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Chapter 11

TROTSKY ON ENGLAND

A contemporary reviewing this book[1] says: 'He stammers out platitudes in the voice of a phonograph with a scratched record.' I should guess that Trotsky dictated it. In its English dress it emerges in a turbid stream with a hectoring gurgle which is characteristic of modern revolutionary literature translated from the Russian. Its dogmatic tone about our affairs, where even the author's flashes of insight are clouded by his inevitable ignorance of what he is talking about, cannot commend it to an English reader. Yet there is a certain style about Trotsky. A personality is visible through the distorting medium. And it is not all platitudes.

The book is, first of all, an attack on the official leaders of the British Labour Party because of their 'religiosity', and because they believe that it is useful to prepare for Socialism without preparing for Revolution at the same time. Trotsky sees, what is probably true, that our Labour Party is the direct offspring of the radical non-conformists and the philanthropic bourgeois, without a tinge of atheism, blood, and revolution. Emotionally and intellectually, therefore, he finds them intensely unsympathetic. A short anthology will exhibit his state of mind:

> The doctrine of the leaders of the Labour Party is a kind of amalgam of Conservatism and Liberalism, partially adapted to the needs of trade unions ... The Liberal and semi-Liberal leaders of the Labour Party still think that the social revolution is the mournful privilege of the European Continent.
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> 'In the realm of feeling and conscience,' MacDonald begins, 'in the realm of spirit, Socialism forms the religion of service to the people.' In these words is immediately betrayed the benevolent bourgeois, the left Liberal, who 'serves' the people, coming to them from one side, or more truly from above. Such an approach has its roots entirely in the dim past, when the radical

[1] L. Trotsky, *Where is Britain Going?*

intelligentsia went to live in the working-class districts of London in order to carry on cultural and educational work.

Together with theological literature, Fabianism is perhaps the most useless, and in any case the most boring form of verbal creation... The cheaply optimistic Victorian epoch, when it seemed that to-morrow would be a little better than to-day, and the day after to-morrow still better than to-morrow, found its most finished expression in the Webbs, Snowden, MacDonald, and other Fabians... These bombastic authorities, pedants, arrogant and ranting poltroons, systematically poison the Labour Movement, befog the consciousness of the proletariat, and paralyse its will... The Fabians, the I.L.P.ers, the Conservative bureaucrats of the trade unions represent at the moment the most counter-revolutionary force in Great Britain, and perhaps of all the world's development... Fabianism, MacDonaldism, Pacifism, is the chief rallying-point of British imperialism and of the European, if not the world, bourgeoisie. At any cost, these self-satisfied pedants, these gabbling eclectics, these sentimental careerists, these upstart liveried lackeys of the bourgeoisie, must be shown in their natural form to the workers. To reveal them as they are will mean their hopeless discrediting.

Well, that is how the gentlemen who so much alarm Mr Winston Churchill strike the real article. And we must hope that the real article, having got it off his chest, feels better. How few words need changing, let the reader note, to permit the attribution of my anthology to the philo-fisticuffs of the right. And the reason for this similarity is evident. Trotsky is concerned in these passages with an attitude towards public affairs, not with ultimate aims. He is just exhibiting the temper of the band of brigand-statesmen to whom Action means War, and who are irritated to fury by the atmosphere of sweet reasonableness, of charity, tolerance, and mercy in which, though the wind whistles in the East or in the South, Mr Baldwin and Lord Oxford and Mr MacDonald smoke the pipe of peace. 'They smoke Peace where there should be no Peace,' Fascists and Bolshevists cry in a chorus, 'canting, imbecile emblems of decay, senility, and death, the antithesis of Life and the Life-Force which exist only in the spirit of merciless struggle.' If only it was so easy! If only one could accomplish by roaring, whether roaring like a lion or like any sucking dove!

The roaring occupies the first half of Trotsky's book. The second half, which affords a summary exposition of his political philosophy, deserves a closer attention.

First proposition. The historical process necessitates the change-over to Socialism if civilisation is to be preserved. 'Without a transfer to Socialism all our culture is threatened with decay and decomposition.'

Second proposition. It is unthinkable that this change-over can come about by peaceful argument and voluntary surrender. Except in response to force, the possessing classes will surrender nothing. The strike is already a resort to force. 'The class struggle is a continual sequence of open or masked forces, which are regulated in more or less degree by the State, which in turn represents the organised apparatus of force of the stronger of the antagonists, in other words, the ruling class.' The hypothesis that the Labour Party will come into power by constitutional methods and will then 'proceed to the business so cautiously, so tactfully, so intelligently, that the bourgeoisie will not feel any need for active opposition', is 'facetious'—though this 'is indeed the very rock-bottom hope of MacDonald and company'.

Third proposition. Even if, sooner or later, the Labour Party achieve power by constitutional methods, *the reactionary parties will at once proceed to force*. The possessing classes will do lip-service to parliamentary methods so long as they are in control of the parliamentary machine, but if they are dislodged, then, Trotsky maintains, it is absurd to suppose that they will prove squeamish about a resort to force on their side. Suppose, he says, that a Labour majority in Parliament were to decide in the most legal fashion to confiscate the land without compensation, to put a heavy tax on capital, and to abolish the Crown and the House of Lords, 'there cannot be the least doubt that the possessing classes will not submit without a struggle, the more so as all the police, judiciary, and military apparatus is entirely in their hands'. Moreover, they control the banks and the whole system of social credit and the machinery of transport and trade, so that

the daily food of London, including that of the Labour Government itself, depends on the great capitalist combines. It is obvious, Trotsky argues, that these terrific means of pressure 'will be brought into action with frantic violence in order to dam the activity of the Labour Government, to paralyse its exertions, to frighten it, to effect cleavages in its parliamentary majority, and, finally, to cause a financial panic, provision difficulties, and lockouts'. To suppose, indeed, that the destiny of society is going to be determined by whether Labour achieves a parliamentary majority and not by the actual balance of material forces at the moment is an 'enslavement to the fetishism of parliamentary arithmetic'.

Fourth proposition. In view of all this, whilst it may be good strategy to aim also at constitutional power, it is silly not to organise on the basis that material force will be the determining factor in the end.

> In the revolutionary struggle only the greatest determination is of avail to strike the arms out of the hands of reaction, to limit the period of civil war, and to lessen the number of its victims. If this course be not taken it is better not to take to arms at all. If arms are not resorted to, it is impossible to organise a general strike; if the general strike is renounced, there can be no thought of any serious struggle.

Granted his assumption, much of Trotsky's argument is, I think, unanswerable. Nothing can be sillier than to *play* at revolution—if that is what he means. But what are his assumptions? He assumes that the moral and intellectual problems of the transformation of society have been already solved—that a plan exists, and that nothing remains except to put it into operation. He assumes further that society is divided into two parts—the proletariat who are converted to the plan, and the rest who for purely selfish reasons oppose it. He does not understand that no plan could win until it had first convinced many people, and that, if there really were a plan, it would draw support from many different quarters. He is so much occupied with means that he forgets to tell us what it is all for. If we pressed him, I suppose he would mention Marx. And there we will leave him with an

echo of his own words—'together with theological literature, perhaps the most useless, and in any case the most boring form of verbal creation'.

Trotsky's book must confirm us in our conviction of the uselessness, the empty-headedness of force at the present stage of human affairs. Force would settle nothing—no more in the class war than in the wars of nations or in the wars of religion. An understanding of the historical process, to which Trotsky is so fond of appealing, declares not for, but against, force at this juncture of things. We lack more than usual a coherent scheme of progress, a tangible ideal. All the political parties alike have their origins in past ideas and not in new ideas—and none more conspicuously so than the Marxists. It is not necessary to debate the subtleties of what justifies a man in promoting his gospel by force; for no one has a gospel. The next move is with the head, and fists must wait.

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