

My Summation of Our (Unnamed) MLM Discussion Group, Upon Its Demise

(4/27/99)

Carl informed me yesterday that A.M., K., and presumably other members of their family, are no longer interested in participating in the group we have been trying to consolidate for over a year. Furthermore, apparently several other people who have participated also see no future for the group. So it seems the group is dead.

All political work should be summed up, both successes and failures. While my summation is unlikely to be that of anyone else involved, for what it is worth, here it is.

What were we trying to do? Although we were never more than an intermittent political discussion group, from the very beginning most of us hoped that establishing such a discussion group would lead to something more; hopefully an organization that could participate in rebuilding a revolutionary movement and help create a new revolutionary party. At least this is what most of us seemed *to be saying* we were up to.

Did we accomplish anything? Whether any activity is a success or a failure depends upon what the goals of that activity are, and the hopes people have for it. If the hopes and goals are achieved in the main, then it was a success. If not, it was a failure. If different people had different goals and expectations, then their summations will be very different. If there were some people in our group who only expected to get together a few times and hash over their experiences with the Party, then perhaps they are happy with the result. But for those of us who hoped to participate in a serious, on-going discussion group, and not only that—but to have that discussion group attract new people and develop into an organization that could contribute to the creation of a new *truly effective* revolutionary party—the only possible summation is that we were a complete failure.

Although we talked quite a bit about establishing some sort of publication, and even possibly publishing pamphlets and books, we didn't get anywhere near doing those things. The idea of creating a web site was also stillborn. We weren't very successful in bringing new people into the group, and actually it is hard to see how we could have been very effective in doing this without establishing some kind of a public presence. From the point of view of our initial hopes of developing something beyond a discussion group we failed completely.

Even as a discussion group, we failed. We did have some interesting discussions. Or at least I thought so. (Apparently most of the others involved disagree, or else it seems they might want to continue having them.) The discussions helped spur my own thinking on political economy and other topics, and possibly it had this effect also for some other participants. But apparently many people found that the meetings were not going the way that they hoped and expected in a discussion group. That leads to the question of what the people involved *did expect* from a discussion group!

But the proof that we also failed as a discussion group is that apparently only a few of us want to continue with it.

So no, I don't think we accomplished much of anything of value.

Am I to blame for the collapse of the group? As I understand it, A.M. and K., and perhaps others, think that I am to blame for the group's disintegration. Since they have not seen fit to discuss this with me, I only have some second-hand fragments of their opinions to address, and some surmises. (And since it seems to me that I am being made the scapegoat for the group's collapse, I hope you all will allow me the opportunity to present some defense, even if I have yet to be informed of all the charges being brought against me.)

A.M. mentioned some criticisms of me to Carl (who passed them along). One of these major charges against me, which A.M. apparently thinks prevents his further participation in the group, is that I am supposedly "unresponsive" to his criticisms of my position on a number of issues. The only specific example I remember Carl passing on to me was on the issue of the "General Crisis Theory". So let me address that point.

We talked about GCT as part of our discussion of *America in Decline*. In my "First Notes Towards a Critique of *America in Decline*", which I prepared on 2/12/99, I had about a page of comments on GCT (pp. 8-9). Presumably no one else wrote up anything about GCT because they fully agreed with the discussion in *AID*, or just didn't have the time. In my essay I noted that I agree that there is a lot wrong with GCT, but I added that "I think there are some aspects of it which are unjustly attacked" by *AID*. I then proceeded to explain how I viewed GCT's notion that "stagnation was imperialism's normal state" as not exactly correct, but nevertheless containing a germ of truth. I wrote that

Actually, the economic cycle continues under imperialism, so there are periods of boom, bust (crisis), stagnation, and recovery. However, under imperialism the contradictions of capitalism are greatly intensified, and the severity of crises are also greatly intensified. (I'll qualify that just a bit in a moment.) The overproduction of capital leading to crises is greatly intensified, and the difficulty of purging that overproduction of capital and starting the cycle afresh grows enormously. Basically, as I argue in my 1979 letter to Bob Avakian on imperialist war and capitalist economic cycles [also posted on my web site], in the imperialist era there is really only one truly effective way out of the stagnation phase of the cycle: war. And not just little wars, but wars which result in the massive destruction of capital. Given this fact, under imperialism the stagnation phase of the cycle tends to go on for a very long time until all the political developments that the economic situation "demands" fall into place and the inter-imperialist war breaks out. Thus, in a way the GCT theorists were close to correct: stagnation has become imperialism's "normal state" except for the relatively short periods of inter-imperialist war, and the much longer (but still limited) periods of boom after such wars.

I also defended, in part, the GCT claim that the prolonged state of crisis tends to lead to the growth of fascism, and also, in part, the GCT claim that underconsumption by the masses plays an important role in the development of economic crises (though clearly it cannot be the whole explanation as some GCT theorists seemed to suggest).

So my attitude toward GCT is different in at least these 3 ways from that of A.M. (and presumably everybody else in the group). Apparently A.M. thinks he made some specific criticisms of my position which I then failed to respond to. However, I truly don't remember any such specific criticisms from A.M. or anybody else. What were these specific criticisms, if they were anything more than simple expressions of disagreement? All I remember is that I criticized the *AID* critique of GCT as one-sided, prepared that one page summary of my position and pointed to elaborations of my ideas on my web site, while everybody else just seemed to disagree with me, and support the *AID* analysis without really addressing the points of my argument. If A.M., or anybody else, did have some specific criticisms of my stand on GCT that I missed and

thus failed to respond to, I would be happy to have them repeated to me. And especially if these are presented to me in writing (so that I can remember them and give them due consideration), I will definitely promise to respond to them.

But for A.M. to just say that I failed to respond to his criticisms and *leave it at that* is really disingenuous, especially when the first I hear of any of this is second hand, as one of his excuses for dropping out of the group.

And anyway, what if A.M. *had* presented a full and careful critique of my position on GCT, maybe even a whole essay, that I had not yet responded to? Would that really be a reason for walking out of the group? After all, responding to such criticisms might conceivably take some time and study on my part; or maybe I might not be up to such a challenge at all. Or is A.M. even complaining that I could not on the spur of the moment present a full-fledged alternative theory of economic crises?! What really is he demanding?? Is A.M. perhaps saying that he doesn't want to be part of any group unless people who disagree with him on any point can immediately and fully respond to his criticisms in ways that totally satisfy *him*?

I really have a hard time seeing A.M.'s complaint as anything other than either a basically irrelevant, pitiful excuse for wanting to quit the group, or else a somewhat camouflaged way of saying that he just doesn't want to be part of a discussion group that has people in it who disagree with him on points he considers important. Perhaps that is an unfair remark, but I really can't make any other sense out of this criticism of his.

As far as any supposed "unresponsiveness" on my part to other issues goes, I can only say that I have not held back in any way from expressing my opinions on any topic, and my reasons for holding those opinions. And especially so on any problematic topic. I have written up numerous little essays on these points (although in some cases I think these didn't get distributed to everybody—which wasn't my fault). In fact, partly because I had more time to do so, I have written up my ideas and opinions on such matters far more than anyone else in the group.

Interestingly enough, few of these papers were ever discussed by the group, and I got little or no feedback on most of them. (This in itself is wrong; whenever *anybody* in a serious political group takes the trouble to write something up, it should be discussed.) At our last get-together Ted suggested that we briefly discuss my essay "Two Concepts of Democratic Centralism", but we didn't do it. There has been no feedback from anybody yet on my mass line manuscript either. I know people are busy, and it takes time to read through even short essays. But I really think that if the issue of "responsiveness" is to be raised, a pretty good argument could be made that I have been *more* responsive to issues raised by people in the group than the other people have. (I was one of only two people who wrote up some comments on A.M.'s original paper on the negation of the negation—and my comments were overall very positive, by the way. And I was the only one who responded to his "Letter to Some Friends" last December.)

But actually, I don't think the real issue here is "responsiveness" at all—it is really a question of *disagreement*. I really believe that A.M. is upset with me primarily because I don't agree with him on some issues. This, I suggest, reflects the baggage from the RCP that holds that there must be more or less total unity of ideas among revolutionaries, that, in fact, the existence of differing opinions on even secondary or tertiary issues is a horrible, even fatal problem. (But do people really believe that everyone in a genuinely Marxist group must have the same opinion about the Comintern's General Crisis Theory of the 1930s?!) The problem with demanding something approaching total unity of thought is that it can only be achieved if most people *give up thinking*

themselves and just mindlessly accept what the leaders tell them to believe. And that is the antithesis of Marxism.

Are my ideas so absurd that I'm not even worth talking to? Carl tells me that A.M. also thought "my claim" that the mass line had never been used by U.S. revolutionaries is also ludicrous, and I guess shows that I am so far off the mark as to not to be worth talking to. My actual claim, as I tried to make clear when I brought up this issue, is that *I don't know of* any significant use of the mass line in this country. As I said, I'm sure there must have been a number of times it has been used, but I just don't know of them.

At that point Ted snorted, and I guess my statement must have seemed totally off the wall to everybody there, not just A.M. In response to the snort, I issued the challenge to the group: "Well, ok, if you know of some non-trivial examples of the use of the mass line in the U.S., I would be very happy to hear about them. I've been attempting to discover such examples for 25 years or more."

And to this challenge there was complete silence. Nobody there could think of a single example either. And that really demonstrates my broader point: the mass line is so little in the consciousness of American "Maoists" that hardly any of them pay much attention to it at all, and can't even point out one or two ready examples that might have been popularized by some American Maoist party or grouping—because no such examples *have* been popularized by the RCP or anybody else. My claim is that what should be viewed as one of the most characteristic and central aspects of Mao's approach to revolution, the use of the mass line method of revolutionary leadership, has been almost totally ignored by the RCP and the American revolutionary movement. True, it *must* have been used on occasion in this country, but nobody seems to be able to think of any significant case where it was.

Perhaps, upon reflection, you have thought of some examples of the use of the mass line in this country. If so, I would still be *very glad to hear about them!* But even if several examples are passed on to me, I won't likely be changing my mind about the thrust of what I said—that American Maoists, including the RCP and its alumni, have *not* in fact embraced Mao's method of mass line leadership. It's not something they think about and try to use.

If I am really the problem, then everybody else should go on without me. If people think that my views, such as my claim about the almost total neglect of the mass line in the U.S., are hopelessly off the mark, so much so that my opinions are really not worth considering and debating, then clearly I should not be part of the group. But in that case, I should go, and the group should continue.

I am happy to drop out if the rest of the people think that my divergent views, abrasive personality, or whatever, create too much disruption and prevent the group from progressing. Just let me know, and I'll go my own way.

I readily admit that I have some shortcomings which have contributed to our difficulties. One such is a tendency towards an uncomradely tone at times. I apologize for that. And I am open to rebuke when I get out of hand.

(But I would also like to point out that Marxism is supposed to be a "wrangling ism", and Marxists must learn to constantly struggle, and struggle *hard*, as well as constantly think and to listen to the opinions and criticisms of others. Moreover, people who are *seriously* engaged in ideological and theoretical struggle must not be so thin-skinned. We must not let criticisms and

comments by others bother us too much (let alone drive us away), even if in the heat of struggle these comments are sometimes unduly harsh and uncomradely. If people aren't tough enough to stand up to some pretty rough intra-party struggle, how can they stand up to the bourgeoisie over the long run? And while it doesn't excuse my own lapses, I would remind everyone that in the Bolshevik party it was none other than Lenin who was most prone to harshness in the criticism of his comrades. But the Bolsheviks were a party of hardened revolutionaries, who were not afraid of struggle.)

In any case, I want to repeat: If you (the rest of the group) have had enough of me, if you think I'm more of a disruptive influence than a positive contributor to the common effort, and if you really think I'm the biggest cause of the current difficulties, then you must continue without me. If you don't, you will have first of all demonstrated that you really *don't* think I am the main problem. And second of all, you will have demonstrated that there is something the matter with the rest of you guys. Like, for example, you are not serious enough about what you say you are trying to do.

My opinion of what the problems are. I personally don't believe that I am the cause of the group's evident collapse, though perhaps I might have contributed to bringing things to an earlier crisis. Instead, I think most of the group's problems go way back to attitudes and methods that we picked up in the RCP, or in reaction to it. I mean such things as:

1. Fear of, and distaste for, internal struggle. (Hey, folks! Struggle is good! It is the source of progress!)
2. Fear of a lack of total unity of thought; fear of a hundred schools of thought contending. Fear of some of this contention going unresolved for long periods.
3. Pragmatism; a lack of enthusiasm for theory and theoretical investigations; many people want ready answers presented to them and don't really want to think things through for themselves. (I don't accuse A.M. of this, however.)
4. Fear of democratic centralism, based on misconceptions of it.
5. Insufficient breaking with the specific line, presumptions, and methods of work of the RCP.
 - a. Although people strongly criticize the RCP in very limited areas, they don't understand how much of its erroneous line and approach they retain.
 - b. The group as a whole did not correctly identify the RCP's central problem (which is, in my opinion, its inability to bring revolutionary ideas to the masses because it has renounced the very idea of participating with the masses in their existing struggles and bringing the light of revolution to them in the process).
 - c. In summing up the RCP, way too much focus was put on personalities, and misdeeds of individual leaders, rather than facing up to the actual (usually unstated) political line that leads those individuals to act as they do.
6. Insufficient seriousness; lack of determination. (A number of us are getting old, and tired, and are none too healthy, but what I am getting at here is a lack of *revolutionary will*, and a tendency to allow petty excuses and obstacles to divert us from our revolutionary obligations.)

The last of these can't be directly blamed on the RCP—they remain a very serious organization (no matter how ineffective they are). It is more a matter of most RCP alumni being burned out, and unwilling to "go through it all again". This, of course, suggests that people conceive of building and participating in another party as more or less the same thing as their RCP experiences—which leads back to the earlier points.

I could elaborate on all the above points if people want me to (but a little voice tells me they don't). Actually I already have elaborated on most of them, such as in my "Two Concepts of Democratic Centralism" essay.

Last month, before I knew of the collapse of group, I wrote another little essay, "A Disconcerting Thought", addressing some of the problems we've been having. So far only Carl and Rusty have seen it; I wanted to get their reactions (mixed!) before distributing it at our next meeting (now not to be). I'll try to see that everyone gets a copy. Anyway, in that essay I wonder out loud if the RCP is like one of those plants that so poisons the ground under it that nothing else can grow, not even its own offspring. Unfortunately, the collapse of our group reinforces that pessimistic idea in me.

Another theory of what the main problem with our group is/was. Carl told me he thinks one lesson of this fiasco (not his word) is that a group of RCP alumni *can't* by themselves create a new group of the type we were aiming at. In light of my above list of problems the group had, which all seem to point to people's RCP experience in one way or another, I guess I have to agree with him. But Carl didn't mention any of the above points that I think explain just why this is so. Instead he, and Ted too perhaps, seem to think that the main problem is that we "alumni" either can't, or won't, relate to the mass movement any more, and in particular the revolutionary youth movement. As Carl put it, it seems that once people have operated as members of the Party, they can't seem to develop any enthusiasm for lower-level work with the masses. It's either Party-level work or nothing.

No doubt there is some truth to this; it is perhaps a tendency. But take an actual look at some of the members of our own group. Does it apply to Carl himself? It sure doesn't seem like it to me! He's very active in mass work, and with revolutionary youth in particular. And I think Rusty is pretty active too. How about Ted? Surely he also must be considered very active in several important areas of mass work. I understand that Leslie is also pretty involved with mass work in his location. The guy up north? Surely he's involved in some good mass work, judging by the report we got from him and his companion that time. (I know, he's not an alumnus exactly.) How about K.? Isn't she doing mass work with the youth that hang out around her place of employment? Isn't the younger K. also participating in mass work? How about A.M.? I've heard talk about recent study groups he's led, and connections via his family and job with other youth.

I guess Frank is not active in mass work at present. And I am not. (I'll say why in a moment.) But that's just two people out of the whole group! It's true that of the other people, all of whom participate in mass work to some degree, some are more active than others. I guess Carl and Ted are the most involved, and perhaps they are right in encouraging all the rest of us to get involved, or to get more involved in mass work than we are.

But overall, it appears to me that Carl (and Ted's?) theory just won't hold up to scrutiny, at least for most of the members of our group. Or are you suggesting, Carl, that the lack of serious, ongoing mass work by one or two members of a group are enough to sabotage the whole thing? Sounds far-fetched to me. (And again, if that were true, just push out the two slackers.)

(My excuse: I have always had a rather low level of energy, and when I contracted Lyme Disease about 10 years ago, that energy level plummeted much further. I consciously decided some years ago that I would focus the limited energy I had on political writing—my mass line ms. and some other things. Although I haven't yet been able to convince anyone that the stuff I have been working on is of any importance, *I* believe it is, and so that's where I plan to continue my efforts. If I were a member of a communist organization I would submit to a collective

decision about what my activities should be, but since I'm not it is up to me to decide. I am open to argument on this point from you guys or anybody else, but I've thought about this issue a lot and you'll find me quite stubborn about it. I try very hard to *resist* getting involved with anything that distracts me from what I see as my primary task. I have too many distractions already.)

It is certainly true that no group divorced from the mass movement can play any significant role in the creation of a new revolutionary party, nor can such a party continue on a correct course if it later becomes divorced from the mass movement. No Marxist could have imagined otherwise, at least up until the RCP came up with its contrary theory around 1981.

On the other hand, there are times when theoretical work becomes primary. The creation of a core group (or groups) of revolutionaries, which because of their many connections to ongoing, practical mass work can serve to tie the various threads of that mass work together, and thus help lead to the establishment of a new revolutionary communist party, is in fact *primarily* a matter of hassling things out on *a theoretical level*. This is *why* Lenin said you need to organize a party around a newspaper (or better yet, a theoretical journal and a mass newspaper).

People can only come together and form such core groups on the basis of some general political line. And such political lines can only be created by the fledgling core groups themselves (based on their study, discussion, and struggle over theory). This sounds like a catch-22 situation, but it is once again only a manifestation of the Marxist theory of knowledge on the collective level of small groups. In other words there are interpenetrating opposites involved in the process: a little unity, struggle, more unity, more struggle... Or looking at it another way: establishment of a preliminary line on some key questions, struggle over that line with some people dropping away and others coming forward, and over and over again with this process, hopefully always at a higher level, and if it is done right, with growing numbers of people.

Practice (mass work) is always important, but theory is always important too. Moreover, theory takes on increased importance at the times when core groups of revolutionaries are being established, when they are establishing and consolidating their public presence (via a journal, say), and again later when like-minded core groups come together to create a larger core group or eventually a party.

Although I admire and respect Carl and Ted and other people for their mass work, I can't help but suspect that they tend to lean a little bit towards pragmatism in their view of what needs to be done to get a core group of revolutionaries established right now. And to lean a little bit towards the disparagement of the importance of theory, of theoretical struggle, of collectively creating and presenting a core political line which can *start* to attract more people. I don't know if I am being fair to Carl and Ted here or not; unfortunately we did not have much discussion on these sorts of questions in our group, certainly not full discussions. (Somehow we "never got around" to the basic issue of how each of us envisaged our achieving the great goal most of us said we were aiming at!)

The way the group ended is very wrong. At what turned out to be our last meeting (Feb. '99), those of us in the local area set up another meeting for April 3rd, to discuss Brenner's article/book. (It took some work to get through the darn thing!) Nobody showed up! "What the hell's going on?" I wondered. When I talked to Carl about this he said that he thought it was just a tentative idea that was never confirmed. I guess it must have been.

Later, Carl told me that A.M. had some criticisms of me, and wondered why A.M. had not come to discuss them with me as he told Carl he would.

Then, yesterday, Carl told me that the whole group had collapsed. A.M. had informed him that his family didn't want to take part any more. Since then Carl has tried to contact A.M. for further one-on-one discussions, but apparently A.M. won't respond.

All this strikes me as being pretty disrespectful to all the people who were involved in the group. And, really, it seems to show a lack of seriousness on the part of just about everybody.

Where do we go from here? Since we didn't even have a final sum-it-all-up meeting of those who cared to attend, I guess it is hard to say what other people may have in mind for the future.

As for me, I plan to keep plugging away at my mass line book, try to keep going on my re-found enthusiasm for studying political economy, and try to look around again for another discussion group—one a little more stable and a little more serious.

I have this fantasy that a group of people might actually be pulled together to read and discuss Marxist and revolutionary books, a group in which it might even be considered ok to hold various different views on this or that topic, especially theoretical ones. A group where you could have discussions and arguments, even heated ones, without people slinking away. And a group where you could get to know other serious revolutionaries and discuss with them how to advance the revolutionary movement. Or maybe each participant in turn could agree to prepare a paper for discussion, pass it around in advance, and invite all comments and criticisms. Maybe people could decide to do some individual thinking, and that might even lead to some collective thinking. It really seems to me that there must be a few people out there who want to do something like this.

—J.

P.S. I would sincerely like to request that the ex-members of our ex-group keep me in mind if they ever want to discuss (by mail, email, or whatever) issues in revolutionary theory, especially on the mass line and mass perspective, and on philosophy and political economy, but on any other topic as well. Also, if anybody has any revolutionary essays or documents they want to post on the web, I might be able to help out on that.

And finally, I would very much like to hear everybody else's summations of our group—even if they only consist of my name and a lot of swear words.