

The Politics of Duplicity: British Trotskyism

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1. Myth and Reality

It is usual for Marxists who try to understand the phenomenon of Trotskyism, particularly in the post-war period, to delve into history of the many splits and realignments that have taken place within this current in the last fifty years. The focus of this talk is not the motives behind any particular split or the consequences of any one fusion. Rather, I am interested in attempting to provide an explanation, in general terms, of what has been the significance of 'British Trotskyism' and to give some account of why, despite an uncompromising formal adherence to revolutionary politics, it has never been able to represent a coherent and consistent defence of the interests of the working class.

A very British tendency

The first question which springs to mind is why should Trotskyism have such an appeal in Britain and other Anglo-Saxon countries, where the vast majority of revolutionary organisations, at least since the late Sixties, have claimed adherence to Trotsky's ideas. In contrast, Leftism on the Continent has generally favoured 'radical' Stalinism, Maoism, autonomous movements and anarchism. I do not think there is a single answer to this question. The difference, in general terms, is due to two factors.

Firstly, the influence and function of the official European Communist parties. In most European countries the Communist parties experienced long periods of repression or semi-legality, themselves a sign of a more politically radicalised working class. The combination of repression and reformist politics led the European CP's to adopt a schizophrenic outlook culminating in a programmatic split between short-term objectives and the grand goal of achieving Socialism by storming the Winter Palace and carrying out a revolution on the Bolshevik model. In the meantime, while the party gained enough supporters to impose its own legality, it attempted to 'neutralise' the wavering middle classes with initiatives that emphasised liberal and democratic issues. In the minds of the many militant workers that filled the ranks of the CP, such 'popular front' politics were just a trick to give the party sufficient time to prepare revolution and to lull the bourgeois into a false sense of security. Once this was achieved the Party would suddenly pull out its real agenda and whack the bourgeoisie. This dual strategy, which was never explicit in Party publications or official pronouncements, allowed militant workers to back the most astounding betrayals in the belief that they were only a temporary trick, a 'maneuver'. When the time came the Party would roll out the cannon.

Italy is a classic example. The PCI justified its extreme moderation on the basis that the Church and the State had duped many backward workers and sections of the impoverished liberal middle

class. Until these were 'won over' or 'neutralised' all talk of revolution would be 'ultra-leftism'. By playing the parliamentary game, the PCI would spread democratic and radical ideas that would isolate the Church and the State. Then, like partisans coming down from the mountains, the PCI would revert to its earlier revolutionary tradition and destroy capitalism. As a result those who disagreed with the PCI's moderate line, or became impatient, split off to form mini-PCI's or 'provisional' PCI's that laid more emphasis on the immediacy of revolution. Since the PCI's 'dual' strategy was never tested, Stalinism and its radical variants were never discredited.

In Britain, only crusty old reactionaries and paranoid members of the far-right ever believed that the CPGB harboured a secret strategy for revolution. By the time it became a sizeable organization during the 1930s it was entirely dependent on the Labour Party and its structures. Its most famous campaign of that period, 'Aid for Spain', was organised on such a liberal and humanitarian level that only the most reactionary could fail to have sympathy with it. There was no glorious past that could prove that the CP was really revolutionary. As a result, anyone who was interested in revolution soon began to hunger for something else. As the CP's failures were associated with its 'Stalinist' politics, it became advantageous to look for another brand name. Thus in Britain the labels 'Stalinist' and 'Trotskyist' mean the difference between 'reformist-consensual' and 'revolutionary-militant' in a way that is not recognised on the Continent.

The second factor that influenced the development of Trotskyism in Britain and most 'Anglo-Saxon' countries, and one which accounts for much of its duplicitous character, was the Cold War. The experience of the working and middle classes in most European countries was very different from those where Trotskyism has been influential. During the 1930s they had seen the major bourgeois parties collaborate with Fascism. They had been on the receiving end of the Nazi war effort. In addition the Communist parties had played a major role in the war against the Axis. Many, including the bourgeoisie, had breathed an immense sigh of relief when the Red Army broke the back of the German Army. The idea that the Russkies were the 'enemy within' or were about to invade at any moment, making a preventive war necessary, did not have wide appeal.

In Britain, Cold War ideology never reached the hysterical heights that it did in the USA, but a tacit anti-Communism did seep into every aspect of society from the unions to the universities. Whereas on the Continent 'Communism' meant 'expropriation', 'class-strife', disturbances and gun totting partisans, in post-war Britain it had all the exclusively negative connotations popularised in Orwell's 1984. This all pervasive Cold War ideol-

ogy had the effect of freezing out and discrediting anything that smacked of revolution or Marxism. It was in this hostile context that Trotskyism acquired its appeal. It was a way of saying 'we are not the baddies'. There is an accommodation to 'anti-Communism' in Trotskyism that parades as something radical in the form of anti-Stalinism. This marked Trotskyism with a duplicity that it has never managed to overcome and a weakness which has always been the source of failure. Trotskyism has no backbone. On the one hand it represented a radical critique of reformism, on the other it is a squalid compromise or 'bending' to hostile bourgeois politics.

This duplicity can be easily seen when one contrasts what Trotsky stood for and what Trotskyism has been since 1945 (with honourable early exceptions).

Internationalism. Internationalism is one of the most misunderstood concepts in revolutionary politics. For Marxists it is essentially a methodological premise that is grounded in the recognition that since Capitalism has become a world system the major determinants of national politics are global. This means that ultimately 'national' strategies must be based on an international understanding. For example, if one takes a narrow national view of Thatcherism one could easily come to the conclusion that 'monetarism' and the assault on the working class were all down to the personal nastiness of the Iron Lady, or the fact that a set of particularly obnoxious Tories got into power in 1979 or of the Tory party itself. This is indeed the understanding of most of the Left. Such an analysis has its consequences. It inevitably leads forming alliances with 'anti-Tory' elements or even 'Tory wets' against the barbarians. Likewise, the whole of politics becomes geared towards 'kicking the Tories out' (*Socialist Workers'* favourite headline) and electing a Labour government. An international perspective allows one to see that 'Thatcherism' is a universal phenomenon - implemented by Socialist and Conservative governments alike - and that a Labour government would be irrelevant. Thus Labour's policy, or lack of it, is not due to Kinnock or Smith but the inescapable realities imposed on any party committed to managing capital.

The second aspect of internationalism for revolutionary Marxists is an implacable opposition to patriotism and 'defence of country'. Proletarian internationalism had been a principle of the revolutionary movement from its earliest days, but in the epoch of inter-imperialist and colonial war it acquired a more determining and crucial significance. More so when a deep seated racism and nationalism became an important influence on working class politics. One can accuse Trotsky of many things, but he never harboured the slightest hint of nationalism in any form. Quite the contrary.

Trotsky's writings show a well-founded obsession with stamping out any manifestation of the nationalist mentality.

Of course, it is not suggested that Trotskyists have acted explicitly as social patriots or chauvinists. With rare exceptions they have not. They simply go along with the nationalist tied and duplicitously use the chauvinism and racism that is in the culture. For example, pick up any Trotskyist paper today and one can search in vain for a critique of the nationalist policies of the NUM and its insistence of saving 'the British Coalfield' for the Nation. One will not find a condemnation of DAF workers' attempt to defend jobs on the basis of 'saving the British truck industry' - a rather ludicrous approach given that the firm is Dutch. This is just the small stuff. In terms of anti-imperialism Trotskyism has been a disgrace. Trotskyism can mobilise enthusiastic support for the armed struggle of Umkhonto we Siswe in South Africa or the Sandinistas. This very building [Red Rose Club] houses the offices of the Cuba Solidarity Committee, the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign, the Salvador Solidarity Campaign and their various off-shoots. In the 1970s' tens of thousands marched through London chanting 'Ho! Ho! Ho Chi Minh!'. But what of Ireland? Here we find the same thousand or so old faces every year at the Bloody Sunday demo. Suggest that Ireland might be Britain's own dirty little colonial war and even most people who think they are 'left-wing' will consider you to be an ultra-leftist nutter. Trotskyists frequently avoid the issue at the heart of the conflict by talking purely in 'communal' terms (a conflict between Catholics and Protestant), or by providing a 'radical' critique of 'Green Nationalism' accommodate to anti-Irish chauvinism. Trotskyism's conduct over the Malvinas and the Gulf war needs no comment.

In conclusion, Trotskyist 'internationalism', as with so many other things, is nothing but a variant of radical bourgeois cosmopolitanism, charity, and breast-beating gimmickry - covered over with the rhetoric of high sounding phrases.

Proletarian Democracy. One of the principles of Marxism is the inseparability of content and form. The organizational form of the official labour movement, which is dominated by a total lack of real democracy, bureaucracy and routinism, is not the product of power-hungry labour officials but of Labourism itself. Labourism's organizational structure re-enforces the its politics and vice versa. Conversely, Marxists fight for democracy and transparency in the workers' movement because we know that it is the best way of making the working class receptive to revolutionary politics. Formally, the Trotskyists' rhetorical critique of Stalinist bureaucracy would fill several libraries. In practice Trotskyism is well ensconced in the labour and state bureaucracy. Where is the campaign to get rid of that feudal practice called the block vote? Is there anything democratic in the way Trotskyists manipulate union branches and branch funds (all in a good cause of course)? Is there anything 'democratic' about the way Trotskyist groups manipulate the NUS? Is the way that *The Militant* clique and its thugs ran Liverpool substantially different for the way the CP Braddock clique used to run it? Do Trotskyist in local authority politics operate different from that of the Labour Right?

The Trotskyist critique of Stalinist bureaucracy is equally applicable to Trotskyism in practice.

Opposition to the State. If there is one thing that should come naturally to a revolutionary it should be opposition to the State. There is not much in Trotsky's writing about this because for most people in revolutionary politics before 1939 the issue was relatively clear. The post-war liberal-welfare consensus transformed this. Today we find that not only is Trotskyism almost exclusively a government and local authority occupational phenomena (Susil Gupta has coined the term 'Nalگو-Trotskyism'), but is also politically geared to state intervention and provision. 'Trot' and 'awkward petty state functionary' are synonymous in the public mind, and rightly so. Take for example the current slump. Any Marxist can see that this is the consequence of an objective crisis of capitalism. It is not an exclusively British phenomena. One can say that the long period of post-war growth has come to an end. Because Trotskyism is totally state geared, and therefore reformist in nature, none of these objective facts catches its attention. The are not interested in it. Instead the slump is the product of Tory mismanagement or Lamont's policies. In other words, it is not an objective crisis but purely the consequence of 'policy'. The task for the working class is therefore to pressure the state raise public expenditure. Today Trotskyism means little more than bleating for more state funding for this or that. It is not possible to be so state-dependent, both personally and politically, and at the same time pretend to be working to smash it.

Entryism. It is important to understand that 'entryism' for Trotsky was a tactic, not a strategy. As such it was a response to specific circumstances. During the 1930s Trotsky noted that the upheavals of the time had led to the appearance of a potentially revolutionary current within the working class. The problem was that these workers were mainly to be found in the official and reformist labour organizations. In contrast, the revolutionary organizations were too small and, as the class struggle was reaching critical proportions, there was no time for them to build a significant alternative following. Trotsky therefore advised such groups to enter the Socialist parties - where there was the possibility of operating relatively openly - and to give a lead.

None of these conditions were present in the post-war period. There was no potentially revolutionary workers' movement. There was no revolutionary crisis looming. There were not thousands of radical workers straining at Labour's leash. The Labour Party is not a place where once can operate openly (unless one is irrelevant or harmless) as is evidenced by the fact that the 'entryists' function in a clandestine manner. Post-war Trotskyism did not 'enter' the Labour Party, it simply capitulated to it. There is no short-term 'entryist tactic', just a long-term adaptive strategy. Trotskyists overcome this duplicity in a number of ways.

a. **Smoke-screens.** IMG and its diaspora. Since there was no potentially revolutionary current of workers to justify this capitulation it had to be invented. The history of Trotskyism is one of 'attempting to identify 'class struggle's left-wing', 'potential vanguards appearing here and there', 'a layer of workers willing to break with Social Democ-

racy' and the such. These were the slogans of the 1970s. During the 1980s it took the form of new radical social movements.

b. **Deception.** Organizations simply lie about what they do, exaggerating the 'good work' they do in the Labour Party and keeping quite about the squalid compromises, or simply claiming that the 'entry' tactic is just one weapon in a wide-ranging arsenal. *Workers' Power* is a good example: no longer formally committed to even 'short-term' work in the now defunct constituency parties, but unable to relate to any thing other than the world of Labourism. We now have a better example, the born again *Militant*; the party that never existed when it was in the Labour Party and now is not Labourist but exists.

c. **Formal Independence.** Put the revolutionary rhetoric aside and it becomes immediately obvious that the SWP is little more than the external faction of the Labour Party. It has no independent life other than in relation to the Labour Party. This is even more obvious when one considers how the SWP works on the ground - particularly in the unions and local authorities - than its usually more radical press. In any of these arenas it is often very difficult to suss out who is in the SWP and who is Labour Left. The Socialist Movement is also an interesting example of the same phenomena. The SM went for the incredible feat of building a movement based on thoroughly Labourist politics, but without the Labour Party. Was there ever any difference between the Socialist Movement's politics and that of the traditional Labour Left?

Individual protestations by Trotskyists that by being in the Labour Party they are 'using the system' is nothing but clap-trap. When one stands back to look over the last 4 decades one can only come to the conclusion that Trotskyist 'entryism' has been little more than a prep-school for bureaucrats, liars, careerists and opportunists of every sort, and a way of channeling the radicalism of the working class into safer pursuits.

Class Collaboration. Class collaboration has always been a problem in the workers' movement, but in the context of the degeneration of the Communist movement during the 1930s it took the more explicit form of Popular Frontism. In one form or another the tactic established itself as the political strategy of the official Communist parties ever since, which makes nonsense of die hard Stalinist dreams of the good old days before 'Eurocommunism' and the 'Democratic Left'. It was justified on the basis of two ideas. Firstly, in a crude application of the concepts which Lenin had introduced in *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, the Comintern argued that the state had been taken over by 'finance capital' to the detriment of other capitalists, particularly smaller industrial capital. This was the main impetus behind Fascism. As a result, many sections of the bourgeoisie felt threatened and were therefore interested in a defensive alliance with the working class. Secondly, this democratic bourgeoisie was also frightened by the rise of Fascism. To achieve an alliance, the Communist Parties argued for a postponement of the class struggle in favour of a broadly based defence of democratic initiatives - the Popular Front. This inevitably led to a down-grading of worker mili-

tancy, which undermined the only real social constituency that could confront Fascism. The failures and mistakes of the 1930s thus led Trotsky and his supporters to an obstinate opposition to any such arrangements. The real task was to unite the working class.

In contrast to this tradition Trotskyism has been deeply involved in Popular Front politics; CND, the anti-EEC campaign of the 1970s, the ANL and the various anti-fascist groupings, and almost all the campaigns organised around the Labour Party work. This denial of class can also take a form which is not explicitly collaborationist. Consider, for example, the 'periphery to the center' tactic championed by Ernest Mandel's 'United Secretariat of the Fourth International'. Mandel took Marcuse's idea that the workers in advanced countries could not be considered the revolutionary subject since they had all either been duped by capitalist propaganda or bought off by the super profits extracted from underprivileged peripheral sectors. This is little more than a rehash of the old liberal critique of colonialism. The real potential vanguard was to be sought in the 'periphery' of consumer capitalism: Blacks, Chicanos, women and above all third world revolutions. Once revolutionaries had established themselves in the periphery they would work on the core. Rebellion in the periphery would undermine the basis of super-profits making the core more receptive to revolutionary politics.

The objection might be raised that what characterises Trotskyism is 'workerism' and not the denial of class. These things are no more incompatible than the liberal middle class ideal of 'salvation through public education' is incompatible with the most elitist attitudes towards education provision. One serves to conceal the other. The working class of Trotskyist 'workerism' isn't you're actual working class of flesh and bone but a largely middle class moral precept of what the workers should be - a revamped Hovis ad. This accounts for the many 'rude awakenings' and subsequent disillusionment.

2. The Orphans of Stalinism

By itself, the above sketch of the real significance of Trotskyism would be one-sided, and perhaps even unfair to the many hundreds of people who have fought in its ranks. The account suggests that Trotskyists have acted solely out of malevolence. That would be to fall into the same subjectivism we have criticised. Though today's Trotskyist organizations are degenerate, and cannot be spared the criticisms made, the men and women who set out to build a Trotskyist movement in the early post-war period did so with the aim of creating a genuinely revolutionary movement.

In many ways their task was almost impossible. Many of the people who had the benefit of direct contact with Trotsky were extremely young - mostly in their early twenties - and inexperienced. Many had come from Stalinist organizations and while they were opposed to the betrayals of the Communist Parties they also brought with them many of its bad habits. Marx and Engels developed Marxism in the heady atmosphere of Hegelianism, French Socialism and radicalism and a world still enthused by the battle of ideas and an appetite for of inquiry. Lenin cut his teeth on an intense strug-

gle against Rural Socialism (Narodnism) and later against the intrepid and sophisticated revisionist thrusts of Legal Marxism. In contrast the world of Stalinism was a pauper's gruel indeed. By the 1930s the life had been battered out of every Marxist idea as concepts became catch phrases and justificatory slogans. Young Trotskyist revolutionaries did not even have the benefit of a growing revolutionary workers' movement in which they could out-grow their errors. They had learned their politics in a period of utter confusion, demoralisation and defeat, in the midst of ignorance and lies. It is surprising that Trotskyism as a revolutionary current survived at all until 1945. That it did is no mean testament to their resilience and dedication. Today it is easy to be dismissive about such people as Tony Cliff, Ted Grant and even Gerry Healy. But a serious revolutionary should also consider what they were up against and the factors that undermined Trotskyism as a revolutionary current. This is particularly important since we face confusing and demoralising times ourselves, and are prone to make the same mistakes.

The negative influence of the Cold War has already been mentioned. Yet long before it crushed the remnants of revolutionary politics by isolating it from the working class and society, Trotskyism, like the children of the poor, had emerged out of WWII as a frail and stunted creature. Perhaps the first miscalculation was the nature of the post-war period. Trotskyists argued that the capitalist economy would never be able to stabilise itself and that the future would be characterised by war, both against the Soviet Union and between imperialist countries. This was not an unreasonable assessment. The late 1940s were an exceedingly gloomy period and most European bourgeois economists had serious misgivings about the future of capitalism. Most European countries had never really recovered from the consequences of the First World War. There followed a decade of depression and only 18 years after WWI had ended Europe was up in flames again. In 1947, the year the Soviets exploded their first atom bomb, most people believed that there would be war sooner than latter.

However, that revolutionaries didn't get it more wrong than anyone else is not good enough. After all, we are supposed to be the vanguard. Two weaknesses within the Trotskyist movement contributed to this lack of clarity. First is the complete absence of Marxist political economy in Trotskyism. Trotskyism is 'pure politics' - economic facts are only summoned up to backup political arguments or to provide 'background'. Given a choice between a turgid tract on the 'Betrayals of Stalinism in Outer Mongolia' and a subscription to the *Financial Times*, the Trotskyist will always choose the former.

The tragedy is not that Trotskyists got it wrong about capitalism in 1945-47 - anyone can make a mistake - but that they did not have the theoretical equipment to realise it and to correct the error. Looking over Trotskyist literature of the period one is immediately struck by the absence of any analysis of all the major developments in post-war capitalism: the institutions of the Bretton Woods Treaty, the Marshal Plan, The Monet Plan, the Shuman plan, the OECD, the early steps towards the crea-

tion of the EEC, NATO, etc. A whole world seems to have passed Trotskyism by. As a result Trotskyism was not able to understand that the Second World War, while tragic in human terms, had had a revitalising effect on European and American capital. As capitalism not only failed to collapse, but went on to experience the longest and most profitable boom in its history, Trotskyism bounced in the opposite direction and began to argue that capitalism had transformed itself. State intervention could overcome crisis. The feeling that capitalism was going to last a long, long time made Trotskyism suspend revolutionary politics. Thus the road to the Labour Party and the shabby compromises of today. (To be fair to Trotskyists, the Stalinists made the same mistakes, but since they had always been committed to capitalist restoration they were spared the embarrassment of an adaptive 'policy shift'.)

The second factor which undermined Trotskyism's ability to operate in the post-war world was its scant understanding of imperialism. Again, Trotsky had a keen nose for the political significance behind imperialist shenanigans but no understanding of imperialism as a global system. Nor did he understand the world economy. He was modest enough to admit so (see his essay 'The Curve of Capitalist Development'). There is no Trotskyist analysis of how a British-dominated world system worked before 1914. There is no Trotskyist analysis of how British weakness caused the upheavals of the interwar period. Trotsky seems to have paid scant attention to some of the major world debates of his day, for example the one provoked by Keynes' revealing *The Economic Consequences of Peace*. There is no Trotskyist analysis of the Depression. Nor of the changing nature of inter-imperialist relationships during WWII. The consequences of this poor theoretical legacy was that post-war Trotskyism was unable to understand the significance of American hegemony over Western capitalism - at least not until the late 1960s.

The points made above by no means exhaust the problems post-war Trotskyism faced. For example, attempting to come to terms with the defeat and degeneration of the Russian revolution was the most difficult task Trotsky ever faced during his revolutionary career. The description of the Soviet Union as a 'degenerated workers' state' proved ultimately incorrect. It was not a workers' state of any sort. Trotsky's 'biography' of Stalin is a travesty in terms of Marxist methodology. Whether we like or not, Stalin was a dedicated and valued revolutionary. That in February 1917 he argued in favour of a democratic provisional government instead of stressing workers power was not the product of a conservative personality trait, and in any case was no worse than the trash Trotsky was also defending at the time [Lenin's livid denunciations of Trotsky cannot be reproduced in a family publication]. It was the policy most Bolsheviks adhered to. It took Lenin quite a struggle to reverse it. That Stalin turned into a monster and a murderous clown - a tragedy that may befall the best of us - is something to be explained in terms other than personality.

Nevertheless, one can forgive Trotsky these mistakes. He struggled avariciously to put together an analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy from the scraps of information which reached him. None of these

problems plagued post-war Trotskyism. His analysis, though exploratory and incomplete was qualitatively different in its mistakes from those of latter-day Trotskyism. One was a sincere attempt to understand what was happening, the other represents a refusal to attempt to understand the world.

In conclusion, the continued adherence to a set of half-baked concepts for fifty years crippled Trotskyism's ability to understand the East and the changing world around it.

Comments and contributions on the subject of this article are welcome