

Karl Marx and the Trotskyist Tradition

From a Lecture by Cyril Smith

Trotskyism - Trotsky himself preferred to say 'Bolshevik-Leninism' - continued the fight for the traditions of the October Revolution, when the degeneration of the revolution became apparent to some of its supporters in the Communist International. Answering Trotsky's call for a new 'World Party of Socialist Revolution', the small groups of Left Oppositionists, now calling themselves the Fourth International, battled against the betrayals, lies and murders of Stalinism.

We can be proud of this tradition. Almost alone, it kept alive within the workers' movement the knowledge that world capital would be overthrown and that the transition to a socialist future was on the historical agenda. With the outbreak of the Second World War, and the assassination of the Old Man, the movement already faced enormous problems. After the war, we grappled with increasing difficulty with the task of comprehending the very changed world situation within Trotsky's theoretical framework. As the century reaches its close - the century which we thought would see the destruction of bourgeois society - we have to ask ourselves: is the theoretical legacy of this tradition adequate for the victory of the socialist revolution?

Indeed, we ought to look carefully at these very notions, 'theoretical framework' and 'theoretical legacy'. Why should any set of ideas be taken as a basis for all thought and action? How can any 'legacy' from past struggles simply be taken on trust as a foundation for revolutionary ideas, whatever course history may take? A 'framework' can be a support, enabling us to build a new structure, or it can be a prison. Today, when so much has changed in the world, those who uncritically take any of their assumptions from the past, are clinging to their prison bars.

Some people refuse to contemplate such questions. Either they want to continue to uphold the old ideas, however much the real world contradicts them, or they have discarded the notion of communism completely. I think that each of these options is false. Against the dwindling resistance of those who still want to 'uphold the heritage', and in opposition to those who want to get rid of it, we are obliged to question every side of the legacy with rigorous objectivity. Amending this or that aspect of our old ideas, trying to patch them up to make them fit the modern world, is the very worst thing to do.

I believe that a first step in the regeneration of revolutionary socialism is to check the tradition against the ideas of Karl Marx himself. I don't mean to imply that

the founder of our movement, who began work a century and a half ago, can provide us with ready-made answers to the problems of today. I am sure there are no such answers to any worthwhile question! But I am convinced that, even while Marx was still alive, his followers lost sight of the chief ideas on which Marx's communism was founded. Certainly, we have to surpass Marx, to develop his work to face the new century, but first we have to catch up with him. In this lecture, I want to use Marx's writings to question some of the ideas which we used to assume were unquestionable.

This wholesale re-examination is made inescapable by the death of the last remnants of the Russian revolution. 1917 was the most important event of the twentieth century, and its negation changes everything. We believed that 1914 had ushered in the final period of class society, and that 1917 was the start of the world revolution. We had no doubt that the Third International, later replaced by the Fourth, would emerge as its leadership. The survival of capitalism we entirely explained by the betrayals of social democracy and Stalinism. Looking back at the situation after the Second World War, it now seems clear that, even then, we should have been more true to the spirit of Trotsky's fight, if we had not just tried to fit the real world into our old conceptions.

We must make up for lost time and ask ourselves some difficult questions. Did the world socialist revolution really begin in 1917? What is the significance of the Russian revolution for the transition to communism? What kind of state and social order emerged from that revolution? In general, what is the communist revolution? How is the leadership of the revolution related to the mass of the working class, and how are our ideas related to the consciousness of this mass? How should the revolutionary leadership organise itself? What, indeed, is revolutionary leadership? Yes, the tradition of struggle for the Fourth International must be maintained, preserved for future generations. But if this is to be done, it has to be transformed in tune with the new problems faced by the working class. Otherwise, IT WILL DIE.

"The economic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution has already in general achieved the highest point of fruition that can be reached under capitalism", Trotsky wrote in the **Transitional Programme**. "Mankind's productive forces stagnate." In 1938, that was a great idea. But ten, twenty and thirty years afterwards, I heard Trotskyists repeating these sentences, while all around them technological advance and economic expansion were

proceeding at an unprecedented rate. Many of us scanned the economic horizons for signs of a recurrence of the 1929-33 slump, which, we imagined, would automatically bring the working class back into mass revolutionary action.

I don't think these notions were really in line with Marx's conception of the communist revolution. Marx showed that capital was an exploitative, oppressive, antagonistic social relation, which continually produced and reproduced itself. As it robbed the workers of their lives and the results of their labour, it drove them to revolt, not simply as victims, but as the bearers of human productive power, potentially, the power of free creation. The communist revolution could not be an unconscious reaction to suffering, for its outcome was to be a truly human society, in which human beings would consciously produce their own social relationships. Yes, the instability of bourgeois society points to the need for its overthrow. But simply watching for the intensification of suffering through an economic crisis, was to fall victim to that 'economic determinism' which led Marx to deny that he was a 'Marxist'. We saw the 'subjective factor' - what we called 'leadership' - separated from these 'economic prerequisites'.

Trotsky's greatest theoretical contribution was to show how the international character of the revolution interacted with national peculiarities. This was in direct opposition to Stalin's reactionary conception of 'socialism in one country'. Trotsky began his political work at a time when the bourgeoisie had not yet conquered state power in many parts of the world, including, of course, his native Russia, while it had already run its course in the older capitalist countries.

Even before Lenin, Trotsky considered the possibility of the working class taking the lead in what they called the 'bourgeois-democratic revolution', so that countries where capital had not yet taken root, and the proletariat formed only a small minority of the population, could begin the world overthrow of capital, before the older capitalist countries. Today, that epoch has passed, and capital now holds state power in every part of the globe. We must re-examine all such questions.

It is hard, now, to recall the extent to which our conceptions of revolution were derived from the Russian model. We understood the development of the working class and its leadership in terms of the slogans, and even the vocabulary of the Comintern. We used words like 'perspectives', 'leadership' and 'crisis' without really questioning their meaning. We modelled the organisation of our own tiny forces on that 'democratic centralism' which was shaped to fit Zinoviev's apparatus. Lenin would sometimes emphasise the backwardness of Russia and look forward to the time when the language of the International would be German, not Russian. But the experience of Bolshevism, of the Revolution and of the Civil War, inevitably moulded the foundation for the Third In-

ternational and its Sections.

The **Transitional Programme** told us that

the Soviet Union emerged from the October revolution as a workers' state. State ownership of the means of production, a necessary prerequisite to socialist development, opened up the possibility of rapid growth of the productive forces.

But the apparatus of the workers' state underwent a complete degeneration at the same time: it was transformed from a weapon of the working class to a weapon of bureaucratic violence against the working class, and more and more a weapon for the sabotage of the country's economy.

But what was a 'workers state'? It was a term that Marx himself never used. Instead, he explained that

between capitalist and communist society lies the period of transition from one to the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat. (**Critique of the Gotha Programme**)

This phrase, 'dictatorship of the proletariat', was used by Bolshevism quite differently from Marx's intended meaning. He aimed it against his opponents, the Blanquists. Their Utopian conception of revolution was to prepare secretly to take over the state power, letting the working class know afterwards what had been achieved on its behalf. Marx, on the contrary, saw the revolution as the task, the conscious task, of the working class itself. Those of the state's social functions which will remain in communist society, he insisted, those 'analogous to present state functions', will be carried out by the class as a whole, not by any self-appointed group of revolutionaries, however devoted they may be.

From its very inception, the State has expressed that separation of economic and communal life, which was the consequence of private property. In the **Communist Manifesto**, Marx described how, after the overthrow of the bourgeois state, what would replace it would be 'the state, i.e., the proletariat organised as the ruling class'. This 'state' would thus 'lose its political character'. But the phrase 'workers' state' came to imply that the instrument of violence by which the bourgeoisie imposes its rule over the working class, would be replaced by another 'weapon', equally violent, by which the proletariat, in the shape of its Party, would force its will on society.

The experience of the Russian revolution and the civil war which followed it led us to see the transition period in terms of bloody conflict. The history of that heroic and brutal struggle made us emphasise the necessity for harsh measures, not only against the old ruling classes, but

also to discipline the masses of toiling people, including the working class itself. The brutality of the civil war in backward Russia became the norm for the transition to socialism. It would be interesting for someone to study in detail the evolution of the ideas of Lenin and Trotsky, from the writing of **The State and Revolution**, to Trotsky's last writings. Then we could trace the way that the idea of proletarian dictatorship was transformed from 'an instrument of the working class' into a form of rule in which the Party acted on behalf of the working class.

In 1920, while living in the famous armoured train and directing the Red Army, Trotsky wrote his **Terrorism and Communism**. (A copy was given to every delegate to the Second Congress of the International, together with Lenin's **Left-wing Communism**.) In this reply to Kautsky, Trotsky explained the conception held by the Bolsheviks of the necessity for iron discipline to defeat the class enemy. It could be argued that at that time such methods were inevitable, maybe even necessary. But they were turned into the norm for socialist revolution. Sixteen years later, by then an exile, Trotsky issued a French translation, prefaced with the words:

This book is devoted to elucidating the revolutionary policies of the proletariat in our epoch.

Among the ideas it included are the following:

In the hands of the Party is concentrated the general control. ... It has the final word in all fundamental questions. ... The last word rests with the Central Committee. ... We have more than once been accused of having substituted for the dictatorship of the soviets the dictatorship of our party. Yet it can be said with some confidence that the dictatorship of the soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party.

What was the aim of this 'dictatorship of the Party', and what did it mean for our conception of the state? Among many other things, Trotsky told the Communists of 1920, and repeated to his followers in 1936, that

just as a lamp before going out shoots up a brilliant flame, so the state before disappearing assumes the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the most ruthless form of the state, which embraces the life of the citizens most authoritatively in every direction.

When Trotsky wrote this book, the term 'workers' state' had not yet become current in the movement. It seems to have been used by Lenin for the first time at the end of the year 1920, in his attack on the ideas of Trotsky and Bukharin in the Trades Union discussion, and then only in the phrase 'a workers' state with bureaucratic deformations'. By then, the Soviets and the factory committees of 1917 existed in name only. The idea was now that the

transition to socialism could be carried out by a workers' state which was 'healthy'. The existing Soviet state was an unhealthy version of the same ideal form.

We must re-examine many issues which used to be built into our thinking. For instance, Trotsky in the 1930s was unable to look objectively at the role of the Cheka at the time of the civil war, or at the Kronstadt episode. We ought to look at these issues again, especially now that new material is available.

Thus already by the 1930s, the ideas of the Marxists were far away from those of Marx. The emergence of Stalin's murderous regime made our task even more difficult. To describe this new social formation, Trotsky introduced the description 'degenerated workers' state'. The effect of this formulation, in my view, was to rob us of any real understanding of what Marx meant by the communist revolution.

Still worse was to follow after the Second World War. The Fourth International tried to grasp the changes in Eastern Europe and China within the same theoretical scheme. Since these states under Stalinist leadership were not bourgeois states, and had never been 'healthy', the label 'deformed workers' state' was invented for them. No-one ever coherently explained just what these monstrosities had to do with Marx's communism. Somehow, in some mystical fashion, they embodied a few crumbs of 'the gains of the Revolution'.

Trotsky, in **The Revolution Betrayed**, had said that 'the revolution, betrayed by the ruling party, still exists in property relations and the consciousness of the toilers', 'property relations' presumably meaning the state ownership of industry. In Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia etc., industry was owned by the state, without a revolution having given rise to this state of affairs. (In fact the nationalisations in those countries were, in general, carried out after the working class had been crushed by the bureaucracy.) Bureaucratic state ownership came to be confused with socialism, and the Chinese revolution merely added to our confusion. If bureaucracies could overthrow the bourgeois state, with little if any independent working-class activity, what was left of Marx's idea of communist revolution as the task of the proletariat itself?

The splits which then affected the world movement were the inevitable outcome of this theoretical chaos, and did little to clarify it. When Castro began to nationalise Cuban industry, in response to the US blockade of the Cuban revolution, it was still further intensified. Now, it seems to me, we must carefully retrace our steps, returning to the original ideas of Marx, in order to regain his fundamental concept of communism.

Behind these problems lies the notion which Marxism had about itself, and about its relation with the ideas held by the mass of workers. Lenin, following Karl Kautsky, had

argued in 1902 that

there could not have been Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without ... The working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness. **(What is to be done?)**

Neither Trotsky nor Rosa Luxembourge ever accepted this idea, and Lenin himself qualified and modified it many times. But on the crucial issue of how Marxism and the Marxist Party relate to the thinking of workers, confusion reigned.

We must ask ourselves again just what we mean by an International. How does a world organisation of revolutionaries relate to the consciousness of the working class? This is how Marx himself saw the problem, in 1846:

Just as the economists are the scientific representatives of the bourgeois class, so the socialists and communists are the theoreticians of the proletarian class. ... In the measure that history moves forward, and with it the struggle of the proletariat assumes clearer outlines, they no longer need to seek science in their minds; they have only to take note of what is happening before their eyes and become its mouthpiece. So long as they look for science and merely make systems, so long as they are at the beginning of the struggle, they see in poverty nothing but poverty, without seeing in it the revolutionary, subversive side, which will overthrow the old society, From this moment, science, which is the product of the historical movement, has associated itself consciously with it, has ceased to be doctrinaire and has become revolutionary. **(Poverty of Philosophy)**

This revolution was

carried through by the class which no longer counts as a class in society, which is not recognised as a class, and is itself the expression of the dissolution of all classes, nationalities, etc. within present society.

For this, 'the production of communist consciousness on a mass scale' was needed. It was not just a matter of the overthrow of the ruling class, but also

the alteration of humans on a mass scale ... because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages. **(German Ideology)**

There can be no short cuts to such a development. 'The first step in the revolution is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy'. **(Communist Manifesto)** This can only arise from the development of capital itself, and the task of the communists is to 'become the mouthpiece' of this development.

The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all the others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.

It is time to get back to this outlook, and to earn the right to be a communist leadership through 'understanding the line of march'. Only then can we show the way forward to the goal, by means worthy of it:

In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.

