Review

From Circles to Party

By Jaques de Fouw – 2025 05 23

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Introduction

Recently, in my search for answers in regards to how to build an effective communist organisation, I came across the book "From Circles to Party", written in 1979 by the Pacific Collective (ML). This book turned out to be a surprisingly well thought out piece of literature on Marxist unity, party building, ideological unity, democratic centralism, with a concrete proposal on how to get there based on analysis of the failures and successes of other attempts. This book attempts to provide a complete and coherent view on how to build an effective and large party, taking into account past successes, past failures, their context, and the state of the movement. It contains a critique of what they consider to be sectarian, unprincipled and spontaneous deviations or mistakes in the approach to building a communist party. It is an attempt to rectify the Leninist party form with the observable failures in building a unified communist party.

Parralels to our own time are easy to find. They too lived in a situation where the communist movement was fractured, the level of theoretical development was low, ideological confusion was abound and experienced leadership was nowhere to be found. They had to reinvent "how to communism" in an imperialist core country with a history of anti-communism, just as we have to do.

The book provides insight in how, historically, communist unity was build, and shows how attempts at unity made in their time, which are similar to attempts we still see today, do not work. While the proposal in this book may not directly applicable, and regardless of the political positions they took on the issues of their time, a critical read will provide you with insights not commonly discussed or present in todays communist discourse on party building and unity. It will be especially of interest to those in either a more traditional Leninist derived party or one of the many broad unity projects that have sprung up in the past decade.

In this review I will first provide some context, then try to summarize the main points of the text, and finally make a short comparison to the current state of the communist movement as I have experienced and understood it. All the concepts in the book are very much interlinked, and do not lend themselves well to a simple sequence, which is also reflected in the book itself, which at times has a slight tendency to repeat itself. I have chosen to format this article in a manner which I hope will be most useful to new communists and those less familiar with the particularities of late 70's Hoxaist miniparties, or to those not as familiar with traditionally ML and Maoist conceptions and particularities.

Whereas the book starts with a concrete critique of the communist scene as it existed in their time and region, using it to slowly establish their view, this summary starts by outlining their conceptions of the subjects relating to party building on which they base their concrete proposal. I will try to walk readers through all the the concepts needed to understand the text. To some this may feel like teaching fish how to swim, but please push past the groundwork that needs to be laid for our comrades who have not yet fully engaged with these topics. With this format I hope to make the core of what I think is most insightful more easily understood. Hopefully it will, if you choose to read the original, help you push past all the conversations, jargon, references to parties and conferences for which not even a Wikipedia page exists, and the ideological controversies which will be unknown to most communists active today.

The views as expressed in the summary are my attempts at paraphrasing the book, and do not necessarily reflect my own views, though I agree with the general gist of it. Regardless of the validity of everything in the original, I think many people can benefit from reading this perspective. There is bound to be a degree in which the summary is marked by my own interpretation of the text.

Too many comrades have defined party-building as "making a break with" revisionism or with ultra-leftism, without explicitly elaborating a positive plan for the work of party-building. This is backwards; one cannot find the way forward just by firmly resolving to avoid the obstacles that have diverted others from the correct path. One must first find the correct path, though seeing the route others have travelled does help in discovering that path. Then the deviations which others have made from it can be assessed, and further analysis of those deviations can help prevent repetition of the same mistakes.

-Chapter 5

Context

This book was written by a small group (as far as I can gleam, a single chapter in size) in the USA in the late 70s, named the "Pacific Collective (Marxist Leninist)". Ideologically, they found themselves in the camp of the then-Hoxhaist aligned groups, demarcated by rejection of the USSR as social-imperialist, rejection of the late-Maoist three-worlds-theory[1] and doubts surrounding the political character of the Chinese state of the time. Naturally, they found themselves outside of the CPUSA and it's pro-China equivalents. Their political landscape was defined by lots of small, isolated groups, split up by international alignment, split over ideological purity, split over petty squabbles or simple geographic and informational bubbles. Even those in their corner of the Marxist movement could not manage to form a coherent and long lasting party. In this context they wrote this book, which serves as an analysis of what they view as the causes of this failure in party building, and based on this a proposal and call to action to the movement to join in a concrete path forward. It an entire, coherent analysis of how they view the process of party formation, including ideological struggle, leadership formation, producing theory for their actual conditions, etc.

Nothing came of this call to action in the end. By their own admission, their network within the wider communist movement was very limited, understandable given the political situation and the state of information-technology in the late 70s USA. Their financial means and manpower were limited as well. Keep this in mind while reading this article and the book. Nevertheless, this book, as a critical read, contains many useful insights in regards to party life and party building, and a starting off point for new ideas.

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[1] The three worlds theory was a geopolitical conception created by Mao Zedong. It posits that there are three worlds, or as we would call them now, spheres of influence. The first being the US world, the second being the Soviet world, the third being the Chinese one. In this conception, China and the Soviets were posited not as allies but as enemies, which is evident in the many proxy wars China and the Soviet Union fought. This three world theory led to the conception that the USA could be an ally of China (which claimed it was itself the only true revolutionary country left) against the USSR (which was social imperialist according to China). In this line, some in the Maoist tradition made the leap to see the US state and by extension its imperialist empire as historically progressive and worth defending in their conflicts with the USSR. (Fun fact, this is where "the third world" as a concept comes from!)

Summary

The Three Tasks of Communists

There are 3 main tasks that communists need to perform. These are:

- Fusion of the communist movement with the labour movement
- The creation of revolutionary theory
- The building of communist unity

Fusion of the communist movement and the labour movement means the connection of the theoretical strata of the communist movement to the actual workers, such that their theory becomes grounded in the experience of the actual workers and the workers become stronger through the theoretical work. All in all, this topic itself is not the most interesting, the main topic, or the most controversial topic of this book, as the texts main focus is addressing what they see as mistakes in the other two topics, so this summary will suffice.

Revolutionary Theory

Exhaustive critique is levelled against the state of the revolutionary theoretical work of their movement. Revolutionary theory includes the totality of economic, political, practical, strategic and tactical theory as it relates to the actual work of the movement. This means everything, from fundamental statistical research on the situation in the USA, using those to form lines and test them in practice, to organizational models and tactics, from high level to the nitty gritty rank-and-file work.

A solid and correct revolutionary theory is a must have for communists to succeed. Without correct theory, no predictions can be made, no strategy laid out, no cadre trained and instructed, no mass movement led against a much more powerful enemy. Incorrect theory leads to disaster, to losses, to death. This much is uncontroversial. The main problem is how to get to this theory. The history of the communist movement is marked in major part by this quest for truth, in this quest for practicable tactics, and a struggle against those who peddle theories that will lead the proletarian liberation struggle into the swamp, to borrow a phrase. More on creating this revolutionary theory later.

Communist Unity

For a revolution to succeed, communists must be united. To fight against the bourgeoisie is to fight against an army, and only by being better coordinated, better prepared, better able to quickly adapt, move forces where they need to be, sabotage what is needed, can this battle be won. To do this, a substantial degree of unity is necessary.

If communists do not work together, their forces are spread out. Work in all aspects of the communist movement will be uncoordinated, lots of work will be needlessly repeated, lessons learned, forgotten and learned again, because they do not know of the failures and successes of their comrades. The fragmentation of the movement is the best thing that has ever happened to the bourgeoisie, as a divided army cannot win against a united one.

Theoretical Unity

Unity is often enforced through the use of "theoretical unity". This term is often interpreted in different ways. Theoretical unity is most accurately described as the following concept:

> For a party to be capable of operating as an army in battle against the bourgeoisie, and for individual communists to be able to implement the general plan of the party locally, there needs to be agreement on primary issues. These are positions, analyses, but also practical methods that are fundamental for the party's strategy. Any disagreement with these primary issues means fundamental disagreement with the fundamental strategy, analysis, way of operation of the party, and effectively that you simply do not see any value executing the directives based on these positions, nor any value in remaining a member. Theoretical unity means having all members fundamentally agree on these primary issues.

A few examples given in the book are:

- An integral picture of present and predictable capitalist development in the USA.
- Basic orientation towards trade unions.
- The class forces that can be reserves of the proletariat and the demands we support on their behalf.

And many more. They state that total unity on all aspects of such questions is not required, merely those aspects that would make carrying out of the practical strategy impossible. In their own words:

> *To illustrate, we will need unity on the communist orientation towards the state and democratic rights, but not on a particular propagandist's conclusions about whether government regulatory agencies are a concession to popular demands for controls on business, or simply a tool of the "regulated" corporations.*

-Chapter 2

Theoretical unity is enforced within a party to ensure the party can remain operating effectively. This means that those who try to join while not agreeing to these core positions, or those who change positions away from them, can be kept out or expelled from the party, to maintain its operational integrity. But how do we determine what does and does not fall within this theoretical unity? When is something ground for being expelled from the party?

What falls within theoretical unity is not static, and enforcement of theoretical unity is not static either. The development of revolutionary theory is an ongoing process. As lessons are learned, polemics are conducted, research is done, and revolutionary theory is refined and proven, aspects of theory will become undeniable to any communists who 1. is genuinely open to finding truth and 2. who has been able to engage in following the polemics, arguments, research, failures and losses on this topic.

Lenin built theoretical unity on this basis, before establishing the Bolshevik party as an effective party and uniting the Russian communists in it. Using the Iskra paper, he provided a place for dialogue between the different currents of the time, provided his own critiques as editor and helped local separate circles publish reports of their successes and failures even during Czarist persecution.

> As we have said, the ideological unity of Russian Social-Democrats has still to be created, and to this end it is, in our opinion, necessary to have an open and all-embracing discussion of the fundamental questions of principle and tactics raised by the present-day "economists," Bernsteinians, and "critics." Before we can unite, and in order that we may unite, we must first of all draw firm and definite lines of demarcation. Otherwise, our unity will be purely fictitious, it will conceal the prevailing confusion and binder its radical elimination. It is understandable, therefore, that we do not intend to make our publication a mere storehouse of various views. On the contrary, we shall conduct it in the spirit of a strictly defined tendency. This tendency can be expressed by the word Marxism, and there is hardly need to add that we stand for the consistent development of the ideas of Marx and Engels and emphatically reject the equivocating, vague, and opportunist "corrections" for which Eduard Bernstein, P. Struve, and many others have set the fashion. *But although we shall discuss all questions from our own definite point of view, we shall give space in our columns to polemics between comrades. Open polemics, conducted in full view of all Russian Social-Democrats and class-conscious workers, are necessary and desirable in order to clarify the depth of existing differences, in order to afford discussion of disputed questions from all angles, in order to combat the extremes into which representatives, not only of various views, but even of various localities, or various "specialities" of the revolutionary movement, inevitably fall. Indeed, as noted above, we regard one of the drawbacks of the present-day movement to be the absence of open polemics between avowedly differing views, the effort to conceal differences on fundamental questions. (my italics)*

-Declaration of the Editorial Board of Iskra, 1900, Lenin

These efforts led to Lenin being able to construct a theoretical unity among the Russian communists, which would form the foundation for the formation of the Bolsheviks. As you can see, this was not a theoretical unity enforced, as it was later and still often is, by a small clique at the top making the theory, and then expelling everyone who disagrees, or by splitting the party over which shade of yellow the highlighters ought to be.

How to Achieve Theoretical Unity

Theoretical unity is not something which can be forced upon an organisation, let alone upon an entire communist movement splintered into many groups. And it has not been historically. It can only be achieved by having thorough research, in the forms of historical, contemporary and statistical research, and using those statistics to inform opinions, to test those opinions in practice, to go into dialogue with those you disagree with, etc. Only by having a continuous process of fundamental, objective research, by producing testable hypotheses, by testing your conclusions and tactics in practice, by collectively reviewing, documenting, and sharing your failures and successes, can tactics be found that correspond to actual reality; and these tactics can be shown to work through implementing them with success.

Creating correct and tested revolutionary theory is thus required for theoretical unity. The other requirement is doing all of this in a manner such that the entire movement actually sees, reads and hears all of this, and actively participates in the process of its development, so that this effort doesn't just disappear into the void. Where we are now stuck in isolated newspapers, organisations, etc, Lenin had (mostly due to his circumstances allowing it) one of the few national communist newspapers in Russia, which meant that all communists were forced to recon with all the ideas in the movement laid out in a comprehensive manner in the Iskra, all the failures, all the successes, even of those who they hated and would rather avoid.

Only after something has been proven, beyond the shadow of a doubt, through statistical proof and other scientific research, though demonstrable success or evident failure, in such a way that every cadre member in the movement or organisation cannot deny the truth of the matter, can such a thing be put under organisationally enforced theoretical unity. Items which are to be put under the discipline of theoretical unity need to be of fundamental importance to the practical work of the movement, such that disagreeing with it amounts to willingly sabotaging it.

To this end the book offers up a proposal to achieve these two goals. More on that later.

Of particular importance is their emphasis on statistical or scientific research, summarized below.

Lack of Statistical Research

There is no actual research being done, there is a reliance on examples and incidents to justify positions, with an overreliance on examples in propaganda work aimed at the masses. You can not claim to have a correct analysis of the situation based on mere incidents, as for every example a counterexample can be found. A correct analysis of your situation can only be attempted based on objective statistical research.

This habit of relying on anecdotal evidence leads to extreme ideological confusion and sectarianism, as groups both base their own line on incomplete or wrong axioms, as well as judging other groups as being opportunist/revisionist based on what could very well be a honest and principled Marxist analysis using incorrect data.

Additionally, examples are a weakness in regards to propaganda. As illustrated in the book, for every instance of a cop shooting a Black person, the bourgeoisie can serve up an example of a cop helping a Black person, and frame the issue as "a rotten apple". The same goes for many different topics, such as upwards mobility and the self made man. Only when the party and movement is armed with statistical data that shows a clear trend, such as disproportionate violence against Black Americans, or that the overwhelming majority of people simply do not have upwards mobility, can they begin the work of convincing the masses of the faults of the system and have them be open to alternatives.

The Party and Democratic Centralism

With all the talk of unity, the question then becomes, what does this unity look like? The book maintains that the classic Leninist party form of democratic centralism is the highest and most effective form of communist organisation. However, nearly the entire book is about how it is the highest, most evolved, *most effective* form of unity, not the *only possible, or only permissible* form.

Democratic Centralism

Democratic centralism is defined as an organisational concept of discipline and distribution of work. In this arrangement, the organisation is divided up into levels, from local, to regional, up and up until the central committee. It also has the following characteristics:

- The congress (assembly of all members or their representatives) is the highest body and has the final say.
- Between congresses, higher bodies have the authority to make decisions, issue commands, and manage lower bodies.
- Members of lower bodies must follow orders issued by the higher bodies.
- Once a decision has been made by the congress by majority, or a body higher than the one concerned, those in disagreement with it will subject themselves to enacting this decision, the decision of the majority.
- Theoretical work moves its centre of gravity to the top, which is tasked with creating more generalized tactics that fit together in a wider strategy, freeing up those on the ground to spend more time doing the mass work, more effectively together, being able to ask for advice from and give feedback to higher bodies, rather than having to figure it all out themselves.

This model of organising allows for much more rapid response to the moves of the bourgeoisie. Additionally, it effectively serves as a division of labour. By shifting decision making powers, the task of theoretical work, following developments, summarizing, evaluating, etc etc, to a smaller group at the top, you free cadre in lower levels to do the actual work. This form of organisation maximizes the effectiveness of a communist party.

Democratic centralism in effect contains a weaker form of theoretical unity. Where theoretical unity requires actual theoretical agreement, ie an alignment of opinion, democratic centralism merely requires discipline on subjecting oneself to the will of the majority. They are thus not the same thing, and confusing the two leads to massive mistakes. Democratic centralism is meant to enforce unity on secondary issues, that do not fulfil the requirements outlined for theoretical unity. For example, when Lenin lost a vote on the requirement of party membership, he subjected himself to the will of the majority of the party, as lax membership requirements did not constitute either a clear betrayal of the communist cause or disagreement with the fundamental goals and methods of the party.

As with theoretical unity, the enforcement of democratic centralism is a matter of judgement and political skill, so as to not overdo it by stifling experimentation and growth, while not letting people make unnecessary mistakes or endanger themselves and others.

Preconditions for Democratic Centralism

As can be seen in history, democratic centralism has been used in both large parties and tiny sects incorrectly. Putting the power of theoretical elaboration into the hands of a smaller group, and subjecting lower bodies to higher ones, poses a risk of abuse of power. If those at the top are incompetent, opportunist, or otherwise unfit for the position, you risk them imposing their uninformed, incorrect opinions on the wider group. More on this later.

Democratic Centralism has 3 preconditions:

1. Agreement on the fundamental goals and objectives of the party (the party programme, which forms a part of the revolutionary theory).
2. A (correct) agreement on how the party should function internally.
3. A proven leadership, in terms of leadership skills, but also a proven principled nature, trustworthiness and ability to consistently make correct theoretical judgements.

The book argues that if any of these three have not been achieved, democratic centralism should not be enforced and enacted.

Democratic Centralism is a Party [2]

Since much time is spend on this in FCTP, it must be noted that the writers define a party to be any organisation that enacts democratic centralism. They do this to combat the confusion in terminology in a sea of pre-parties, networks, revolutionary committees, as well as a slew of organisations that do not enact any form of democratic centralism, while calling themselves a party. They further spend time on discussing various conceptions people have about the ought's and should's of parties, which are better appreciated in the full context of the book. But going forward in this article, when something is called "a party", an organisation with democratic centralism is meant. Consequently, this definition helps you relate what is being spoken about here to your own situation, where many factions, caucuses, etc, in broad tent movements are effectively what this book calls "parties", and so all talks of "small circles" and "unity projects" in the book, can to a large degree be applied to analyse broad tent organisations that you may encounter today.

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[2] This sections is a bit out of place and less summarising than the rest, but important for understanding the book.

Aims and Objectives

A party cannot be a party, a united group going toward a common goal, without agreement on the fundamental goals and objectives of the party. These fundamental beliefs are captured in the party programme. And if a party is truly to be a party that actually works towards these stated goals, it must enforce theoretical unity on this programme. A "party" that has a programme which its members do not have to follow or agree with is not a party, it can not bring its stated goals into practice as a collective, and this programme effectively becomes meaningless.

Because of this, the fundamental party programme in this interpretation is limited to more fundamental topics which are foundational to the basis of the party and its activities, rather than implementation details that are enforced under democratic centralism and/or are still open to discussion, and the programme should not contain electoral or specific policy decisions. The programme thus becomes a fundamental piece of binding literature as much for its members as it is for those outside the party understand their goals.

Agreement on Party Functioning

Equally important is fundamental agreement on how the party should function internally. The processes, rights, authorities, limits, manner of conducting oneself are a fundamental aspect that distinguish a loose social group from an organisation. This book is in large part an attempt at presenting a positive vision for the functioning of a party, which is why it outlines their specific conceptions of ideological unity, democratic centralism, etc. Agreement to respect the process and rights given to you, and agreement and clarity on what these ought to be, is important for an organisation to function properly.

Proven Leadership

Lastly, a leadership is needed that has shown to be reliable, trustworthy, principled and capable, and able to tackle the organisational and theoretical problems with success. This is required because democratic centralism means putting an incredible amount of trust into the hands of the leadership. This leadership is given the confidence to think in place of others so that others may do the work among the masses, and they are trusted to act justly and correctly in doing this. They have the power to issue commands, expel people, and more, especially during times of intensified class conflict where the organisation may need to (partially) operate underground, conditions which limits visibility of abuses of power if they occur, and which limit the viability of frequent congresses which could correct these mistakes.

Lack of proven leadership has been shown in organisations large and small to lead to abuse of power, to opportunistic leaders isolating their members from valid critique of their actions because it would undermine their own position, to imposing decisions on the organisation as a whole unnecessarily and to the detriment of the party on its members.

The degree to which these qualities have to be proven is of course not absolute, as nobody can prove they are all capable. But some are more capable and fit for leadership than others, and the only way to gain the confidence of the communist movement so that they will follow them, is by demonstrating these qualities consistently. Leadership has a big role to play in guiding the process of theoretical research, having theory be tested in practice, evaluating and generalizing lessons, to clarify the revolutionary theory. All the while ensuring that the parties members remain in the loop on the lessons learned and the reasoning on why decisions are made, so that "organic" theoretical unity can be maintained, and thus ensuring opportunistic elements can be filtered out. Successfully performing the tasks of leadership, in turn, trains and demonstrates the characteristics required of proven leadership.

Preconditions not Achieved Yet

The book concludes that in their current conditions, these three conditions are not fulfilled. There is no agreement even between MLs about what exactly democratic centralism and theoretical unity means, there is no proven leadership, and there is not a clear view of how a party should function and why. And most importantly, the theoretical work has not been done, neither the research-polemic-testing-evaluation work, nor has it been possible for all communists honestly open to engage in finding this truth to follow all of it.

Thus, democratic centralism should not be established, and thus a party should not be established, conclude the authors. So what *can* we do? More on that later. For now, we must cover the 2-3 big errors in party building the authors identify, which provide additional insights to us.

Deviations

The books identifies 2-3 kinds of "deviations" which lead to failed projects of unity or to the formation of an ineffective party. For those unfamiliar with old Marxist or Maoist jargon, a deviation is when some aspect of Marxist politics which needs to be balanced (for example, between excluding damaging elements from a coalition vs working with a broad base), is taken too far to an extreme, damaging the movement. FCTP categorises them into the classic left-right binary, but for clarity it makes more sense to split them into three tendencies.

These are the tendency of a broad tent/eclecticism (right), the tendency of inaction (right), and the sectarian tendency (which they call left or ultra left). Both "right" deviations have a similar origin but a different practical impact.

Broad Tent / Eclecticism

The broad tent or eclectic tendency is characterised by seeking a premature organisational unity, a unity with no basis, with too broad a group. While communist unity is a goal of every communist, such unity should be achieved on a principled basis, and unity should not come at the expense of principles. A broad tent approach tries to rectify, without much success in the long run, the fact that they are an eclectic collection of different groups, a group with vastly different and opposing ideas, tactics and beliefs, with their task of collectively, as one army, fighting the much stronger enemy that is the bourgeoisie, and having to put out a coherent message to the working class.

In this they unite without any actual shared values other than vague general ideas, such as anti-capitalism. Important, fundamental topics of revolutionary theory, like the basic approach to union work, which strata are winnable to the cause, etc., are not agreed upon, and consequently, no real strategy can be undertaken by the organisation as a whole. As there is no explicit intention to work towards theoretical unity, due to "unity" being *the* goal in and of itself, there will be no mechanism by which ideological differences are sorted, there will never come a moment where unity will be reached "organically" by its members. Attempts at realising theoretical unity are often viewed with hostility as it undermines the perceived organisational unity. Additionally, there often is little to no evaluation and sharing of experiences, which leads to the same issue, but on the more practical aspect of the revolutionary theory.

This leads to the following outcomes:

- If organisational discipline on some position **is** enforced at a premature moment, whether they choose to call this enforcement democratic centralism or ideological unity, it will lead to a split in the organisation. As no process exists to grapple with the topic at hand, and no expectation of membership to engage in this, the moment a position, tactic, etc, is put to the vote and adopted by the majority, it will effectively narrow the organisation in its ideological scope. It will inadvertently drive out of the organisation all those who did not share that opinion, even if it would have been possible to reach actual unity on this topic by taking the time and effort needed to fully cover the issue. In this way, a big tent organisation or broad unity project can turn into the sectarian deviation.
- No effort towards democratic centralism/theoretical unity is undertaken in order to keep the broad tent broad, leading to an ineffective organisation unable to unify behind proven tactics, leaving it in an eternal state of de facto separate groups. Often the idea that unity will automatically emerge from "doing things together" is used to justify it, but developing unity requires active effort to be put into developing revolutionary theory and forging unity on it. (See inaction).[3]

Big tent organisations often explicitly reject the idea of theoretical unity, but then often go on to adopt clear positions for the organisation as a whole on very fundamental topics. Additionally, broad tent parties also tend to unconsciously adopt theoretical unity on certain topics by adopting collective strategies which are based on specific positions on one of a few primary issues. Adopting positions on fundamental issues such as attitudes towards union work, whether or not to work together with an electoral party, taking a side in an international war, represent a de facto imposition of theoretical unity. While those involved may deny to be imposing theoretical unity, due to them claiming to strive for broad unity, in reality no group is going to continue acting out the orders of a larger group if it goes against their fundamental beliefs. They are not going to espouse publicly positions which go against their fundamental analysis of class society, the world, and how to position themselves in it. Disagreement and discipline on secondary issues may be tolerated by members so long as it is in line with their fundamental beliefs, but it won't be tolerated on issues of primary importance to the work of the party.

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[3] These two results are not mutually exclusive. Lacking clarity on what the goal of the organisation is (ie. is it a broad front or a party), or not being aware of the difference, are both caused by a lack of clarity on how to apply democratic centralism, party building and theoretical unity. Unawareness can lead to the same organisation both narrowing itself through prematurely adopting positions, even if those positions may have little impact on practical work, while at the same time not putting in the effort to determine positions on those things that can be objectively determined to be proven or true.

Lastly, big tent organisations have a tendency to not have agreement on the internal working of the party, which leads to a lot of effort being expended over formulating and reformulating the paper democracy of the organisation, unclear roles and authority, unclear obligations by its members, all of which sabotage the effectiveness of the organisation.

Inaction / Spontaneity

The inaction or spontaneous tendency recognizes that no capable party exists yet, but consider themselves incapable or are unwilling to put effort into creating this party, so they simply do not join in any attempt at building this party. Instead, they wait for some other group to "build the party" so that they can join it.

In reality, the inertness of people to leave their own clique, and not participating actively in the process of building revolutionary theory makes it unlikely they will ever join another group as they will always have some (perceived) difference with them. Additionally, as said previously, building theory is an active process, no groups will one day spawn into existence with the answers to the universe in their mind.

Both inaction and broad tent attitudes leads to not enough effort being spent on the theoretical work needed. Inaction is especially egregious in this, as a singular person or tiny group is simply not able to keep track of everything, and can not learn from the experience of others. For obvious reasons, those that are inactive do not have a correct view of party building and how it should function, as they simply view parties as something which will emerge somehow, and thus these people do not fulfil their task as a communist in building communist unity.

Sectarianism

The sectarian or "ultra left" tendency is characterised by, effectively, premature enforcement of theoretical unity. This can have several causes and effects, which prevent them from ever contributing to actual theoretical unity of communists or to their party becoming the actual vanguard. (A party being the vanguard necessarily means unity of communists has been achieved.) The essence is captured in this quote from the book:

> *Their belief that they already have the leadership, the line, and the press that the communist movement needs strengthens their inclination to engage in polemics aimed at justifying their separate existence and trying to get all communists to join them, rather than polemics aimed at helping an entire movement settle the questions facing it.*

-Chapter 4

As explained in the section on theoretical unity, such unity can only come into being after proving, to the whole movement, that the theory works, that it is correct, through applying it or by providing irrefutable proof. The sectarian mindset instead forms its positions based on lacklustre research, scattered inconclusive examples and quotes from long dead men worlds away. It assumes that the positions which their party adopted, whether by majority vote or by their leadership, are fully correct. In reality, no full line is correct. If any party had "the" correct line, they would not be one of many, the correctness of their line would prove itself through their work, and we would be on the eve of revolution.

All parties, circles and individuals right now have some incorrect positions. Being products of a capitalist society, where you live and breathe bourgeois laws and ideology, where you are forced through school indoctrinated by its ideas for your entire youth, inevitably means that you are shaped by those ideas in some way or form. It is through polemic, critique, between all groups against each other, and by showing correctness through irrefutable proof or practical proof, that such shortcomings may be addressed. The sectarian mindset, however, assumes that they already have the correct line, and that those who do not join it must be either empty vessels to be filled or irredeemable opportunists. It leaves them closed to critique on their prematurely adopted lines of demarcation, the basis for their party.

Enforcing theoretical unity, as opposed to enforcing democratic centralism, on secondary questions also leads to sectarianism, by splitting over aspects which are non-essential. As explained in the section of theoretical unity, secondary questions are those which do impact the work, but in which having a difference in opinion does not mean a fundamental break with the most basic goals and objects of the party, or its most basic strategy.

Additionally, premature party formation due to a lack of adequate leadership leads to sectarian tendencies. The nature of democratic centralism, as it is a division of labour, means that the theoretical work becomes primarily the domain of the leadership, and that other members follow their instructions. If the leadership is unfit, and unable or unwilling to grapple with the fact their their theories may not be correct, then no amount of polemics, critiques, etc. against that party will ever achieve something. Anything sent to its leadership will be promptly ignored and never reach all the other members who are perhaps willing and able to reconsider their positions. The nature of a democratic centralist party means, if the leadership is incapable of carrying out the ideological leadership, that outside critique will never amount to anything. Even if such critique is posted up for all to see, the average communist doing actual work is simply unable to read through the dozens upon dozens of publications, newspapers, etc. that exist.

This premature leadership often also enforces their personal views onto their membership from the top down, even if these views are incorrect, unproven, or worse. This leads to these types of parties being very effective in keeping communists busy doing things that aren't going anywhere, and if anyone goes against this "indisputable" aspect of their line, they are promptly eliminated from the party for breaking lockstep.

Another aspect that can intensify sectarian behaviour is a misunderstanding of how to convince people. Many comrades seem to think that you can simply prove you are correct by writing a good article and having people read it. In reality, it requires thorough proof through statistics, but most of all, convincing people is done through people themselves experiencing (individually or by proxy) events that shatter their pre-existing notions and beliefs. To this end, merely polemicizing will lead nowhere, which is why theories need to be proven or disproven in practice for all to see.

Lastly, the sectarian mindset can be strengthened by the extrapolation of the fundamental character of another group of people (for example, label them all as being intentionally opportunists or national chauvinists) based on a couple of publications by this group. Just as a sect is unable to base its positions on thorough proof, which can only be done by communists as a movement collectively, so too do other groups necessarily base all their positions on a foundation. Whole groups are othered and turned into an enemy based on a few articles written by this or that uneducated but well intentioned member. By this othering, the sectarian mindset precludes them from finding truth together, as they already delineate them as irredeemable and not worth engaging.

The sectarian mindset seeks to establish the vanguard through competition, simply by enacting their "obviously correct" line and outcompeting all other "obviously incorrect and bound to fail" groups. In reality, "their line" is just as wrong and correct as some other line of some other group. A vanguard is not made by a "free market competition of parties", so that "the best product may win by eliminating its competition". "Theory" is not some competing, indivisible singular thing. A correct line is made by uniting the experiences and insights of all communists, to test their views, have them refute each other where they are wrong, etc. If free market party competition had worked, we would not have seen the continual and ever increasing splintering of parties into smaller and smaller groups.

In the end, communists need to be open to the possibility of having their minds changed, and actively engage in the process of clarifying the questions in the movement, rather than declare that they alone have the truth. Enforced theoretical unity follows from, as explained before, irrefutable proof shown to all.

Demarcation

As touched upon briefly in the previous section, "lines of demarcation" are covered in the book as well. A line of demarcation is a term used to mean some point on which theoretical unity is enforced. So, necessarily, it is some aspect of theory that is viewed as irrefutable and proven through history to all communists who are open to having their minds changed. While reading this summary thus far may give the impression that FCTP calls for some "lets talk with absolutely everybody" petit-bourgeois intellectual attitude, nothing could be further from the truth. The authors outline several lines of demarcation which they, in their situation, view as proven and self evident to any communist in their time not willingly plugging their ears. Among the things they list are:

- The USA is an imperialist nation (surprisingly relevant in their time due to "three worlds theory", which led some would-be communists to view the USA as a progressive force in the world)
- The Soviet Union is social-imperialist
- Being open to the possibility that China has become revisionist, and willingness to research this topic

Regardless of the position that you might hold on these topics (for which you have irrefutable, proven in practice, fully solid proof, right?), the main point to take away in a critical read of this text is not whether or not the authors themselves held this or that correct position, but the fact that lines of demarcations are a valid concept, if applied with the rigour laid out in the rest of this work.

The authors lay out their lines of demarcation to limit the scope of the groups they wish to try and realise their proposal with (see section "The Proposal Itself"). Rather than naively offering to work with anyone, from their closest friends to the most reactionary liberal, they do limit themselves to a section of the communist movement. Perhaps the demarcation they outlined is too strict for the state of the movement as it exists today, with its theoretical confusion, lack of concrete experiences and lack of real continuity with the revolutionary periods of modern history. Perhaps it was too strict even then, this you must determine yourself. What you *should* take away is asking yourself, keeping in mind all the nuances of how to apply it, which questions in our day and age are proven to anyone not willingly fooling themselves.

To start out with a really soft example, a line of demarcation can be put between modern (European) social democrats and those in the Marxist tradition, being that class struggle is real and that the current state under capitalism is an instrument of class oppression by the bourgeoisie, rather than a neutral instrument standing above society, with socialism through reform being impossible. Many more lines of demarcation can be put up, narrower or broader. Where to put them is perhaps one of the most important questions that this book elicits, and correctly placing this demarcation is one of the keys in achieving communist unity in your own situation. Not too broad such that you remain stranded in big tent organisations which go nowhere, and not too narrow such that the process of building communist unity is prevented by narrowing too early.

Lines of demarcation are put up by the authors of the book to delimit with whom they wish to work in their broader project for communist unity, and these limits are not the same as the totality of the positions they held themselves. After all, everybody thinks their opinions are correct, why else hold them, but they are self aware enough to know that they could be wrong on many aspects of them.

The Proposal Itself

The book proposes a unity project based on the above, which aims to realise the 3 preconditions for party formation (i.e. agreed upon aims and objectives, agreement on party functioning, and proven leadership), to break the movement out of its sectarian and ineffective form, while recognising the fact that a party simply is not a form of unity that is possible yet.

They start by recognising that the highest form of unity the movement at that point was able to achieve was the local circle, or very small parties. Their movement was composed of small organisations of one or a very limited number of chapters. Earlier attempts at unity projects, as analysed in the book, had failed in achieving substantial results, and further fracturing was observable. These were delineated geographically and along ideological and positional differences, some small differences, some large. Much of the fracturing in their time happened due to parties splitting over aligning or not aligning with the latest denouncement of another socialist power put out by one of the socialist countries that existed at the time.

With their observation that these local circles were the highest stable form of organisation at the time, their proposal proposes a way towards unity using these circles as the foundation, the building blocks of the pre-party network, as they call it. Instead of trying to implement an organisational form for which the movement simply is not ready, as shown by failures of such attempts, they instead propose a way to use those forms that do currently work to create the conditions that allows a fully fledged unified party to be established later on.

To summarize their chain of thought very briefly:

- The party form is the best possible form of communist organisation to tackle the tasks of the communists, due to its division of labour, its quick response time and sharing of experiences.
- A party is only a party if it has democratic centralism.
- Democratic centralism has some preconditions, such as theoretical unity on primary issues, leadership, agreement on how a party works.
- Attempts at unified practical work without this basic theoretical unity will never work, as these are fundamental to the most basic tactics and strategy you employ.
- Theoretical unity can only be achieved by communists collectively working through the process of creating this theory, through research, trial and error, etc. It cannot be done by individuals, or by small groups alone, due to the size of the task.
- But a party encompassing all or most of the communists cannot be formed yet, because the preconditions for democratic centralism, for the most basic form of an actual party, do not exist yet.
- Thus we need an organisational form that can start creating these preconditions, without being democratic centralist itself. This form should:
  - Create proven revolutionary theory, and do it in such a way that theoretical unity can be achieved by it in the movement as a whole.
  - Create proven leadership trusted by the movement so that they will accept them as leadership.
  - Create agreement on the basic functioning of the party. The book itself covers the majority of the basics for this, but the concrete forms should be further worked out through the pre-party network.

To this end, they propose a "pre-party network". This network would consist of existing circles and possibly a small number of unaffiliated individuals, who agree to work in this form to build towards realising the preconditions of party formation. This network will have the from of a committee made up of representatives from the circles in the network. Unaffiliated individuals are permitted to join the network and help realising the work, but should be encouraged to join a group which aligns with their political views, and if that is not possible, the committee should help likeminded individuals to link up into a new constituent circle.

The committee would have the following tasks:

- Identifying and prioritising which topics ought to be focussed on in its research and publications, and taken up by the members of the network. These are the most pressing, primary, controversial topics within the movement.
- Coordinating the research and discussion on these topics. This can be done through literature review, creating and sending out questionnaires and research assignments to groups and individuals in the network and across the country, or by sending people to interview and summarize positive and negative results relevant to the chosen topics of focus.
- Ensure that this research and polemic is easy to follow for the average communist, even those outside of the network. To this end, restraint in the scope of topics to be covered is needed, as well as in relation to the amount and length of articles and other such concerns.
- Coordinate this research, these polemics, etc, through appropriate mediums so that the above can be realised, from newspapers, periodical journals to conferences.
- Ensure that the main political tendencies within the network are able to contribute to the work, and are represented in work groups on topics which are of a more analytical nature. This is less of a concern for workgroups focused on more objective statistical research.
- If high unity is achieved on some point, steps can be undertaken to coordinate joint action on it with the groups involved.

The steering committee or any bodies established by the network may not speak for the network as a whole on topics which are still controversial within the network.

The constituent groups would have an obligation to both contribute human and financial resources to the network. Additionally, and this is stressed with all capital letters in the book, the entire membership of the constituent circles should study and discuss the different positions that are put forward within the network, and struggle over these topics. Without the membership of the parties themselves engaging in this discussion, this network would not overcome one of the issue of sectarianism, because it would just end up being a few "delegates" from each constituent groups shouting their own opinions, while the actual membership ignores it all and keeps doing the same as they have always done, thinking they already have the correct answers in their small circles.

The books gives two examples to illustrate their general vision:

First, let us say that the steering committee of a pre-party network, implementing the organization's unity on theoretical priorities, decides to organize work on a class analysis. It could coordinate the formation of a small working group, after local circles recommend individuals who have already done such work or at least whose research skills and grasp of dialectical materialism are thought to be well developed. The steering committee should see to it that the working group, though kept small, represents the main political tendencies that exist within the network.

We would expect the group to put together, and use, a study list of materials from the classics on classes and class analysis; frame the questions which a U.S. class analysis must answer; read analyses that have been written by Marxist-Leninists in other advanced capitalist countries; implement a division of labor for studying and reporting on relevant materials from bourgeois sources, Marxist academics, and other U.S. communist organizations; investigate the current outlook and behavior of different classes and strata fusing, among other things, questionnaires sent to the circles in the network, to get their reports on what can be observed locally; and study relevant historical and current materials to be found in basic library research (concerning, for example, various ways members of the petty bourgeoisie have organized themselves and acted, in the class struggle).

The class analysis working group should make periodic progress reports to the entire network, particularly at the beginning of each stage in its work, as plans are being drawn up, so that other comrades can contribute their suggestions.

If its ideological unity were unusually high, such a working group could produce a single report analyzing the various strata in U.S. society, and explaining their interests, their typical conduct and outlooks, and their predictable reactions to the deepening crisis of capitalism and the initiatives that will be taken by both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

But it is quite likely that more than one such report will be produced and that a series of polemics will develop within the network. Such differences, and the need to resolve them through ideological struggle, are unavoidable among revolutionaries who are a product of bourgeois society, who bring different experiences to the movement, and who vary in their ability to embrace consistent Marxism-Leninism and resist opportunism. But at least the network will permit the study to be done and the debate to take place in an organized way, rather than leaving its members exposed to only one point of view or none at all.

[…]

Theoretical projects less ambitious than a class analysis could be handled differently. Investigation and struggle over the forms and effects of various affirmative action programs, for example, might take place in the form of a few comrades' individual contributions to a debate in the network's theoretical journal. The network steering committee should provide some organization in the choice of questions to be taken up, using its authority to decide for what purposes the theoretical journal will be available at a particular time.

-Chapter 2 (emphasis is mine)

Though this may sound difficult, one must face the fact that if organising such a committee is beyond our abilities, then an actual communist party, leading a revolution, is even more impossible. It is through this network that capable leadership will both show itself and have the ability to develop the skills needed to become this leadership. The authors acknowledge that we have no Lenin, no Mao, but that this alone should not stop us.

Unfortunately, many of the comrades who must begin laying the foundations for a true vanguard party are among the least experienced in our movement. We can see why some wait for someone else to build the party. But they should not wait, for so many of those who have been in the movement longer either have gone too far on the wrong track in their present parties, or have dropped away, too disappointed in how they saw things going.

Those who are less sure of themselves, however, who are open to learning from each other and from the workers, yet who are also determined not to follow anyone uncritically, no matter how well developed they appear to be–such comrades can be among the best in the movement, despite their real shortcomings. They can do far more at present than those who deny the immensity of our tasks; pretend that the masses are eagerly hanging on their every word (or who fear that saying any words will alienate the people); propose yet another "unity plan" that ignores the need to involve rank-and-file communists in the broadest line struggle; pretend that their theoretical poverty does not emasculate their attempts at revolutionary practice; and can hear no criticism of their various dual unionist, nationalist, social-chauvinist, or other dangerous political lines and right or "left" methods of mass work.

-Conclusion

While we cannot prove irrefutably some of the aspects of the needed theory without actually implementing them and seeing what works and what does not, we can start working without a full on party. Many aspects, such as an understanding of the class composition of the working class and bourgeoisie can be done through literature review. Basic aspects of practical work on a small scale can be undertaken, the most obviously incorrect tactics can be shown to all through this pre-party network. These first steps are needed to lay the most basic of basic groundwork, so that practice on a larger scale, with a better understanding of the conditions, can be tested.

Really? Another Iskra?

Some of you are undoubtedly thinking, "all this just to propose yet another Iskra clone?". After all, this proposal for a publication sounds a lot like what Lenin did with his newspaper, as described in "*What is to be done*". Doesn't every communist sect already do this? Of course, the authors countered this objection more than 46 years ago already.

They go into quite some depth in outlining how their proposal is different. Currently, as well as back then, there are a few types of publications, which are all unable to fulfil the role the Iskra did fulfil:

- Propaganda publications aimed at other communists. These serve mostly as a means for the party who publishes it, or more realistically, the leadership or editor, to signal their opinions at others, in a one way street. These publications are in line with the sectarian tendency, as it serves as an attempt to "enlighten those who do not know of the truth I have". A contemporary example would be the Manifest from the NCPN, and there are many more like it.
- Propaganda publications aimed at other communists, while trying to be the Iskra. Some parties "open up" their paper for others. In reality, several things ensure this tactic does not work in the current movement:
    - There are uncountable concurrent failed papers attempting to be the Iskra. If the defining characteristic of the Iskra was that it was *The Paper*, then none of them succeed, and having your small circle make yet another one on their own isn't going to suddenly make yours work.
    - Due to lack of human resources or skill, getting your entry published in some wannabe Iskra might take months. Meanwhile, the whole point which led Lenin to establish the Iskra was uniting the dozens of small papers that existed in Russia into a single, frequent national paper, which could bundle the experiences and lessons of all communists. The local papers which were not of any use to the wider communist movement, as they were only informed by the limited experiences of the publishing small local organisation, and which came out once a month, if it was a particularly well run one.
    - When publication *is* frequent, but limited in the amount off communists contributing to it, or if it is badly managed, it often turns into a paper forum for the editors to dunk on people who bother to send in an article, a collection of hastily written, useless and unfocused filler, or a paper where people trade insults, a paper version of twitter. Think of the Weekly Worker for a contemporary example.
- Propaganda papers aimed at laymen. For obvious reasons, these do nothing to unite communists.

- Purely theoretical, academic publications. These are completely detached from the practical work, and do not answer, in a form useful and understandable to the actual communists who must do the actual work, the fundamental questions about the basic work and analysis of our situation. Often these limit themselves to re-interpreting old texts and neglect doing contemporary statistical research altogether. They do not try to create, test and correct a working theory that provides results.
- Internal publications. For obvious reasons, these can never achieve communist unity, as they are not available to those not already a member of that party, and extremely limited in the range of opinions and experiences that are published in it.

The Iskra formed in a specific historical context. During that time, all communist work was conducted underground out of necessity. The Iskra became successful by using and strengthening the networks to smuggle existing communist literature to the local circles, as well as providing couriers for correspondence between communists. Lenin used this network to spread the Iskra, which due to this situation, was one of the few national communist newspapers. This, combined with an editorial board which was skilled, principled and pragmatic enough to truly strive towards theoretical unity, rather than simply smearing or not publishing anything they didn't like, made the Iskra successful and useful to the communist movement.

Today, at the time of this summary in 2025, the barrier to publish your very own Iskra is nothing more than registering a WordPress website and copy pasting your opinion into it.

The book does not merely propose to "make another Iskra". It differs fundamentally with Lenins Iskra, and differs from the dozens of contemporary Iskra clones, in that it proposes the editorial board be made up of a wide range of tendencies, rather than a single tendency (the Bolsheviks) such as was the nature of the Iskra. This difference is required because it is clear to see that a single tendency publishing a newspaper open to contributions and opinion pieces by those outside the tendency simply *will not work* in the current conditions. There are and have been uncountable publications like that. The current conditions do not allow for a single newspaper by a single group to fulfil the role of a universal organisational organ, as there are simply too many already, which means all these papers end up unused. Additionally, there is no editorial board with as much theoretical insight, discipline, skill and vision as Lenin and his Bolsheviks that can elevate their paper to such heights that it would become well known and "the one and only". Lastly, the barrier to creating your own paper is so low, that there is simply no need for grapple with the content of another paper, as there is much less need to get your own opinions and findings published in such a paper if you disagree with its editorial board.

The book proposes a paper publication, given it was written in the 70's and that was the best medium available. However, the core is the fact that they propose an explicit process to work towards unity. First, through uniting on a shared understanding of what a party is and how it works. Then, by forming a pre party network to tackle the leadership and theoretical problems, in such a way that it breaks the isolation of communists, that it is easy to follow, etc. Finally, to unite this pre-party network in a party once there is a proven leadership, once theoretical unity on the primary aspects has been achieved, and agreement on the basic functioning of the party has been achieved.

And doing this all in conjunction with actual practical work, which informs the research being done, is informed by the research being done, which proves or disproves ideas and publishes these findings.

If you consider the arguments in this book to be convincing, your task is to ask yourself in what other form this theoretical work can be conducted and made available to the communists in our movement in your current situation. Perhaps podcasts on the topics being discussed, audiobooks, or something else.

In their own words:

> *What is different in our party-building line from that which built the others is what we propose for creating that trend: (1) taking up, really taking up, crucial and long-neglected theoretical work; (2) doing concurrent practice, including broad mass agitation and organizing work, as well as propaganda to the most developed workers, but without delusions on the degree of fusion today; and (3) painstakingly building an organization that can carry out the theoretical work, share what we learn from practice, and carry out an open, uninhibited struggle against all the forms of confusion and opportunism that we will undoubtedly run into, instead of entrusting all this to slick careerist leaders, while the rest of us implement their line and brush off any contrary views as those of "anti-party" or opportunist forces.*

-Chapter 9

On Experimentation and Premature Democratic Centralism

Lastly a topic which did not neatly fit in with the rest of this summary, but is important highlight.

Following from the notion of democratic centralism as presented in this book, the authors warns against premature democratic centralism. With this they criticise the tendency of adopting a decision on some tactic or strategy by majority vote, and imposing this on the rest of the organisation, when this tactic or strategy, or analysis for that matter, simply has not been shown to be true and to work yet. In this, it hinders the development of the movement. What ought to be done is to let circles, chapters or groups experiment with different approaches and ideas, so that through this application, and by systematically recording and reporting the results and failures, the correct method can be found. Instead, what happens when you enforce universal adoption of untested tactics on a whole organisation, is the entire organisation experiencing the same single failure together, collectively learning just one lesson, "this particular approach doesn't work". Experimentation allows for a functioning theory or tactic to be found much more quickly, and subsequently be adopted by all. Allowing ten circles to fail while one succeeds in the same timeframe allows for much quicker development of functioning theory.

Lenin touches on the need for this experimentation:

> *It would be more correct to say that those political and ideological trends which were genuinely of a class nature crystallised in the struggle of press organs, parties, factions and groups; the classes were forging the requisite political and ideological weapons for the impending battles. The years of revolution (1905–07). All classes came out into the open. All programmatical and tactical views were tested by the action of the masses. [...] The relations between the proletariat, as the leader, and the vacillating and unstable peasantry, as the led, were tested in practice. The Soviet form of organisation came into being in the spontaneous development of the struggle. [...] As for teaching the fundamentals of political science to masses and leaders, to classes and parties alike, each month of this period was equivalent to an entire year of "peaceful" and "constitutional" development. Without the "dress rehearsal" of 1905, the victory of the October Revolution in 1917 would have been impossible.*

-Left Communism - an Infantile Disorder - "The Principal Stages in the History of Bolshevism"

Applying These Ideas

This book is a complete and holistic view on how a party should work, how unity was historically formed, how ineffective organisations fail to achieve the goal of growth and principled unity, and sets out a complete proposal on how to get there, calling for joining in this proposed unity project. Its conceptions of democratic centralism, theoretical unity, party functioning and unity are very helpful and provide a much clearer understanding in how to apply these concepts than most you find these days, and clearer than the context-heavy, situation specific historical document in which these conceptions were first put on paper.

Despite its age, many of its core critiques and proposals are recognisable in our own day and age. However, as shown by the lack of a successful project along these lines since the time of its publication, and taking its age and differences in situation into account, everything in this book should not be adopted as is. As with all books of our predecessors, from those who were at the helm of great victories to those who are footnotes in a long list of failures, we must read this book while considering their situation, *why* their proposals did not work, in which aspects our situations are the same, in which way they differ, etc. Proposals that worked before may not work now, and vice versa, because the conditions in which they were applied is different from now. And with this critical investigation, we should try to see how we can use their thought process, their ideas, in forms modified to work in our own situation.

To this end, below will follow two sections, one comparing it to the work "Revolutionary Strategy" by Mike Macnair, used as a basis for groups ranging from the CPGB, RSP (formerly dS) in the Netherlands, to the Marxist Unity Caucus in the DSA, with similar tactics being employed in Die Linke and other organisations. The other will be my short analysis of where I see the main obstacles in our current movement, comparing them to the obstacles the authors of the original book faced, and finally put forth a few unfinished ideas about how to, perhaps, apply some of these ideas.

Comparison to Mike Macnairs "Revolutionary Strategy"

In his work "Revolutionary Strategy", Mike Macnair of the CPGB grapples with the issue of the fractured nature of the Marxist movement. In his book, he too tries to provide a new way out of the eternal sectarianism, by formulating an analysis of the causes of this sectarianism, followed by a proposal for a new way forward. If the reader of this article found it at all interesting, I would highly recommend also reading Macnairs book critically. His main message is to advocate for programmatic unity in opposition to theoretical unity. He proposes that communists ought to unite on a practical party programme which they accept or agree with (which of these is still a topic of hot debate even within the CPGB), and advocates against enforced theoretical unity on topics outside of the scope of this programme. His perspective is very interesting, given how it has influenced quite some organisations, and with similar ideas are widespread in the current broad tent organisations.

However, in contrast to From Circles to Party, Macnair focusses solely on the sectarian aspect, and does not present a coherent critique of the issues occurring in broad tent parties. In his defence, at the time of publication, 2008, there were no broad left, broad anti capitalist, or broad Marxist parties to be found, and they had not existed in any meaningful capacity for a long time. Nor had he had the opportunity to see the practical results of trying to implement his own ideas, as we have been able to the past 17 years. These circumstances do however mean that Macnair solely tries to solve the problem of sectarianism, and that his critique of sectarianism therefore views sectarianism not as the misapplication of Leninist concepts, but sees the issue in splitting and purges itself to an extent.

In chapter 4, he paints the purges (or forced splits from the majority onto the minority) as barely anything more than naked attempts to rid the party of "opposition", as political manouvering of a clique in control. Perhaps it is unsurprising then that his book found a receiving audience in those experiencing organisational struggles in which purges along pollical lines occurred, and we cannot blame people for at least trying to do something different to that which was not working. But this does mean that he gives no credit, or does not describe properly, why and how theoretical unity was created and used by the earlier Bolsheviks. His book lacks a positive generalized prescription for splits, lines of demarcation and theoretical unity. He does no further than saying the split in the Second International was justified while decrying others, seemingly with nothing but his own agreement or disagreement with the stated ideological position on which the split was based, to justify his support or opposition. By merely attacking splits for "splitting up the movement to consolidate power", he paints, whether consciously or not, a picture to readers that theoretical unity as a concept is fundamentally wrong and flawed, rejecting it as a damaging concept, leavings his readers confused as to which split are and are not "justified" and why.

Ultimately, the core of Macnairs work is often interpreted as "reject theoretical unity, only have democratic centralism". It is taken to mean that you ought not to delineate membership based on positions, only requiring that any resolution adopted by majority vote must be carried out and adopted positions defended by the membership to non-party members. As explained in this article, you cannot have democratic centralism without theoretical unity. Basic unity in action, basic strategy or tactic, is grounded in a base level of theoretical unity on some primary point or points. While his "unity on programme" does serve, unconsciously, as a basis of theoretical unity, his approach runs into issues in every subsequent step. By adopting the first position for the whole organisation beyond the base programme, or by adopting the the first practical work, theoretical unity is imposed. This is not done consciously, such as via a method as laid out in From Circles to Parties, but unconsciously.

When put into practice, this broad tent "unity in diversity" collapses the moment the party starts to perform any work that is not purely internal-bureaucratic or based in a negative position in opposition to shared enemies. The manner in which they unconsciously impose theoretical unity is eclectic, narrowing much more quickly in this or that area than another. Their tactic is to "convince others that you are right" through polemicizing, by using formal factions to try and clarify existing positions and polemicizing through them. In this one point, their tactic and that of From Circle to Parties align, but only partly. Because of a lack of conscious knowledge of the process of how things can and must be proven, because of a lack of internal discipline on its membership to engage in the polemics, because of the lack of clear guidance of this polemic by leaving it up to individual factions themselves to just publicise on their own sites or sporadically in internal papers nobody reads, because of the unconscious adoption of de facto theoretical unity, no real unity is ever achieved, and parties fall apart.

I have seen this first hand, and contributed to it too on occasion in years past, in the RSP (formerly dS) and ROOD in the Netherlands, where a blanket rejection of theoretical unity was adopted as the unifying lesson and basis for the organisations, after being purged from the Socialist Party (SP). It quickly led to attracting a wide range of "left" radicals (with a few of them hardly deserving to be called even that), from vague internet Marxists, vague anti capitalists, anarchists, young and inexperienced ML leaning members, to a substantial amount of members who can be firmly said to be the left wing of social democracy. In not providing a criteria for principled unity, there was no real limit to who could and could not join, and no method in determining when to impose such a limit.

This resulted in an unworkable situation which led to the splitting off of several tendencies in these organisations. One split was that of the social democratic wing, those who wished to follow more in the lines of the earlier stages (90's) of the Socialist Party. They split off when a basic party strategy along basic Marxist lines was pushed for and adopted. Another was that of one of the Trotskyist wings (SAP, part of the USFI) split off when the RSP adopted the position that the war in Ukraine was an inter-imperialist conflict, with the SAP having adopted a position of solidarity with Ukraine as they viewed them as defending their national self-determination. Several more incidents have happened, from near splits with

the anarchists over the usage of hammer and sickle imagery within the youth wing, to slowly bleeding individual members over adoptions of motions and positions.

After years of this, it has proven to be near impossible to organise work in this organisation on anything that isn't either opposition to a shared enemy such as an anti-NATO campaign, borderline tailist participation in existing marches, or helping organise broad and vague protests such as mayday or protests for better public transport. It is my opinion that this, and the lack of discipline, is partly caused by a lack of a clear method of party building and basis for why and what the party is. From Circles to Party seems to provide a much more complete outline. The lack of theoretical unity on the primary issues means that no unified action on these topics is possible, and attempts to force through unified action lead to splits or intense conflicts.

Macnair provides some interesting perspectives, some of which are completely valid and useful, but his works leaves much room for improvement. For instance, he calls for internationalist parties on a continental scale (pan European, pan African), but provides no guidance or path on how to get there, merely decrying Trotskyists internationals as premature. This is where From Circles to Party goes a substantial and much needed step further. It outlines a concrete understanding of democratic centralism, theoretical unity, what the conditions for party formation are, etc. It provides both a positive and negative aspect of theoretical unity, by describing how it relates to all the other aspects, when theoretical unity should and can be enforced, when to enforce democratic centralism, and what you need to form a coherent party. Judging whether or not something has been "proven beyond the shadow of a doubt to every communist serious about being a communist" remains a matter of political skill and subjectivity, and this question should be part of the discussion when proposing to adopt an official position or tactic to be universally applied. But their outline of all these aspects, when to use them and when not to, and what for, mean that these decisions can be made in a much more systemic manner.

Our Situation

In the previous section I already briefly touched upon experiences in my own political life. Of course, my perspective is limited, and if all the international contacts I have, and general vibe on the internet is anything to go off of, everybody's perspective is incredibly limited. Nobody knows what goes on in other parties, what works, what does not. There is a high level of hostility and unwillingness to share experiences in a lot of the movement. However, after speaking with other communists internationally for over a decade now, and with some experience trying to help build a party under my belt, and since it's my article and I can do whatever I want, I will outline a few of the problems as I see them in the West.

Low Theoretical Education

The first is that the level of theoretical education of communists is low. It is, incredibly, indescribably low. It has become clear to me that even those who give off the impression of having done the reading often simply have not. Those in leadership positions are often very underdeveloped ideologically, yet it is these people who proceed to tell newer members what to read and what to think. Ideas from historically important revolutionaries are dismissed based on secondary sources, hearsay or opinions formed through social osmosis, and when pressed on if they have actually read the works they critique, let alone done further research and analysis, the answer is often no. And let's not even speak of the level of theoretical education of the rank and file.

Not only are smaller parties often being led by people who have no idea what they are talking about, who have not bothered to study the history of our movement ourselves, the internet is also full of them. Due to the limited size of our movement, and perhaps the low attention spans induced by the hyper optimised digital crack pushed onto us by our digital overlords, the internet is full of people speaking with authority on subject about which they clearly have not read themselves, and they have thousands hanging onto their every word. Even in real life, well known academics who speak on Marx frequently espouse completely unfounded lies about what he or some other Marxist said, something which could be simply refuted by someone digitally searching keywords on marxists.org. The fact that nobody in communist parties simply refutes these political celebrities says it all. Worse still, many times these "experts on Marxism" are held in high regard by self proclaimed Marxists.

While no wide-spread phenomenon can be blamed solely on the individuals who are part of it, we must admit that this is a problem which must be fixed somehow. For those who push themselves into leading roles, or those who find themselves there, there is no excuse for not putting on an audiobook on your commute to work or school, while doing dishes, etc. You cannot lead if you do not know where to go.

For the rest of the movement, I think this problem can be partially solved if aspects of the proposal of From Circles to Party could be implemented. The other cause lies in a lack of discipline. More on this in the next section.

In this, our situation is on a fundamental level different from the situation in the time of From Circles to Party, or Lenin for that matter. The authors of From Circles to Party found themselves in a situation where local circles were delineated on ideological grounds, and people had a much higher base level understanding of the core ideas of Marxism, or at least a higher shared familiarity with these ideas. Ideological confusion in our time is much higher, people do not know what their own opinion is, they are unable to articulate it, let alone write polemics in favour of it.

The proposal in this book relies on definite circles with definite positions, able to articulate them, and having a baseline agreement on very basic questions. Where the authors of the book proposed unity with everyone who agrees to basic Marxist Leninist principles, it is very unlikely that 80% of current self identified communists could give you a correct summation of what this would entail. This means we cannot simply copy paste their proposal, or implement a variation with similar level of unity at the start. If some aspect of this proposal is to be realised, it must necessarily take a much more proactive role in realising in some way a higher base line of theoretical education of the communist movement, whether that be by adopting a shared reading list, creating a comprehensive series of podcasts on basic theory, or something else entirely. Such details will have to be determined, tested and adjusted in practice.

Lack of Discipline

Another gigantic hurdle is the complete lack of discipline communists in general seem to have. The amount of dependable, somewhat disciplined people in the multiple hundreds member strong organisation I was in, is probably below 20. Online it is no different.

There seems to be a resistance against doing the hard work that needs to be done, as well as a lack of willingness to educate oneself. Where others sometimes joke "your organisation is nothing more than a reading group", I would jump for joy if a reading group was able to survive for more than 4 sessions, if people read the books at all.

In my view, there is a pervasive sense of individualism among communists who see themselves not as, for a lack of a better analogy, a soldier in an army in the class war against the bourgeoisie. This seems to be a more general problem in the west, with an ongoing decline in social club and charity organisations due to lack of volunteer commitment, which is more pronounced among the newer generations.

Online people are unwilling to commit themselves to a real life organisation, instead being content wasting their time in online chats or forums about communism, watching full time communist entertainers who do not have the time to do deep study and test the praxis they peddle, and these internet communists think this online activity constitutes communist work.

Perhaps your own organisation, your local circle has some form of discipline. I am glad if it does, but given that even an organisation such as the NCPN/CJB (Netherlands), which contrasts itself with competing groups by highlighting its internal discipline, had a relatively recent congress dedicated to "all our members exist only on paper", the state of the movement in the west is very dire indeed. Consider all the people who lean communist, who are stuck in online performative activism, who exhibit the spontaneous deviation of waiting for "when the true party (that already agrees with everything I think) comes into being, I will join!". These are also the communists who must be unified into the one single class war, into the vanguard, who must start doing the work, etc.

This lack of discipline is also one of the major hurdles of our movement in the current moment. This problem precludes the most important aspect of the proposal in the book, namely discipline on ensuring all communists engage with said work. Without solving the problem of discipline, any attempt at this unified organ will simply not be read, listened to, or be engaged by by the majority of those who call themselves communists now.

At the same time, the scattered nature of our movement must be taken into account when some attempt at such a pre-party network is made. Perhaps a pre-party network, bundling the power of the few communists who actually do the work, can put out media, maybe in collaboration of "content creators", to ensure those not yet in an organisation stay in the loop, and get a more practically applicable theoretical education, are pushed to join organisation in more effective practical work better informed by better theory, etc. Or perhaps some other tactics needs to be developed to solve this problem.

An Alternative for Broad Tent Unity?

Despite the hurdles as described above, this proposal can perhaps serve as an alternative model for attempts at broad tent unity. Macnairs ideals of faction-based polemics can be mapped cleanly onto the circles in this book, even though people currently have no clear idea of what they themselves believe than would be ideal, as shown by lacklustre realisation of actual factions in organisations that follow Macnairs model.

Doing so could entail adopting the core concepts of this book on democratic centralism, theoretical unity, and their proposal on how to build unity, and dissolving the broad unity parties into this pre-party network form, with factions taking up the role of the tendencies. As this publication would not be bound to locality, such a structure would also allow for multiple concurrent groups within the network in the same locality, so that currently competing local groups are forced to grapple with their collective duty in a single theoretical publication, allowing the process towards unification to actually happen.

It would entail letting go, until higher unity is actually reached, from adopting network-wide positions on primary issues, instead allowing individual tendencies to develop and test their techniques, and learn from others. The role of the party leadership would then be reduced by removing the following tasks:

- Forming a singular complete programme.
- Organising national campaigns.
- The need to directly handle issues around individual members, depending on the degree of dissolution.

And instead their role would shift to guiding the pre-party work of both research-based theoretical work, ensuring the factions/circles report and analyse their successes and failures, and promoting emulation by having different circles visit each other.

A Model for European Unity?

A proposal such as this could also find application in my own continent of Europe. Aside from the few "international" Trotskyist newspapers, there is no actual concrete internationalism going on in Europe, not by communists, not even by social democrats. With the exception perhaps of Diem25, which is not communist, Marxist or even explicitly anti capitalist due to its national front character.

This lack of internationalism is despite the fact that the European Union is a political reality, that the Shengen area has deep, incredibly deep economic and legal integration, or even that countries such as the Netherlands has integrated parts of its army into the German army, a first step to the increasingly likely development of a European Army. The streets and parks of my cities are lined with homeless Poles and Romanians who got exploited, fired and left for dead by giant warehouse and farming corporations. Greece had a Mexican standoff with the "Troika" during the short reign of Syriza. Huge profits are extracted from the European periphery towards Germany and France.

Meanwhile, no anti capitalist party of any substance even has a collective paper. The PVDA-PTB, the KKE in Greece, and many others all part of the International Meeting of Communist and Workers' Parties, do not have a collective European Strategy. Even those more closely aligned, such as the KKE, the TKP in Turkey and their aligned junior parties in Europe in their newly formed organisation after the split with the Russian aligned ones over Ukraine, do not have anything. At best, you will find a translated article from their Spanish sister party in their newspaper (which comes less than once a month, and barely has anything in the way of more in depth theoretical aspects to convince others of their positions).

Imagine for a second, that instead of just saying we want international collaboration, we implemented the proposal in this book not on the scale of just one European country, but on the scale of the entire continent. Where research into the causes, effects, elements of the homelessness crisis of migrant workers could be done both in the places where they end up, as well as in the places they come from. Where these lessons, these facts, could be used to amplify our effectiveness in both ends of the continent.

I believe that in the current year, with the advancements of automatic translation tools, such a publication can be made digitally. Just publishing in English is simply not good enough, as even in the best non native English speaking country like the Netherlands, reading, writing and following more abstract and theoretical works on politics is beyond the ability of most people to do comfortably. Such a publication needs to be available in the language people actually speak, and articles need to be able to be written in their own language, so that all communists, from those fluent to those who speak not a word of English, can read this publication.

Translation tools have developed to the extend that they can provide translations into all European languages, and you would need about 30 languages[4] (all available as services/downloadable models) to provide it in a language every European would be able to speak as their first or their national language. A website could simple have one digital publication, and depending on the settings of the user, translated into the language they wish to read it in.

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[4] Russian, German, French, Italian, English, Spanish, Polish, Ukrainian, Romanian, Dutch, Serbo-Croatian (Serbs can also read the Latinized version, so 1 translation should suffice, but all 3-4 variations exist.), Turkish, Greek, Hungarian, Swedish, Czech, Portuguese, Bulgarian, Albanian, Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, Slovak, Lithuanian, Slovene, Latvian, Macedonian, Estonian, Maltese, Icelandic. - With these 30 all inhabitants should be able to read and write in a language that is either their native language or their national language. For example, the Welsh have English as the national language, Catalan speakers Spanish, in which they have all received higher education. This list is merely here to illustrate the viability of this proposed idea for practical purposes, and not a comment on the validity or right to existence of regional languages.

These translations do not need to be perfect. They need to be good enough so that any article *can* be read by every inhabitant with decent accuracy. Any specific question or mistake can be resolved by asking for clarification to those who speak the original language of the article, or requesting a manual correction if major translation errors are found. Further clarity can be ensured by doing the following, to name a few:

- Keep sentences short. Long sentences tend to translate worse.
- Do not use idioms.
- Do not use high-context language. For example, if you can use the name of something instead of pronouns to refer to it, do so, as pronouns are both hard to link and translating from languages without gendered pronouns (ie Finnish) to languages with them or the other way around can make it unclear. Case systems similarly are harder to translate.
- Critiques of or replies to an article which cite specific phrasing must be proofread by someone capable to reading the original work, to check if the argument is truly about what is said or the disagreement is caused by a translation error.

Such concerns would be enforced by the steering committee/editors of the publication.

In this way, actual internationalism, unity of the communists in both theory and action can be achieved on a continent-wide scale, and practical political action on a European scale to counter the internationally organised bourgeoisie could be enacted. Currently, all we have is talk of internationalism, everybody wants to "work together", but when pressed what this actually means, they come up empty handed. A theoretical publication on a European scale, just like how the Komintern used to have publications by and for all its constituent parties, would be the first step towards actual internationalism beyond empty statements of solidarity. And perhaps, some years in the future, we could have a communist counterpart to the vile liberal Volt party.

Conclusion

If you found this article at all interesting, I recommend you read the whole book. While it may be a bit hard to follow sometimes due to being context heavy, and even though it is on the long side, it contains a lot of useful insights of those who struggled with the same problems we are. I found the analysis of party function and party formation in this book incredibly insightful in clarifying exactly what and why some concepts exists, and I hope it may help others and their organisation further along. Their thought process, manner of analysis, how they identify issues, etc, on how to get from A to B can be applied to many different situations, such as our own problems of discipline, theoretical education, etc.

While the practical proposal outlined in this book is not immediately applicable in our current situation, its core elements are interesting to consider. While one of the two major obstacles they list for the likely failure of their own project is gone, namely not being able to get into contact with other groups easily, due to the internet existing now, the other remains. Convincing a wide array of existing parties, from large to sects, to join in this process, remains as difficult as ever. However, there is a growing tendency among the younger communists who, now that the Soviet Union and most other socialist countries are dead, seem to wish to move beyond the squabbles of the past. Much more are people rejecting old blood feuds over whether Trotsky or Stalin was the coolest Bolshevik after Lenin, or whether or not Hoxha was right or if Mao was right on this or that topic, as all their projects sadly died before we were born, with no country fulfilling the role of global revolutionary leader anymore. I hope that bringing this book and its ideas to light can be the start for the work to actually clarify the questions of our movement, so that, in whatever way it will be done, communist unity can be achieved. Because there is no better foundation to build anew than rock bottom.