

Paul Le Blanc: Reflections on Coherence and Comradeship - Some political thoughts on revolutionary approach, organization, and politics

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Paul Le Blanc reflects on the challenges and pitfalls facing revolutionary organizations on the Left. Drawing on decades of experience, Le Blanc grapples with the tendency to idealize or deify specific organizations, the complexities of building a genuine working-class consciousness, and the difficulties of developing effective revolutionary strategies in the face of capitalist resilience.

Revolutionaries must avoid idealizing their organizations and see them as part of a broader process, with each having strengths and limitations. The working class is diverse and multifaceted, and class struggle must be integrated with the fight against all forms of oppression. Democratic and open organizational structures are essential for developing effective revolutionary strategies that are responsive to the complexities of mass struggles.

As the crises of global capitalism deepen and the specter of authoritarianism looms, the Left faces urgent challenges in building effective movements for social transformation. Le Blanc's reflections offer valuable insights and hard-won lessons for activists seeking to navigate these challenges with principled commitment, strategic clarity, and a spirit of democratic comradeship.

In recent discussions with European comrades, whom I have known for many years and whose experience in the struggle goes back many more years, have stirred a desire in me to draw together some political thoughts long swirling and at least partially coming together in my mind. [1]

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Working in Europe during the period from mid-January to mid-April of 2019 took me away from a political earthquake and after-shocks hitting my organization in the United States, the International Socialist Organization (ISO). Regarding aspects of both the earthquake and the after-shocks, I have formed only tentative and partial judgments. An impending dissolution of the group seems likely.

What I have written is not a commentary on these recent specifics. Yet they have deepened my desire to draw together these longer-range thoughts, and find reflection in what I have to say here.

The gist of what I am reaching for involves several things.

(1) I feel compelled to continue the work, in which I have been engaged for some time, of seeking to identify aspects of the nature of the revolutionary approach, organization, and politics that are needed at the moment of history in which we find ourselves.

(2) I am concerned that the proliferation of elitist manipulations (even when based on the best of intentions and cleverest of analyses), cropping up within diverse revolutionary as well as reformist currents, have generated confusions and disillusionments that are obstacles to engaging with the tasks we face.

(3) I am haunted by the challenge posed if the revolutionary approach actually brings the mass revolutionary consciousness and organized force many of us have been reaching for. In such places as Brazil and Greece, which seemed for many of us to be exciting experiences to emulate, it turned out that the revolutionary promise would culminate in humiliating disaster.

I believe it is crucial to be wrestling with these and related questions, given the nature of the present period. We are facing questions of life and death, as the crises of global capitalism seem to be deepening and pushing massive numbers of people into greater hardship, turmoil, and calamity. It is an open question as to whether climate change, in upcoming decades, will be tipping into something increasingly deadly for many millions of people. Economic inequality and crisis seem to be intensifying – austerity, poverty, joblessness and semi-joblessness, lower incomes for all but the wealthy and their minions, degradation of living standards and conditions, multiple insecurities.

In reaction, we see around the world the rise of an anti-humanist Right, fake-populist authoritarians, with even worse elements beginning to mobilize to offer their own horrific “solutions” (with the multiple bigotries – racism, misogyny, homophobia, and more) to the terrible problems that are shaping up. At the same time, a deep and long-term process of radicalization – in the best sense – is also becoming manifest in multiple ways. In the United States this has been reflected in the Occupy movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, the million-woman mobilization against Trump, the #MeToo movement, the growing strike-wave spearheaded by teachers, and the amazing impact of the Bernie Sanders campaign, and the accompanying mushrooming of Democratic Socialists of America. Things are incredibly complex, fluid, horrible, hopeful ... yet-to-be-determined. What we do and fail to do – each and every one of us – makes a difference. All the vibrant, interactive specks of humanity, all of us, are part of the amazing equation whose solution is not yet clear.

In order to help deal with such realities, we need to face, and move beyond, the long-term crises afflicting the Left – that segment of the political spectrum that is defined as favoring rule by the people, with liberty and justice (social justice, economic justice) for all. And we need to wrestle with the age-old question of *what is to be done*. For many on the revolutionary left, there is a need to move beyond the shambles in which we find ourselves in order to do what we need to do. There is much good, over time, that we have contributed to struggles for human liberation, but we must learn from limitations and recent failures if we are to do more.

The God That Failed - or Not

Over the years, I have seen crises, unravelings, implosions, explosions, and quiet disintegrations of many organizations on the Left. I have sometimes witnessed such things from the inside: Students

for a Democratic Society, Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Action, the Fourth Internationalist Tendency (the only one here intending to go out of existence at the appropriate time, and did), the Labor Party emerging from its more accurately-named predecessor Labor Party Advocates, Solidarity, Committees of Correspondence, and the Green Party. [2]

Varied critics have cited one or another demise as the inevitable consequence of embracing or failing to embrace a truly revolutionary program, the absence or presence of certain organizational structures or policies, the wickedness of specific leaders, the absence or presence of Leninism, etc. Looking back on almost six decades of experience, it seems to me that the complexity of factors cannot be reduced to any single or simple cause – one must look at the multiple specifics in each case to comprehend what actually happened in each case. (This is something I have tried to do in my two essays on the SWP in Breitman, Le Blanc and Wald volume *Trotskyism in the United States*, and in my reviews of books by Peter Camejo, Leslie Evans, and Barry Sheppard in my collection *Left Americana*.) At the same time, I have seen certain patterns common to many of these experiences.

Often members and supporters are inclined to idealize or even deify (unconsciously, of course) the specific organization: it will live forever, manifesting in itself, and at a future glorious time bringing into the world, all that is Good. But – consisting exclusively of mortal creatures – no organization can live forever and for the same reason no organization can manifest in itself all that is Good. Organizations can, if their members operate intelligently, help to create a better world – but if they aspire to do more than they can possibly do, profoundly debilitating results are inevitable.

Related to this tendency toward idealization or deification, members of the organization can make a variety of mistakes. One is to approach the organization uncritically, as a Beloved Community, an affinity group that validates one's own Goodness or superiority – rather than as something that can and must be utilized to accomplish real-life practical goals that will actually contribute to meaningful change and, ultimately, a better world. Another mistake is to allow an exasperated or dismissive or contemptuous or condescending attitude toward those not adhering to the organization (especially if they are in different, especially competing, organizations).

Connected to this is the illusion that the organization must do more than it actually can do – and in this, falling prey to a sort of magical thinking that (abra-ca-dabra!) in *some way*, or *some how*, the organization will be able to Do What Must Be Done to create a beautiful (perhaps socialist) future, even though an objective analysis would reveal that the actual members of the organization lack sufficient resources, knowledge, or expertise to make this so. At best, the organization can be part of a process preparing consciousness, experiences, and conditions, and in this helping to bring together the massive and diverse forces that will actually be capable of doing what must be done. This should mean being more respectful of, and inclined to learn from, those who are not in one's organization – and also avoiding unrealistic actions that will isolate, demoralize, disappoint and exhaust the organization's membership.

The organization's inability to live up to some members' idealized or deified conceptions may, at decisive moments, feed into feelings of betrayal, disillusionment, and bitterness. While such feelings have often been justified by truly negative practices or policies within the organization, such negative dynamics are hardly to be found only in organizations on the Left. One could almost say they are inseparable from the human condition. Still, the traumas suffered have sometimes become as debilitating as the previous idealization and deification, in regard to aspirations and efforts to change the world for the better.

There are two concluding notions that occur to me as I seek to relate these reflections to the struggles against oppression and for a society of the free and the equal.

One is that, since no organization existing today can possibly be the force we need to lead the struggle for such a future society, it is crucial to push against the idealization and deification of any organization on the Left. We must see our present organizations as part of a process – each organization may have strengths, but each is limited and must go out of existence, feeding into the future, richer, more massive organization that we need.

The second concluding notion is that organizational mistakes, frustrations, or failures must not be reduced simply to matters of psychology, sociology, ethics, tragedy or comedy. They may have each of these dimensions – but they also have an essential and practical relevance to politics, economics, and human survival. Regardless of the fortunes of one or another currently existing organization, we must labor as best we can to learn from and build on our experiences in a way that can really, truly, practically advance the struggle for liberation.

This struggle for liberation was once described by the young Karl Marx as overturning all conditions that make people oppressed, damaged, mutilated beings, prevented from realizing all that is wondrous within them as free (self-determining) and creative beings living in genuine community. This aspiration has sometimes been restricted, with the multiple identities of those who make up the rich tapestry of humanity being belittled in preference to a very abstract, idealized or deified understanding of one of these identities (an absolutely crucial one, to be sure) – *class*, with special reference to what in capitalist society has become the great majority, the working class. This tangle, too, must be undone in order to help us make sense of what is to be done (or less imperiously, what we need to do).

The Wondrous, Mundane, Multi-Faceted, Actual Working Class - All of Us

It is possible (and among certain socialist, communist, anarcho-syndicalist currents, it is the norm) to idealize and deify the working class. This can become a huge barrier to revolutionaries who wish to overcome multiple forms of exploitation – thinking of people as glorified abstractions instead of actual people.

Actual people have a variety of ages and cultural preferences, different genders and sexual orientations, different sets of biases and prejudices, different levels of knowledge and insight, various neuroses and other mental-emotional problems, divergent attitudes on multiple questions, and more. All of this true of the working class, given that it is composed of actual people.

The classical definition of the working class is: those who make a living (get enough money to buy basic necessities and perhaps some luxuries) by selling *their ability to work* (their *labor-power*) to an employer. Out of the labor-power, the employer squeezes actual labor in order to create the wealth that is partly given to the workers (usually as little as possible), with the rest of this labor-created wealth going to the employer. In the early decades of the Industrial Revolution in patriarchal and capitalist Europe, men were often considered the “real” workers (even though many women worked), and factory workers were often considered the “real” working class. But men and women, and many, many children too, were part of the working class the way we have defined it, and that was the case whether they produced goods or services, regardless of specific and proliferating occupations, skill sets, levels of income, levels of occupational pride, etc.

As a class, the immense collectivity of people just described have been oppressed and exploited in order to enrich the tiny and powerful minority that owns and controls our economy. But there are powerful and terrible forms of oppression that bear down – in multiple ways – on people through their non-class identities, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, age, distinctive physical specifics, and more. Not only must fighting against such oppression be central to all that

activists do in the struggle for human liberation, but the interrelationship of such forms of oppression, and of the struggles against them, must be understood.

In particular, the *class struggle* must be seen as involving determined, creative, uncompromising struggle against all forms of oppression. "Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter what class is affected," Lenin once emphasized. He specified that this includes oppression around freedom of speech and expression, cultural freedom, the rights of religious minorities, the rights of racial and ethnic groups, the rights of women, of soldiers, of students, of peasants. He argued that such oppression must be seen by the worker (here Lenin was presumably speaking of male workers) as coming from "those same dark forces that are oppressing and crushing him at every step of his life." A revolutionary must be a "tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of people it affects."

Good as Lenin was, however, he had his limitations – not least of which is that he was a mortal human being who never said the last word on anything. An amazing collectivity of people have addressed these and related questions over the years, and their insights can be indispensable for those seeking to advance the struggle for human liberation. (Among those who have influenced me, in novels, in non-fictional works, or both, are: Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Rita Mae Brown, James Baldwin, C.L.R. James, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ella Baker, Sheila Rowbotham, Alexandra Kollontai. There are many more.)

Also worth considering, in this regard, are the comments of someone I knew personally, and who became one of my mentors – a seasoned working-class intellectual named George Breitman, who put the matter this way half a century ago:

"The radicalization of the worker can begin off the job as well as on. It can begin from the fact that the worker is a woman as well as a man; that the worker is Black or Chicano or a member of some other oppressed minority as well as white; that the worker is a father or mother whose son can be drafted; that the worker is young as well as middle-aged or about to retire. If we grasp the fact that the working class is stratified and divided in many ways – the capitalists prefer it that way – then we will be better able to understand how the radicalization will develop among workers and how to intervene more effectively. Those who haven't already learned important lessons from the radicalization of oppressed minorities, youth and women had better hurry up and learn them, because most of the people involved in these radicalizations are workers or come from working-class families."

The integration of such understandings as these into one's thinking, and into the very core of one's political collective or organization, is necessary, I believe, for anyone who genuinely wants to see a revolution. Yet simply doing that will not, by itself, bring a revolution. Which leads to further sets of reflections.

Aspirations and Realities

"You say you want a revolution," sang the Beatles in 1968. "Well, you know, we'd all love to change the world." *What kind of change* has been a focal-point of revolutionaries for generations. We have been told that Spartacus defined it as "a world without slaves." It is said that Jesus projected the Kingdom of God as something to exist "on earth as it is in Heaven" – which meant that all would be equal before their Creator, living in brotherhood and sisterhood, with all things in common, animated by the Golden Rule of each person treating all others as they themselves would want to be

treated. Architects of, advocates for, and participants in various utopian projects in more recent centuries sometimes advanced very detailed plans that reflected – in one way or another – their distinctive communitarian ideals and aspirations.

Marx added three compellingly realist notions to the mix: 1) the actual possibility of this hoped-for cooperative commonwealth must be grounded in a serious, disciplined understanding of the realities of the present and an understanding of history (social sciences); 2) the dynamics of capitalism, despite their inherent destructiveness, have created technological possibilities providing the material conditions for a society of the free and the equal in which all might realize their full human potential for freedom, creative endeavor, and genuine community; and 3) the dynamics of capitalism have also created a complex but truly amazing force, increasingly global, of working-class majorities (those whose labor collectively creates the wealth – goods and services – through which society lives), majorities having the potential, if their vast numbers are drawn together through consciousness and organization, to bring to birth a new and better world.

Rosa Luxemburg brilliantly emphasized essential aspects of this realist standpoint, particularly in regard to a controversy arising among Marxist-influenced socialists. Some of her comrades argued the hoped-for future could only be brought about by a revolutionary mobilization of the working class to overturn the existing capitalist order and create a workers' democracy for the socialist reconstruction of society. Others insisted that this could be achieved more gradually, with the accumulation of reforms (in part secured through compromises with pro-capitalist liberals) that would over time transform a problematical capitalism into a harmonious socialism. Such differences continue to find expression today – including in what is now by far the largest socialist organization in the United States, Democratic Socialists of America.

Luxemburg insisted that it is foolish to think one could simply choose different paths to socialism – one a quicker, more radical (but trickier, if spicier) path, the other a slower, more moderate (milder but less risky) path, as if one were selecting mild or spicy sausages at the market. The realities of capitalism make it impossible to compromise that system out of existence – the effort would involve an entanglement in and adaptation to capitalism, with an ultimate erosion and corruption of reformist achievements. The “mild” path could not actually lead to socialism, but only to a partially (and impermanently) “reformed” capitalism.

The underlying reasons making the reformist pathway to socialism utterly unrealistic flows from the incredible dynamism, and inexorably destructive dynamics, of capitalism. Luxemburg explored this in her classic *The Accumulation of Capital* (an irreplaceable contribution, whatever its imperfections). This text also decisively challenges, it seems to me, the notion that any conscious person can afford simply to withdraw from political activism, tend to interesting hobbies and one's own little garden, and let the problems of the world unfold as they may. For committed political activists, such realities intensify the challenge – what is to be done?

Collectives and Cadres

Many adages from past movements and struggles continue to resonate: an injury to one is an injury to all, in unity there is strength, if we fail to hang together we may be hanged separately, and so on. The understanding – throughout their political lives – of such figures as Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci, Zetkin and their many co-thinkers takes such elemental notions further. There will be no inevitable triumph of human rights, freedom, creativity, community, and a better future. Such things must be fought for, and they must be fought for against oppressive and exploitative elites that are powerful and well-organized, with immense resources. They can only be overcome by the force of

the majority, but only if that majority has the necessary consciousness and a high degree of organization.

Obviously, not every human being who is part of “the majority” has the same thoughts and values. Some are drawn to multiple forms of bigotry and/or fear and/or passivity and/or submissiveness, etc. Only a portion – a layer – of the working-class majority is at this moment inclined toward a revolutionary class-consciousness, commitment against all forms of oppression, and inclination to fight for a better world. Within this layer, there are some who have developed some skills in actually fighting back, in analyzing what’s what, and in waging effective struggles. Anarcho-syndicalists have referred to this as “the militant minority,” and such a minority has sometimes been able to provide leadership in sustained struggles that result in victories. Many among those inclined to read a document such as this happen to be part of the *broad vanguard layer* of the working class.

Based on what has been said so far, it seems clear that this vanguard layer or militant minority must not substitute itself for the majority (let alone arrogantly claim that it is the majority). Rather, it must seek to win more and more individuals, more and more of the majority, to forms of consciousness and activity through which they too will either become part of the vanguard layer or increasingly conscious and active supporters of what that layer is reaching for – against all forms of oppression, and for a world in which the free development of each will become the condition for the free development of all.

Just as the entire working class or the entire majority of the population is not telepathically connected, thinking the same thoughts and automatically inclined to carry out the same actions, so those who are part of the vanguard layer do not all have the same thoughts and understanding, including about pathways that make sense and what to do next. To be effective, individuals who are part of this layer must join together to pool their energies, their ideas, their resources, their insights, their commitments. Without the development of such a collaboration of thinking and activism, without a political collective (in fact, a network of collectives), there can be no effective plans of action that can be carried out to change the world.

Such collectives cannot be sustained, cannot grow, cannot carry out the broad array of educational, consciousness-raising, and practical political activities, without people who have developed the skills to make this so. The word *cadre* has been used as a tag for such people.

Such a person has developed the interactive blend of knowledge, understanding, experience, and skills to do the things that must be done.

- How does one organize a meeting that is coherent and democratic and effective and has good practical results? How are those good practical results achieved, and how can various comrades be helped to make sure that they are achieved? How can one’s specific collective be sustained in order to ensure the development and effectiveness of its various comrades and the collective as a whole?
- How does one size up an actual situation in the community or the workplace, figure out the kinds of things that need to be done, and figure out how they can be done in order to realize a specific goal? How does one organize an educational forum, a picket line, a strike, a rally, a mass demonstration, an election campaign, a struggle for a specific reform, etc.?
- What can we learn from other struggles, at other times, from other places, that can help us be strong and effective in our own struggles? How can these be applied to our specific situations?

Not everyone can answer such questions – but a cadre is someone who can answer some of them, and can help create collaboration in which further answers can be developed and tested in practical

action. A cadre is someone who can help ensure that the collective can be what it must be, who can help others see the need to become part of the collective, and who can help members of the collective (and even people who are not members of the collective) to become cadres in the sense that is suggested here.

With the proliferation of cadres, with more and more and more of us developing as cadres, we can see the growth of a mass movement that is capable of being effective in the fight against all forms of oppression, forging pathways in the struggle for a better world of the free and the equal.

As we seek to realize such goals, we necessarily come to additional and interrelated sets of reflections – on structures and strategies.

Democratic and Revolutionary Structures

There are two fundamental issues that must be of concern to revolutionary activists. One involves the organizational forms and policies through which we structure our collective efforts. Another involves the actual purpose of the organization: getting from the “here” of our present-day realities to the “there” of our hoped-for socialist goals – *strategy* being the term often used to refer to that specific and practical pathway. As has been suggested already, it would seem that the effective approach to developing both must be democratic and revolutionary.

Focusing on the matter of organizational structures for a moment, it occurs to me that the old and much-maligned and sometimes grotesquely distorted term democratic centralism continues to make a considerable amount of sense. I am absolutely opposed to the follow-the-leader interpretation which tells us that some central authority (the wise leader, the top cadres, the central committee or whatever) should be the brain that does the thinking and gives the orders – after which we should “democratically” discuss it all and then carry it all out as disciplined little soldiers. That is the opposite of the actual democratic centralism I believe in – a phony “Leninism” associated with pretentious clowning and the organization falling flat on its face (to paraphrase Lenin’s *Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*).

Democratic centralism was not quite the hallmark of Leninism that many make of it. Use of the term has been found in the German workers’ movement of the 1870s, and it seems to have been introduced in a positive way into the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party around 1905 by the Menshevik faction, although the Bolsheviks embraced it as well. It seems to me to involve a democratic common sense for any serious organization, and at the same time its implementation necessarily involves a reasonable flexibility.

If the organization has a full, democratic discussion regarding *actions to be taken* and makes a decision (determined by majority vote) – then the organization *carries out* the decision that was democratically decided upon. If the decision is to support a strike action, or an anti-war action, or an anti-racist action, then no comrade is to work against the action. On the other hand, if a majority of comrades in the organization have a specific position regarding a philosophical question, or an understanding of history, or a specific political analysis, there is no reason why dissident comrades cannot openly, publicly state their own views, if they have them. Nor are they prohibited from expressing disagreements with the leadership or with majority decisions on other matters as well, even publicly. But if the collective decides to do one thing, it is not acceptable for dissident members simply to do the opposite. Only on questions involving basic revolutionary principles is there validity in breaking ranks (Lenin himself did this at certain decisive points) – but this is generally an indication that a political break may be in the offering.

Related to this mode of functioning is the elective principle in regard to selection of leaders (with no mandatory slates chosen by “outgoing” but actually self-perpetuating leaderships). Full and critical-minded discussions must occur prior to national conventions of democratically elected delegates, where the basic decisions are made and leaders chosen. Leadership bodies, elected at the local and national level, are answerable to and replaceable by the membership.

Insights, experiences, and energies of all members are needed by the organizational collective. Individual members must be animated by the sense that this organization is *theirs*, collectively, and by the understanding that each and every comrade makes a difference. This is enhanced by collective decision-making and the collective testing out of the decision in practice, in action.

The democratic mode of functioning must, in repressive contexts, naturally be modified to help protect members and thwart the forces of repression. This has proved to be the case with organizations forced into underground work by vicious dictatorships, and those initiating armed struggle. But such restrictive organizational policies (problematical even when necessary) have also cropped up in less repressive contexts. The utilization of “security” precautions that dispense with transparency and accountability must be avoided as much as possible.

Experience has shown that the absence of openness, transparency, and democratic accountability can result in self-inflicted wounds, internal abuses, and victimization of some comrades by powerful but disoriented comrades. Organizational secrecy provides enhanced opportunities for dirty tricks and provocations on the part of the state’s repressive apparatus. Especially damaging has been the separation of select cadres “in the know” from their comrades (which can distort political judgment), and also narrowing the involvement of the organization’s active membership and potential social base in the revolutionary process. Which brings us to questions of strategy.

Strategic Challenges

The democratic mode of functioning seems most consistent with the revolutionary strategic orientation of classical Marxism. This orientation was powerfully advanced by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*. The actual struggles of the laboring masses of the exploited and oppressed are the essential element in the struggle for a better world, according to Marx and Engels. Revolutionary socialists have relevance only to the extent that they merge their ideas and energies with such struggles. Struggles at the workplace by trade unions, as well as struggles for human rights and for life-giving reforms through social movements must ultimately be combined with struggles for political power by the working class – “winning the battle for democracy” through a developing and triumphant labor party. The revolutionary-democratic triumph would set the stage for the transition to socialism.

This strategic perspective was enriched by later revolutionaries who embraced it: Luxemburg’s reflections on reform and revolution and on the mass strike; Lenin’s notions of revolutionaries as tribunes of the people fighting against all forms of oppression, plus the need for a worker-peasant alliance, and especially the centrality of the struggle for radical democracy in the fight for socialism; Trotsky’s formulation of permanent revolution – highlighting the revolutionary internationalism shared by all being discussed here – and his insights on the obstacles and dangers of bureaucracy; Gramsci’s profound contributions on cultural dynamics, the masses/vanguard interplay, and his utilization of the concept of hegemony. These and contributions from yet other twentieth-century Marxists have been invaluable for those seeking to develop strategic perspectives – how to develop practical pathways of struggle that can get us from the “here” of present-day capitalism to the “there” of a socialist future.

The compelling nature of such theoretical contributions poses its own dangers.

One could spend one's entire life simply studying and discussing such things, with little time to spare for actual efforts to change the world. An alternative to such passive individualism is to form activist collectives dominated by what my Uncle Adrian (a class-conscious worker) called "the words of wisdom guys," leaders who would call the shots regarding what the organization should do. This approach can involve greater or less sophistication, but it has proved, over time, to be problematical.

An obvious danger is for leaderships to mechanistically superimpose previously-developed theoretical perspectives and experiences (a sort of tyranny of the past) on today's realities in ways that make no sense, given dramatically changed conditions.

Another danger, even among sophisticated leaders, is to conclude that – as keepers of revolutionary Marxism's amazing Truths – they must ride herd over the organization's membership, preventing deviations from the that Truth. After all, the hope for the future depends on that specific revolutionary collective (sometimes perceived as the Party, or the Nucleus of the Future Party) guided by this Truth. This is strategically barren, not really helping us get from "here" to "there." Instead, the priority becomes maintaining the specific organization that is the keeper of Truth.

Even among more sophisticated comrades and dynamic organizations there can be problems. Pierre Rousset recently reminded me of something he had pointed out when he was the director of the International Institute for Research and Education in Amsterdam, when I attended back in the 1980s. There is a fatal pattern among revolutionary organizations, not an iron law but a recurrent tendency. This tendency can even involve quite creative and insightful efforts (but flawed efforts) to use revolutionary theory for the purpose of developing genuinely revolutionary strategies. I want to try to describe this "fatal pattern" here, because it has implications regarding the interplay of revolutionary strategy and democratic organization.

A primary purpose of studying revolutionary theory is not only to comprehend the past and understand the present, but to develop an understanding of how things are likely to play out in the future – or, to use a common term, *predictions*. The more sophisticated theorists, employing the best of Marxist social science, often base strategic orientations on an analysis of trends and tendencies in the present that point to likely outcomes in the foreseeable future. There are various plausible predictions that have been advanced over the years. Capitalist and Stalinist elites seemed likely to be swept away throughout Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. A Third World War seemed likely, in the early years of the Cold War, between imperialist capitalism and the Stalinist degenerated workers' states. Experiences of the late 1950s and early 1960s suggested a wave of guerrilla wars culminating in triumphant liberation struggles throughout the Latin American continent. The dynamics of social struggles and economic problems in the United States from the 1960s through the 1970s indicated a deepening radicalization that would culminate in a class-conscious working class moving to center stage of the political arena in the twentieth century's final decades.

Strategic orientations developed and implemented on the basis of these predictions were disastrous failures. The social sciences lack the exactness of such natural sciences as mathematics, chemistry, astronomy, physics. (Even with these "exact sciences," there are multiple variables.) Social science can identify past patterns, current structures and dynamics, and possible developments, but can hardly grasp all of reality's complexities. Far-reaching predictions are too weak a reed on which to forge coherent strategies, even when articulated by the most sophisticated "words of wisdom guys."

Strategic orientations are essential if one truly hopes to get from the capitalist "here" to the socialist "there." But strategies must be based on more than the abstract theory and prediction-connected

analyses offered by the words of wisdom guys. Historical and political and economic developments impact powerfully, but in complex ways, on the essential and infinitely complex human factor. And it is this human factor that is the key to strategy – the incredible variables and possibilities in what people, masses of people, actually think, do, desire, and are inclined to try out.

A democratic collective process is needed by revolutionary activists. Naturally, we must understand trends and tendencies of history, of capitalism, and of our times. These impact on popular perceptions and moods and consequent political responses and struggles or inclinations to struggle. It is the vanguard layer's alertness to these popular responses, thanks to their connections with masses of people, that help generate struggles and suggest strategies that will make sense. A democratic process within revolutionary collectives provides the basis for our getting from "here" to "there." Our organizations must be structured and developed to enable such a revolutionary-democratic process to flourish.

And Yet ...

The *problems* of how to get from here to there have hardly evaporated by virtue of any theoretical flourish that might be teased out from what I have written so far. A few years ago, I wrote that "Leninism is unfinished," and this is certainly true of revolutionary organization and strategy in general, and in more than one way. They remain relevant to our time, but they remain as fluid as the complex realities of today and tomorrow, presenting much to struggle with, much to struggle over, much to work out.

I want to conclude with additional brief reflections regarding strategy.

As an exuberant young activist back in the 1970s and '80s, I advocated the creation of a labor party based on the trade unions – which would give the working-class a political voice of its own, greatly advancing class struggle and class-consciousness. I could point to our Northern neighbor, Canada, a country similar to our own, as having exactly what I was advocating – in the form of the New Democratic Party. And in the province of Ontario, in 1990, the NDP ran a militant campaign with strong reformist demands, backed by strong and left-leaning unions conducting their own militant campaigns, and it was swept into power – just as an economic recession was beginning. And I learned a bitter lesson.

Apparently the NDP leaders had not expected to be swept into power, and they had no idea of what to do. They found themselves enmeshed in a capitalist state, grounded in a capitalist society, and they responded to the situation, in their new governmental positions, by managing that capitalist state and working to salvage the capitalist economy – implementing austerity measures and anti-union policies that were the opposite of what they had campaigned for (not to mention a betrayal of the socialist principles with which some of them had spiced their speeches). This hopeful model that I had pointed to seemed totally discredited.

More recently, triumphant new "broad parties of the left" (far more substantial and radical than the NDP) – in Brazil, for example, and in Greece – crystallized, and won decisive elections. And each in their own way, for their own specific reasons and in their own specific circumstances, then traveled along a similar trajectory. My friend John Riddell has, in response to an earlier draft of these reflections, appropriately noted that "even when the power of the masses is fully mobilized," global capitalism "has proved able to wall off the process, isolate it, undermine and strangle it." He pointed to Greece and Venezuela as examples, but of course there have been and, quite likely, will be others. This highlights the necessity of revolutionary internationalism – not as an abstract slogan or as a simple appeal for solidarity work, but as an essential element in developing a strategic orientation

capable of interlinking revolutionary struggles and triumphs in a variety of countries.

It is time to bring these reflections to a close. This is not the place to take up the challenge of the recent experiences just referred to, which will require more detailed engagement than is possible in this conclusion. But it is essential that there be such critical engagement, analyzing what went wrong, what might have been done, and what must be done in the future. That is essential for anyone truly wanting to find pathways from the “here” of capitalism to a society of the free and equal.

What seems clear to me, also, is that this can best be done by serious activists in a collective and democratic manner, with revolutionary organizations helping to provide the kind of cohesion and comradeship that can enable us to struggle effectively for a better world.

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Footnotes

[1] Friends directly influencing the crystallization of the current draft of reflections presented here include: Michael Löwy, Eleni Varikis, Pierre Rousset, Helen Scott, John Riddell, Joost Kircz, Peter Boyle, Tamas Krausz. It should not be assumed that any of them necessarily agree with all that is said here.

[2] Some of these have, of course, continued to exist as shells or fragments of their former selves. In some cases they would continue in reinvented forms, generally with new and quite different leaders, but (from what I can see) generally without the earlier vibrancy, effectiveness, and impact.