
Opinions

Against Sectarianism and Liberalism

by Kim Malcheski

From time to time the Theoretical Review will reprint articles and reviews from other publications which may not be seen by many of our readers. In this issue we are reprinting an article by Kim Malcheski of the National Lawyers Guild which first appeared in the NLG paper, Guild Notes in January 1980. This article discusses some of the political problems of left work in mass organizations, which has relevance not just for the NLG, but for communist mass work in general. The article is reprinted in its entirety. The title was supplied by the Theoretical Review.

The National Lawyers Guild, as an independent mass organization, contains a variety of political tendencies. This political diversity is one of the Guild's greatest strengths and makes it a unique group on the American left. It has enabled the Guild to become the largest and oldest "united front" organization on the left.

Yet this diversity produces both positive and negative consequences. It is positive because it strengthens the Guild as a broad based organization. Yet negative political practices may develop when there are so many different political groups and tendencies contending within the Guild. Of these negative practices, I would posit that the most serious political problems facing the Guild in this period are sectarianism and liberalism.

Sectarianism

With the intervention of recently formed parties and preparty formations in the Guild, the charge of "sectarianism" has been leveled at some of these groups. Although this term has been used with some frequency, it has seldom been defined with any specificity. Does it refer to just their "style" of political struggle, the content of their political line, or both? To combat sectarianism within the Guild, we should understand what its various manifestations are and what its roots are.

The essence of sectarianism is the placing of a small sect's narrow political interests above those of the mass movement as a whole. These sectarian political groups fail to understand that while a particular case may be of burning importance to them, it is not necessarily so for others. This parochial outlook leads to their participation in the Guild not to build it but only to get its support.

Another aspect of sectarianism is a style of political struggle which is unprincipled, manipulative, and unduly divisive. Often times a group will present their position in an arrogant or condescending way so as to alienate people who may otherwise be receptive to their analysis. Given the importance of political discussion and education for Guild members, it is imperative that it be conducted in a principled and constructive manner so we will be able to achieve a higher stage of political unity.

Not only do some groups have a sectarian style of political struggle, but they also have what I would describe as a sectarian "political line." These groups fail to understand who our main enemy is, which determines what forces we make alliances with. Their flawed political analysis of the world and national situation has the effect of diverting our attention away from our struggles at home and abroad against the U.S. ruling class.

The sectarianism which is prevalent in the American left and reflected in the Guild has several root causes. First, these sectarian political formations have failed to develop a theoretical and political understanding of the U.S. social formation. This is due to the dogmatism of these groups and the general anti-theoretical bias produced by American pragmatism which is reflected in numerous left groupings. Their theoretical underdevelopment prevents the elaboration of strategy and tactics based on the specificity of the present conjuncture (the current situation).

Furthermore, the historical isolation of these groupuscles from the people's movements contributes to their inability to engage in nonsectarian political practice. This isolation results not only from their own failings but also from the relative stability of the present conjuncture in the U.S.

Sectarianism is a danger to the Guild because it weakens our internal unity and isolates us from our potential allies. To strengthen the Guild as a progressive legal and political organization, it will be necessary to combat sectarianism in our ranks while at the same time avoiding liberalism.

Liberalism

In addition to sectarianism, liberalism hinders the political development and work of the Guild. Liberalism occurs in a political organization in different ways. In certain situations it develops in reaction to sectarianism. A "liberal" reaction would be to avoid political struggle against sectarianism because it may create controversy and cause further political divisions. Sectarianism (and other political deviations) cannot be defeated by simply ignoring it.

Generally liberal political tendencies underestimate the importance of theoretical study and political discussion. This study is important not only for our own education but also to provide direction to our programmatic work (political practice). Liberal tendencies correctly realize that mass organizations should not have a comprehensive political line like a democratic-centralist organization. Yet they err in the opposite direction by failing to understand the importance for the Guild to have at least a limited political line to direct our programmatic work.

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because the available literature indicates that the majority of punk rockers are male, and sufficient information is lacking to incorporate the situation of female punks. Though women are a part of the subculture, and Poly Styrene and the Slits are important musically, little is written about women and punk, which is a real problem in the overall analysis of punk rock.

²⁶Tom Robinson and Danny Kustow, "Ain't Gonna Take It," *Power in the Darkness*, 1977, Capitol Records, 11778.

²⁷Simon Frith, "Beyond the Dole Queue: The Politics of Punk," *Village Voice*, October 24, 1977, p. 79.

²⁸Laing, 1978, p. 124.

²⁹*Temporary Hoarding* No. 6, Summer, 1978, n.p. "Interview with Jimmy Pursey and Misty."

³⁰Harry Doherty, "Heroes for Credibility," *Melody Maker*, March 29, 1980, p. 16.

³¹Robert Christgau, "A Cult Explodes—and a Movement is Born," *Village Voice*, October 24, 1977, p. 72.

³²Christgau, 1977, p. 72.

³³See Bruce Dancis, "Safety Pins and Class Struggle: Punk Rock and the Left," *Socialist Review*, No. 39, May-June, 1978, pp. 76 and 77.

³⁴Frith, Oct. 24, 1977, p. 79.

³⁵Frith, Oct. 24, 1977, p. 78.

³⁶Hans Enzensberger, *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*, 1974, Seabury Press, p. 5.

³⁷Jon Landau, *It's Too Late to Stop Now: A Rock and Roll Journal*, Straight Arrow, 1972, p. 40.

³⁸Enzensberger, 1974, p. 14.

³⁹Bruce Dancis, "Artistic Control and Records Too," *In These Times*, June 4-17, 1980, p. 20.

⁴⁰Paul Costello, "Ideology, Ideological Practice and Cultural Criticism," *Theoretical Review*, No. 10, May-June, 1979, p. 19.

⁴¹Bruce Dancis, "The Left Wing of New Wave Rock Grows," *In These Times*, Feb. 27, 1980, p. 21.

⁴²James Truman, "Message Received—The Clash: 'London Calling'," *Melody Maker*, Dec. 15, 1979, p. 25.

⁴³"As the central image of black music [some have pointed to] the story of Stagger Lee, the gambler who shook off the chains of religion and racism and cautious survival, and in his freedom shot a man and became a myth—admired, feared, fated." Frith, "Rock and Popular Culture," *SR* No. 31, p. 108.

⁴⁴Hebdige, 1979, p. 79.

⁴⁵X-Ray Spex, "Identity," *Germfree Adolescence*, EMI, 1978.

⁴⁶Laing, 1978, p. 126.

⁴⁷Steel Pulse, *Handsworth Revolution*, Mango MLPS 9502, 1978, Island Music.

⁴⁸Misty, *Temporary Hoarding*, No. 6, "Pursey/Misty Interview."

⁴⁹Rock Against Racism/*t-Ital Wave Times*, P.O. Box 11491, San Francisco, CA 94103; and Rock Against Racism International, Box M, 27 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1, U.K.

⁵⁰"Dialectics Meets Disco," *Melody Maker*, May 26, 1979, p. 18.

⁵¹Jeffrey Peisch, "Gang of Four," *New York Rocker*, Oct. 1979, p. 9.

⁵²"Dialectics Meets Disco," p. 18.

⁵³Peisch, 1979, p. 9.

⁵⁴Peisch, 1979, p. 10.

⁵⁵Hannah Charlton, "The deconstruction of the beat," *Melody Maker*, Feb. 23, 1980, p. 13; see also Chris Brazier, "The Gang that tries to talk straight," *Melody Maker*, Nov. 3, 1979, p. 24.

⁵⁶Tim Patterson, "'Punk Rock' Reflects Cultural Decay," *Guardian*, New York, October 19, 1977, p. 19. See also "Punk Rock: Glorification of Nihilism" by Patterson in the December 21, 1977, *Guardian*.

⁵⁷See the debate in *Cineaste*, Vol IX, No. 4, Fall, 1979, "Marxist Film Criticism: A Symposium," including "What's in a Marxist

Film Review?" by Irwin Silber, and Silber's reply to critics in Vol. X, No. 1, Winter 1979-80.

⁵⁸See "Of Socialist Realism" and "Symposium on the Question of Decadence" in *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*, ed. by Lee Baxendall, 1972, Penguin, London; and Gaylord LeRoy, "Marxism and Modern Literature," 1967, American Institute for Marxist Studies, Occasional Papers, No. 5.

⁵⁹Jim Griffin, "Punk Rock: Revolt, Revolting or Resignation?" *The Organizer*, May, 1978, p. 15.

⁶⁰Stated in 1976, quoted in "Making It Without Making It," Howard Rodman, *Seven Days*, March 30, 1979, p. 31.

⁶¹Quoted in *Rolling Stone*, October 20, 1977, p. 49; see footnote in Dancis, 1978, p. 60.

⁶²"Rock 'n Revolt: Interview with Prairie Fire," *In Struggle!*, February 12, 1980, p. 11.

⁶³*In Struggle!*, Feb. 12, 1980, p. 11.

⁶⁴For more on the Dils see "Interview: The Dils," *Urgent Tasks*, No. 5, Summer, 1979, pp. 38-41.

⁶⁵R. Gare, "Meet the Clash," *Revolutionary Worker*, September 28, 1979, p. 6.

⁶⁶Elaine Zeskind, "Punk Rock: Music in Search of a Movement," *Urgent Tasks*, No. 5, Summer, 1979, pp. 1-5.

⁶⁷Gary Herman and Ian Hoare, "The Struggle for Song," *Media, Politics and Culture: A Socialist View*, Carl Gardner, ed., Macmillan, 1979.



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The Guild and its members are not insulated from the dominant ideology of this society which surrounds us and clouds our thinking. This ideology is liberalism which is the dominant ideology of modern capitalism. It is produced consciously by the capitalist state and class and spontaneously by the capitalist mode of production. By saying that liberalism exists within the Guild does not mean that there are a bunch of little Teddy Kennedy's running around.

Conclusion

To overcome the political deviations of sectarianism and liberalism, we will have to develop a theory of political practice. We will have to construct a theoretical framework along with a scientific methodology (a scientific problematic) with which to analyse the political problems facing us.

To develop a theory of political practice we need to address certain questions. Some of these questions are what are the differences between mass organizations and party formations, what is the balance of class forces in the present conjuncture, what is the nature of the Guild as a mass organization, what political issues (both national and international) should the Guild address, and what tactics should parties employ in doing mass work. These questions, and others, should be taken up in a systematic and theoretical way as we are currently assessing the state of the Guild.