

## ORGANIC CENTRALISM: A VITAL QUESTION (I)

The vital question of organic centralism is always a difficult question for those who approach the Party for the simple reason that it clashes head on with the spontaneous atmosphere of the bourgeois society and with the harmful atmosphere of the supposedly alternative environments, where all the pests of the bourgeois democratic environment are cultivated - worsened - .

In order to properly approach the question we must start from the development of the approaches of organic centralism by the Communist Left in the context of the struggle within the III International against its degeneration.

### The Democratic Principle (1922)

We will begin our exposition with some quotations from a Party text entitled "**The Democratic Principle**" and published in 1922 (the bolds of the quotes are ours).

***"We do not attribute these capacities of the party to its particular constitution, anymore than we do in the case of any other organization. The party may or may not be suited to its task of leading the revolutionary action of a class; it is not any political party but a precise one, namely the communist party, that can assume this task, and not even the communist party is immune to the numerous dangers of degeneration and dissolution. What makes the party equal to its task is not its statutes or mere internal organizational measures. It is the positive characteristics which develop within the party because it participates in the struggle as an organization possessing a single orientation which derives from its conception of the historical process, from a fundamental programme which has been translated into a collective consciousness and at the same time from a secure organizational discipline."*** (The Democratic Principle, 1922).

That is to say, we do not consider that the Party can fulfill its function by virtue of a statutory mechanism or by the constitution of its internal organization. What really determines that the Party is up to the historical function is its own process of development in the participation in the struggles and in the action (understood in its historical sense of the great struggles since the constitution of the Party in 1848 with the Manifesto of the Communist Party and not in the immediate or vulgar "here and now"), which crystallizes in a common direction. This common direction is realized around the same conception of the historical process, the same program and a firm organizational discipline. And what are the "guarantees" of a correct outcome of this process? The same text has clarified that there are no absolute guarantees that "immunize" the Party. We will return later on this question, but we are first interested in discarding a recurrent error: the mistaken pretension that this result can be reached through the democratic mechanism.

***"But as we have emphasized, there is no reason to raise the use of the democratic mechanism to a principle. Besides its consultative functions, analogous to the legislative tasks of the state apparatus, the party has executive tasks which at the crucial moment of the struggle, correspond to those of an army and which demand maximum discipline toward the hierarchy. In fact, in the complex process which has led to the formation of communist parties, the emergence of a hierarchy is a real and dialectical phenomenon which has remote origins and which corresponds to the entire past experience of the functioning of the party's***

***mechanism. We cannot state that the decisions of the party majority are per se as correct as those of the infallible supernatural judges who are supposed to have given human societies their leaders, like the gods believed in by all those who think that the Holy Spirit participates in papal conclaves. Even in an organization like the party where the broad composition is a result of selection through spontaneous voluntary membership and control of recruitment, the decision of the majority is not intrinsically the best. If it contributes to a better working of the party's executive bodies, this is only because of the coincidence of individual efforts in a unitary and well-oriented work."*** (The Democratic Principle, 1922).

The text highlights a real historical fact and that is that the complex processes that have led to the constitution of communist parties, as well as to the conformation of their internal structures, have not been the result of democratic consultations but of real and dialectical processes that have entailed a selection (through voluntary adhesion and control of recruitment), an accumulation of experience and the exercise of the party mechanism. Even in such a Party, the majority mechanism does not necessarily lead to the correct solution and, if it does, it is not as a majority decision but because it is the result of the convergence in the concord and well directed work.

It is known, for example, that, although the "Bolsheviks" have this name because they were momentarily in the majority at the London Congress, they were quickly left in the minority and lost control of the publication of the *Iskra* immediately afterwards. Lenin's April Theses of 1917 are another clear example of the futility of the majority opinion. On the other hand, this is how Marx expressed himself in a letter to Engels in 1859: *"I told them straight out that we owed our position as representatives of the proletarian party to nobody but ourselves; this, however, had been endorsed by the exclusive and universal hatred accorded us by every faction and party of the old world. You can imagine how taken aback the oafs were."* (Letter from Marx to Engels, May 18, 1859, Marx and Engels Collected Works Vol. 40, p.440). Lenin expresses himself in these harsh terms in the *What is to be done?* (1902) in relation to the "game of democracy": *"It is a useless toy because, in point of fact, no revolutionary organization has ever practiced, or could practice, broad democracy, however much it may have desired to do so. It is a harmful toy because any attempt to practice "the broad democratic principle" will simply facilitate the work of the police in carrying out largescale raids, will perpetuate the prevailing primitiveness, and will divert the thoughts of the practical workers from the serious and pressing task of training themselves to become professional revolutionaries to that of drawing up detailed "paper" rules for election systems. Only abroad, where very often people with no opportunity for conducting really active work gather, could this "playing at democracy" develop here and there, especially in small groups (...). The only serious organizational principle for the active workers of our movement should be the strictest secrecy, the strictest selection of members, and the training of professional revolutionaries. Given these qualities, something even more than "democratism" would be guaranteed to us, namely, complete,*

*comradely, mutual confidence among revolutionaries*<sup>1</sup>”.

It took the later disastrous experiences of the degeneration of first the Second International and then the Third International for the Left to be able to draw definitively in their full depth the lessons of the necessity of the definitive burial of the democratic mechanism and the overcoming of it through organic centralism; but certainly the previous quotes demonstrate that the disregard of any intrinsic value or principle in relation to the democratic mechanism is in the DNA of Marxism and that the conformation of the Party organ has always been seen by Marxists as the dialectical and material development of a selection process. We will return later to a crucial fact and that is that both the First, the Second and even the Third International were politically heterogeneous organizations that included in their bosom even currents that were avowedly non-Marxist.

Returning to **"The Democratic Principle"** (1922), the text states that the democratic mechanism is a mere "material accident" and in no way an "indispensable platform", it states that it is possible to get rid of democratic conventions if we have other elements of decision and resolution of problems that truly respond to the demands of the development of the party and its activity:

*"But we can envisage a mode of organization which will be increasingly liberated from the conventions of the democratic principle, and it will not be necessary to reject it out of unjustified fears if one day it can be shown that other methods of decision, of choice, of resolution of problems are more consistent with the real demands of the party's development and its activity in the framework of history. (...) The democratic criterion has been for us so far a material and incidental factor in the construction of our internal organization and the formulation of our party statutes; it is not an indispensable platform for them. Therefore we will not raise the organizational formula known as "democratic centralism" to the level of a principle. **Democracy cannot be a principle for us. Centralism is indisputably one, since the essential characteristics of party organization must be unity of structure and action. The term centralism is sufficient to express the continuity of party structure in space; in order to introduce the essential idea of continuity in time, the historical continuity of the struggle which, surmounting successive obstacles, always advances towards the same goal, and in order to combine these two essential ideas of unity in the same formula, we would propose that the communist party base its organization on "organic centralism". While preserving as much of the incidental democratic mechanism that can be used, we will eliminate the use of the term "democracy", which is dear to the worst demagogues but tainted with irony for the exploited, oppressed and cheated, abandoning it to the exclusive usage of the bourgeoisie and the champions of liberalism in their diverse guises and sometimes extremist poses.**" (The Democratic Principle, 1922).*

#### **Communist Organization and Discipline (1924)**

This text is linked to the previous one: *"In one of the issues of Rassegna Comunista an article about the "democratic principle" was published, considering its application whether in the State or in the union or political organizations, and*

*developing the demonstration that for us this principle is not sustainable, whereas it can be debated whether the introduction or not of a numerical and majority democracy mechanism can be convenient, for certain organisms, in certain historical situations.*

*It is implicit in Marxist thought the critique of the pompous majority illusion according to which, the correct way is always indicated by the confrontation between the ciphers of a pole in which every individual would have the same weight and influence. And this critique of the majority criterium can lead to refuse it as an illusion not only in the huge lie of the parliamentary bourgeois state but also for the functioning of the revolutionary state, and even inside the proletarian economical organisms and our own party, granting the eventuality of having adopted it in practice given the lack of a better organizational convention. **Nobody more than us, Marxists, recognizes the importance of the function of the organized minorities and the absolute need, in the phases of revolutionary struggle, that the class and the party that conducts it work under the strict direction of the hierarchies of the organization itself and under the most solid discipline.**" (Communist Organization and Discipline, 1924).*

Starting from the concept that the numerical majority mechanism is a mere mechanism and by no means a principle, three other points are emphasized: recognition of the function of the organized minority (the Party itself in relation to the whole class!), the need for centralism and a solid discipline.

The text recalls that there is no good discipline in itself and that: *"It is therefore clear that the criteria of the discipline for the discipline is, in certain situations, used by the counterrevolutionaries and is used to obstruct the development that leads to the formation of the true class revolutionary Party.*

*The most glorious example, of how the demagogic influence of these sophisms must be disregarded, is given by Lenin himself, who was hundred times attacked as dissolver, segregator, violator of party duties, but which continued undaunted through his way, and became with perfect logic the vindicator of the healthy Marxist principles of organic centralization in the State and in the party of the revolution.*

*On the contrary the most disgraceful example of the formal and bureaucratic application of the discipline is given by the vote that Karl Liebknecht considered himself forced to make on August 4th 1914 in favor of the war credits." (Communist Organization and Discipline, 1924).*

Karl Liebknecht was imprisoned and murdered by the German Social Democracy for calling for revolutionary defeatism against the bourgeoisie itself, but, even so, by a formalistic, bureaucratic and... democratic application of discipline he voted in favor of the budget for Germany to enter the war.

Thus, *"The guide that links us to our revolutionary purpose cannot therefore ever be provided by the formal and constant deference to the officially stated chiefs, and neither by the indispensable fulfillment of all the formalities of an elective consultation. We repeat that our solution is built in a completely different and superior way". (Communist Organization and Discipline, 1924).*

The overcoming of "discipline for discipline" and of

<sup>1</sup> Only the opportunists (call them Stalinists, Trotskyists, Maoists or whatever you want) have been able to pervert Lenin's demand for full dedication and militant devotion to the revolutionary cause, turning it into a "professional opportunist" who lives off the organization instead of living for the revolution.

democratic deception is found in the vindication of the tactical program: *"Our opinion regarding this sort of problem is that the **question of organization and discipline** inside the communist movement cannot be resolved without keeping it **in close relation with the questions of theory, program and tactics.**"* (Communist Organization and Discipline, 1924).

At this point it is fundamental to remember what is said in "The Democratic Principle" (1922) in the sense that the Party is not an organization that receives its hierarchy from the outside, like a company, the police, the body of officials, crime, etc. The bourgeoisie sets in motion enormous masses at its service with the mechanism of dependence or economic blackmail, as well as the threat of repressive sanction. Stalinism did the same by using the Russian State against Party militants to impose its counterrevolution. Adherence to the revolutionary Party on the contrary is voluntary and the cement of our discipline must be found elsewhere.

*"We have to remind, in order to begin our analysis of the issue, that communist parties are organisms of **"voluntary" adherence.** This is a fact inherent to the historical nature of parties, and not the acknowledgement of some **"principle" or "model"**. It is for granted that we cannot force anyone to take our member card, we cannot make a conscription of communists, we cannot establish sanctions against the person that does not act uniformly towards the internal discipline: all of our members are materially free to leave us whenever he or she wants. We do not want to state now whether it is desirable or not things to be this way: the fact is that they are so and that there are no ways apt to change them. As a consequence, we cannot adopt the formula, certainly rich in many advantages, of the absolute obedience in the execution of orders coming from above".* (Communist Organization and Discipline, 1924).

The text has already advanced the vital importance of the tactical program: *"There is no mechanical discipline good for the execution of superior orders or dispositions **"whatever they are"**: **there is an ensemble of orders and dispositions that respond to the real origins of the movement that can guarantee the maximum of discipline,** that is, of unitary action of the whole organism, whereas there are other directives which emanate from the center that can compromise discipline and organizational solidity".* (Communist Organization and Discipline, 1924).

There are orders and dispositions that correspond to the theory, to the program, to the tactical lessons of the defeats and counterrevolutions suffered. These orders and dispositions are accepted and carried out by the militancy as a whole because they are coherent with the doctrine-program-tactics nucleus. When these orders and dispositions are carried out, the militants who carry them out and the rest of the organization feel reflected and identified in this common action tending to a common end. If, on the contrary, the orders and dispositions are contradictory with the theory-program-tactic of the Party, there will be no democratic or disciplinary mechanism that can prevent fractions, ruptures and degenerations.

The text continues: *"It comes down therefore to tracking the task of the leading organs. Who will have to do it? The whole party, the whole organization, must do it, not in the banal and parliamentary sense of its right to be consulted about the **"mandate"** to confer to the elected chiefs and about its limits, **but in the dialectical sense that embodies the tradition, the preparation, the real continuity in the thought and in the action of the movement.** Precisely because **we are anti-democratic, we think that in any***

***matter a minority can have more corresponding views than those of the majority in the interest of the revolutionary process.**"* (Communist Organization and Discipline, 1924).

*"We thus summarize our thesis, and we believe to be thus faithful to the dialectics of Marxism: **the action that the Party develops and the tactics that it adopts, that is, the manner in which the party acts towards the "outside" have at their turn consequences upon the organization and its "internal" constitution.** Fatally compromises the party that who, in the name of an unlimited discipline, pretends to have it disposed for an action, a tactic, **"whatever" strategical maneuver, that is, without well determined limits known by the ensemble of the militants.***

*The desired maximal unity and disciplinary solidity will be effectively reached only by facing the problem in the basis of this platform, and **not pretending that it is already solved prejudicially by a banal rule of mechanical obedience.**"* (Communist Organization and Discipline, 1924).

We commit ourselves to a militancy to carry out an action within *"well determined limits known by the ensemble of the militants"*, as we have said before, *"in the dialectical sense that embodies the tradition, the preparation, the real continuity in the thought and in the action of the movement."* Apart from this, no rule of mechanical obedience - whatever it may be - will ensure *"the maximum of discipline, that is, of unitary action of the whole organism"*. In fact, not only will it not ensure it, but it will liquidate the Party. It is for this reason that the collective study of the Party texts is fundamental, the international clarification on the basis of the past experiences in order to face correctly the experiences and struggles of the future.

In **"The Democratic Principle"** it is stated that *"The developments of these ideas are contained in the theses on tactics presented to the Congress of the Communist Party of Italy, and which the reader is familiar with"* and in **"Communist Organization and Discipline"** it is said that *"The problem is also partially considered in the tactic thesis for the 4th Congress which have recently been reproduced by Stato Operaio."* They are respectively the **"Theses on the tactics of the Communist Party of Italy - Rome (1922)"** and the **"Draft Theses of the CP of Italy for the IV World Congress - Moscow (1922)"**, from which we will depart in the next number.

*(To be continued in the next number)*