

LEFT COMMUNISM AND TROTSKYISM: A ROUND TABLE

The following is a round-table which took place in March 2007. The common thread is the question of whether the terms of the debate emerging from the years 1917–1923, codified today in different variants of “left communism” and “Trotskyism” have any practical meaning today. Three of the participants (Loren, Amiri and Will, live in the U.S.; the fourth, Yves, lives in France. We decided to make the proceedings public in hope that they are of use to others interested in these questions.

Loren Goldner

LOREN (3/3/07);

I wanted to share some thoughts with you, which have been swirling around in my head recently. I recently read most of Martin Glaberman's (ed.) *Marxism for our Times* (1999), a slightly preposterous book of his master James's writings, since no text is later than 1969, and naturally, like the intro thirty years later, makes no mention whatever of de-industrialization or anything else that has happened to the working class since the 60's. Nonetheless, James is almost always interesting, though some of it, such as the internal correspondance of the Facing Reality group in the 1960's gets a bit tedious, particularly when you realize that they had six members in 1962 and the same number when they dissolved in 1970. I mean, even SDUSA (the right-wing Schactmanites) grew in the 60's. But I digress.

You are familiar with James's rather unusual take on the Russian Revolution and its aftermath, expounded here but actually stated better in his masterpiece *Notes on Dialectics* (which I highly recommend). For James, Lenin was almost a spontaneist, a party-builder yes, but after he bit the Hegelian apple in 1914, was in another universe from *What Is To Be Done?*, which he repudiated ca. 1909 (following the events of 1905). James sees TROTSKY as the problem, for having continued Lenin's pre-1917 conceptions into the new period in which they were superseded (all this is laid out in the two texts on James on my web site <http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner>). For James, bureaucratic capitalism after the defeat of the Russian Revolution teaches "everyone" the truth of capitalism, so the party is no longer

necessary, as witnessed by Hungary '56, France '68 and Poland 80-81. It's so simple it's charming, I guess. But the Marxist organization, for reasons never explained well, is still necessary, not to organize the workers, mind you, but to organize the Marxists. This is (as I say in those two texts on my web site Break Their Haughty Power) where they lose me, namely saying on one hand that the "whole class has become (and therefore superceded) the party" but at the same it is necessary to organize the Marxists because the working class needs them. For what?

But again, I digress. What I really wanted to write you about is my inability, 90 years on, to shake free of the Russian Revolution. Symptoms: in Ulsan (South Korea) in December, the worker group there asked me to speak on the differences between Rosa and Lenin, which I did (not terribly well, and with a very mediocre interpreter). In no time we were deep into a two-hour discussion of what happened in Russia in the 20's (the agrarian question). And this was not some cadaverous nostalgia piece as might be served up at an Spartacist League meeting, but with intense back-and-forth and questions and furious note-taking. The point is that no matter where you start out, somehow the question of "what went wrong in Russia" comes front and center. (In January, the Kronstadt debate erupted in Korea. A leading member of the British SWP-affiliated All Together group published a large theoretical work with a defense of Trotsky. This resulted in more "hue and cry over Kronstadt" in the press.

Is this just me or is it still contemporary reality?

Another symptom: upon returning to New York in December, I began to read seriously about Korea. Because I don't read Korean, I'm limited to the rather meager work available in Western languages, in contrast to the shelves of books on China and Japan. And since both China and Japan had such influence on Korea (particularly on the formation of the communist movement before 1950) it was easy to shift over to Asian history broadly speaking. Then as the question of Islamic fundamentalism began to loom, I started on my hobby horse of the struggle for control of the world taking place on the borders of Russia and China, from the Baltic states to Korea. In no time I was into the history of the Marxist and Islamic movements in the Central Asian states (check out a weirdly remarkable book on this by Delugian called Bourdieu's Secret

Admirer in the Caucasus). Fascinating. There was a whole Tatar etc. Marxist intelligentsia by 1910, headed by Sultan Galiev, whose acquaintance you should also make.

In short, there I was back again on the Russian Revolution. About that time a friend passed on the Glaberman book, and I found the portrait of Lenin so interesting that I went back to Moshe Lewin's *Lenin's Last Struggle*, and began to feel (again) some sympathy for the guy (James makes a big deal of Lenin's speech to the 1922 Comintern 4th Congress, in which he seems to repudiate many of the theses of the 3rd Congress as "too Russian". It was his last public speech.

You recall Lenin's eulogy for Rosa Luxemburg after her death: "she was wrong on the question of organization, of nationalism, of economics, but she shall always remain for us an eagle". Somehow I feel I could say the same thing about Vladimir Ilyich. In 1971, in the funk after the collapse of the New Left, I traded in my complete works for the complete *Remembrance of Things Past* of Proust. I unloaded another set in 2000, this time into the garbage can, since my local used bookstore wouldn't trade it for anything! I then acquired a third set in Paris in 2003, I'm not sure why. Do you know Valentinov's portrait of Lenin (Oxford UP 1968)? He was not--how shall I say?--a nice guy. But I do buy the idea, reiterated many times, that he was, in contrast to Trotsky, not overly taken with himself and utterly without vanity. He wrote about philosophy, about literature, about the Russian economy. He was a hack in philosophy, not terribly inspiring about literature, quite problematic in his economics. He did write an entire book on American agriculture (1913, a whole volume of the complete works). The key books: *What Is To Be Done?*, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, *Imperialism, Left-Wing Communism*, the *Philosophical Notebooks* (if that can be called a book) taken individually or as a whole, are deeply flawed. But I guess he lingers with me as the supreme example of a certain coherence of theory and practice, however one criticizes both. Trotsky is more appealing--I basically become a Marxist reading Deutscher's bio in 1967--and has a wider range. One cannot easily imagine Lenin collaborating with Breton and Rivera in 1938. *The History of the Russian Revolution* is a masterpiece. But one cannot (as Eastman points out in his 2 vol. memoirs, quoted at length in my 2006 article) imagine Trotsky without Lenin backing him up, as evidenced by what happened after

1923. Lenin owed a lot to Trotsky, to be sure, but the dependence was not mutual. Luxemburg is a third figure, undoubtedly the most humane of the three, and so much more right about so much.

There were a number of people of the historical ultra-left-- Bordiga, Pannekoek, Gorter, Mattick, Ruehle, Canne Meier, Cajo Brendel--who produced important oeuvres, but, I ask you, when one sets them side by side with Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg, does one see the RANGE of the latter three? CLR James, who to my knowledge never repudiated his interpretation of Lenin, also had that range. In one essay in the 1999 Glaberman book, James says in passing that there was nothing comparable to Russia as it prepared the revolution, not merely in the Marxist tradition, but also in literature, painting, music. The pressures that produced the revolutionary movement and then the revolution also produced a unique culture, a hot house to be sure (I'd have to argue with James about whether Russia really deserves primacy over Germany). And what do we have to show in our own time? Of course there is an endless list of creative people, from Debord, Camatte via EP Thompson--you can fill in your favorites. But as Thompson said in his polemics with the Althusserians, all this heavy theory has not produced one practical mouse. THAT's what pulls me back, I think. I recently saw the Warren Beatty film "Reds" again. Is there anything since 1917 comparable to that brief moment of hope in which everything seemed possible, on a WORLD scale? 1968, of course, comes close, without the practical success (such as it very briefly was).

I recently told a good friend (who's pushing 70, and who is no slouch) that I experience the pull of the Russian Revolution like a bear trap from which I cannot extricate my leg. Am I living in the past? Not in the sense of Faulkner's remark that "the past isn't dead, it isn't even the past" , but in the sense that one's sensibilities (I'll be 60 in October, f'chrissakes) almost necessarily become superannuated, in the way 1930's survivors struck us as superannuated in the 60's.

Loren

From Yves 3/4/07

There are three different problems in your letter

1) the historical role of Lenin and his status as a theoretician. It seems quite obvious that Lenin's works only had such a lasting political influence because of the existence of a "totalitarian" (1) State which published and used its works internationally in all sorts of social and political contexts. Note that the Russian state never published in other languages the complete works of Marx. That says much about the difficulty in using Marx for the same aims as Lenin... Hopefully Marx was not a Marxist and did not build a system, or a State or a "totalitarian" Party (although he used all sorts of maneuvers to kill the First International).

The fact that the Russian state was a counter-revolutionary state, which made possible a huge primitive accumulation, gave birth to an imperial power, gave its full meaning to the concept of totalitarianism, persecuted everywhere revolutionaries, manipulated national liberation movements, etc, all that in the name of Lenin, points to the weaknesses and ambiguities of Lenin (and the party he contributed to build) both as a theoretician and as politician. There are elements of continuity between Leninism and Stalinism, and the 1917-1924 period enabled these elements to take a decisive negative form which has influenced our history until now.

2) the Russian Revolution as an exceptional event in history. No doubt about that. But I don't think we should underestimate other failed insurrections, nationalist insurrections, long general strikes, democratic revolutions, massive factory occupations, which happened since 1917.

Unless one is obsessed by state coups and the building of a new so-called « socialist » state (which you are not), history gives us many examples of the creativity of the exploited to resist by all sorts of means. And that is what fuels my optimism; not the nostalgia of 1917, 1919; 1921 or 1936. It's also the continuous attempts of the exploited to find a way to counter all forms of oppression (the fight against racism and sexism has made huge historical progresses, and these questions were totally underestimated before the Second World War and even during the early 60s)

3) Camatte, Debord, the Situationists and other fakes, both as intellectuals and as revolutionaries.

I'm sorry, I can't take seriously these guys and the comparison with Lenin is just laughable. I can't express myself more politely.

If you want to name intellectuals who have written important books about world history, functioning of world economy, changes of the social structures, social psychology, class struggles, etc., and whose books have been and are still useful to revolutionary militants to understand the world since 1917 and to fight against Capital, there are many names both among non revolutionary or even reactionary intellectuals, and among so-called Marxists whose works will remain. But the Situationists and Camatte ?!

Since 1917, there has been only small groups of revolutionary militants who often were preoccupied by their own survival and did not have much time and energy to devote to illuminating new perspectives. Very often they just repeated what has been written in the sacred texts with an uncritical mind or picked up some trendy new idea and made a strange cocktail between rigid literal Marxism and some fashionable ideology.

Instead of being nostalgic about past revolutions or bowing in front of fakes like Debord or Camatte or the Situationists, I think those who want to help revolutionary militants to get out of their present mediocrity should analyze today's world and offer new and inspiring perspectives to them and all those who care about changing this world.

Yves

(Note: I don't like the word "totalitarian" but at the same time, I think concepts like "state capitalism" or "bureaucratic collectivism" don't describe the complex process which happened in the Stalinist States. So I use totalitarian by default, hoping one day those who endured and fought Stalinism will come with a better theoretical model.)

From Amiri 4/3/2007

Dear Yves:

In what respect were Debord/Situationists and Camatte fakes?
That's a pretty hostile stance!

Amiri

FROM YVES 4/3/2007

Debord and the Situationists, on one side, and Camatte on the other, never tried to unite theory and practice ("The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" said Marx 160 years ago), to contribute to any workers struggle.

The Situationists have posed themselves as theoreticians, despising all the revolutionary groups and militants of their time. They presented themselves as saviors who should be revered. They took most of their truly interesting ideas from revolutionary thinkers and groups which preceded them and were never preoccupied by getting the media's attention. They have hidden their main sources of inspiration and not explained the differences between their own "contribution" and what they had understood from previous revolutionary thinkers.

If you can read French and get hold of these texts I can only recommend you to read Henri Simon's booklet about the few contacts between the Situationists and ICO (Informations correspondances ouvrières was a group of workers coming mainly from the Socialisme ou Barbarie group). That would certainly cure you of any illusions of this petty small milieu. Or the booklets written by Guy Fargette about his experience with these fakes over a number of years.

As regards Camatte, he is a "marxologist". A guy who read Marx (a positive thing that many Marxists don't do) and wrote long and obscure texts about his own interpretation of Marx. But was never bothered to bring his ideas to a larger public, in a more concrete and usable form. On this level, he had and still has the same elitist attitude as the Situationists even if he never looked for the media's attention. To my knowledge he never wrote a text based on original

data gathered in the economic, historical, sociological field or a text based on a concrete experience of the class struggles, or on specific strikes.

Camatte on one side, Debord and Co on the other, are a typical French intellectual product. Their originality is that they did not belong to the academic milieu but they had the same flaws as Althusser, Lacan and the icons of the 60s: they loved to use sophisticated concepts and words most of the members of their court ignores. They loved to discuss about abstract notions, "philosophy" and "problemativity" (this word has even become trendy now among high school teachers) and never turned to militant action, because they did not want to dirty their hands. And anyway militantism for them was and is a form of alienation, so they had a good excuse for going on drinking good wine and gossiping about the others groups or intellectuals. And most of their political heirs today have the same elitist-bohemian attitude about revolutionary militants and the working class as their spiritual fathers. Nobody took the Situationists seriously in 1968 because they were totally unknown and had no influence on the general strike, on the action committees, in the growth of the revolutionary groups of that time, in the important political discussions of that period. As regards Camatte his intellectual influence was even more minute because he never got attention of the media or of any important publisher. A fact which makes him rather sympathetic to me compared with the Situationists. But he never bothered uniting theory and practice. The only period when the Bordiguists (PCI, his former grouplet) grew from 20 to 200 militants was a time during which he was not active with his comrades anymore. (...)

Where are the decisive political tools you can find in the Situationists or in Camatte which enable you to understand present problems such as the constitution of the EU, the growth of capitalism in India and China, mass world unemployment, decline of Stalinist parties, disappearance of the Soviet Bloc, rise of political Islam, workers' difficulties in organizing outside bureaucratic trade union organisations, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and their place in history, etc. ?

These guys are not useful for me to understand this world and to fight against it. That does not mean one must not read them. One should read or try to read everything – if one has time. But I just

don't see any connection between their writings and any form of revolutionary activity today or yesterday.

I can't remember of any text written by Camatte or the Situationists about

- the state in France, its historical and economic role
- the history of the workers movement in France, its evolution
- the concrete role of the different trade unions,
- the main classes of French society, their alliances and contradictions
- the main political parties and their role

Etc.

Even Lenin, with his dogmatic texts written a century ago for a very different society and world is much more useful than all the Camattes, Debords, etc...

These intellectuals were never preoccupied to forge theoretical tools which could be used in daily political fights in the society they were living in. Just "philosophical" dissertations with pretentious playing with words (the Situationists) or endless dissertations about some aspects of Marx's thought disconnected from present problems or related in such an abstract way that it was almost impossible to understand what it was leading to.

Yves

From Will 5/3/2007 - Open Letter to yves

Allow me to begin with a little levity as a point for departure for otherwise serious discussion: I must say , Yves, that Loren "elicit[ed] some feedback from " with his recent piece...

There are, indeed, somber and critically significant points you make in regard to Loren's "reminiscences" (e.g., I would not dispute elements of a continuity between Leninism and Stalinism or, for that matter, Lenin and Stalin, and perhaps even along the lines you suggest. Loren can speak for himself), but I also think there is an underlying tenor, Amiri identified it as "hostility," that goes back to an unresolved problem at the origins of our conversation, and that is in my view not entirely unjustified.

I offer the following elaboration.

Yves, you have of course told us these opinions previously. You questioned the validity of the inclusion of Debord, the Situationists, and the concept of the spectacle as, taken together, a point of focus. You provided your reasons, not the least of which (as I recall) revolved around the fact that contemporary French intellectual life is suffused with obfuscatory debris which passes itself off as sophisticated, Situationist analysis. (If my formulation is inadequate, please forgive me.)

A number of us responded, and we in turn affirmed Debord, the Situationists and the analytic value of the concept of the spectacle. (I believe I followed Amiri in this.) I, while noting my hesitation in regard to mentioning Debord et al, contrasted the intellectual climate here in the United States to that in France and suggested that here the concept of the spectacle remained of critical import.

I still hold this position, and though I think I could mount a forceful theoretical defense of Society of the Spectacle and a similarly vigorous defense of Situationist practice as well, I simply think that at this point, here and now, it is irrelevant and perhaps even meaningless... for several reasons:

First, I don't think the United States is the center of the universe.

Second, as a matter of fact in our discussion to date Debord, the Situationists and the concept of the spectacle have played at the very most a minimal role.

Third, my own focus (which differs somewhat from the framework Loren initially suggested) resolves itself into this: I think there are three knots that must be unraveled before we can effectively

develop a new revolutionary synthesis that can adequately mediate the whole ongoing era of capital's development. Without regard to an order of prioritization, I've in mind the following: (a) at a historical junction in which abrupt climate change is becoming an ever more pressing societal issue, we must rethink the whole of the "man-nature" relation; (b) forced upon us by the failure of revolutionary movements of the past, central and decisive theoretical assumptions concerning agency and consciousness must be critically addressed and reconsidered; and (c) our relation as revolutionary communists to what Loren has aptly terms "reactionary anti-imperialism" (at which the heart of which lies religious fundamentalism, in particular the Islamic variety) must be clearly resolved. My sustained contributions to this discussion center on (a) and (b)...

While this focus is certainly moot, I am further convinced that, if it does not neatly dovetail with, it is nonetheless consistent with your call (at the end of your most recent intervention) "to forge theoretical tools which ... [can] be used in daily political fights in ... society... [not] disconnected from present problems ..."

Fourth, I think (returning now to our earlier exchanges) that the objective outcome, which I suspect you inwardly lived, of the series of Situationist-affirmative posts that followed yours was to pour it on, to (using an idiom that I cannot find a polite counterpart to) trash you... This, I believe, was an injustice perpetrated, mostly unconsciously, at the origins of this discussion.

It was an outcome that I deplore and that I, vaguely recognizing, should have gotten back on-line and apologized for. I am apologizing right now: Whatever our difference over the Situationists, they simply do not appear to be germane to the tasks at hand as I understand them (and, if I understand you and I may not, they do not appear relevant to you either)... If, and if then when, they become significant, I, for one, am in favor of full-scale debate, argument and polemic in which they are thrashed out...

While I can only speak for myself, I want to finish by saying that (recognizing your work with *Ni patrie ni frontières* limits your involvement in this exchange) I miss the contributions you might make since your continental vantage point is unique to this list.

Will

FROM YVES 5-3-2007 - ANSWER TO WILL

(...) As regards the Situationists' influence today, maybe the most irritating thing is not the fact that some of their concepts are used today by the bourgeois media ("la société du spectacle" is a commonplace among TV journalists and even TV "animateurs" today, imagine TV clowns flirting with the critique of spectacle. The worst is that the young people I meet today have a totally uncritical attitude towards the Situationists, their texts, their version of their role in 68, etc. (...)

The introduction of the "Bureau of Public Secrets" website says it all when it presents the "Situationist International as the group that "helped trigger the May 1968 revolt in France".

This sentence already points to a legend : the IS did not "help trigger the May 68 revolt in France". As they say themselves in one of their texts, they were 4 guys in Paris when May 68 started. (For the use of the myth of May 68, you can read my article "Let's get rid of some myths about May 68" on mondialisme.org or read recent Mouvement communiste's booklet about May 68) on their website (...)

There is a permanent reconstruction of militant history, and 40 years later some unconnected facts and events can become - by a magical operation on paper - the fruit of a very coherent strategy, or a very coherent fairytale, even if the people who participated in these events had no common consciousness and often no political links between themselves. The funny thing about the Situationists is that they try, like any trivial Leninist group they hate, to claim they had a specific role in "triggering" the events, while at the same time they hail workers' initiative and creativity.

* the OCI (Trotskyist) helped "trigger" the general strike because Sud-Aviation (where they controlled a rightwing trade union) was the first factory to get on strike and to start a local strike committee

* the JCR (Trotskyist) helped “trigger” May 68 because they had an influence outside Paris (in Caen, Rouen and other towns) where young workers fought against the cops before 68 and also in the Parisian 22nd March Movement and in the Comité Vietnam National which politicized students before 68

* the 22nd March Movement (and whoever participated to this heterogeneous movement from J-P Duteuil, to Daniel Cohn Bendit, two anarchists, or Daniel Bensaid, a Trotskyist) helped “trigger” May 68 because they started the fight in Nanterre University

* the UJCML (Maoist) helped “trigger” May 68 because they participated to some factory struggles in the provinces before 68, to some immigrant workers struggles and had a leading role in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, which contributed to politicize the student youth.

There is a long list of groups and individuals who pretend to have helped “trigger” May 68 general strike. Boris Fraenkel had a funny statement in his autobiography when he wrote that being the translator of Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich he was one of the main secret artisans of May 68.

Maybe the content of the expression “they helped trigger a general strike” should be carefully analyzed and criticized when it comes from people who pretend to defend “autonomy”, “spontaneity” and other nice-looking concepts.

Yves

FROM LOREN 6-3-2007

I'm a bit startled to see that the weight of responses to my reminiscences of a few days ago focused not on Lenin, or James's Lenin, but on Debord and Camatte.

Yves's and Will's posts have naturally got me thinking. I think Yves is right that Debord and Camatte wrote from Olympian heights, generally contemptuous of the day-to-day problems of militants and activists, and at the same time proposing no viable alternative kind of activity. (With Camatte, I think we should be charitable and distinguish between phases of his writing: his 1974 pamphlet on

the French postal strike was certainly an attempt to analyze a concrete situation and see a way forward.)

On the other hand, I don't think it's fair to call the most important writings of Debord and Camatte "fake" because they fail the "militancy" test. We all know that militantism itself is often an ideology and I had my fill of organizations and activities in which "what are we going to say at next week's trade union fraction meeting" occupied ALL discussion, relegating theory and culture to window dressing and Sunday morning edification, and generally favoring "practical" people who had no use for theory of any kind, but who pursued a mainly "gate receipts" kind of strategy.

When I first read *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1970, I felt it was one of the first Marxist texts in which I clearly "saw" the world I lived in, of high-rise apartment buildings, suburbia, freeways, television, mass consumption, and white-collar work in a way (to use Marx's words) that "made the reified relations dance". I had had a somewhat similar experience with Paul Cardan's (Castoriadis's) *Revolutionary Movement in Modern Capitalism* and--excuse me--Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*. Debord, Castoriadis and Marcuse all had serious flaws (in ascending order, I think) but in the late 60's context, in which "economic issues" (not to mention economic crisis of the type that erupted in 1973) were almost nowhere in the general climate of the New Left, and almost no activists, myself included, read the 3 vols of *Capital* seriously, those texts were important in "making it new" (to use Ezra Pound's phrase). Today, some of the historical sections of vol. I of *Capital* seem to be written about the present, whereas in the late 60's they seemed to conjure up more the world described in Engels' book on the English working class.

A few years later, as I said two months ago about Lyn Marcus, it was easy to go from the "spectacle" to fictitious capital.

Camatte is another story. I should have been more specific in that I was referring mainly to the early Camatte, prior to "The Wandering of Humanity" (1975). In particular, the early issues of *Invariance* (late 60's/early 70's) and the masterpiece *Gemeinwesen et Capital* introduced an analysis of workers' struggles of the 19th and 20th centuries in terms of formal and real domination of capital, absolute and relative surplus value. For the first time, in my

experience, it became possible to connect 20th century working-class history not merely to "bureaucracy" but to the shifting nature of capital accumulation that produced and required bureaucracy. Camatte (in his writings on Bordiga) also made known the centrality of the Russian peasant commune and the agrarian question which, in my own experience, no one had ever talked about before. As mentioned earlier, Camatte also wrote about specific struggles such as the 1974 French postal strike.

Thus my basic point is that theoreticians such as Debord and Camatte can write things of real value that may have no, or wrong-headed implications for day-to-day practice, but which can be very suggestive of the nature of the epoch and point toward general trends in the present. Slightly farther afield, we can get insights about social relationships from Balzac or Proust or Dostoevsky which have no immediate programmatic or practical use, but which in the long run give us a clearer idea of what we are against than many long-winded theoretical treatises.

Loren

FROM YVES 6-3-2007 - ANSWER TO LOREN

1. Loren wrote " I don't think it's fair to call the most important writings of Debord and Camatte "fake" because they fail the "militancy" test."

That's not my point. The Situationists are fakes because they spent a lot of energy presenting others' ideas as theirs. That is not intellectually honest. And the worst is their young followers today: as we live in a society where only what was produced today is valuable to their eyes (the rest is corny, outdated, boring, etc), they think they don't need to read Marx, Pannekoek, Bordiga or Luxembour, because everything is in Debord, Vaneigem or Sanguinetti. And tomorrow they will read the heirs of Debord and probably ignore where these ideas come from.

As regards Camatte (who had and has a minute influence compared to the Situationists), his writings belong to a form of "marxology", an activity usually developed by academics of CP "intellectuals" but also by some Trotskyists (Daniel Bensaid is the

worst example; compared to the dwarf Bensaïd, Camatte is a Giant : at least, in his initial works, he was truly interested by communism and did not take Russia for a “degenerated workers State”; and if you read his texts you get to know the importance of the Grundrisse and 6th unpublished chapter of Capital).

2. “militantism itself is often an ideology”, wrote Loren.

Obviously but Marxism has no interest for me if it is not related (in whatever form) to my daily life. The first writings of the Italian operaists were obscure and difficult to read for an ordinary militant with no academic and Marxist background but at least they were addressing Italian reality in the 1960s. They could not be reduced to the 1567th analysis of the law of value, alienation or fictitious capital in Marx’s writings

3) Loren criticizes the fact of “relegating theory and culture to window dressing and Sunday morning edification, and generally favoring people who had no use for theory of any kind”.

He is right but this situation is also linked to the very abstract and difficult character of the writings which pretend to produce new theories or new interpretations of old theories. It is linked to the unwillingness of their authors to address ordinary militants, to give lectures, to confront other militants in the streets, in struggles, etc.

If a radical author writes for a small audience who has to know and understand all sorts of mysterious concepts, then he should not complain if people don’t read his writings. If he never confronts other militants or ordinary working class people to explain his ideas, then he has no reason to complain about the small impact of his ideas. But usually academic or radical Marxologists don’t bother with these details. They like to have a court of admirers around them and that’s enough to satisfy their ego.

4) Loren wrote: “I clearly “saw” the world I lived in, of high-rise apartment buildings, suburbia, freeways, television, mass consumption, and white-collar work.”

There are many sociologists, novelists, filmmakers who described all these realities. They did not claim to be revolutionaries – but

who cares ? What is important is to find good sources of information about the world we live in. And so-called radical philosophers and marxologists are perhaps not the most useful ones for people who can only devote 45 min per day to reading – as a working class militant told me recently.

The Situationists were not only people who described the world, like Loren says ; they were a group which pretended to have a form of political activity, which pretended that this activity could change the world or has effectively changed the world . That's why we should be much more demanding than if we were discussing about an interesting novel, film or piece of sociology which has no militant or political aims.

5)Loren praises Camatte for having underlined : “ the centrality of the Russian peasant commune and the agrarian question which, in my own experience, no one had ever talked about before”.

Did not Marx write about Russia and the importance of the Russian peasant commune in his letter to Vera Zassoulitch ? Camatte may have dwelled on this idea but it did not come from him. And the centrality of the agrarian question in a country where 90 % of the population is composed of peasants does not seem to me a very original idea. After all, Lenin spent a lot of energy discussing about the importance of peasantry, the possibilities of class alliances between the working class and the peasants, and he defended the idea of the “democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants” at least until April 1917 (according to Trotsky) and even later (according to the Stalinist version of history). If you dont concentrate your attention on the bolsheviks and the Putilov factories and start looking at the other political parties during the Russian revolution including the anarchists and the narodniks or left revolutionary-socialists, if you analyze what happened during the Civil War, it's not difficult to see the importance of the agrarian question ! You will “discover” the same basic element, if you try to understand the mass resistance against the collectivization of agriculture launched by Stalin.

6. Loren wrote : ”Thus my basic point is that theoreticians such a Debord and Camatte can write things of real value that may have no, or wrong-headed implications for day- to-day practice, but

which can be very suggestive of the nature of the epoch and point toward general trends in the present. Slightly farther afield, we can get insights about social relationships from Balzac or Proust or Dostoevsky which have no immediate programmatic or practical use, but which in the long run give us a clearer idea of what we are against than many long-winded theoretical treatises.”

Exactly. But Balzac or Proust were not Marxists or revolutionaries. They did not form groups or belong to groups who pretended that all the other groups were stupid activists, alienated individuals, small foremen, counter revolutionaries, agents of Capital, etc. That’s the big difference .

What interests me is not only the content of Debord or Camatte, it’s their social function in certain so-called radical circles. The same with Cardan-Castoriadis and the “Castoriadisology” which may replace “Marxology” in academic and radical-chic circles.

One has to confront all these young people who discover Castoriadis or X, consider themselves as very radical but think they have to read some more years before taking any political position... They are often looking for a modern guru who will give them all the answers quickly. And “Marxists” should be very cautious with radical gurus...

LOREN:

I do not wish to make a big deal of my bout of nostalgia, if that's what it was, for "1917". When I say 1917, I don't just mean Russia, I mean the world moment of 1917-1921, just about everywhere. Which took to its paroxysm the world revolutionary wave 1905-1914. Of course, as Yves says, there have been many movements and general strikes and creative moments, large and small. But I frankly don't think that capitalism has been on the defensive at any time, in face of a world movement, as it was in those years.

Second, on Russia itself. The thread that ties me to the complex of events, people, etc. conjured up by "Russia" is the contemporary importance of Trotskyism. This may sound strange, to some people on this discussion and in the broader left. Not too many people at "Porto Alegre" (for example) give a damn about Trotskyism. But I

frankly think that "Trotskyism" in the broad sense is still the "team to beat" in the contemporary period.

Let me explain myself. Let's start with Great Britain, where the SWP (Cliffites) is the largest group to the left of the Labour Party. Let's go on to France, where the three dominant Trotskyist groups (LO, LCR and OCI) got 11% of the vote in 2002 and, much more importantly, are capable of putting thousands of people on the streets in large mobilizations. And more important than that, they have a presence in the trade unions, as trade union militants at least, which is not negligible.

(Of course, France is an exceptional country, seen internationally.)

Before I elicit the kinds of criticisms which I myself could make (and agree with), let me say myself that, already in 1968, developments showed that the movements were much bigger than any organization, a tendency that has only intensified since (to the extent that there have been movements). But, for example, in France in May–June 2003 I saw the Trotskyist groups, and particularly Lutte Ouvriere, skillfully influence (i.e. manipulate) the mass assemblies that arose in the public sector strikes of that year, as well as the trade union apparatuses. France being what it is, they could not (as they tried in 1968) present themselves directly as what they were, but postured as "honest trade unionists". But there they were, and no "libertarian alternative" seemed capable of ousting them.

I'm less informed about the weight of the British SWP in UK realities.

In 2003, at the demos just before the Iraq war in Washington, New York and Paris, I was struck by the fact that, after more than 30 years during which I had been influenced by and involved with "left communists" or the broader ultra-left (the Situationists, Socialism or Barbarism, Bordiga, and many journals from around the world) that the weight of those currents in these events wasn't much different from 1968. In 1968 as in 2003 the "traditional left groups" seemed to have the ability to capture the high ground (in terms of the ability to "set the tone"). The work of the "old mole" in undermining the conditions for the "bureaucrats" did not seem to have progressed much.

I'll give another example, this time indeed from the U.S. Since 1968, there have been (to my knowledge) three important left-wing interventions in the organized labor movement: the role of TDU (Teamsters for a Democratic Union) in the Teamsters, the more muted triumph of the "reformers" around Toussaint in the New York transit workers, and most recently, the triumph of a left-wing caucus in the Los Angeles teachers' union. The first two seem to have been largely fiascos, we'll see about the third. But it is undeniable that none of them would have happened without the central role of the (neo-Trotskyist) Solidarity group, one of 8 tendencies to spin out of the Independent Socialist Clubs of 1969. (I call them neo-Trotskyists because they reject the Trotskyist theory of "workers' states" for the Stalinist (class) regimes, but their methodology of trade union intervention is strictly Trotskyist.) Why, when I want to know what's happening on the ground with the New York municipal employees or the subway workers, do I ask the Trotskyists I know and not the left communists? What's wrong with this picture?

Perhaps I am flaying my own wounds.

Finally, in America. events like these periodically force me to ask why (as EP Thompson said in the quote I used in my recent intervention) that "all this heavy theory has not given rise to one practical mouse". I left the ISC milieu because it was philistine, anti-theory, anti-intellectual. That seemed to point to opportunism, and that certainly was the case in TDU and with the New York TWU. They had no interest in Guy Debord, Jacques Camatte, Lyn Marcus, the best of Italian workerism, or any of the other people whose work seemed much more interesting. The ISC was workerist, You weren't taken seriously unless you worked in a factory, and the sole focus of every meeting was the line to take at the next trade union meeting. And yet, there they have been, having a real impact (such as it has been) in the labor movement.

Sorry to be so long-winded. I look forward to comrades' feedback.

Loren

LOREN: (Addendum)

Yves has supplied us with some excellent insights into the realities "on the ground" in France and to some extent in the rest of Europe. But does this material really undermine what I said? I refuse to consider myself a dinosaur. I mentioned earlier the feeling of superannuation, somewhat analogous to the way we in the 60's looked at the people still around from the 30's. Certainly there is a "style" in Marxism that resonates with the contemporary world in which it is expressed. But when all is said and done, there is also an "invariance" which is transgenerational. Yves doesn't participate in Meltdown, but that list serve attempts to be an almost day-by-day dissection of the unfolding of the capitalist crisis. It actually exasperates me that the "cultural" writings on my web site get far more hits than the critique of political economy stuff. When one thinks of a figure like Hal Draper, no one could have been more out of sync with the "cultural style" of the 1960's, yet he was the only adult "over 30" hailed by the 1964 Free Speech Movement and his overall oeuvre influenced hundreds of people, beyond the small circle of militants he personally formed. Lyn Marcus, too, with his bow ties and business suits, cajoled his ex-New Left following (1000 members, including in Europe, at its peak ca. 1973) into giving up Bob Dylan and rock for Beethoven and Spinoza, and into reading Luxemburg's Accumulation of Capital instead of Marcuse.

But we have been arguing about Trotskyism per se. Here's how I see it. Trotskyism in different varieties today (Yves admits that LO is Trotskyist, which is the only thing he has to concede where France is concerned to make my case) asserts the following: that the surviving CPs and SPs are "workers' parties" that should be pushed into united fronts to expose them; that the trade unions are workers' organizations that can become revolutionary with the correct leadership; that national liberation fronts are broadly progressive. The French Trotskyists (I believe differently from Trotsky himself) sometimes support "reformist" candidates such as Mitterand, but there are many variations on that theme.

The left communist "scene" in the world today, however incandescent (as I myself outlined in a previous intervention) looks at the Trotskyists and says: the CPs and the SPs are parties of "state capitalism"; that the unions are instruments of capital which cannot be captured for revolution; that national liberation fronts etc. are reactionary, the "left wing of capital". In fact, for the left

communists, the Trotskyists themselves are the "left wing of capital", a role they have certainly played in Chile or Nicaragua or (with the exception of LO) in France during the Mitterand years.

I ask Yves: are these questions dinosaur questions? I don't think so. I threw out three examples of fairly impressive (initially) Trotskyist interventions in American unions (the Teamsters, the New York TWU and the LA teachers), even as at least the first two turned to fiasco.

Perhaps to some extent this debate is due to the fact that Yves' point of departure is France, whereas mine is the U.S. He makes a distinction between Trotskyists facing big CPs and Trotskyists dealing with little CPs. I myself would say that big CPs themselves have existed where the agrarian question (as in France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Chile) remained a major issue well into the 20th century, and small CPs existed where (as in Scandinavia, Holland, Britain, the US) where the agrarian question was settled earlier. But I think Yves underestimates the importance of the American CP and thus of American Trotskyism. At its peak, in the Popular Front, the CPUSA had only 100,000 members: perhaps 0.1% of the population. But does this tell us anything about the real weight of the CPUSA? Something, of course, but anyone who knows the history of the American 1930's first or second hand knows that the CP's influence reached far beyond its numbers, in the Democratic Party, in the CIO, in a "climate" deepened by CP and left-liberal Stalinophilia in publishing, in Hollywood, in academia. I argue that the shape of the American New Deal is incomprehensible without an understanding of the weight of the CP and CP fellow travelers, up to the highest levels.

Ca. 1940, American Trotskyism had a few thousand militants. Or perhaps 2% of the CP's membership. Was their social weight comparably small? How about the Minneapolis Teamsters' Strike and the Toledo Auto-Lite strike, both in 1934, two of the most important battles of the American 30's and again, unthinkable without Trotskyists? How about the waves of wildcats against the no-strike pledge during World War II in which the (Schactmanite) Workers' Party, just off its split with Trotsky, played a leading role? How about CLR James, Raya Dunayevskaya, Hal Draper, and Lyn Marcus, who at their best (we can discuss exactly where this was) influenced thousands of people in the 60's and 70's?

And let's not forget that EX-Trotskyists became key figures of the post-World War II intelligentsia, on the "left" (the Daniel Bells and Irving Howes and Michael Harringtons) and on the right (some of the neo-cons).

There are of course much larger populist formations afoot today. But when I say Trotskyism remains the "team to beat", I don't trouble myself overmuch with these more visible, obviously bankrupt groupings. However much in the past, the question of Stalinism still hovers over the international left like a shadow, something that billions of people instinctively point to when the question of "going beyond capitalism" is raised. Isn't going beyond capitalism still the issue, Yves?

Isn't the abolition of commodity production still the goal? And if it is, are the questions I outline above (above all the character of trade unions) central to any strategic appreciation of the present?

Loren

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From Yves: 8-3-2007

Trotskyism is almost dead. Has neo-trotskyism a future ?

I would give another meaning to the term "neo-Trotskyism".

The neo-Trotskyists are those (the Fourth International headed by the French LCR) who have abandoned

- the perspective of building a revolutionary party around their program (transitional or not). Consequence: the presence inside the Brazilian PT, Die Linke in Germany, the PRC in Italy, presented not as a temporary move, a raid to steal some militants (the traditional "entrism) or split the Party, but as a long term perspective of building parties with "undelimited programmatical frontiers". Probably tomorrow if new Left wing parties like the French PSU or the Italian PSIUP of the 60S-70s reappear the Fourth International

will jump in the wagon and stay there for a long time with the idea of dissolving itself progressively. At least that is their perspective and best hope...

- the idea of a revolution as an insurrection. There is a public debate in the LCR with people defending Gramscian or/and reformist ideas. Preparing a military insurrection in Europe is overtly seen as nonsense inside the LCR today and inside the Fourth International.

- the opposition to participation to a bourgeois government (Rossetto was Minister of the Land Reform in Lula's government; Besancenot in France is not hostile to participate to an "anticapitalist" government under certain conditions)

- the reference to Trotskyism as a main element of their political identity (in France it's quite obvious and reinforced with the alliance of the LCR with some fractions of the CP apparatus and CP intellectuals and trade union bureaucrats).

- democratic centralism as a main reference (this is in process so we shall see if they are able to function one day like the Anarchist Federation, each local group having its own politics including anarcho-individualists, anarcho-syndicalists, anarcho-communists, etc; but already the LCR has a very "cool" and "democratic" functioning compared to all the other groups)

- the dictatorship of the working class. The LCR and the 4th International have made their turn towards the defence of democracy, a move which impedes them to defend the dictatorship of the working class.

So I would call Trotskyists those who in words, on paper, maintain much more references to their political origins. Outside the tiny sects of 20 people, the only big group in France which could be assimilated to a purer form of Trotskyism is Lutte ouvrière. It uses a kind of Comintern-Third period (1) vocabulary but only inside the group and here and there in some non electoral meetings and some booklets which have a restricted circulation. During the rest of the time, its propaganda is a left reformist one in the name of "pedagogy"

And the OCI-PT, the 3rd big group (each of the 3 main Trotskyist groups having around or more than 1000 militants), is on a more nationalist-republican line, defending the Nation, the local "communal democracy", making alliances with the free-masons, rightwing social-democrats and Stalinists of the worst kind (those who regret the "good old times" of Stalin and the Soviet Bloc). And even for the OCI-PT trotskyism is an almost clandestine reference for insiders who read their theoretical magazine but not for a large public.

We have to get accustomed to the idea that "our" (at least Loren and I) past Trotskyist references discovered 40 years ago are totally un-understandable today, including for the new generations of Trotskyists and neo-Trotskyists. As Trotskyism was always deeply interlinked with Stalinism for all sorts of reasons (both as mortal enemies and competitors claiming the same heritage: the October Revolution and Lenin), it's quite normal that as Stalinists die or change skins, Trotskyists follow the same biological and political process.

The whole generation of Trotskist leaders who have known the October Revolution has disappeared. The next generation who lived at the time of 1936 in Spain and France and the Second World War will soon die. And the third generation in Europe has only known a long period of peaceful development (at least in Western Europe) obviously with some serious political and social crises in the 60s in Italy, and France and later in Portugal (factory occupations and self-management) but that's already too far away to be a concrete reference for the militants who arrived in the revolutionary milieu in the late 80s, 90s and later.

As regards the other grouplets of the communist Italian, German and Dutch Left (2), their references are even more esoteric and unknown today, as their publications (when they are published more than twice or once a year) are almost impossible to find not to speak of their non-existent "militants" or clandestine meetings. The web may be a source of information but I doubt ideas which are not defended by frequent face to face contacts and discussions can last very long...

Dear Loren, I hope this won't make you more nostalgic, but we are already dinosaurs...

Yves

1. "Third Period" refers to Trotsky's description of the "third period of mistakes of the Communist International" roughly between 1928 and 1936 (and in some cases for a shorter time). The Komintern had a pseudo radical, "ultraleft", vocabulary ; it supported the creation of "soviets everywhere" and characterized Social Democracy as "social-fascist" and had this "brilliant" prognosis about Germany: "After Hitler, it will be us" (i.e. we'll come to power). The "third period" has always been a reference for Mao-Stalinist groups who wanted to be more "radical" than the traditional pro Russian CPs. And it was also a reference for European terrorist groups like AD, BR and RAF whose comprehension of the class struggle did not go farther than denouncing "fascists" and "fascism" all the time, and assimilating all political forces and bourgeois democracy to fascism.

2. The "Communist Left" does not refer to the left tendencies of the official Communist Parties but to the Revolutionary oppositions to Stalinism in the Communist International which appeared even before Trotskyism: Bordiga in the Italian CP which he contributed to found, Korsch and the KAPD - a split from the official KPD - in Germany, Pannekoek in Holland. Each of these oppositions was politically defeated and expelled from the Communist International and has given birth to small grouplets of "council communists", "Bordiguists", generally called "ultralefts" by journalists and lazy historians. Being in a total isolation, these groups and intellectuals have spent most of their time restoring Marxism against its Stalinist distortions, describing the USSR and the Stalinist States, and sometimes even new trends in capitalism (Paul Mattick). They generally shared the point of view that a long period of counter revolution started in the 20s and lasted at least until the 60s if not later.

FROM YVES

Trotskyism is almost dead (2)

To continue on Loren's interrogations, I think there is a big difference between the countries where the CP was a mass party, often as important or more important than the SP, and the countries where it was reduced to small party or a grouplet.

Trotskyism was built in opposition to Stalinism. Very roughly speaking it took radically two opposite directions when it faced a mass CP:

- Some Trotskyists chose to see the local CP and Stalinism in general on a world scale as their main enemy; in France concretely this line led the OCI-PT to make a tactical alliance with Social Democracy, to denounce very violently what was happening in the Soviet bloc, to defend Soviet and Eastern European dissidents and even to try to build groups in Eastern European countries before the fall of the Berlin Wall. So their violent anti-Stalinism had first rather positive consequences, but on the long run it pushed them more and more in the direction of right-wing Social Democracy and adaptation to bourgeois democracy.

One could say roughly the same thing about people like Cornelius Castoriadis or Daniel Mothé who chose to cooperate with the journal of the CFDT trade union just after 1968 (when this former right-wing Catholic trade-union progressively evolved in the direction of a "left-wing" Social Democracy after 1968; later the CFDT evolved more and more to the right, even of Social Democracy and Castoriadis took his distance with traditional political or trade union circles).

The strong anti-Stalinism of these groups and intellectuals had a positive aspect (they did not have illusions on the exploitative nature of the Soviet bloc, they supported the 1956 Hungarian revolution, they did not fall in the trap of the Chinese cultural revolution or the Cuban revolution) but on the other hand they were not able to maintain a radical position after the crisis of the 1960s and went more and more politically to the right.

Another aspect of this strongly anti-Stalinist current: all these groups and intellectuals were very critical towards national liberation movements when everybody else hailed them in the 1960s. This was positive in a way, but it did not lead them to

propose an alternative policy to immigrant workers in France or to the “colonial peoples” in French colonies.

– Some Trotskyists chose to enter clandestinely the CPs (the majority of the Fourth International) or to oppose it openly (Lutte ouvrière triggered the Renault strike in 1947 which obliged the French CP to leave the government and abandon its open pro-bosses and national unity policy; after 1956 they started distributing factory bulletins in front of the factories which provoked numerous fights and even battles with the Stalinists) before 1968 but they always considered Stalinist militants and Stalinist states as “comrades in error” and at least “anti-imperialist” states which had a positive role. For them there was only one imperialist power: the USA. Therefore they were much more critical towards Social Democracy, generally much more “anti-American” during the Cold War, They criticized the formation of the EU as an American plot (1) to struggle against the Soviet Bloc, and they supported uncritically the national liberation movements (Lutte ouvrière being an exception on this last theme).

Today this soft anti-Stalinist tendency leads them to be allied, uncritical or soft towards the neo-Stalinists (in Germany, France, Italy at least it is the case) and to be much more antisocial-democrat than anti-CP. These tendencies openly regret the positive influence of the USSR in international politics and have illusions about Cuba, Chavez, Hamas, etc (with the exception of Lutte ouvrière).

This primary option (who is our main enemy ? Social Democracy or Stalinism ?) may help to explain many splits and differences inside the Trotskyist movement. I took this idea from Philippe Raynaud’s book (L’extrême gauche plurielle) who applies it to France and I tried to apply it internationally. It would be interesting if comrades from other countries say if it fits within their national reality or not.

But we have to go further. In the countries where the CP was not a mass party, or was not the hegemonic force inside the workers movement, the Trotskyists had a big problem. They did not have the same monstrous enemy (Stalinism) to define themselves against.

But maybe we can apply the same division between:

- those who decided to be, from the start, ferocious anti-Stalinists and to ally themselves with Social Democracy, the Labour Party or whatever moderate "anti-communist" forces. Here I'm thinking of Schachtman's Workers Party, Gerry Healy's SLL, the Lambertists in Portugal, and certainly other groups.

- and those who decided to be more or less soft on the Russian camp. The Spartacists and the American SWP being a good example of this soft anti-Stalinism in the Anglo-Saxon world where the CPs were never a significant force. And this soft anti-Stalinism has progressively led them to be a pro-Stalinist force today.

As regards the British SWP (first called IS) it grew inside the Labour Party as a strong anti-Stalinist and Luxemburgist group, but strangely enough when it left the Labour Party, when it grew by itself and later when it made its "Leninist" turn, the positive aspects of their anti-Stalinism progressively disappeared: they started supporting a Third Worldist Party in Portugal in 1974 (the PRP), then they discovered the radical aspects of political Islam and today they look like any confused Maoist group of the 1960s: Third Worldist, anti-working class (supporting the Iraqi resistance, which kills workers everyday), building the Respect Coalition with the MAB, a group linked to the ultra-reactionary and anti-Communist Muslim Brothers. In international politics the SWP and its International Socialist Tendency defend the same so-called "progressive anti-imperialism" that the USSR, the Stalinist CPs or the Maoists defended in the 1960s and 1970s.

As regards the Maoist groups their anti-Russian Stalinism pushed them

- towards Social Democracy (In Holland today the ex-Maoist SP is supporting anti-immigration laws and it's on this political basis that they got MPs; in France they went into the CFDT when they exploded, to the SP and also later to ATTAC, which is a front between left-wing Social Democrats and fractions of the CPs with Christian leftwing people)

- either to join the remnants of the CP like in Italy where, after building big groups like Potere Operaio and Lotta Continua, they are now in the PRC-Rivoluzione comunista which is clearly not an

anti-Stalinist Party and has attracted the old-style Stalinist workers and petty bourgeois.

It would be very useful if other people could add some information to this picture or criticize its flaws. Or propose another picture... Obviously it is a way to see large tendencies in the International Trotskyist movement and they are many national exceptions to the general picture. But I think it can help us to stay less focused on the past political heritage of the "revolutionary" groups, their so-called Trotskyism, and interpret their evolution in relation to the evolution of the big forces of the "workers movement" (Social Democracy and Stalinism) and of the powers and States (today for example Russia, Iran and Venezuela) competing with American and European imperialism on a world scale.

Yves

1. This first analysis of the EU as an "American plot" explains why still 40 years after the creation of the CECA (the ancestor of the EU) the Stalinists and the second kind of Trotskyists still defend roughly the same point of view: the return to national barriers is more progressive and pro-working class than the progressive disappearance of national barriers. There is a common incapacity to analyze the new situation opened by the attempts to create a European imperialist State, Army, etc. Whether this project will fail or not is another question.

Reversely groups like the AWL, which belongs more to the first category of "Trotskyists" I described, has a more subtle analysis of the EU. One can see how this position towards the EU is related to their softer point of view towards social-democracy, which is ferociously pro EU (even if the picture is more complex in Britain's Labour Party).

From YVES

To start with I think there is a little misunderstanding. We (Loren and I and may be others who would like to join the club) are not dinosaurs because we are asking ourselves how to change the

world, we are dinosaurs because (or if) we think young militants today have the same references as we had 30 or 40 years ago (and that's one of the reasons I attacked the Situationists so much, because they are the worst theoretical link between the experiences of the 60s and today that I can imagine; with their confused writings about "alienation", "consumer society" and "spectacle industry" they provide intellectual justifications to all those who don't want to fight against this society today: the exploited are so dumb and alienated, the system's ideology is so pervasive and subtle, let's just have a bohemian lifestyle and be proud of our isolated esthetic radicality).

1. Loren writes that Trotskyists want to push the CP and SPs to power to then expose them. That was true in the 1970s and 1980s. That's no more true today.

The LCR is ready to participate to an "anticapitalist government" (including Lula's government in Brazil which is considered as progressive). The Italian comrades of the LCR stayed in the PRC when it was in power, when it was in the opposition and still today when the PRC is once more in power. They don't have people in the government but they have had MPs and senators (Livio Maitan their main historical leader was member of the Senate before he died; I don't know right now what their parliamentary situation is).

LO does not want to push any party to power, they have always publicly criticized the others for doing so. And when they call for a vote for the left (they don't do that at every election like the other groups) it's always without illusions (obviously the picture is more complicated, but what I want to say is that until now they are considered by the Left and Far Left as non-integrable in the political game. The sole fact that they refuse to shake hands with SP mayors and MPs caused much scandal.)

Only the OCI-PT (sometimes) and small micro-sects coming from the PT still ask for a "workers government" with a less and less precise content.

The LCR has broken officially with all this 3rd and 4th international rhetoric about the United Front and never uses the term anymore.

They shout "Everybody together" (Tous ensemble) or "100 % to the Left" (100 % à gauche), or they use the no-global rhetoric ("Another world is possible"); that's all.

LO never uses the word united front, at least in its weekly newspaper and factory bulletins. Only the Trotskyist mini-sects and sometimes maybe the PT do so.

So for different reasons the "United Front", the "Workers Government", and even the "CP-SP government without bourgeois parties" formula (which was used before 1981) have disappeared from mainstream Trotskyism. This is why we are dinosaurs if we discuss Trotskyism today, as it had not radically changed.

And the British SWP has not used all these Trotskyist slogans in its daily propaganda for years, if it has ever used them in Socialist Worker or its leaflets, which I doubt.

2) According to Loren "Trotskyists think that the trade unions are workers' organizations that can become revolutionary with the correct leaders"

We are dinosaurs if we think Trotskyists are still worried by socialist revolution ; and we are dinosaurs if we think that they are worried by transforming the trade unions into revolutionary organisations.

The LCR occupies some positions in the trade union bureaucracy either in the old trade unions (CGT and FSU mainly a teachers trade union) or in the new SUD trade unions (splits from the CFDT in the state sector and sometimes from the CGT, supposedly on the left of the more official unions; in fact not very more radical, just a bit more democratic to a certain extent)

From what I know in the Post Office sector, and maybe in other sectors, LO has a kind of unofficial pact or gentleman's agreement with the bureaucrats of the CGT and the CP fake "Left" : you let us animate the trade union at the rank and file level and we let you have the apparatus and do whatever you want with it. We won't fight for leadership, won't build any national opposition to you, as long as we can use the local trade unions. This enables LO to denounce the other revolutionary groups (because the other

Trotskyists build tendencies with fake left bureaucrats to climb in the apparatus) and to maintain their working class militants and periphery in the illusion that they are more radical.

(To be honest, in my personal trade union and political experience and observing what other groups do either in France or in other countries today, I have never heard of any long-term group of workers which succeeded in having a permanent activity on their factory and outside the trade unions in Europe. And that poses many questions about the just but abstract criticism of the trade unions put forward by the left communists for decades.)

The PT is well set inside FO's bureaucracy, a right-wing trade union, and does fight not for any revolutionary transformation of the trade unions. It fights to defend the Nation against Europe and America ! For more details about the CP you can read on mondialisme.org in the Ni patrie ni frontières section the articles of Karim Landais about the OCI-PT and Europe and about "lambertisme", in French. Or the volume 1 of his book "Passions militantes and rigueur historique" where he analyses the OCI-PT and interviews 14 former OCI-PT members.

3) About the CPUSA.

More than a question of size of CPUSA, my interrogation was what choice did the Trotskyists make in the US ? Did they desperately look for an alliance with the CP ? Or did they choose to make an alliance with other forces to fight Stalinism as the main enemy ?

This strategical choice is very important. And I think you can find the same division and dilemma inside the American Trotskyists as in France, Italy, Portugal (after 1975), etc.).

4) "Isn't going beyond capitalism still the issue?" asks Loren

Yes, but not in the terms posed by the Third or the Fourth International or the Communist Left.

Obviously knowing the past is important. The journal "Ni patrie ni frontières" reproduces and translates old texts in almost every

issue. So I agree that there are "trans-generational" problems, concepts, etc, as Loren writes, but we also need to produce NEW answers to these old questions. Often the left is blocked by old answers – when it knows them, which today is less and less the case (the radical left culture including among the anarchists and Trotskyists is much more oriented towards trendy sociologists – Bourdieu – or American imperialism critics like Chomsky, than towards Trotsky, Marx, Bakunin or Proudhon).

5) “Isn't the abolition of commodity production still the goal?” asks Loren

Well for the mass of the no-global young militants, for the Trotskyist young sympathizers, NO, unfortunately. And we are dinosaurs if we discuss as if we had a common culture with these guys even if they are vaguely interested in the radical left.

That's the big difference with the 60s and 70s. We have lost (and this is not our choice) a common ground of discussion, a common set of references, with the rest of the revolutionary left and even with the reformist left.

We have kept and cherished very important ideas, but the young generation does not care. And not because it is interested in “cultural politics”, as Loren writes (although rap or comic books or movies are a source of politicization of the youth), but because it is engaged in massive humanitarian actions, from the defence of illegal workers (you may have heard about the RESF network in France) to solidarity work in Palestine or elsewhere. International solidarity work in the 60s and 70s was 100% political. Today it is totally centered around humanitarian micro-projects and refuses to discuss political issues (like for example what are the political forces in Israël, Lebanon and Palestine, outside the ones the media talk about ? are there political discussions inside the Left of these countries ? etc.). If we deal with Third Worldists (that is in modern terms partisans of the no global movement) today as we did 40 years ago, then we are dinosaurs.

Yves

As some of you who are familiar with my situation know, for me composing some remarks does not always present itself with the opportunity for posting them. The comments below fall under that heading. They were composed, but not posted, prior to my most recent post.]

Death Agony of Trotskyism?

Will

While I have certain reservations, I am going to defer to Yves' judgments on the various (neo)Trotskyist tendencies in Europe.

I do not, however, think Trotskyism is entirely dead. In fact, I would suggest that in some places it is quite alive and well. (This is, I believe, what Loren had in mind when he spoke of contemporary Trotskyism as the major tendency to which we are opposed in today's revolutionary milieu.) I think, further, this points to the different social and historical contexts in which Trotskyists rooted themselves. So in this regard I would like to say a few words about a Trotskyist tendency in the United States. I am speaking of the Spartacists...

In general, I think that Yves has really hit on the core of the issue when he notes that Stalinism and Trotskyism are linked phenomena, each developing with reference to the other. This situation goes back to their respective origins in which both were born, so to speak, sharing the same head. While none of the really crucial issues (the developing agricultural crisis, the Chinese Revolution, the expulsion of Trotsky, Zinoviev and other Oppositionists) were and are separable, I'm not going to develop this perspective here except to say that it was the situation in the countryside, in particular, the grain crisis of late 1927 - early 1928, that forced the party of Stalin out into the open, precipitated an explicitly Trotskyist tendency (and, to boot, crystallized the Right Opposition around Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsy).

Trotsky remained tied to the regime because as long as there was a chance he and his faction could regain power, he would not openly criticize the party. Stalin, on the other hand, was tied to Trotsky in a different manner altogether: For Stalin, Trotsky was his theorist. (At the same time, he, for example, ordered them suppressed, Stalin

studiously read Trotsky's analyses prepared for publication in party journals, papers, etc.) This situation did not change until Stalin was able to deal with the deteriorating situation in the countryside on his own terms, that is, until that moment at which he had fully digested the Left's program and, on the basis of his 1928 experience, entered on a brutal course of action centered on crash program of industrialization and agricultural collectivization.

The underlying orientation that made Stalin's theoretical appropriation of Trotsky possible was the identity in their perspectives on, if perhaps not the meaning of then, the road to socialism. For both the singularly decisive criterion that really enabled a society as socialist was collective ownership of the means of production and a planned economy, viz., a stratification that allowed for, so it was hoped, unlimited development of productive forces. The entire complex of ideas can be summarized in one term, namely, the "workers' state."

So that when Yves suggests those neo-Trotskyists who have abandoned the concept of the "workers' state" have abandoned their own past, I could not agree more. But what happens when a Trotskyist organization refuses to forsake its own past?

Here, in the United States, unlike as in Europe, Trotskyists pursued a revolutionary course at a time by which Stalinists were fully and openly committed to reformist pursuits. While, for example, the CPUSA was "critically supporting" Roosevelt, Trotskyists organized the Teamsters on the basis of an open confrontation (which they won) with an armed employers' organization and the regionalized incarnation of the State (that political-administrative unit called the state of Minnesota and its armed force, the state police) in a bloody struggle, the Minneapolis general strike of 1934, that saw serious injuries and deaths among the workers. In the thirties, there was no counterpart among Trotskyists to, say, Leon Blum's Socialist Party in France: "Soft" or reformist impulses in the Trotskyist movement in the United States did not emerge until after the end of the last imperialist world war...

The Spartacists have not abandoned this legacy. While I see no need to describe their origins (suffice it to say that they explicitly trace themselves back to the struggles inside the Russian party on the terrain of the Soviet bureaucracy in the twenties, and count James

Cannon as one of the effective, if not actual, founders of their tendency), what is really fascinating is the contradictory manner in which they combine a “hard” Trotskyist commitment to a rigid theoretical framework (the transitional program, workers’ state, centralized planning, Leninist norms of organization, etc.) with subtle, insightful political analyses of contemporary developments.

It is the latter that interests me, and apparently others...

I have watched over the years as the Spartacists have lost members, a loss confirmed, for example, in the closure of sections across the country. While I do not know how large the organization is (and while Loren might, I would be surprised if it numbered one-hundred and fifty active members), and though it is tiny, it’s political weight on the left in the United States cannot be related to the size of its membership. The Spartacists have, relative to their numbers, a much larger, sympathetic periphery and a presence in the American left which, considering this otherwise insignificant political force, is in my view unrivaled.

This I attributed to a compelling sense of the major issues of the moment, to the analyses presented of these issues, positions taken on them (all as expressed in Workers Vanguard, the organization’s newspaper) and, in a limited way, to a small number of actions especially with regard to the Klan Spartacists have played a major role in organizing.

The Spartacists have taken “advanced” positions on a host of contemporary issues. These positions range from an opposition to Islamic fundamentalists that doesn’t situate them indistinguishably alongside the bourgeois State, to the defense of democratic rights in opposition to that State and to their view of the centrality of a black proletariat for a revolutionary movement that has yet to unfold in the United States. In my estimation, the “large” theoretical concepts upheld by the Spartacists (again, for instance, the concept of the workers’ state and all that it entails at the level of the world) are not only sclerotic, not only belong to a different historical era and were not even adequate to an emancipatory project in that era, but must in the end reach into and shape organizational positions and practice. Yet, and this is the contradiction, those positions and that very limited practice have the appearance, in my opinion, of being revolutionary

Thus, I think that our different evaluations of Trotskyism's "death agony" reside in good measure in the different societally-based situations that Trotskyists grounded themselves in both immediately before and after Trotsky's death. I am not attempting to relativize different claims (Loren's and Yves'), merely to suggest that, if we are ever to assist in advancing development of a revolutionary tendency that functions as a pole of attraction within the workers movements where they exist in the capitalist world, we require a subtle, differentiated analysis of those, hard as well as soft Trotskyists, counterposed to us.

From Yves:

I think Will points to a very crucial problem, and not an academic one, namely the problem of the role of small groups and the role of their political heritage in their possible development.

The first issue for a group is its "programmatic references": whether they refer to traditional Trotskyism, to anarcho-syndicalism or to the Communist Left, these small radical groups have great difficulties not degenerating into a microsect. So they have to find a "niche" in order to get some political oxygen. Will tells us apparently that the fight against the Klan may have been such a niche for the Sparts in the States, at least from what I understand from his mail. The "Bordigists" in France have had their niche for a while : it was solidarity work with Palestine and support to migrants workers' struggles (but they were unable to manage their growth and exploded very quickly to become once more a micro sect). The anarcho-syndicalists had no niche for 30 years and had a weekly meeting with three people in a Parisian café when suddenly a group of 200 migrant workers cleaning the tube contacted them and that was the spark which enabled them to grow (they have around 1500 militants on the national scale but have a larger periphery, on a radical trade unionist basis with no reference to anarcho-syndicalism anymore, at least for their sympathizers).

A small group can grow, that's obvious. But it needs people who have other abilities than just nice or coherent programmatic references. It needs

* a set of efficient organizational techniques inherited from the past: the Comintern or the Spanish CNT techniques can be quite useful. I think that's one of the reasons of the long duration of some small and medium groups. They have had good teachers. But most of these teachers are dead now and sometimes their pupils were not to the level required (Saturday night I printed 4000 leaflets for a student nurse who is trying organize a strike in all the hospitals of Paris. I had to do it - I have the technical means to do it - because the trade unions offices were closed and her organization, the LCR - which has supposedly 1500 members, full timers, a bookshop, headquarters, etc. - was not able to help her quickly - the leaflets had to be handed to the different night shifts. A good example of how amateurism pervades Trotskyist groups today...)

* an acute sense of opportunities, a sense which can be close to the art of maneuvering, but is a linked to

* a capacity to put forward new tactics, make some right prognoses about the evolution of the class struggle or the importance of new social problems, etc.

* a group of leaders with a certain charisma not only inside the group but also outside: in political or trade union meetings, in spontaneous street gatherings, etc.

* a capacity to manage internal and personal conflicts,

* the capacity to find a milieu where there are no left competitors and it can attract people who in other cases would have gone to the CP or to any radical left group, but come to this group, because it is there and proposes them action and politics

And certainly many other qualities I can't think of right now.

So I think the development of a tiny group into a group of a reasonable size is not only linked to a "good" program or some "good" programmatic elements.

And there is also the opposite situation : microsects with lunatic politics which train people who, when they leave the sects, use

some of their political and organizational heritage to become efficient trade union leaders or... SP senators.

So to come back to the subject, I doubt Trotskyism will have a long life for the above quoted reasons, on an international scale, but that does not prevent many exceptional exceptions and surprises, obviously.

PS.: I add 3 texts to my last answer to Loren ; two I wrote about Trotskyism and one about the spontaneist and confusedly pro-Situationist ideology in recent movements in France. Maybe they can be useful for our discussion.

Some hypotheses for a balance sheet of « Trotskyism »
Four prerequisites for a useful discussion

1) One should not discuss Trotskyism as Trotskyists do (and as most of its adversaries do) : as a coherent and unified ideology or theory, as the continuation of « Leninism » (for its partisans) or « Stalinism » (for its adversaries), as the « revolutionary Marxism of the 20th or 21st century », etc. This method may seem useful for polemics but it's a lazy and unproductive way of dealing with Trotskyist ideas and practices.

2) One should differentiate between Trotskyism as a rather coherent ideology or theory until 1940 (Trotsky's assassination), and what it became afterwards. Today one can't talk anymore of Trotskyism, but only about very different forms of « Trotskyisms » which have very little in common in theory and practice with their origins. What is left of the original Trotskyism today among its present followers, is mainly a cult of the personality of Trotsky and a general incapacity to make a balance of his theoretical work and actions when he was in power on in exile.

3) For the same reason, the fact of reducing Trotskyism to a form of « centrism » (this ideology which allegedly hesitates between reform and revolution) is just a lazy way to deal with the complex and multiform evolution of different political currents. Unless one has a very simplistic vision of the political world as divided into three basic forces : the revolutionaries (ourselves), the counter-revolutionaries and those in between : the centrists. This kind of vision is a simple copy of what Lenin wrote during the First World War 80 years ago when he analyzed the positions inside the

international Social Democracy and can't be seriously applied to all non-100 percent-revolutionary political groups since then. For the same reason, comparisons between the different political Russian tendencies before 1917 (Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Narodniks) and present revolutionary groups are not of any use today.

4) Today, it's more important to pinpoint what Trotskyists do, than what they write. Or better to study the relationship between what they write and what they do in practice. At least in the countries where they have some influence on reality. And that's true for all political currents, it does not apply just to Trotskyist groups. A French libertarian group like Alternative libertaire is in fact, by its practice, much nearer to the Trotskyist Ligue communiste révolutionnaire than to the Fédération anarchiste. The British SWP today is nearer from the Mao-populist or even Mao Stalinist groups of the 1970's than from its Marxist-Luxemburgist origins or its Trotskyist heritage. The anarcho-syndicalist CNT-AIT is strongly influenced by traditional Marxist ultra-left thinkers, etc. So what applies to Trotskyism applies also to anarchism and other political tendencies. There are no more definite frontiers between the most active « revolutionary » tendencies. Or, if they exist, they are more subtle than the officially proclaimed theoretical and practical differences.

These prerequisites are essential because if we don't agree on these minimum points, discussing Trotskyism becomes like discussing genealogy : one goes as back as far as possible in the past (for revolutionaries, it's usually the mid-19th century) and then one establishes an apparently « coherent » list of political ancestors (what Marxists usually call the « red thread » or the “historic continuity”). Then, the game (and political reflection) is already over : your present political group belongs to a long, « coherent » tradition which was always right for the last 150 years, so obviously what you do and say today is right because you are continuing what all your always-right-political ancestors did.

Trotsky's failures

They are today rather easy to spot, at least in what concerns the analysis of Soviet Russia and Trotsky's desire to defend Lenin's ideas and the political theses of the first four congresses of the Third International. This work has been partly done by all the different « state-capitalist » (Socialisme ou Barbarie with Claude

Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis; Tony Cliff and the International Socialists) , « left communist » (Amadeo Bordiga, Anton Pannekoek, Grandizio Munis, Otto Rühle, Paul Mattick) and anarchist groups or intellectuals (Luigi Fabbri, Makhno, Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman and Rudolf Rocker). This work has been useful because it showed that Trotsky's conception of Marxism had disastrous political consequences when he had to analyze Stalinism, both in Russia and internationally. And also that he proposed totally or partly wrong tactics to face the traditional forms of reformism and the general crisis of capitalism in the 1930s.

But these criticisms written in the 1920's, 1930's and used by their political heirs generally share the point of view that an international revolution was possible between the two world wars. This assumption should be today discussed in detail, if one wants to understand what happened at that time but also after the Second World War.

In other words, the explanation by a long-term « counter-revolution » and/or by the "lack of a revolutionary Party" does not suffice to explain the weight and continuing existence of Social Democrat reformism and why Stalinism controlled so easily the newly formed CPs.

Another problem : left communists and « state-capitalist » analyses of Soviet Russia start from the point of view that Marxist categories could be applied to Soviet Russia's economy and politics. Although Soviet Russia does not exist anymore, it's strikingly astonishing that since 1989 no revolutionary group has tried to re-evaluate Stalinism now that access to this country, its archives and its people is much easier. The same could be said about Eastern European former Stalinist states. No effort has been made to put together and confront the concrete experiences and theories of Stalinism in Eastern European countries by local revolutionaries and the theoretical analyses produced in the West. At least for a last check of what was wrong and right, in the analyses of Stalinism.

This theoretical laziness has dangerous political consequences because it means that the bureaucratic problem inside the workers movement is strongly underestimated even by those who always denounced the bureaucracy as a class or a social layer in the Stalinist states.

What happened to Trotsky's ideas ?

Most Trotskyist groups have in fact rejected the most revolutionary insights of their political mentor. They kept the worst (the tactical recipes : like "entrism" into reformist or Stalinist parties, the faith in the magical effect of political slogans like the Constituent Assembly, the United Front or the Workers government) and rejected the best (his revolutionary hatred of reformism and Stalinism).

At least one positive thing remained from Trotsky's voluntarism , if one compares the fate of Trotskyist groups with the fate of the groups influenced by the Left Communist tendencies : Trotskyist groups have always attracted people (intellectuals of all kinds, but also workers) who wanted to do something concrete against capitalism and oppression, while left communist groups have attracted mostly people who despised what they call « activism » or had such a pessimistic and defeatist analysis of reality that they decided to only comment what was happening and not intervene in political struggles. So the concrete consequences today in France, for example, is that Trotskyist militants are well-known in their workplaces, lead strikes or at least can express their opinions publicly inside strike movements, while ultra-lefts are in marginal positions, are rarely known by their workmates and have rarely a leading role in strikes. In other words, there is a strange division of labour : Trotskyists act (with wrong political tactics and strategies) and ultra-lefts criticize them in little-read theoretical journals.

If we turn back to the negative aspects of the various forms of Trotskyisms for the last 60 years they are so numerous that it is difficult to list them all :

- * tailism towards the national liberation movements,
- * tailism towards the states which were born after the success of these national liberation movements,
- * tailism towards all the so-called left-wing tendencies which appeared inside the socialist and Stalinist parties,
- * incapacity to analyze the basic trends of postwar capitalism :

+ until the end of the 1950s (they believed in the possibility of a Third World War and never asked themselves since then why their prognosis was wrong),

+ and then the incapacity to foresee the basic developments of world capitalism : oil crisis, ecological crisis, social role of women and its effects on capitalist society, the changing international role and place of Chinese and Indian capitalist powers, disappearance of the USSR and Eastern European Stalinist states, fundamental changes inside the Western working class, etc.

* incapacity to renew, modernize the socialist program both in function of the failures of the revolutions between the two world wars, and of the changes occurring inside world capitalism.

Yves

10/1/2006

BANKRUPTCY of TROTSKYISM

(This is the modified version of a text written for Combat Communiste in 1978. The added or modified parts are between brackets [].

The myth of « Trotskyism »

If the word Trotskyism has been used by the Stalinists to describe the ideas defended by Trotsky and his partisans in the years 1924–1940, for the militants of the Left Opposition and then the Fourth International the word Trotskyism has become a synonym of Marxism at the epoch of imperialism and Stalinism. For Trotskyist groups today, Trotsky's political and theoretical work continued the work of the Second and Third Internationals. To consider Trotskyism as the « Leninism of our epoch » is as false as to consider « Leninism » as the « Marxism of the imperialist epoch ».

In fact, words « Trotskyism », « Leninism » and « Marxism » have little meaning in themselves. They have all been invented by epigones or adversaries of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky and they all entertain the false idea that these different « isms » were theories produced by exceptionally ingenious individuals, without whom the working class could not have survived, and whose theories are closed systems, with any internal contradictions.

The writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky have been presented as the four gospels, the Bible or the Koran : it was

supposedly sufficient to learn them by heart and recite them to be able to understand today's realities and act upon them.

Marx, Lenin and Trotsky refused the canonization of their individual thought because they knew that their thought had evolved in a contradictory way, they had encountered fundamental theoretical problems without being able to solve them and their theoretical work was part of a collective movement of action and reflection.

When Marx or Lenin were alive, there were tens of revolutionary theoreticians who enriched and developed what is traditionally and wrongly called « Marxism », « Leninism », and their theories were confronted with the daily test of reality. When Trotsky was alive and led his struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy, revolutionary theoreticians could be counted on the fingers of both hands and Trotskyist groups were tiny organizations.

[The long period of ebb which started in the 1920s has struck all groups (left communist, councilists, luxemburgists, « state-capitalists », etc.) which have tried to maintain revolutionary positions against the stream. If Trotskyism has been and still is the most important « revolutionary » current (by « revolutionary » I mean a current which pretends to struggle for a socialist revolution, nothing more, nothing less) on the world scale it has been a victim of this situation as well as all the other currents.

The distinctive contribution of Trotsky, as compared to the other programmatic positions defined in the first four congresses of the Communist International (necessity of a Communist party and of the dictatorship of the working class, unfortunately reduced to the dictatorship of the Party over the workers committees and soviets ; support to national liberation struggles against imperialism ; political work inside the trade unions and mass organisations ; participation in bourgeois elections) can be defined by 5 essential points :]

- * the analysis of Russia and Stalinism,
- * the systematization of the permanent revolution theory already conceived in 1905,
- * the transitional program,

- * the analysis of fascism,
- * the critique of the popular fronts.

[Trotsky's original contribution (apart from the theory of permanent revolution conceived in 1905 with Parvus) has mainly consisted in trying to define revolutionary positions about the events and phenomena which appeared after the 1917 Russian revolution. What he wrote about Russia is certainly what is the most outdated; obviously because the Soviet state has disappeared today, but also because his prognoses were wrong as well as his analysis of the "working class" nature of the Soviet state. These mistakes led his followers, after his death, to adopt an even more right-wing position than their mentor. Nevertheless, when one reads Trotsky and despite all his illusions about the gains of October (planning, collective ownership of the means of production) his texts are far superior to everything produced on the same subject and on the Stalinist states by his followers after World War II.

We can pass over in silence the analyses of the microsects who defend North Korea and Cuba today as the outposts of socialism. We can only hope that these people are generously paid by the embassies of these countries for their services. If not, we can only regret their stupidity. But we would like to quote here somebody who belongs to mainstream Trotskyism. What does Alain Krivine tell us in his last autobiography "You will change with the years" (Ca te passera avec l'âge) ? That he is often invited to Cuba, a "deformed workers state", in luxurious villas where he eats gorgeous meals while Cuban people, according to him, are starving ! He does not even think of refusing such invitations or at least paying his hotel and meals because he is entirely convinced that Stalinist leaders are "mistaken comrades" with whom one can fruitfully discuss.

USSR and popular democracies

Today one is obliged to admit the almost general bankruptcy of the prognoses linked to Trotsky's analyses about Soviet Russia, Stalinism, permanent revolution and the imminent character of capitalism's disappearance.

Contrary to Trotsky's numerous predictions, the Russian so-called « parasitic » bureaucracy did not disappear after the Second World

War to give way to the proletariat or to restore traditional private property, and after 70 years of domination by the Stalinist dictatorship, one can't seriously defend the idea that it was simple mistaken about "timing ».

Trotsky's analysis of Russia already played a negative role in the 1920s: by struggling for the reform of the party and state in the years 1924–1933, the Trotskyist movement did not offer a clear perspective to the workers who lived under the yoke of the Russian capitalist bureaucracy. After Trotsky's death the Trotskyist groups have continued to defend imaginary gains of October , which led them to take numerous or criminal positions on Soviet interventions in other countries and to consider that countries such as the popular democracies, China or Cuba could become « deformed workers states » without the working class's active participation. From Tito to Castro, Trotskyists always hoped that a fraction of the capitalist–Stalinist bureaucracy could magically be converted to Trotskyist ideas and open the way for a political revolution in the so-called degenerated or deformed workers states.]

Contrary to the predictions of the permanent revolution, national–bourgeois–democratic revolutions have occurred in many underdeveloped countries since the Second World War. While Trotsky thought that the bourgeoisie of the colonial states was unable to fulfill the democratic bourgeois tasks, no bourgeois revolution has fulfilled them as radically as the Chinese revolution or the Vietnamese revolution, to quote only two examples.

And if Trotsky always defended the leading role of the working class in the national liberation struggles, most Trotskyist groups have been tailing national liberation movements led by Stalinists.

The Transitional program and understanding of capitalism

The use of the Transitional Program by Trotskyist organisations has led to a total failure. The transitional program is not only false but it offers no practical indication, no help to militants who are not today in a pre-revolutionary situation and are dealing with a reformist working class.

[The main Trotskyist groups in France have shown their plain opportunism at each municipal, legislative, presidential or European

election for the last 30 years. They called to vote for “workers parties” on the second ballot, for the CP or for the SP, or they made demagogic propaganda about the “economic planning” and “ban on large-scale layoffs” separating this question from a social revolution]

To the failure of the main specific theoretical analyses of Trotsky corresponds necessarily the failure of the Trotskyist groups, as they have been absolutely unable to understand the main mistakes of the founder of the Fourth International.

One of the main aspects of this bankruptcy is the incapacity to understand the nature and evolution of capitalism – and the basic differences between the capitalist mode of production and socialism. This misunderstanding has certainly been made possible by the weaknesses of the Third International which was itself largely influenced by the dominating conceptions of the Second International : Kautskyism, which conceives socialism only as a rationalization, planning and statification of capitalism. This conception is clearly explained in « The Socialist Programm » of Kautsky which is still today a central book in the theoretical training of LO’s militants. In « The road to power » where Kautsky still defends the principle of a revolution (without posing concretely the problem of the armed insurrection and destruction of the State), the revolution appears only as the final crowning of a natural movement of capitalist concentration : one has only to eliminate the owners and share-holders of the main trusts which have become social « parasites », but the economic structure will stay untouched : the division of labour, hierarchy, etc.

[This conception can also be found in numerous texts of Lenin and has anyway never been seriously criticized by Trotskyists. One can say that the Third International did not the time to make a complete balance sheet of the distorsions which the Second International caused to Marxism. But this can’t be said about the various Fourth Internationals who have had 80 years to think about it !]

These false social-democrat conceptions of capitalism and socialism have been maintained by the various Fourth Internationals and Trotskyist groups. Trotsky’s analysis of Russia which confuses statification of capital with a transitional society towards capitalism has played an important role in the perpetuation of this

mystification. Social–democratic conceptions of socialism largely influence Trotskyism.

One has to underline also that Trotsky totally underestimated the possibilities of evolution for capitalism between the two world wars (because he considered that the productive forces had ceased to grow and that capitalism had entered a period of decadence and terminal decay). He was unable to recognize in Italian fascism, German Nazism, Russian Stalinism and the American New Deal the signs of a growing role of the state, a role which would appear clearly during and after the Second World War.

And one had to wait until the beginning of the 1960s to see most Trotskyist groups recognize that capitalism was still developing its productive forces.

One can find Social Democratic conceptions of socialism in all the writings of Ernest Mandel, the only Trotskyist theoretician who tried to analyze the evolution of capitalism and its modern tendencies – and his positions have not been criticized by the other tendencies of the international Trotskyist movement, at least on this point. These positions explain why Trotskyist groups always want more nationalizations than the reformists or the Stalinists : for them, the nationalization of the key sectors of the economy leads to the automatic liquidation of capitalism.

A manipulative conception of the Party

To this misunderstanding of the real nature of capitalism (a mode of production which gives birth to a division of labor, a hierarchy, an organization and aims of production and not only the private property of a handful of « big capitalists » which control the State and fill up their pockets) one has to add a total misunderstanding of the historical period.

Our aim is not to regroup dissatisfied people and find shortcuts to construct the party through electoral campaigns – although electoral propaganda could marginally contribute to this task. A revolution in France or in any other country won't be a hunger revolt led by the Central committee of a Party which will be the only one to know what socialism means. Revolution will be led by hundreds of thousands of organized or non–organized workers whose level of consciousness and understanding will be a hundred

times more sophisticated than they are today and than they were during the October revolution. Revolutionary groups have a capital role to play in raising the level of consciousness of the working class.

The Trotskyist movement, as a whole, is unable to offer clear perspectives to the working class.

Y.C.

Spontaneist and pro-Situationist myths about the November riots and anti-CPE struggle

It's impossible today to talk of a Situationist group in France but there are obvious strong « anti-organization » feelings in the student milieu. Today, in France, one uses much more often the words « pro-situs » or « post-situs » than « situs » (abbreviation for Situationists). There are different minute circles which pretend to continue the Situationists' efforts (mainly on paper), but what is most striking is a more confused and vague influence of situationism or post-situationism among anarchist sympathisers and rebellious students who just want to do something and are fed up with everything capitalism « offers » them.

To sum up the elements of this confused and heterogenous spontaneist ideology, which is partly influenced by the Situationists, I can quote :

- * the primacy of the satisfaction of individual « desires » (today, struggles must be « festive », a permanent joyful activity, a feast)
- * the illusion that one can build isolated alternative islands inside capitalist society (communes, squats, etc.) which would make it possible to transform inter-individual relationships (a direct return to the 60s)
- * the permanent denunciation of the leaders of the extreme left and permanent contempt for rank and file militants, considered to be potential bureaucrats,
- * the defense of so-called exemplary actions, street fighting, stealing and plundering with no analysis of the relation of forces and their legal consequences for the individuals concerned when they are caught by the cops and condemned to heavy jail sentences,

- * an underestimation of the role of the working class which goes together with a glorification of an abstract revolt of the undifferentiated masses, the « precariat » being a sort of vanguard replacing the working class

- * the refusal to think about the construction of political organizations regrouping those who not only « desire » a social revolution but want to prepare it concretely,

- * the illusion that one can build another world at once, without any transitional stage,

- * a frequent contempt for demands, because material demands are seen as the expression of a will to kill social movements

- * the refusal to participate to the « coordinations » (non-trade union groups organized for a specific student or even workers struggle). These coordinations are considered as a nest for future bureaucrats. At the same time the partisans of « autonomy » want to build alternate « autonomous » bodies. The result is that the coordinations remain in the hands of the reformists, Stalinists and Trotskyists, and the official student trade unions appear as being representative of the mass of the students even if they are in fact bureaucratic grouplets.

- * A confused opposition to democracy and democratic procedures (voting, even raising hands in an assembly, is already a betrayal)

- * The myth of May 68 as a wildcat general strike (if it is true the trade unions did not call to a general strike, at the same time they bureaucratically organized the occupations of most factories ; the mass of the workers occupied neither their places of work nor their neighborhoods in 68 : and the young workers went to the universities, or to the local action committees or to the demos to have some fun fighting the cops).

- * The myth of November 2005 described as an « insurrection »

- * The romantic and falsified presentation of so-called « street fighting ». In fact these so-called fights mainly consisted in throwing some rocks and then running away as quick as possible in order not to be caught by heavily-equipped cops (today a cop needs ten minutes and the help of a colleague to put on all the elements of his equipment !)

- * The manipulative theme of a nuclear or ecological apocalypse : during the Cold war the nuclear threat was used as a supposed stimulus to push people to act against capitalism ; today there is an additional apocalyptic menace : the ecological threat. This propaganda about capitalism's barbarism has positive effects but

also potentially negative ones : it may reinforce individualism and individual solutions (from mysticism to cynical attitudes towards climbing in the social scale : after all if the world is going to disappear soon, why should not I take advantage of everything offered to me right now ?; or it can favor terrorist actions supposed to wake up the « alienated » masses ; or it can lead to the illusion of creating a counter culture or a counter society.

* The abstract support to the small minority of suburban kids (a few hundred) who attacked isolated students on the sidelines of the mass student demonstrations in 2006. This abstract support is much more linked to the « white man's guilt complex» than to any concrete action of solidarity and political work with the « banlieue kids » on a day-to-day basis. Those who defend this position justify their support by saying that the small groups who attacked the « petty bourgeois » demonstrators were victims of racism and came from the suburbs. The problem with this fairy tale is that it covers up the reality that tens of thousands of young kids from the working class suburbs and of all national origins did demonstrate inside the student demonstrations !

* The combination of many of the above quoted ideas may lead to a false appreciation of what happened during and after the anti-CPE struggle ; this is why people like the Situationist Ken Knabb can write that thousands of people continued the struggle after the CPE was suppressed ; that workers in some places were starting to escape to the control of the trade unions ; and that there was a solidarity movement between the students and the workers, retired people, migrants, jobless and precarious people. All these minute-scale phenomena - unfortunately - are presented in such an exaggerated and, at the same time, vague form that they offer total fantasy of what happened in France.

Y.C.

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