

Trotsky & the ‘Crisis of Trotskyism’

The Revolutionary Betrayed

The following review essay, by Murray Smith, was originally solicited by a left-wing academic journal which subsequently decided not to publish it. We are pleased to make it available as a contribution to the history of our movement.

In his memoirs, Leopold Trepper, the one-time head of the Soviet “Red Orchestra” spy network in Nazi-occupied Western Europe, paid the following tribute to the Trotskyist opposition to Stalin’s regime—a regime which Trepper had faithfully served throughout World War II despite growing misgivings that it had betrayed the principles of the October socialist revolution:

“The Trotskyites can lay claim to this honor. Following the example of their leader, who was rewarded for his obstinacy with the end of an ice-axe, they fought Stalinism to the death, and they were the only ones who did. By the time of the great purges, they could only shout their rebellion in the freezing wastelands where they had been dragged in order to be exterminated. In the camps, their conduct was admirable. But their voices were lost in the tundra.

“Today, the Trotskyites have a right to accuse those who once howled along with the wolves. Let them not forget, however, that they had the enormous advantage over us of having a *coherent political system* capable of replacing Stalinism. They had something to cling to in the midst of their profound distress at seeing the revolution betrayed.”

—Leopold Trepper, *The Great Game*, 1977,
emphasis added

Trepper’s memoirs and his belated tribute to Trotskyism testify eloquently to the accuracy of Leon Trotsky’s claim of 1938 that the Soviet bureaucracy was by no means a homogeneous monolith united behind a single political project, but a sociologically brittle and politically unstable phenomenon that owed its temporary unity to a peculiar combination of venality, fear, inertia, and, for at least some of its members, continuing commitment to the original ideas of the October Revolution. Referring to the defections of the Soviet diplomat Butenko to fascist Italy and of the top-ranking GPU agent Ignace Reiss to the movement for a Fourth International, Trotsky noted:

“The public utterances of former foreign representatives of the Kremlin, who refused to return to Moscow, irrefutably confirm in their own way that all shades of political thought are to be found among the bureaucracy: from genuine Bolshevism (Ignace Reiss) to complete fascism (F. Butenko)....

“If tomorrow the bourgeois-fascist grouping, the ‘faction of Butenko,’ so to speak, should attempt the conquest of power [in the Soviet Union], the ‘faction of Reiss’ inevitably would align itself on the opposite side of the barricades. Although it would find itself temporarily the ally of Stalin, it would nevertheless defend not the Bonapartist clique but the social base of the USSR, i.e., the property wrenched away from the capitalists and transformed into state property.”

—Leon Trotsky, *Transitional Program*

The Trotskyist “political system,” to which Trepper referred, comprises many elements, but one of those elements—implacable opposition to Stalinism combined with

unconditional defense of the Soviet Union from external imperialist attack and internal capitalist counterrevolution—was always the touchstone of “orthodox Trotskyism.” In a pithy, yet definitive, programmatic statement of 1939, Trotsky wrote:

“[The] question of the overthrowing of the Soviet bureaucracy is for us subordinate to the question of preserving state property in the means of production in the USSR; [the] question of preserving state property in the means of production in the USSR is subordinate for us to the question of the world proletarian revolution.”

—*In Defense of Marxism*

It is hard to imagine a principled political position more difficult than this to champion in a world bitterly polarized between Stalinist “real socialism” and “democratic capitalism,” and this alone goes far to explain the Trotskyist movement’s persistent “marginality” within the international labor movement since World War II. Trotsky’s last major political fight was waged precisely over the “Russian question”—and it was waged with some of his own erstwhile followers, who insisted against him that the USSR was no longer a “workers’ state” (however “degenerated”) and that it therefore no longer merited unconditional defense (*Ibid*). Since then, putatively Trotskyist groups have been continually wracked by schisms over whether and how Trotsky’s fundamental programmatic positions with respect to the Soviet Union (unconditional defense against capitalism combined with a struggle for anti-bureaucratic “political revolution”) should be upheld and applied to a succession of concrete political events, among them: the “revolutions from above” in Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe, the peasant-based revolutions of Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam, Korea and Cuba, the worker-led insurgencies in Hungary and Poland in 1956, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, the *Solidarnosc* movement in the Poland of the 1980s, the “pro-democracy” movements in Eastern Europe and China at the end of the 1980s, and the final crisis of Stalinism in the Soviet bloc between 1989 and 1991, followed by the consolidation of openly capitalist-restorationist regimes.

There is no doubt that these schisms decisively weakened the ability of Trotskyism to present itself as a coherent political-organizational alternative to the Stalinist and social-democratic apparatuses dominating the international labor movement. To be sure, the various ostensibly Trotskyist tendencies—whether they define themselves as “orthodox Trotskyist” or as “neo-Trotskyist” in some sense—have developed profound differences over a range of other programmatic, strategic and tactical questions; but the “Russian question” has always loomed largest. Indeed, the disarray amongst ostensible Trotskyists in the face of the victory of capitalist counterrevolution in the Soviet Union in 1991 goes far to explain why, despite the apparent vindication of Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism that this event signified, little interest has been displayed by a crisis-ridden Marxist left in revisiting the Trotskyist “political system” that Trepper identified as the only “coherent” socialist alternative to Stalinism.

It is in light of these considerations that two recent books,

Trotsky as Alternative by Ernest Mandel and *Trotskyism in the United States: Historical Essays and Reconsiderations* by George Breitman, Paul Le Blanc and Alan Wald, need to be evaluated. The former was the last work published in English by Mandel before his death in 1995, while the latter is a volume of essays written by former members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) of the United States—the “historic” party of American Trotskyism that formally renounced Trotskyism in favor of an erratic Castroism in the early 1980s. Despite certain differences, all four of these authors agree that the United Secretariat-led “Fourth International”—the product of a reunification of the SWP and Mandel’s International Secretariat in 1963—constitutes the “mainstream” and legitimate continuator of the Trotskyist tradition. I should make clear that this is a premise that I do not share. Although the United Secretariat is certainly the largest putatively Trotskyist formation in the world, substantial grounds exist for arguing that all of its major contending tendencies and factions (from the 1960s to the present day) have departed from Trotskyism in fundamental ways. Indeed, one important element in today’s “crisis of Trotskyism”—its inability to present itself as a coherent political-organizational alternative to social-democratic and Stalinist movements that have long since demonstrated their incapacity to lead a serious struggle for world socialism—derives from the reputation that the United Secretariat formation has enjoyed as the pre-eminent, “mainstream” Trotskyists on the world political arena. The story told by Paul Le Blanc in his two contributions to *Trotskyism in the United States* provides many clues as to why such a reputation is undeserved, even though Le Blanc himself fails to draw any of the necessary conclusions.

The appropriate starting point, however, is with Mandel’s attempt to restate the case for Trotsky’s politics in an era of Stalinist collapse. An influential Marxist economist and certainly the best-known ostensibly Trotskyist political figure of recent decades, Ernest Mandel brings an authority and reputation to his argument that few others could match. Mandel’s familiarity with Trotsky’s voluminous writings, together with his acumen in illuminating both the historical and contemporary relevance of many of Trotsky’s ideas, is impressive, and it must be acknowledged that, in many ways, Mandel does a fine job of honoring the intellectual and political legacy of the man to whom he pays the following tribute:

“Of all the important socialists of the twentieth century, it was Trotsky who recognized most clearly the main tendencies of development and the principal contradictions of the epoch, and it was Trotsky also who gave the clearest formulation to an appropriate emancipatory strategy for the international labour movement.”

Mandel begins by pointing to the centrality of Trotsky’s “law of uneven and combined development” in the totality of his theoretical and political views. This “magnificent theoretical achievement,” says Mandel, “brings to light the articulation of all the major elements (economic, political, class, psychological, ideological and organizational) of a historical mechanism at work.” Indeed, it constitutes the indispensable foundation of Trotsky’s theory and strategic perspective of “permanent revolution,” his analysis of the principal contradictions and crisis tendencies of the imperialist epoch of capitalist development, his conviction that the wage-earning working class is the only consistently revolutionary class in the modern world, his understanding of the uneven and discontinuous development and spread of revolutionary consciousness within the international

working class, and his analysis of the bureaucratic tendencies at work within the labor movements of the capitalist world and within the Soviet degenerated workers’ state.

The law of uneven and combined development goes beyond the more familiar Marxist law of “uneven development” by grasping that the very unevenness of global development—in its variegated technological, economic, social, political and ideological dimensions—cannot fail to produce specific and original (local) combinations of features that co-exist within a global totality that has been unified and rendered permeable by the growth and extension of world capitalism. This means that the more backward countries are not condemned to follow the same “stages of development” as the more advanced ones. As they seek to solve the problems of national unification, industrial modernization, agrarian revolution, democratization and secularization, they have at least some access to the technological, socio-economic, political and educative achievements of societies that have already wrestled successfully with them. At the same time, precisely because they address these problems at a time when the global system of capitalist production relations has reached a stage of structural crisis, such countries are obliged to look beyond the horizon of capitalism for their successful resolution. The tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution become combined with the tasks of “socialist construction;” the leadership of the revolutionary process in *all* countries devolves to the working class; and the strategic perspective of revolutionary Marxism in an age of “permanent revolution” becomes more dependent than ever on the victory of the socialist revolution on a *world* scale. Just as Trotsky’s law of uneven and combined development establishes *why* an immanent tendency exists for the bourgeois-democratic revolution to transform itself into a proletarian-socialist one in the epoch of imperialism, it also points to why any attempt to limit the revolutionary process to a single country or group of countries—in the name of “building socialism in one country” or “securing peaceful coexistence between the socialist and capitalist camps”—leads perforce to the creation of a deformed caricature of socialism and ultimately to the re-establishment of capitalism.

Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism, then, is inextricably bound up with his larger analysis of the contradictions, crisis tendencies, dangers, and revolutionary potentialities of an epoch of transition from capitalism to socialism on a world scale. From the standpoint of the 1990s, when the “world revolution” seems not only to be in retreat but to have disappeared from the horizon entirely, such an analysis may appear to be hopelessly outdated and even quixotic. Yet it is precisely Trotsky’s specific analysis of Stalinism—and of the damage that Stalinism as the “gravedigger of revolutions” has done to the global socialist project—that may furnish the conceptual resources to explain *how* we have arrived at the present global conjuncture of capitalist triumphalism, and *why*, now that Stalinism has lost its pre-eminence on the anti-capitalist Left, there are grounds for hope that the socialist project, like the fabled phoenix, will eventually re-emerge from its own ashes stronger than ever. In all events, *only* Trotsky’s analytical perspectives appear *fully consistent* with a rational “socialist optimism” that looks to the revival of a proletarian socialist movement inspired by the internationalist, revolutionary and democratic principles of authentic Marxism. In this connection we might note that Trotsky’s fundamental ideas seem altogether more consistent with Antonio Gramsci’s prescription for “a pessimism of the intellect and an optimism of the

spirit” than any of the essentially “national-reformist” projects currently claiming Gramsci’s legacy.

If all this is true, the stakes involved in a proper evaluation of Trotsky’s legacy are very high. Yet, on a number of points central to that legacy, Mandel’s discussion must be judged as profoundly flawed. This is nowhere more clear than in his discussions of Stalinism and the problem of “substitutionism.” Mandel affirms correctly that the key to Trotsky’s theoretical analysis of Stalinism was his recognition that the Stalinist bureaucracy represented “a specific social layer with its own particular material interests.” But by identifying Stalinism simply with the political rule and material interests of the *Soviet* bureaucracy, Mandel is unable to grasp the significance of anti-capitalist social revolutions led by *Stalinist* parties that refused to subordinate their policies to the dictates of the Kremlin oligarchy. For Mandel, such parties—the Yugoslav, the Vietnamese and the Chinese in particular—had “broken from Stalinism in practice,” precisely by creating new, albeit bureaucratically deformed, workers’ states. But, contrary to Mandel, Stalinism is not inherently a “national” phenomenon (the peculiar result of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution), but a *social* phenomenon (as Mandel elsewhere seems to grasp): the phenomenon of bureaucratic rule on the basis of property forms that correspond to the historic interests of the working class. As such, Stalinism possesses a *dual character*. On the one hand, it is implacably hostile to the direct political rule of the working class; on the other, it defends—inadequately and inconsistently—the proletarian-socialist forms of collectivized property, planned economy, and state monopoly of foreign trade. Hence, the specific “material interests” of a Stalinist bureaucracy are rooted in its political domination of a post-capitalist “transitional” socio-economic formation featuring many of the structural prerequisites of a socialist society, but lacking many of the latter’s most indispensable elements: in particular, a real democracy of the “associated producers,” an international division of labor, and an adequate development of the “productive forces,” defined broadly as “human capacities in general.” These considerations stamp the Stalinist bureaucracy as a privileged, “parasitic layer” within a workers’ state, rather than as a new ruling class presiding over a class-exploitative mode of production; but they also stamp it as a mortal enemy of the global socialist project and of the full and “healthy” development of social relations, institutions and practices.

In light of this understanding of Stalinism, what the Yugoslav, Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions signified is that, in a world polarized between capitalist imperialism and the Soviet bloc, it was quite possible, under specific conditions, for Stalinist parties—that is, parties committed to the Soviet model of “real socialism”—to lead peasant-based social revolutions and to create bureaucratically-deformed workers’ states qualitatively similar to those which issued from the bureaucratic degeneration of the October socialist revolution and from the Soviet-sponsored “revolutions from above” in Eastern Europe. Even so, the victory of these revolutions in no way suggested that the role of the Fourth International had become any the less historically indispensable. For *none* of these degenerated and deformed workers’ states could play a positive role in promoting a *world proletarian revolution* and none could be expected to build a nationally delimited “socialism” worthy of the name. A workers’ political revolution remained urgently necessary in these bureaucratized workers’ states to create revolutionary, internationalist regimes based upon the di-

rect rule of workers’ councils; and proletarian-led socialist revolutions remained necessary elsewhere in the world to create the conditions for world socialism.

In hindsight, it is relatively easy to say that, in *both* the societies ruled by Stalinists and in the capitalist-dominated world, the Fourth International’s mission of organizing the working class for its “self-emancipation” should have remained clear, despite the unexpected “revolutionary capacities” displayed by the insurrectionary (but profoundly anti-proletarian) Stalinists of China and Yugoslavia. Unfortunately, these peasant-based, Stalinist-led revolutions engendered a profound disorientation within the post-war Fourth International. One of its central leaders, Michel Raptis (Pablo), spoke of the likelihood of deformed workers’ states existing for “an entire historical period of several centuries,” and urged the national sections of the FI to transform themselves into little more than ginger groups within the mass Stalinist, social-democratic and anti-colonialist movements. Pablo’s proposals—and accompanying organizational machinations—precipitated the 1953 split in the FI, a split from which world Trotskyism has yet to recover.

While Mandel pays tribute to Trotsky’s opposition to “substitutionism” within the workers’ movement (in particular, the tendency of bureaucratic apparatuses to substitute themselves for the self-activity of the working-class masses), he evinces very little self-consciousness about his own long-standing support, extending back to his collaboration with Pablo, for a politics constantly in search of “substitutes” for the class-conscious working class under revolutionary Marxist leadership. This “substitutionist” politics—and its astonishingly opportunist range—remains largely concealed in *Trotsky as Alternative*, but it nevertheless reveals itself at a number of points: in Mandel’s contention that Mao Zedong “tried to fight” the “hardened party, military and state bureaucracy” in the course of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (rather than merely for the triumph of his own bureaucratic faction!); in his soft-pedaling of Trotsky’s critique of popular-front coalitionism;¹ and in his rather surprising demand for a reformed United Nations. But it finds its most striking expression in Mandel’s fulsome support (left unmentioned in *Trotsky as Alternative*) for the *Solidarnosc* “trade union” in Poland despite the explicitly anti-socialist character of that organization’s leadership and stated program from 1981 on. Throughout the 1980s, Mandel’s objectivist and substitutionist methodology led him to conclude that the “objective dynamics” of a working-class struggle against Stalinism *guaranteed* the progressive character of that struggle, leading him to abandon in practice any defense of the Polish deformed workers’ state against a movement, backed by the Pope and Ronald Reagan, bent on the restoration of capitalism. This political capitulation to Cold War anti-communism, along with many other examples of Mandel’s political positions that could be cited, confirm that he was far better at defending Trotsky’s ideas in the abstract than applying them correctly to concrete contemporary developments. Indeed, Mandel’s substitutionism and indiscriminate anti-Stalinism placed him in the camp of that “political fatalism” that he counterposes (abstractly but correctly) to the revolutionary Marxism of Trotsky—“a Marxist who was severely critical of the political fatalism of the Second International and who attributed to the subjective factor in history a decisive role in the drama of our century.” All this points to one unmistakable conclusion: that Mandel, in the political vernacular of classical Leninism, was an inveterate “centrist”—a revolu-

tionary in words but a reformist in deeds.

In his splendid essay on “Centrism and the Fourth International,” Trotsky noted that: “In the choice of his international allies, the centrist is even less discriminating than in his own country.” This observation is a good starting point for considering the significance of the reunification of the Socialist Workers Party (U.S.) and Mandel’s rump “Fourth International” in 1963, Mandel’s twenty-year toleration of an SWP leadership that was moving rapidly to the right, and the SWP’s decision in the 1980s to formally break from all pretenses of Trotskyism while concurrently calling for a new revolutionary International centered on the Cuban Communist Party. There is no shortage of irony in these historical developments. The SWP, at the time of the split in the FI in 1953, was the largest and most experienced national section of the FI (aside from the Ceylonese section, which was both politically and organizationally marginal to world Trotskyism). Against Mandel and Pablo, the SWP leadership waged a principled—if not altogether adequate—defense of “orthodox Trotskyism.” But between 1959 and 1963 it became clear that the SWP and Mandel’s International Secretariat had developed convergent perspectives on the Cuban Revolution.

Despite continuing disagreement over the issues that had led to the 1953 split, the new-found agreement on Cuba was deemed to be substantial and significant enough to warrant reunification of the SWP (and some of its international camp-followers) with Mandel’s IS. Inasmuch as the agreement on Cuba basically consisted in uncritical cheer-leading for the Castro-Guevara leadership, an unwillingness to characterize Cuba as a *deformed* workers’ state, and a refusal to call for a working-class political revolution to institute a regime of workers’ democracy, one can say that the SWP had substantially embraced key elements of the “Pabloist” perspective it had opposed in 1953. The *irony* is that, having embraced the “substitutionist” methodology of Pablo and Mandel, the SWP soon moved far to the right of the Mandelite majority of the United Secretariat. This was evidenced in the liberal-pacifist character of its leadership of a major wing of the Vietnam anti-war movement, in its support of black nationalism and related abstentionism from the struggle for racial integration, as well as in many other aspects of its politics. The SWP’s formal break with Trotskyism and the United Secretariat in 1983 was thus long presaged by an essentially reformist orientation that appears to have been inspired by its “discovery” (in Cuba) of “adequate substitutes” for Trotskyist parties and proletarian leadership (as incarnated in the peasant-guerrilla bands led by the “unconscious Trotskyists” Castro and Guevara).

One will look in vain for an adequate analysis of these questions in the Breitman-Le Blanc-Wald collection. And yet the irony—and tragedy—of the SWP’s political trajectory from 1959 to 1983 are what most haunt the reader of *Trotskyism in the United States*. In six essays, each fascinating in its own way, the three contributors to this volume provide historical and biographical sketches which capture something of the original spirit of American Trotskyism (especially its “heroic” years of the 1930s and 1940s when James P. Cannon was its pre-eminent leader) even while failing to identify the (rather obvious) source of the SWP’s 1980s turn to Castroism in its uncritical appreciation of the Cuban Revolution in the early 1960s. Given the centrality of the Cuban question to the SWP’s trajectory from 1960 on, it would seem appropriate to give serious attention to the arguments of those within the SWP who opposed the leadership’s political adaptation to Castro’s regime as well as the reunification of 1963. The failure of the authors to do

this is, however, hardly accidental.² Their support for the United Secretariat position on Cuba apparently precludes any serious investigation of the “anti-Pabloist” positions of the Revolutionary Tendency of the early 1960s, as does their factional hostility to the groups that trace their lineage to the RT (in particular, the Spartacist League and the International Bolshevik Tendency). No doubt this is why Le Blanc, in his two substantial historical and interpretive essays, chooses to focus instead on the bad *organizational* precedent established by the expulsion of the RT in 1963 and the way in which the 1965 SWP organizational resolution that justified that expulsion was used by the “leadership team” around Jack Barnes to consolidate its bureaucratic grip on the SWP in the 1970s. Barnes’ proto-Stalinist interpretation of this resolution—and of Leninist organizational norms in general—is obviously of considerable importance to any analysis of how the democratic internal life of the SWP was strangled and how the SWP leadership was able to so easily dispose of two waves of left oppositionists: the Mandelite opposition of the mid-1970s (the Internationalist Tendency to which Wald adhered) and the “Trotsky-loyalist” opposition of the early 1980s (which included Breitman and Le Blanc, along with most of the SWP’s old guard). The problem is that, by stressing “organizational” questions above all others, Le Blanc leaves the reader with the impression that the *politics* of the SWP remained basically consistent with “orthodox Trotskyism” up to the point that Barnes finally decided that his grip on the party was strong enough to permit him to formally dump the “old Trotskyism.” Even for those relatively unfamiliar with Trotskyist ideas, this thesis should ring rather hollow.

To explain the SWP’s *formal* disavowal of Trotskyism in the 1980s, it is necessary to trace its *de facto* break with both the political and organizational principles of Trotskyism that began around 1960. But to do this one must be prepared to analyze critically the “substitutionism” that continues to inform the politics of the international organization that was led for decades by Ernest Mandel. This is something that none of the authors of *Trotskyism in the United States* is prepared to do, and this failure is finally what renders the book a disservice to the best traditions of American Trotskyism.

Notes

1. Mandel devotes less than three pages to Trotsky’s critique of the politics of the “popular front,” and part of this woefully inadequate discussion is devoted to criticizing unnamed “sectarians” who are less tactically flexible in their approach to popular-front coalitions than is Mandel’s United Secretariat. Mandel long insisted that a policy of “critical support” to the workers’ parties participating in an electoral coalition with bourgeois parties is a legitimate application of Leninist-Trotskyist tactics. But this position betrays a failure to see that what is at stake in an openly class-collaborationist coalition is not a “tactic,” but a *strategic* question linked to the principle of the political independence of the working class. As Trotsky noted: “In reality, the People’s Front is the *main question of proletarian class strategy* for this epoch” (“The Dutch Section and the International”, 16 July 1936). And, as he goes on to argue, it was the Bolsheviks’ *refusal* to lend “critical support” to the Russian “people’s front” of 1917—including its Menshevik “proletarian” contingent—that was critical to their leadership of the October revolution.

2. One of the authors, George Breitman, was obviously not in a position to do so, since his piece was written as a

series of talks to a national education conference of the SWP in 1974. Its inclusion in this collection is motivated principally by the fact that Breitman (a long-time cadre of the SWP) was amongst the victims of the purge of “veteran Trotskyists” engineered by the SWP leadership in the early 1980s. Together with Le Blanc, Breitman helped form the Fourth Internationalist Tendency which regrouped some of

the *several hundred* expelled from the SWP for no reason other than their continuing rhetorical fidelity to Trotskyism and the Fourth International. Breitman’s article is not altogether lacking in interest, however, since it captures unwittingly much of the substitutionist methodology that contributed to the SWP’s degeneration. ■