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THE COMMUNIST PARTY  
AND  
LENIN'S THEORY OF ORGANISATION

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THE COMMUNIST PARTY IN  
LENIN'S THEORY OF ORGANIZATION

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INTRODUCTION

This essay is an attempt to grapple with the theme that in Political Science has been known as Organisation Theory. The contribution of Lenin in this field is inestimable though most "respectable" studies have continued to ignore even mention of Lenin on this topic. The study of organisation theory has stagnated in attempts to compare several bourgeois theorists who substantially have the same conceptualisation. Thus Thompson writing about work in the field has argued:-

Although each of the several schools has its unique terminology and special heroes, Gouldner (1959) was able to discern two fundamental models underlying most literature. He labelled these the "rational" and "natural-system" models of organisations and these labels are indeed descriptive of the results. To Gouldner's important distinction we wish to add the notion that the "rational model" results from a "closed-system strategy" for studying of organisations, and the "Natural system" model flows from the "open-system strategy."<sup>1</sup>

How does Lenin's conceptualise the organisation in general and the Communist Party in particular?

In order to be able to better understand the organisation of the Communist party, we first attempt to look at Lenin's theory of organisation in relation to bourgeois organisation theory then proceed to his theory proper.

The Rational Closed-system and Bureaucratic Model

This strategy of organisation was first formulated in a clear statement by Max Weber in his "The Theory of Social and Economic Organisations." Central to Weber's view is that the internal factors are given more emphasis than environmental factors. The closed system arises because an organisation is looked upon as an artificial human association. It is an instrument that is created deliberately and consciously to obtain certain goals. A study of organisations then emphasises goals as the sole set of variables constituting explanation of organisational behaviour.

Thus a leading spokesman of the above model has defined an organisation as:

'Any activity involving the conscious cooperation of two or more persons in so-called organised activity - participants have tasks assigned to them, the relationships between participants are ordered in such a way as to achieve the final product with the minimum expenditure of human effort and material resources. Thus, by formal organisation we mean, a planned system of co-operative effort in which each participant has a recognised role to play and duties or tasks to perform. These duties are assigned in order to achieve the organisation's purpose rather than to satisfy individual preferences although the two often coincide.'<sup>2</sup>

Romantic, Open-System Strategy

This model puts less emphasis on the goals of an organisation. It sees the goals as subjected to the environment in which the organisation is operating.

Such concepts as rationality and efficiency are not central, but rather those which spell out solidarity with the organisation. Rationality is seen to play a less important role in decision making.

The main point raised by this model is that rationality in organisation will be limited by the force of environment to a greater extent than the technical qualifications of the participants.

The fact that an organisation is established does not mean that all activities and interactions of its members conform strictly to the official blueprint.<sup>3</sup>

Informal structures, largely dependent on the environment, will emerge, and the model emphasises the importance of such informal organisations in decision making. It is argued that considering the bureaucrat to be objective just because he has a career and wage would be to ignore the value system of the bureaucratic participant society. The environment or milieu is the main dominating variable in this model.

Having outlined the two models of organisations, we can now be able to place Lenin's theory of organisation into the general framework of organisation theory.

### Lenin's Definition of An Organisation

The popular view of the Leninist theory of organisation is generally associated with party organisation. While the Communist party is crucial in Lenin's theory, sight should not be lost of his fundamental contribution to the field of organisation theory in general. Lenin defined an organisation:-

The word 'organisation' is commonly employed in two senses, a broad and narrow one. In the narrow sense it signifies an individual nucleus of collective of people with at least a minimum degree of coherent form. In the broad sense it signifies the sum of nuclei united into a whole. For example, the navy, the army, or the state is a at one and the same time a sum of organisations (in the narrow sense of the word). The Department of Education is an organisation (in the broad sense of the word). Similarly, the party is an organisation (in the broad sense of the word); at the same time, the party should consist of a whole number of diversified organisations (in the narrow sense of the word). Therefore, when he spoke of drawing a distinction between the concepts, party and organisation, Comrade Axelrod firstly, did not take account of the differences between the broad and the narrow sense of the word "organisation", and, secondly, did not observe that he was himself confusing organised and unorganised elements.<sup>4</sup>

It is worth pointing out that the Leninist organisation is goal oriented in a way similar to the rationalist conception, while the environment is included in the "broad sense" of the word "organisation." However, the articulation of the goals was so central to Lenin's thesis that he must be regarded as closer to bureaucratic model. Wolin in his "A Critique of Organisational Theories" quotes Lenin as saying:-

Bureaucracy versus democracy is the same thing as centralism versus (local) autonomism, it is the same organisational principle of revolutionary political democracy as opposed to the organisational principle of the opportunists of the Social Democracy. The later (Social Democracy) want to proceed from the bottom upwards ---. The former proceeds from the top, and advocate the extension of the rights and powers of the centre in respect of the parts --. My idea ... is "bureaucratic" in the sense that the party is built from the top downwards.<sup>5</sup>

In fact this idea lies at the centre of the Leninist democratic centralism which will not be our concern in this essay.

It is important to note the closeness of Lenin's model in as far as the idea of looking at the organisation from top downwards; the heavy formalism of the part of the desire to increase goal-attainment, discipline, expertness via rationality in decision-making. Lenin's insistence on the concept of party membership should be seen to be aimed at efficiency of goal-attainment. Having said that we can now attempt to isolate aspects of a party organisation for special consideration. They are:-

- (a) Goals of the party
- (b) Participants
- (c) Consciousness and rationality
- (d) Efficiency
- (e) Division of labour within the party

#### Goals of the Party

Though we have so far been saying that there is a broad similarity between some bourgeois theories of organisation and Lenin's theory, a more detailed study will reveal that there are some important differences on a conceptual level of the major variables of the rationalist and Leninist Model. In the rationalist model, goals are conceived as finite e.g. profit maximisation - while in the Leninist conception the goals are infinite and are shaped by a multiplicity of forces dialectically related. It is possible for rationalists to present ideas about succession of goals; e.g. where independence was achieved in African countries, political parties were faced with problems of succession of goals, the behaviour of post-independence political parties will be defined in terms of one goal being fulfilled, then a new goal was set and fulfilled. Each goal is seen as an unproblematic finite statement.

On the other hand the environmentalism of the open system strategy though it allows the goals of an organisation to dynamically change under pressure from exogenous factors, this change is conceived as unplanned and almost haphazard, depending on "irrational" factors as they continuously exert themselves on the goals of the organisation. In Lenin's conception goals are defined infinitely.

The working class is, therefore, most certainly interested in the broadest, freest, and rapid development of capitalism. The removal of all remnants of the old order which hamper the broad, free and rapid development of capitalism is an absolute advantage to the working class. The bourgeois revolution is precisely an upheaval that most resolutely sweeps away survivals of the past, survivals of the serf-owing system (which included not only the autocracy but the monarchy as well), and most fully guarantees the broadest, freest and most rapid development of capitalism.

That is why a bourgeois revolution is in the highest degree advantageous to the proletariat. A bourgeois revolution is absolutely necessary in the interests of the proletariat. The more complete, determined and consistent the bourgeois revolution, the more assured will the proletariat's struggle be against the bourgeoisie and for socialism.<sup>6</sup>

Defined this way the socialist goal is presented in a dynamic manner guided by the dialectical interplay of the historical classes. Written just before the 1905 revolution, the statement presented the goals of the then Russian Social Democratic Workers Party in a protracted way. This is in line with the dialectical conception expressed by Engels in his criticism of German Philosophy:-

Just as knowledge is unable to reach a complete conclusion in a perfect society, a perfect 'state' of affairs exists only in imagination."

Relentlessly committed to justice, a Leninist party can not define itself in terms of finite goals. Even after it has taken over state, power, non-antagonistic contradictions will still be observable. This means that even the highest goal of

proletariat control is not in itself a finite goal. This must mean that Leninist goals are a "chain-goal-system" without any finite point. Even the structure of the party must change in a similar manner of "chain-goal-system". This difference in goal conceptualisation will be found to be significant and generally qualify our earlier assertion of parallelism between Lenin's theory and the rationalist model. It has to be emphasised that in the Leninist model, the role of the environment is recognised but it should be observed that it can only influence the tactics rather than the strategy of the organisation. In his discussion of the tactics of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party before the 1905 revolution, Lenin divides the goals of the party into two broad categories termed the maximum and the minimum programme.

The maximum programme for a working class party is the achievement of Socialism and Communism. Our discussion of this goal already revealed that its nature is infinite.

The minimum programme was presented as a programme that the workers could temporarily accept while making further demands:-

That it is necessary to spread among the working class a concrete idea of the most probable course of the revolution, for the appearance of a provisional revolutionary government, from which the proletariat will demand the realisation of all the immediate political and economic demands of our programme (minimum programme).<sup>8</sup>

This programme formulated at the anticipation of the bourgeois revolution in 1905, visualised the role of the party to be a left wing of a bourgeois struggle. However, by putting forward minimum demands the workers will prepare for a maximum programme:

Each stage is necessary, and therefore justified for the time and conditions to which it owes its origin. But in the face of new, higher conditions which gradually develop in its womb, it loses its validity and justification. It must give way to a higher state which will also in its turn decay and perish.<sup>9</sup>

#### The Minimum Programme

Discussion of the minimum programme must be connected with the idea of trade union consciousness. In participating in a minimum programme implied that the workers had to take part in the economic struggles through the trade unions. How-

ever, this part of the proletariat struggles was not decisive. Its role is restricted to the fact that it is an important stage in the development of the proletariat consciousness. While participating in these struggles will increase the workers' consciousness, it is the role of the party within these trade union struggles that will hasten class consciousness. This class consciousness will allow the workers to go beyond mere trade union demands. For a party of the working class, participation in the minimum programme, is recommended as this will be a good recruitment ground. The party activists' role will be to carry the demand further than mere trade union reforms to realisation that genuine solution of problems is on a political level, hence demands for economic reforms to be subjected to an overall political solution.

Trade union organisation of the workers and the working party's participation will constitute a minimum programme. It is for this reason that Lenin places much stress on the concept of party membership. Just because one is a worker or trade unionist should not automatically entitle him to party membership. Let us now examine the membership concept more closely.

### Party Members, Rationality and Efficiency

The three concepts mentioned above, though normally separate, are so important and interlinked in our discussion that they are best discussed together. In his proposition to the party congress of 1903, Lenin defined a party member as:-

A member of the party is one who supports the party both financially and by personal participation in one of the Party organisations.<sup>10</sup>

This strict definition of a party member was a result of the organisational problems, encountered at the time. We can easily identify two:-

- (a) Trying to operate in the framework of the Russian autocracy of the 19th century, demanded secrecy. A loose definition of a party member would not increase organisational efficiency, especially considering the ease with which elements of the state machinery could infiltrate such an organisation. Such infiltration would lead to organisational goal sabotage, making their achievement difficult.
- (b) The second reason for the strict definition must be seen to be connected with Lenin's conception of class formation in the Russia of that time. In his *Development of Capitalism in Russia*, Lenin outlines a dynamic model of the development of Class formation in Russia, concluding that the level of consciousness were varied. The progressive proletarianisation of Russia, created a dynamic situation producing different levels of consciousness. The most elementary level of consciousness being the trade union one.

Lenin intimates that there is a close relationship between the length of the time the individual worker has participated in a capitalist mode of production and the level of consciousness. It was also seen to be related to the availability of Social Democratic study circles and individual ability of workers to grasp the inter-connectedness of things. The advanced workers, intellectuals and other advanced elements should form the core of the party. It is these advanced workers who will avail themselves to the workers through the trade unions. By participating in one of the "party organisations," a party member attains higher levels of consciousness enabling him to be a more rational and effective party worker.

While Weber put stress on formal training as a contributing factor to efficiency achievement of goals, Lenin stresses consciousness as the dominating variable. In a goal-oriented organisation of the form was talking about, swift action was necessary and a diffused member concept would make attainment of goals difficult.

#### Class in Itself and Class for Itself

The idea of a vanguard party may sound undemocratic, especially if one does not distinguish that "the party as the vanguard of the working class, must not be confused, ... with the entire class."<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that as Vanguard of the Working class, the party acts for them (class for itself), while the objective conditions in which the worker finds himself make him a member of the class in itself. Class in itself would include even those workers that have not attained trade union consciousness. By working for conditions that will improve circumstances for this class, a Vanguard party is looked upon as democratic since the producing class is the majority in society - hence majority in capitalist society.

The principal ideas which *Iskra* strove to make the basis of the party organisation amounted to essential to the following two: first, idea of centralism which defined in

Principle the method of deciding all particular and detailed questions of organisation; second, the special function of the organ Newspaper, for ideological leadership - an idea which took into account the temporary and special requirements of the Russian Social Democratic working class movement in the existing conditions of political slavery, with the initial base of operations for the revolutionary assault being set up abroad.<sup>12</sup>

The first condition put up by Lenin concerning centralism is consistent with earlier observations of an organisation which starts from the top downwards and extending the privileges of the top to all corners of the periphery. However, the second condition concerning the functioning of the party organ Iskra must be related to Lenin's conception of a party operating under automatic conditions and a special condition to consider and in a society with multi-level system of consciousness as a temporary condition. Under these last two conditions, the organ's role will consist of being ideological vanguard of the party. Its specific audience will be the more advanced elements within the working class movements.

The central point in this vital aspect of the Leninist theory is connected with the distinction first made by Marx of "a class in itself and a class for itself." The Russian "class in itself" was not only numerically weak but the levels of consciousness were varied in accordance with the insipient nature of Russian Capitalism.

The conception of centralism and ideological leadership must be seen to be related to the question of efficient execution of the goals that will result in the removal of the conditions that hinder the development of a class for itself. Lenin envisages the execution level to be guided by similar propositions as those of the rational model. A professional group of revolutionaries whose technical qualifications could be backed by their record of consciousness as the closest approximation to rationality:

On the other hand, the organisation of the revolutionaries must consist first and foremost of the people who make revolutionary activity their profession.<sup>13</sup>

The similarity between Lenin's model and the rational model can be understood only if it is remembered that for Lenin, a party is a conscious, deliberate and purposeful instrument for the overthrow of the existing social order and later to maintain a proletarian order. In that the activity is deliberate and purposeful, then it is rational, such that identification of goals will be associated with the ability to see things in their interconnectedness. This ability then is used for the benefit of the whole class under the leadership of the advanced elements constituting the revolutionary core. The advanced worker as a propagandist is basically a theoretician well versed in Marxism.

### The Propagandist and Agitator Role

Corresponding to the different levels of consciousness will be the ability to comprehend the significance of things in their interconnectedness. Lenin particularly spelt out the implications of the different levels of consciousness.

An agitator has as his function to take incidences happening and showing the nature of the oppressive elements e.g. an accident in a factory. He will concentrate on one phenomenon and try to show the relation between the oppressive elements and the exploitative nature of the capitalist system. He nurses workers' trade union consciousness, teaches by taking concrete cases befalling workers and develops them to their full extent, as Lenin states:

.... will take as an illustration a fact that is most glaring and most widely known to his audience, say, the death of an unemployed worker's family from starvation, the growing unpoverishment ... and, utilising this fact known to all, will

direct his efforts to presenting a single idea to the "masses" e.g. the senselessness of the contradiction between the increase of wealth on one hand and the increase of poverty in the other, he will strive to cause discontent and indignation among the masses against this crying injustice, leaving a more complete explanation of this contradiction to the propagandist.<sup>14</sup>

Since he is mainly a party activist at the place of work, the agitator mainly deals with the heterogeneity of workers before and immediately after they have acquired trade union consciousness. He teaches by the pedagogic method of demonstration.

On the other hand the propagandist deals with workers at higher but still varied levels of sophistication. A propagandist talking to the workers about a problem of unemployment,

... must explain the capitalist nature of crises, the cause of their inevitability in modern society, the necessity of transforming this society into a socialist-society, etc. In a word he must present "many ideas", so many, indeed, that integral whole only by a (comparatively) few persons.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed only the most advanced members of the working class will understand him. Here, we argue, we find the kernel to the pyramidal nature of Leninist theory of organisation and its close resemblance to the legal-bureaucratic. The structural features of the pyramid are some form of a function of consciousness. In some way inherent in rationalism - a deliberate, conscious and purposeful strategy, is the pyramidal structure of social organisation termed by Lenin democratic centralism.

The conscious, deliberate and purposeful overthrow of Russian autocracy as a goal could be accomplished by:

... a centralised, militant organisation that consistently carries out a Social-Democratic policy, that satisfies, so to speak, all revolutionary instincts and strivings, can safeguard the movement against making thoughtless attacks and prepare attacks that hold out the promise of success.<sup>16</sup>

Centralism is being recommended because it increases rationality and efficiency. Prepared or planned attacks will require some form of rational examination of available information. A rational judgement based on available data would be a central element in the success or failure of attacks. However, centralism is also related to decentralism. On the level of participants - we note here that the cadres are divided into agitators and propagandists to correspond with the level of consciousness of the proletariat public as a class in itself.

### Consciousness, Rationality and The Role of the Party

The relation between the trade union and the party is determined by the consciousness of the workers. The important principles of trade union organisation should aim to show that:

The very aims of the trade union would be impossible of achievement if they did not unite all who have attained at least this elementary degree of understanding, if they were not broad organisations. The broader these organisations, the broader will be our influence over them - an influence due, not only to the spontaneous development of the economic struggle, but to the direct and conscious effort of the socialist trade union members to influence their comrades.<sup>17</sup>



As members of the social democratic party participating in these trade unions, they must endeavour to show the way to further development of the working class consciousness. Trade union consciousness being the most elementary level of consciousness - it is basically theoretical and can easily lead to reformism. The cadres must show the way beyond the legalistic ways of conducting the economic struggle.

Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is only from outside the economic struggle ... For this reason, the reply to the question as to what must be done to bring political knowledge to the workers can not merely -- be to "go among the workers" To bring political knowledge to the workers Social-Democrats must go among all classes of the population; they must dispatch units of their army in all directions. 18

The aim of the social democratic activist was to assist the workers transcend mere bourgeois understanding of their conditions. Given the influence of bourgeois ideology on the workers, assistance from advanced workers would enable him to objectify his conditions. An agitator's role is mainly connected with helping the worker to objectify his conditions by showing that an incident is elsewhere in society.

Let us emphasise that a worker in presenting his demands through yhr trade union accepts as valid bourgeois "formalism" of presenting his demands through the trade union accepts as valid bourgeois "formalism" of presenting his demands, the channels they should follow etc - accepting the framework of bourgeois legalism. It is an alternative to this formalism that the agitator should aim at presenting an alternative that finally will lead to the workers joining the social democrats through study circles.

It is not absolutely clear what the relation between consciousness and rationality is. However, following the Marxian tradition of equating socialism to scientific criteria - it is tempting to equate consciousness to rationality. However what emerges fundamental is that the economic theories Marx Lenin, etc. the organisational and philosophic writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Plekhanov, to mention the most important, can, not be grasped by any worker. These writings are the "parametric variables" that define the proletariat's goals, hence the most efficient ways of achieving them: quite obviously, digesting this enormous theoretical material, analysing it to be able to draw revolutionary conclusions, is a task that requires a high ability of abstraction above the average worker. Let this observation be understood in the light of the rationale around the idea of centralism, and its relation to the ideas of a class for itself. Revolution being a scientific application of the theory of materialism to concrete conditions to effect this application certain rational elements inherent in the concrete conditions reveal themselves and may prove vital in the determination of the method of goal attainment. Lenin explains that for this reason, the workers must recruit from the intellectuals, students, etc.

#### Lenin on Efficiency

One of the main points of difference between those who have argued for the rational and the romantic models has been the question of efficiency. In fact efficiency turns out to be the key explanatory variable in both schools' presentation of the theory of organisation. The concept is defined as the ability to achieve goals with minimum resources and human effort. In Lenin also, efficiency turns out to be a key variable. The goals of Proletarian victory has to be achieved with minimum resources and human sacrifice. For this to happen Lenin proposes that the core of the revolutionary party should be composed of:

A small, compact core of the most reliable, experienced, hardened workers, with responsible representatives in the principal districts and connected by all the strict secrecy with the organisation of revolutionaries, without any "

formal organisation, perform all functions of the trade union organisation, in a manner, moreover, desirable to Social Democracy.<sup>19</sup>

Lenin further stresses:

If we begin with the solid foundation of a strong organisation of revolutionary armies, we can ensure the stability of the movement as a whole and carry out the aims both of Social Democracy and of trade union proper. If however, we begin with a broad workers' organisation, which is supposedly most "accessible" to the masses (but which is actually most accessible to the police) we shall achieve neither one aim or the other.<sup>20</sup>

The most efficient way to achieve proletariat power is seen from multi-level perspective representing different degrees of consciousness. The lowest degrees of the pyramid is the trade union conscious worker - from a goal oriented social democratic party, this worker was mainly the target population of the agitator. On a higher level of consciousness - the party level - then the propagandist takes the platform. At the highest level is the army of trusted revolutionaries. Central to this conception is the idea of central command as articulated in the theory of democratic centralism.

#### Specialisation Within The Party

We have seen some elementary problems of specialisation within the party which are said to be directly relevant to the problem and concept of consciousness. The lowest party unit is to be found at the place of work in the form of a cell and working directly under a factory committee. These committees are established in all work places. At this level already advanced workers will conduct study circles for workers who have mere trade union consciousness. Depending on consciousness the workers can be admitted into one of the party's organisations e.g. women's league, etc. In its turn the local committee must be endorsed by one of the party's organisations. Lenin outlined the structure of the party's general activities in five main categories:

- (a) Organisation of revolutionaries
- (b) Organisation of workers, as broad and as varied as possible (I confine myself to the working class, taking it as self evident that, certain elements of other classes will be included here).

These two categories constitute the party. Further

- (c) Workers' organisations associated with the party
- (d) Workers's organisations not associated with the party, but actually under its direction and control.
- (e) Unorganised elements of the working class, who in part also come under the direction of the social democratic party at any rate during the big manifestations of the class struggle.

This differentiation within the working class movement also spells out the multi-level activities of the party dependent on the varied level of consciousness among the class in itself. Different tactics, organisational methodology to be applied to these various sectors of the working class should form part and parcel of the theory of proletarian party organisation. The decentralised party structure spelt out by the various multi-level presentation finds its centralisation in the theory democratic centralism.

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