Ideological Intransigence, Democratic Centralism and Cultism: A Case Study

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Abstract

There is a dearth of literature documenting the existence of cults in the political sphere. This paper suggests that some left wing organizations share a number of ideological underpinnings and organizational practices which inherently inclines them to the adoption of cultic practices. In particular, it is argued that doctrines of "catastrophism" and democratic centralist modes of organization normally found among Trotskyist groupings are implicated in such phenomenon. A case history is offered of a comparatively influential Trotskyist grouping in Britain, which split in 1992, where it is suggested that an analysis of the organization in terms of cultic norms is particularly fruitful. This is not intended to imply that a radical critique of society is necessarily inappropriate. Rather, it is to argue that political movements frequently adopt organizational forms, coupled with "black and white" political programmes, which facilitate the exercise of undue social influence. This stifles genuinely creative political thought. Issues which this analysis suggests are particularly pertinent for those involved in radical politics are considered.

Introduction

Cults embrace the fields of psychotherapy, religion, new age, self help, business training – and politics (Hassan, 1988). Thus far, the latter area has attracted little attention. One reason may be that the frantic activity and intense feelings of party loyalty which often characterises political life makes it difficult to differentiate between "normal" political involvement and that which qualifies groups to be regarded as a cult. This is particularly true of fringe political groupings, on the extreme left and right. This paper argues that the phenomenon of political cultism is more widespread than is normally assumed. In particular, it focuses on the ideological and organizational dynamics of left wing groupings which fall within the Trotskyist tradition, and argues that these predispose such groupings to cultic practices. Accordingly, those criteria which it is authoritatively agreed constitute diagnostic criteria for the classification of groups as cults are reviewed. This is then refined into specific criteria which are particularly pertinent to the activities of political groups. Flowing from this, a case study approach is adopted. A prominent British Trotskyist grouping (variously known as the Committee for a Workers International, Revolutionary Socialist League, Militant Tendency – henceforth referred to as CWI), which acquired significant political influence in the 1980s, is discussed. Sources utilised in the study include interviews with ex-members, journalistic accounts, internal documents and open publications.

Members of the CWI had a long standing tradition of working within the British Labour Party, a policy known as "entrism". It also, beginning in the early 1970s, built small groups of supporters internationally, including within the United States. By the late 1980s it controlled the British Labour Party's youth wing (since dissolved), counted three Labour MPs among its approximately 8000 members, employed 200 full time staff, had a national headquarters in London, published a 16-page weekly newspaper, and led large movements on some issues which at times dominated the domestic British political scene. In short, the CWI became probably the most successful Trotskyist organization in the world since the 1930s.

However, a huge dispute erupted within its ranks during 1991 over whether to remain inside the Labour Party. This led to a split in early 1992, during which the organization's original founder

and many others were expelled. They instantly set up a new Trotskyist international, still committed to entrism. The CWI reconstituted itself as a new "open" party named "Militant Labour", since relaunched as "The Socialist Party" in early 1997. The evidence is that both groups have since sharply declined, and that the remains of the CWI in particular may now number no more than a few hundred members. Its theoretical beliefs, organizational practices and the 1992 split are assessed in the light of the extent to which they match the criteria under discussion. The data is also reviewed from the standpoint of Lifton's (1961) suggested criteria for what he termed "ideological totalism". Finally, the implications for the ideological underpinnings and organizational cultures of political organizations (particularly those on the left) are examined.

Defining traits of cults

Broad agreement exists in the literature on general characteristics which delineate cult groupings. The American Family Foundation (1986, pp.119-120) defined cults as:

"A group or movement exhibiting great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing, and employing unethical manipulative or coercive techniques of persuasion and control (e.g. isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience, powerful group pressures, information management, suspension of individuality or critical judgement, promotion of total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it), designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families or the community."

Langone (1988, p.1) further proposed that cults tend to share the following characteristics:

"1. Members are expected to be excessively zealous and unquestioning in their commitment to the identity and leadership of the group. They must replace their own beliefs and values with those of the group.

2. Members are manipulated and exploited, and may give up their education, careers and families to work excessively long hours at group-directed tasks such as selling a quota of candy or books, fund-raising, recruiting and proselytizing.

3. Harm or the threat of harm may come to members, their families, and/or society due to inadequate medical care, poor nutrition, psychological and physical abuse, sleep deprivation, criminal activities and so forth."

These conditions broadly match those which Singer (1987) has suggested characterise programmes of thought reform – i.e. attempts to reframe a person's sense of individuality, core belief systems and overall self concept within a totalistic ideology which "explains everything". Specific measures which might be employed in such an effort include:

"1. Controlling an individual's social and psychological environment, especially the person's time.

2. Placing an individual in a position of powerlessness within a high-control authoritarian system.

3. Relying usually on a closed system of logic, which permits no feedback and refuses to be modified except by executive order.

4. Relying on unsophistication of the person being manipulated (that is, the person is unaware of the process), and he or she is pressed to adapt to the environment in increments that are sufficiently minor so that the person does not notice changes.

5. Eroding the confidence of a person's perceptions.

6. Manipulating a system of rewards, punishments, and experiences to promote new learning or inhibit undesired previous behaviour. Punishments are usually social ones, for example, shunning, social isolation, and humiliation (which are more effective in producing wanted behaviour than beatings and death threats, although these do occur)" (p.1470).

Extensive data is now available on the extent to which such methods have been used in a variety of settings. However, this is limited in its application to political cults in general and left wing cults in particular. The main case study material hitherto available concerns a Marxist-Leninist party (the Democratic Workers Party – DWP) based in California from 1974 to 1985 (Siegel *et al.*, 1987; Lalich, 1992; 1993). A summary of these accounts will be helpful in identifying the specific thought reform techniques most widely used by left wing cults, and which must therefore be taken into account in any formal definition of political cults.

Fundamentally, the DWP ideology and organizational practice completely dominated the lives and psyches of its members. Siegel *et al.* (1987, p.62), in an account written by ex-members, testify that: "It challenged its members to devote their lives to revolutionary struggles as others were doing around the world, and to see themselves as part of a world movement; to do less when one could do more was profoundly unserious. This was a compelling moral imperative."

This "moral imperative" is a leitmotif in many accounts of extreme left wing politics, and historically has had the effect of extracting extraordinary levels of commitment from people. For example, Valtin (1988), in a text originally published during the 1940s, chronicled life within

the Communist International (Comintern) during the 1920s and 1930s, when it came increasingly under the control of Stalin. Particularly with the rise of fascism the organization could plausibly represent itself as a last barrier to barbarism (thereby engendering a moral imperative in many people), particularly if it denied that anything untoward was occurring within Russia. The effect was to generate what George Orwell described as a religious veneration of the Russian experiment, and a sanctification of the personality of Stalin. This ensured a frantic devotion to "building the party", slavish conformity to the party's often contradictory nostrums, and a habit of responding to suspected dissent with a heresy hunt.

Within the DWP, indoctrination started at an early stage of membership. Thus: "... members went through an intensive new members program, which included in-depth analysis of their class history and intensive criticism of their practice and attitudes. The discipline demanded of a cadre member included 24-hour-a-day availability and submission of all aspects of one's life to the needs of the party. In principle one's personal life was one's own business; in practice the party's discipline and control were total. A very unified but stratified community was developed as party members were taught that we were preparing to be an elite, and we took pride in our submission to criticism and discipline in the name of political commitment. The ideology of the Leninist party as an instrument of the working class, and each member as an instrument of the party, was the overriding justification for party functioning and discipline" (Siegel *et al.*, 1978, p.63).

This account also makes it plain that, whatever formal controls were supposed to operate, all power was concentrated at the top, and in particular in the hands of the party's General Secretary. There were intensive sessions of "group criticism", during which alleged mistakes would be picked out and the individuals concerned denounced by the other members. Several effects flowed from this regime. Members experienced enormous pressure to conform. Dissent led only to group criticism sessions, which everyone was naturally anxious to avoid. To avert such an eventuality all members eagerly denounced the others. In turn, this display of devotion to the party combined with a radical departure from the norms of decent everyday conduct reinforced the belief systems of those involved, by creating an intense private world, cut adrift from how everyone else thought, behaved and handled difficult feelings.

Within this world, a peculiar paradox may have been that members came to depend on the leaders precisely because of the abuse which was meted out to them. Aronson (1997) has reviewed research within the paradigm of cognitive dissonance theory which suggests that people prefer to maintain close involvements with those whose evaluations of their abilities are in line with their own evaluations, even when these are negative. This takes precedence over being with people who have a positive evaluation of the person, if that is out of line with what the person believes. In this way, feelings of dissonance (i.e. an unpleasant awareness of the gap between self-perception and that of others) is avoided. The odd effect is that when cult leaders damage the self concept of their recruit they activate the dissonance reducing process just described, and so leave the recruit more dependent than ever on their relationship with the cult leader.

More subtly, since it was assumed that the group leader had a special insight into social problems above and beyond that of anyone else members came to believe that disagreements with her analysis, even before they had been clearly articulated, were liable to be wrong. Thus, Lalich (1992, p.21) refers to "... the intensity of the members' faith in the political model and the fact that unquestioning belief in that model led each member to accept and contribute to a stern discipline and a harsh fate". Doubt dared not speak its name. Such unquestioning belief has been a recurrent theme in many accounts of extreme left wing politics. For example, Valtin's (1988) description of his career as an agent of the Communist International between the wars makes it clear that unquestioning obedience, veneration of the Soviet experience and a feeling of living under siege were vital factors in the ideological, organizational and moral domination of foreign Communist Parties by Stalinism.

Conformity within the DWP was also reinforced by the fact that intense activism prevented members from having a personal life outside their role as party members. This high speed political existence ensured that rival social networks atrophied through neglect. The unrelenting pace induced exhaustion and depression, while making it harder to "think your way out" – too many commitments had been made, all bridges back to sanity were long dynamited and too little time was left over from party activity for reflection. In a paradox far from unique to political cults, the more deeply ensnared people were in the perfumed trap of activism the harder it became to escape. Members tended not to leave as the result of rational reflection and conscious decision, but dropped out in despair, exhaustion and crisis.

Further reinforcements for conformity were institutionalised into the party's *modus operandi*. Lalich (1992) reports that a buddy system of a one

to one helper assigned to new recruits was instituted, to "integrate" the newcomer into party life. This confirmed the new recruit's perception that:

"... submission to the organization was the ruling principle, There was intense pressure to conform. Any group meeting was one obvious place where this came into play and the tone was set. For example, the leadership would give a presentation on a change in the direction of some work or would open up a denunciation of a comrade for some error. Once the leadership finished, each militant would be expected to say how much he or she agreed with the presentation or the criticism. Ideally, each person was to say something different from what had already been said; but more to the point each person was expected to agree with ('unite with') whatever was going on. Questions, should there be any, had to be couched within an overall agreement. After years of this kind of participation, people were quite incapable of any kind of creative or critical thinking, could only parrot each other, and had shrunken vocabularies riddled with arcane internal phraseology" (Lalich, 1992, p.47).

Underlying these practices were the cardinal assumptions that social, economic and political catastrophe lay on the immediate horizon, that a vanguard revolutionary party was essential to lead the working class back from this abyss and towards the conquest of power, and that the nucleus of such a party was to hand in the form of the DWP. This encouraged illusions of correctness, unanimity and total political prescience. As Lalich (1992, p.71) explains it: "... there was always a correct answer for everything. It was a black and white world, even though at times black was white. Nevertheless, the party had the answer and the party was always right."

These accounts, building on the definitions of cults discussed above, suggest that political cults tend to be characterised by the presence of the following traits.

1. A rigid belief system. In the case of left wing political cults this suggests that all social, natural, scientific, political, economic, historical and philosophical issues can only be analysed correctly from within the group's theoretical paradigm – one which therefore claims a privileged and all-embracing insight. The view that the group's belief system explains everything eliminates the need for fresh or independent thought, precludes the possibility of critically appraising past practice or acknowledging mistakes, and removes the need to seek intellectual sustenance outside the group's own ideological fortress. All such thinking is dismissed as contaminated by the impure ideology of bourgeois society.

2. The group's beliefs are immune to falsification. No test can be devised or suggested which might have the effect of inducing a reappraisal. The all-embracing quality of the dominant ideology precludes re-evaluation, since it implies both omniscience and infallibility. Methods of analysis which set themselves more modest explanatory goals are viewed as intrinsically inferior. Those who question any aspect of the group's analysis are branded as deviationists bending to the "pressures of capitalism", and are driven from the ranks as heretics.

3. An authoritarian inner party regime is maintained. Decision making is concentrated in elite hands, which gradually dismantles or ignores all formal controls on its activities. Members are excluded from participation in determining policy, calling leaders to account, or expressing dissent. This is combined with persistent assurances about the essentially democratic nature of the organization, and the existence of exemplary democratic controls – on paper.

4. There is a growing tendency for the leaders to act in an arbitrary way, accrue personal power, perhaps engage in wealth accumulation from group members or in the procuring of sexual favours. Activities which would provoke censure if engaged in by rank and file members (e.g. having a reasonable standard of living, enjoying time off, using the organization's funds for personal purposes) are tolerated when they apply to leaders.

5. Leader figures, alive or dead, are deified. In the first place, this tends to centre on Marx, Trotsky or other significant historical figures. It also increasingly transfers to existing leaders, who represent themselves as defending the historical continuity of the "great" ideas of Marxist leaders. In effect, the new leaders are depicted, in their unbending devotion to the founders' ideals, as the reincarnation of Marx, Trotsky or whoever. There is a tendency to settle arguments by referring constantly to the sayings of the wise leaders (past or present), rather than by developing an independent analysis. Even banal observations are usually buttressed by the use of supporting quotations from sanctified sources.

6. There is an intense levels of activism, precluding outside interests. Social life and personal "friendships" revolve exclusively around the group, although such friendships are conditional on the maintenance of uncritical enthusiasm for the party line. Members acquire a specialised vocabulary (e.g. they call each other "comrade"), which reinforces a sense of distance and difference from those outside their ranks. The group becomes central to the personal identity of members, who find it more and more difficult if not impossible to imagine a life outside their organization.

A number of features of extreme left wing political organizations are now considered, particularly as they apply to the CWI, with a view to identifying the most salient features of its guiding ideology and organizational practice, and assessing the extent to which they match the criteria suggested above.

The concept of a vanguard party and its effect on conformity

A central tenet of Trotskyist politics is its insistence that a "vanguard party" is required to guide the working class to power. This is conceived as an organization of professional revolutionaries, steeped in Marxist ideology, tightly organized and determined to win the leadership of the working class. The idea was most forcefully advanced by Lenin at the turn of the century (Deutscher, 1954; Cliff, 1975), and justified by reference to the particular needs of a revolutionary movement operating under an autocratic regime (Volkogonov, 1994). As Milliband (1977) has pointed out, this was a departure (Leninists would describe it as an extension) from the original ideas of Marx, who was much more inclined to argue that the task of liberating the working class was the task of the working class itself. Ironically, Trotsky himself initially resisted Lenin's views (Poole, 1995). He argued that a vanguard party would inevitably seek to substitute its own activity and insights for the activity of the working class. Within the party, meanwhile: "... the party organization (the caucus) at first substitutes itself for the party as a whole; then the Central Committee substitutes itself for the organization; and finally a single 'dictator' substitutes himself for the Central Committee."

However, during 1917 he finally accepted the Bolshevik model of organization, and defended it with increasing insistence until his assassination in 1940 (Deutscher, 1963; Trotsky, 1975). In the last year of his life he wrote that "... in order to realise the revolutionary goal a firmly welded centralised party is indispensable" (Trotsky, 1973, p.141).

From the perspective of this discussion a number of important consequences follow. Firstly, the notion of a vanguard party inherently predisposes its adherents to view themselves as the pivot on which world history is destined to turn. Revolution is seen as the only route by which humanity can avoid annihilation, but revolution is only possible if a mass party is built around a group of "cadres": that is, devotees of the party with a particularly deep insight into its ideology. Thus, Trotskyists are possessed of a tremendous sense of urgency and a powerful conviction of their group's unique role in bringing about the transformation of the world: what could

be described as delusions of historical grandeur. Trotsky himself confided to his diary in 1935:

"... now my work is 'indispensable' in the full sense of the word.... The collapse of the two Internationals has posed a problem which none of the leaders of these Internationals is at all equipped to solve.... There is now no one except me to carry out the mission of arming a new generation with the revolutionary method over the heads of the leaders of the Second and Third International" (Trotsky, 1958, p.54).

This approach leads to the belief that the vanguard party has a level of insight into society's problem unmatched by anyone else. The grouping under consideration in this paper, the CWI, provides many instances of such a conviction in its publications. An internal document from 1977 averred:

"What guarantees the superiority of our tendency ... from all others inside and outside the labour movement is our understanding of all the myriad factors which determine the attitudes and moods of the workers at each stage. Not only the objective but the subjective ones too."

This conviction is combined with contempt for all other organizations on the left. The closer such organizations are to the group's own ideological lineage the more likely they are to be the targets of abuse. A CWI International Bulletin in 1975 declaims:

"... we consider that our organizations are alone in upholding the banner of Marxism ... we repudiate every sectarian fragment appropriating the name of the Fourth International."

One interviewee (David) told me: "We were taught to absolutely hate every other political organization that there was. Anybody on the left who wasn't a Marxist were called left reformists, and we were absolutely convinced that they didn't have a clue. We looked on them as hopeless people. People outside left politics at all were dismissed as 'liberals', but we probably hated them more than extreme right wingers – we used the word liberal as a sort of political swear word. But other Trotskyist groupings were the worst. We just laughed at them in internal meetings. We called them 'the sects' and took the view that they were incapable of any development at all. They were good for a laugh at best, but really the attitude towards anybody else claiming to be Trotskyist was that they were the complete enemy of everything we stood for. If we ever had taken power God knows what we would have done to them."

However, an additional feature of Lenin's conception of a vanguard party is that it was to be governed by the principles of what he termed democratic centralism. It would not be a loose federation, but a tightly integrated fighting

force with a powerful central committee and a rule that all members publicly defend the agreed positions of the party, whatever opinions they might hold to the contrary in private. Between conferences the party's leading bodies would have extraordinary authority to manage the party's affairs, arbitrate in internal disputes, update doctrine and decide the party's response to fresh political events.

As Lenin expressed it: "The principle of democratic centralism and autonomy for local party organizations implies universal and full freedom to criticise, so long as this does not disturb the unity of a defined action; it rules out all criticism which disrupts or makes difficult unity of action decided upon by the party" (Lenin, 1977, p.433).

Given what is now known of social influence this approach is almost certainly destined to prevent genuine internal discussion. Firstly, it is not at all clear when "full freedom to criticise" can actually be said to disturb the unity of a defined action. The norms of democratic centralism confer all power between conferences onto a central committee, allowing it to become the arbiter of when a dissident viewpoint is in danger of creating such a disturbance, normally presumed to be lethal. The evidence suggests that they are strongly minded to view *any* dissent as precisely such a disruption, and respond by demanding that the dissident ceases their action on pain of expulsion from the party. It should be borne in mind that the leadership of Trotskyist groupings views itself as the infallible interpreter of sacred texts which are seen as essential for the success of world revolution, which in turn is seen as vital if the world is to be saved from complete barbarism. This "all or nothing" approach to political analysis reinforces the tendency to view dissent as something which automatically imperils the future of the planet, and a justification (perhaps unconscious) of whatever measures are required to restore the illusion of unanimity. The following quotation, from a document written by some members expelled in 1992, suggests that such unanimity was endemic to the CWI method of working:

"The immense authority of the leadership created an enormous degree of trust.... In reality, the leadership of this tendency enjoyed more than trust. It had virtually a blank cheque (even in the most literal sense of the word) to do what it liked, without any real check or control. No leadership, no matter how honest or politically correct, should have that amount of 'trust' ... we built a **politically homogeneous tendency**. Up to the recent period there did not appear to be any serious political disagreements. In fact, there have been disagreements on all kinds of political and organizational matters, but these were never allowed to reach even the level of the CC [Central Committee] or IEC [International Executive Committee]. Nothing was permitted to indicate the slightest disagreement in the leadership.... There was uniformity, which at times came dangerously close to conformism.... The tendency became unused to genuine discussion and debate. To be frank, many comrades (including 'leading comrades') simply stopped thinking. It was sufficient just to **accept** the line of the leadership.... We have a situation where the leadership enjoys such trust that it amounts to a blank cheque; where there is uniformity of ideas, in which all dissent is automatically presented as disloyalty; where the leadership is allowed to function with virtually no checks or accountability, under conditions of complete secrecy from the rank-and-file" (their emphasis).

This document, independent testimony from journalists and other observers, and my own interviews and conversations with ex-members supports the view that intense fear of real debate and discussion was a defining characteristic of the CWI. All resolutions at party conferences would either come from the leadership or be completely supportive of its position. If branches or members submitted resolutions which were insufficiently enthusiastic about the general line CWI leaders exerted enormous pressure for them to be withdrawn. They invariably were. The leading role in the elimination of dissent appears to have been played by the CWI's General Secretary, determined to inherit the mantle of Lenin and Trotsky in modern day Britain. The "Oppositionist" document already quoted above recounts on this issue that:

"To cross the General Secretary would result in a tantrum or some kind of outburst. Comrades became fearful of initiative without the sanctions of the General Secretary. Incredibly, even the opening of a window during an EC [Executive Committee] meeting would not go ahead without a nod from him! Under these conditions, the idea of 'collective leadership' is a nonsense.... The EC as a whole – which is supposed to be a sub-committee of the CC – is out of control. In 99% of cases the CC is simply a rubber stamp for the EC."

The picture that emerges is of elected bodies usurping the normal democratic rights of members and becoming increasingly removed from formal controls. It was reported in early 1992 that over two years had elapsed between party conferences, during which time the leadership was effectively removed from all practical accountability to the membership for its actions. It also appears that power continued to flow upwards to the General Secretary and the full time staff

which he had ample scope to mould in his image. The Oppositionist document quoted above recounts:

"... no decisions of any significance are taken without the full knowledge and consent of the General Secretary, and that the great majority of them are taken, either on his initiative, or at least with his active participation.... The full-timers tend to order and bully the comrades, instead of convincing them. They rely upon the political authority of the leadership handed down from the past, in order to get their way. If you do not accept the targets handed down by the full-timer, you are 'not a good comrade', you are 'conservative', and so on."

Secondly, Cialdini (1993) reviews a variety of studies which show that when people take a public position in defence of a proposition there is then a strong tendency for their private attitudes to shift so that they harmonize with their public behaviours. In short, if people tell others that they support X (for whatever reason) their belief system will begin to agree that indeed they do support X. The more public such declarations have been the more likely it is that such a shift will take place. This will then contribute to future public activities in line with a now firmly held belief. Such findings suggest that if, in the name of democratic centralism, party members publicly uphold the party line it becomes increasingly difficult to hold a private belief at variance with attitudes publicly expressed. The evidence suggests that it is not possible to have a group of people presenting a conformist image to society at large while maintaining an inner party regime characterised by frank and full discussion. Conformity in public tends to equal conformity in private.

The gospel of catastrophism

It has been widely noted that apocalyptic images pervade the ideology of cultic groups. Cultic religious groupings routinely predict the end of the world (Richie, 1991), some psychotherapy cults also claim that unless their methods of producing rationality are widely adopted global catastrophe is assured (e.g. Jackins, 1990), and what some writers have termed "catastrophism" (Callaghan, 1984; 1987) pervades the ideology of Trotskyist groupings (e.g. Cannon, 1969). A leading Trotskyist theorist expressed this position thus:

"Monopoly capitalism ... considerably limits the development of the forces of production.... Crises become longer and more frequent, from the beginning of the twentieth century. Monopoly capitalism becomes more and more a fetter on the development of the productive forces. Henceforward its parasitic character explodes in the world's face in a new epoch of history, filled with convulsions: the age of capitalist decline, the age of war, revolutions and counter-revolutions" (Mandel, 1962, p.437).

This mode of analysis is the norm rather than the exception in Trotskyist circles. A 1981 CWI document, written by a leader with a penchant for death analogies, anticipates the closing decades of this century in the following terms:

"On a world scale capitalist economies not only find themselves in a crisis, they find themselves ensnared in an epoch of crisis, stagnation and decline ... short-lived half-hearted booms, followed by downturn and recession in an ever tightening cycle – these are the characteristics of the new period of general decline of world capitalism ... the search for lasting concessions and lasting reforms is now as futile as the search for flesh on an ancient skeleton."

It is further held that this economic contingency will have enormous political repercussions. In particular, it is argued that it poses a "black and white" choice for society, in that there will be either a triumph for socialism or the planet will be engulfed by unprecedented barbarism. A CWI internal document from 1975 proclaims that the period of class struggle inaugurated by the 1973 oil crisis will "... end either in the greatest victory of the working class achieving power and the overthrow of the rule of capital with the installation of workers democracy or we will have a military police dictatorship which will destroy the labour movement and kill millions of advanced workers, shop stewards, ward secretaries, Labour youth, trade union branch secretaries and even individual members of the Labour movement".

Such a toxic perspective poisons the internal atmosphere of the organization concerned. Firstly, it tends to black and white thinking in terms of prognosis, combined with a straining sense of urgency. Mutually exclusive and totalistic options for the future are assured. *Either* there will be a completely new form of society, hitherto unknown in human history, *or* there will be a relapse into forms of Nazism, this time threatening global nuclear destruction. No other options are available. The future is presented as a choice between imminent salvation or eternal damnation, and one which hinges on every action which party members take. Secondly, such a perspective is a classic cult means of extracting maximum involvement from people alongside a minimum critique of the group's position. It imbues the organization's routine activities with a sense of colossal urgency, purpose and conviction which normal politics can never hope to match. This reinforces a conviction on the part of members that they are destined to play a more vital and indispensable role than any previous group in human history.

Power dynamics, and life within the CWI

It has already been noted that the organizational norms of democratic centralism imply a concentration of power at the top. There is abundant evidence that such a concentration has been a defining feature of the CWI.

A passive membership uncritically adopted a political position handed down by the leadership. Structures, communication systems and organizational behaviours ensured a one way transmission of information and precluded the possibility of corrective pressure being exerted by the rank and file. Callaghan (1984, p.180), writing of the CWI, observed:

"... it is unclear what the contribution of the ordinary supporter can be. For a perusal of the group's internal documents ... reveals that these consist of unsigned articles carrying instructions, reports and, in general, attempts to co-ordinate or in some way organize the membership. There is no evidence of discussion and debate or of the involvement of the rank and file.... The national meetings which [CWI] does hold appear to be organized more like rallies than conferences with the audience playing a relatively passive role."

The question arises at this point: what did life within the CWI under such a regime feel like to the average member? How were they recruited and how was their compliance and then conformity to the group's ideology obtained? The following comments on these issues from one interviewee is typical of the accounts gained from many former CWI members. (One told me that when meeting other former members he felt that they had all been through a shared religious experience together!) *Ronnie* spent a number of years working full time for the CWI. Much of his experience echoes the points made by Siegel *et al.* (1987) and Lalich (1992; 1993) concerning the DWP:

"6/7 day weeks for activists were common, particularly those full time. We nominally had a day off, but I can remember another leader saying to me proudly of another that 'he uses his day off to prepare his lead-offs (introductory lectures) for meetings'. Full timers were also kept in poverty. Wages were virtually non-existent, and I found out recently that from 1985 to 1991 they got no pay rise at all!

"When we worked, the pressure was awful. Key committees often met Saturday and Sunday 9 to 5, on top of your normal week's work. There would be different sessions, with a leader making an hour long introduction which laid out the line. Everyone else then would come in and agree. The more you agreed with the leader the more he or she cited your contribution in a 15-20 minute summing up at the end. If you disagreed, your contribution would be unpicked, but if it wasn't sufficiently enthusiastic about the line it would –

even worse – be ignored. In this way you soon knew who was in and who was out. There was a distinct tendency to promote the most conformist comrades to key positions, even if they were also the most bland.

"High dues or subs were extracted from members. A certain minimum sub per week was set, which at several pounds a week was far in excess of what normal parties extract. But people were 'encouraged' to go beyond this. At big meetings a speech would be made asking for money. Normally, some comrade would have been approached beforehand and would have agreed to make a particularly high donation – say £500. The speaker would then start off asking for £500, its donation would produce an immense ovation and people would then be pressurised to follow suit.

"Everything was also run by committees, and we had plenty of those. Branches had branch committees which met in advance of branch meetings to allocate all sorts of work, this went on to districts, areas and nationally and internationally. Very often it was the same people on these committees wearing different hats! But nothing moved without the committees' say-so. This was accompanied by persistent demands for people to take more initiatives, but in practice there was no mechanism for this to happen. Also, at national conferences, leaders were elected by a slate system – i.e. the CC proposed a full list of names for CC membership. If you opposed it you theoretically stood up to propose a full list of new names, but needless to say no one ever did. New members were regarded as 'contact members' and allocated a more experienced comrade who was supposed to have weekly discussions as part of the 'political education'.

"I do remember feeling absolutely terrified when I first left – what was there for me now, what would I do, where did I start? I eventually managed to get my life together, but it was a hard slog."

Indoctrination began with the recruitment process. Given the CWI's secret existence within the Labour Party, people who came into contact with it would not have immediately known that it was an organization, with its own annual conference, full time officials and central committee. Potential sympathizers encountered CWI members in the normal environment of the Labour Party or trade unions. Once their left wing credentials were established they would be asked to buy the CWI newspaper, make a small donation, and support CWI motions at other meetings – a process of escalating commitment. Only after a series of such tests had been passed would the person be initiated into the secret of the CWI's existence, and provided with further internal

documents detailing aspects of its programme. As many ex-members have testified, the effect of this was to create a feeling that the potential recruit was gaining privileged information, and being invited to participate in the transformation of history. Furthermore, they could only access more of this knowledge by escalating their involvement with the group. The excitement at this stage was considerable.

In the 1970s, before the CWI grew to any significant size, the mystical aura around joining was heightened by the formality with which it was concluded. New recruits traveled to London, where they were personally vetted by the organization's founders. When this became impractical they were formally welcomed "in" by the nearest member of the Central Committee – an exercise close to "the laying on of hands" found in baptism ceremonies. Tremendous feelings of loyalty were engendered by this process, and fused together a group which saw itself as intensely cohesive and blessed with the evangelical mission of leading the world revolution. Research suggests that merely being a member of a group encourages the development of shared norms, beliefs systems, conformity and compliance (Turner, 1991). Belonging to a group with such a deep and all embracing belief system as that offered by the CWI encourages this process all the more.

Once in, however, the picture began to change. More and more demands were placed on members. In particular, they were expected to contribute between 10% and 15% of their income to the party, buy the weekly newspaper, contribute to special press fund collections, subscribe to irregular levies (perhaps to the extent of a week's income), recruit new members and raise money from sympathizers. Tobias and Lalich (1994) argue that cults have only two real purposes: recruiting other members, and raising money. These certainly emerge as central preoccupations of the CWI. Crick (1986, p.178) cites a former member as follows on some of these issues:

"A lot of it boiled down to selling papers. The pace didn't bother me, but one day I suddenly realized that after a year my social circle had totally drifted. I had only political friends left, simply because of the lack of time. There'd be the ... branch on Monday evening, the Young Socialists meeting another evening, 'contact' work on Friday night, selling papers on Sunday afternoon, and on top of that, to prove to the local Labour Party we were good party members, we went canvassing for them every week and worked like hell in the local elections."

Such a level of activity could be physically and emotionally ruinous, and required members to redefine their entire existence in terms of their membership of the CWI. Crick cites another interviewee as recalling:

"The most abiding memories of life [in the CWI] are filled with the sheer strain of it all. If you were even moderately active, you would be asked to attend up to six or seven boring meetings in one week.

"You built up an alternative set of social contacts as much as political activity. It can easily take over people's lives. It became obsessive. They were almost inventing meetings to attend. There was a ridiculous number of meetings held to discuss such a small amount of work. Even if you didn't have a meeting one evening, you'd end up drinking with them.

"The kind of commitment ... required was bundled together in the form of highly alienating personal relationships. You had to make sure your subscriptions were paid and your papers sold so as not to feel guilty when you chatted to other members. The only way out seemed to be 'family commitments' and the unspoken truth that as soon as a young ... member got a girlfriend he either recruited her or left" (p.182).

What runs through all these accounts is the boredom which accompanied CWI membership, after the thrill of initiation and the feeling of being special had worn off. For example, recruitment itself, and much of party life, consisted of hearing the same basic ideas endlessly repeated: there might be variations, but they would be variations around a minimalist theme. As Scheflin and Opton (1978) point out, paraphrasing no less an expert on mind control than Charles Manson, such repetition, combined with the exclusion of any competing doctrine, is a powerful tool of conversion. Even if the belief is not fully internalised a person hearing nothing but a one-note message will eventually be compelled to draw from it in expressing their own opinions. But once inside the CWI this became akin to spending every night listening to an orchestra playing the same piece over and over again. However well accoutered the musicians or however superb their performances boredom, tiredness and cynicism inevitably set in.

The recruitment process can also be interpreted as a means of indoctrinating new recruits by presenting them with an escalating series of challenges, or ordeals. Wexler and Fraser (1995) have argued that this is an important method of establishing the cohesiveness of decision elites within cults, thereby activating the extreme conformity known as groupthink. However, within the CWI, it seems that such methods were used on all new recruits in order to embroil them more deeply in CWI activities. Thus, the prospective recruit first expressed private agreement with some CWI ideas. They were then required to advance this agreement publicly at Labour Party or trade union meetings, then

contribute money, buy literature, and sell newspapers on the street. This continued until their entire life revolved around the CWI. The process seems to be one of *extracting commitment and then forcing a decision.* The full extent of the group's organization and programme would not be immediately made clear, and given the secretiveness of the CWI about its very existence would not be readily known via the media. Nevertheless, a commitment to some form of activity was obtained, and sounded on first hearing to have nothing in common with a life-transforming commitment. One interviewee told me:

"We would routinely lie to recruits about what their membership would involve. They would ask what level of activity we expected, and we would talk mostly about the weekly branch meeting and tell them that they could pick and choose what else to do, if anything. But once they were inside there would be systematic pressure to do more and more. Once they were in, very few could resist. But we knew that if we told them in advance all that was involved they would never join. I remember telling a full-timer once that I thought this new recruit we had met didn't have any friends. He looked absolutely delighted, and told me that meant we would at least get plenty of work out of him!"

Thus, recruits soon found their initial levels of activity rising: "come to one more meeting", "attend one more conference", "read an extra pamphlet this week". Whether they had consciously decided anything became irrelevant: a real commitment had been made to the organization. They often then found that their attitudes changed to come in line with escalating levels of commitment, and eventually reached such an intense pitch that a formal decision (if it needed to be made at all) was only a small final step – a classic demonstration of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957).

The evidence therefore suggests that, until the mid-1980s, the CWI was a growing political force, with several thousand predominantly young and enthusiastic members. Prospects seemed limitless. Members were certainly encouraged to believe that the British revolution would develop within a 10-year period, and that their organization would play a decisive role in history's most crucial turning point. It was at this point, with pride at its peak, that everything began to go wrong.

Collapse and disintegration

The steady growth which the CWI experienced in the late 1970s and 1980s created the twofold illusion that the party's entire programme had been confirmed, and that permanent expansion was assured – if everyone merely redoubled their already incredible work rates. New members were recruited without the period of lengthy indoctrination which had hitherto been a major condition of CWI membership. Consequently, their loyalty, conformity and respect for CWI methods of working were much less pronounced. Simultaneously, the Labour Party began to take action against CWI members, expelling them in large numbers. This created the first ripples of doubt concerning the organization's rationale for its existence.

Fundamentally, the CWI was hoping to remain a highly cohesive grouping, but with a mass membership: in essence, it was attempting to design a round square. Given an influx of new members not prepared to devote all their energies to party building, nor to avoid challenging CWI leaders when their predictions failed to materialise, this proved impossible. For many, after a short period of time, applause gave way to a slow handclap. The consequences are well summarised in a document published in 1992 by those expelled from the organization:

"... 1987 was a watershed.... The membership fell each year.... Then the sickness of commandism and substitutionism rose apace. The leadership hid the real situation from the ranks. Instead of 'success' we were faced with retreat, which did not suit the prestige of the leadership. Comrades were telling other comrades what they wanted to hear. The Centre became more and more out of touch with the situation on the ground. The CC generally accepted this state of affairs as they were too fearful of raising real criticisms and being labelled 'conservative'. The situation led to the burning out of a whole layer of comrades and Full Timers. Since 1988, the organization halved in size ... the turnover reached 38% in 1990 ... we have lost 1000 comrades since Jan. 1991 – a turn-over of 20% ... according to the census conducted at the 1990 congress less than 1100 were attending the branches, which includes 200 FTers."

"For years the uniformity then exhibited began to be transformed into conformity. Those who stepped out of line were clarified as 'pessimists', 'conservatives', 'troublemakers' etc. More and more the pressure was exerted to accept the line – more or less to stop thinking for yourself. The need for a critical minded membership was transformed into its opposite."

Latest reports suggest that the CWI has continued to decline since the early 1990s. An official history of the organization (Taaffe, 1995) boasts of increased membership figures up until the late 1980s, when it seems to have peaked at around 8000. Thereafter, no figures are claimed. However, material published by expelled members of the Opposition suggests that membership had fallen to below 3000 by 1993, with only a small

proportion of that active in any meaningful sense. It appears that this has since dwindled to well under 1000, and falling. It has lost its three MPs, positions in trade unions and a great deal of money. In a real sense, the glowing future which its leaders anticipated is by now well behind it.

Ideological totalism
The rise and fall of the CWI can also be understood in terms of Lifton's (1961) classic study of thought reform programmes in China. This introduced the term "ideological totalism" into the literature on social influence. Lifton defined this as "... the coming together of immoderate ideology with equally immoderate individual character traits – an extremist meeting ground between people and ideas" (p.477). He made it clear that the potential for such ideological totalism is present within everyone, in that extreme conformity exists at one end of a continuum, consisting at the other end of extreme dissent. However, totalistic convictions are:

"... most likely to occur with those ideologies which are most sweeping in their content and most ambitious – or messianic – in their claims, whether religious, political or scientific. And where totalism exists, a religion, a political movement, or even a scientific organization becomes little more than an exclusive cult" (p.477).

As this discussion makes plain, extremist Trotskyist organizations adhere to what could only be described as such an ambitious and messianic ideology, thereby holding an enormously exalted view of their role in society. The case history of the CWI suggests that conformity, the banning of dissent, intense activism and ultimate collapse are inevitable features of such a political landscape. This analysis is reinforced if we consider the extent to which the practice of the CWI accords with the eight main conditions which Lifton identified as indicating the presence of ideological totalism. These are:

1. *Milieu control*
As Lifton postulated it, this is primarily the use of techniques to dominate the person's contact with the outside world but also their communication with themselves. People are "... deprived of the combination of external information and inner reflection which anyone requires to test the realities of his environment and to maintain a measure of identity separate from it" (p.479).

In the DWP, discussed earlier in this paper, blatant measures were employed to achieve such effects – e.g. members were "encouraged" to share party accommodation. However, within the CWI, this seems to have been managed in a more subtle way. Firstly, the norms of democratic centralism (which, it will be recalled, require members to only put forward the party's position in public) disrupts their capacity to critically appraise party ideology. It is difficult to say one thing in public and hold to a set of private beliefs at variance with what is publicly expressed. Secondly, intense activism means that the party environment comes to dominate every aspect of the member's life. In this way, they are bombarded with party propaganda, in endless meetings, through reading party literature and by virtue of the fact that there is no time to read anything but party publications. Most points of contact with the external world are eliminated or drastically curtailed. As the material pertaining to the CWI's collapse suggests, this form of milieu control can be more subtle than in its most blatant cultic manifestations, but is still capable of exercising a profound influence on those affected.

2. *Mystical manipulation*
Lifton argues that: "Included in this mystique is a sense of 'higher purpose', of 'having directly perceived some imminent law of social development', of being themselves the vanguard of this development" (p.480).

This becomes a means of achieving higher and higher levels of commitment. Frantic work rates are intrinsic to vanguard notions of party building, and to the philosophy of Trotskyism, which claims in its starkest form a special ability to illuminate all intellectual discourse. Thus, Woods and Grant (1995), two leading British Trotskyists, have recently published a book on science, which attempts to apply a Marxist understanding to the origins of the universe, chaos theory, time travel, geology and evolutionary theory. The discussion above shows the extent to which the claim of privileged insight is central to the appeal of Trotskyist organizations and is ritually invoked to encourage supporters into binges of party building.

3. *The demand for purity*
Here, "... the experiential world is sharply divided into the pure and the impure, into the absolutely good and the absolutely evil" (Lifton, p.483).

Within the CWI, this process was best illustrated through its enormous emphasis on unanimity. For most of its history internal debate was effectively squashed, since ideas which challenged party orthodoxy could be beaten off as tainted by "the pressures of capitalism". But when the organization experienced significant setbacks in the late 1980s internal debate became unavoidable, particularly since an Opposition was declared by several of the most prominent leaders. However, and again this is more the norm than the exception in Trotskyist politics, this rapidly

led to the formation of factions, uproar and expulsions, with each side to the dispute claiming (a) complete fidelity to sacred traditions and (b) that opponents were under the influence of bourgeois ideology. The "demand for purity" is thus central to Trotskyist practice, but is inimical to the norms of democratic debate.

4. *The cult of confession*
In essence, this requires people to confess their inadequacies, their relative unsuitability to act as a vessel for the group's pure ideas, and the many ways in which they have let the organization down. The DWP, discussed earlier, institutionalised the ritual of confession into its programme of criticism, a norm at party meetings. There is no evidence that such practices gained such a hold in the internal life of the CWI. This may be partly because, up until the 1991/92 schism (and as noted earlier), vigorous measures were taken to sustain an illusion of unanimity within the organization's top ranks. Without the role models of lively discussion above it appears that the ranks retreated into an abject conformity unusual even in Trotskyist circles. This minimised the opportunity for confession rituals in party practice.

There is some evidence that in the 1992 split this changed. People who initially sided with the Opposition but then "changed their minds" were required to publicly retract their previous opinions. However, this was obviously mild in comparison to the practices of the DWP.

5. *The "sacred science"*
This aspect of ideological totalism is particularly apt to Trotskyist politics. Lifton describes it as follows:

"The totalistic milieu maintains an aura of sacredness around its basic dogma, holding it out as an ultimate moral vision for the ordering of human existence. This sacredness is evident in the prohibition (whether or not explicit) against the questioning of basic assumptions, and in the reverence which is demanded for the originators of the Word, the present bearers of the Word, and the Word itself ... the milieu ... makes an exaggerated claim of airtight logic, of absolute 'scientific' precision. Thus the ultimate moral vision becomes an ultimate science; and the man who dares to criticise it, or to harbour even unspoken alternative ideas, becomes not only immoral and irrelevant but 'unscientific' " (p.487).

This could be a purpose built characterisation of the CWI, as discussed above. Trotskyism, as defined by the CWI, is the only pure strain of such ideology (and hence of Marxism) left in the world, since the many others claiming such sanctity have in reality capitulated to "the pressures of capitalism". Only the group's ideology offers salvation. The effect is to secure a redoubled effort from the members in party building, presented as a race between the creation of mass revolutionary parties built in the image of the CWI and world destruction.

6. *Loading the language*
Lifton has described this as the extensive use of what he termed "the thought-terminating cliché", used as "interpretive short-cuts" (p.488). Repetitive phrases are regularly invoked to describe all situations, and prevent further analysis. Expressions such as "bourgeois mentality" are bandied around as a signifier of something which is an ultimate evil, in contrast to the ultimate goodness of the group's beliefs. Lifton describes the overall effects thus:

"For an individual person, the effect of the language of ideological totalism can be summed up in one word: constriction. He is ... linguistically deprived; and since language is so central to all human experience, his capacities for thinking and feeling are immensely narrowed" (p.489).

This is observable in the CWI's documents, and has been widely commented on by independent observers. The writings of CWI leaders are a compendium of clichés – "dazzling" prospects are always said to exist in the immediate future, "colossal" opportunities to build are identified in every situation, the years ahead are invariably referred to as "the coming period", the group's prognoses are frequently signaled by the tautologous expression "we predict in advance". The spectacle is one of thought attempting flight, only to find, in mid-motion, that all its moving parts have been superglued together.

In addition, the language of demonisation is used to describe dissidents. Both sides in the 1991/92 split accused the other of "bending to the pressures of capitalism". It is inconceivable that honest differences could exist which should be debated on their merits – they are invariably viewed as signifying the presence of alien class interests, to be engaged in mortal combat. The language is one of all or nothing – complete agreement or absolute separation becomes the norm.

It is also startling, in reading CWI documents over an extended period, to see how the same catastrophist ideas are repeated over and over again, without members apparently noticing that the predictions of 20, 30 or 50 years ago are the same as today and have yet to be borne out. A 1996 document produced by the faction expelled from the CWI in 1992 closes by advancing the by now familiar prediction that:

"The coming period into the new millennium

will be a period of convulsions for capitalism nationally and internationally. The socialist transformation of society will once again be on the agenda. The whole world situation is such that one victory in an important country would electrify the masses and lead to the socialist transformation of the entire globe."

The impoverishment of language used by these groupings, in which historical analysis regularly gives way to hysterical analysis, is clearly a major reason for the members' inability to grasp either the repetitious nature of its perspectives or the derivative nature of its analysis. Linguistic asphyxiation leads to intellectual paralysis. By narrowing the range of thought it also hinders falsification. Members lack the information required to compare predictions with reality, to distinguish between evidence and assertion, and eventually to think.

7. *Doctrine over person*
Essentially, Lifton argues that historical myths are engendered by the group as a means of reinforcing its black and white morality. Then, "... when the myth becomes fused with the totalist sacred science, the resulting 'logic' can be so compelling and coercive that it simply replaces the realities of individual experience ... past historical events are retrospectively altered, wholly rewritten, or ignored, to make them consistent with the doctrinal logic" (p.490).

Trotskyist organizations have no shortage of such historical myths, but the one which is most doggedly advanced concerns the 1917 Russian Revolution – often simply referred to in CWI circles as "October". A recent article in the journal of those expelled in 1992 is typical, and reads in part:

"The October Revolution was, and remains, the most significant event in history ... perhaps the most important lesson of the October Revolution, and the failed revolutions which followed it, is the role of Marxist leadership. Among Lenin's greatest contributions to the ideas of Marxism are his writings on the role of the party – ideas upon which he built and moulded the Bolshevik Party."

The objective then becomes one of repeating this glorious chapter under modern conditions. Countless subsidiary myths are woven around the primary myth of October. For example, a document by those expelled from the CWI describes the Bolshevik Party as "the most democratic party in the history of the world working class". There are also frequent references to the lonely but allegedly indispensable role of the CWI in maintaining the "sacred science" of Trotskyism in the post-war period. Historical myths console members for their present day impotence, provide a ready made historical schema

to impose on the complex realities of modern politics and – principally – act a strait jacket on innovative thought.

8. *The dispensing of existence*
Fundamentally, this proposes that only those who adhere to the group's ideology are fully human or fully good. Others are either conscious agents of evil forces or unconscious barriers to historical progress who may well deserve annihilation. The notion is promulgated that outside the ranks of the grouping the member may be corrupted by alien pressures, while only within its ranks can true purity be attained.

The desire for affiliation is one of the most deeply rooted features of human existence (Hargie and Tourish, 1997). A driving force behind it is our desire to reduce uncertainty, by embracing ready made explanations for the conduct of others (Berger, 1987). In particular, a number of crucial studies (Burgoon *et al.*, 1994) show that anxiety producing situations increase a person's need to affiliate with others and can also change their pre-existing criteria for choosing companions. Within all of this, it has been argued that the concept of a group is "... a pervasive, ever-present psychological mechanism which creates social cohesion and collective action and makes possible certain higher-order, emergent forms of social life" (Turner and Oakes, 1997, p.364). We attempt to reduce uncertainty through what might be termed a process of "social testing", in which we measure the validity of our attitudes by comparison to what significant others believe. How does this relate to the CWI?

Clearly, the huge levels of activity demanded of CWI activists ensured that their entire lives revolved around it. The group's ideology also offers ready made explanations for everything, thereby providing a convenient explanatory framework for the rapid reduction of uncertainty. This constituted one of its main appeals, particularly among young people, for whom uncertainty about the meaning of life and the future is naturally greatest. In addition, the high activism and frequently hostile climate in which people attempted to advance the CWI programme increased anxiety in the manner discussed by Burgoon *et al.*, and which therefore exaggerated the tendency towards affiliation, compliance and belief.

There is also evidence that the organization took a dim view of ex-members. An internal circular labelled those expelled in 1992 as "a hostile force, against which we will have to fight in the labour movement". The comrades of yesterday had become the demons of today. One interviewee, *Robert*, also recounted that:

"When people left, we always said that they

had 'dropped out'. I suppose that kind of implies that by leaving you were falling down or showing weakness! We also often said that they had 'degenerated'. There was never a good reason for calling it quits."

Conclusion

This paper has explored the techniques used by some groups on the left to maintain high levels of conformity, activism and intolerance on the part of their members. None of this necessarily implies that radical movements to change society are inherently destined to become obscure cults, or that a radical critique of modern society is inappropriate. In the final analysis, the condition of society is a vitally important issue, and requires a political rather than a psychological analysis. However, the evidence plainly suggests that a number of traditional Leninist or Trotskyist assumptions endanger internal democracy, political thinking and what must be a central goal of any movement seeking wider influence – the regular updating of ideas to retain relevance.

In particular, the Trotskyist conception of the role of the revolutionary party has become transmuted into a rationale for the creation of tyrannical fiefdoms locked into a spiral of irrelevance, fragmentation and ideological petrifaction. Rigid adherence to "democratic centralism", a term which appears to be an oxymoron, reflects an excessive veneration for "October", which in turn precludes an updated historical analysis of the 1917 Revolution and its aftermath. Accordingly, the Trotskyist tradition eschews innovation. Those marooned in its static preoccupations find themselves condemned to an ever greater isolation, in which the search for other footprints in the sand is always in vain. This is combined with a catastrophist political analysis which (despite its frequent falsification by events) acts a spur to such intense activism that the energy, time and confidence required for political reflection is consumed by party building. Such "party building" is generally signified by the presence of innumerable factions – and the absence of a party. The question therefore arises: to what extent can the CWI and Trotskyist groupings in general be regarded as cults?

It has been suggested in this paper that political cults possess six main distinguishing features, namely:

1. A rigid belief system.
2. An immunity to falsification.
3. An authoritarian inner party regime.
4. A leadership able to exercise arbitrary power.
5. The deification of leader figures.
6. An intense level of activism.

The discussion of the CWI suggests that virtually all of these were present within the organization, to one extent or another. However, no evidence has been presented that CWI leaders enjoyed a privileged lifestyle above other members, either sexually or financially. In addition, aspects of party ideology which reinforced conformism, including its enthusiasm for democratic centralism, have been identified. Much of this also suggests that the grouping concerned made ready use of the means by which Lifton (1961) suggested that undue social influence can be exercised to create ideological totalism. Nevertheless, not all of these elements were used equally, and their relative impact clearly varies from group to group.

Thus, Tourish and Irving (1995) have argued that it is useful to conceptualise the issue of cultism as a continuum. At one end of the spectrum we find voluntary associations of people co-operating to work out their ideas and develop a shared sense of purpose. At the other end are manipulated individuals, compelled to uncritically accept the theories of unchallenged, infallible and uncorrectable leaders. Organizations and individuals can move back and forth along this continuum. Harmful practices may reach such a level that the group experiences a qualitative rather than quantitative transformation, emerging as a fully fledged cult. In one sense this approach makes analysis more difficult, since it becomes more conditional and less "black and white". Groups are not necessarily either cults or not cults. They can be both, at different times and under different circumstances. The key is to identify what techniques of social influence are being used, and the extent to which the people involved recognise the dangers inherent to a great many forms of organization.

This paper opened with a brief review of the DWP in California, and then moved on to consider the CWI in Britain. It is clear that the vices of cultism were much more pronounced in the former case. Activity levels were greater, the arbitrary power of the leaders more entrenched, a cult of confession much more widely practised and the overall harm inflicted on members all the greater. Nevertheless, as this paper has shown, many standard practices and beliefs of the CWI (and the Trotskyist movement in general) suggest that it does occupy a place on the spectrum of cultic organizations, albeit perhaps not always at the most severe end.

Left wing activists, in common with all those interested in movements which set themselves ambitious goals of social, moral or commercial regeneration need to temper enthusiasm for change with a stronger awareness of the techniques of social influence, and a greater scepticism towards totalistic philosophies of social change. Without such an approach, individuals face lifelong disillusion with any form of political action.

Cults prey upon our aversion to uncertainty. Yet, in reality, they only illuminate the darkness with burnt-out candles. The disillusionment they cause itself becomes an enormous waste of democratic energy. In learning from organizations such as the CWI it will be possible to avoid such a fate and strengthen people's willingness to engage in political action which genuinely liberates their thinking and thereby contributes to social, economic and political growth and change in our society.

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