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Trotsky Dossier

The question of the party: Trotsky's weak point

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Trotsky made an inestimable contribution to the preservation and development of revolutionary Marxism in the first half of the 20th century, both by his militant activity and by his analyses.

This contribution embraces a vast terrain stretching from the comprehension of particular societies (Tsarist Russia, a young imperialism, the bureaucratic post-capitalist society in the USSR), immense socio-political phenomena (for example fascism, the social-democratic and Stalinist degeneration of the workers' movement, the complex processes of the class struggle, the revolution in the Third World), as well as a development of the programmatic, strategic, tactical and organisational perspectives of the workers' movement. In this vast ensemble, his weak point is the problem of the party.

Weakness

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/gif/lenini12.gif>]

Francois Vercammen

This weakness is in part linked to his trajectory as a militant. Trotsky did not have the capacity (1903-1917) or the opportunity (after 1917) to participate directly in the construction of a revolutionary party, in its main aspects (beyond general analyses and perspectives), namely the elaboration and the implementation of a political line and concrete tactics, a collective work inside a central leadership, the construction of a political-organisational apparatus, work in common with other cadres and militants; and more generally the implementation of an internal dialectic which prioritises the experience of party militants in the elaboration of the line. Between 1903 and 1917, having broken with Lenin, he did not try to organise a current or a party (confining himself to an activity as journalist and orator).

When he joined the Bolshevik party in June 1917, it was to immediately join its central leadership (June 1917): the question was no longer building a party, but leading a self-organised mass movement towards the conquest of political power.

Then he defended the revolution in the civil war, creating and leading the Red Army. At the head of the Third International (1919) he helped Lenin to transform the ex-social-democratic and anarcho-syndicalist leaders through the specific experience of the Bolshevik party which had been capable of overthrowing the bourgeoisie.

It was only when he was expelled from the CP, expelled from the USSR and hunted across the planet by Stalin's police apparatus, that he developed the best synthesis of revolutionary strategy of the period 1903-1922. [1] In his new militant situation, preparing and founding the Fourth International, through postal communication and occasional visits from his partisans, Trotsky turned his attention to building often small and marginalised organisations. He spared neither time nor energy in educating them in all the concrete aspects.

Recomposition

But, in reality, this was not about the construction of independent parties with social implantation, but participation in a political recomposition where the "Trotskyists" tried to salvage a part of the workers' movement (social-democratic,

but above all Stalinist) and to advance "quickly" towards a revolutionary party. This history and the personal trajectory which underlay it generated a very particular political-intellectual heritage, which can be explored from two angles: what was Trotsky's thinking on the construction of the revolutionary party, beyond a general principal conception, and how have the succeeding Trotskyist generations grasped it and applied it in practice?

The answer is not simple. For Trotsky was the man of the revolutionary moments of this century and the mass leader, rather than a "party man" who organised collective work through the ups and downs of the political conjuncture.

What appears on all the evidence to have been "over-determinant" is the battle to the death waged by Stalinism to discredit and kill "Trotskyism", starting with Trotsky himself. The "anti-Bolshevik" past of the pre-1917 period weighed very heavily in the balance. Trotsky's explanations as to his relationship with Lenin are in general forced and uneasy. On the one hand, he did not cease to recognise in an emphatic manner his debt, indeed his subordination to Lenin. He thus voluntarily under-evaluated his own militant and political contribution when he co-led the party, the revolution and the International (between 1917 and 1922-24).

But on the other hand, he tends also to reduce the width and depth of his political divergences with Lenin before 1917: and with reason, for this is precisely the period when Lenin trained and organised his "middle cadres", including a certain Joseph Stalin. One can say that Trotsky, in his line of self-defence against Stalin's assaults, had two strong elements. Firstly, he maintains, but in the manner of a note, that there had been "three conceptions of the Russian revolution": Menshevik, Bolshevik and his own - the permanent revolution. And that this last was the correct one.

Significance

At the same time, he limits the political significance of it: he explains that he never tried, before 1917, to constitute a specific platform inside the Russian social democratic party (reunified after 1905) on such a strategic programmatic question; and he would protest vigorously against Zinoviev-Kamenev-Stalin when they reopened the debate on the subject (as a diversionary manoeuvre) in autumn 1924, that is after the death of Lenin.

But at the same time Trotsky considered that the divergence on the permanent revolution (opposed to Lenin's formula of "the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry") explained the drift of the Bolshevik party in February-March 1917, when the leadership of the Bolshevik party on the ground in Petrograd (Kamenev-Stalin) rallied to the bourgeois government which emerged from the first phase of the revolution. Secondly, if he admitted that, since 1917, the centralisation of the party was a very important element, he considered that the "committee men" (the leaders of the committees, in other words the middle cadres) were a danger for the party, enemies of democracy, authoritarian, a real incarnation of the tendency to "substitute" the party for the working class.

Drift

The two elements together are, in Trotsky's eyes, the cause of "the drift" that the Bolshevik party experienced in February 1917 and the reason why it had to undergo a radical change in its programme and the composition of its leadership. If that had succeeded, it was through the dialectic between the action of Lenin, who imposed a new programme, [\[2\]](#) and the Bolshevik worker militants, who carried into the party the revolutionary spirit of the worker masses.

Trotsky believed that his own error could be summed up as the under-estimation of the centralisation of the party, which related to the nature of the party and his attempt to gather all the currents in the same party ("conciliationism") - under the impact of a revolutionary upsurge.

The Fourth International during Trotsky's life, and the Trotskyist current since then, have based themselves on this history. This has had a series of positive and negative consequences. The main positive consequence, a real gain for the international revolutionary movement, has been the development of the strategy of the permanent revolution, entirely validated by the positive and negative experiences of the revolutions in the so-called Third World, and on another level, by the problematic of "socialism in one country", which is the ideological basis of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The main negative consequence is the incomprehension of the reasons which allowed Lenin to build, in the period from 1905 to 1914, a party which had succeeded in crossing the stage of initial accumulation of cadres and had become a party, still a minority one, but already socially implanted and capable of influencing certain mass sectors of the working class and the urban intelligentsia. (that is, it had precisely resolved the problem that has bedevilled revolutionary Marxists since the political-organisational monopoly of social democracy and Stalinism in the workers' movement began to break up in some countries in imperialist Europe in the years 1965-68). There is a clear necessity for a reorganisation of the historiography of the period 1895-1914, with a re-evaluation of the key sequences, and a re-evaluation of the policy of Trotsky and Lenin in this period.

Indubitable

From a practical point of view, the conclusion is indubitable: at the moment where, in July-August 1914 (the "forgotten revolution") the Bolshevik party led the insurrectional general strike in Petrograd and Moscow and became the majority current in the working class in those cities, Trotsky was war journalist in the Balkans, isolated in the Party and cut off from the workers' movement in Russia. It was the culminating point of the respective political and organisational choices that the main leaders of the revolution of October had made.

It was Lenin's determination to attach himself "to the real movement" in Russia combined with a succession of complex socio-political conjunctures which fashioned and rooted the Bolshevik party in (urban) Russian society. It is the policy of Lenin which was determinant and not his "conception of the party" such as it is commonly understood (democratic centralism, the general programme).

It was the political weakness of Trotsky which was at the base of his defeat at the level of the organisation. One can sum it up in the following manner: before 1917, his extra-ordinary capacity to grasp the significant general tendencies of the era and to draw strategic perspectives did not allow him to develop a revolutionary policy (and he was unable or unwilling to create a militant collective). His weakness on the party is located in this framework. [3] On Trotsky's side, two men and two events had a determinant influence in the short period from 1902-1905; Parvus and Axelrod; the second congress of the social democratic p in 1903 and the first Russian revolution (1905).

Neophyte

Trotsky met Lenin in 1902. He was 23, Lenin 32. Trotsky was a neophyte, bursting with militant energy and talent, a convinced Marxist (it was in prison that he had learned a particularly vibrant and dialectical "basic Marxism" through reading the Italian philosopher Antonio Labriola) but with a limited experience. Organiser of a clandestine workers'

circle in the provinces, arrested, imprisoned, then sent into exile in Siberia, he escaped and joined the circle of leaders in Western Europe. Lenin was already a hardened militant.

He had organised the real founding congress of the (revolutionary) social democracy and was convinced that he should take the head of it. The young Trotsky entered into politics at this level in 1902, joining the social-democratic leadership in London. Abroad, he made the acquaintance of two Marxist leaders who would have a significant but contradictory influence on him: Axelrod, who he met in 1902, and, in 1904, Parvus, "one of the most important Marxists of the turn of the century". [\[4\]](#)

This latter would open the way to the theory of permanent revolution by developing a strategic perspective which was unthinkable for the Marxism of the time: the taking of power by the working class was possible in a country as backward as Russia. From 1895-96, before Rosa Luxemburg, Parvus had already conceived "the mass political strike" as the key element of the workers' strategy. He had predicted that a Russo-Japanese war would be probable (it would take place in 1903-04) and that, through the war-revolution dialectic, Russia could carry the proletariat to power as vanguard of the international socialist revolution.

All this was framed by an international vision of the transformations in capitalism announcing the advent of imperialism. In August 1904, Trotsky still remained in the strategic framework of Russian social democracy: "Only a free Russia of the future, where we will be obliged to play the role of opposition party and not of government, will allow us to develop to the limit the struggle of the proletariat". [\[5\]](#) In January 1905, Parvus crossed the Rubicon: "the revolution could bring a democratic workers' government to power". [\[6\]](#)

Conclusion

In 1906, after the 1905 revolution Trotsky [\[7\]](#) pushed the conclusion to the end: this working class, coming to power with the support of the mass of the peasantry, would be led to transgress the limits of capitalism and embark on the socialist revolution. Adding immediately: "without the direct state support of the European proletariat, the working class in Russia could not remain in power and convert its temporary domination into a durable socialist dictatorship". The embryo of the theory of permanent revolution was thus posed.

If the role of Parvus is well known and appreciated, the same is not true of the other major influence on Trotsky: Boris Axelrod. This latter played no positive role in traditional "Trotskyist" historiography. But it was nonetheless him who influenced Trotsky's choices and concrete political positions the most and for the longest time. In 1898 Axelrod produced two documents which launched the strategic debate after the big strikes of 1895-96. They would have a considerable impact on all the leading cadres of Russian (revolutionary) social democracy, notably Trotsky and Lenin. (though they would draw different political conclusions according to the political-theoretical framework already acquired).

Axelrod belonged with Plekhanov to the first Marxist generation, which had been involved in revolutionary Populism and constituted the first Marxist nucleus in Russia. His text starts from some notes: the breadth of the strikes of 1895-96 and the defeat of the attempts to stabilise a social-democratic organisation; the danger of an "economist" or "pure syndicalist" falling back on the immediate demands of the workers and then "resignation" before the fight against the Tsarist dictatorship.

Then he refers to the old analyses of the Populists of Tchernychevsky and Marx [\[8\]](#) concerning the specificities of the Tsarist social formation. And he puts forward a political perspective: [\[9\]](#) if industrialisation takes place under the régime of Tsarist despotism, that would stop the formation of a coherent and active working class, and would bar the

way towards a workers' movement in the European style.

Indeed, Axelrod was also a eulogist, in the best tradition of Marx himself, of the self-activity of the working class as indispensable lever to its organisation and its socialist consciousness. For this latter to emerge it is necessary then to defeat "Asiatism". For Axelrod, this "civilising" task falls historically to the (liberal) bourgeoisie. The strategic conclusion is not clearly drawn. But the door is open to a support, indeed a collaboration with this bourgeoisie and a strategy of revolution in two stages (it is in fact the still unconscious embryo of Menshevism which appears here and becomes a consistent strategy after 1905).

Creativity

Trotsky and Lenin were very impressed by the creativity of this respectable leader who seduced them also by his human aspect (with Trotsky, this factor played a political role in his realignment at the Congress of 1903). But they drew from it very different conclusions. [10] Trotsky, already educated in this sense by Labriola, absorbed deeply this idea of the primacy of the autonomy of the proletariat (during his stay with Axelrod in London in 1902-03).

His polemical book against Lenin, *Our political tasks*, poor and erroneous as it is on the political and organisational level, is one of the first examples of a Russian Marxist text which takes this theme as its central axis. If he accepts the idea of the role of the peasantry (which Parvus rejected, but which Lenin defended from 1901: another element of the permanent revolution emerges here) he remains indecisive and confused (even after 1905) on the question of electoral support to the liberal bourgeoisie. The other wing of Axelrod's approach, that Trotsky assimilated, was the European perspective of the Russian workers' movement. Trotsky was never a Menshevik in the political-programmatic sense of the term. But the Menshevik organisation was unquestionably more open to political debates and an internal dialectic than the Bolshevik current (which became a party in 1912).

Europeanism, the role of the working class, its self-activity and its self-organisation, the dynamic of the revolution: here is the hard core of what Trotsky acquired in the course of these three years. Two key events, but of a very different order, also intervened in his development: the second congress of the RSDLP (summer 1903) and the first Russian revolution (January-December 1905).

Trotsky entered this congress as a heated protagonist of centralism, the dictatorship of the leadership over the party and "distrust towards rank-and-file organisation". He came out of it as opponent of centralism, of Bonapartism, of the dictatorship of the intellectuals over the working class, of substitutionism, and so on.

Psychodrama

This congress ended with a split and a psychodrama. The unity at the summit broke. The reasons are not clear. The cause does not reside obviously in a programmatic disagreement, nor in the famous rule of the statutes determining who was a member (in 1906, during the reunification, a compromise was quickly reached). It was rather a crisis of growth, linked to the passage from an artisanal and familial party to a party that was professional from every point of view (organisation, apparatus, slogans, political line, programme) in relating to every aspect of the revolution (big student and peasant mobilisations, then workers strikes).

To undertake such a transformation of the party, the question of leadership becomes decisive. Lenin, who wanted a leadership that led, proposed Plekhanov, and ditched Axelrod and Zassoulitch. Trotsky revolted against Lenin.

Moreover, he found the concepts to express it in *Our Political Tasks*. It was a merciless polemic against Lenin, where Trotsky gathered all the fragments of analysis that circulated in the left political and intellectual milieu and gave them a concentrated force.

His behaviour at the Congress had shown his political immaturity. The pamphlet confirmed it while highlighting his capacities for analysis. However, the polemic is totally impertinent: he has manifestly not understood what Lenin wanted to do (Trotsky recognised this afterwards).

In 1905 the proletariat had marked its extraordinary combativity and its radicalism with the election of democratically designated workers' councils. Moreover, the soviet (in fact Trotsky himself) succeeded in imposing unity between the three revolutionary parties: the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries (the successors of the "Narodniks" [Populists]).

Moreover, Trotsky and Parvus, situated in the Menshevik current, succeeded in drawing in (by action, speeches and a daily presence) the majority of militants and a part of the leadership (but not Axelrod, Plekhanov and Martov) on their political position. Trotsky would have this model of the social and organisational dynamic in his head (until 1914), without really theorising it however. The post-revolution would strengthen his anti-Lenin analyses and prejudices, until the moment where the divergences between the left wing (Bolshevik) and the right wing became clearer and crystallised.

Separation

If Menshevism kept a globally revolutionary orientation until 1910-11, the upsurge of struggles, instead of bringing the two wings of the party closer together, on the contrary led to definitive separation on the basis of a political orientation faced with the social and political problems of the moment: parliamentarism, class alliances, immediate demands of the workers, type of trade union organisation, agrarian reform, the place of democratic demands. At this moment it was apparent that the Mensheviks had built a legal workers' movement that was no longer ready to confront Tsarism.

It was a disaster for the left Mensheviks (Martov). It was also a disaster for Trotsky. [\[11\]](#) In fact, it was the result of a disastrous political choice, which placed him in the Menshevik current and made him accept their conception of the party, without supporting their programme. Until 1914, he would remain blind before his mentor Axelrod : " It is true that the differences between [the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks] in this matter is very considerable: while the anti-revolutionary aspects of Menshevism have already become fully apparent, those of Bolshevism are likely to become a serious threat only in the event of victory" he wrote in 1906. [\[12\]](#)

He had already abandoned the idea of the vanguard party in favour of a broad party and had theorised it in his work *Our tasks*. This time, the concept is introduced by Axelrod in a context of grave political downturn, under different forms: the workers' Congress (on the model of the Belgian workers' party of the time, bringing together workers' leagues, trade unions, mutual associations, youth groups and so on) and the subordination of the clandestine party to the legal party.

Weakness

Trotsky's weakness on the Party, before 1917, formed part of his semi-spontaneist conception of politics in general.

Firstly, it sullied his initial version of "revolution permanent". Partisan (like all the Russian Marxists) of a revolution supported by a majority, Trotsky did not underestimate, contrary to Stalinist legend, the role of the revolutionary peasantry in a predominantly rural country. What preoccupied him was to emphasise the unavoidability of the final phase of the revolutionary process when this latter passes to "the socialist dictatorship" thanks to the social and ideological strength of the proletariat. But how this majoritarian force could organise itself did not preoccupy him at this time. [\[13\]](#)

In 1906 and the years that followed, he satisfied himself with two theoretical generalizations which translated above all the prejudices of European Marxism at the time (post-Marx): historically, the countryside follows the town, and the peasantry the proletariat (industrial, urbanised); at the same time, the peasantry is incapable of following an autonomous political line and creating an independent organisation (it follows either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat).

Analysis

The result is that he hardly concerned himself with a close analysis of the Russian peasantry, the diversity of its conditions of work, its "spontaneous" demands, its actually existing organisations, and so on. Thus, Trotsky made no contribution during the Fourth congress of the ("reunified") RSDLP in 1906, where agrarian reform was discussed. [\[14\]](#)

If he did not go as far as his mentor, Parvus, who attributed to the peasantry as role "of augmenting the chaos in the country" in the revolutionary process, Trotsky did not seek, unlike Lenin, the construction of a real workers and peasants alliance, with all its demands. By its abstract character, the theory proved a veritable political trap for Trotsky. For, against all expectations, a Tsarism which had been presumed "immobile" profited from the defeat of the proletariat in 1906 to launch a surprising self-reform with the birth of a parliamentary system, an agrarian reform, a certain trade union liberty, the first social laws (insurance).

It all fell through, but meanwhile it would shake up political and social life. Trotsky had neither an organisational instrument to intervene, nor a political project to face a new situation, when his political line had been developed on the basis of a tumultuous rise of the popular masses. [\[15\]](#)

Secondly, any history of the workers' soviets born out of three waves of general strike in 1905 had revealed two important facts: the birth of a new, superior, form of the workers' movement, which founds the unity of the class, organises its political power and expresses to a scale without precedent in history its self-emancipatory aspirations. On the other hand, the negligence and sectarianism of the leaders of the different revolutionary parties on the ground, whose political horizon was confined by their organisational conservatism/sectarianism.

The Bolshevik cadres of Petrograd saw a competing workers' organisation and wished to impose on it (by a vote) the programme (maximum) of their Party. The Mensheviks wished to put into practice the line (of Axelrod) of the "workers' congress" which would mean both the fusion of the three socialist parties who were members of the Second International (Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries), and bring into the framework of the party (as in the British Labour Party or Belgian POB) every kind of workers' organisation (parties, unions, co-operatives, youth, women, gymnasts, mutual associations, cultural clubs). Trotsky (and some others like Parvus, Pannekoek) took on board the political scale of the workers' councils. He drew from it a conclusion of steel (which he would call later his "social fatalism"): the working masses are in advance of the parties and capable of imposing their will on them thanks to their spontaneous radicalism.

Conviction

This dual note would influence in a determinant manner his opinion on and his behaviour in the Party until 1917. One cannot say that he possessed, after 1905, a real conviction on the subject. His vision of the class struggle in Russia, past and future, did not henceforth need a defined and strong role for the Party. Opposed more than ever to the Bolshevik current, which reorganised itself, he chose to place himself in the Menshevik current. And this despite the striking fact that Bolshevism showed itself the most radical current in the RSDLP.

At the 5th congress of the Party (London, May 1907), Trotsky voted with Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin in favour of the resolution which included "the dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the peasantry", against the whole of the Menshevik delegation. He did not break however with these latter. But that did not stop him being simultaneously in agreement (albeit with reticence) with Axelrod for the transformation of the Party into a "workers' Congress", legal and open to all the workers' organisations.

Trotsky was not blind to the opportunist instincts of the Menshevik current. Hestuck to his spontaneist belief that a new revolutionary upsurge would impel everyone to reconstitute a unified party. Meanwhile his anti-Bolshevik sectarianism acquired a visceral character: he sees in this current backwardness and "Asiatic" primitivism and predicted its anti-revolutionary evolution.

On the other hand, the Menshevik current incarnated the European future of the coming revolution. It was in the political-cultural ambience of this current with its debates, pluralism and more human relations that Trotsky found himself truly in his element. His choices seemed even more justified in that Axelrod and Plekhanov worked in concert with Kautsky, at the time still uncontested revolutionary leader of the Second International. A new revolution (in 1917) would be needed for the experience of Lenin's party to incontestably assert its authority, including to Trotsky. [\[16\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) See in particular *The First Five Years of the Communist International* and *The Communist International after Lenin*.

[\[2\]](#) That of the permanent revolution - see Lenin, *April Theses*.

[\[3\]](#) Few authors from the Trotskyist milieu have noticed this. Among the rare ones to do so are Alain Brossat, *Aux origines de la révolution permanente*, Maspero, Paris 1974, and Tony Cliff, *Trotsky, volume 1: Towards October*, London 1998, Bookmarks. Ernest Mandel, who defends Lenin against Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg on the question of the party, does so from the party/vanguard/self-organisation angle, see *Trotsky as alternative*, Verso Books, London 1995.

[\[4\]](#) According to Trotsky in his autobiography, *My Life*.

[\[5\]](#) Trotsky, *Our Political Tasks*.

[\[6\]](#) Preface to Trotsky's pamphlet, *Towards January 9th*.

[\[7\]](#) See Trotsky, *Results and Prospects*.

[\[8\]](#) See his *Letters to Vera Zassoulitch*, 1881.

[\[9\]](#) An analysis which plunged Lenin into a political-existential crisis. See the remarkable analysis in Claudio Segio Ingerflom, *Le citoyen impossible, Les racines russes du léninisme*, Payot, Paris 1988.

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[10] So far as Lenin is concerned, see my article *Le périmètre de la pensée révolutionnaire chez Lenin*, in *Politique la Revue*, n° 6, 1997.

[11] See Geoffrey Swain, *Russian Social democracy and the Legal Labour Movement 1906-14*, McMillan, London 1983.

[12] *Our Differences*, in Trotsky, 1905, Penguin, London, 1971, p. 332.

[13] *Results and Prospects* (1906). He would return to this theme later, in his completed formulation based on the experience of the Chinese revolution in 1926-28.

[14] A truly historic congress because it broke with the Europeanism which predominated inside the Socialist-Marxist workers' movement. Not until the congresses of the Chinese CP in the 1930s would such analytical and prepositional heights be reached on this question.

[15] On the process of political apprenticeship of the main protagonists, see chapters 5-6 of T. Shanin's brilliant *Russia 1905-07: Revolution as a moment of truth*, McMillan, London.

[16] In June 1917, when the Bolshevik Party was already the majority current in the big cities, Trotsky demanded that Lenin, who had asked him to join the party and come directly onto its leadership, abandon the Bolshevik name!