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Abstract

The words 'revolutionary party' are much bandied about, yet surprisingly ill-defined, and equally poorly understood. This causes both theoretical and practical problems. Practically, in the tradition of the Western Left, many groups award themselves the title without much enquiry into how they will conduct themselves to merit the award. Theoretically, it is not at all clear, for example, that the Cuban revolution was led by a party at all, yet the present Cuban Communist Party would be characterised by most as the party of the revolution. It is equally unclear whether there was any 'party' behind the French Revolution in the normal sense, even though that process created the very concept of 'the left', still in universal use, and the 'parties' which formed in the Assembly included the Jacobins on which generations of revolutionaries have modelled themselves.

Russia is yet more problematic; there is a widespread misconception that the Bolsheviks constituted themselves as a party from the outset, but they were a faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party at least until 1912. Even after that, the first decision of the party organisation they then created – the RSDLP (b) – was to expel the Mensheviks and recallists, in effect declaring itself to be that party, rather than a split from it. It is at least arguable that they viewed themselves, and were viewed, as the revolutionary wing of a party containing many trends, up until 1917 itself.

Yet many revolutions are associated with parties of some type: Sinn Fein in Ireland, the Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico, the Turkish CHP, or the Soviet Communists themselves as well as the Communist Parties of China, Yugoslavia and Vietnam, not forgetting that on the right, the parties of Hitler, Mussolini and Franco were an integral part of the processes of taking over, and exercising, power. The central question which emerges is to what extent parties created revolutions, and to what extent do revolutions create parties.

This paper will explore the issue historically, drawing on the concept of party advanced by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in the Communist Manifesto and in their work in the International working class movement, on the origin and role of 'resolute revolutionary' movements such as the Jacobins and the Bolsheviks.

Key Phrases: Geopolitical Economy, Revolution, State, Party, Political Power.

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