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Review

Trotsky's Marxism and the USSR: Looking Back, Looking Forward

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Review of:

***The Marxism of Leon Trotsky.* By Kunal Chattopadhyay. Kolkata: Progress Publishers, 2006, 672 pages, including index, \$25 paperback.**

***Western Marxism and the Soviet Union.* By Marcel van der Linden. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009, 379 pages, including index, \$20 paperback.**

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KARL MARX AND his comrades deemed their own approach “scientific,” as compared to “utopian” intellectual efforts on behalf of socialism, because they believed that practical efforts to challenge and ultimately replace capitalism with something better must be grounded in a serious study of economic, political, social, historical realities and dynamics.

More, they believed that lessons learned from practical organizing and political experiences of the working class and popular social movements — sometimes glorious victories and often tragic defeats — must also guide practical efforts of the future. The combination of such study and experience has been called “Marxist theory.”

The massive crisis of capitalism has put the meaning of “socialism” back into public debate. Superficially equating state intervention in the economy with “socialism,” some are inclined to agree with Newsweek magazine that “we are all socialists now.”

Despite far-right hysteria, however, President Obama is no socialist. Like President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the last big decline in capitalism's fortunes, he is insistent that bailing out capitalism is the purpose of his administration's hands-on approach to the economy. But those who

perceive that — from the standpoint of human rights, the dignity of labor, the preservation of our health and communities and environment — “capitalism fouls things up,” will certainly feel that we must go beyond the limitations of Obama’s policies.

One of the many differences between the present global capitalist downturn and that of the 1930s is that back then there were millions of people throughout the world who believed the 1917 Revolution that the Bolshevik/Communist vanguard led in Russia had actually opened the pathway to the socialist-communist future — despite the dictatorial emergency measures brought on by foreign invasion and civil war. Rule by democratic councils (soviets) of the workers and peasants seemed to have been established, and a global Communist movement took shape for the purpose of carrying out similar revolutions throughout the world.

After the revolution’s universally acknowledged leader, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, died in 1924, a sharp struggle erupted over future perspectives, between the intransigent revolutionary Leon Trotsky and the seemingly more patient and easy-going Joseph Stalin. Victory within the Russian Communist Party went to Stalin — who then guided the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) into what was called a “revolution from above,” involving the forced collectivization of land and a fiercely rapid industrialization. By the 1930s, the Stalin regime claimed that it had finally achieved “socialism,” a claim accepted with hope and rejoicing by many workers, peasants, students, intellectuals, and others throughout the world.

As time went on, increasing numbers of people came to the conclusion that what existed in the USSR had little to do with the socialism forecast by Marx — a “free association of the producers” in which the laboring masses had won the battle for democracy to create an abundant society of the free and the equal. Instead, it was a society which continued to be marked by a considerable degree of inequality, drudgery, scarcity, and extreme restrictions on freedom.

If this was not the socialism that the Stalinists said it was, then what was it? How could its emergence be explained? The answers to such questions have obvious implications for other questions: Is a socialist alternative to capitalism actually possible? What are the preconditions, the barriers, and the possibilities for such a transition? Such questions as these have a greater edge than ever in the present period of capitalist crisis. Each in their own way, the books under review here have relevance for those facing this dilemma.

Trotsky’s Marxism

The life and thought of Leon Trotsky have guided many seeking to understand the grandeur of the Russian Revolution and the tragedy of its betrayal. Kunal Chattopadhyay’s *The Marxism of Leon Trotsky* is not the first book to deal with the topic indicated in the title. The more serious biographies — by Isaac Deutscher and Pierre Broué (the latter still calls out for English translation) — naturally deal at length with Trotsky’s revolutionary perspectives, as does Tony Cliff’s more activist-oriented four-volume study.

Important discussions of Trotsky’s political orientation have been offered by such activist scholars as Ernest Mandel, Michael Löwy, Duncan Hallas, and John Molyneux — the first two inclined to embrace Trotsky without reservation, the latter two (along with Cliff) taking issue with him particularly for not agreeing with them that the USSR was “state capitalist,” and also for founding the fragile revolutionary socialist network known as the Fourth International.

But until the present volume, the only study reaching for a thorough and in-depth exposition has been Baruch Knei-Paz’s 1978 work *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky*. When all is said

and done, however, Knei-Paz is unsympathetic, even dismissive of Trotsky's revolutionary Marxism, despite his devoting 598 pages to it. Chattopadhyay's book (30 pages longer) provides a more sympathetic, insightful, reliable account.

A Professor of History at Calcutta's prestigious Jadavpur University, Chattopadhyay brings to this study a sensibility developed through his own family's long-time involvement in the substantial Indian Communist movement. In his youth, he himself was swept up in Maoist currents before experience and reflection brought him into the Fourth International. Such background may contribute to his ability to see and explain the coherence in the complexity and sweep of Trotsky's thought.

It is unfortunate that this splendid book is not easily available to U.S. readers. Its length and polemical edge raise questions as to whether a U.S. publisher will be inclined to rectify the situation. Yet the occasional reference to recent debates within the Fourth International, or between the Fourth International and other left-wing currents, cannot obscure the fact that we are presented here with a clear, rigorous, richly textured examination of an amazing political theorist and revolutionary leader. Those seriously concerned with Trotsky, Marxism, revolutionary history and activism must take this massive contribution into account.

The book's chapters are grouped into four parts. "The Foundations" makes a distinction between Classical Marxism (associated with Marx and Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky) and the more rigid, mechanistic, dogmatic "Orthodox" Marxism supposedly predominant in the mainstream of the socialist movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Part Two, "The Strategy of Revolution," offers two chapters exploring the development of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution in Russia, and then his generalization of it on a global scale.

Part Three, "The Revolutionary Process," consists of three chapters dealing with the interrelationship of the working class and the revolutionary party, the relation between democratic workers' councils and working-class political rule (or "dictatorship of the proletariat"), and the transition to socialism. The three chapters of Part Four, "Proletarian Internationalism," deal respectively with imperialism, the Communist International which Lenin and Trotsky helped to found and lead (and which Stalin helped to corrupt and dissolve), and the Fourth International.

Chattopadhyay helps us see in Trotsky's thought the dynamic interplay of democracy and class struggle, the self-activity of the masses of laboring and oppressed people reaching for their own liberation within, while at the same time straining beyond, the context of global capitalism.

The three elements of his theory of permanent revolution — (a) the possibility and necessity, under the right circumstances, of democratic and immediate struggles spilling over into the struggle for working-class political power, (b) culminating in a transitional period going in the direction of socialism, (c) which can be realized only through the advance of similar struggles around the world — permeate Trotsky's orientation from his youth to his death.

His vision of workers' democracy, and his appreciation of the radical sub-culture created by the embattled working class, comes through in his failed effort to mobilize a Communist-Socialist united front against Hitler in the early 1930s:

"In the course of many decades, the workers have built up within the bourgeois democracy by utilizing it, by fighting against it, their own strongholds and bases of proletarian democracy: the trade unions, the political parties, the educational and sports clubs, the cooperatives, etc. The proletariat cannot attain power within the formal limits of bourgeois democracy but can do so only by taking the road to revolution ... And these bulwarks of workers' democracy [which Hitler's Nazis were preparing to destroy] within the bourgeois state are absolutely essential for taking the revolutionary road." (359)

The commitment to workers' democracy also comes through in Trotsky's effort to mobilize Communists in the Soviet Republic of the mid-1920s against the bureaucratic onslaught represented by Stalin:

"We must not build socialism by the bureaucratic road, we must not create a socialist society by administrative orders; only by way of the greatest initiative, individual activity, persistence and resilience of the opinion of the many-millions masses, who sense and know that the matter is their own concern ... socialist construction of possible only through the growth of genuine revolutionary democracy." (398)

Chattopadhyay notes that in his 1936 classic analysis of the USSR, *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky rejected any "attempt to prettify the totalitarian regime." Insisting "that statism was not identical to the socialization of the means of production," he "denied the claim that the USSR was in any sense a socialist society." (537)

According to Chattopadhyay, "Stalinism (political counter-revolution within the workers' state) and fascism (political counter-revolution in the bourgeois state) heralded a long black night. It was necessary to raise a new, 'stainless banner,' around which the revolutionary workers of a new generation could unite." (515)

At the same time, running through Trotsky's orientation is a thoroughgoing revolutionary internationalism which is rooted in a conception of "world economy and the class struggle as a totality subject to uneven and combined development," as he put it, and an understanding that "today the entire globe — its dry land and water, its surface and interior — has become the arena of a worldwide economy; the dependence of each part on the other has become indissoluble." (436)

The relevance of his perspectives for modern-day global justice movement seems striking: *"Imperialism represents the predatory capitalist expression of a progressive tendency in economic development — to construct a human economy on a world scale... Only socialism ... which liberates the world economy ... and thereby liberates national culture itself ... offers a way out from the contradictions which have revealed themselves to us as a terrible threat to all of human culture."* (440)

And in sharp contrast to the ethnocentrism of many European socialists, he commented in 1919: *"We have up to now devoted too little attention to capitalism in Asia. However, the international situation is evidently shaping up in such a way that the [revolutionary] road to Paris and London lies via the towns of Afghanistan, the Punjab, and Bengal."* (447)

Critical Appreciation

While those inclined to take issue with key aspects of Trotsky's thought will be dissatisfied with the author's almost invariable defense, this is always accompanied by an informative and well-reasoned discussion that even the most severe critic would do well to consider. Nor is Chattopadhyay himself completely uncritical of Trotsky's perspectives, and his contributions on this score are very much worth more attention and debate than will be possible here.

One of the sharpest criticisms seems to focus on what he views as Trotsky becoming, in a sense, too "Leninist." While hardly rejecting Lenin's fundamental orientation, Chattopadhyay approves of the young Trotsky's conflict with what he portrays (wrongly, I think) as Lenin's hyper-centralist deviations in *What Is To Be Done?* and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*.

He is also critical of Trotsky initially giving too much ground to Bolshevism when he joined Lenin's

party in 1917. (For an impressive challenge to the gist of Trotsky's 1904 criticism of Lenin, and thus of Chattopadhyay's characterization, see Lars Lih's splendid *Lenin Rediscovered* [Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008].)

Chattopadhyay's argument is intriguing. In Trotsky's anti-Lenin polemic *Our Political Tasks* (1904), "Trotsky made a point to which we will find him returning all his life: 'The problems of the new [revolutionary] regime are so intricate that they can be solved only through the rivalry of the various methods of economic and political reconstruction, by long 'debates,' by systematic struggle — not only between the socialist and capitalist worlds, but also between the various tendencies within socialism, tendencies that must inevitably develop as soon as the dictatorship of proletariat creates tens and hundreds of new unresolved problems'" (220).

This clear recognition of the necessity of political pluralism as an integral part of creating socialism is not present in Lenin's otherwise magnificent *The State and Revolution* (1917). The calamities of civil war, foreign intervention, economic blockade, and social chaos following the 1917 revolution caused Lenin, Trotsky and the other Bolsheviks to establish a one-party dictatorship, curtail and ban various manifestations of political pluralism, and adopt other authoritarian measures on an "emergency" basis.

Some of Chattopadhyay's sharpest criticisms of Trotsky center on this period of 1919-1922. In fact, the temporary expedients were never rescinded, contributing to the replacement of power of workers' councils by the power of the state and party bureaucratic apparatus — and the crystallization of Stalinism. By 1923-24, Trotsky recognized the danger and began his leadership of the ill-fated Left Opposition.

In his final years, now living in exile before being murdered by a Stalinist agent in 1940, he had — Chattopadhyay shows us — explicitly reintegrated into his Bolshevik-Leninist orientation the pluralist insights of 1904, calling for a political revolution that would overthrow the bureaucratic dictatorship, and for a multi-party soviet democracy. Trotsky viewed this as a political revolution, which he believed could and must rescue the social and economic gains of the 1917 Revolution.

Making Sense of Stalin's "Socialism"

The political revolution never happened, however. Trotsky himself spent more than 16 years seeking to make sense of Stalin's "socialism," a matter Chattopadhyay deals with capably, but not in great depth.* He never expected the bureaucratic dictatorship to last as long as it did.

In fact, several generations of Marxists labored to make sense of what the USSR represented and how it might be squared with Marxist perspectives. Marcel van der Linden, Research Director of Amsterdam's prestigious International Institute of Social History, points out that "the 'Russian Question' was an absolutely central problem for Marxism in the twentieth century."

In Western Marxism and the Soviet Union, van der Linden offers a survey of Marxist-influenced theorizations and debates. The discussion is not exhaustive but presents the thinking of over 100 people from 1917 to the dawn of the 21st century, whose works are listed here in 44 pages. The eyes and mind of even veteran Marxists may begin to blur after spending excessive stretches of time with this volume — but the author's account is quite clear, coherent, fair-minded, and genuinely interesting.

The periodic crescendos of theory and debate (seven in all, van der Linden tells us, from 1917 to the end of the 1990s) have implications for the nature, but also the very possibility, of socialism. The

nature of capitalism is also at issue, as are the capacities of the working class to improve its own situation and the world, and the adequacy of Marxism as a tool for understanding the world.

Marx's materialist conception of history had posited a European historical development leading from a generalized primitive tribal communism, eventually giving way to the rise and fall of a succession of slave-based civilizations, then an extensive feudalism slowly evolving through the crystallization and expansion within it of a market economy, explosively giving way to a full-blown and dynamic capitalism, which would generate the possibility of immense productivity and abundance that would pave the way (after a working-class revolution) for a socialist future.

"It is necessary to reconsider the whole traditional structure of historical materialism," according to dissident-Marxists György Bence and Janos Kis (under the pseudonym Marc Rakovskii) in *Les Temps Modernes* as they sought to comprehend Soviet-style societies. (247)

Indeed, how could such a society fit within the traditional Marxist schema? In 1980, Rumanian dissident Pavel Campeanu suggested a variety of contradictory elements that added up to "some kind of pre-capitalist socio-economic formation." (284) Back in 1944 Czechoslovakian ex-Communist Josef Guttman, writing under the name Peter Meyer in the U.S. radical journal *Politics*, suggested what many others had concluded before him: "Perhaps there is neither capitalism nor socialism in Russia, but a third thing, something that is quite new in history." (127)

As late as 1980, British economist Simon Mohun argued a point made by some other analysts, summarized by van der Linden in this way: "Just as the transition to capitalism could be understood only after capitalism was consolidated, the transition from capitalism to communism could only be fathomed once communism had become established." (197-198) But others refused to assume that the USSR represented any such transition to socialism or communism.

In 1970s samizdat essays, Alexander Zimin, an old Bolshevik oppositionist who had somehow survived years in Stalin's labor camps, suggested that the USSR represented "a mongrel and freakish social formation," a stagnant evolutionary byway, a dead-end detour going away from both capitalism and socialism. (222) In the 1940s, German left-wing economist Fritz Sternberg had argued that the USSR was a hybrid form with progressive and reactionary tendencies (he increasingly saw the latter as predominant) and that one should resist labeling: "It is useless to attempt to cover with a name; it is misleading to mistake one side of the Russian development for the other." (131)

This has not stopped many from seeking and applying one or another label. Van der Linden notes: "Numerous attempts were made to understand Soviet society, some with solid empirical foundations, but most lacking them; some consistent and carefully thought-out, others illogical and superficial." (305)

The three "classical" theories predominating in critical-minded circles (each with some connection to the Trotskyist tradition) have been: (1) degenerated workers' state, (2) bureaucratic collectivism, (3) state capitalism. Van der Linden argues that none of these matches up with what he calls "orthodox Marxism" — but we will see that some theorists have insisted that major aspects of Marxism itself have been thrown into question by the evolving realities.

Challenge to Marxist Theory

Among the early critics, some insisted that the existence of the authoritarianism and bureaucratic aspects of reality in the early Soviet Republic, and then the substantial concessions to market forces

during the period of NEP (New Economic Policy, 1921-29), were far from the socialist goal. This meant, from the standpoint of the stages (primitive communal/slave civilization/feudalism/capitalism/socialism/communism) that have been associated with the Marxist schema, that what existed in Soviet Russia had to be some variety of capitalism, which the critics were inclined to dub “state capitalism.”

The Bolshevik leaders — Lenin and Trotsky most of all — never asserted that socialism had been established. Only Stalin and his followers would claim this, beginning in the 1930s. Lenin argued in 1921 that the 1917 working-class revolution had established a workers’ state (political rule by the workers’ councils, or soviets), but that under pressures of scarcity and war it was “a workers’ state with bureaucratic deformations.” The transition to socialism could only be completed on the basis of further economic development, the deepening of workers’ experience and power, and the triumph of the revolution in other parts of the world.

Bolsheviks could also point to Marx’s comments that the future communist (or socialist) society must be seen “not as it has developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society, which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth-marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.” (264)

Some socialists who had opposed the Bolshevik regime, such as the Menshevik Olga Domanevskaya, insisted that central dynamics of capitalism, such as economic competition and the insatiable quest for profit, were absent from the economy of Soviet Russia. Similarly, the famous Austrian Social-Democratic economist Rudolf Hilferding argued that “wages and prices still exist, but their function is no longer the same,” and that “while maintaining the form, a complete transformation of the function has occurred” in this emerging totalitarian order. (92)

This partly dovetails with the analysis of another Austrian Social-Democrat, Friedrich Adler, that (according to van der Linden’s summary) “Stalin’s ‘experiment’ should be judged as an attempt to realize, through the sacrifice of a whole generation of workers, the primitive accumulation process which in developed capitalism had occurred earlier, and in this way lay the foundation for a socialist Soviet Union.” (53) Hilferding, on the other hand, stressed that the bureaucratic-authoritarian state in Soviet Russia had fractured the classical Marxist dictum that the economic system determines the class nature of the state. Under Stalin it had converted itself into “an independent power” ruling over the Soviet people. (90)

Other challenges to traditional Marxist perspectives would crop up. For example, Simone Weil developed a 1933 analysis which argued that under modern capitalist production the growing division of labor and specialization increasingly resulted in the mass of individuals losing their ability to “see society in its totality,” which meant that they were “imprisoned in a social constellation” which prevented them from grasping the logic and history of social-economic reality. On the other hand, growing managerial and bureaucratic apparatuses were becoming essential for coordinating the “numerous fragmented activities.” If a revolution removed the capitalists, more likely than working-class rule would be the rising administrative forces becoming a new bureaucratic caste ruling over the economy, as in Stalin’s Russia. (74-75)

In fact, the division between intellectual and manual labor had been emphasized by many theorists, and had identified as a source of bureaucratization within the workers’ movement before World War I, and — by logical extension — in the first effort to create a workers’ state. This logic dovetailed with the perception of what actually manifested itself in the USSR, lucidly described in 1970 by U.S. Marxist economist and *Monthly Review* editor Paul Sweezy:

— “The Party established a dictatorship which accomplished epic feats of industrialization and preparation for the inevitable onslaught of the imperialist powers [which took place during World

War II], but the price was the proliferation of political and economic bureaucracies which repressed rather than represented the new Soviet working class; and gradually entrenched themselves in power as a new ruling class.” (209)

Some would come to perceive this inability to sustain workers’ power as involving a fatal shortcoming in the working class itself. As another left-wing economist, the Greek/French political theorist Cornelius Castoriadis put it in the late 1940s:

— *“Having overthrown the bourgeois government, having expropriated the capitalists (often against the wishes of the Bolsheviks), having occupied the factories, the workers thought that all that was necessary was to hand over management to the government, to the Bolshevik party, and to the trade union leaders. By doing so, the proletariat was abdicating its own essential role in the society it was striving to create.” (118)*

Such perceptions contributed to some theorists — such as the 1970s East German Communist dissident Rudolf Bahro — concluding that since “the immediate needs of the subaltern strata and classes are always conservative, and never positively anticipate a new form of life,” the hope in bureaucratized “workers’ states” was with the more intellectual middle strata of specialists and administrators pushing aside the privileged bureaucratic elites in order to guide society to genuine socialism. (235-235)

For others, such as James Burnham — the most prominent Trotskyist intellectual in the United States before his rapid swing rightward to the Central Intelligence Agency and the editorial board of conservative journal *National Review* — a different conclusion became obvious: socialism is impossible.

Dismantling his previous Marxist convictions in the 1941 classic *The Managerial Revolution*, Burnham asserted that the inevitable wave of the future, already well under way and destined to be completed within half a century, was a global transition to variations of “managerial society” (already evident in the USSR, Nazi Germany, and the extensive social-liberalism of the New Deal in the United States). These different entities would enter into “direct competition in the days to come” for global empire. (83)

Varieties of Socialist Affirmation

While van der Linden feels “it is perfectly clear that the Soviet society can hardly be explained in orthodox Marxist terms at all,” his own sympathies bend toward those who refuse to abandon the Marxist method and the socialist goal. He gives greatest attention to those operating within the general revolutionary socialist framework personified by Leon Trotsky.

Trotsky himself followed the logic of Lenin (workers’ state with bureaucratic deformations) by terming the USSR as a degenerated workers’ state requiring a political revolution by the working class to replace the tyranny of the Stalinist bureaucracy with genuine workers’ rule. “Democracy,” he insisted, “is the one and only conceivable mechanism for preparing the socialist system of economy and realizing it in life.” He forecast in 1938:

— *“That which was “bureaucratic deformation” is at the present moment preparing to devour the workers’ state, without leaving any remains. . . . If the proletariat drives out the Soviet bureaucracy in time, then it will still find the nationalized means of production and the basic elements of the planned economy after its victory.” (66-67)*

Some of Trotsky’s U.S. followers, led by Max Shachtman (and fleetingly Burnham), agreeing with Trotsky’s revolutionary-democratic thrust, concluded that by 1939 the bloated bureaucracy had

indeed left “no remains” of the workers’ state. They held that a qualitatively new form of class society had crystallized — what they termed bureaucratic-collectivism. Its effective overthrow would require a much deeper break with the USSR than Trotsky was prepared to accept.

Van der Linden notes that for Trotsky “planned economy and bureaucratic dictatorship were fundamentally incompatible,” and that — as his French comrade Pierre Frank put it — “Stalinism was an accident, not a durable creation of history.” (67) He envisioned either the working class once again taking control of its own workers’ state, clearing away the bureaucratic deformations, and (within the context of working-class revolutions spreading to other lands) moving forward to socialism, or to continued bureaucratic decay ultimately resulting in a collapse that would pave the way for capitalist restoration — which is, of course, what took place 50 years after his death.

The weak point in Trotsky’s conceptualization was pinpointed by his one-time follower in Britain, Tony Cliff: “If the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class, then you cannot have a workers’ state without the workers having power to dictate what happens in society.” (119)

This was exactly the point made by Shachtman and other proponents of the bureaucratic-collectivist analysis — although the barely half-century survival of this purportedly “new stage of class society” does suggest the possibility that it was an optical illusion.

What Cliff and his co-thinkers came up with seems to avoid that problem. They asserted that the USSR under Stalin had evolved into a new variety of capitalism: state capitalism. The Cliff current has been one of the most influential proponents of the “state capitalism” analysis (though van der Linden also treats other proponents — the council communists, as well as C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya).

The “state capitalist” theorists have defended this conception from the types of criticisms noted earlier — for example, the absence of the dynamics of economic competition and of profit maximization as driving the capital accumulation process that defines capitalism — by claiming (as van der Linden summarizes Cliff’s thesis) “that the USSR should be defined as one big capital [or capitalist firm], which operated within the world market, and in so doing competed with the West, above all through the arms race.” (160)

One might question the analytical value of expanding the meaning of “capitalism” in this way. But, as was also the case with the bureaucratic collectivism concept, it served the function of drawing the sharpest line of demarcation between revolutionary socialism and the bogus “socialism” of Stalin and his successors. It also helped prevent, among its adherents, the demoralization and disorientation brought on by the collapse of Communism that afflicted so much of the Left in the 1990s.

On the other hand, van der Linden points out that Cliff and his supporters “had originally assumed that state capitalism represented a higher stage of development than Western capitalism” (258) and — ill-prepared for the crisis and impending collapse that became evident in the 1980s — were compelled to make dramatic if unacknowledged analytical shifts in their later theorizations. For that matter, even more “mainstream” Trotskyists — including such capable and brilliant figures as Ernest Mandel — were inclined to credit the USSR’s “nationalized, planned economy” with much greater efficiency than later proved justified.

It was maverick theorist Hillel Ticktin who in the 1970s broke important new ground by noting that bureaucratic “planning” — by denying democracy — was increasingly inefficient and wasteful, a point that Trotsky himself had made more than once. This allegedly planned economy was “really no more than a bargaining process at best, and a police process at worst.” Ticktin added that “the more

intensive and more complex is the economy, the longer the chain of command, and the less intelligible is industry to the administrators, and so the greater the distortions and their proportionate importance.” (242, 243)

Ticktin’s view was that this represented neither a variety of capitalism nor a phase transitional to socialism nor a durable new form of society. Its insights, in fact, influenced competing views, as van der Linden observes:

— *“Increasingly dominant in all currents of thought became the idea that the Soviet Union embodied a model of economic growth which, although it had initially been successful using extensive methods of industrialization and extra economic coercion, could not maintain its economic and military position in the competition with globalizing world capitalism, because of growing inefficiencies and the absence of a transition to intensive growth.”* (303)

Open Questions

In his conclusions to this rich volume, van der Linden emphasizes that while he does “not mean to imply that the old theories are of no use whatever in further theoretical developments,” his conviction is that a fully adequate analysis of the USSR has yet to be developed. (318)

It may be that if we are able to build mass movements and struggles — in various parts of the world, as the 21st century unfolds — that add to our experience of bringing about transitions from capitalism to socialism, a more fully adequate analysis will come more within our grasp.

Marxist theory and history have often been dismissed with shrugs and giggles and eye-rolling, even on the Left, with a few superficial comments being deemed sufficient to sweep away such “ideological cobwebs.” For those embracing that approach, the two volumes reviewed will seem explorations in irrelevancy. For serious activists, however, these books offer not only historical knowledge but insights on our struggle for a survivable future.

Paul Le Blanc

P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) # 143, November-December 2009 (published as “Theories of Stalinism”).