

lots of practical experimentation.

An additional factor was a movement-wide consensus that – whatever the ideal mix of theory, unity and fusion – party building required hammering out and uniting around a program and strategy that did not yet exist. Despite belief in the universal truth of the communist classics, most movement cadre believed that there remained a glaring vacuum in applying Marxism-Leninism to US conditions. To fill that gap required developing a comprehensive political line (“general line”) around which a new party could be formed. That in turn required an outpouring of research, discussion and debate.

In practice, this meant an explosion of forums, study groups and written polemics. Exchanges filled the opinion pages of the *Guardian*. Organizations, and sometimes prominent unaffiliated activists, sponsored meetings and conferences for discussion among activists in a common area of work or a particular geographic region. Despite a frequent dogmatic bent, such forms gave the early New Communist Movement a lively intellectual life, and one initially at least as democratic and participatory as that of any other trend on the left.

Thus in its early years the movement enjoyed many of the benefits of both discipline and democracy, of both tight organization and flexibility. Its young organizations, integrating recruits into their democratic-centralist structures, were able to focus their energies and coordinate ambitious campaigns. The movement’s wide-ranging debates and its immersion in study attracted many new members. The movement offered a great deal to individuals who wanted to develop their knowledge and skills as revolutionary cadre at a time when sharp social struggle was producing many people who wanted to become cadre. In these ways an orthodox notion of party building – even though ultimately a key factor in the movement’s undoing – initially provided a source of strength. This powerful dynamic was reproduced on a smaller scale during the initial stages of several second-wave party building efforts in the late 1970s.

The movement’s focus on cadre development and organization thus added a third pillar to the other areas where the New Communist Movement was distinguishing itself – anti-imperialism and antiracism. The combination of prioritizing these three areas, in both doctrine and practical work, was unique. It directly addressed the prime concerns of most revolutionaries forged in the 1960s. It was the fundamental reason this current initially held such tremendous momentum and appeal.

However, the movement proved unable to fulfill its early promise in tackling these three priority issues, largely because a quest for Marxist orthodoxy led it into a series of dead ends. But before detailing that story, we must examine the movement’s political culture and the structure and functioning of a typical party building group.

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## BODIES ON THE LINE: THE CULTURE OF A MOVEMENT

If one word had to be chosen to characterize the culture of the New Communist Movement that word would be *intense*. The sheer amount of time, passion and energy that movement cadre threw into political work made movement life nearly all-consuming. Today it is fashionable to attribute such single-mindedness to some combination of top-down structures, ideological brainwashing, and psychological aberration. But the willingness – indeed, eagerness – of young Marxist-Leninists to devote most of their waking hours to revolutionary activity was not the result of manipulation, orders from above or unmet emotional needs. It was the expression of deeply held convictions. Even at the height of late-sixties radicalism it was no casual, risk-free or faddish decision to declare oneself a communist. Those who turned to party building weighed their options carefully and decided that the only way to realize their dreams of a better world was to build an organization capable of waging revolutionary struggle. Radicalized amid surging mass movements, these young people had come to eat, sleep and dream politics. They had the enthusiasm and intellectual curiosity of youth. They had grown accustomed to enduring official hostility, and often jail and police violence. That activism required sacrifice was a given; it was the notion of a meaningful political life *without* sacrifice that seemed wildly unrealistic.

Of particular importance, those who adopted Marxism-Leninism internalized a commitment to fighting racism and imperialism that transcended all matters of doctrine and orthodoxy (though many decided later that orthodoxy was the key to success). This commitment went beyond notions of “support” for the struggles of

the oppressed or "alliances" between people of different backgrounds. Cadre of all colors considered themselves an integral part of a universal community of revolutionary peoples. This movement's "we" crossed racial and geographic borders; that was a key part of its early moral authority and political appeal.

### Voluntarism as Marxism-Leninism

Movement cadre also had a self-confident, can-do attitude. Coming of age at a time when protests often doubled in size from one month to the next, they were accustomed to shaking up those in power and seeing the left grow. The downside of this quality was pervasive voluntarism. Generalizing from their 1960s experience, most cadre believed that that history always moved fast, and that they could make it move even faster with enough dedication and the right ideas.

The turn to Marxism-Leninism was supposed to replace New Left idealism with scientific materialism, but in many ways it simply reinforced the New Left's voluntarism. The side of Marxism that emphasized socialism's inevitable victory, and the aspect of Leninism that stressed the unique role of the vanguard, buttressed notions that this young movement could move mountains. Cultural Revolution Maoism – which viewed ideological transformation rather than economic development linked to the development of grassroots-empowering democratic institutions as the key to building socialism after the initial seizure of power – was especially compatible with idealist notions inherited from the New Left.

The New Communist Movement also carried on the New Left tradition of trying to live your political values, albeit in its own distinctive way. One current of thought (intertwined with the "good sixties/bad sixties" school) sees a major contrast between the early and late 1960s in terms of "prefigurative politics" vs. "strategic politics."<sup>1</sup> According to that view, the early New Left believed in incorporating human values and compassion into its day-to-day work, so that its activism prefigured the liberated society of the future. In contrast, the Marxist tendencies of the late 1960s allegedly practiced only strategic politics, which were unconcerned with the quality of life or relationships among activists, who were regarded simply as cogs in a political machine.

This contrast is too sharply drawn, however. The New Communist Movement certainly placed great value on tangible outcomes and believed in subordinating personal concerns to political tasks. But the movement expressed a prefigurative dimension in its stress on building a multiracial revolutionary community via immersion in political battle. Activists took their lead here from how they interpreted the Cultural Revolution, and to a extent from Che's ideas about revolutionary enthusiasm and moral incentives. Young Marxist-Leninists envisioned the liberated community as one engaged in constant struggle, in which every member

strove to become the best possible revolutionary. Toward this end movement culture prized the creation of powerful bonds of comradeship between people of diverse backgrounds through intense collective work. For many, the feelings of loyalty, trust and mutual support that arose out of this experience did indeed prefigure their vision of human relationships in a future liberated society. And despite grueling factional battles and the movement's collapse, many bonds formed in those years survive to this day. The point is that movement cadre saw no contradiction between political fervor, allegiance to Marxism-Leninism, giving priority to strategic objectives, and forging relationships that were harbingers of life in a socialist society.

The movement's zeal was a double-edged sword. It too easily led to impatience with individuals who were unwilling or unable to make a 24-hour-a-day commitment, and contributed to political rigidity and intolerance. And later, when the movement was no longer surrounded by a large radical milieu, revolutionary zeal tended to enclose cadre in a self-contained and distorted world. But early on it inspired many activists to tap reserves of energy and imagination.

It also prodded activists to develop their intellectual capacities: one of the movement's most interesting characteristics was the amount of reading, study and exchange of ideas that went on within its ranks. Movement life broke down much of the gap between theoretical exploration and grassroots activism that has long plagued US radicalism. The New Communist Movement encouraged workers and youth who had never set foot on a college campus to read books and debate theory while pressing its professors and ex-graduate students to take up activist campaigns. The movement's contribution in this area was one reason that the gap between the academic and grassroots left in the 1970s was not nearly as wide as it is today.

Movement zeal also motivated many individuals to look critically at their own prejudices and egoism. Their high level of commitment made movement cadre willing to engage in self-criticism, not only to learn better organizing skills but to unlearn conduct that reflected narrow individualism, or race, class or (less frequently) gender privilege. Self-transformation was seen as an integral, if subordinate, aspect of social transformation.

In the early 1970s, a culture based on fierce commitment, can-do attitudes, and linking self- and social transformation was not restricted to Marxist-Leninists. It pervaded all revolutionary tendencies, and even many who advocated reform within the system functioned with a level of cadre commitment that appears exceptional by today's standards. The assumption that changing the world required submitting individual behaviors to group examination was, for example, at least as widespread within the radical wings of the gay/lesbian and women's movements as among Marxist-Leninists. Indeed, within the women's movement there

was considerable overlap between activists promoting the idea that “the personal is political” and those most enthusiastic about Mao’s dictums to practice criticism-self-criticism and “combat liberalism.”

Many voices then – and even more today – ridicule or dismiss all revolutionary fervor as self-righteous arrogance or youthful naiveté. Some arrogance, and a great deal of naiveté, was present in the Marxist-Leninist ranks. But what’s even more naive is the belief that social transformation can come about without cadre who are willing to work endless hours, take risks, participate in disciplined collective action, and think of themselves as contributing to world-historic change. Sectarian vanguardism needs to be criticized. But all too often what its critics are really rejecting is any audacious effort that requires cadre-building or disrupting business as usual. The audacity of the New Communist Movement was one of its finest qualities; hindsight should not be used to smugly dismiss it, but to analytically disentangle its positive from its negative side.

### Sinking Roots in the Working Class

Another determinant of movement culture was determination to root activists in the working class and within people of color communities. Marxist-Leninists scoffed at the notion that they could build a base for socialism through exhortation alone. Only a body of cadre immersed in working class life and participating directly in the day-to-day struggles of ordinary people could win millions to revolutionary politics. Thus the movement was confronted with a twofold challenge. First, its initial cadre – a disproportionate number of whom were from the middle class – needed to be integrated into working class jobs and communities. (This was sometimes termed “colonization.”) Second, large numbers of workers, and workers of color in particular, had to be recruited into the membership and leadership ranks. Cadre from all backgrounds had to be forged into an effectively functioning team. And the movement needed to establish an atmosphere and culture that attracted workers and people of color and made them feel at home. All these things were encompassed in the movement’s definition of what it meant to proletarianize.

The centerpiece was ensuring that the majority of cadre (from whatever class, racial or educational background) shared the material conditions of working class life. This translated into most living in poorer neighborhoods and getting blue collar jobs – including the most exhausting, dangerous and low-paying. Others sought clerical or secretarial work in large offices, or employment as nurse’s aides, nurses or clerks in hospitals and nursing homes. The relatively small proportion of cadre who were already doctors, lawyers or college professors when they joined the movement were not generally directed to leave these positions. Instead, their

skills, greater financial resources, and – in the case of teachers – potential influence over students were tapped in other ways. But most activists who were still in training toward those or other advanced degrees were encouraged to leave the campuses. Many needed little pushing. Alienated from academia and full of enthusiasm, hundreds of undergraduates and dozens of graduate students set out on their own to get jobs as factory hands, laborers, bus drivers, painters and the like. This phenomenon, too, continued a 1960s tradition going back to SNCC and the SDS Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP).

There was a lot of blundering about in early efforts to proletarianize. But rank-and-file activists overwhelmingly embraced this objective and persisted through numerous embarrassments and difficult transitions. Almost every antirevisionist group gained at least a minimal foothold within working class life. Despite the depth of the class transformation involved, many colonizers successfully implanted themselves within unions and community institutions. A significant percentage of those who stuck it out in the unions for years rose through the ranks to leadership positions. Likewise, many workers learned valuable political, organizational and even academic skills within the movement’s orbit, and utilized these not just in political efforts but to rise within trade union and other organizations, or in some cases to leap over class barriers to professional careers.

Positioning cadre within certain jobs and neighborhoods was only the beginning. Activists’ skills, attitudes and behaviors had to be brought into harmony with the goal of building an advanced detachment of the proletariat. In part this was done via aggressive efforts to develop the leadership potential of people from working class backgrounds who had received fewer educational opportunities than their middle class comrades. Developing workers’ leadership was a major criterion in determining work assignments as well as allotting time for study of Marxist theory. Some of the more sophisticated groups paid attention to “the hidden injuries of class” as well,<sup>2</sup> challenging the negative self-images society drums into the exploited and oppressed.

The other side of this coin was struggling against elitist attitudes and actions displayed by activists from more privileged backgrounds. Tendencies to talk on and on and dominate meetings, consider themselves best-suited for the most interesting assignments, reluctance to take on the “shit work” – these behaviors and more were targets of individual criticism and occasional organization-wide campaigns.

### Fighting Racism and Sexism

Internal struggle against elitism was related to – but not identical with – specific efforts to combat manifestations of racism and sexism within the ranks. The movement’s basic framework was that an advanced political line and all-sided revolu-

tionary practice were the decisive elements in building unity across barriers of race and gender, but that a self-conscious cadre policy and struggle against manifestations of backwardness among communists was needed as well. It was assumed that activists' behavior and attitudes showed scars of the class-divided, racist and sexist society from which they emerged. This was "baggage" to be overcome in the course of revolutionary work; and it was argued that cadre from all backgrounds had a common stake in doing so. That assumption provided the unity within which criticisms could be raised of individuals who exhibited prejudice or insensitivity.

In keeping with the predominant consensus that racism was the principal obstacle to working class unity, internal struggles against racism generally received the most attention. The more sophisticated groups worked hard to educate all cadre in the importance of these struggles and to find ways to take them up aggressively but without fostering individual scapegoating or subjectivity. It was argued that the most common error in the history of the communist movement was to neglect the fight against racism, but that it was also a mistake to "hold that racist contradictions among communists manifest themselves with the same identical degree of antagonism as in the broader society."<sup>3</sup>

On this basis, organizational bodies were mandated to be vigilant against manifestations of racism, to encourage forthright and timely criticisms if problems arose, and to periodically review each unit's level of antiracist consciousness. Serious attempts were made to go beyond generalities and probe the concrete dynamics of building a multiracial movement, for instance in terms of cadre policy concerning recruitment, promotion and training:

The social and class dynamics in US society are extremely complex and diverse – of course this holds true for racism. The experience of racial and national oppression is thoroughly bound up with class and has fundamentally framed the life experience of the vast majority of minority activists. This experience has often entailed (depending a lot on the activists' class origins) substantial material inequalities in terms of education, extent and scope of cultural experiences, etc.

If such concrete factors are not taken into consideration, a profound racist dynamic is set up. A moral atmosphere is established with sweeping generalizations concerning "minority experience," "internalized oppression" etc. – all of which has a decidedly racist undercurrent. For example, the insidious (and usually unspoken) assumption can gain sway that all minority activists have had a poor education and are ill-trained academically and theoretically, which is far from the truth. On the other hand, minority activists who may be functionally illiterate find very little consolation in mere moral outrage over the inferiority of ghetto and barrio schools if, at the same time, the communist movement fails to provide any concrete assistance on how to begin to overcome this handicap step by step...

A correct policy for cadre care and development is by its very nature principally individual. The whole point is for each cadre to be examined, given tasks and trained in light of the work at hand and their particular strengths, shortcomings and experiences. Generalizations concerning the social dynamics of class, race and sex should be utilized to inform and highlight the assessment of – and not as substitute for the inquiry into – the particular life and history of the activist in question...."<sup>4</sup>

Besides trying to formulate and implement such guidelines, movement groups conducted organization-wide educational or struggle campaigns if and when they identified patterns of racial insensitivity, tokenism or the like. They also encouraged units to deal forthrightly with criticisms of individuals for chauvinist behavior when these were raised. Again, in this the movement continued a strand of New Left as well as communist tradition; much was learned from insights first popularized by SNCC activists concerning the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which educated whites patronized, romanticized, intimidated and otherwise disrespected the Black people they were trying to assist during Mississippi Freedom Summer and similar efforts.

A similar framework undergirded movement efforts to tackle sexism, but by and large the early Marxist-Leninist groups pursued this goal with less vigor and based on a relatively narrow view of what constituted women's oppression. (As with theoretical analysis of women's oppression, several of the later party building groups did much better.) Still, less attention did not mean no attention. The October League, for instance, included the article "Women and Party Building" in the first issue of its theoretical journal in 1975, and included a section on its internal anti-sexist policies:

The Marxist-Leninist party does not organize women into separate groups within it and does not have separate "women's caucuses" which might be found in unions or mass organizations.... However, working groups and bodies ... must be established to oversee work among women, and particularly among the minority and working women.... The Women's Commission also has the duty of seeing that those women brought into the OL are trained in Marxism-Leninism and equipped for their role in the struggle. All forms of discrimination and chauvinism against women and minority comrades must be opposed by the entire membership....

It is also necessary that our party-building work take into account the special needs of women.... This means attention must be paid to child-raising and child-care so that women can attend meetings and activities as well as being able to spend time with their children. Women who are not as politically advanced as their husbands must be carefully and patiently worked with and brought into the struggle. In other cases, special work must be done with the men whose wives are politically active. Special emphasis must be placed on the fight against male chauvinism within the ranks of the movement. This

is the main roadblock to the participation of large numbers of women in our organizations.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly some of the assumptions on which the OL's policy was based (such as the premise that a husband/wife family arrangement is typical if not universal) would be challenged today (and was challenged by some at the time). That noted, the approach outlined above – common to most early party building groups – facilitated the fuller participation of many women in activist life, and altered the attitudes and practices of many men.

Without doubt there were struggles during which some white and/or middle class individuals were put on the spot and made to feel uneasy. Some of these individuals resented such treatment, and either at the time or later described their experiences as examples of how undemocratic and inhumane the movement was. In some cases these episodes were genuine horror stories. But more often than not such tales miss the forest for the trees and resemble today's backlash against affirmative action. The fact is that many movement groups stood out in terms of their ability to forge rapport and mutual trust across class and racial lines in a society (and a left) where such harmony is extremely rare. This cannot be accomplished without occasional times when those from more privileged backgrounds feel uncomfortable and are challenged to change some aspects of their behavior.

### Working Class Culture

The New Communist Movement worked overtime to present itself – and actually become – culturally in and of the proletariat. This was no simple task. Faced with a badly divided working class and fuzzy borders between the working class and other classes, it was hard to locate any kind of uniform or clear-cut working class culture. Within people of color communities there were identifiable cultures of resistance, and a few organizations had some success meshing into and helping sustain them. But there were few left-wing cultural milieus that simultaneously crossed racial lines and had a mass character. Some pockets remained from the 1930s and 1940s, but they were largely in and around the CPUSA and thus out of bounds to the new movement.

Some groups – especially RU between 1971 and 1976 – dealt with this issue by conjuring up an image of what a progressive working class culture was supposed to be and then trying to fit their organization to that conception. The results were often clumsy, such as adopting clichéd language and styles of dress from the 1930s (actually, 1960s notions of the 1930s), or promoting a crude anti-intellectualism masquerading as hostility toward elitism. In combination with the movement's general ultraleftism this approach produced some truly stilted and out-of-the-past-

looking newspapers and leaflets. On another level, the search for working class culture led some groups to embrace a sweeping cultural conservatism, including mandates that unmarried couples who lived together must get married (in order to fit in with “normal” working class life) and strictures against homosexuality (again on the grounds that same-sex relationships were foreign to the working class). Besides simply being backward, such policies were counter-productive. They repelled many women, gays and lesbians as well as large numbers of the most open-minded and rebellious straight male workers.

Another prominent feature of the 1960s counterculture was drug use, and here the dominant policy was to forbid members' use of marijuana and psychedelics as well as all harder drugs. There were certainly good reasons for such policies, including the inherent health dangers of substance abuse as well as heightened threats from police, given that movement groups were often under a certain amount of police surveillance. But the frequently given argument that “workers didn't like pot-smoking hippies” included strong elements of backwardness and miscalculation as well.

There were also serious problems with the movement's stance toward alcohol use, which in its early years ranged from complete tolerance to near encouragement on the grounds that drinking was part of working class culture. Whatever the stated policies of a particular group, in practice alcohol abuse was a prevalent (but hardly ever discussed) problem. In part this mirrored the low level of attention the overall society then gave to alcoholism. It also reflected the common pattern of individuals under constant stress turning to alcohol (or drugs) in efforts to manage that stress, with negative if not disastrous results. Problems stemming from substance abuse were found from the base to the top leadership level in several groups. And the dynamics accompanying substance abuse tended to exaggerate a group's voluntarist tendencies and complicate the already serious problem of providing accountability and democracy within their hierarchical structures.

### The Search for a Strategy

The New Communist Movement gave high priority to tackling questions of strategy. Which sectors of the working class were likely to play a leading role in the confrontation with capital? How can the movement best link different struggles as well as its short- and long-term objectives? How should a small organization prioritize its activity so that it makes the most gains?

There was no shortage of mechanical reasoning – but also sparks of creativity – in the countless study groups, forums, central committee plenums, campaign sum-ups, and written polemics devoted to these matters. There were also tendencies (again, inherited both from the New Left and traditional communism) to formu-