

The Baggage of Exodus: Trotsky, revolutions and the constitution of original ‘Trotskyism’

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Certain ‘Trotskyist’ theses, like the theory of permanent revolution, first appeared at the beginning of the century in relation to the Russian revolution of 1905. However, the term ‘Trotskyism’ only appeared, as a banal term of bureaucratic jargon, in 1923-4. After the victorious civil war, and still more in 1924 after the failure of the German October and Lenin’s death, the leaders of Soviet Russia and the Communist International were in an unforeseen situation of relative international stabilisation and the lasting isolation of the Soviet Union. It was no longer the social base which supported the State superstructure, but the will of the superstructure which sought to engage the base.

After his first stroke in March 1923, Lenin urged Trotsky to begin fighting Stalin on the questions of the foreign trade monopoly, nationalities, and especially the internal party regime. In a letter to the Central Committee in October 1923, Trotsky denounced the bureaucratisation of state institutions. In December of the same year, he assembled these criticisms into a series of articles calling for a New Course. This provoked the fight against ‘Trotskyism’ and its demands: the re-establishment of internal party democracy and the adoption of an economic plan to control the uneven and centrifugal effects of the New Economic Policy. In December 1924, in Pravda, Stalin personally characterised Trotskyism as “a variety of Menshevism” and as “permanent despair”. He opposed to this the daring construction of ‘socialism in one country’, rather than waiting to be rescued by an extension of the revolution elsewhere that might never actually happen.

After the massive recruitment of the ‘Lenin levy’ in 1924, the few thousand veterans of October no longer weighed very heavily in the party’s membership relative to the hundreds of thousands of newcomers, amongst whom were many last-minute careerists. In a country lacking of democratic traditions and following the slaughter of the Great War, the hardships of the civil war left a people accustomed to extreme forms of social and physical violence. The upheavals of war and civil war led to a ‘great leap backwards’ and a reversion to an archaic level of development compared to that reached before 1914. Of the 4 million inhabitants of Petrograd in 1917, there remained no more than about 1.7 million in 1929. More than 380,000 workers left production and only 80,000 remained at work. The workers’ citadel, the Putilov works, lost four-fifths of its employees, while more than thirty million peasants experienced food shortage and famine. The devastated cities lived on the back of authoritarian campaigns of requisition. ‘In truth’, notes the historian Moshe Lewin, ‘the State was formed on the basis of regressive social development’.

Privilege thrives on scarcity: therein lie the fundamental roots of bureaucratisation. In a journal dictated in 1923 to his secretaries, Lenin, already sick, deemed that “we call ‘ours’ an apparatus which is deeply foreign to us and which represents a hotchpotch of middle-class survivals and tsarists”. That year, the prices of manufactures had practically tripled compared to pre-1914 levels, whereas farm prices had increased by less than 50 %. This disproportion explains the imbalance between city and countryside, and the refusal of the peasants to deliver their harvests at imposed low prices while there was nothing to buy.

The Bolshevik leaders had always conceived the revolution in Russia as the first step towards a

European revolution or, at least, as a prelude to German revolution. The question put in 1923 was therefore: how to hold on until a possible resumption of the revolutionary movement in Europe? In 1917, all the Russian parties admitted that the country was not ripe for socialism. However, the 'democrat' Miliukov himself estimated that it was no more ready for democracy. He saw no alternative between the military dictatorship of Kornilov and that of the Soviets. This meant a pitiless fight between revolution and counter-revolution.

From before Lenin's death, responses diverged. The strategy of 'construction of socialism in one country', defended by Stalin and his allies, subordinated the chances of world revolution to the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy; that of 'the permanent revolution', developed by Trotsky and the Left Opposition, subordinated the future of the Russian revolution to the extension of the world revolution. These strategies implied divergent answers in relation to the principal international events: Anglo-Russian relations in 1926, the second Chinese revolution of 1927, the rise of Nazism in Germany, and later the radically contrary attitudes towards the Spanish civil war, the German-Soviet pact of 1939 and preparations for war.

The two strategies were equally opposed on the Soviet Union's policies at home. Trotsky and the Left Opposition proposed after 1924 a 'new course' aimed at reviving Soviet democracy and the role of the Party. They put forward policies of planning and industrialisation aimed at reducing the tensions between agriculture and industry. However, they came to oppose Stalin's brutal about-turn of 1928 from Bukharin's 'socialism at a snail's pace' to forced collectivisation and the accelerated industrialisation of the First Five-Year Plan, which denuded the countryside and led to the great famine of 1932 in the Ukraine.

Faced with such clear alternatives, some historians have wondered about Trotsky's relative passivity immediately after Lenin's death, his reluctance to start a ruthless fight against Stalin, his agreeing to sweep Lenin's testament under the carpet. Self-interest provides plausible and logical explanations. He was, in the mid-twenties, perfectly conscious of the brittleness of a revolution whose working-class and urban base was thin, and of the need to work with a backward peasantry which constituted the overwhelming majority of the population. Given such an unstable equilibrium, favourable to authoritarian Bonapartist solutions, he refused to be pushed by the army (where his popularity remained high) and by the officer caste, because a military coup d'état would only have accelerated the process of bureaucratisation.

However, the political struggle had in fact been joined from 1923. By 1926, a united opposition was established which saw itself as a tendency that respected the legal authority of the Party; their perspective was one of redirecting and reforming the regime. In May 1927, after the defeat of the second Chinese revolution, they called for a militant mass mobilisation. In October of the same year, on the tenth birthday of the revolution, Zinoviev and Trotsky were excluded from the party. The latter was exiled to Alma Ata, while more than 1,500 oppositionists were deported. The purges began.

In 1929, faced with a catastrophic economic situation, Stalin turned against the right of the party. He seemed, by instituting the first five-year plan, to be adopting certain suggestions of the opposition. This turn precipitated a split among the Opposition. Some of its most prestigious leaders saw in this 'revolution from above' a swing to the left. Capitulations and defections followed one after another. For Trotsky, those reconciled with the thermidorean regime were from now on 'lost souls': planning without the restoration of socialist democracy would only further reinforce the power of the bureaucracy. Thus began a long exodus, forced to the margins of the mass movement.

These tragic inter-war struggles shaped the original defining characteristics of Trotskyism. Its essence can be summarised in four points.

1. The opposition of the theory of permanent revolution to that of 'socialism in one country'.

The elements of this strategy had emerged from the earlier Russian revolution of 1905. They were elaborated during the 1920s and found their full expression in Trotsky's theses on the second Chinese revolution of 1927:

"With regard to countries with a belated bourgeois development, especially the colonial and semi-colonial countries, the theory of the permanent revolution signifies that the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving democracy and national emancipation is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses.... The conquest of power by the proletariat does not complete the revolution, but only opens it. Socialist construction is conceivable only on the foundation of the class struggle, on a national and international scale.... The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable. One of the basic reasons for the crisis in bourgeois society is the fact that the productive forces created by it can no longer be reconciled with the framework of the national state. From this follow...imperialist wars.... Different countries will go through this process at different tempos. Backward countries may, under certain conditions, arrive at the dictatorship of the proletariat sooner than advanced countries, but they will come later than the latter to socialism" (Trotsky 1928/1962, pp.152-155).

In his introduction to the 1930 German edition of his texts on Permanent Revolution, Trotsky denounces the Stalinist amalgam of *"messianic nationalism ... supplemented by bureaucratically abstract internationalism"* (ibid., p.25). He maintains that the socialist revolution remains, even after the seizure of power, *"a continual internal struggle"* through which society *"continues to change its complexion"*, and within which inevitable shocks arise from *"the various groupings within this society in transformation"*. This theory is imbued with a nonlinear and non-mechanical conception of history, where the law of 'combined and uneven development' determines only a range of possibilities whose outcome is not determined in advance. *"Marxism"*, writes Trotsky, *"takes its point of departure from world economy, not as a sum of national parts but as a mighty and independent reality which has been created by the international division of labour and the world market, and which in our epoch imperiously dominates the national markets"* (ibid., p.22)

2. On transitional demands, the United Front and the fight against Fascism.

The question put in the light of the Russian revolution were: how to mobilise the greatest possible numbers; how to raise the level of consciousness through action; and how to create the most effective alliance of forces for the inescapable confrontation with the ruling classes. This is what the Bolsheviks had known how to do in 1917 around the vital questions of bread, peace, land. It was a question of moving beyond abstract discussion of the intrinsic virtue of the claims, whether reformist by nature (because compatible with the established order) or revolutionary by nature (because incompatible with this order). The appropriateness of the demands depends on their mobilising value in connection with a concrete situation, and on their educational value for those who enter into struggle. The concept of 'transitional demands' overcomes sterile antinomies between a reformist gradualism which believes in changing society without revolutionising it, and a fetishism of the 'glorious day' which reduces revolution to its climactic moment, to the detriment of the patient work of organisation and education.

This debate is directly related to the one at the centre of strategic discussions on the programme of the Fifth and the Sixth Congresses of the Communist International. Reporting on the question in 1925, Bukharin reaffirmed the validity of 'the tactics of the offensive' of the beginning of the 1920s. On the other hand, at the Fifth Congress, the German representative Thalheimer supported the idea

of the united front and transitional demands. He argued in particular:

“One only has to look at the history of the Second International and its disintegration to recognise that it is precisely the separation between day-to-day questions and broad objectives which constituted the starting point of its descent into opportunism [...] The specific difference between us and the reformist socialists lies not in the fact that we want to eliminate from our programme demands for reform, by whatever name we give them, in order to distance ourselves from them. Rather, it consists in the fact that we locate these transitional demands in the closest relationship to our principles and our aims”.

The question was again on the agenda of the Sixth Congress of 1928, under profoundly different conditions. Exiled in Turkey since 1929, Trotsky benefited from his enforced retreat to assess more deeply the previous ten years of revolutionary experiences. This reflection provided the material for the texts on *The Communist International after Lenin*. In his critique of the programme of the CI, published in Constantinople in 1929, Trotsky condemned the abandonment of the slogan of the Socialist United States of Europe. He rejected any confusion between his theory of permanent revolution and Bukharin's theory of the permanent offensive. He again characterised fascism as a 'state of civil war' carried out by capitalism against the proletariat.

Immediately after the Congress, through an about turn which ran in parallel with the policy of liquidation of the kulaks and forced collectivisation in Soviet Union, the CI adopted an orientation of 'class against class'. This made social democracy the principal enemy and produced a fatal division in the German labour movement faced with the rise of the Nazism. In a booklet entitled *The Third Period of Error of the Communist International*, Trotsky denounced this disastrous course not as a relapse into revolutionary enthusiasm, explicable as youthful leftism, but as a senile and bureaucratic leftism subordinated to the interests of the Kremlin and the zig-zags of its diplomacy. In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, he insisted on the serious study of indices of mass radicalisation (the evolution of trade-union power, electoral results, the strike rate) instead of abstractedly proclaiming the constant possibility of revolutionary action: *“the activity of the masses can take very different forms according to conditions. At certain times, the masses can be completely absorbed by economic struggles and express very little interest in political questions. Alternatively, after having undergone several important reverses on the economic front, they can abruptly shift attention onto the political field.”* His *Writings on Germany* day-by-day advance proposals for united action to overcome the resistible rise of Nazism. They provide a brilliant example of concrete political thought adjusted to the changes in the economic situation. They were thunderbolts hurled at German Communist Party 'orthodoxy', which was wedded to the stupid prophecy according to which 'after Hitler, comes the turn of Thälmann [then Secretary-General of the German CP]'.

In 1938, the founding Programme of the Fourth International (or Transitional Programme) summarised the lessons of these experiences:

“In the process of their daily struggle the masses should be helped to find a bridge between their immediate demands and the program of the socialist revolution. This bridge must consist of a system of transitional demands, based on current conditions and the real consciousness of broad layers of the working class, and inexorably leading them towards the single conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat [...] The Fourth International does not reject the claims of the old minimum programme insofar as they retain some vitality. It tirelessly defends workers' democratic rights and their social achievements. But it undertakes this daily work from the revolutionary point of view.”

The programme included demands for sliding scales of wages and hours, for workers' control of production (a school for the planned economy) and financial transparency, for “the expropriation of

certain groups of capitalists", for the nationalisation of credit. It attached particular importance to democratic and national claims in the colonial and semi-colonial countries. This programme did not constitute a ready-made model of society; rather it developed a way of understanding action in which the emancipation of the workers remained the task of workers themselves.

3. The fight against Stalinism and the bureaucracy.

At the beginning of the 1920s, certain Soviet economists saw the world capitalist economy plunging into endless stagnation. Trotsky was one of the first to analyse its relative revival. In this context, he came to think of the Soviet economy not as a socialist economy, but as an 'economy in transition' in a country subjected to constant military threats and forced to devote a disproportionate share of its meagre resources to defence. It was thus not a question of building an ideal society in one country, but of gaining time, while awaiting the ebb and flow of the world revolution on whose final authority the future of the Russian revolution depended. The Russian revolution would remain constrained by the world market, and by competition with countries with more developed technology and higher labour productivity, for as long as it remained unsupported by the revolutionary movement of more developed countries.

Within the framework of these contradictions, Trotsky was one of the first to perceive the danger of the bureaucracy as a new social force enjoying social privileges related to its monopoly of political power. If, at the time of the civil war and War Communism, he had been in favour of authoritarian methods, as testified by his worst book, *Terrorism and Communism* (1921), since 1923 he had started to analyse bureaucratisation as a social phenomenon, even if in his eyes the 'new middle-class' of the kulaks and Nepmen still remained the principal danger. This decisive question of the periodisation of the bureaucratic counter-revolution continued to confront the Russian and international revolutionary movements. It was a question of knowing if the 'Soviet Thermidor' was already achieved or yet to come.

The bureaucratic counter-revolution was not a single event, symmetrical to that of October, but a drawn-out, cumulative process of different levels and stages. From October 1917 to the Stalinist Gulag, there is no simple continuity, but different levels of repression by and weight of the bureaucracy. At the same time as forced collectivisation, a crucial reform of the detention system came into effect in June 1929, generalising work camps for all condemned prisoners with more than three-year sentences. Confronted by the great famines of 1932-1933 and the importance of internal migrations, a decision of December 1932 introduced internal passports. The law of December 1st 1934 introduced procedures that provided the legal instruments of the great terror. Then began the genuinely terrorist cycle marked by the great purges of 1936-1938. More half the delegates to the congress of 1934 were eliminated; more than 30,000 cadres from an army of 178 000 were killed. In parallel, the bureaucratic state apparatus exploded: according to the statistics of Moshe Lewin, the numbers of administrative staff went from 1,450,000 in 1928 to 7,500,000 in 1939, while the number of white collar workers leaped from 4 million to nearly 14 million. The state apparatus devoured the party, which thought it had the power to control it.

Under the bureaucratic knout, the country thus witnessed an upheaval without equivalent in the world. Between 1926 and 1939, the cities grew by 30 million inhabitants, and their paid labour force went from 10 to 22 million. It resulted in a massive ruralisation of the cities and the despotic imposition of new work discipline. This transformation by forced march was accompanied by the exaltation of nationalism and a massive rise in careerism. In this great social and geographical whirl, as Moshe Lewin comments ironically, society was in a certain sense 'classless', because all classes were formless, in perpetual fusion.

Despite the differences in their outlooks, authors as different as Trotsky and Hannah Arendt agree

that the first Five-Year Plan and the great purges of the 1930s were the qualitative turning-point after which it became possible to speak about bureaucratic counter-revolution (for Trotsky) or totalitarianism (for Arendt). Trotsky's contribution was to provide the elements of a materialist understanding of the bureaucratic counter-revolution, where social and historical conditions take precedence over palace intrigues or the psychology of the actors. He does not reduce colossal events involving multitudes to the whims of a 'history from above', made by supreme guides or great helmsmen. His contribution therefore does not end the debate, and definitely does not solve the historical problems which continued to divide his 'orthodox' and 'heterodox' heirs.

He particularly sought to locate the stages of the process by which the bureaucracy became autonomous and power became concentrated in the hands of one individual. The extent of crystallisation of privileges, the relationship between classes, Party and State, and the bureaucratic orientation of international politics represent various indicators which he combined to try to determine these stages. The most telling element of this reactionary break, however, was not sociological, but political: it lay in the bankruptcy of the Communist International in relation to the rise and victory of Nazism in Germany. In 1937, when the Moscow trials and the great terror were in full swing, Trotsky corrected his vision: *"We had formerly defined Stalinism as a bureaucratic centrism. This assertion is now redundant. The interests of the Bonapartist bureaucracy no longer correspond to the hybrid character of centrism. The counter-revolutionary character of Stalinism on the world arena is definitively established"*. From this followed the need to give up the position of realignment and reform of the USSR: *"the central task from now on becomes that of overthrowing the thermidorian bureaucracy itself"*. This revolution qualifies as political insofar as it is supposed to be based on existing social rights (state property and planning). In his essay on Trotsky, Ernest Mandel uses the paradoxical formula for Stalinism of *"political counter-revolution in the revolution"*. Such ambiguous formula led to an insistence on characterising the state as a bureaucratically-degenerated workers state, thus attributing to it a social content that gave rise to many ambiguities.

The programme of the political revolution still included a series of democratic claims already advanced in 1927 in the Platform of the Left Opposition: *"1) To prevent any attempt to lengthen the working day; 2) To increase wages, at least in relation to current industrial output; 5) To reduce rents for ..."*. This platform categorically condemned the practice of removing elected trade-union representatives under the pretext of internal party dissent. It advocated full independence for factory committees and local committees with respect to the state administration. On the other hand, it did not call into question *"the position as a single party occupied by the Communist Party of Soviet Union"*. It was satisfied to announce that this situation, *"absolutely essential to the revolution"*, generated a series of *"particular dangers"*. The Transitional Programme of 1938 marks a fundamental change on this point. There, political pluralism, the independence of the trade unions from the Party and the state and democratic freedoms become questions of principle, insofar as they express the heterogeneity of the proletariat and the conflicts of interests likely within it that are likely to persist well beyond the conquest of power. In *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky had shown the theoretical bases of this principled pluralism. Classes are not homogeneous *"as if the conscience of a class corresponded exactly to its place in society"*. They are *"torn by internal antagonisms and arrive at their ultimate goals only through competing tendencies, alignments and parties. One can recognise with some reservations which party is a fraction of which class, but as a class is made of a number of fractions the same class can form several parties"*. Thus the proletariat of the Soviet society *"is not less, but much more heterogeneous and complex than that of the capitalist country, and it can consequently provide a largely sufficient breeding ground for the formation of several parties"* Trotsky concluded from this that the democratisation of the Soviets was from now on *"inconceivable without the right to the multi-party system"*.

4. The question of the Party and the International.

This is the fourth great question constitutive of original 'Trotskyism'. It is the organisational corollary of the theory of the permanent revolution, and of understanding the revolution as an international process. Trotsky's last fight for a new International, which he regarded as the most important of his life, was against the nationalist evolution of the Soviet regime and its foreseeable consequence: the liquidation of the Communist International itself, made official in 1943.

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