

Zenith: Faction or Tendency?

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Red Star strives to be a Marxist-Leninist center in DSA, as described in Hal Draper's *Anatomy of the Micro-sect*. In this piece, Sean T. and Matt M. describe two complementary dimensions of this construct – the 'faction' and the 'tendency' – as well as how both need to exist in balance.

Red Star considers ourselves a "center": a coherent grouping that advocates for and organizes a particular political line within a broader political context. We advocate for an anti-imperialist, Marxist-Leninist, and scientific socialist line within DSA, developing our analysis through political struggle within the organization as well as our practice through organizing efforts that DSA undertakes. We see centers as the most ideologically cohesive elements in socialist struggle – adherents of a particular ideological outlook operating within and influencing the actions of a broader party, which guides the class in arenas of struggle. Red Star views the "center" framework as a useful corrective against the consequences of both sectarianism, which leads to political irrelevancy, as well as an overly-broad political outlook, which leads to tactical freeze and movement capture.

The Center in Draper

Red Star's concept of the "center" is drawn from Hal Draper's definition in his piece *Anatomy of the Micro-sect*. Draper defines centers as "informal socialist circles – or formal ones if you will – which have an integral relation to the real struggles people are carrying on." Centers operate in various spheres of social and political work, providing a place for ideologically-aligned socialists to access resources like literature as well as interpersonal guidance and assistance, and where related political struggles can be linked, coordinated, and reinforced. Sects, on the other hand, see themselves as a vanguard-in-waiting rather than a part of the grassroots: "their organizational road to power is the formation of an elite band of Maximum Leaders which holds itself ready to bestow its own rule, at a propitious movement, on an elemental upsurge of the people." In the absence of a mass movement, sects grow by accretion, engaging themselves in activity that is "oriented towards" a particular strata of working-class people and attempting to skim the cream of the crop by identifying individuals whose political line passes muster to recruit.

Contra the Marxist sects, which counterpose the high bar of their own political program against the generally-underdeveloped activity of the

masses, Draper argues that revolutionary organizing “looks to the lines of struggle calculated to move decisive sectors of the class into action,” hoping to influence the actions of many through generative political struggle. These centers exert force against the existing struggle, pulling it towards their political perspective, but they do not just latch onto the most “advanced” members to draw away from the movement into sect activity: they pull from the roots, not the leaves.

What Doesn’t This Concept Give Us?

To elaborate on what it means to be a center in the context of DSA, it is useful to explore two dimensions of this work in practice: a center’s faction and its tendency. Draper does not define or use these terms in *Micro-sect*, but we are using them here in ways that should be familiar: a faction is a bloc within a broader group that acts together, while a tendency is a loose current that is typically not bound by unity in action but rather cohered through identification with a political or ideological pole rather than the practical implementation of a program. Each of these dimensions reflects aspects of political struggle, and despite the negative connotations of the word “faction”, they are meant to be value-neutral descriptors. Acting as a faction and acting as a tendency are both important aspects of political centers’ existence, whether in a multi-tendency organization as in DSA or in the broader context of arenas of struggle.

Acting as a Faction

When acting as a faction in the context of a broader democratic organization, a center uses democratic political struggle to advance the sharp edge of the tendency’s theories. Factions contest the structure of formal authority in their political context, acting as voting blocs and bringing in members or supporters to act under their guidance. They develop tight cohesion, often both political and social, that allows them to act in a unified manner. Activities which can be broadly characterized as “faction” behaviors include internal member development, group identity formation, polemicizing, developing and utilizing vote whip lists, and building name recognition and political “brand” identity. Factions fight for the organization to implement parts of their program as a way to test their strategies and use elements of their political line to call supporters into action.

Acting as a Tendency

If acting as a faction gives a center its sharp edge in intra-organization political struggle, acting as a tendency gives it its heft. A developed tendency advances a theoretical basis for its actions, entrusting observers and fellow travelers with the tools to both deploy and critique its tactics. A developed tendency names its politics, theoretical influences, strategic outlook, and contextual goals with the intent of bringing many people along under its diffuse political influence. “Tendency” behaviors include writing theoretical work, supporting study and inquiry efforts by non-members, and building informal organizing relationships that connect multiple struggles through emergent political unity. Tendencies attempt to use a shared theoretical basis to develop a wider, more coherent base for their project, using practical activity as a way to draw political actors towards their political line.

Centers: A Dialectic of a Faction and Tendency

A center needs to have a factional dimension and a dimension as a tendency in order to move its politics forward. While factional development allows a center to contest for formalized power and authority within its organizing context (such as a political organization, labor union, tenant council, or government board), development as a tendency gives it the ability to lead people into action outside of its formal democratic discipline (members, workers, residents, or constituents). In an arena of struggle, a tendency guides its supporters with the “why” and “how” of techniques for class struggle; a faction has the power to dictate the “when” and “where”.

A faction that does not understand the importance of developing its tendency, of guiding fellow travelers into correct action through generative struggle marked by an underlying dedication and commitment to the wellbeing of the political context, will devolve into sectarianism. Its activity will become insular, its motivations inscrutable to outsiders, its ability to draw anyone into action except by sheer discipline nonexistent. A faction that exists solely to contest for power will be stuck permanently flailing in the present, eating its seeds to win the current struggle but starving its chances at a future one.

Draper cautions against this danger in the context of building a socialist opposition within the labor movement:

The sectists who operate in unions and plants to subordinate the workers’ interests to their sect-advertising adventures and sorties are enemies of the working class and of socialism, not merely “misguided radicals” who are to be chided in Marxistical editorials. They are not “adventuristic” allies of our

camp in the class struggle; they are wreckers who cannot always be distinguished from police provocateurs. Any militant opposition movement in the trade unions which makes alliances with such elements will deserve its fate.

Indeed, this is a charge that has been levied against communist formations in and around all kinds of left social movements for decades.

On the flip side, it is equally true that a tendency without a factional element will struggle to develop a mature political practice. Factionalism gives the center its ability to engage in meaningful democratic struggle; it allows for the development of its politics in practice by carving out space for its desired program in the movement space it resides in. A broad working-class organization that encompasses a number of different strains of thought will need to make decisions about how to act as a group: consequential decisions like whether to go on strike or stay on strike; to withhold rent; to defy a court order; to participate in an election. It is not enough for a center to broadcast its ideology into the ether and wait for it to take shape organically: a center must act on the world by bringing new forms into being, and contesting the power of the old ones.

In this way, there is a dialectical relationship between centers' roles as factions and tendencies. Strengthening one allows for the strengthening of the other. Developing the faction helps us to advance our line and enact our preferred program through political struggle, putting our theories into practice. It allows ideas to be both demonstrated and refined in practice. And it allows us to demonstrate the differences between factions, as contesting and using power at the organizational level requires everyone to put their cards on the table when it's time to decide on a course of action. This is especially important for eliding real practical differences among people with similar ideological commitments, from those as broad as the organization-wide commitment to socialism to strategic differences between various camps in DSA that are vociferously anti-Zionist. Factional struggle demonstrates where a caucus's priorities and commitments are when the rubber meets the road.

Conversely, a well-developed tendency influences the broader organization's theoretical development, strategic thinking, and orientation towards particular arenas of struggle in a way that affects our practical activity. It also facilitates recruitment more easily: creating an ideologically-developed pole allows for further differentiation between tendencies (how many Marxist caucuses are there in DSA?) and helps people with both less- and more-developed politics find points of agreement or disagreement with our political program. A well-articulated tendency should, ideally, give

supporters, fellow travelers, and even skeptics the ingredients needed to test their theories through organizing efforts.

Why Does This Matter to DSA?

Many DSA members lament the degree to which caucuses and inter-caucus dynamics dominate the national-level political decision making within DSA. This is to an extent understandable, since DSA is an organization with its own political program, practice, and goals. However, the politically dynamic nature of the big tent organization allows for the fact that these goals, the plans of our program, and our day-to-day organizing activities are tests of different political tendencies' political assumptions and theoretical commitments. The existence of political formations within DSA that express these tentpoles makes that more scrutable and transparent, not less.

Factional disputes and their fallout within DSA is not a consequence of the existence of these groups. Rather, overdevelopment of factions and underdevelopment of tendencies stunts political development in practice. Factions fight for control over their pet projects without leading a broader tendency, attempting to suppress rather than resolve contradictions. Faction fights can take the form of abstract "meta-political" struggles and debates – how to best represent the political currents within DSA, where the lines around the "big tent" should be drawn, questions about membership and decision-making, even the multi-convention debate around how chapters should elect delegates. Beneath each claim to a democratic organization is a set of beliefs about how to assimilate or ostracize competing visions for DSA.

Conversely, underdevelopment of factions and overdevelopment of tendencies leads to inability to make democratic decisions at the organization-wide scale. Caucuses and groups that emphasize a certain strategy or tactic without attempting to synthesize it with the organization's overall political program or resolve points of contradiction make it hard to strategize or act collectively. Tendencies that don't engage with the factional struggles of resolving political differences in practice leave lingering questions of relating to outside organizations, formations, and fronts. Building a revolutionary political organization requires us to work with the masses and condition our politics through external struggle, certainly. But it also requires us to develop the capacity to work as an organization, to transform all the various energies expended in class struggle into the cooperative construction of a new society.

The question of synthesizing different political visions in practice, in

service of building the socialist movement, is one we must face head-on. It is a challenge that every socialist movement must contend with, in and out of power. Mao Zedong addressed this challenge within the Communist Party of China during several speeches addressed to the party during the second phase of the Chinese Civil War: the armies fighting in the war had emerged to fight in specific contexts, developing a strategic program informed by the battles they were fighting. Each cell became a “mountain”, looming large and formidable over their region, governing according to the principles that had won them the war. However, the development of the party as a governing institution required that these “mountaintops” would subordinate themselves to the work of the party as a whole in leading the Peoples’ Republic. Mao did not criticise the mountains, but rather “mountaintop-ism.” (The “mountaintop-ism” critique has been put forward more contemporarily to address corruption and cliquish behavior by party members.) The PRC was not just a sum of its parts – party schools and press, roads, communication networks, etc.; it was the synthesis of these capacities into a governing project. So too must the partisans of particular strategies within DSA be ready to take the question of political struggle for leadership, to acknowledge the other mountains, to engage in criticism, draw out contradictions, and synthesize them into practice.

Understanding DSA as the locus for not just factional struggle but a place where different tendencies manifest as a synthesized political practice requires devoting effort to both elements of political development. This is a crucial capacity we must develop; right now, a dearth of synthesis pulls DSA in numerous directions, with groups working at cross purposes. Red Star relies on the framework of the center to guide us through moments where we must struggle internally and those where we must struggle externally. At a time of heightened political activity and rapidly-changing circumstances, the current fractures that define the organization are liabilities not just for us but the working-class resistance which is struggling to emerge.