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The Function of Trotskyism

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It is a major and very widespread error to consider that what distinguishes revolutionaries from Trotskyism is the question of the “defence of the USSR”.

It goes without saying that revolutionary groups, which the Trotskyists contemptuously refer to as “ultra-left” (a pejorative term the Trotskyists use in much the same spirit as the term “Hitler-Trotskyites” which the Stalinists used against them) naturally reject any defence of the Russian capitalist state (or state capitalism). But the non-defence of the Russian state does not at all constitute the theoretical and programmatic foundation-stone of revolutionary groups – it is merely the political consequence of their general conceptions, of their revolutionary class platform. Inversely, the “defence of the USSR” is not something specific to Trotskyism.

While out of all the political positions that make up their programme, the “defence of the USSR” is the one which most clearly shows their blindness and loss of direction, we would make a serious error if we only looked at Trotskyism through the lens of this position. At most we can see this position as the most typical, complete expression of the basic fixation of Trotskyism. This fixation, this abscess is so monstrously evident that it is repelling more and more adherents of the Fourth International and it is quite probably one of the main reasons that a number of sympathisers have hesitated to join the ranks of this organisation. However, an abscess is not the same as the illness itself; it is simply its localised, external expression.

If we insist so much on this point, it is because so many of the people frightened by the external signs of the illness have too much of a tendency to rest easy as soon as the outward signs seem to have disappeared. They forget that an illness that has been covered up is not the same as an illness cured. People like this are just as dangerous, just as much capable of spreading the disease, perhaps even more so, as those who sincerely believe that the illness has been fully cured.

The “Workers Party” in the USA (a dissident Trotskyist organisation known by its leader Shachtman), the Munis tendency in Mexico, the Gallien and Chaulieu minorities in France, all the minority tendencies in the “IVth International”, because they reject the traditional position of defence of Russia, think they are cured of the “opportunism” (as they put it) of the Trotskyist movement. In reality the changes are largely cosmetic and underneath they are still totally trapped by this ideology.

This is so much the case that for proof you only have to take the most burning question, the one which offers the least possibilities of evasion, which poses the most irreducibly the proletarian class position against that of the bourgeoisie, the question of the attitude to take in the face of imperialist war. What do we see?

Both one and the other, majority and minority, with different slogans, **all participate in the imperialist war.**

We won't take the trouble to cite the verbal declarations of the Trotskyists against the war. We know them very well. What counts are not declarations but the real political practice which flow from theoretical positions and which was concretised here in ideological and practical support for the war effort. It matters little what arguments were used to justify this participation in the war. The defence of the USSR was certainly one of the most important threads that tied the proletariat to the imperialist war. However it is not the only one. The Trotskyist minorities who reject the defence of the USSR, like the left socialists and the anarchists, found other reasons, no less "valid", no less inspired by bourgeois ideology, to justify their participation in the imperialist war. For some it was the defence of "democracy", for others "the struggle against fascism" or "national liberation" or "the right of peoples to self-determination".

For all of them it was a question of the "lesser evil" which led them to participate in the war or in the resistance, fighting for one imperialist bloc against another.

The Party of Shachtman is quite right to reproach the official Trotskyists with supporting Russian imperialism which, for him, is no longer a "Workers' State"; but this doesn't make Shachtman a revolutionary because this reproach is not made on the basis of a proletarian class standpoint against imperialist war, but in virtue of the fact that Russia is a totalitarian country, that there is less democracy there than anywhere else, and that for this reason it was necessary to support Finland, which was less totalitarian and more democratic, against Russian aggression.

To show the nature of its ideology, notably on the primordial question of imperialist war, Trotskyism has no need, as we have seen, for the position of the defence of the USSR. This defence of the USSR does enormously facilitate its position of participation in the war, enabling it to camouflage itself with a pseudo-revolutionary phraseology, but by itself it can obscure the real question and prevent us from clearly posing the problem of the nature of Trotskyist ideology.

For the sake of clarity, then, let's put to one side the existence of Russia or, if you prefer, all this sophistry about the socialist nature of the Russian state, through which the Trotskyists manage to obscure the central problem of imperialist war and the attitude of the proletariat towards it. Let's pose brutally the question of the attitude of the Trotskyists towards the war. The Trotskyists will obviously respond with a general declaration against the war.

But once they have correctly quoted from the litany about "revolutionary defeatism", they get onto the concrete issues, and start making distinctions, start with the ifs and buts which, in practice, leads them to join existing war fronts and to invite the workers to participate in the imperialist butchery.

Anyone who has had any relationship with the Trotskyist milieu in France during the years between 1939 and 1945 can bear witness that the dominant sentiments among them were not so much dictated by the position of defence of Russia as by the choice of the "lesser evil", the choice of the struggle against "foreign occupation" and for "antifascism".

This is what explains their participation in the “Resistance”, in the FFI and the “Liberation”. And when the PCI in France was praised by sections in other countries for the part it played in what it calls the “Popular Uprising” of the Liberation, we leave them with the satisfaction of bluffing about the importance of the part a few dozen Trotskyists played in this “great” popular uprising. Let’s stick to the political content of this praise.

What is the criterion for a revolutionary attitude to imperialist war?

Revolutionaries begin from the recognition that the world economy has reached its imperialist stage. Imperialism is not a national phenomenon (the violence of the capitalist contradiction between the level of the development of the productive forces – of the total social capital – and the development of the market determines the violence of the inter-imperialist contradiction). In this stage there can no longer be any national wars. The world imperialist structure determines the structure of every war: in this imperialist epoch there can no longer be any “progressive” wars. Progress can only take place through the social revolution. The historical alternative posed to humanity is social revolution or decadence and the descent into barbarism through the annihilation of the riches accumulated by humanity, the destruction of the productive forces and the continuous massacre of the proletariat in an interminable succession of localised and generalised wars. This is therefore a class criterion, related to the analysis by revolutionaries of the historic evolution of society.

Let’s see how Trotskyism poses the question theoretically:

“But not all countries of the world are imperialist countries. On the contrary, the majority are victims of imperialism. Some of the colonial or semi colonial countries will undoubtedly attempt to utilise the war in order to cast off the yoke of slavery. Their war will be not imperialist but liberating. It will be the duty of the international proletariat to aid the oppressed countries in their war against oppressors”.

Thus the Trotskyist criterion is not connected to the historical period in which we live but is based on an abstract and false notion of imperialism. Only the bourgeoisie of a dominant country is seen as imperialist. Imperialism is not a politico-economic stage of world capitalism but strictly an expression of the capitalism of certain countries, whereas the “majority” of other capitalist countries are not imperialist. In fact, if you look at it in a purely formal manner, all the countries of the world are currently dominated economically by two countries: the USA and Russia. Are we to conclude that only the bourgeoisies of these two countries are imperialist and that the proletariat’s hostility to war only applies within these two countries?

Even better: if we follow the Trotskyists, for whom Russia is by definition “not imperialist”, we arrive at this monstrous absurdity which holds that there is only one imperialist country in the world, the USA. This leads us to the comforting conclusion that all the other countries of the world are “non-imperialist” and “oppressed” and that therefore the proletariat has the duty to come to their aid.

Let’s look at the way this Trotskyist distinction works concretely, in practice.

In 1939, France is an imperialist country: revolutionary defeatism.

In 1940-45, France is occupied. From being an imperialist country it has now become an oppressed country; its war is “liberating”; “the duty of the proletariat is to support its struggle”. Perfect. But suddenly in 1945 it’s Germany that becomes an occupied, “oppressed” country: the duty of the proletariat should now be to support

Germany's liberation from France. What is true for France and Germany is equally true for any other country: Japan, Italy, Belgium etc, not to mention the colonial and semi-colonial countries. Any country that, in the imperialist epoch, in the ferocious competition between imperialisms, doesn't have the luck or the strength to be the victor becomes in fact an "oppressed" country. Example: Germany and Japan and, in the opposite direction, China.

The proletariat's duty is therefore to spend its time going from one side of the imperialist scales to another, jumping to the commands of the Trotskyists, and to get itself massacred for what the Trotskyists call "giving aid in a just and progressive war" (see the Transitional Programme, same chapter).

It is the fundamental character of Trotskyism which, in all situations and in all its current positions, offers the proletariat an alternative: not by putting forward the class opposition between proletariat and bourgeoisie, but by calling on it to choose between two equally "oppressed" capitalist formations.

Between the fascist bourgeoisie and the anti-fascist bourgeoisie; between "reaction" and "democracy"; between monarchy and republic; between imperialist war and "just and progressive wars".

It is starting from the eternal choice of the "lesser evil" that the Trotskyists participated in the imperialist war, and this was not all limited to the need to defend the USSR. Before defending the latter, they participated in the war in Spain (1936-8) for the defence of Republican Spain against Franco. It was then the defence of Chiang Kai Shek's China against Japan.

The defence of the USSR thus appears not as the starting point for these positions, but as their culmination, one expression among others of the Trotskyists' basic platform, a platform in which the proletariat does not have its own class position in an imperialist war but can and must make a distinction between the various national capitalist formations, momentarily antagonistic towards each other, and where the proletariat must proclaim which side is "progressive" and thus to be supported – as a general rule, the weakest, most backward formations, the "oppressed" bourgeoisie.

This position in a question as crucial as that of war immediately places Trotskyism as a political current outside the camp of the proletariat and in itself demands that any revolutionary proletarian element has to make a total break with it.

The Trotskyists call on workers to be at the rear of the "progressive" bourgeoisie

However, we have only drawn out one of the roots of Trotskyism. In a more general way, the Trotskyist conception is based on the idea that the emancipation of the proletariat is the not the result of a struggle which places the proletariat as a class against the whole of capitalism, but is the result of a series of political struggles in the narrow sense of the term, and in which the working class, allied in succession to diverse political factions of the bourgeoisie, will eliminate certain other factions and by stages and degrees will succeed in gradually weakening the bourgeoisie, in triumphing over it by dividing it and beating it in separate bits.

The fact that this is not simply a very subtle and insidious strategic conception, best formulated in the slogan "march separately but strike together", but is connected to one of the bases of the Trotskyist conception, is confirmed by the theory of the "permanent revolution" (New Look), which sees the revolution itself as a series of political events, in which the seizure of power by the proletariat is one event among many other intermediate events. In this view, the revolution is certainly not a

process involving the economic and political liquidation of a class-divided society, a process in which the building of socialism can only get underway AFTER THE SEIZURE OF POWER BY THE PROLETARIAT.

It is true that this conception of revolution is in some sense “faithful” to the schema of Marx. But this is just faithfulness to the letter. Marx developed this schema in 1848, at a time when the bourgeoisie was still a historically revolutionary class, and it was in the heat of the bourgeois revolutions which unfolded across a whole series of European countries that Marx hoped that it would not end at the bourgeois stage but would be outflanked by the proletariat pushing forward towards the socialist revolution.

If reality invalidated Marx’s hopes, this was at that time a daring revolutionary vision, in advance of what was historically possible. The Trotskyist view of permanent revolution is very different. Faithful to the letter but unfaithful to the spirit, a century after the end of the bourgeois revolutions, in the epoch of world imperialism, when the whole of capitalist society has entered its decadent phase, it attributes a progressive role to certain factions of capitalism, certain capitalist countries (and as the Transitional Programme expressly puts it, this applies to the majority of countries).

In 1848 Marx’s aim was to put the proletariat forward at the head of society; the Trotskyists, in 1947, put the proletariat in the rear of the so-called “progressive” bourgeoisie. It would be hard to imagine a more grotesque caricature, a worse deformation of Marx’s schema of permanent revolution.

When Trotsky took up the formula in 1905, the theory of the permanent revolution still retained a revolutionary significance. In 1905, at the beginning of the imperialist era, when capitalism still seemed to have wonderful years of prosperity ahead of it, in one of the most backward countries in Europe where a feudal political superstructure still survived, where the workers’ movement was still taking its first steps – in this situation, in the face of all the Russian social democrats who were announcing the coming of the bourgeois revolution, in the face of Lenin who at that time didn’t dare go further than assigning the future revolution the task of carrying out bourgeois reforms under a revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants, Trotsky had the undeniable merit of proclaiming that the revolution would be socialist – the dictatorship of the proletariat – or it would not be.

Then the emphasis of the theory of the permanent revolution was on the role of the proletariat, from now on the only revolutionary class. This was an audacious revolutionary proclamation, entirely directed against the frightened and sceptical petty bourgeois socialist theoreticians, and against hesitant revolutionaries who lacked confidence in the proletariat.

Today, when the experience of the last 40 years has fully confirmed these theoretical givens, in a fully formed and already decadent capitalist world, the theory of the New Look permanent revolution is directed only against the revolutionary “illusions” of these ultra-left oddballs, the *bête noire* of Trotskyism.

Today, the emphasis is on the backward illusions of the workers, on the inevitability of intermediate stages, on the necessity for a realistic and positive policy, on workers’ and peasants’ governments, on just wars and progressive national revolutions.

This is the fate of the theory of permanent revolution in the hands of disciples who have only managed to retain and assimilate the weaknesses of the master and not his grandeur, strength and revolutionary worth.

Supporting the “progressive” factions and tendencies in the bourgeoisie and strengthening the revolutionary advance of the proletariat by exploiting inter-capitalist divisions and antagonisms, are the twin peaks of Trotskyist theory. We have seen what the first means, now let’s look at the second.

What is the basis for divergences inside the capitalist camp?

Trotsky, who often allowed himself to get carried away by his own metaphors and images, to the point of losing sight of their real social content, insisted a great deal on the aspect of the divergence of economic interests between the various groups that make up the capitalist class. “It would be wrong to consider capitalism as a unified whole”, he taught. “Music is also a whole, but it would be a poor musician who could not distinguish one note from another”. And he applied this metaphor to social movements and struggles. No one denies or ignores the existence of clashes of interest within the capitalist class, and the struggles that result from them. The question is to know what place they occupy in society and in various struggles. It would be a very mediocre revolutionary marxist who put struggle between the classes, and struggles between groups inside the same class, on the same level.

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of the class struggle”. This fundamental thesis of the Communist Manifesto obviously does not ignore the existence of secondary struggles between various groups and economic entities inside classes, and their relative importance. But the motor of history is not these secondary factors, but the struggle between dominant class and dominated class. When a new class in history is called upon to take the place of an older class that is no longer able to maintain the leadership of society, i.e. in a historic period of transformation and social revolution, the struggle between these two classes absolutely determines and dominates all social events and all secondary conflicts. In such historical periods, like ours, to insist on secondary conflicts in order to determine and condition the direction and breadth of the class struggle shows with startling clarity that you understand nothing of the essentials of marxist social analysis. All you have done is juggle with abstract phrases about musical notes, and in concrete terms, you have subordinated the historical social struggle of the proletariat to the contingencies of inter-capitalist political conflicts.

This whole kind of politics is fundamentally based on a singular lack of confidence in the proletariat’s own forces. Certainly the last three decades of uninterrupted defeats have tragically illustrated the immaturity and weakness of the proletariat. But it would be wrong to seek the source of this weakness in the self-isolation of the proletariat, in the absence of a sufficiently supple line of approach towards anti-proletarian classes, strata and political formations. It’s the other way round. Since the foundation of the Communist International, the infantile disease of “leftism” has been constantly decried, in favour of elaborating strategies for winning over the broad masses, conquering the unions, using parliament as a revolutionary tribune, the political united front with what Trotsky called “the devil and his grandmother”, the participation in the workers’ government in Saxony...

What has been the result?

A disaster. Each time a new supple strategy was put forward, there followed a greater, deeper defeat for the workers. To make up for a weakness that is attributed to the proletariat, to “strengthen” the working class, we were going to rely not only on extra-proletarian political forces (social democracy) but also on ultra-reactionary social forces: “revolutionary” peasant parties, international peasants’ conferences,

international conferences of the colonial peoples. The more catastrophes rained on the proletariat's head, the more the rage for alliances triumphed in the CI. Of course the origins of this whole policy must be sought in the existence of the Russian state, which began to find its reason for existence in itself, having by nature nothing in common with the socialist revolution, since the state is alien to the proletariat and its finality as a class.

The state, in order to conserve and strengthen itself, has to look for and find allies in the "oppressed" bourgeoisies, in the "progressive" colonial peoples and countries, because these social categories are naturally called upon to build up a state themselves. It can speculate about divisions and conflicts between other states and capitalist groups, because it is of the same social and class nature as them.

In these conflicts, the weakening of one of its antagonists can become the condition for the strengthening of the state. It's not the same for the proletariat and its revolution. It cannot count on any one of these allies; it cannot rely on any of these forces. It is alone and what's more is placed in a situation of irreducible opposition to all these forces and elements who for their part are indivisibly united against it.

To make the proletariat conscious of its position, of its historical mission, hiding nothing about the extreme difficulties of its struggle, but at the same time teaching that it has no choice, that it must fight and conquer despite these difficulties or else sacrifice its human and physical existence – this is the only way to arm the proletariat for victory.

But trying to get round the difficulty by trying to find possible allies, even temporary ones, portraying them as progressive elements of other classes which the working class can rely upon – this is consoling it with deception, this is disarming and disorienting it.

This is effectively the function of the Trotskyist movement today.

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