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Paul Le Blanc's biography: "A most intelligent and insightful presentation of Trotsky's thought and historical action"

Monday 4 May 2015, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: 3 May 2015).

This new intellectual and political biography of Lev Davidovitch doesn't pretend to bring sensational new discoveries from the archives in Moscow, but it gives us a wonderful introduction to the ideas and struggles of the founder of the Red Army. Sympathetic but even-handed, it emphasizes the greatness of the revolutionary thinker and leader, without ignoring his shortcomings. The hostile biographers, from Robert Service to Peter Beilherz are criticized and rejected, but their arguments are considered with attention. In short, this is a most intelligent and insightful presentation of Trotsky's thought and historical action. [Paul Le Blanc, *Leon Trotsky*, London, Reaktion Books, "Critical Lives", 2015, 223 pages.]

The book begins with a curious and astonishing comment by an hostile observer, Raymond Robins, the representative of the American Red Cross in Russia, who met Trotsky soon after the October Revolution : he is "a son of a bitch, but the greatest Jew since Jesus Christ". Somehow, the man had an inkling of the towering historical significance of LD Bronstein...

Paul Le Blanc chose to focus the narrative on the exile years, which may seem surprising, considering the importance of Trotsky as founder of the Soviet Union. But he is following LD's own assessment in his *Diary in Exile* (1935) : "The work in which I'm engaged now (...) is the most important work of my life - more important than 1917, more important than the period of the Civil War or any other". But of course there are significant references to the earlier years; for instance, to *Our Political Tasks* (1904), a pamphlet by the young Trotsky against Lenin's conception of the Party : these methods lead to the Party substituting itself for the class, the Central Committee substituting itself for the Party, and finally "the dictator substituting himself for the Central Committee"; the attack may have been unfair towards Lenin's intentions, but it foresaw, with uncanny precision, the fate of the Soviet Union during the 1920's...

Trotsky's views and actions during the Civil War years are described with understanding for the harsh conditions, but also with critical distance, as in Rosa Luxemburg's well known piece on the Russian Revolution in 1918. Le Blanc denounces "the brutal repression of the angry sailors and workers who revolted at Kronstadt", and he sees as "one of the great tragedies of Bolshevism" that Lenin and Trotsky "had by 1922 crushed the oppositional currents" in the Party that tried to resist the growing process of bureaucratisation. This seems to me a fair assessment, very different from Slavo Zizek, that sees no problem with Trotsky's writings and action from those years, since what we find here "is revolutionary terror, party rule, etc, but in a different mode from Stalinism"...

Le Blanc's presentation of LD's struggle against Stalinism, Fascism and Capitalism during the

difficult exile years is remarkable. My main disagreement concerns his argument that Trotsky produced no theoretical innovations. Criticizing my account of the origins of the theory of permanent revolution (in the book *The Politics of Uneven and Combined Development*, London 1981, Chicago 2010) he argues that the same basic approach can be found already in Parvus, Rosa Luxemburg, Franz Mehring, and, of course, Karl Marx. Well, it is certainly true that the idea of “permanent revolution” appeared already in some of Marx’s writings, such as the Circular Letter to the Communist League (March 1850) – curiously enough, never mentioned by Trotsky – but Parvus, Rosa Luxemburg and others, while hoping for the establishment of a revolutionary worker’s government in Russia, did not consider the possibility of an anticapitalist, i.e. socialist, development of the future Russian revolutionary process. Lev Davidovitch was the only one to advance, already in 1905-1906, such a “heretical” proposition. I’m surprised that Le Blanc hardly mentions *Results and Prospects* (1906), a unique document that not only foresaw, with astonishing precision, the “permanentist” dynamics of the Russian Revolution, but also announced the opening of a new historical period of revolutions in the capitalist periphery, which would unfold throughout the 20th century.

In general, Le Blanc emphasizes “the *unoriginality* in Trotsky’s thought”, who “only sought to remain true to the old revolutionary perspectives”. I would plead for a *dialectical approach*: LD both “remained true to the old perspectives” *and* developed decisive new and creative theories. I think this applies not only to Lev Davidovitch but to revolutionary Marxism in general : it is a thought *in movement*, in constant transformation and evolution, in order to deal with new historical phenomena. This applies to Lenin’s theory of imperialism as well as to Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, or to his analysis of Fascism and Stalinism. One could perhaps argue that the Marxist method is the same “old revolutionary” one, but in fact the interpretation of the method also changes. To give one exemple : Lenin’s understanding of Marxism is not the same in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* (1909) and in his *Philosophical Notebooks* (191-15), after the discovery of Hegel’s Logic...

Le Blanc doesn’t only discuss political ideas, he also deals, with much sensitivity, with LD’s personal relations: with his life companion, Natalia Sedova, with Lyova, his beloved son – who complained, at some moment,s of his father’s “lack of tolerance and rudeness” – with Diego Rivera, with Frida Kahlo – the short-lived romance – with Alfred and Margueritte Rosmer, his nearest personal friends, even (or because !) they did not belong to his organization, and many others.

Le Blanc ends his book with a thoughtful assessment of Trotsky’s intellectual and political legacy, without necessarily taking sides in the various controversies among his followers – for instance, on the nature of the USSR : worker’s state, state capitalism, or bureaucratic collectivism? The quote from Perry Anderson at the conclusion seems a fair assessment : the Trotskyist tradition deserves to be studied and “it may surprise future historians with its resources”.

Michael Löwy
