



Trotsky's Marxism: "The point, however, is to change it"

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At the 2011 Left Forum, held at Pace University in NYC between March 18-21, Platypus hosted a conversation on "Trotsky's Marxism." Panelists Ian Morrison (Platypus), Susan Williams (Freedom Socialist Party), and Jason Wright (International Bolshevik Tendency) were asked to address, "What was Trotsky's contribution to revolutionary Marxism? At one level, the answer is clear. Above even his significance as organizer of the October insurrection and leader of the Red Army during the Russian Civil War, what makes Trotsky a major figure in the history of Marxism is his status as the leader of the Left Opposition and, later, his founding of the Fourth International. But this panel asks whether stating this fact is sufficient for understanding Trotsky's Marxism, or whether this might not in fact merely beg the question. The issue remains—what was it in Trotsky's evolution from the period of 1905 through the Russian Revolution of 1917, that allowed him to become the leader of the left opposition and the great Marxist critic of Stalinism in the 1920s and 1930s? What of Trotsky, rather than "Trotsky-ism"? The following are Jason Wright's opening remarks.

LEON TROTSKY WAS A BRILLIANT WRITER, thinker, military strategist, and revolutionary organizer, whose life was defined by the struggle to preserve and develop the legacy of Bolshevism and the lessons of the October Revolution of 1917, the single most important historical event of the last 200 years. In an entry in his diary on March 25th, 1935 he wrote:

[I] think that the work in which I am engaged now, despite its extremely insufficient and fragmentary nature, is the most important work of my life—more important than 1917, more important than the period of the Civil War or any other.

For the sake of clarity I would put it this way. Had I not been present in 1917 in Petersburg, the October Revolution would still have taken place....

Thus I can not speak of the "indispensability" of my work, even about the period from 1917 to 1921. But now my work is "indispensable" in the full sense of the word... There is now no one except me to carry out the mission of arming a new generation with the revolutionary method over the heads of the leaders of the Second and Third International[s].¹

Trotsky was murdered by a Stalinist assassin a little more than five years later, but he lived long enough to launch the Fourth International and write the *Transitional Program*—a document in which he codified the essential lessons of the October Revolution, thus, in his words, "ensuring the succession" of Bolshevism.

Trotsky was a relative latecomer to Leninism. Before joining the Bolshevik Party in 1917 he was one of its most vociferous, and prominent, opponents. Yet as early as 1901, before the publication of Lenin's justly celebrated *What Is To Be Done?*, Trotsky had flirted with the idea that the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) needed a more centralized apparatus than it then possessed.² And when he escaped from Siberian exile in 1902 he joined Lenin in London. The next year, in 1903, he attended the Second Congress of the RSDLP, where Lenin sought to reorganize the party on a centralist basis. However, Trotsky rejected Lenin's notion of a hard combat party, and instead favored the Menshevik model of a broad organization that would include sympathizers, fellow travelers, and well-wishers.

In hindsight it is clear that the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 would have been impossible without the prior split with the Menshevik "softs." But it took many sharp political struggles between 1903 and 1917 before the significance of the differences between Bolshevism and Menshevism came into focus for many of the participants. Looking back, Trotsky was harshly critical of his own role in 1903, writing:

My break with Lenin occurred on what might be considered "moral" or even personal grounds. But this was merely on the surface. At bottom, the separation was of a political nature and merely expressed itself in the realm of organization methods. I thought of myself as a centralist. But there is no doubt that at that time I did not fully realize what an intense and imperious centralism the revolutionary party would need to lead millions of people in a war against the old order.³

Trotsky had been wrong on the most essential issue, but he was not wrong about everything. In terms of the historical possibilities for the Russian Revolution, his vision was more acute than Lenin's—particularly in the aftermath of the failed 1905 Revolution, which Lenin later referred to as a "dress rehearsal" for 1917.⁴ Lenin's thinking in 1905 remained essentially confined within the then prevailing Social Democratic orthodoxy that Russia must first pass through a bourgeois revolutionary stage. Trotsky, who had begun to take note of the combined and uneven character of Russia's development and of the limitations of the nation state, recognized as early as 1904 that a successful revolution would require the working class to lead Russia far beyond the demands of the liberal bourgeoisie.⁵

The spark that set off the 1905 revolution was the "Bloody Sunday" massacre of workers peacefully marching to the Winter Palace to petition the Tzar in January of that year. There are many parallels between Russia in 1905 and the current wave of popular revolt sweeping the Arab world, but in some very important ways the Russian workers' movement was more advanced than what we have seen recently. The tumult of 1905, which produced the first true mass organizations of working class power, the soviets, temporarily suppressed the cleavage between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. Trotsky, who returned from exile when the revolution erupted, quickly emerged as a leading figure in the Petrograd Soviet, and in that capacity collaborated closely with the Bolsheviks.

When the revolution was defeated, Trotsky was jailed. While in prison he began to refine his theory of permanent revolution, which he elaborated in 1906 in *Results and Prospects*. He subsequently summarized his conception as follows:

[T]he Russian revolution, although directly concerned with bourgeois aims, could not stop short at those aims; the revolution could not solve its immediate, bourgeois tasks except by putting the proletariat into power. And the proletariat, once having power in its hands, would not be able to remain confined within the bourgeois framework of the revolution ...

The contradictions between a workers' government and an overwhelming majority of peasants in a backward country could be resolved only on an international scale, in the arena of a world proletarian revolution. Having, by virtue of historical necessity, burst the narrow bourgeois-democratic confines of the Russian revolution, the victorious proletariat would be compelled also to burst its national and state confines, that is to say, it would have to strive consciously for the Russian revolution to become the prologue to a world revolution.⁶

As his biographer, Isaac Deutscher, observed,

[T]his powerful insight shaped much of Trotsky's future activity. In this brochure of eighty pages was the sum and substance of the man. For the rest of his days, as leader of the revolution, as founder and head of an army, as protagonist of a new International and then as hunted exile he would defend and elaborate the ideas he had put in a nutshell in 1906. Similarly, Karl Marx spent his whole life developing and drawing conclusions from the ideas he had advanced in the *Communist Manifesto*...⁷

Yet despite his important insights on the shape of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky acted as an impediment to the development of an effective revolutionary party in Russia. From 1903 until the outbreak of World War I, he was perhaps the foremost advocate of a reunification between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. As the French historian Pierre Broué has noted,

[T]he more striking feature of this period is his constant striving at any price for conciliation and for the unity of the Russian Party. For Trotsky at that time, Lenin was sectarian and even secessionist, fully responsible for the Party split. The outcome of this line was the constitution of the 1912 August Bloc, in practice the regroupment of every current of the Party against Lenin and several so-called Party Mensheviks.⁸

The revolutionary events of 1917 forced Trotsky to belatedly recognize that he had been wrong and Lenin right on the necessity of a hard break with Menshevism. In a symmetrical development, Lenin's April Theses were denounced by many old Bolsheviks as an expression of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. Still, the essence of the partnership was that

Trotsky came over to Lenin. The Russian Revolution was possible because Lenin had built a party whose cadres fought every form of revisionism and class-collaborationism. Once Trotsky made the leap to Leninism, he never went back, and from the day he joined there was, in Lenin's words, "no better Bolshevik."⁹

During the 1920s and 30s Trotsky extended and deepened Bolshevism "according to its own logical laws of development," and upheld its internationalist core against the reactionary and autarchic nationalism of Stalin's "socialism in one country." Against the Comintern's ultra-sectarian Third Period attacks on social democrats as "social fascists," the Left Opposition advocated the creation of a united front between Communists and social democrats to smash the Nazis.

During the Spanish Civil War, Trotsky told the bitter truth about the betrayal of Andrés Nin and the POUM in supporting the cross-class "Popular Front" government. Trotsky asserted that the first step to defeating Franco and the forces of reaction was to break with *all* wings of the capitalists, including the "progressive" bourgeois forces aligned with the Popular Front. This was, of course, exactly what Lenin had proposed in his April Theses.

Today we have a somewhat analogous situation with Hugo Chavez, the left-talking Bonapartist that heads the Venezuelan capitalist state. He must of course be defended against attacks by the CIA or rightist coups, as the Trotskyists sided with the Spanish republicans against Franco and the Bolsheviks blocked with Kerensky against Kornilov in 1917. But, like both the Spanish Popular Front and Kerensky, Chavez deserves no political support from revolutionaries.

Trotsky's contributions—including his incisive critique of the degeneration of the Soviet Union and the Communist International—are largely ignored by contemporary dilettantish left academics, who generally prefer parsing the opaque prose of Antonio Gramsci or C.L.R. James, or engaging in other even less rewarding pursuits.

Trotsky's policy was always to "put program first." Today most of those who claim his legacy take exactly the opposite approach. In France, the former Revolutionary Communist League (LCR—which falsely claimed the mantle of the Fourth International) has rechristened itself the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) and abandoned any pretense of Leninism in an attempt to find a niche in a popular front government. This has been coming for a long time: 30 years ago the LCR (and most of the rest of the world's "Trotskyists") were enthusing over the Ayatollah Khomeini's reactionary mass movement in Iran, the CIA-supported Afghan Mujahedin, and Lech Walesa's counterrevolutionary Solidarnosc in Poland.

In his last major political fight, Trotsky locked horns with a section of American followers that renounced the defense of the degenerated Soviet workers' state. In that struggle, Trotsky observed that "[i]t is the duty of revolutionists to defend every conquest of the working class even though it may be distorted by the pressure of hostile forces. Those who cannot defend old positions will never conquer new ones."¹⁰ This is not just a historical question—it remains on the agenda today for the deformed workers' states in Cuba, China, Vietnam and North Korea.

In the August 1991 showdown in the Soviet Union, we of the International Bolshevik Tendency were virtually alone in militarily siding with Stalinist remnants against Boris Yeltsin's forces—a necessary position from the standpoint of defense of the Soviet degenerated workers' state. By 1991, the Spartacist League, which only eight years earlier was openly identifying with Stalin's heir Yuri Andropov (the butcher of the 1956 workers' political revolution in Hungary), refused to take sides in the final showdown between the Stalinist "hardline" remnants and Yeltsin's counterrevolutionary rabble. It could have been worse—most of the rest of the world's supposed "Trotskyists" openly supported the pro-imperialist Yeltsinites.

Trotsky's ideas remain a vitally important guide for action today because, as recent events from Egypt to Wisconsin clearly show, the future of humanity depends on finding an answer to the essential problem he addressed in the *Transitional Program* of 1938—the "crisis of proletarian leadership." Trotsky's devotion to the struggle for human liberation continues to inspire many of the young fighters around the world who recognize that the only way out of the endless horrors of global imperialism is through revolutionary organization. He had an immensely powerful intelligence and a brilliant facility for expression, but perhaps more importantly he was one of those exceptional individuals who, in the words of James P. Cannon, remained true to the revolutionary ideals of his youth.¹¹ His entire life was governed by Marx's injunction in the 11th thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." | P

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1. Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky's Diary in Exile—1935* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), 46–7. Quoted in Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (London: Bolshevik Publications, 1998), 5. Available online at <http://www.bolshevik.org/tp/IBT_TP_0_Preface.html>.
 2. The 1901 letter on centralization is quoted in Leon Trotsky, *Report of the Siberian Delegation* (London: New Park, 1980 [1903]), 39–42. Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1903/xx/siberian.htm>>. It is also discussed in Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky 1879-1921* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989 [1954]), 44–46.
 3. Leon Trotsky *My Life* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970 [1930]), 162. Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/mylife/ch12.htm>>
 4. V.I. Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder," in *Collected Works*, Vol. 31 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1961 [1920]), 27. Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch03.htm>>
 5. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky 1879-1921* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989 [1954]), 99–116.
 6. Leon Trotsky, *1905* (New York: Random House, 1971 [1907]), vi–vii. Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1907/1905/index.htm>>.
 7. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky 1879-1921* [1954] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p 162.
 8. Pierre Broué, "Trotsky: A Biographer's Problems" in *The Trotsky Reappraisal*, ed. Terry Brotherstone and Paul Dukes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 17.

9. "The Lost Document," in Leon Trotsky, *The Stalin School of Falsification* (London: New Park, 1974), 82. Available online at <www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/ssf/sf08.htm>.
10. Leon Trotsky, "Balance Sheet of the Finnish Events," in *In Defense of Marxism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1995 [1942]), 271. Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1940/04/finnish.htm>>
11. James P. Cannon, "Sixtieth Birthday Speech," in *Notebook of an Agitator* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973 [1958]), 180-1.

