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International conference: Trotsky in Cuba, 2019

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More than one friend has expressed the hope that I would write a report on my experience in attending an international conference on Leon Trotsky to be held in Havana, May 6-8, 2019 - so I have felt even more compulsion to craft such a report than I would have otherwise. Since I have come down here earlier than the dates of the conference, I find that I have time to begin shaping such an account as I am living through what I describe. My take on all of this is influenced, naturally, by my understanding of the Cuban Revolution - which can be found in "Origins and Trajectory of the Cuban Revolution," in my collection *Revolutionary Studies* (Chicago: Haymarket 2017), first published in the journal *Against the Current*, January/February 2007 [1]). My experience now seems to me consistent with what I wrote then.

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With my excitement somewhat subdued (after all, I have turned 72 years old on the very day of this journey), I made my way to the fabled land of my radical youth - where I have never been before, this land of revolutionary mystique and alluring rhythms, José Martí's green and crimson verses of "Guantanamera" and the wondrous sounds of *The Buena Vista Social Club*, a land embraced by foreigners like Ernest Hemingway and Che Guevara, a central element in my own political formation and in my evolving intellectual landscape. It seemed unreal that I would be making this journey. But now I was finally making it - with a persistent anxiety that somehow, at one point or another, I would be prevented from reaching this wondrous, contradictory land where I now find myself.

An additional magical quality involves the circumstances of this first visit to Cuba - the fact that I have been invited to make a presentation at an international conference on the life, ideas, and influence of Leon Trotsky. This is a first, running counter to significant elements of anti-Trotskyism that have been prevalent in sectors of the Cuban Communist Party since the 1960s. Yet there have been counter-tendencies - for example, efforts by the late Celia Hart (daughter of two historic leaders of the Cuban Revolution, Armando Hart and Haydée Santamaría) to popularize the ideas of Trotsky in her homeland.

More recently, there has been the incredible contribution to twenty-first century literature, Leonardo Padura's *The Man Who Loved Dogs*, referring to three men - Leon Trotsky, his Stalinist assassin Ramón Mercader, and a fictional down-and-out Cuban writer/veterinarian who becomes acquainted with the aging Mercader who lived in Cuba years after the killing. This magnificently written novel wrestles with the meaning of Communism - with Trotsky representing the luminous hopes and Mercader representing the horror and betrayal. Most significantly, this truly subversive

work is *not* a piece of émigré literature, but a prize-winning contribution by a well-known writer still living in Cuba. I had nursed the hope that Padura might make an appearance at the conference, but was told that he is currently in Japan.

So here I am in Cuba, experiencing contradictory realities in this amazing land. After giving a taste of those, I will focus on at least some of which happened at the Trotsky conference.

1. Experiencing Cuban Realities

Even with the limitation of being only in Havana, it is clear that this is an amazingly beautiful country, a tropical island embraced by the Caribbean Sea, with such sunny (sometimes all-too-hot) days kissed by cooling breezes in the evenings. Modern and air-conditioned buildings in Havana co-exist with picturesque older buildings, some nicely renovated, some badly in need of renovation, still others seemingly beyond renovation. The ongoing hostility of Cuba's powerful Northern neighbor - whose military threats blend with persistent and brutal efforts at economic strangulation - has combined with the severance of a life-line from the now collapsed Communist Bloc, to ensure a plummeting of the Cuban people's quality of life.

The quality of life may be undermined, but it is hardly obliterated. One is struck, in this urban landscape, by the bright colors (some faded in the non-tourist areas), as well as by the fact that things have been run-down but persistently and creatively refurbished. Very early morning, the water was off, another time the electricity interrupted, but not for long. In this self-defined socialist society - with health care, education, housing, food and jobs seemingly guaranteed to all, by a government dominated by the Cuban Communist Party - one can see the prevalence, nonetheless, of a vibrant network, in fact a seeming prevalence, of small private enterprises. At the same time, there are maddening restrictions especially for those who have become addicted to the internet. The complex dialectic of governmental policies - historically aggressive ones from the US state, and defensive ones (some understandable, some not so much) from the Cuban state result in restricted access to the internet. It is not impossible to get online, but it is not easy. Early on I simply decided simply to avoid the frustrations and reconnect to the world-wide web when I get back to the United States.

The centrality of tourism to the Cuban economy today - though assuming less exploitative and extravagant forms than what existed before the Revolution - naturally impacts culture and human relations. There is a pronounced friendliness to the many foreigners walking around in Havana, sometimes tinged by an overly-friendly hustle: a wonderful place to dine right around the corner, a chance to get black market cigars, an opportunity to get candy for one's grandchildren, and sometimes more. And there is, of course, the double currency system - a certain form of Cuban *peso* for tourists (*peso convertible*), equivalent in value to a US dollar, worth much more than the regular Cuban *peso* (*peso cubano*). Meals at restaurants, trinkets, books, etc. are very reasonably priced for a typical US consumer, but they are beyond the reach of the average Cuban who must subsist on the *peso cubano* of much lesser value. Yet the average Cuban can secure fruits, vegetables, meats, at primitive markets, bread at bakeries, and medicines in pharmacies for inexpensive *peso cubano* rates. The fact remains that a more or less middle-income person from the blue-collar/white-collar US working class becomes privileged, although the tourist dollars one spends are vital to the health of the Cuban economy.

The several highways, the many crisscrossed avenues and streets, alleyways and plazas of Havana are animated with the traffic of cars (with many *cacharros*, ingeniously overhauled and brilliantly painted US vehicles from the pre-revolutionary 1950s), taxis and buses, bicycle-powered cabs, semi-

silent motor scooters, and masses of pedestrians in this vibrant city of 2.1 million people. The populace seems, overall, relaxed and generous, and the overall pace of life seems free and easy. This is not a terrible city to get lost in – there are many helpful people, and finding one’s way often leads to encounters with fascinating and pleasant sights. It feels safe, even when one is walking at night on fairly dark and narrow streets. There are plenty of pot-holes, and sometimes smells emanating from dumpsters and piles of garbage bags (huge garbage trucks come around regularly), but such things are not overwhelming and are partially offset by lovely parks and playgrounds. There are economic (and political) limitations, certainly relative scarcity, relative poverty – but without the levels of hunger, illness, illiteracy, despair that have been evident to me elsewhere. This is the triumph and legacy of the Cuban Revolution.

I am struck by the multiracial, interracial, bi-racial blendings, reflected not simply through the genetic make-up of the multitudes of individuals all around me, but especially in the dynamism of blended cultures, with often truly beautiful young men and women making wonderful music (jazz, Afro-Cuban, salsa, more) in the many cafés and on the streets, with people of all ages sometimes breaking into dance. The pulsating national culture is punctuated, no less in Havana than elsewhere, by street graffiti art, but also flows in abundance in the richly layered collections – reflecting multiple styles and sensibilities – of the *Museo Nacional de Belle Artes*. Here, and not surprisingly in the neighboring Museo de la Revolución, but also throughout Havana, pride in and identification with the Cuban Revolution seem to be essential elements in the culture – certainly fostered by the government, but also freely, consistently, and sometimes enthusiastically embraced by many, many people. The prevalence of revolutionary symbols seems to have little in common with the bureaucratic inundation of such stuff in the restrictive societies that Eastern Europeans had to endure under Communist Party dictatorships. Here things seem to be open, vibrant, animated by an incredible energy and creativity, by nourishing humor, and by stubborn life-force.

Some of us are staying in lodgings that are part of a network – again – of private enterprises known as *casas particulares*, in ways similar to bed-and-breakfasts. The people who conscientiously oversee the apartments some of us live in are very down-to-earth working people in very casual dress – two sisters and a brother. Aleida (age 74), who seems to be in charge, speaks some English, and makes breakfasts (plenty of fruit, an egg, toast, coffee) for Flo, or Florivaldo Menezes Filho – a Brazilian musician and independent Trotskyist, a delightful comrade, a youthful 57-year-old – and myself; her very outgoing sister Juana (72) makes casual conversation with us in Spanish (though one morning she had to go out early for choir practice), and her older brother Eduardo (76) invariably walks to and fro, for the most part silently, tending to some task or another. Their father was an electrician, their mother a homemaker, and the family supported the triumph of Fidel’s July 26th Movement. Almost sixty years ago, at the time of the US-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion, Eduardo was only 16, but was part of the force that defeated the invaders at *Playa Girón*. When Aleida tells us this, Eduardo pauses, his face suddenly animated with pride, his eyes flashing as he affirms that this is so, adding a detail or two. Aleida also explained to me that the very appealing original art works on the walls are from a longtime artist friend, Carlos Guzmán, and that the many photos in her living room are of her three grandchildren (two living in Spain, one in Havana) and her handsome son now living in Chile. Juana speaks with pride about her own son, a doctor, and her now twenty-something grandson.

Of special interest to me, naturally, are Havana’s younger people, of whom I certainly see many. I am staying across the way from a school, and especially in the morning I hear animated sounds of many children. Sometimes I see students, in well-kept school uniforms, which initially misled me when a Canadian labor historian, a good friend (and now temporary neighbor) Bryan Palmer and I were visiting the *Museo Nacional de Belle Artes*. A contingent of well-behaved and very engaged young people entered, wearing uniforms that included red kerchiefs, and I thought I was perhaps

seeing a Communist-connected youth group. I asked several of them the name of their group, and some of them held up five fingers – saying “Five” and “Cinco.” Just that. It seemed a very odd name for an organization, until I realized these were fifth graders on a field trip to the art museum.

It is precisely the enthusiasm of younger people that brought me down to Cuba so much earlier than I otherwise would have – traveling on my April 30 birthday in order to participate in Havana’s massive May Day parade. This was at the urgent, almost insistent, invitation of the young militant who has organized the Trotsky conference, Frank García Hernández. He is 36 years old, but to me he still qualifies as one of the Havana’s “younger people.” He definitely has the energy and buoyancy of youth. Frank is an earnest and very knowledgeable researcher at the Cuban Institute of Cultural Research Juan Marinello. He insists that he is *not* a Trotskyist. Rather, he believes what Trotsky offers must be integrated into the enriched and renewed body of Cuban Marxist thought, animated by a revolutionary internationalism. He sees such a process as essential for the future of Cuba.

Frank’s generous and soaring visions often seem to outpace the material realities and practical possibilities. I am worried, based on several experiences, that the organization of this specific conference may suffer from such tendencies, and from the possibility that Frank is trying to do too much by himself, with insufficient back-up from friends and comrades. We will see – the conference is still two days in the future as of this writing.

At the same time, some of Frank’s inclinations go very much in the right direction, such as his insistence that it would be best if I came to participate with many thousands of buoyant Cubans in the massive May Day march. Here indeed was a magnificent outpouring of youth, as well as non-youth, and the mood seemed a blend of immense national pride and exuberant support for the revolutionary ideals that had animated the coming to power of the *compañeros* of the July 26th Movement in 1959 and the radical course charted by Fidel and others in the years afterward. Surging waves of marchers – cheering, singing, shouting rhythmic slogans – carried a multiplicity of signs and banners, as well as Cuban flags and red flags as well. An especially vociferous and large contingent of medical students, with other student contingents as well from various schools, contingents from workplaces and unions, working people of various ages – but especially the youth – from the neighborhoods, and bringing up the rear a very large and powerful contingent of soldiers.

Frank held aloft a large red flag with hammer and sickle – signifying the alliance and power of workers and peasants – as he led our little contingent of early conference arrivals, along with a small cluster of Cuban friends and comrades, including his very smart and outspoken young wife Lisbeth (a journalism student) who wore a big cast on her broken leg and was being pushed in a wheelchair, holding a patchwork banner containing the flags of many nations. What for me was an incredibly remarkable development was the fact that we found ourselves in the midst of a gay liberation contingent – its members (gays and their allies) exultingly waving large and little rainbow flags signifying gay rights. Frank enthusiastically combined a large rainbow flag on the same pole as the red flag, and all of us accepted the smaller flags being handed out to us and joined with the hundreds of others, mostly young women and men, many seeming to be students, who were waving them as they sang and chanted and danced.

Despite the enthusiasm, not all in this May Day celebration were supportive. Some onlookers cheered our rainbow contingent, but others definitely did not. In the military contingent a young woman took one of the little rainbow flags, handing it to a somewhat older comrade or family member in an officer’s uniform, and he looked at her askance as she giggled at her little joke. The fact remains that such an open and substantial gay rights manifestation within the May Day march is hugely significant in a country where persecution of homosexuality had been all-too-prevalent in past decades.

Of course, one cannot live by demonstrations and political struggle alone. Last night Bryan and I went to a large club where the drinks were good but not too expensive, and the big band sound created by very professional musicians really got the place jumping. Especially impressive were two wonderful dancers, a relatively young man and woman, each gorgeous, smart, and sexy – performers with a delicious sense of humor who got many of the customers (except for cowards such as me) on the dance floor. It was great fun.

On the following day it was time, at long last, to engage with the Caribbean. Flo and I took a forty-minute bus ride to the beach. The water was clear turquoise, no waves, not too cold, but luxuriously refreshing. It costs only a single *peso cubano* to go each way on the bus, and the bus was packed. The trip out there wasn't too bad, but the return trip was even better after the revitalizing experience.

By the day before the conference, it seemed clear to me that the conference is likely to be a success. We had a space (fortunately one that would be air-conditioned), and there was now a dramatic influx into Havana of the many and diverse scheduled speakers bristling with knowledge, ideas, interpretations, analyses, and dynamic personalities, and having things to say. It was a given that there would not be enough time for them to say everything they would want to (and at least many of them were sufficiently experienced to know that would be so), but I still felt some worry that more might be packed into the conference than could be contained in its three days.

2. Cuba's First International Academic Meeting on Leon Trotsky

The day before the May 6-9 conference was to begin, preparations were made in a fine large room housed within the beautiful, Mexican oriented *Museo de Benito Juarez* for the next day's sessions. Conference organizer Frank García Hernández and a team from the Museo Casa de León Trotsky (headed by its energetic new director, Gabriela Pérez Noriega) were busily putting up beautiful banners and an excellent photo exhibit. Chairs were set up, there was a relatively good sound-system being put in place. It seemed to me that things were looking good.

Omens seemed encouraging. The sun was shining reassuringly, and Frank's wife Lisbeth, recently been afflicted with a broken leg, was out of her cast, able to walk and preparing to participate fully in the conference. As it turned out, the first day of the conference had both its triumphant and problematical aspects.



Simply the fact that such a conference on Leon Trotsky was taking place in Havana constituted an amazing achievement, guaranteed to have an intellectual ripple-effect and contribute to the further development of a critical-minded Marxism, within Cuba and beyond Cuba. One of the best qualities of this conference, as with many others that I have enjoyed attending, was the opportunity for informal and very meaningful interactions among activist scholars. Because of space restrictions, attendance was on an invitation-only basis, with the number of applications far exceeding the 100 or so who were in attendance. (I believe about 190 applications could not be granted.) There were

about 40 Cubans, and then substantial numbers of Latin Americans (many - a vibrant contingent - from Brazil, also from Argentina, Peru, Mexico, Puerto Rico), a few from the United States and Canada, a handful of Europeans. Some were seasoned veterans, many were young.

On the other hand, there were a number of complications, some certainly related to the relative inexperience of conference organizers, but many simply being unavoidable given the limitation of resources - due especially to Cuba's impoverished conditions, and perhaps also to the disinterest, in some cases maybe even hostility, of certain entities having resources. And yet there was enough support within Cuba's institutions that, combined with the very hard work especially of Frank but also of others, ensured the conference's success.

One of the problematical aspects was the fact that initially there was a single very capable and hard-working translator who was able to do only serial translations from English to Spanish and Spanish to English. Fortunately, a couple of conference participants were able to pitch in to help with the translation efforts. Still, the absence of simultaneous translation forced many speakers (already restricted to 20-minute time limits) - on the spur of the moment and as best we could - to cut our talks by a third or half, with some inevitably running over time. This, in turn, ran roughshod over the schedule, which was consequently being revised as the conference unfolded.

In what follows, I will offer, more or less in order, a detailed summary - as best I can - of the presentations at the conference (excluding special events: greetings read aloud from Trotsky's grandson, video greetings from Alan Wood, special presentations related to just-published books by or about Trotsky, etc.).

Day One

After greetings from the very supportive director of *Museo de Benito Juarez* and also from Frank, the first session began (only 30 minutes late), chaired by Frank. Entitled "Trotsky: The Revolution Against the Bureaucracy," it included: Eric Toussaint, Paul Le Blanc, Robert Brenner, and Suzi Weissman.

Toussaint (associated with the Fourth International) began with a sweeping overview of the Lenin/Trotsky collaboration in the Russian Revolution and in efforts to push back against the growing bureaucratic dictatorship, and then of the opposition that Trotsky continued to lead in the struggle of what was beginning to crystallize as Stalinism - all of which represented part of the revolutionary-democratic legacy within Marxism that has also been rightly associated with Rosa Luxemburg.

Le Blanc noted Trotsky's assertion that Stalin represented a more serious assault on the socialist and communist workers' movements than Hitler - the Nazi leader's assaults were from the outside, whereas Stalin's were from *within*, with practices that would pollute, disorient and discredit the struggle for socialism. He went on to discuss the resistance in Soviet Russia of Left Oppositionists associated with Trotsky, especially their heroic struggles in the face of certain destruction in 1937-38, inside the Stalinist gulag. Referring to Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy and related theory of permanent revolution, and to the program of the Left Opposition - explications of these were dropped from the talk for time reasons - he emphasized their relevance for today.

Brenner apologized in advance for what was about to happen - knowing that he had insufficient time to do what he had intended. He proceeded to use up most of his 20 minutes by offering a capable presentation of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. This drew a round of applause, but it turned out to be only preliminary remarks for his main argument. Acknowledging that he was out of time, he went on to provide a quick summary of the argument that he had intended to make - which

took another twenty minutes, particularly because of some translation difficulties. He suggested that Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution had proved more than adequate up to 1917, but not so much afterward. He suggested that the major contradiction within the new Soviet Republic after 1917 was between workers' power and peasant power (although what this meant was, for many, not made clear). He asserted that the basic analysis of the peasantry among the various Bolshevik current missed the fundamentally non-capitalist nature of the peasantry as such, and that - among other things - this had created an obstacle to the ability of Trotsky and Bukharin to join together in opposing Stalin - with Trotsky wrongly believing that Bukharin's soft policy toward the peasants would tilt in the direction of empowering the rich peasants, who would constitute the base for a capitalist restoration. For that matter, Stalin and others among the Bolsheviks were also inclined to view the peasants with suspicion, as potentially a class enemy - with murderous consequences when there was a shift to the forced collectivization of the land in 1929-1930.

Weissman offered a penetrating examination of the vibrancy and breakdown of the relationship between Leon Trotsky and Victor Serge. Trotsky was largely to blame, in part due to an isolation from strong co-thinkers and from involvement in mass struggles (a point buttressed by a quote from Serge's recently published notebooks), resulting in impaired judgment. Serge, she seems to feel, was in the right about pretty much everything. Another factor was the infiltration of Trotskyist ranks by the Stalinist secret service, and the disruptive dirty tricks such agents employed to turn Trotskyists against each other. She also acknowledged the development of actual political disagreements between the Serge and Trotsky as a factor in their fracturing relations - although time prevented her from elaborating on these. She emphasized the importance of the two men's contributions to the revolutionary cause, and that the cause was weakened by their split. (In the all-too-brief discussion, Bryan Palmer took the floor to suggest Serge's and Weissman's contention regarding Trotsky's isolation is overstated, citing as an example the extensive and ongoing discussion and collaboration with leading militants of the US Socialist Workers Party as being essential in Trotsky's development of documents for the founding conference of the Fourth International.)

The first panel - all of which was quite interesting to me (perhaps because I was a panelist) - set a pattern that at least one conference participant with whom I spoke was quite critical of. Following that pattern, most of the conference sessions went significantly over time, involving what became for some an overwhelming number of presentations (many of them short or even truncated, some stretching out to be rather long) with all too little time for discussion - and sometimes there was no discussion time at all. The critical participant argued that it would have been better to have a pre-determined and more planned-out selection of significantly fewer and more substantial presentations, with more time allocated for critical discussion.

I must confess that it was difficult for me to give the second session's presentations adequate attention and fair evaluation, perhaps because of a sudden energy drain caused by my no longer having to be concerned about my own presentation. The panel was a reorganized merger of portions of two different panels, with a very heavy concentration of people who seemed to me to have a relationship to one or another relatively small but pure-minded Trotskyist group. For me it had a droning quality - some assured me that was caused by the acoustics in the room - punctuated by a little liveliness here and there, but with very frequent intoning of factional references in a couple of the talks, and seemingly innumerable repetition of words like "the Pabloites" and "Posadas" and I'm not sure what else. (Pablo was a major figure in the Fourth International during a fierce factional conflict in the 1950s, and Posadas led a somewhat divisive Latin American current influential in the late 1950s and early 1960s.) A veteran Trotskyist from the post-World War II period that we were being lectured about, old enough to be most of the panelists' grandmother, leaned over to me, shaking her head with disgust: "I lived through that - they don't know what they're talking about." But it must be stressed that I was not able to give serious attention to what was presented (some of

which, I am told, was quite good): Gabriel García on the image of Trotsky in historiography of perestroika (1986-91), drawing from his recent book of essays, *Trotsky in the Mirror of History*; Emanuele Saccarelli and Latha Varadajan on Lenin, Trotsky, and the theory of imperialism; A.M. Gittlitz on “the catastrophic trend” in Trotskyism; Marcio Lauria Monteiro on the international Trotskyist movement and the post-war revolutions.

A third panel was postponed to the following day.

Day Two

The initial panel of the day contained presentations that attempted to cover far more than could be accommodated in the amount of time allotted.

Presentations by two young Brazilian comrades (friends who were collaborating in their efforts), both on fascinating topics, would have required a half a day for adequate presentation and discussion. Clara de Freitas Figueiredo utilized slides to give a sense of the Soviet artistic avant-garde - Mayakovsky, Rodchenko, Eisenstein and others, combined in a radical artistic grouping, the Left Front of the Arts, referred to as LEF. LEF defined artistic realism as dealing with the materiality of the construction of a work, not as any attempt of an artistic work to create the illusion of reality. She asserted, without time to make her case, that concerns of LEF's concerns coincided with cultural issues that Trotsky dealt with in his essays of the early 1920s, *Problems of Everyday Life*. She also argued that the quasi-religious cult of Lenin, that developed after his death (despite the opposition of Lenin's widow Krupskaya, as well as Trotsky and some others) had a profound and “liturgical” cultural impact that - if I understood her correctly - was a thorny issue with which the avant-garde had to deal, but there was insufficient time for this idea to be developed clearly.

No less frustrating was the inability (given the time constraints) of the next speaker, Marcela Fleury, to develop her fascinating thesis on the correspondence between Eisenstein's first major film, “Strike” (1925), with Trotsky's theorizations of uneven and combined development and permanent revolution. She also utilized slides but would have been better served by showing clips from the film - for which, of course, there would not have been time. She appropriately emphasized the actual historical context of the film - which included worker dissatisfaction with the capitalistic impacts of the New Economic Policy, and also debates in the Communist International on the possibility of bourgeois-democratic revolution in China (positing two separate and distinct “democratic” and “socialist” stages of revolution - in contrast to Trotsky's theory). She argued that Eisenstein's film - contrasting the collectivism and solidarity associated with the working class and both the individualism and selfishness associated with the capitalist class, and the incompatibility of the two - connected with the contemporary sentiments and debates in Soviet Russia, tilting in Trotsky's direction.

The others on the panel were more successful in dealing with the time constraints.

Armagan Tulunay gave a very capable presentation on Trotsky's extremely productive years in his Turkish exile after being expelled from the Soviet Union - maintaining contacts in the USSR, launching the Russian-language *Bulletin of the Opposition*, extending the global reach of the Left Opposition to a proliferating number of countries, developing ongoing analyses and commentary on world events, and writing the classic works *My Life*, *History of the Russian Revolution*, and *Permanent Revolution*. She then focused on the development of Trotskyist influence within the Turkish left - with an especially intriguing discussion of what appeared to be impacts on the thought and work of the great Turkish Communist and poet Nazim Hikmet, whose positions and poetry veered away from Stalinist perspectives, more consistent with those of Trotsky at various points. She noted that Hikmet expressed anti-Stalinist views well before the Khrushchev revelations of 1956,

and that - after years of exile in the USSR - visiting Cuba in the early 1960s was a revitalizing experience for him.

Helmut Dahmer's low-key presentation suggested an "aesthetic relationship" between Trotsky and the great culture critic Walter Benjamin (who influenced many in German intellectual circles, including those around the Frankfurt School, various other Marxist intellectuals, and particularly the great playwright Bertolt Brecht). He traced the life of Benjamin while noting striking similarities (despite the obvious and dramatic differences) between Benjamin and Trotsky, insisting that there were affinities between the two. Both felt the need to draw on historical materials to find a way out of the labyrinth of the present. While Trotsky was probably unaware of Benjamin's work, Dahmer offered interesting points on the influence on Benjamin of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* and writings on Britain.

Cultural motifs - and also the unfortunate patterns in the conference indicated earlier - were abundantly present in the next panel.

Flo Menezes offered remarks on Trotsky and art, literature and culture. He began with a focus on the 1930 suicide of the revolutionary poet Mayakovsky, and Trotsky's comments that linked this act to negative pressures in the increasingly bureaucratic-authoritarian atmosphere of Soviet Russia. This led to an assault on that analysis by Anatoly Lunacharsky, a highly cultured Bolshevik of some prominence who was adapting to (and thereby distorting himself) the now-dominant Stalinism. Discussing Marxist conceptualizations of ideology and knowledge, Menezes emphasized that art and politics cannot be understood in the same way. Basing himself on the work of Marx, Trotsky was able to advance theorizations Marx had never had an opportunity to develop. Terming the Stalinist-backed artistic development of "Socialist Realism" anti-Marxist, Trotsky - while not uncritical of surrealism - allied himself with surrealists in efforts to push back Stalinism's deadening cultural incursions. Menezes was about to enter into discussion about the Brazilian Marxist theorist and Left Oppositionist Mário Pedrosa - at which he ran out of time and concluded his presentation. Fortunately, the next speaker - Edson Luiz de Oliviera - dealt with Pedrosa, with a focus on the Brazilian Trotskyist's appreciation for the work of the great German artist Käthe Kollwitz. Yunier Mena engaged, in his presentation on *The Revolution Betrayed*, with cultural developments in the early Soviet Republic up to the mid-1930s. The one presentation on this mostly cultural panel that was not like the others came from Dan LaBotz, who offered an energetic and lengthy biography of Boris Souvarine, a short-term Left Oppositionist coming out of the French Communist Party who first supported, then clashed with, then broke from Trotsky in the course of the 1920s. LaBotz's contention was that Souvarine was superior to Trotsky in regard to his analysis of the Russian peasantry, his analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy, and his positions on democracy in the Soviet Union and the Communist movement.

The next panel on Trotsky's theoretical impact was as uneven as many others - some well-developed and clearly presented presentations, others seeming more like a work-in-progress. What the session did not amount to, however, was a systematic overview of Trotsky's theoretical work; instead, consistent with the organization of the conference as a whole, there were a number of different presentations reflecting the particular inclinations of the presenter - although many were certainly of interest (at least to me).

Two speakers explored Trotsky's impact on and interconnection with Italian revolutionaries. Antonella Marazzi explained that her presentation was part of a bigger project in which she is engaged. Noting that Lenin and Trotsky became famous throughout Italy with the Russian Revolution of 1917, she referenced the massive working-class upsurge that rocked Italy in 1919-1920 and noted that splits in the country's large Socialist Party resulted in the formation of a substantial Italian Communist Party. Prominent figures in this included Amadeo Bordiga (a very

influential, but somewhat ultra-left figure), Giuseppe Serrati (a left-wing leader of the Socialist Party, drawn to the new Communists, but not fitting easily among them), and ultimately the important personage of Antonio Gramsci. The rise and onslaught of Benito Mussolini's fascist movement naturally constituted a destructive context for subsequent developments. This occurred in the period when both Trotsky and Bordiga were being marginalized in the Communist movement (the speaker felt that Bordiga's marginalization was partly self-inflicted). Unity explorations between the two came to nothing, as Trotsky's overtures ran into the wall of Bordiga's sectarianism. Gramsci, on the other hand, developed some positions similar to Trotsky's, but he never chose to connect with the Trotskyist movement. The speaker went on to discuss the leading Italian Trotskyist, Pietro Tresso, and then her time was up. The question of Trotsky and Gramsci was revisited by the next speaker, Robert Massari, who emphasized that Gramsci was far from being the abstract theorist presented in various academic studies. Rather, his militant theorizations were inseparable from his role as an activist leader in the Communist movement. In the complex swirl of the 1920s, Gramsci momentarily approached Trotsky's position, then pulled back. But he never became a Stalinist, and from prison he absolutely rejected the disastrously sectarian "third period" orientation of Stalinism.

The other speakers on the panel were more Trotsky-focused. Alex Steiner offered the most thorough and elaborated presentation, providing an informative and detailed discussion of Trotsky's philosophical and theoretical notebooks, and how these connected to a wide range of subjects - from Hegelian dialectics and evolutionary theory, aspects of the natural and physical sciences, and more contemporary political issues of the revolutionary movement. Niloofar Moazzami and Morgana Romao focused, respectively, on Trotsky's political theorizations regarding the dynamics of revolution and the development of the Soviet bureaucracy. Moazzami's attention was drawn to Trotsky's classic *History of the Russian Revolution*, which showed the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy resulted in the unstable alliance and growing conflict between two power-blocs, one dominated by bourgeois forces, the other consisting of a worker-peasant combination. She then suggested the value of comparing Trotsky's analysis with works of other scholarship on revolution, such as Barrington Moore's classic of historical sociology, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Of course, the worker-peasant triumph, with the October Revolution culminating in the creation of the Soviet Republic, soon led to crisis. Trotsky saw the early Soviet Republic, according to Romao, as a society in transition to socialism - but the problems facing it (economic underdevelopment, devastating impacts of world war and civil war, the relative isolation in a hostile capitalist world, etc.) caused it to develop into what became known as Stalinism, with its extreme bureaucratic-authoritarian distortions.

Day Three

The first session of the final day opened with two discussions on the evolution of Trotsky's thought in the years of his Mexican exile. Daniel Persegum, commenting that Trotsky's ongoing contributions to a variety of journals over the years (in a sense, his work as "a journalist") reveal an evolution of thinking and sensibilities, from the first issue of *Iskra* in 1900 to the last issue of the Russian-language *Bulletin of the Opposition*. This has framed Persegum's own research project of tracing Trotsky's writings in his final period of exile, in Mexico, within which the final issues of the *Bulletin of the Opposition* (from number 54-55 in 1937 to number 87 in 1941) were published. Trotsky's emigration to Mexico provided a relative freedom that, according to Persegum, changed the relationship of forces on the Left to the detriment of the Kremlin. One source of enrichment in the thought of Trotsky and his co-thinkers was the influence of the indigenous cultures of the Americas - an important assertion for which there was an unfortunate lack of time to develop. A clear example of evolution in Trotsky's thinking on the relationship of art and revolutionary politics was provided by comparing a formulation in his 1924 work *Literature and Revolution* and the 1938 manifesto he drafted for the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art (FIARI), the latter

emphasizing the absolute necessity for autonomous artistic creativity missing from his writings of fourteen years earlier. Perseguim argued that further systematic research into Trotsky's writings during his final exile might change our understanding of this revolutionary theorist.

Anti-imperialism and the struggle for political independence of the working class was the dual focus of the presentation by José Alberto Fonseca Ornelas. The approach developed in the mid-1930s by the Communist International under Stalin's domination, the popular front (or people's front), was - according to Fonseca (basing himself on Trotsky's critical analysis) not a tactic for struggle against fascism, as presented by Stalinists at the time, but rather a crime leading to working-class defeat. It replaced the goal of working-class victory over capitalism with subordination by the labor movement to "progressive" capitalists, who would advance positive reforms in exchange for working-class political support. One example of how this worked out in practice was the backing by the Cuban Communist Party in the 1940s for the regime of Fulgencio Batista, aligned as it was, during World War II, in the anti-Hitler coalition. Of course, Batista - tied in with US imperialism - ultimately headed up the corrupt and murderous dictatorship that was overthrown by the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Another example was support in the 1930s and 1940s given by the Mexican Communist Party to the ruling nationalist PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) and its predecessors. Fonseca noted that Trotsky supported the radical-nationalist Lázaro Cardenas regime in its opposition to imperialism and its progressive national reforms - but did not favor electoral support to the party of Cárdenas. He championed, instead, the creation of an independent party of the working class. The Mexican Communist policy eventually resulted in a debilitating subordination of the powerful trade union movement to Mexico's capitalist state, dramatically eroding the working-class power as the PRI came to be dominated by more corrupt elements than Cárdenas.

What may have been an excellent exposition by Kaveh Bovieri on the historiography of Trotsky was actually - I am sorry to say - impossible for me to hear (others noted the same difficulty) due to problems with acoustics.

Héctor Puenta Sierra began by making the important point that Trotsky represented a continuity with classical Marxism. He then repeated the earlier assertion by Suzi Weissman regarding a judgment-impairing isolation that, he argued, resulted in a complex and problematical legacy, particularly in regard to Trotsky's development of the conceptualization of the USSR under the Stalin. Puenta argued that it was a problem to identify this as a bureaucratically degenerated *workers' state* in the face of the thoroughgoing political expropriation of the working class, and the complete absence of workers' democracy. The reality was resolved in a more satisfactory manner, he suggested, through the development by Tony Cliff of the analysis of the USSR as a variant of capitalism - *state capitalism*. Cliff's analysis was superior to Trotsky's, he contended, in preventing one from seeing the collapse of the USSR as the collapse of socialism.

The session's final presentation was from Gabriela Pérez Noriega, Director of the *Museo Casa de León Trotsky*, who hailed the conference as an historic event. Before continuing with her presentation, she showed a specially-made video in which Trotsky's grandson, Esteban Volkow (in part responding to questions from Alan Wood), greeted the conference, referred very positively to Padura's novel about Trotsky and his assassin, *The Man Who Loved Dogs*, and commented on the importance of his grandfather's ideas. After the short video, Pérez (citing the Russian's historian Dmitri Volkoganov findings of materials in the Stalin archives) emphasized that the dictator was animated by great fear of Trotsky, which is why he sent an agent with an ice-axe to destroy one of the greatest brains of revolutionary Marxism. She observed that such enemies continued to slander Trotsky viciously down to the present day, pointing to the recent anti-Trotsky film series produced by right-wing filmmakers in Russia and distributed globally through Netflix. Those at the conference and others, with their own serious work, were pushing back against such assaults. Pérez then discussed the development of the *Museo Casa de León Trotsky*, noting that it had in recent years

added to its mission an emphasis on defending the right to asylum for the oppressed and the persecuted – which had been central to the last chapter of Trotsky’s struggle. Revitalizing the *Museo*, this commitment was reflected in its investigations of and support for the recent migration movement that had surged through Mexico. Inviting every one to visit the *Museo Casa de León Trotsky*, she concluded with a quote from Trotsky’s final testament: “Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression, and violence and enjoy it to the full.”

In the truncated discussion period, there were brief and bitter interchanges (of which there had been some rumblings on Day Two). In one of the milder interventions, responding to the presentation on Tony Cliff, Paul Le Blanc insisted that regardless of what one thought of the theory of state capitalism – and he expressed his own rejection of it – one must recognize that no Trotskyist, and certainly none at that conference, saw the collapse of the USSR as the collapse of socialism, or identified Stalinism as a variant of socialism: Stalinism is the opposite of socialism. Utilizing her prerogative as the chair of this panel, Caridad Massón (of the Cuban Institute of Cultural Research Juan Marinello) concluded the session with an impassioned admonition. Noting the existence of contradictory perspectives among a number of the presenters, she emphasized that contradictions in fact generate development. It is a mistake to see Marxism as representing something that is singular, and it is ill-served by taking a stance of dogmatic leftism – there are diverse currents of thought and Marxism can take in all. She insisted that conference participants should listen to each other and discuss with respect, working together to study reality and working together in the struggle for a better world.

Day Three Continued: Building Revolutionary Struggles in the Americas

The next very substantial set of presentations had a richness to which I cannot possibly do justice in this already lengthy report.

Reviewing the context and specifics of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, veteran Canadian Trotskyist Ernest Tate emphasized the internationalism that has been decisive in the efforts of Trotskyist mainstream, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist action most of all – focusing not on explication of and disputes over revolutionary texts, but rather on mobilizing practical action to defend and advance actual revolutions. He offered three examples of this in his own experience: (1) defense of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, through the development of Fair Play for Cuba Committees and multiple other efforts in the early 1960s; (2) defense of the Vietnamese Revolution in the 1960s and early 1970s, through recurrent mass anti-war mobilizations in North America and globally, which helped to limit the power of US war makers; (3) defense of the Algerian Revolution in the 1950s and 1960s, including not only anti-imperialist mobilizations but also helping to get weapons and supplies to the revolutionaries.

Simón Rodríguez’s discussion of permanent revolution in Latin America emphasized the necessity of building, throughout the continent, revolutionary organizations based on a revolutionary program, engaged in struggles of today, recognizing that that no elements of the bourgeoisie of the various countries can play a consistently progressive or democratic role, invariably functioning instead as the tail of imperialism.

Drawing on experience from his native Puerto Rico, Rafael Bernabé noted – consistent with the previous presentation – that the rise and development of US imperialism has been central to all that has unfolded in modern Latin American history. It is essential to analyze the particularity of US imperialism, which, as a latecomer in the competition of capitalist economic expansionism, has presented itself as a democratic force, in contrast to the older colonial empires. It functions differently, dominating through economic rather than political structures, and always claiming to be dedicated to “liberating” someone. In Puerto Rico, this facilitated the seduction of various reformers

- often very militant in popular mobilizations against various forms of oppression, but also inclined to build faith in the United States as a progressive ally. The Puerto Rican Communist Party - the central force in building Puerto Rico's powerful labor movement of the 1930s and 1940s - was committed to building an alliance with the "progressive" and "democratic" imperialism of the United States, particularly in the struggle against fascism during World War II. To facilitate this, the Puerto Rican Communist Party liquidated itself, which consequently facilitated the collapse of the labor movement. An economic boom combined with Cold War anti-Communism resulted in substantial political disorientation. Bernabé recalled that Trotsky had emphasized the need, in the Americas, for an "Americanized" Bolshevism to confront and defeat American imperialism. Instead, a bureaucratized Bolshevism (in the form of Stalinism) ended up confronting American imperialism - and had proved incapable of bringing victory. The struggle must continue, based on lessons learned from the past.

Bryan Palmer, drawing on new research for the upcoming second volume of his James P. Cannon biography, discussed the relationship of Cannon and another founder of US Trotskyism, Max Shachtman, with each other and with Trotsky, from 1928 through the 1930s. Cannon has had an misleading reputation of being provincial, weak on internationalism, and "innocent of theory," while his former young protégé Shachtman has often been seen as cosmopolitan and theoretically sophisticated. Trotsky's assessment in the early 1930s was that Shachtman was overly inclined to place "chumminess" above principle and too often unreliable on political matters; eventually he placed greater trust in Cannon. In the early 1930s a generational divide had opened up among US Trotskyists, with a younger group headed by Shachtman impatient and hostile toward the older Cannon - bringing to mind a Freudian sons-slay-the-father dynamic. Shachtman was soon reconciled with Cannon, a close and fruitful cooperation being generated by several major developments: the New York hotel workers strike; the Minneapolis teamsters strikes; the struggles against fascism and Stalinism; merger with another left-wing group headed by A.J. Muste; a battle against internal sectarian tendencies; and a decision to merge the US Trotskyists into the Socialist Party. Yet differences between the two reemerged: Shachtman was inclined to focus on negotiations and maneuvers with an organized tendency of militants in the Socialist Party (with hopes of perhaps taking over the Socialist Party), while Cannon (anticipating a split) preferred to build Socialist Party branches outside the control of the Socialist Party leadership, and helping advance labor struggles in California and Minnesota. When Trotskyists were - as Cannon anticipated - ejected from the Socialist Party, they took many labor militants and youth with them to form the Socialist Workers Party, that was able to play a leading role in helping to found the Fourth International in 1938.

A detailed, critical-minded, finely nuanced analytical account of an almost-revolution in Bolivia in the early 1950s was provided by S. Sándor John, with useful focus on both contributions from and mistakes of Bolivian Trotskyists. Rather than trying to summarize, I will share the comrade's contact information, since he promised to send to anyone interested the full, detailed paper on which his presentation was based: s_an@msn.com.

A need to connect with Lindy Laub, the comrade who is working on the full-length documentary on Leon Trotsky - "The Most Dangerous Man in the World" (45 minutes of which had earlier been shown to enthusiastic conference participants) - caused me to miss the conference's final panel, focused on Cuba. According to the program, this is what I missed: Ricardo Márquez on Julio Antonio Mella (1903-1929), founding leader of the Cuban Communist Party, martyred in 1929, who sympathized with the Left Opposition; Caridas Massón on a founding leader of Cuban Trotskyism - black working-class militant Sandalio Junco (1894-1942); Rafael Acosta on the Last Days of Cuban Trotskyism after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution; Burak Sayim on Trotsky, Che Guevara and Permanent Revolution.

Unplanned was an enthusiastic, more or less harmoniously multi-lingual singing of the

“Internationale.” I noticed a wonderful young comrade who did not sing, looking askance at the weirdness of it all, while the older singers around her were, in contrast, especially loving it.

Concluding Reflections

With the upcoming eightieth anniversary year of Trotsky’s death in 2020, there are discussions taking place about the possibility of organizing conferences and other observances in various cities around the world. This year’s Havana conference gives a vibrant sense of what can be done. It is worth learning from the experience. Worth considering, for example, is my friend’s suggestion – noted earlier – that a different organization of such a conference might be considered: a pre-determined and more planned-out selection of significantly fewer and more substantial presentations, with more time allocated for critical discussion. On the other hand, there is something to be said for providing opportunities for younger presenters to present their ideas and their scholarship – going more in the direction of what happened at the Havana conference.

As I have been completing this report, I have been struck – despite limitations I have alluded to – by the breadth and richness of the content that I have been describing. Such a gathering would have had value anywhere. The fact that it was held in Havana has great significance. Many participants seemed to feel a profound affinity between all that is vibrant and healthy in the Cuban Revolution (and in Cuban society today) and the revolutionary democracy and internationalism that are central to the Marxist theorizations developed by Trotsky. A gathering of such a diverse number of activist-scholars is impressive. For the conference organizers in Cuba – operating with quite modest resources – the achievement is even more impressive.

Even had I not been there, I would have been excited and grateful that such an event could take place. To have been able to actually be there and participate feels like an immense privilege. But beyond such individual reactions, there is the obvious question about what is the meaning of what happened in Havana. From a political standpoint it seems obvious that amid the deepening crises of our various societies throughout the world, growing numbers of people are searching for answers to the multiple and complex questions with which we are confronted. Much of what Trotsky and his various co-thinkers have had to offer in the past seem, for such people today, to provide insights and possible starting-points. This makes it likely that such gatherings and discussions will multiply and be fruitful.

Paul Le Blanc

Footnotes

[1] Which is available on ESSF (article 5046), [On the Origins of the Cuban Revolution:](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article5046)
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article5046>