

Two Concepts of Democratic Centralism

I think we are all pleased that our recent discussions went well, that (once things were clarified a bit!) we agreed on so many basic issues, and that we came up with a basic course of action for the group over the next six months or so. Everybody else might think that I was dissatisfied with the outcome in light of the fact that I proposed a higher level of formal unity for the group, and in particular the formation of a democratic-centralist organization right now. But I think that we made the right decision for the present. Moreover, even if we had adopted democratic-centralist principles at this time, I don't see how it would have made much difference in the actual plan of action that we adopted, and that is the main thing.

At the same time, I thought the comments against adopting democratic centralism at this point suggested some differences among us in our interpretations of democratic centralism, differences which might present problems in the *future* if we don't think about them a bit now. So this is my attempt to get that started, even if it is not really that urgent of a question at the moment.

There seemed to be several basic objections expressed against adopting democratic centralism right away:

1. Concern that our level of political unity is not high enough yet, and consequently...
2. Concern that democratic centralism might mean that the group would direct individuals to change the focus of their efforts from what they are presently doing and what they are quite sure is important work that needs to be done, to something quite different and of uncertain political value, and
3. Concern that the early adoption of democratic centralism would make it difficult or impossible for us to unite with other folks, draw them into the group, and form the more broad-based democratic-centralist communist organization (and ultimately party) that we are all working toward. (I.e., more broad-based in terms of ethnic composition, political backgrounds, areas of work, regions of the country, and so forth.)

I don't completely reject these arguments. I think there is at least a grain of truth to them, and maybe considerably more than just a grain. At the same time I cannot help but wonder: Do these concerns reflect a conception of democratic centralism that sees it *in general* as more of an *impediment* to our work than an *aid*? More of an *obstacle*, or *threat*, or *problem* for our political work than it is a means of helping us accomplish our work, and a means of doing so in the best way and in the most timely fashion?

After all, if adoption of democratic centralism now can mean that individuals get reassigned to work that they personally view as less important, can't it also happen later on? If adoption of democratic centralism means that it is harder to draw in new people *now*, why won't it mean the same thing later—even after the party is formed? I am not being facetious; we should ponder questions like these.

If democratic centralism is something which can really aid our work, both our individual efforts and our resulting group efforts, then it seems we should anxiously desire its adoption—at least as soon as the basic preconditions are in place. (I know; that's the rub! I'll return to this point.) On the other hand, if democratic centralism is really a general obstacle to our work then we should certainly reject it—both now *and* later!

So which is it? Is democratic centralism an aid or a hindrance to our work? Well certainly Lenin, and all the Leninists who followed him, have believed that democratic centralism is a critically important tool, a valuable aid to our work, and—more than that—a *necessity*.

Every Marxist-Leninist understands that democratic centralism is necessary for the *unity of action* of the organization or party. But important as that understanding is, it is only one part of the story. Democratic centralism is *also* important for enhancing the effectiveness of the work of individual communists. Democratic centralism facilitates the division of labor; it promotes the growth of skills and technical expertise (in the positive sense!); it sets up organized networks which can aid the work of individuals; it encourages the collective examination of individual work and criticism and self-criticism; it helps keep us all busy in our work and productive; and it results in tremendous *encouragement* for individual work.

At least it does all these things if it is correctly applied! And we need it as much for these reasons as we do for unity of action.

I think that part of the resistance that exists towards democratic centralism comes from the rather bad experiences that many of us had with it in the RCP. Even in the earlier days, the democratic aspect of democratic centralism was largely missing there, and from the stories I have heard it seems that things only got worse. Moreover, the centralist aspect was applied in more and more bureaucratic and arbitrary ways. Even though we were all revolted by this application of democratic centralism it cannot be denied that our conceptions of what democratic centralism *means* was shaped to a considerable extent by our RCP experiences. But we need to completely cast off that perverted conception of democratic centralism.

When I was in the Party I don't ever remember being asked about what I thought I might be able to do which could help the revolution and the work of the Party along; or about what contributions to the struggle I thought I was best able to make. On those occasions when I (somewhat timidly) brought up things like that myself they were never seriously considered. In fact, there didn't seem to me to be much in the way of leadership interest in or respect for the ideas of Party members at all, on any topic. (The mass line was not applied within the Party, let alone among the masses.)

But the way I see it, a communist group or organization *of any kind* exists in large part to encourage the work of its members and to increase their effectiveness. It should start by looking not only at the overall tasks which need to be done by the group, but *also* at work already being done by its members, giving encouragement and aid to the best of this work, and arranging for other members to support it. To me, the thought that democratic centralism might mean the general disruption of important revolutionary work is appalling. And I don't even want to call that sort of thing democratic centralism; that's bureaucratic centralism.

I recognize, as every Leninist does, that there are times when the organization will have to decide collectively that individuals should switch from one task to another, sometimes from one area of work to another, and occasionally from one area of the country to another. But if the organization is really attempting to raise the general effectiveness of its members it will try to do these sorts of things as infrequently as possible, will try to minimize the disruptions to the work and to the activity of individuals, and will look for volunteers most of the time (and there are always people who are looking around for ways to make themselves more useful). When such changes in work are deemed necessary, implementation via orders is almost never appropriate. If it is really important that an individual make a basic change in their work, a change which they see as a serious mistake, then they should first be won over through extensive political discussion.

If the individual cannot be won over in this way, then maybe the change really isn't such a good idea for that person after all. (The leadership isn't always right, and should be prepared to admit this on occasion.) Sometimes the organization does have to insist, but it should be more the exception than the rule.

So I think we really have no reason to fear that democratic centralism *correctly applied* would mean the disruption of our individual work; I see it instead as greatly fostering our work.

When you look at the decisions our group *actually made* in the last meeting, it is clear that the main focus was indeed on helping to foster the political work that individuals have already begun. In several cases these individual projects were adopted as group projects, with the same individuals concentrating their attentions there, but with conscious thought given as to how the rest of the group might be able to lend aid and support to those projects. In other cases, such as the video work, the study groups and the novel, we did not formally adopt these projects as group projects, partly I think because it is not clear that doing so at this point would be of much aid to them. But even so, the importance of these other projects was recognized, their continuance encouraged, and it didn't enter anyone's ~~mind~~ ^{mind} to propose that any of these valuable projects be abandoned.

The actual decisions we made show two important things about our group: first, we are already *informally* applying aspects of democratic centralism, even if we have chosen (wisely) not to formally adopt the rules of democratic centralism at this point; and second, our implicit application of democratic centralism is very far removed from the bureaucratic sort that many of us had negative experiences with in the past. We have already demonstrated that we all wish to proceed in more or less the correct way. We have already demonstrated that at least this fear about democratic centralism, that it will hinder our existing work, is unjustified.

It is of course possible that things will go wrong in the future, especially if the group becomes much larger, needs to create a hierarchical structure, and fails to prevent the development of bureaucratic relationships. If such a thing happens, each of us will need to reevaluate our relationship to the group. But I for one am quite happy with the direction the group is presently going in. I am certain that the group will be spurring on my own efforts and aiding them, not only the mass line ms., but other things as well. And I certainly don't see this as interference, but as very useful and needed help.

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The other main fear is that democratic centralism makes it difficult to draw new folks into the group, and even just more difficult to work with other groups and individuals. I don't think it can be denied that it has had this effect in the case of the RU/RCP from the early days on—though it has undoubtedly gotten much worse over the years. But again, is this due to democratic centralism really, or is it due to a bureaucratic and sectarian perversion of it?

If democratic centralism, properly applied, can make our individual and group work more effective, it certainly seems to me that it can make that portion of our individual and group work *directed at attracting others* more effective too. *All* of our work can benefit from real democratic centralism, and become much more effective and successful. Isn't that true?

The comrade who brought up this concern suggested other people may not want to join with us in creating a communist organization unless they can be in on it from the very start, in on the ground floor so to speak. But we already exist as a group. Would it be valid to extend that

argument to say that we should disband our existing group in order to more effectively create a new and broader one, and in order to give *everybody* out there an even better chance “to get in on the ground floor”? To me that doesn’t make much sense. In fact, I would go further: I think the *more we have our own act together* as a communist organization, the more attractive we will be as a group to other revolutionary-minded people. And if we were to discover another group out there which is truly trying to do the same thing we are but which is further along in the process, including organizationally, wouldn’t we all be delighted? Wouldn’t we all be thinking about how to merge our group into the more advanced one?

If democratic centralism really did serve to drive most people away, then it would *never* be right to adopt it. But I just don’t think it has this effect, at least not genuine democratic centralism.

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In my manuscript I talk about how the mass line—though first raised to the level of conscious theory by Mao—was implicit in Marxism from the very beginning. I think you could make a similar argument with respect to many of the principles of democratic centralism. In particular, the actual working relationship which Marx and Engels developed between them illustrates many of the principles of democratic centralism.

Marx and Engels really did work together in a collective manner. They consulted frequently about what to do, and about how each of them was progressing. They formed a division of labor, with Marx of course concentrating on the massive task of political economy, while Engels took the lead in a number of other areas including philosophy, natural science and military theory. But they helped each other in their individual tasks tremendously. When they decided that Engels should write a polemic against Dühring, Marx contributed a chapter. They worked together to create a common line, and jointly presented that common line to the world.

Marx and Engels really did form a kind of democratic centralist duo—except for the hierarchical aspects of democratic centralism, which didn’t apply because there were only two of them. (Engels did, however, recognize and approve of Marx taking the overall lead in their partnership.)

If just two people can do it, then any number can. At least they can, if they have the requisite unity. So that is the final topic to address. How much unity do you need, anyway, before you can reasonably adopt democratic centralism?

You don’t need total unity. In fact, in reality there is no such thing as *total* unity among different thinking human beings. (And that’s what any worthwhile communist organization is—an organization of *thinking human beings*.) If there somehow did develop such total unity, it would soon break down as new thoughts and ideas came into the minds of different people. (As I recently remarked to an acquaintance, I don’t even have *total* unity with the me of last week!)

Democratic centralism is needed, in fact, *precisely because* there is not total unity of thought among different people. If everyone thought alike there would be almost automatic unity of action, little point to consultation or criticisms, and there would hardly be any reason to form any kind of organization at all.

Still, you obviously do need considerable unity before democratic centralism is appropriate. It seems that you need firm unity about the ultimate goal, first of all, but you also need considerable

unity about how to get there. That is, you need to have the same *general conception* of the overall strategy and the practical day-to-day work methods that can get you to your revolutionary goal. After all, the point is to *work together* towards that goal, so you have to at least have some considerable unity about the general nature of such work, what kind of work is most important, etc.

How do you know if you have *enough* unity about what political work to do and how to go about doing it? Well your initial discussions when you form (or enter) the group will give you an important clue, but the real test comes in actually trying to work together. And that is the stage we are now entering.

But as I suggested above, if you can work together *at all* toward some common goal, big or small, then you can work together better if you start applying the principles of democratic centralism. The natural tendency of Leninists, certainly, will be to *informally* start applying various democratic-centralist principles and techniques, especially those that most directly serve to aid individuals in their work. Criticisms and suggestions will (hopefully!) be solicited, and will be given even if they are not solicited. The organization will seek to sponsor networks of cooperation and support, and try to bring new people into those activity networks. It's natural for us to do these sorts of things.

And we saw this natural tendency at work in our own recent meetings. We didn't formally adopt democratic-centralist principles, but at the same time we subconsciously gravitated towards applying many of them. And this is what I think we should and will continue to do.

At some point, probably when we get so large that our simple organizational structure becomes a matter that must be dealt with, we will have to formally adopt at least some rules of democratic centralism. We will be forced to do so, for reasons of maintaining a unified collective course, for security reasons, and in order to continue to effectively support the work of individuals within an enlarged group with individuals in separate branches. At that point there may still be some people who resist democratic centralism and feel that we are not ready as a group to implement it. We will have to struggle this out at that time and begin to formally implement it at that point anyway. Probably all the basic rules of democratic centralism should be formally adopted at that time even if some of them (the large organization specific ones) are not yet applicable.

Anyway, that's how I see it. What does everybody else think about all this?

—J. (9/3/98)