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United States - On Cannon, Shachtman and early US Trotskyism: talk to the Havana conference on Leon Trotsky

Tuesday 21 May 2019, by [PALMER Bryan D.](#) (Date first published: 8 May 2019).

What follows are Bryan Palmer's notes for his presentation to the May 6th-8th, three-day conference in Havana, Cuba, organized to commemorate the centennial of the founding of the Third International, with a discussion of the topic, "Leon Trotsky and Trotskyism".



Max Schachtman and James Cannon.

Remarks to the Trotsky Conference, Havana

1. Thanks to Frank, the Trotsky Museum of Mexico, and other sponsors and organizers of this historical conference. Thanks to all present for coming, sharing ideas, differences, perspectives, and allowing us all - who share a common commitment to the heritage of revolutionary Trotskyism - to express our solidarity with the Cuban Revolution and defend the accomplishments and achievements of this society, forged against US imperialism, and threatened today by the forces of capitalist aggression.

2. My talk, upon which I will try to impose a Bolshevik discipline, is different than what is titled in various programs. I won't be talking about Trotskyism in North America, too broad a subject to broach. I will address two critically important leaders of the US Trotskyist movement, Max Schachtman and James P. Cannon, and the emergence of Trotskyism in the US in the 1930s. These necessarily truncated comments might be called, "Theses on Cannon & Schachtman: United States Trotskyism, 1928-1938." And they recall an earlier set of theses, one of which declared, 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is to change it.'

3. I start by tilting my sails against the winds of conventional wisdom. Schachtman is actually more written about than Cannon, and he is presented in the standard accounts in more sympathetic ways. Schachtman, who is often seen as representative of the immigrant strand of revolutionary socialism in the US, is usually presented as cosmopolitan, multilingual, sophisticated, internationalist, and Trotsky's collaborator and translator.

4. Cannon, representative of the native born, English-speaking revolutionary, is presented as more parochial, uninterested in international questions, and somewhat wooden and mechanical in his translation of revolutionary politics into the United States context.
5. Over the course of the 1930s these two figures, more than any others, charted the course of American Trotskyism. But the path followed, and their relations with one another were contested and conflictual, and the actualities of their contributions were different than are often depicted in a mythologizing of Shachtman's sophistication and superiority.
6. Cannon was in fact the experienced leader inside the Communist Party, which he helped to found in 1919-1921. Shachtman, along with Martin Abern, Albert Glotzer, Maurice Spector, and others were youthful recruits to Cannon's eventual break from Stalinism and his embrace of Trotskyism in 1928, which eventually resulted in expulsion from the CP.
7. But from the moment that these figures, along with Rose Karsner, Cannon's partner, formed the American Trotskyist movement and the Communist League of America, Cannon and Shachtman clashed.
8. Shachtman led a personalized assault on Cannon in the difficult days of the early Depression, chastising Cannon's supposed laziness, his lack of theoretical sophistication, and his ignorance of international issues as they related to the struggle to forge a Trotskyist movement. Shachtman and Glotzer, fluent in European languages, met with Trotsky in Europe early in the 1930s. Cannon did not, and was forced to test Trotsky on a number of occasions in written communications and challenges that were structured so as to ascertain that Trotsky would not behave towards the American section of his movement in the same way that the Stalinist Comintern had behaved.
9. This accelerated an almost Freudian rift between Shachtman, Glotzer, Spector, with Cannon, a father figure, who now seemed displaced by a youthful cohort who demanded their place at the leadership table. The public denunciation of Cannon was vicious, and among Shachtman and his social and political network the sense that Cannon as a senior figure in the movement had three children to support and difficult material and personal circumstances to navigate was non-existent. That Rose Karsner suffered what can only be construed as personal breakdown after the expulsion from the CP only worsened the situation.
10. Had the critique of Cannon, which had some basis, been entirely valid and fair-minded, it would have been devastating. It was not. And ultimately what was a personal assault on Cannon's regime merged with a politics of political error and lackadaisical organizational activity that Trotsky identified with Shachtman, whom he criticized for forming political alliances in Europe on the basis of "chumminess" rather than political principles, for failing to follow through on basic organizational assignments because they might have ruffled some European feathers, and for acclimatizing to and papering over politically retrograde activities because of personal relations.
11. This was the beginning of Trotsky's understanding that Cannon, who had flaws, was the more stable political element in the American movement, a steeled revolutionary with experience who could be trusted, whereas Shachtman was mercurial, too preoccupied with questions of a literary or journalistic nature, and simply incapable of holding to the necessarily firm politics of revolutionary principle.
12. The personal and political estrangement of Cannon and Shachtman in 1930-1933 was quite ugly and nasty, but it showed signs of moderating in 1933-1934.
13. There were three reasons for Cannon and Shachtman coming together: 1) NY hotel strike of

1933 brought Cannon and Shachtman closer, with Cannon especially playing a revived role in public agitation that ended in the two Trotskyists opposing B.J. Fields' opportunistic and ultimately failed leadership of the strike; 2) the involvement of both figures in the highly successful Minneapolis teamsters strikes of 1934, led by Cannon allies like the Dunne brothers and Carl Skoglund; and 3) the anti-fascist campaign against developments in Germany and the need to prepare for war, although there continued to be factional bumps along this road. Ultimately, however, the anti-fascist struggle led Trotsky, as well as Cannon and Shachtman, to conclude that it was time to take Trotskyism out of the shadows of being merely an Opposition to the Comintern, forging a truly independent revolutionary organization and indeed a new Fourth International.

14. This led to Cannon and Shachtman's alliance over fusion with the Musteites in the American Workers Party, which Cannon considered a variant of the French Turn, and the actual French Turn in America, entry into the US Socialist Party of Norman Thomas. Cannon and Shachtman found themselves together in opposing the sectarian opposition of Hugo Oehler, and Shachtman seemed to have broken from his young allies, Glotzer, Abern, and Spector, all of whom continued to harbour deeply personal resentments of Cannon and his leadership of the American Trotskyist movement.

15. But in the Socialist Party entry, Cannon and Shachtman again found themselves at loggerheads. Shachtman thought entry into the SP should be long-term, that the Trotskyists could ultimately take over the organization, and that the path to this end was negotiations with the SP's seemingly left wing, known as the Militants and later the Clarityites.

16. Cannon ended up with an entirely different orientation, one supported by Trotsky. Shachtman and the entire NY leadership of the Trotskyist movement, which included James Burnham, Cannon's long-time supporter Arne Swabeck, Glotzer, Spector, youth leader Joe Carter, and to a limited extent Abern, were content to engage in endless negotiations with the so-called NY SP militants.

17. Cannon opted for a different course. He travelled the country, building the SP, especially in California, where he settled, and where he came, according to SP sources, perilously close to taking over the state Socialist Party. With SP left wing militant, Glen Trimble, Cannon started an agitational paper, the LABOR ACTION. He built relations with a seamen's union figurehead, Harry Lundenberg, and influenced a successful mass struggle of seamen in a lengthy 99-day strike that paralyzed west-coast ports and pitted militant direct-action seamen against the capitulationist sensibilities of the Harry Bridges/Stalinist led longshore union. Cannon won over provincial militants in Ohio, such as the seasoned Musteite, Ted Selender, and consolidated his ongoing relations with the revolutionary leadership of the Minneapolis Teamsters, who were now central figures in the Socialist Party. He campaigned successfully to free Tom Mooney and other political prisoners, and while he and Shachtman differed greatly on what to do in the SP, they collaborated on the defence of Trotsky through organizing the Dewey Commission, a campaign in which Shachtman and New York-based Trotskyist comrades like George Novack, undoubtedly played the preeminent roles.

18. Throughout all of this Cannon was opposing both the Stalinists and the Socialist Party hierarchy, whether they were right wing or ostensibly left leaning. This was especially evident in his critique of the Popular Front and how it licenced and abetted the murderous assault on the revolutionary forces fighting in Spain.

19. All of this embarrassed the SP leadership, who grew increasingly agitated in their opposition to Cannon and the Trotskyists. As Cannon and Trotsky knew would happen, eventually the Socialist Party expelled the Trotskyists in 1937. Shachtman and Burnham resisted recognizing this until the very end.

20. But as the expulsion happened, hundreds of new recruits were drawn to Trotskyism, and the

foundation was laid for establishing the Socialist Workers Party in 1938. Trotsky then turned to Cannon, first and foremost, to build the groundwork for establishing the Fourth International in the summer of that year. Yes, Shachtman would chair the actual meeting in France where the Fourth International was formed, but Trotsky explicitly tasked Cannon with meeting with the rancorous and divided British sections of his followers, to mould them into one entity and win over CLR James. Shachtman played a role in these international developments because of his linguistic abilities, but it was Cannon Trotsky trusted.

21. At this point in 1938, Shachtman and Cannon were as one in their views that Russia was a workers' state, and only Burnham and Carter were dissenting. Within months another factional rift was in the making, in which Shachtman would renounce the view that Russia was a workers' state, however Stalinistically degenerate. This would prove a slippery slope down which he would slide as he made his exit from revolutionary Trotskyism, breaking decisively from Cannon in the 1939-1940 disagreement within the SWP over the nature of the Soviet Union.

22. Cannon, in contrast, proved to be the red continuity that evolved from the revolutionary syndicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World to the founding of the Communist Party in 1921 to the break from Stalinism in 1928 to the founding of the Socialist Workers Party and the Fourth International in 1938. Thereafter, whatever errors he may have committed, it was Cannon not Shachtman, who embodied revolutionary internationalism.

23. In the regroupment of the revolutionary left that is necessary at the current conjuncture, we will need and rely on a diversity of talents. Shachtman brought much to the making of the revolutionary Trotskyist left, but he contributed also a great deal of a negative kind. A great irony is how kind history has been to Shachtman, and how harsh it has been on Cannon, routinely dismissed as a limited theoretical mind with a Zinoviev appetite for bureaucracy. Yet it was Cannon, more than any other figure in the United States Trotskyist movement who built and sustained a revolutionary organization and remained firm in his programmatic principles, which were anything but parochial. In a reconstituted revolutionary left, we will need Cannon's resolve, his principle, his steadfast adherence to a politics of class struggle, and his refusal of the clique politics and combinations that so often sadly animated Shachtman.

24. As Trotsky once said. "Those who cannot defend old positions will never conquer new ones." Cannon stayed such a course of revolutionary resolve, holding to old positions of programmatic principle while learning new lessons of how to function as a revolutionary.

Bryan Palmer

P.S.

- <http://links.org.au/node/5408>

- The second volume of Palmer's major biography, *James P. Cannon: Revolutionary Continuity and Class-Struggle Politics in the United States, 1890 - 1974*, will be published by Brill at the end of 2019, and will be published soon thereafter in soft-cover, by Haymarket Books. It is titled *James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928-1938*.