

The Legacy of Trotskyism

by Steve Bloom

The purpose of this contribution is to briefly explore the legacy of Trotskyism on two levels—political and organizational. The conclusion I draw, which seems obvious to me, is that the political legacy of Trotskyism continues to summarize essential historical lessons which can be of inestimable value for the next generation of revolutionary struggles. At the same time, the organizational legacy of Trotskyism can only be described as dismal—a maze of incompatible sects incapable of agreeing on what their political legacy actually means. This disconnect needs to be explained, in particular by those of us who continue to identify with the theoretical tradition of Trotskyism as an international current.

Part I: Political Legacy

If we look at the core political ideas that have defined Trotskyism since the late 1920s we can affirm—at least in general outlines, and often in their specific detail—the ideological points that differentiated the Trotskyist movement from other currents on the left (anarchist, Stalinist, and social democratic):

- a) An analysis of and opposition to bureaucratic rule in the USSR (later in Eastern Europe, China, etc.), affirmation of the need for workers' democracy, a general respect for freedom of speech and discussion within the mass movement, on the left, and in the revolutionary party. Today this idea is embraced by a wide variety of left currents that trace their roots through different backgrounds—including many whose histories lie in either Maoist or pro-Soviet political traditions.
- b) Opposition to any long-term strategic alliances with reformist forces (governmental alliances in particular) which inevitably cripple the independent struggle for working-class power and socialism. Here a Trotskyist appreciation is counterposed to the idea of "People's Front" that was first promoted by Stalin and the Comintern in the 1930s. Popular frontism, however, continues to dominate the strategic thinking of many on the left today.
- c) A maintenance and development of the united front concept (first introduced by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, later elaborated theoretically by the Comintern in its early years) as the alternative to popular front policies. The united front constitutes an alliance around specific actions or political goals that reflect the needs of working and oppressed people.
- d) Transitional demands and the transitional method: the need to find slogans and programmatic positions that can speak to present-day mass consciousness while simultaneously raising that consciousness, pointing toward the possibility of a systematic transformation of society.

e) Permanent revolution: the idea that in the age of imperialism, countries with an incomplete bourgeois-democratic revolution (that is, virtually every single country) cannot effectively develop a process of bourgeois-democratic revolution without simultaneously pursuing a process of socialist revolution. These two, separate social processes cannot be conceived of as separate temporal stages. They will inevitably be telescoped and combined after any successful struggle to replace the old state power with a new one, or else the new state power cannot survive as a revolutionary force. The Stalinist (previously Menshevik) concept of a “democratic revolution” which comes first, and that must be “completed” before a socialist revolution can be conceived, constitutes an invaluable aid to the forces of counterrevolution.

Permanent revolution means pursuing a process of national liberation through socialist revolution, and also a process of socialist revolution through national liberation. There should be no preconceived theoretical formula for the precise relationship between these two different aspects of the struggle. The proper balance depends on specific circumstances that prevail in any particular revolution (level of economic development, levels of mass consciousness, histories of social relations, actual pathways through which bourgeois power came to be replaced by working class power, etc.). Permanent revolution has too often been mistakenly interpreted as a call for socialist revolution to trump bourgeois-democratic revolution, but that constitutes a sectarian/schematic caricature of the theory as actually elaborated by Trotsky and as properly applied in the world today.

f) The theory of Leninism and the vanguard party—though unlike with points a) through e) we must significantly qualify our embrace of this idea.

I would argue that the programmatic points listed so far can be reasonably supported based on present-day and/or fairly recent historical experience. There is no need to rely primarily on the deep historical record or on abstract theoretical considerations—though it is certainly useful (even essential) to understand the historical background and the underlying theory.

This obvious relevance to present-day struggles, however, does not carry over to the question of Leninist organization. Because we lack any considerable body of recent revolutionary experience, Leninist organization can only be defended on the basis of theoretical and historical considerations. I will assert, however, that the arguments in favor of this concept remain valid and need to be made—while simultaneously excavating the essential core truth of Leninism from the bureaucratic and sectarian caricatures (Stalinist/Maoist as well as Trotskyist) that have come to be identified with it for the overwhelming majority of present-day activists.

Part II: Organizational Legacy—why the disconnect?

In contrast to this political legacy of Trotskyism, the organizational legacy represents some kind of bad joke played on us by history. There are, today, between two and three dozen separate international currents claiming to be the Fourth International, or claiming

to represent the legacy of the Fourth International, or calling for the reconstruction (refoundation, or whatever) of the Fourth International—plus many small Trotskyist groups and collectives in various countries that are unaffiliated to any international, or to each other.

This disconnect between Trotskyist theory, as a powerful analytical tool/guide to action, and Trotskyist organization today needs to be explained, and remedied. I do not pretend that the present article will offer the final word about how to achieve that goal. Indeed, one of the assumptions I start from is that no single individual, or current, should attempt to achieve this on its own. The idea that a small collective somewhere will sit down and write the definitive manifesto on *any* question is one part of the problem that plagues the present-day remnants of Trotskyism. The solution to our dilemma is going to have to be discovered through a collective process, or remain undiscovered (which would be a significant historical loss for the revolutionary left).

What I hope to do here is sketch a few elements that we will certainly need to deal with as we try to develop a collective solution. Others have made similar observations before, so I make no particular claim to originality. What tends to be missing from previous critiques, however, is the idea that we can acknowledge these organizational problems, and attempt to remedy them, *without* blaming/abandoning the theoretical legacy of Trotskyism as well. That, in my judgment, has been the Achilles heel of all previous attempts to identify the source of Trotskyist sectarianism. Such efforts have ended up rejecting one or more essential elements of the programmatic legacy in an attempt to suggest necessary organizational corrections.

a) While never an explicit theoretical tenet of Trotskyism, the embattled and isolated nature of our historical current, the domination of popular frontist notions about the struggle for power as a result of Stalinist/Social-Democratic hegemony over the left for the final seven decades of the twentieth century, tended to produce a certain mind-set. We convinced ourselves (because it seemed to be true) that *only* those who explicitly understood revolutionary theory in Trotskyist terms would ever be capable of acting in a genuinely revolutionary manner.

This conclusion was understandable under the circumstances. But it was incorrect. We have had hints that it was incorrect periodically (for example: Cuba, Nicaragua/Grenada, the development of figures like Patrice Lumumba in the Congo or Malcolm X in the USA). But we still continued to act as if a Trotskyist ideology was a prerequisite to genuinely revolutionary action. Indeed, we clung to this idea so tightly that the instances in which it turned out to be false were felt as a severe challenge to our self-identity and to the validity of “our” ideas (instead of a confirmation of those ideas).

Further, the cases in which potentially revolutionary upsurges failed because their leaders did not understand (in particular the necessity of class independence and “permanent revolution”) were overwhelming during this time. A consistent pattern of defeat continually reinforced the notion that only avowed Trotskyists were capable of understanding anything at all about how to make revolution. The relatively minor

exceptions could be brushed aside as precisely that: genuine exceptions to a dominant rule.

It is now time to definitively reject this notion, especially (I would tend to say) in light of events in Venezuela. The fact is that a significant new space has opened up for others to come to a reasonable strategic understanding of how to make revolution independently from (or, perhaps better, in convergence with) Trotskyism as a historical current. This space for the re-emergence of revolutionary ideas results from the disappearance of the USSR and China as ideologically hegemonizing poles of attraction for anyone struggling to develop revolutionary praxis in the world today. Cuba, which is now the only nation likely to play such a role (at least until the present dual power in Venezuela is superseded by a genuine working-class power), represents a different legacy both in practice and theoretically.

b) There has been a failure to understand the nature and limitations of the programmatic agreement required for unity, and also the relationship between theoretical work (polemical discussion) and practical experience as methods for working out disagreements among revolutionaries. This, too, is a historical artifact, a result of the small size and embattled nature of the Trotskyist movement during its early days, when the hegemony of Stalinism assured the systematic defeat of revolutionary struggles. There was strong pressure during this time to retreat from revolutionary ideas, and many did. One of Trotsky's great contributions during his lifetime was the maintenance and development of Bolshevik theory while others were retreating from it. He was in a constant ideological battle with those in retreat, writing polemic after polemic. And this experience shaped the early cadre of Trotskyism. It came to be seen as normal.

There was little or no experience during this period with a different kind of discussion: a disagreement among genuine revolutionaries such as the debate over the character of the Russian revolution that divided Trotsky and Lenin between 1905 and 1917. There are two key things to note about that question: First, it was, indeed, a disagreement between genuine revolutionaries, not a dispute that divided revolutionary thought from reformism or ultraleftism. Second, a disagreement of this scope can only be resolved through the actual experience of revolutionary struggle (as the disagreement between Trotsky and Lenin was resolved after the February revolution of 1917). It can never be resolved *solely* through logic and the power of ideas, not even by the most brilliant polemical writings.

The small number of cadre who embraced Trotskyism, combined with their relative isolation from genuine mass struggles, contributed significantly to the development of a tendency to deal with all the world's problems on the level of pure theoretical abstraction. With few exceptions (such as the Minneapolis strikes in the USA, France in May-June '68) our historical current could only try out its ideas in life in a negative sense, as Stalinist and social democratic alternatives were constantly being tested and found wanting. There was, simply, not much at our disposal under these circumstances except the power of theoretical/programmatic polemic.

Thus a strong tendency developed to act as if every question can be resolved on a purely abstract and theoretical level, and also to treat every significant disagreement about things on an abstract, theoretical level as if it *must* reflect a divide between revolutionaries and non-revolutionaries. So long as Trotsky was alive, representing a strong authority figure (and one who had a lived experience in a less isolated political movement) the negative effects of such thinking could be contained. After Trotsky's death, however, they led to an almost constant process of splits, often over questions of purely abstract doctrine.

c) The small size and relative isolation of the Trotskyist movement—its reality as an embattled fortress of revolutionary ideas—had another negative side affect. A strong tendency developed to view the relationship between revolutionary theory, encapsulated in the program of “the vanguard,” and the mass movement as essentially a one-way street, with “the party” providing leadership to the mass movement, full stop. This “crisis of leadership” is what we were able to identify as the causal factor in so many failed attempts at revolution during the 1920s and '30s. The idea that the mass movement also gives leadership to the party was often repeated as a mantra, recognized in historical examples, taught in classes, etc. But it was not, for the most part, our lived experience because we were too isolated from the mass movement itself. It was therefore not ingrained into our collective consciousness and we didn't really act as if we believed it. The overwhelming stress in all of our thinking was on the role of the vanguard organization in providing leadership for the mass movement.

Without the essential counterbalance of the class struggle itself, helping us sort out what ideas were right and what ideas were wrong, we tended to rely almost entirely on the correctness of our own logic to “prove” that our particular interpretation of Trotskyism was the proper one. The “fact” of our correctness became a self-fulfilling prophecy as we gathered together in smaller and smaller circles, spent most of our time talking to other people who already agreed with us on all of the most essential questions, thereby continuously reconvincing each other that our particular version of “the program” was, indeed, the one and only.

d) All of these factors combined with an extremely caricatured notion of the vanguard party and democratic centralism, a subject which requires a great deal more exposition than we can possibly develop here. For now let's simply touch on three key difficulties:

* Forms of organization that were appropriate to small mass parties (tens of thousands) were also imposed on propaganda groups attempting to act like a party (several hundred to several thousand) and then to ever smaller and smaller units as the movement split—until today there are groups of a few dozen who continue to develop classically “Leninist” statutes and “party institutions.” There has been no attempt to think through what these institutions are actually for, and when they are appropriate.

* Every question, no matter how small (or how theoretical and relatively unimportant in terms of immediate action) tended to become a matter for “party discipline.” Thus there has been a strong pull toward developing organizational units that not only try to act in a

united fashion in relation to the class struggle (a reasonable goal of democratic centralism, even if it has been fetishized a bit too much), but also expect every member to think about the world in precisely the same ways. Anyone who does not believe as the group does is made to feel distinctly uncomfortable and pushed out, even if no formal disciplinary action is taken.

* The idea that there is one, and only one, correct understanding of Trotskyism, and that attaining this correct understanding of Trotskyism is the key goal of any Trotskyist organization, leads to a severely caricatured “central leader” syndrome, bordering on (and often turning into) cultism. Too many “leaders” strive to be the next Lenin, or the next Trotsky (not understanding that Lenin and Trotsky were not actually the leaders they imagine them to have been). If there is, after all, only one correct set of Trotskyist ideas, and if no two people can hold precisely the same set of ideas in their heads at the same time, then it’s only logical that our task is to locate the single individual who has the “correct” interpretation of Trotskyism and follow their lead.

Conclusion: What to do?

The bottom line, then, has been the development of a tendency for Trotskyists (even those who escaped the disease of cultism) to believe, or act as if they believe, the following syllogism: “Only Trotskyists understand revolution. Only I (my current) understands Trotskyism. Only by the construction of a vanguard party that understands revolution and Trotskyism can the working masses and oppressed peoples of the world move forward to socialism. Only, therefore, if my particular ‘vanguard party’ (no matter how small we may be) gains hegemony is there any future for the working class and oppressed of the world.”

This, I suggest, is an obvious formula for sectarianism, for the process of splits that has characterized post-war Trotskyism, for the creation of our present competing warren of alternative Fourth Internationals. It’s long past time to call a halt to this process. The only way to do so is to look back at the history of our movement and understand the fallacies inherent in the vanguardist logic that came to dominate our thinking, look to create a Trotskyism that is multifaceted and multisided (multi-tendencied), that appreciates the fact that no one current of thought ever has a monopoly on truth nor is anyone immune from errors. We must understand the proper relationship between Trotskyism and other revolutionary and potentially revolutionary currents in the world. We need to believe (and act on the reality) that revolutionary theory is not a finished product, codified in the writings of Trotsky during the 1920s and ‘30s, but an ongoing process of discovery in which Trotsky’s writings can help us to gain essential insights—which must then be contextualized in, and understood as subordinate to, a present-day reality that is constantly changing, constantly unfolding in new and unexpected ways.

The trick will be to do this without, at the same time, abandoning the essential historical truths that Trotskyism *does* offer us as part of its theoretical arsenal, and without abandoning the *essential* role that *discussion* and *logic* (political polemic) actually play

(in conjunction with experience, not instead of it) in the development of revolutionary ideas.

The call in this paper is, therefore, for the creation of a conscious Trotskyist current that can strive to achieve the appropriate dialectical synthesis between these things.