

Democracy and napkins - Socialism, Democracy and Movement-Building

Monday 7 December 2009, by [MAC UAID Liam](#) (Date first published: 17 November 2009).

Napkins are hardly indispensable to a meal but they are one of those luxurious fripperies that you might indulge yourself with on special, more formal occasions. That gives them something in common with the left's attitude to democracy and it's a subject that's been bugging me for a while.

Quotes from Trotsky are a rarity on this site since you can prove more or less anything by a bit of selective quotation but this one expresses a pretty timeless truth:

"Classes are heterogeneous; they are torn by inner antagonisms, and arrive at the solution of common problems no otherwise than through an inner struggle of tendencies, groups and parties.... An example of only one party corresponding to one class is not to be found in the whole course of political history." (*The Revolution Betrayed* p. 267.)

To which we can add that parties and organisations are heterogeneous and torn by inner antagonisms simply by virtue of the fact that they are comprised of individuals and sub groups with a variety of partial experiences and insights. The paradox is that in Britain it's precisely those currents and individuals which locate their origins, no matter how indirectly, in Trotsky's critique of Stalinism, which most regularly ignore or chose not to understand this essential part of what he had to say.

Ernest Mandel who was able to draw on the experience of a bureaucratised workers' movement and the Stalinist states enriched the Marxist appreciation of democracy as a non-negotiable principle. If there is a single text which underlies the ethos of this site it is probably his *Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Socialist Democracy*. Writing of a political culture in the European workers' movement which put a premium on "unity" and the absolute authority of actually existing leaderships he asserted that: "There are no infallible party leaderships, or individual party leaders, party majorities, "Leninist central committees.""

Lots of people disagree with this hypothesis in deed, if not in word. A repeated behaviour in the various attempts at pooling the forces of the British left has been exactly this assumption that one small group of people is, for all practical purposes, as near infallible as makes no difference and they have the right to make decisions for everyone else. This is the path to leadership by clique or secret groups. Even on occasions where the formal appearance of democracy is preserved, there is simply a test of the strength of voting blocs rather than a choice between alternative political lines. The only way to avoid this is for free and open conflict between structured and coherent option. You can call these things programmes, factions, tendencies parties but as soon a restriction is put on them two things happen. The first is that a limit is wilfully set on dissent and the other is that de facto cliques emerge. Another avenue is that chosen by the team around Ken Livingstone, which having got the formality of elections out of the way, made a virtue out of not being accountable to anyone.

If you had to pick the single most important reason for rejecting this way of working it's because it offers a paternalistic, substitutionist and elitist corruption of Marxism's emancipatory message, replacing a small group's ideas for those that emerge in the conflict of opposing tendencies. This

idea is largely kept locked away to stop it getting a bit scruffy through daily use and is dusted down for occasional propaganda and educational purposes when it's not so important to win a vote.

Now let's make the imaginative leap that we are in a post revolutionary society. At the best of times these are societies under great external pressure and, as Cuba demonstrates, one response to this is the restriction of the freedom to organise alternative parties or unions even if they are in favour of the revolution. Is it possible to conceive of an organisation in power which has a history of not allowing open dissent internally permitting freedom of criticism of the government or the right for opposition parties and media to exist? That's an imaginative leap too far.

Marxism is still paying a price for its association with the lack of socialist democracy in Eastern Europe. It gave social democracy an advantage for decades and today the emphasis on public unanimity, winning every vote or packing meetings to make sure they produce the right result makes Anglophone Marxism unattractive to either many people with experience of rudimentary trade union democracy or social movements like the more imaginative climate change campaigners. They should be lining up to join organisations which offer a coherent global critique of the world but prefer more fluid ways of acting and an imperfect consensus based decision making process.

Mandel was inflexible on the utter necessity for thoroughgoing democracy in organisations with pretensions to provide leadership to the working class. "Any restriction of free political and theoretical debate spilling over to a restriction of free political mass activity of the proletariat, i.e., any restriction of socialist democracy, will constitute an obstacle to the revolutionary party itself arriving at correct policies. It is therefore not only theoretically wrong but practically ineffective and harmful from the point of view of successfully advancing on the road of building socialism." Self evidently we are far from a position in which any organisation is able to restrict mass political activity but we do repeatedly see a contempt for democracy and the right to dissent prevent the sort of real unity in action that makes political convergences possible. You could even say that even as a shortcut it's "ineffective and harmful".

P.S.

* From Liam Mac Uaid's blog:

<http://liammacuaid.wordpress.com/2009/11/17/democracy-and-napkins/>