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Trotsky: past, present... future? An interview with Tariq Ali

Sunday 5 September 2010, by [ALI Tariq](#), [KIRSTY Jane](#) (Date first published: 3 September 2010).

Today's guest contributor, Tariq Ali, is a writer, activist and political commentator. A leading figure of the Trotskyist movement in the sixties and seventies, Ali's engagement with Trotsky goes far beyond party politics. I met up with him at the Edinburgh Book Festival, where he was presenting his new novel *Night of the Golden Butterfly*, to talk about old friends... and new strategies.

Jane Kirsty - You mentioned in *Street Fighting Years* that you first read Isaac Deutscher's biography of Trotsky when you were ill in bed (and I wish I hadn't known the rather TMI details of that... you've scarred me for life). How, then, did you begin to read Trotsky? What was your first contact with him?

Tariq Ali - After reading the Deutscher trilogy, I was just quite naturally drawn to read the writings of the subject of this amazing biography, which has no precedent. There's nothing quite like it. So then I read *My Life*, Trotsky's own account of his life, which is beautifully written and almost reads like high quality fiction. The literary quality of Trotsky appealed to me enormously. Then I started reading his other writings. For my generation he was very important, because he offered us an alternative to a system which we could see even then wasn't working and was going very wrong. It was reading him which finally led me to become a Trotskyist for that period of the sixties and seventies. Ernest Mandel was another leading figure. The strange thing was that one met people in that period who knew or had direct links with the Bolsheviks, and so it was like we were just continuing that tradition. But Trotsky himself always stayed with me, and the prescience of some of his analyses... when I think back on it, in the book which he called *What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?*, which was mistranslated as *The Revolution Betrayed* - a very sober book - he said that, in the future, either the Soviet Union will move and advance and become a socialist democracy; or there will be a regression and it will revert to capitalism, and many of today's bureaucrats will become tomorrow's millionaires. And his opponents said, "this is just crazy stuff". No-one else ever thought so far ahead and in that way. He had a very fine mind, and I guess it was his qualities as an intellectual and as a revolutionary which combined to create this appeal, certainly for me, and for lots other people who were coming of age in the sixties as well.

So it was a natural progression for you to become a Trotskyist in that period?

In that period, certainly, because how could one not? The choices were limited. And then slowly one realised that Trotsky was one thing, but many of the Trotskyist groups were something quite different. It was in response to one of these that Trotsky himself had declared "I'm not a Trotskyist".

Since the sixties, which you wrote about so eloquently in *Street Fighting Years*, how has your relationship to Trotsky evolved?

People sometimes ask me: are you still a Trotskyist? And I say no, because I'm not a member of any of those organisations. I think most of them are pretty clapped out, to be honest. But I say I am still Trotsky-ish, because the impact he had on me intellectually and many of his ideas have stayed with me, and the fact that we are going through a big, big period of defeat is something he knew very well. Most of his life was lived like that. So I find a lot in him still. Sometimes when I pick up some essay of his which I haven't read for twenty, twenty-five years and re-read it, I learn something again. It's quite, quite amazing.

You know, the thing about him was that he was incredibly contemptuous of fools; and it was a problem for him, because if you look at the Bolshevik Party there were lots of idiots in it, and he had no time for them. These are the guys who finally mobilised against him. The notion I used to love that he's sitting in a Politburo meeting, he can't bear the level of discussion, and he takes out a novel by Balzac or Stendhal and reads it. It's a very arrogant thing to do, but somehow it's quite admirable. So my attitude to him remains that he's a central figure of the twentieth century - intellectually, politically, as a revolutionary - and his work will endure. There are books which are now being written to rubbish him by professional Cold War historians, who hated the fact that there was one Bolshevik who understood the system better than they did at the time when they were sucking up to it, and are now writing books just to prove that nothing good came out of it: that they were all evil, all the same. No difference between Lenin and Stalin, no difference between Trotsky and Stalin. For [Robert] Service, Stalin might even have been better on some levels. And for many conservatives it was the same. Stalin was someone they could do business with, and did, and prospered and, small mercy, he wasn't a Jew... After all, Stalin scrupulously kept his side of the bargain after the Second World War. For his own people he was a disaster. Yevtushenko's poem about doubling and trebling the guards at his grave spoke for many at the time. I don't take this Service stuff too seriously. It's an ideological fashion. It comes nowhere near to doing what Deutscher did, really. It's not that Deutscher was totally uncritical, either, but he just... lifted that whole experience to a higher level. The fashion now is to say that everything that happened in that period and in that time was altogether bad. I don't accept that and never will. It belongs to the school of historians who worship accomplished facts and ignore the possibilities that are inherent in many situations. The French Revolution suffered the same fate, so that in Paris today there is a Metro station called Stalin, but no Rue Robespierre.

In your view, is this limited to academia or does it reflect a wider change in attitudes to Trotsky?

I think it's restricted to academia. The rest of the world, or the young generation, doesn't particularly think about any of that. That is the tragedy. This is essentially designed within the academy, for academics making a name for themselves and showing that they are loyal servitors of the state and its needs, and no alternatives are to be permitted at all. There have been some other books too - equally bad - by younger academics, which I couldn't even read. They stayed on my desk but I didn't look at them.

There's a movement - Slavoj Žižek comes to mind - about "reloading" Lenin. Do you think there's a case to "reload" Trotsky as someone who should be read by a younger generation?

I think he certainly should be. Žižek can't do it because he's never read any Trotsky. What Žižek does brilliantly, which is quite funny: he shocks the bourgeoisie, he's a contrarian in the real sense of the word. So he picks up Lenin, whom everyone hates, who is seen by the mainstream as a criminal and a murderer, and he picks him up and forces the reader to confront his ideas. But, in

fact, someone should do a similar exercise for Trotsky as well, before too long. We're thinking about it at Verso.

Hilary Mantel's novel on Robespierre was very good, I thought. Decades ago Alan Brien wrote a less successful and less accomplished novel on Lenin. It didn't work, but the intention was good.

I can understand that perhaps in the sixties the link between what Trotsky was describing and what you were seeing was more direct. But how do you think Trotsky should be approached now? What is directly relevant, and what is more symbolic or encouraging of debate?

I think his *History of the Russian Revolution* remains one of the best accounts by a participant of a revolutionary upheaval. His autobiography, his essays, his way of looking at the world globally, analysing the trends in that world, predicting the triumph of Fascism in Germany, warning the Jews of the fate that awaited them if Hitler triumphed: nobody else was writing with such lucidity at the time. This is something people could learn from today. Trotsky's writings on how Fascism in Germany could be defeated are a very important corrective to sectarian ways of thinking. The phase where he was mainly involved in arguing against one group of sectarians or another is not the most interesting thing about him. It was a period of defeat and it was not his forte. Trotsky's intellectual strength exploded when it came into contact with mass social movements. His writings on the Jewish question are not without interest. That's a book which should be brought to light, because it's very relevant. He was the only thinker on the Left who understood that, in order to defeat Fascism, you have to unite with the Social Democrats and Liberals: make a real front to defeat it. That is something which is almost relevant today, even though there are no Social Democrats left... This whole business of constructing little sects around leaders is very depressing, really, and it would be sad if this were the only legacy.

When I spoke to Geoffrey Swain earlier, he mentioned Trotsky's work on economic planning in relation to South America. Do you think that Trotsky would now be writing about South America, if he were active? Would he see this as something of interest, where his ideas about planning could be useful?

Yes, without any doubt. But the thing is: Trotsky would argue for taking control of the state and the state apparatuses, and that hasn't happened. So what you have in South America today, using Trotsky's own language is a situation of dual power. You have these elected governments based on the masses; but the army remains the spinal cord of the state, and that army hasn't been crushed or defeated or transformed. So I think that's what he would argue. But in terms of giving advice on how to plan, etc., some of his writings are actually very good.

You spoke earlier about *My Life* as a literary artefact. Has Trotsky influenced you, too, as a reader and writer - on a literary level?

There are some influences, but one can only aspire to write like him. And, you know, we come from totally different generations. English for me, anyway, is a second language; Trotsky wrote in Russian. I think some of his ways of seeing the world have remained with me, but I don't even try to write like him. One can't mimic that even if one wants to. It used to be very funny to me, in the sixties, how people in some of the sects used to talk, trying to mimic Lenin and Marx and Trotsky in everyday debates, as if we were debating on the same level or the stakes were the same. And then mimicking how to remove dissidents and oppositionists from within their tiny organisations. For some this became an art-form: trials, expulsions, denunciations. Very bad art, of course. I never took it seriously at the time. I did parody some of this stuff in one of my early novels, which made me very unpopular, but I just felt it had to be done and I don't regret doing it.

The ongoing Trotskyist tradition in the UK... thinking about the distinction you drew earlier between Trotskyist and Trotskyish, what advice would you give these groups now? What do you think they need to change in their relationship to Trotsky?

Well, I think it is slowly happening. These great thinkers from the past – Marx or Lenin, Trotsky or Gramsci – all of them were important, and all of them offer stuff we can learn from, but none of them should be treated like gods. That was a big, big problem in the Communist and Trotskyist movements: their style was very religious. It was as if a quote from Marx or a quote from Trotsky was enough to settle the debate. To be honest, I was never totally impressed by that even when I was a member, and now I'm not impressed by it at all. People have to learn to argue on the merits of the arguments of those opposed to anything to do with the Left, and find ways of debating with them. And they now have to do it, because all the references which were common in the sixties and seventies, and even in the eighties to a certain extent, have gone. They've just gone. So one can't argue like that, although it was a very common style of argument. "We are going to do this because Trotsky said it here". And then someone would go and find a different quote from Trotsky to prove the opposite; and the same with Marx. It's not a good way to argue, it's a religious way, and these were not religious people. On the contrary, they argued against all that and that style of doing things. I think that this is a process which started with Stalin's speech at Lenin's funeral. "We vow to thee, Comrade Lenin"... and you know, it's sad. I think one of the big problems with Trotsky's own evolution is that, because he was constantly being accused of not being a Leninist, he himself became a sort of semireligious Leninist; whereas he had very real and accurate criticisms of Lenin in the past. I always felt, and now I really feel it, that this was a real, real tragedy for that man. Such a powerful intellect. He must have known the mistakes they made and how these mistakes could or should have been avoided, but didn't dare say it for fear of what his political opponents would do with it. That must have been torture for him and I think, being who he was, he was very, very aware of that.

Imagine then a young person or, indeed, a person of any age, politically aware, discovering Trotsky and being inspired by him. What would your advice to that person be now? How can we be activist on that basis?

Well, I think you have to be activists who learn from many different traditions. Certainly from Trotsky and Gramsci and Lenin; and Marx, for that matter. One can learn a great deal from these great thinkers, but to put any of them on a pedestal is just wrong. We have to create something new. It can't be totally new, because we can't ignore the past and our history, but there are certain things which have to be done in a different way. And that style of political organisation without any serious debates or discussions, where minorities are booted out, expelled... it was a parody in the sixties and seventies, but today it's just a joke. I really think that young people are not attracted to that at all. What you've asked me is not an easy question, because the honest answer is that I am not 100 percent sure myself what the best way is to go about it. But what I do know is that the old style is the wrong way to go.

Perhaps, as Deutscher said, sometimes one needs to retreat to one's watchtower.

I think that's very important, and Marx said it as well after the defeats of 1848. You go, you think, you write. But you can't totally stop being active. When atrocities happen, people make war, people are killed, you can't stay still. At the same time, I think one has to be hard headed. When you look at those papers produced by far left groups... who can read them? I mean, they're little more than internal bulletins. Any serious Left that emerges from the ruins of the 20th century will have to both learn and unlearn. Otherwise much better to become a fishmonger than a dogmatic, religious-style leftist.

P.S.

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* Tariq Ali has written a number of books about socialism and Communism, including his political memoir *Street Fighting Years*, *Redemption* (a satire on the Trotskyist movement), *Trotsky for Beginners*, *Fear of Mirrors* and *The Idea of Communism*. For more information, visit his official website: <http://tariqali.org/>