

Revolutionary History and its Relevance for Today: The Legacy of Trotskyism in the US

by Steve Bloom

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Let me start with a disclaimer. I am a member of Solidarity and the Columbus branch of Solidarity is sponsoring this conversation. But these remarks do not speak for Solidarity. I speak only for myself. We have many viewpoints in Solidarity on this topic and mine is only one of them.

This is part of a new approach to revolutionary organization-building, an approach which is critical, in a way, of the Trotskyist legacy in the USA. This is something I will come back to it at the end of my remarks.

Also, allow me to preface my main comments by noting that times are changing. We all feel the change and have talked about it a lot since the development of Occupy Wall Street last Fall. I have heard many musings about the question: Will OWS come back again now that the Spring has arrived? But I would like to suggest that the question should be broader than just whether OWS will come back. We need to consider not only that, but also whether the spirit of resistance and protest that OWS began to manifest will bubble up in other places too.

For example, we had a May Day demonstration in New York City at the beginning of this month. It was the biggest May Day I can remember. Of course, OWS was involved in May Day, but it was more than just OWS. It was a genuine coalition effort between the OWS folks and two other groups that have celebrated May Day (at least for the last few years): the NY labor movement and a group called the “May Day Coalition” which traditionally focuses on immigrant rights issues. And it seems obvious to me that we had a demonstration three times the size of any previous event (my personal estimate) not because of any one of these individually, but because of the synergy between all three working together.

I was also at a demonstration at the Justice Department in Washington DC on April 24, Mumia Abu-Jamal’s birthday. It had been called by Mumia to protest the whole constellation of issues around prisons and the prison industrial complex. Having experienced previous actions of this kind, and knowing that April 24 was a Tuesday so folks would have to take off from work or school, I went expecting one or two hundred hearty souls. I have heard estimates as high as 1000, though on the day I told myself it was somewhere around 500. Still, even my lower estimate is dramatically higher than what I had expected.

So something is happening in the world right now, and it creates a renewed imperative for the study of revolutionary ideas.

But why, in that context, should we study history? The short answer is because history rhymes. It does not repeat. The current problems we face are never identical to historical problems. But they do

have analogues. There are essential similarities in terms of the substance, if not the form, of the questions that are being confronted, reflecting the underlying similarities of class dynamics in any society where class struggle is dominated by the existence of bosses and workers, of oppressed nationalities, by the subordination of women and other forms of gender oppression, etc.

If we go through new experiences without studying the ways these dynamics have worked themselves out in the past we are likely to make the same mistakes over and over again. And this has happened, repeatedly, precisely because new struggles so often arise without reference to any historical experience.

And then there is still one more level to this question: Why study Trotskyist history? My answer is that we should do so because from the mid-1920s until at least some time after the second world war (arguably until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989) the Trotskyist movement was the most consistent, militant, and creative force attempting to deal with a series of concrete problems in a revolutionary way. We therefore have something to learn from that experience today.

I am struck by how often I see books or movies or TV shows that celebrate wonderful and heroic moments of struggle from history. And such moments should be celebrated. They allow us to feel good about ourselves and about our humanity. But the task is not just to struggle, it seems to me. It's to figure out how we can win. What are the lessons from history's many failures and its few successes?

Trotskyism lived through one of the most tragic failures of the revolutionary experience, the decades in which the existence of a bureaucratic dictatorship in the USSR dominated the world in many ways, certainly from a revolutionary point of view. Trotskyism struggled against this bureaucratic dictatorship and drew the lessons of that struggle. For sure there are things we can learn. Whether you think the Trotskyists did well or badly, the experience was a success or a failure or something in between, it should be essential to try to learn the lessons.

Let's start by considering two extreme attitudes about Trotskyist history which you will most commonly encounter, both of which are wrong in my judgment.

First, there are those who worship the history of Trotskyism and attempt to apply it by rote. This includes the obviously sectarian currents which tend to give Trotskyism a bad name. But it also includes many honest individuals who learned something useful in the 1960s and 70s, but are stuck in what they learned back then and refuse to consider what is changed today. Often they refuse even to conceive of the fact that things have changed.

The other grouping consists of those who assert simply: "that was then this is now." These folks do understand that things have changed but do not consider the ways in which they also remain the same. Some of them will tell you that Trotskyism has historical interest for those who are strictly interested in history, but they generally consider that little or nothing of real substance from previous times applies today.

Of course, as you can probably tell from my comments so far, you will find me somewhere in between these two extremes. Unfortunately I do not find a lot of people in between these two extremes. Most seem to gravitate to one pole or the other. Still, I remain steadfast in asserting that there are valid observations on both sides, and that neither side taken to the extreme can generate the overall truth we need. The task is, precisely, to sort out what is true and what is false in each perspective, what has changed and what has remained the same.

In that context let's consider some of the lessons I think future generations will need to know, and that studying the history of Trotskyism can help us to learn. We have only a limited time, and so I will briefly mention three points:

* First: Every significant mass movement, even in non-revolutionary times though even more so in revolutionary times, is confronted with a choice: It can accept immediate gains which might be won by a compromise with the present power structure, or else focus on more substantial goals which require a direct confrontation with and defeat of that power.

What are the consequences of making different choices? What effects does this have in terms of long-range and short-term goals? How can we struggle for and win reforms without unacceptably compromising our revolutionary aims? How can we effectively deal with leaders that arise and who seem to be sympathetic to the strivings of the mass movement but who are, fundamentally, mired in their own compromise with the present system—without either isolating ourselves from our potential mass base or capitulating to the program of such reformist leaders?

* Second: Over and over in the history of the 20th century mass movements have created a political situation that leads to the brink of revolution, but then failed to take the steps necessary to actually make revolution a reality. That means the eventual dissipation of the revolutionary wave and the re-imposition of the old state power, often in a bloody and repressive mode. This happened during the 1920s in Germany and China; during the 1930s in France, Spain, Britain; post-World War II in Greece, throughout Latin America (though Chile stands out as a particularly tragic and well-known example) also in France again and Portugal. South Africa, the Congo, Indonesia, Iran and many additional cases could be cited.

I will tell you now that this is going to happen again, unless there is a revolutionary cadre in place—when a mass upsurge pushes things to the brink of revolution—which understands the dynamic and how to get over the hump, how to actually make a revolution. This has to be a cadre which is large enough and has sufficient roots in the mass struggle to actually provide leadership, which means we cannot wait to begin its creation until a revolutionary crisis becomes manifest. By then it is too late.

* THIRD: Every successful revolution is confronted, in the short to medium term, with bureaucratic trends that threaten to derail it. Russia is the classic case, but consider how many others there have been during the 20th century, from China to Nicaragua and Grenada. Why do these bureaucratic tendencies arise? Is it possible to combat them effectively?

Trotskyism has some considerable experience with all three of these big questions, and therefore something to teach us if we pay attention.

Our subject today is Trotskyism in the USA, so let me say a few words about this as a specific variant. US Trotskyism is marked by some key successes and a number of important theoretical contributions, for example:

- * The success in building the Minneapolis teamsters union in the 1930s, as documented by Farrell Dobbs in his wonderful book, *Teamster Rebellion*. This represents a concrete and positive example of what is needed to counteract bureaucracy. And although it is only a case study of one union, not of a revolution, the same basic principles apply.

- * There is the work done in collaboration with Trotsky to develop the transitional program, also in the 1930s. This was a role US Trotskyists could play because of their proximity to Mexico, where Trotsky was living in exile.

- * An active opposition to US imperialism in world war II, including a rejection of the no-strike pledge that was imposed by the labor bureaucracy and endorsed by the Communist Party. US Trotskyists also supported the March on Washington proposed by A. Phillip Randolph to oppose racism in the military and other spheres of US life, rejected subordinating this struggle to the war drive.

- * During the 1960s and '70s US Trotskyism was instrumental in building an "Out Now" wing of the anti-Vietnam War movement. And during the same period we have the groundbreaking theoretical work done by George Breitman to understand the meaning of Malcolm X and the rise of a Black revolutionary movement.

These are heroic moments in the history of US Trotskyism, and therefore in the history of Trotskyism on a world scale, and therefore in revolutionary history. But what's important, it seems to me, is not just admiring these heroic moments. What we need to do is study the underlying revolutionary principles and theory that allowed US Trotskyists to make these contributions, even as a minority current struggling against Stalinism, against Social Democracy, and against the US Capitalist ruling class. The terrain we face today is different. But these underlying revolutionary principles and theories can help us to navigate the terrain we face today too.

It is also essential, of course, to understand and contextualize the errors made in the course of this Trotskyist history. For example, immediately after the end of the second world war the US Socialist Workers Party adopted a document called "The American Theses," which declared that the US Socialist revolution was imminent and that the SWP would be the vanguard of that revolution, this at a time when history was, unfortunately, moving in precisely the opposite direction (though the forces that would create the witch-hunt atmosphere of the 1950s were not yet evident). There was, obviously, something quite fundamentally wrong with the SWP's approach that allowed this mistake to be made. And US Trotskyism was subject to all of the splitting and factionalism that also plagued this current on a global level.

So once again our attitude should be neither worshipful nor dismissive. The task is to do a serious and critical re-evaluation.

Finally, allow me to say a word about the relationship of Trotskyism, and the study of Trotskyist history, to the ideas being developed today by other revolutionaries who come out of other traditions. Those who identify with Trotskyist ideas understand important truths, things we know to be true as a direct result of our experience in the Trotskyist movement . But we do not have a monopoly on the truth. There are many others, from other traditions, who have converged on certain key elements that were once identified strictly with Trotskyist ideas (the question of democracy—in the context of creating a revolutionary mass movement and a revolutionary cadre organization—is an obvious one). And there are insights which others have that they arrived at independently, that we who come from a Trotskyist tradition need to catch up with.

Here I will highlight the question of ecology and the need for a new vision of ecosocialism. This idea is in contrast to the solution our current has most often envisioned: More and more production to satisfy more and more real or acquired needs. Ecosocialism requires scaling back, producing less, identifying what our real needs as human beings really are and discarding the rest. Further, the ecosocialist movement begins to insist on a concept that has been essentially missing from the Trotskyist arsenal: the prefiguration of new social, economic, and cultural forms in advance of "the revolution," as part of the process that helps create the preconditions for revolution. Trotskyists have tended to see the development of new social, economic, and cultural forms as something that only takes place after the conquest of political power.

So today it is not only those who come from a Trotskyist tradition who have something positive to contribute, but also many who identify with anarchist and Maoist traditions, with indigenous peoples struggles, and with other ideological currents. It therefore becomes even more imperative that we reject the exclusivity (sectarianism) which has, too often, dominated the Trotskyist movement. There is not one and only one right answer, which we somehow have the key to because we understand the history of Trotskyism. There is a need to develop collective answers in a collective way, a process Trotskyism can contribute key ideas to, but one our historical current also has a great deal to learn from.

We have to discover (rediscover) the ways in which genuine revolutionaries can learn from one another in an atmosphere of collectivity and mutual respect rather than exclusivity and mutual hostility. The task, in short, is to combine our appreciation of revolutionary history with a new vision of a revolutionary future, welcoming the positive contributions that can be made by so many to that process.

And so I return, as promised, to the question I raised at the start: why Solidarity conceives of itself in a different way, a way that is sharply critical of how Trotskyists have traditionally organized themselves (in exclusive groups based on a tightly-held collective ideology). There was a whole historical period in which Trotskyism could reasonably conceive of itself as the only current which was pursuing a genuinely revolutionary path. And in that context it often seemed true within the

Trotskyist movement that one particular strand or current could reasonably conceive of itself as the only strand or current which had a revolutionary objective in mind. But whatever historical assessment we might make of such attitudes, they are clearly inappropriate today. We therefore need to create forms of organization today which welcome diversity and understand that no one individual or current has a monopoly on the truth, forms of organization which can incorporate the contributions that come from many different sources.

In my view this should not cause us to downgrade or disregard the essential contributions of Trotskyism historically. It should, in fact, allow us to appreciate these contributions more fully and more completely as part of a broader collective process.