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# The Origins of the Slate System

*by Brian Ó Cathail*

For more than 90 years a large majority of organisations claiming to be Marxist have adopted broadly similar structures, modelled on the “democratic centralist” set up used by the Russian Bolsheviks. There are two main problems with this set of structures. The less important one is that they were not in fact used by the Bolsheviks before or during the Russian Revolution. The more important one is that they consistently serve to create

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I do not argue here for a return to a prelapsarian set of Bolshevik structures, those used before they were buried under the anti-democratic accretions of the 1920s. We are not Reformation radicals desiring a return to the unsullied early church. An accurate understanding of the history of the “democratic centralist” sect model undermines the myth that these structures and norms have some special Bolshevik authority, but socialists today are not historical reenactors. It is far from obvious that the structures Russian Marxists used in conditions of illegality in a vast, economically backward, mostly illiterate Empire more than a century ago should serve as a model for socialists today. However, the structures wrongly ascribed to those Russian Marxists have their own history, albeit one starting a little later than their proponents generally understand. That history has demonstrated their undesirability with grim repetition.

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The development of these structures took place in a

“They consistently serve to create politically sterile sects presided over by permanent leaderships”.

attempting to make a revolution to attempting to govern a vast territory in conditions of economic collapse and civil war, they began to reshape their organisation in ways that generally sought to make it more orderly and controlled. As the 1920s progressed, and as faction after faction was driven out of the Russian party, the Communist International pushed for its sections to adopt various new norms and structures. This process was particularly intense

during the period of so-called “Bolshevisation”, which was to a considerable extent an international extension of the campaign against Trotsky at home.

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was again extended into purges of the “right” of the Comintern parties.

Through this extended process, “democratic centralism” ceased to be the broad and relatively uncontroversial principle that unity of action should be combined with freedom of discussion. The term had come to signify a baroque structure of mostly unwritten rules and norms, which functioned to free leaderships of any control from below while enabling strong control from above. Over the course of the 1920s the Communist Parties were transformed from usually lively and at times fractious organisations of revolutionaries into obedient, carefully controlled bodies, devoid of democracy.

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Oppositional communists didn't escape these developments. The "Right" Opposition parties were formed after the process was complete and usually took with them many of its

assumptions. The Trotskyists were also bequeathed much of this poisonous inheritance. Many of their leaders came from the Zinoviev wing of the International Left Opposition and, as the proteges or admirers of the then head of the Comintern, had been enthusiastic supporters of the Bolshevisation campaign and the process of party centralisation. Even after their separation, the Stalinist parties continued to exercise an influence, with oppositional Marxist currents determined not to cede any claim over "Leninism" or "Bolshevism" to the adherents of the Moscow line and so vulnerable to importing further Stalinist norms.

So what structures am I talking about? To give some examples, none of the following existed before the Revolution and most did not exist for a considerable time afterwards: a two tier, large committee –



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the leadership rather than elected; secrecy of leading committee discussions or “committee discipline”; direct control of all party publications by the leadership; rules or norms keeping debate internal to the organisation; a slate system of election, with leaders nominated by the outgoing leadership; and a ban on factions or in its milder form a culture treating factionalism as a grave matter and likely prelude to a split.



All of these things developed in the period between 1919 and 1929, as did other institutions now generally assumed to be integral to Bolshevism like the Central Control Commission. All

formed part of a reconception of the Marxist party as a monolith, homogenous in its political views and tightly organisationally controlled. Individually these measures tend to strengthen the leadership’s dominance within the organisation. Taken as a package, each of these measures reinforces the effect of the others. It should be stated that not every organisation modelled on late 20s Comintern

historical reasons have little choice for instance but to permit factions at least formally, although they tend to mitigate that concession to democracy by strongly discouraging them in practice.

“In practice what defines the slate system is the existence of a recommended list or

Probably the single most egregiously undemocratic part of the late Comintern party model is the slate system of election. This system has many variants, but centrally consists of the party bodies themselves recommending a list of candidates to make up leadership committees. Sometimes the actual voting is between complete slates, sometimes the voting is for individual candidates. Usually, the party body making the slate recommendation is the outgoing leadership, although sometimes there is

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practice, what defines the “slate” system is the existence of a recommended list or panel of candidates with the authority of the existing leadership behind it.

## The disastrous 10th Congress

This kind of officially recommended “slate” did not exist in the Bolshevik Party or

in the RSDLP before or during the Russian Revolution. It was never formally adopted by the party. It developed out of unofficial but completely dominant factional slates backed by Stalin and Zinoviev during the “troika” period. Its prehistory lies in the disastrous Tenth Congress in 1921, which took place in an atmosphere of crisis against the background of the bitter trade union controversy and the Kronstadt uprising. That Congress took a number of organisational decisions which were almost entirely negative in their consequences. The

Control Commission, a disciplinary structure which was to prove enormously useful to the Stalin faction in the following years. Less well known is what happened to the Central Committee.

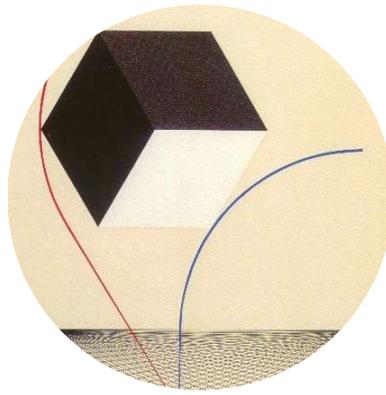
Lenin and those who backed him during the trade union controversy, the “Group of 10” including Zinoviev and Stalin, decided to alter the composition of the Central Committee. The intention was to reduce the weight of those who had agreed with Trotsky in what had been a finely balanced body. To that end they proposed increasing the size of the CC to 25 and then they put forward an unofficial factional slate. The slate they put forward was not intended to homogenise the CC. One of Lenin’s consistent views over his career was that minorities should always be represented on leading bodies. Both those who had backed Trotsky on the one hand or the Workers Opposition on the other were included in their factional proposal (even as the Workers Opposition was being banned). However, a number of key opponents were to be removed, most notably Trotsky’s close allies Krestinsky and Preobazhensky. Both the spaces left by their removal and the new

supporters of Lenin's position who would not have been capable of winning election under their own steam. Most of these additions were loyal but not very well known functionaries from the provinces.[1]

The scheme worked. This was the last Bolshevik election where there was still a large range of candidates (there were 93 candidates for full CC membership) and the winners were not understood to be predetermined. It was the first election where there was a chasm between the numbers of votes received by all of those elected and the number of votes received by even the most popular losing candidate (in this case, Krestinsky). All of those on the "Group of 10" slate received at least 75% of the vote. While this was not yet "the slate system" in the sense of an official slate proposed by the outgoing leadership, a completely successful factional slate proposed by the main party leader clearly laid the basis for the development of such a system.

By 1923, with Lenin incapacitated, Stalin and Zinoviev were operating a factional slate that had

system". The winners of elections were predetermined and everyone knew it. In the early days, they didn't move to eliminate their main opponents or their close supporters. They simply expanded the CC again and again, to 40 full members in 1923, to 52 in 1924 and so on, and filled the new spots with their proteges. They similarly made use of what was by now a separate election for "candidate members" of the CC to run a slate of their supporters (up until 1920 the closest losers in the CC election automatically made up the "candidates").



It took time for this to become normalised. After 1921, individual vote tallies for candidates were no longer announced, presumably because the near identical votes received by those elected and the relatively tiny votes received by those not on the slate made what was going on undesirably obvious. Nobody was yet publishing articles claiming that this was the proper "Bolshevik" method of leadership selection. But it was firmly established behind the scenes and as the 1920s progressed, it

# The Slate is introduced across the Comintern

The Comintern began by pushing for something resembling the slate system in CPs with severe factional divisions. A number of the early CPs had electoral systems which awarded leadership committee places to their factions based on their proportional strength at Congress. At certain points, Comintern representatives under Zinoviev's influence tried to pull together factional leaders and push them into negotiating an agreed leadership proposal as part of an attempt to reduce the degree to which leaders saw themselves as factional representatives. This never worked as intended. It did lead to, for example, Congresses in Germany[2] in 1925 and the USA in 1925 electing supposedly united leaderships as a bloc. In both cases the factional divisions immediately reasserted themselves. In France in 1926, PCF factional leaders were also prevailed upon by Comintern representatives to negotiate a jointly proposed leadership. They responded by putting all of every

This, like the factional slate at the Bolshevik 10th Congress, is a kind of prehistory of the slate system. Factional negotiations of this kind sporadically replacing factionalised election contests clearly had the potential to become something akin to the "slate system" as later understood. Gradually leaderships selected by negotiations between local "left", "right" and "centre" factions under differing degrees of Comintern patronage could become leaderships selected by the dominant faction as its opponents were driven out. In the majority of Communist Parties however, with traditions of straightforward election by individual candidate rather than by factional apportionment, the slate system was imposed much more abruptly and arrived in its finished state.

This occurred in the early days of the "Third Period". As Stalin turned on his ally Bukharin, a campaign against the "Right" was carried out both in Russia and in the Communist Parties abroad. One aspect of this campaign was the attempt to finally impose truly homogenous leaderships across the Communist Parties and the slate system, now

perpetuating that homogeneity. Between 1928 and 1931 the system was introduced into Communist Party after Communist Party.

In 1929, the Communist Party of Canada for the first time in its history elected its Central Executive Committee by means of a vote between slates. This was the last time it would have a seriously contested election for some decades. At each Congress afterwards, slates effectively chosen by Tim Buck, a prominent Stalin protégé within the Executive Committee of the Communist International, were elected without great controversy.[4] In 1930, a second rank leader who had been resident for a period in Moscow, Douglas Wolton, returned with Comintern instructions to reorganise the Communist Party of South Africa and deal with the "Right danger" there. This entailed announcing to the Ninth Party Conference that from that point on elections for all committees were to be by slate. The leaders now viewed as Bukharinites were of course not included on the slate.[5] Quickly, any remnants of party democracy disappeared and a long period of untrammelled leadership dominance began.



In 1931, the Communist Party of Australia, at the urging of its new Comintern imposed leader Herbert Moore, introduced the slate system of election for all leadership

bodies at its Tenth Congress. The variant introduced was one in which the leadership elected a body to consider nominations rather than one in which the leadership openly made the selections itself, but this was window dressing. As Stuart MacIntyre's history of the CPA put it "This method of controlling elections henceforth applied at all levels of the party and effectively suppressed democratic choice of representation", a verdict which could apply with equal validity to every occurrence of this election method.[6]

The Communist Party of Yugoslavia, which had in its early days enjoyed a mass following and had a long tradition of serious factional disputes, appears to have elected a CC negotiated by the factions in 1927. When the Comintern representatives, Manuilsky and Togliatti, presented the delegates to

entire slate except for the man, Djakovic, they knew was intended to be the new party leader. The Congress proceedings were halted. Eventually the ballot was held again and the slate was passed, as it so often is in so many parties, unanimously.[7] The usual pattern of self-perpetuating leadership didn't begin until years later, essentially because first the local police and then the Soviet secret police kept murdering CPY leaders until Tito rose to dominance, starting with the unfortunate Djakovic in 1929.

Similarly, in 1927, the Communist Party in Greece appears to have selected a CC through factional negotiation, but in 1930 it was simply instructed to elect a whole slate pre-chosen in Moscow.[8] In 1925, the likewise factionalised Communist Party of the Netherlands was capable of bucking Comintern advice in leadership selection but by 1930 it too was simply sent a full slate with details of exactly who should be elected to each post.[9]

The Communist Party of Great Britain had traditionally elected its



“The

CPs, with candidates nominated as individuals and delegates having a number of votes equal to the number of seats on a committee. At their Eleventh Congress at the end of 1929, a slate system was introduced on the explicit recommendation of the Comintern. The slate was first used to remove those of the previous leadership who were regarded as "Rights", in keeping with the anti-Bukharin campaign and the Third Period turn.[10] After that, it became an instrument of leadership control, successfully maintaining peace and harmony behind whatever ideas the leadership were espousing for nearly thirty years. The contested elections of the 1920s were replaced with usually unanimous votes right

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... until the explosions of 1956

# The Slate takes hold in the Trotskyist movement

How this system made the jump from the Stalinist parties into the Trotskyist movement is a little murkier. The earliest example of its use in the Trotskyist movement that I can be certain of is in the American SWP, which used it from its founding in 1938. It appears likely that it was used earlier and may even have been taken with them from the CPUSA, the US Trotskyists having split only in 1928. In Britain, it was not used by the early Trotskyist groups. It appears to have been introduced by the Revolutionary Communist Party in 1944 in the form of a leadership proposed to its founding Congress jointly by the leaderships of its merging predecessor groups. When the new leadership proposed an official slate in 1945, this caused enough disquiet among a membership used to some degree of functional democracy that a lengthy document had to be produced to dispel their "confusion".[11]

The political range of organisations using this

been remarkably similar. In the words of a historian of the Danish CP, after the party adopted slate elections for the Central Committee in the late 20s, "in reality it was appointed by the CC in office".

[12] In party after party, and in little groups aiming to become parties, the same process occurred.

Leaderships became effectively permanent, renominating themselves year after year, then elected by acclamation at rubber stamp congresses. The norm quickly becomes not just election contests heavily favouring an entrenched leadership, but the absence of contest at all. In such parties, as leaders drop away, they are replaced by younger members chosen by the core leadership to be added to the slate. In this kind of managed process, the new leaders chosen are, of course, congenial to the leadership core. They prove themselves not by challenging the leadership but by ably implementing the leadership's line. And so a leadership core may perpetuate itself effectively indefinitely, or at least until some shock external to the process intervenes.

If you get involved in a Marxist group and at your first Congress or Conference the leadership election

“Trust  
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to any more experienced member who tells you that this represents some higher form of democracy. Trust your instincts. What’s going on is exactly what it looks like. The argument that this produces a better balanced, more representative or more collective leadership is one the Stalinists invented when they were gutting Communist Party democracy in the 1920s and it has no more merit now.

#### Notes

[1] Daniels, Robert V “Origins of Leadership Selection in the Central Committee 1917-1927” in Pintner, Walter “Russian Officialdom”, p 355 – 361.

[2] Fisher, Ruth “Stalin and German Communism” gives an insider’s account of how proportional

p. 442. For Fisher's own role in the 1925 factional agreement and subsequent unanimous election of a leadership see Fowkes, Ben "Communism in Germany Under the Weimar Republic" p 129-130.

[3] Carr E.H "Foundations of a Planned Economy 1926-1929" Vol 3 p 525.

[4] Angus, Ian "Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada", p 219.

[5] Drew, Allison "The New Line in South Africa" in Worley, Matthew ed. "In Search of Revolution: International Communist Parties In the Third Period"

{6] MacIntyre, Stuart "The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality", Chapter 7.

{7] Avakumovic, Ivan "History of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia" Vol 1. p.92.

{8] Ulunian, Artiem "The Communist Party of Greece and the Comintern: Evaluations, Instructions and Subordination" p. 198.

[9] Voerman, Gerrit "From Lenin's Comrades in Arms to 'Dutch Donkeys'" p 140

[10] Worley, Matthew "Class Against Class: The Communist Party of Great Britain Between the Wars" p.141.

[11] "The Panel System of Election and Bolshevik Tradition" RCP Internal Bulletin 4 (1945)

[12] Thing, Morten "The Communist Party of Denmark and Comintern 1919-1949" p.8



End of the (party) line?

The Feminist Challenge to Traditional Political Organising

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