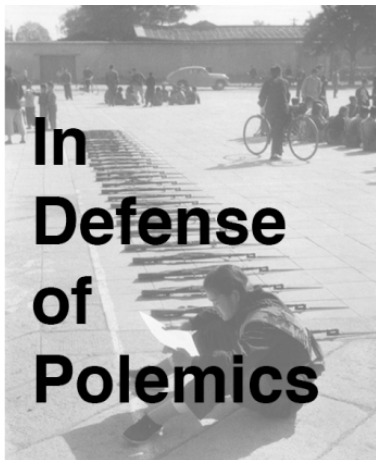


In Defense of Polemics

JANUARY 19, 2021

STRUGGLESSESSIONS



the winter has backed down
almost killing everything
and him staring at a shotgun
giving up on his notions
of being a lousy drunk
and a poor poet
satisfying his hands
to the task of a propagandist

The poem used as introduction is from an unknown source active in the movement. It speaks of the internal contradiction in an individual and his transformation through struggle.

by Kavga

Revolutionary theory is denigrated in many ways, perhaps the most vulgar of which is the argument that there are “too many polemics.” We have all heard the charge and have met the chagrin of the devotees of the first type of liberalism; it is a sort of intellectual blight which insists that polemics are inherently sectarian, that the “masses” are apathetic and theoretical skirmishes belong only to the sectarianism of minute factions of some also minute, nebulous, and writhing “left,” discontented with itself and oblivious to the world. This is a damnable view worthy of polemic itself, and could the defense of the polemic take on any other form?

There are not enough polemics, not enough direction, not enough organization and certainly not enough ideology. The polemic is perhaps the most revolutionary discourse on the intellectual terrain, outmatched only by

armed struggle on the physical terrain. This is enough defense in itself, submitting only to the law of contradiction and never bowing before polite society's ingrained liberalism. It is important here to demarcate between the polemic as a high expression and a rant as a low tirade. Polemics at their best are brave acts of intellectual violence, an overthrow of incorrect ideas; and, at their worst, they act as an exposition of feeble defense for the rot and clutter of the bourgeois mind. Both are useful in drawing the correct conclusion from a struggle.

The process of the polemic is also vital and educational for the writer and the reader alike. A problem cannot be intimately understood unless there is a mental fight—the role of contradiction in education. A struggle between opposites provides a better means of comprehending previously missed aspects. Correct ideas better themselves and discover their aspects when locked in struggle with incorrect ideas. This is a nobler calling than letting bygones be bygones; it is enthusiastic from the revolutionary standpoint and not conciliatory.

Like all propaganda efforts, the polemic is either well-executed and precise, or it is poorly-executed and vulgar. How we judge specific polemics is irrelevant to the vital role they play in general in the development and advancement of revolutionary theory—in the triumph of the new over the old. Marxism has never taken a step in its life without struggle:

“And what, precisely, is our task today? It is to raise up the banner of our ideology, defend, and apply it, and to struggle energetically so that it will lead and guide the world revolution. Without proletarian ideology, there is no revolution. Without proletarian ideology, there is no hope for our class and the people. Without proletarian ideology, there is no communism.

“Therefore, for us, the task is to fight revisionism and fight it relentlessly. We must keep in mind the lesson that we can't fight imperialism without combating revisionism.

“How should we carry out this struggle? In all spheres: the ideological, the economic, and the political—we must fight them in each one of these classic spheres. For if we should fail to carry out the struggle against revisionism, we wouldn’t be communists. A communist has the obligation to combat revisionism, untiringly, and implacably.”

Of course, the above powerful, clear, and revolutionary remarks from Chairman Gonzalo are not limited to the polemic, but are all-encompassing. The polemic is but one sharpened spear in the armory. Polemics of course must not be stale, and cannot interact only with themselves, but with the other—unlocking and enriching development. Importantly, defending the ideology leads to an ability to apply it.

Opportunism within leftist thinking can only conceive of the polemic in opportunist terms—and, consequently, can only produce poor polemics. Opportunism forecloses on defending the ideology of the proletariat; in place of Maoism, it has all-American pragmatism, its tactical advantages but strategic failures. Without defense, they cannot apply; and defense itself is always and invariably linked with ideological attack—active ideological defense, this is the beating heart of the polemic.

Opportunism in its highest expressions categorically treats the greatest intellectual accomplishments of revolutionary theory as if they were mere spats, and of course makes light of the most illuminating polemics in our proletarian history. Often, their petty defense of the ego only gets crushed anyway by texts already aging into the hundreds. The great polemics still march like juggernauts through the wreck of contemporary thinking.

Can we for a moment imagine a Bolshevik emerging absent of his fight with the Menshevik? Would the great Chinese Letter, a polemic of monumental importance, have been able to fully articulate itself without the living example of its opposition? Without the enemy, such a display would seem inane, peculiar at best and quixotic at worst. The law of contradiction allows us to begin grasping the importance of the polemic; we need not imagine that there

are those common among us who have the mastery of execution which is most evident in the great Lenin. This poverty cannot translate into apathy or the assumption of apathy among others.

Two line struggle exists, even if it is not clearly communicated, and the polemic seeks to bring clarity only to what really exists; it cannot invent that which does not exist from the basis of pure thought. It is easy enough here to conjure up Engels, and to imagine for a moment that it was mere sectarianism that caused him to set his sights on Dürhing. Our opportunists and their deadbeat thinking today would shush Engels and tell him quietly to “just out-organize comrade Eugene Dühring.” It is not contestable that the absence of this great polemic, of Anti-Dühring, would result in the most destitute diversions from the scientific Marxist philosophy. Engels understood opportunism well and hence added to his first introduction to the work a bit of active defense in guarding against accusations of sectarianism. Engels did not take the task lightly—assuming his post after being convinced to do so by his comrades—he remarks:

“Nevertheless it was a year before I could make up my mind to neglect other work and get my teeth into this sour apple. It was the kind of apple that, once bitten into, had to be completely devoured; and it was not only very sour, but also very large. The new socialist theory was presented as the ultimate practical fruit of a new philosophical system. It was therefore necessary to examine it in the context of this system, and in doing so to examine the system itself; it was necessary to follow Herr Dühring into that vast territory in which he dealt with all things under the sun and with some others as well.”

Following opportunist logic, which is anything but rational, we might convince ourselves that the starving masses in 1877 Europe would not care anything about the disagreements between Engels and Dühring—after all, only a minority of the population was even literate. Thankfully, Engels did not give in to this sort of anti-intellectualism and instead bestowed upon the world one of the foundational texts of Marxism, a document of profound importance which far outlives any memory of Eugene Dühring. This is a grand example of a

polemic, and no argument for a quantity of lesser polemics, but, to be precise, an argument in defense of the polemical form when put in the service of world proletarian revolution.

There is something to be said here for the responsibility of the polemicist which Engels establishes theoretically when examining the contradiction freedom and necessity:

“Freedom does not consist in any dreamt-of independence from natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws, and in the possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards definite ends. This holds good in relation both to the laws of external nature and to those which govern the bodily and mental existence of men themselves — two classes of laws which we can separate from each other at most only in thought but not in reality. Freedom of the will therefore means nothing but the capacity to make decisions with knowledge of the subject. Therefore the *freer* a man’s judgment is in relation to a definite question, the greater is the *necessity* with which the content of this judgment will be determined; while the uncertainty, founded on ignorance, which seems to make an arbitrary choice among many different and conflicting possible decisions, shows precisely by this that it is not free, that it is controlled by the very object it should itself control. Freedom therefore consists in the control over ourselves and over external nature, a control founded on knowledge of natural necessity; it is therefore necessarily a product of historical development.”

After this detour, we must return to our argument that the polemic is not the creator of a contradiction but the result of it, at least in its principal aspect (it negates and affirms and affirms and negates). A polemic cannot produce that which does not exist from the basis of pure thought; its merit is measured by how well it conforms to reality, how it understands and expresses reality. This is the quality test as well as the defense against anti-polemic views, views which are themselves instantly failed polemics when expressed to others.

Where do correct ideas come from? Social practice, and the three types i.e. scientific experiment, production, and class struggle, all of which must be understood through the law of contradiction. Polemics are not needless division when done correctly. Even when done incorrectly, they still have use value—exposing opportunism by way of opportunist confession. It is a great delight when the guilty confess to their opportunism by way of their defense, and the prosecution can rest its case.

A polemic can be dogmatic, sectarian, and full of incorrect ideas, but these types of polemics do not discredit or impose limitations upon the polemical form; they too are good in their own way, by forcing contradictions into the open and allowing themselves to be exposed in polemical opposition.

Many get lost in tone, and take the tone as the main point of consideration—a ritualistic error of perceptive level knowledge. One would think they were at a deep-south gala with the level of decorum expected by these opportunists. Here we draw a bit of inspiration from Comrade Stalin's polemical speech on the Trotskyite Opposition:

“I am rude to those who grossly and perfidiously wreck and split the Party. I have never concealed this and do not conceal it now. Perhaps some mildness is needed in the treatment of splitters, but I am a bad hand at that...rudeness is not and cannot be counted as a defect in Stalin's *political* line or position.”

A sectarian is only interested in the interests of their small group. Revolutionaries fighting fervently, harshly, or—dare we say—rudely for the interests of the broad masses and most especially the proletariat can never be considered sectarian however merciless they are with their deviant opponents. The approach to the form can only take into consideration the nature of the deviation and those responsible. It is one thing to denounce Trotsky as a rat or Kautsky as a renegade, Deng as a fool who could not tell the difference between imperialism and socialism etc. and another to disregard comrades who have made mistakes, who only need some convincing. Even with mistakes

in form, the essence of the matter is still derived from very real and very serious contradictions, even if these end up being poorly expressed.

More often it is those who decry polemics and “sectarianism” who are the most bitter sectarians of all; their writing will expose them, little more than an uncontrollable rant, wrought with emotion but devoid of revolutionary substance. They have a lot to fear, and they fear that any act of defending the ideology will cost their clique a future, ever sure of themselves that they have nothing to learn from a scathing review furnished by their peers. It is their own liberalism which hopes to sustain itself on the rotting meat of unprincipled peace, a fitting diet for them indicative of the reality of their future they so desperately seek to safeguard from attack.

Years later, when some of these wretches find themselves in basic agreement with the content and essence of the line presented in the scathing polemics against them, they will puff their chests up and declare this a unique discovery of their own; so their past refusal to listen, their current inability to accept criticism stands as their promise that they have really learned very little. Even if the polemical assaults on their fortress of ignorance happen to be 70 percent incorrect, that remaining 30 percent should be of great use, and immaturity must not forbid recognition of this fact. For the revolutionary polemicist it is not about receiving recognition of their correctness, but the necessary intervention and the offer of a correction which is guided by greater understanding that is critical. Here the revolutionary thinker has done her or his duty in making a contribution, even in part, to a better understanding. This benefits not only the stubborn recipient of the polemic, but all those who read its content and learn through interacting with the existing contradictions; thus the polemicist in this case has also learned a great deal and can correct whatever errors were made.

Populism and pragmatism are deviations from Marxism and hence Maoism. They are not developments of the latter. Utmost regard for the masses requires dedicated polemicists—there is a task to educate the masses who make history in the ideology of the proletariat, and this is not limited to

speaking directly to the masses, but also involves confronting incorrect ideas among those advanced elements who have already pledged to the task of making revolution. Still, our liberal opportunist here will unfurl all their catch words: “splitter,” “factional,” “sectarian,” in response, which the great Lenin, one of the world’s finest polemicists, exposed as a cloak. Lenin states:

“By a ‘split’ the liberals understand the removal from the workers’ ranks of the opponents of the ‘underground’, a handful of liquidationist intellectuals. By ‘unity’ they understand the *maintenance* of liquidationist *influence* over the workers.”

Revolutionaries, the proletariat, and the masses are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with ideas, there is a struggle within and between all and this struggle is between correct and incorrect ideas. Polemics which arm advanced elements with sharper, more correct ideas are part of arming the masses, as the advanced elements go among them and propagate. Marxists fear no struggle at all—if they are real Marxists. We disdain to hide our views, and were built not only for rigorous intellectual, theoretical struggle, but for practical struggle, class combat in all fields.

To hell with the squeamish. Long live polemics, and let there be more, you damned cowards!

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