaneously struggling against deviations internal to our political organizations so that we continue to advance the cause of proletarian revolution and the elimination of the basis for inequality. Without the pursuit of the two-line struggle, we will inevitably end up practicing a bourgeois line within our organization even as we combat various external enemies. When our disagreement with a VA comrade’s proposal to include quotes from the writings of the Brigade Rosse (BR) was met with a complete lack of engagement, we failed to insist on struggle over this point. Thus, we allowed quotes from a left-adventurist group, whose politics we repudiate, to be included in the document we were drafting collectively. Internally, this was justified on the grounds that these particular quotes did not have any negative political content. In our recent re-reading of the document, we have come to realize that this is not that case, and that the BR quotes put forth a distinctly anti-Maoist politics.

Our bland liberal acceptance of these articulations—the significance of which we did not fully understand at the time—was unprincipled. By liberal acceptance we mean that we neglected ideological struggle in favor of unprincipled peace

between ourselves and VA. The correct and principled action would have been to insist on struggle over these points and oppose the pushing through of edits and quotes because of a time constraint. It must be admitted that this lack of two-line struggle led us to form an unprincipled unity with VA, predicated on the need to struggle against the bureaucratic deviations of the NY Branch. But as struggle is the life of an organization, avoiding principled struggle only covers over contradictions. Since the publication of the “Externalization” piece, it has become clear that many serious contradictions were present in our relations with VA which have since led to the cessation of communication between our branches. If we had engaged in principled struggle when drafting the “Externalization” piece, these contradictions would have been easier to identify and we would have been better equipped to correctly handle them.

To be clear, there are articulations in the “Externalization” piece that were not forced through un-democratically which must also be criticized. However, these errors are not as serious as the error of allowing the inclusion of quotes that convey such a left-adventurist tendency.

Externalization and Disdain for the Masses

The “Externalization” piece includes two quotes from the BR. This is the first:

“That is why today it is of fundamental importance for the leap to the Party to recognize that there is no separation between cultural revolution in the metropolises and civil war, neither temporally (that is to say as two separate phases), or spatially. Civil war and cultural revolution are two aspects of the same process: the total social war. It is by placing that consideration at the center of the activity of the Party that the correct basis is established for the construction of the system of red power and at the same time the war for transition to communism is placed on the agenda.”

Here the unity between “civil war” and “cultural revolution” is described as “total social war”. In this articulation, there is no distinction between these processes (between the seizing of state power and rebellion against revisionist trends internal to a socialist state or proletarian organization), and the correct path of the party is described as placing the necessity of a total social war at the center of its activity. This opens the door for an adventurist understanding of any armed action, like those of the BR, as being in the service of the revolution (it’s all “total social war”, after all) and as being a step along the road to establishing communist relations of production.

Against this we must assert that the transition to communism is not something that can be guaranteed by an outburst of violence or the destruction of a solitary existing organ of state power. Instead, to trod the path to communism we must employ the mass-line to defeat state power, engage in two line struggle at all times, and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat. We must continue the

process of the working-through of contradictions in order to advance towards communism.

This is the second quote from the BR included in the document:

“Internal to the capitalist mode of production, the technical division of labor appears within the relations of production as a political separation between manual and mental labor, which is identified with and polarized between different social figures who contend with one another for power. We must conduct an incessant battle against this separation, against its residue in every militant, in every site of politics, every variable of the proletarian system of power, until the appropriation of consciousness, mediation and mental processing, can be produced as necessary and recomposed steps of the daily practice of revolutionary transformation of the present state of things.

Our criticism towards militarism, that it surreptitiously reintroduces the separate forms, on one side of knowledge-power (politicians, theoreticians, spiritual fathers..) and on the other side the combatant executives (the fighters) is not tactical but involves the foundations of the metropolitan revolutionary process.

The expropriation of knowledge from the proletarians of the metropole is much deeper than a limited education, because it [knowledge] states a decisive condition of their subordination. Knowledge is opposed against them as power, command embodied in machines, command hierarchy, the rule of the intellectuals and technicians and moreover the most perfidious form of the leadership of the ‘organic intellectuals’ and the ‘new political class.’

The reappropriation of knowledge is the result of revolutionary practice and no organization calling itself communist can underestimate it. The reconstruction of social individuals through the recomposition of their practice is not a problem to be solved in the future. It concerns us today and develops along with the process of revolutionary struggle, which transforms the objective world at the same time as it transforms those who carry out this transformation.

Communists and the development of communism are not two separate processes.”

Here we have first the equation that “division of labor” = “different social figures contending for power”. This articulation, steeped in the ideology of bourgeois individualism, is opposed to the two-line struggle. The BR posits that, instead of division and contradiction internal to every grouping and every militant, there is a metaphysical opposition between those who uphold the division of labor (a supposed undivided group of politicians, revolutionary theorists, and spiritual fathers) and those who carry out, unthinkingly, the orders of this technocratic elite.

What the BR is saying here is that all those who do not agree with them are their enemies and therefore uphold the division of labor. Such a conception of political disagreements as necessarily co-incident with upholding the division of labor establishes a politics of purity supposedly beyond reproach. This left-adventurist politics is defined by its supposed opposition to the counter-revolutionary figure of the technocrat, who manages the proletariat by taking away its ability to think or act, depriving it of access to knowledge-power. This formula is anti-dialectical: it posits an abstract equivalence between knowledge and power. Further, since this idea puts forth that the masses do not think and do not have ideas the quote is clearly anti-Maoist. Instead of positing the need for two-line struggle at all times, the BR posits a subjective and arbitrary determination of friends and enemies, where any disagreement with their politics aligns one with the figure of the technocratic elite.

In the place of a metaphysically pure class line residing in an organization operating at a distance from the masses (an idea we have critiqued the NY branch of the MCG for holding) this quote puts forward a metaphysically pure political line that resides in a single militant, in a single-minded opposition to the division of labor. It's clear again that these ideas put forward an adventurist understanding, where a single militant or a small group of militants are understood as advancing the cause of proletarian revolution by simply striking at the figure of these "leaders" or anyone who opposes the line of "purity". The only means to handle contradictions for these militants is violence, since every disagreement with the purity of the figure of the militant is a contest for power and an effort to uphold the division of labor. There is no room in such a politics for the correct handling of contradictions among the people, for the preservation of minority opinions within a political organization, or for principled disagreement between comrades.

We must oppose these left-adventurist conceptions with the Maoist principles of the mass-line, that the "one divides into two", and the two-line struggle. The masses do think, and our work as revolutionaries is to concentrate the correct ideas of the masses. Positing the existence of an undivided enemy upholding the division of labor violates the principle that "the one divides into two" and that all militants and all political lines divide. Instead of drawing abstract and arbitrary categories and formulating supposedly pure political lines based on those determinations, it is necessary to pursue the two-line struggle at all times. Without doing so, communists will only reproduce inequality and oppression (internal to their organizations) in the struggle against external enemies. Without the two-line struggle, communists externalize the anti-revisionist struggle, and therefore negate proletarian politics.

To once again reiterate our self-criticism, it was primarily our hasty reading and our stale liberalism that led us to accept the addition of these quotes. In order to avoid these deviations, we should have pursued the two-line struggle and refused to accept an unprincipled agreement on the addition of these quotes.

Clarity, Unity, and Democratic Centralism

The same form of liberalism led us to accept the addition of a number of confusing and overly academic articulations in the “Externalization” piece. The comrade who put forward the quotes from the BR also wrote a number of statements which were indicative of petite-bourgeois intellectualism. We in Boston challenged these confused articulations and pushed this comrade to be more clear. In this instance he responded to our criticism, but only to state that his original articulation was clear enough and that he opposed any changes to his wording.

At the time, we in Boston were focused on our opposition of the revisionist politics being forward by the NY branch and consequently paid too little attention to the concerning developments in VA. We sought to forge a unity with comrades in VA, but failed to realize that struggle is the life of a political organization, and that without real ideological struggle there can be no principled unity and therefore no political organization! We saw clearly how NY’s bureaucratic foreclosure of struggle prohibited the development of principled politics within the MCG, but we remained blind to how our own failure to pursue the two-line struggle was also a deviation from principled politics. Because of this, we accepted the confused and convoluted articulations of one comrade from VA despite the fact that he was the only one that supported the inclusion of his unedited writing. An adherence to the principle of democratic centralism would have avoided this deviation towards a subjective and arbitrary articulation.

In order to clarify some crucial contradictions internal to the “Externalization” piece itself, we must criticize the closing lines in particular. The final paragraph, authored by this one comrade, remains dangerously close to the writings of the BR and contains certain fundamental ambiguities which must be clarified and criticized:

“We end with a final provisional thesis on the universal political importance of the Cultural Revolution:

The basic political question is how such a trajectory can advance towards communism with a protracted continuity. The question of state power when it is posited in relation to the realization of the communist objective at every moment and not autonomized by a instrumental stage theory is a dependent variable in relation to this question of how to launch and develop this living identity of cultural revolution and civil war.”

This final section is concerned with the question of the difference between “an instrumental stage theory” and “the realization of the communist objective at every moment.” Through further communication it has become clear that what is being put forward here is the idea of the “immediate realization of communism”, said to be possible through the mass-suicide of the party in the wake of a successful national revolution that arms the masses. This articulation clearly

negates the need for, or possibility of, the dictatorship of the proletariat in favor of an ultra-left fantasy of resolving each and every contradiction of capitalist social relations through the self-destruction of the party. In self-criticism, it must be said that we did not engage critically with this passage. If we had done so, we would have come to understand the anti-Maoist politics that are put forward in it.

The ultra-left position put forward in this final passage is consistent with the BR quotes that were critiqued earlier in this document. This position substitutes a metaphysical dualism of the opposition between bourgeoisie and proletariat for a detailed analysis of the contradictions at play in a situation. This overly simplistic metaphysical position is best labeled as “Two times One” in its world outlook because it simplifies the complexity of concrete situations into static dualisms.

Two errors prevail here in the understanding of contradictions. The first error is based on positing an abstract equivalence between contradictions. From this position, it follows that in the wake of a successful revolution, the dualist opposition between *the bourgeoisie and the proletariat* is replaced by that of *the party and the masses*. Thus, just as it is necessary to destroy the bourgeoisie to achieve revolution, it is posited that the destruction of the party is the only possible means of preventing their ossification into a new bureaucratic bourgeoisie. This is the “living identity of cultural revolution and civil war” where there is no two-line struggle, only struggle against the enemy.

The second error is based on positing an abstract equivalence between the two sides of a contradiction. The bourgeoisie and the proletariat are not two equal and opposite forces contending for power; if this were the case, it would mean that victory of the proletariat would entail replacing the bourgeoisie as the oppressive and exploitative class. But instead, the victory of the proletariat entails the destruction of the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat via the realization of communism. That is to say, the elimination of the possibility of inequality which means the elimination of the possibility of the existence of the proletariat itself.

What’s more, the ultra-left articulation put forward by this comrade in VA forecloses on the necessity of a prolonged working-through of contradictions in the wake of a successful revolution. Without a concrete understanding of the need for and purpose of two-line struggle against revisionism, promoted by the dictatorship of the proletariat, one is led to posit that the dictatorship of the proletariat is equivalent to a bureaucratic bourgeoisie that upholds revisionism. It must be noted that this position is in line with what the NY MCG puts forward in their document “On Maoist Practice” namely, that:

“Mass initiative is effectively exhausted in the relation of leadership that organizes it—which is to say: it is drained in the tactics of seizing state power from the bourgeoisie with the aim of smashing the bourgeois state and building a proletarian state of a new type.”

Through our failure to pursue the two-line struggle in drafting this document with VA, we failed to realize the similarity of the politics of the NY branch and the politics being put forward by this comrade in VA. It is now clear to us that positions of this comrade from VA and the NY branch are very similar in both their ultra-leftist rejection of the need for the two-line struggle and their rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat in favor of positing a metaphysically correct political line.

Mass Democracy and the Mass Line

Throughout the “Externalization” piece, there are a number of references to the need to “further the democracy of the masses.” However, the articulation of exactly what such a task entails remains vague and unclear. A reader could be forgiven for believing that we are simply advocating for bourgeois democracy, for the free circulation of diverse opinions. The ambiguity of our articulation also left room for a left-adventurist interpretation that understands the democracy of the masses as achievable solely by arming the masses and attacking various organs of the bourgeois state. We should have been clearer in our articulation so as to avoid these potential confusions.

In our view, it is key to understand that the democracy of the masses cannot be furthered without the mass-line. Furthering the democracy of the masses is the process of working towards the realization of communism through the use of the mass-line to concentrate the correct ideas of the masses, which are then deployed in concrete struggles. The concentration of the correct ideas of the masses also necessarily entails promoting those of the advanced while isolating the backwards ideas which are reflective of bourgeois ideology; without doing so, concentrating the correct ideas of the masses is not possible.

Understood in this sense, the furthering of the democracy of the masses through the mass line is directly related to the ability of the masses to realize their power and win in the struggle against the bourgeoisie. Insofar as ‘the correct ideas come from the masses’ a revolutionary organization without broad and deep ties within the masses will never succeed in making revolution. It is only through concentrating the correct ideas of the masses that we can advance our revolutionary practice and MLM itself.