

Trotsky's Marxism

Ian Morrison

At the 2011 Left Forum, held at Pace University in NYC between March 18–21, Platypus hosted a conversation on "Trotsky's Marxism." Panelists Ian Morrison (Platypus), Susan Williams (Freedom Socialist Party), and Jason Wright (International Bolshevik Tendency) were asked to address, "What was Trotsky's contribution to revolutionary Marxism? At one level, the answer is clear. Above even his significance as organizer of the October insurrection and leader of the Red Army during the Russian Civil War, what makes Trotsky a major figure in the history of Marxism is his status as the leader of the Left Opposition and, later, his founding of the Fourth International. But this panel asks whether stating this fact is sufficient for understanding Trotsky's Marxism, or whether this might not in fact merely beg the question. The issue remains: What was it in Trotsky's evolution from the period of 1905 through the Russian Revolution of 1917 that allowed him to become the leader of the Left Opposition and the great Marxist critic of Stalinism in the 1920s and 1930s? What of Trotsky, rather than 'Trotsky-ism'?" An earlier issue (PR #35) included opening remarks by Jason Wright. What follows are Ian Morrison's opening remarks.

TO SPEAK ABOUT TROTSKY'S MARXISM, and not simply Trotsky himself, is to speak, above all, about the distance traveled from the First to the Second Internationals, as well, of course, as that from the Third to the Fourth. In what manner had political organizations and the discontents those organizations sharpened changed over time, from the Gotha program to the Erfurt program, from the Zimmerwald Conference to the April Theses, all the way to the Transitional Program? The question of Trotsky's Marxism also seems to presuppose that an essential framework, namely the critique of political economy, somehow remains valid throughout these periods, and that hence the idea of being a Marxist is stable through time. That is, the question of Trotsky's Marxism suggests that through events such as 1848 and the Paris Commune,



"Learned divers descend to the bottom of the ocean and there take photographs of mysterious fishes. Human thought, descending to the bottom of its own psychic sources must shed light on the most mysterious driving forces of the soul and subject them to reason and to will."

and, during Trotsky's lifetime, the 1905 and October Revolutions—however cataclysmic they were, however profoundly they transformed the political landscape—still, somehow, Marx's original standpoint remains. There is no simple, straightforward approach to this.

Trotsky himself was attentive to changing circumstances, arguing that the Bolsheviks (and his leadership thereof) had left an indelible mark on the past, present, and future of Marxism. "Before Marxism became 'bankrupt' in the form of Bolshevism," he wrote on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the October Revolution,

...it had already broken down in the form of social democracy. Does the slogan 'Back to Marxism' then mean a leap over the periods of the Second and Third Internationals...to the First International? But it too broke down in its time. Thus in the last analysis it is a question of returning to the collected works of Marx and Engels. One can accomplish this historic leap without leaving one's study and even without taking off one's slippers. But how are we going to go from our classics (Marx died in 1883, Engels in 1895) to the tasks of a new epoch, omitting several decades of theoretical and political struggles, among them Bolshevism and the October Revolution? None of those who propose to renounce Bolshevism as an historically bankrupt tendency has indicated any other course. So the question is reduced to the simple advice to study [Marx's] *Capital*. We can hardly object. But the Bolsheviks, too, studied *Capital* and not badly either. This did not however prevent the degeneration of the Soviet state and the staging of the Moscow trials. So what is to be done?¹

Trotsky's answer here, in short, is to study and deepen our understanding of Bolshevism from the present

“Thermidorian Reaction” all the way back to the party’s origins. No “Marxism” can be complete, Trotsky maintains, without taking up this task, and he himself inaugurated the work, particularly in *The Lessons of October* (1924), *The History of the Russian Revolution* (1930), and his autobiography, *My Life* (1930). It is curious, looking at this incomplete bibliography, how carefully Trotsky modulated the genre of his writing to fit different objectives: as a revolutionary politician, as a historian, and as a modern subject struggling to reflect on his own life. There is no other writer, it seems to me, who presents such a full account of the period in question. His insistence (and persistence) on this score tells us quite a bit about how he sought to register the profound discontents emerging during his lifetime and, subsequently, what it meant to be a “Marxist” in Trotsky’s eyes. Clearly, Trotsky saw no need to reconstruct Marx’s critique of political economy, which is not to say that he believed it to be anachronistic. On the contrary. But during the intervening history—between Marx’s time and Trotsky’s—it seems important to underscore that the object of critique had been transformed as well as the organizations that were being intersected. Turn-of-the-century social democracy and the post-war communist parties are, sociologically, quite unlike the political organizations that made up the First International. In *The Lessons of October* Trotsky is addressing a political party of which he is a leader, and perhaps more importantly, one that is in power. The dangers and responsibilities of that organization (“the party”) are first and foremost on his mind. The subsequent history makes it clear that when a political party loses its grasp on reality, its degeneration is rapid.

I believe that is one reason why Trotsky begins *The Lessons of October* with the curious claim that “we met with success in the October Revolution, but the October Revolution has met with little success in our press.” Trotsky develops this claim well beyond a technical critique of the press. Rather, he implies that although the October Revolution appears “objectively” to have been a success, “subjectively” it potentially is not. For reasons that are by no means self-evident, this history is repressed. The party as an institution appears, then, not only as a means for revolutionary action, but also, potentially, as a means for evasion, a political obstacle *par excellence*. This claim, no doubt, is peculiar. How could a nation be mobilized without being fully cognizant of its intentions? How could the *desire* to overcome the status quo that had united disparate groups of men and women during “October” somehow be *forgotten, averted, recoiled from* by the very people who were mobilized by that desire to escape the present? There are many difficult questions here that go well beyond the typical condemnation of bureaucracy. In Trotsky’s view the results

are obvious enough, since he writes *The Lessons of October* as a response to failure in Germany. He argues that such a forgetful approach,

though it may be subconscious—is, however, profoundly erroneous, and is, moreover, narrow and nationalistic. We ourselves may never have to repeat the experience of the October Revolution, but this does not at all imply that we have nothing to learn from that experience. We are a part of the International, and the workers in all other countries are still faced with the solution of the problem of their own ‘October.’ Last year we had ample proof that the most advanced Communist parties of the West had not only failed to assimilate our October experience but were virtually ignorant of the actual facts.²

On first glance it may appear that there is a question of sheer ignorance. There is also the technical problem of simply producing and supplying the intellectual material. These are hardly irrelevant factors. Nonetheless, these factors do not explain the phenomenon itself, especially since this is a problem that has deepened immensely over time. Historical distance has rendered the problem even more opaque, as “narrow and nationalistic” sentiments have only grown. The question worth asking is: Why is it the case that the great struggle associated with Trotsky took the form of a “historical struggle,” a struggle to remember the past, and not merely a struggle of agitation and force?

Marx describes how the leaders of the French Revolution emulated “the Roman republic and the Roman empire.”³ Socialists in the nineteenth century sought to revert to the craftsman’s guilds of the pre-modern city-states. All these impulses and discontents Marx sought to ground in his theory of *Capital*, tearing asunder all the crude parodies of the past. The leaders of October had no such illusions; the paradigm, it seems, had changed. They struggled over the “incomplete present,” appraising the meaning of their actions on a world-historical scale. It is no small wonder that modern social thought emerged contemporaneously in figures like Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. Trotsky (and the Bolsheviks) simply stand out as a profound expression of this historical shift, with an acute understanding of the “October” experience.

Trotsky is even clearer on this score in an appendix to his *The History of Russian Revolution*. In a revealing passage, he writes,

The task of the historian [in the period of “Thermidorian Reaction”] becomes one of ideological restoration. He must dig out the genuine views and aims of the revolutionary party from under subsequent political

accumulations. Despite the briefness of the periods succeeding each other, this task is much like the deciphering of a palimpsest, for the constructions of the epigone school are by no means always superior to those theological ingenuities for whose sake the monks of the seventh and eight centuries destroyed the parchment and papyrus of the classics.⁴

This is no hyperbole. One only needs to take a quick glance at contemporary “Marxism” to get a sense of how terribly cryptic this material has become.

What was the “ideological restoration” needed? The reader cannot help but be struck by seemingly anticlimactic conclusion of the *History*, where Trotsky speculates:

The historic ascent of humanity, taken as a whole, may be summarized as a succession of victories of consciousness over blind forces—in nature, in society, in man himself. Critical and creative thought can boast of its greatest victories up to now in the struggle with nature. The physico-chemical sciences have already reached a point where man is clearly about to become master of matter. *But social relations are still forming in the manner of the coral islands.* Parliamentarism illuminated only the surface of society, and even that with a rather artificial light. In comparison with monarchy and other heirlooms from the cannibals and cave-dwellers, democracy is of course a great conquest, but it leaves the blind play of forces in the social relations of men untouched. It was against this *deeper sphere of the unconscious* that the October revolution was the first to raise its hand. The Soviet system wishes to bring aim and plan into the very basis of society, where up to now only accumulated consequences have reigned.⁵

If we are to believe that history is more than a set of contingent factors, more than an oversized pinball machine shooting us around every which way, or a form of “divine providence” as the pre-moderns believed, we must approach the present as historical, such that “the tradition of all dead generations” really does weigh “like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”⁶ This was the project Trotsky had set for himself, and it is the essence of his Marxism.

As far back as 1906, Trotsky had written in his pamphlet, *Results and Prospects*, “History does not repeat itself. However much one may compare the Russian Revolution [of 1905] with the Great French Revolution, the former can never be transformed into a repetition of the latter. The 19th century has not passed in vain.”⁷ If only one could be so optimistic today! We face the uncertain phenomenon of 1989 effacing not only “October” but 1789 as well. It may

no longer be the case that, as Trotsky once claimed, “The whole of modern France, in many respects the whole of modern civilization, arose out of the bath of the French Revolution!”⁸ |PR

-
1. Leon Trotsky, “Stalinism and Bolshevism” (28 August, 1937). Available online at <<http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/08/stalinism.htm>>.
 2. Leon Trotsky, *The Lessons of October*, trans. John G. Wright (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1937 [1924]). Available online at <<http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lessons/index.htm>>.
 3. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Saul K. Padover. Originally published in 1852. Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/>>.
 4. Leon Trotsky, “Appendix No. 2: Socialism in a Separate Country?,” in *The History of the Russian Revolution*, vol. 3, *The Triumph of the Soviets*, trans. Max Eastman. Originally published in 1930. Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch50.htm>>.
 5. Leon Trotsky, “Conclusion,” in *The History of the Russian Revolution*, vol. 3. Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch48.htm>>.
 6. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.
 7. Leon Trotsky, *Results and Prospects*. Originally published in 1906. Available online at <<http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/rp-index.htm>>.
 8. Leon Trotsky, “In Defense of October” (speech delivered in Copenhagen, Denmark in November, 1932). Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/11/oct.htm>>.