Opening remarks

One of the plenary sessions held at the third annual Platypus Affiliated Society international convention, hosted by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago between April 29–May 1, 2011, set about exploring the legacy of Trotsky's Marxism. Speakers Mike Macnair of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Bryan Palmer of Trent University, Richard Rubin of Platypus, and Jason Wright of the International Bolshevik Tendency were asked to consider: "What is the relevance of Trotskyism for the Left today? On the one hand, there is a simple answer: The mantle of Trotskyism is claimed by many of today's most prominent and numerous leftist parties in America and Europe (and beyond). The International Socialist Organization in America, the Socialist Workers Party in Britain, and the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste in France all have their origins in Trotskyism. Evidently, the collapse of Stalinism in 1989 left Trotskyism's bona fides, as anti-Stalinist Marxism, intact. On the other hand, Trotskyism has been infamously associated on the Left with sectarianism. Certainly, the ISO, SWP and NPA long ago made their peace in crucial ways with the politics of the post-Marxist New Left—a revisionism that their sectarian brethren (for instance, Trotskyism's bête noire, the Spartacist League) have proudly and doggedly opposed. However, despite their differences, all varieties of Trotskyism today evince the conditions of the New Left's 'return to Marxism' in the 1970s, for which the legacy of Trotsky provided one significant vehicle (the other being Maoism). For instance Trotsky's biographer, Isaac Deutscher, strongly influenced the journal, New Left Review. *And yet there is something peculiar about this legacy. As one Platypus writer has suggested, Trotsky is as out of place in the post-World War II world as Voltaire or Rousseau would have been in the world after the French Revolution. Trotsky, unlike Trotskyism, exemplifies the classical Marxism of the early 20th century, and that tradition certainly died with him. Thus, before we can understand how Trotskyism's legacy has influenced the Marxism of our time, we must first answer the question: What has Trotskyism made of Trotsky's Marxism?" Add: A full recording of the event is available at <http://www.archive.org/details/LegacyOfTrotskyism_platypus2011ConventionPlenary>.*

Trotsky at his desk in 1931.

Bryan Palmer: "A specter is haunting Europe," wrote Marx and Engels in 1848, "the specter of Communism." We live in a different epoch. Communism haunts little in our world. Platypus captures something of our dilemma with its proclamation, "The Left is dead; Long live the Left." I take this to mean that the defeats of the Left in the 20th century have resulted in the demise of the forces of the revolutionary left, inhibiting our ability to recognize possibility. To transcend this limitation, which threatens to preclude the self-realization of humanity, the Left must live again. "Long live the Left," then, is not merely a hope. Rather, it is a necessity, and not only for those who advocate this, but for all people.

The specter of communism, the specter of the Left, does not haunt today's powers. Our specters are different: the capitalist crisis, on the one hand, and Stalinism, on the other. One threatens intensified exploitation, deteriorating standards of life, increased oppression, greater environmental despoliation, and imperialist war and carnage, while the other has soured peoples' understanding of socialism. These dual specters have produced the dialectical dilemma of our times. Never has socialism been more necessary, more obviously the solution to capitalism's quickening pace of crisis, and yet never has socialism, since its inception in the aftermath of the bourgeois revolutions of the late 18th century, seemed so unattainable. The Left seems dead, even as it holds the key to humanity's emancipation and survival.

It is against this backdrop, at once pessimistic *and* optimistic, that the legacy of Trotsky's Marxism must be assessed. Platypus presumes that the legacy of Trotsky's Marxism can best be evaluated by exchanging the much-cherished memory of Trotsky as the anti-Stalinist martyr for the more painful image of Trotsky as the last man standing among the ruins of revolutionary Marxism. I cherish nothing about martyrdom, but view Trotsky's assassination in light of Stalinism's legacy: the degeneration of the fundamental revolutionary program of proletarian internationalism into the politics of "socialism in one country," a profound shift that turned revolutionary possibility into its opposite and signaled the defeat of the world-historical accomplishment of 1917, while obliterating all protagonists of that original revolutionary victory.

The history of "socialism in one country" has been a profound failure regardless of the form it takes (Maoism, Guevarism, etc.). Thus I reject the notion of Trotsky as the last man, alone among the ruins of revolutionary Marxism. Revolutionary Marxism is *not* in ruins. It remains a profoundly rich legacy of insight and guidance, a way of thinking and acting in the world that is capable of explaining not only the rise and fall of capitalism, but also the rise and fall of what we have come to know as "actually existing 20th century socialism." Revolutionary Marxism, far from being in ruins, is reaffirmed in its understanding of capitalist crisis, which unfolds on a daily basis. It is a considerable irony that even as bourgeois economists and organs of the bourgeois media confirmed Marxist insight at the height of the 2007–2008 mortgage meltdown, there were and are ostensible leftists proclaiming Marxism's death.

The crises, in short, will continue as long as capitalism does. Marxism tells us this, and Trotsky's legacy builds on Marxism's historical development. More than an analysis of capitalism, Marxism pledges a way out of the recurring crises of capitalism. Trotsky, standing on the shoulders of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, theorized "the Revolution betrayed" and built an alternative to the Stalinist Communist International. Like his predecessors, Trotsky is alive, pregnant with possibility, and is the best guide revolutionaries have regarding what is to be done in an age overripe with capitalist decay and burdened by Stalinist degeneration. To the question of whether or not Trotsky's Marxism continues to matter and whether revolutionary consciousness is possible in the current conjuncture, my answer is a resounding "Yes!"

One decisive component of Trotsky's contribution, an extension of the thought and practice of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, is the importance of the subjective component within the objective circumstances. As a revolutionary Marxist response to Stalinism, Trotsky is the continuity, in different conditions, of the accumulated gains of Marxism-Leninism in the era of revolutionary degeneration. Trotskyism necessarily underscores that in a period when capitalism is overripe for revolutionary overthrow, the crisis of humanity is indeed the crisis of revolutionary leadership. This simple maxim, so curtly dismissed by all of those ostensible Marxists for whom now is never the time to struggle, never the time to build a disciplined, revolutionary working class party, never the time to call for capital's defeat, is central to grasping what the revolutionary left has failed to do in the current hour of need.

James P. Cannon, founder of American Trotskyism, is one of the most significant figures in the history of the United States labor and left milieus. Cannon was forced to take principled stands, often against his personal inclinations, that left him marginalized, isolated, seemingly a "last man" among the ruins of revolutionary Marxism. Yet his history shows that, like Trotsky, he never was the last man standing; his worldview, his

"Opening remarks" continues on page 2

www.platypus1917.org

THE LEGACY OF TROTSKYISM

The Platypus Review

Supplement to Issue #38 | August 2011

Statement of Purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Articles will typically range in length from 750–2,500 words, but longer pieces will also be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: *review_editor@platypus1917.org*. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

THE PLATYPUS REVIEW IS FUNDED BY:

The University of Chicago Student Government
Loyola University of Chicago
School of the Art Institute of Chicago Student Government
New School University
The Platypus Affiliated Society

Supplement to Issue #38 / August 2011

Staff

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Sunit Singh

MANAGING EDITOR
Nathan L. Smith

EDITORS
Spencer A. Leonard
Pam C. Nogales
Laurie Rojas
Laura Schmidt
Bret Schneider
Ben Shepard

COPY EDITORS
Zebulon York Dingley
Jamie Keesling

PROOF EDITORS
Jeremy Cohan
Edward Remus

DESIGNER
Benjamin Koditschek

WEB EDITOR
Gabriel Gaster

influence on military opposition, and on Stalinism. It is also necessary to pay serious attention to Ryazanov's politics and not just his stature as a famous historian, and to take Parvus seriously in spite of the fact that he turned into a class traitor.

It is also necessary to actually read Kautsky. People represent me as wanting to revive Kautsky—I do not want to revive Kautsky, but a *part* of Kautsky, namely the serious, long-term attention he paid to the idea that before you get to the point of being able to pose the question of power, you have to build up a movement in non-revolutionary times. I do not in the least wish to revive Kautsky's idiot anglophilia, his belief that Britain was not an imperialist country, his belief that imperialism was simply a product of the ascendancy of the aristocracy and bureaucracy in Germany and France. I do not wish to revive Kautsky's belief in the separation of powers as a normal feature of modern society that has to be maintained, or that the society of the future will be divided into nation-states. Nonetheless, it is impossible to understand Lenin without understanding Kautsky. It is also impossible to understand anything that Trotsky wrote after 1917 without understanding what Lenin had to say about the party.

These are preliminary points; my substantive points are three. First, there is not as large a gap between Trotsky's writings during the high period of the Comintern and post-war Trotskyism as is commonly believed. It really is the case that the movement which Trotsky set out to build was the movement which attempted to reconstruct itself, with weaknesses and problems, after World War II.

My second point follows from this: It is necessary to critique Trotskyism. What we have is this wilderness of competing sects, none of which can speak to the masses, for whom the state of division on the revolutionary left looks a bit like the Monty Python joke in *Life of Brian* about the "Judean People's Front" and the "People's Front of Judea." Moreover, the critique of Trotskyism has to be based not in theory but in concrete, voted-on, programmatic, organizational positions. On that basis, if we actually asked where sectarianism comes from, it is clearly not something that is peculiar to Trotskyism. The particular form of sectarianism that characterizes Trotskyism also characterizes anti-revisionist communism, including all forms of Maoism and Stalinist politics. I believe the Stalin Society in England, for instance, has broken into three divergent groups.

This fissile character of the revolutionary left has its roots, it seems to me, in the Comintern, and specifically in the Comintern's formal decisions. First, there is the Comintern's justification of the split in the Second International, that it had to happen because by splitting they would purify the movement. But this had already been disproved when Stalin and Kamenev entered into negotiations with the Mensheviks in the spring of 1917 and when Zinoviev and Kamenev denounced the October Revolution in the bourgeois press in October 1917. The bourgeoisie will find people to do its work even in the most acutely split revolutionary organizations.

Then there is the Comintern's *Theses on the Role of the Communist Party* 1920–1921,[8] which suggests that the Party will avoid the opportunism that paralyzed the Second International through a system of bureaucratic control. It preserves the central committee members' right of veto by a system of purging the organization of accidental and non-proletarian members. The Communist parties under this Bolshevized regime descended into corruption and control by the bourgeoisie far more rapidly than Social Democracy under the democratic, loose regime given to it by Marx, Engels, and Wilhelm Liebknecht. After these decisions of the Comintern, the space no longer existed to do what Lenin did in the spring of 1917 and fight against the central committee through the public press. The form of bureaucratic centralism that won out in the Comintern is more appropriate to corruption by the bourgeoisie than the forms of organization that existed before 1918.

Of course, these speculations assume a mass party. Today, the method of bureaucratic centralism, when applied to a small group, means that any serious difference inevitably leads to a split, irrespective of the depth or permanence of the difference. Thus, every Trotskyist organization is necessarily violently fissile.

In spite of what I have just said, it is important in terms of reconstructing the Left today that we understand there is not a Trotskyist "original sin" that somehow invalidates the experience of Trotskyism since World War II. There *are* things that a small revolutionary movement can learn from its experiences. Admittedly, most of these are negative lessons. They deserve recognition and study, nonetheless.

Richard Rubin: To address the question of the legacy of Trotskyism at a Platypus convention, one must steer between Scylla and Charybdis. Two opposed dangers confront one: to reduce Trotskyism and its history to merely the further elaboration of the history of "the dead left," or to collapse Platypus itself into a continuation of Trotskyism, as a sort of "neo-Trotskyism." Both tendencies clearly exist within Platypus. The description of this panel, which asks what "Trotskyism [has] made of Trotsky's Marxism," exhibits the first tendency. The implication is, unfortunately, that Trotskyism is merely a caricature of Trotsky, who is assumed to be a great Marxist, "the last man standing of the Second International radicals." The Trotskyists tend to be dismissed as mere epigones, a view that one must admit is sometimes implicit in the self-conception of Trotskyists themselves. This esteem for Trotsky but dismissal of Trotsky-*ism* is, I will argue, erroneous.

The question I wish to raise is how one can take seriously the history of Trotskyism, even assert its centrality to the history of the 20th century Left, without being a Trotskyist. To understand this possibility, which in fact lies at the heart of the Platypus project, I must raise an important distinction between "revolutionary continuity" and "historical memory." Platypus, unlike actual Trotskyists, does not believe that "revolutionary continuity" is possible now. On the contrary, it is premised as a project on the notion of a fundamental *dis*-continuity in politics, "the death of the Left." We understand ourselves as the result of this profound revolutionary discontinuity and see our main task as the understanding and amplification of that discontinuity, in the hope of making it recognizable as a problem.

For this task, the history of Trotskyism, or rather its failure, is not a marginal subplot, as might appear to be the case given the ineffectiveness of Trotskyism as actual politics, but lies at the center of the story. It is what did *not* happen, and why, that matters to us. Trotskyism is the most important thing that "did not happen" for most of the 20th century. It is the ghost of that ever-deferred revolution that haunts us. (Žižek refers somewhere to Trotskyists as the Hölderlins of the Left.)

This view of Trotskyism is, of course, in direct contradiction with Trotskyism's view of itself. Thus in an article by Jason Wright, published in *Platypus Review* 35, the assertion is made that "Trotsky's policy was always to put program first."[9] While this is an accurate description of a political tradition for which I have deep respect, it is one from which Platypus represents a fundamental break. I shall not, therefore, be addressing the question, "What is to be done?" but rather, "How did we get here?" Ultimately, indeed, the point is to change the world, and in this Platypus completely agrees with a classical Marxist tradition, but for us the intellectual tools to change the world no longer lie as immediately at hand as they once did for our predecessors.

"Trotskyism" as a political tradition no doubt has an indefinite shelf life. A generation from now, "Trotskyists" may still be insisting on the "centrality of a program"—but a generation from now, the British monarchy may well exist, too. Just as the British monarchy no longer means what it once did, "Trotskyism," despite outward continuity, has also undergone an essential transformation. It is not at all clear that "the defense of the North Korean deformed workers state" in 2011 means the same thing as defense of the Soviet Union did in 1939—or even the defense of North Korea in 1950—even though the logic that led to one might seem to be the same as the logic that leads to the other. To continue the analogy: The abolition of the British monarchy in the 21st century would no longer have the significance that its abolition in the 17th century did. These questions within the political tradition of Trotskyism are difficult to pose. Indeed, from a classical Trotskyist perspective, what Platypus most esteems in Trotskyism is perverse—not its self-proclaimed, unyielding, revolutionary militance, but rather its role as critic of the Left, from the left.

Trotskyism was born as a response to a twofold historical catastrophe, Stalinism and Nazism. The heroic—one might say the deeply *ethical*—character of Trotskyism stems from its refusal to accept the necessity of accommodation to defeat. If many a mid-century intellectual responded to Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and the Gulag with Petronius Arbiter's reflection, "*si recte calculum ponas, ubique naufragium est* [if you rightly cast the reckoning, shipwreck is everywhere]," Trotskyism presented itself as a raft. Still imbued with a rational 19th century optimism and an Enlightenment faith in humanity and the working class, it insisted on the accidental character of the 20th century. An emphasis on the accidental character of an entire historical epoch, though, sits uneasily with Marxist materialism. It raises difficult questions about the role of ideas and intellectuals in history, particularly the role of Marxist intellectuals in the development of Marxism. As such, a reflection on Trotskyism is also necessarily a broader reflection on both the necessity and limitations of Marxism as an approach to history.

For a representative of an avowedly Marxist organization, to emphasize the limitations of Marxism may seem odd, but Platypus is not interested in promoting a sterile orthodoxy. I, for one, would not be offended if someone were to apply to me or to Platypus the label *Worker's Vanguard* once applied to Joseph Hansen: "honest revisionist." Marxism is necessary for us, because in the last two hundred years no better way of thinking about human beings and the alienated social world they have made has been developed. To give up on Marxism is to give up on making sense of history. Marxism may not, however, be fully adequate to the task. It may be merely an approximation. In particular, Marxism may not be able to give a fully adequate account of its own history. Thus, for example, the notion that Marxism is simply the intellectual expression of the class struggle generated by capitalism or that political struggles within the Marxist movement are the reflections of class struggles within the party is, I think, a completely inadequate notion. While I would, for example, agree with the position of Cannon and Trotsky against Shachtman, I do not think that the positions of the latter were a manifestation of some "petty bourgeois" character. This is bad sociology and even worse intellectual history. The 20th century has been a confusing time to be a socialist. Often fundamental values such as socialism and democracy have seemed to be—and, indeed, perhaps have been—counterposed. We need to acknowledge this openly and understand the fractured and tragic history of Marxism as resulting from fractures within Marxism, and not simply as deviations from Marxism. In this view the split, for example, between Shachtman and Cannon is not merely the falling off from Marxism of the former but an expression of the disintegration of Marxism itself. Such disintegration may force choices on us, and though some of those choices may be better than others, the fact of the necessity of a choice remains tragic.

I mentioned earlier that Trotskyism was born of defeat, specifically the triumph of Stalinism and Nazism. Trotsky saw these two catastrophes as intertwined, since Stalinist misleadership certainly paved the way for the German catastrophe, but also because both Stalinism and Nazism were the result of the failed German revolution. Hitler and Stalin were the product of a world in which Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Lenin, and ultimately Trotsky himself failed. But this raises a deeper problem, for there are two distinct types of "failure" here. One might call one the "German question" and the other the "Russian question." The first question is how it is that the strongest Marxist party in the world could betray its own revolution. The second is how a revolution based on profoundly democratic and emancipatory impulses could lead to a totalitarian nightmare.

The 20th century has provided us with several examples, beginning with the Bolshevik revolution, of the successful abolition of capitalist social relations in significant chunks of the planet, but none of them has come up even to the standards of bourgeois democracy in terms of political freedom, and the human price of the successful abolition of capitalist social relations has often been horrific—in some cases, such as the Khmer Rouge or North Korea, so much so that it is hard to see any progressive value at all in it. On the other hand, quite the opposite of what Marx envisioned, there has never been a successful revolution abolishing capitalist social relations in any advanced capitalist country. Indeed, it is precisely in those countries where the working class wields the greatest potential power that the prospect seems most distant, although since this certainly cannot be a result of objective conditions, one must attribute it to the power of that mysterious force, bourgeois ideology.

Trotsky, Trotskyists, and non-Trotskyist Marxists have certainly tried to grapple with these problems. But instead of recapitulating their answers, let me rather outline what I see as the history of the Left in the 20th century, from a Platypus perspective, and the role of Trotskyism in this story—not because Trotskyism provides the answers, but rather because it directs us to the most difficult and essential questions. Although the heroic period of the Left is certainly the early 20th century, particularly the late teens and early 1920s, I will focus on a later period. The central period in this narrative is the mid 20th century, from 1933 to 1968. Two further periods, one from 1968 to 1989 and one from 1989 to the present might also be distinguished, but I will address these later.

If World War I marked a fundamental divide in the history of the Left, World War II did also, but in quite a different way. The First World War led to a radicalization that profoundly threatened the capitalist world order, while the Second World War had much more ambiguous effects. On the one hand, fascism, the most brutal form of bourgeois class rule, was defeated, but on the other, both bourgeois democracy and Stalinism emerged strengthened. As such, the Allied victory in the Second World War was both a victory for the Enlightenment, of which both bourgeois democracy and Stalinism were ambivalent and degenerate representatives, and at the same time a defeat of revolutionary possibility. The Second World War did *not*, as Trotsky had anticipated, throw both the advanced capitalist world and Stalinism into profound crisis. Instead, it led into a new era in which the former was stabilized and the latter expanded. Both of these threw Trotskyism into a series of theoretical crises, or in some cases a simple denial of reality to mask a sense of theoretical inadequacy.

If the post-war world has witnessed massively attenuated inter-imperialist competition, marked by the hegemony of a single imperialist power—the United States—which took upon itself the role of organizer of global capitalism, it has also witnessed decolonization. The end of formal European empires triggered no radical upheavals in the metropoles and, while radical nationalist verbiage was common, in retrospect it must be admitted that the effect of decolonization has been conservative over the last half century. Free of direct colonial rule, capitalist exploitation of what is now called the Third World with the assistance of local brown- and black-skinned elites is more rampant than ever. At the beginning of the process, however, it seemed quite different to many people, and Trotskyists as much as Maoists would turn out to be prone to illusions about Third World nationalism, so that a political tradition originally based on socialist internationalism and the rejection of "socialism in one country" prostituted itself before any number of nationalisms.

Furthermore, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, developments in both the advanced capitalist world where Trotskyism was concentrated and also in the Stalinist world would prove confusing. After the initial dramatic expansion of Stalinism in the aftermath of the Second World War, Stalinism would after 1956 begin to liberalize somewhat and become multi-polar. Stalinism was no longer a single, exceptional historical experience growing out of the tragic degeneration of a world-historical revolution, but seemed rather a family of political types. In the advanced capitalist world, when the Left began to revive in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it did so via a "New Left" that wanted to bypass the supposedly sterile political debates of the 1930s. As the Sixties heated up, the Great Dionysian moment of 1968 seemed to promise, to many otherwise sane leftists, a Revolution by Pure Ecstasy, a notion that, despite decades of disabuse by Freud's Reality Principle, is still with us.

By 1968 Trotskyism had for the most part simply become a variety of New Leftism with Trotskyist characteristics. In many cases whether someone became a Trotskyist or a Maoist was probably a matter of accident. What had disappeared, though, was Trotskyism's role as critic of the Left. To the extent that this role was maintained, and I am thinking particularly of the honorable exception of the Spartacist League, it led almost necessarily to a political style that seemed hyper-sectarian. Furthermore, as the period following 1968 saw a steady decline of the Left on a worldwide scale and, a couple of decades later, witnessed the peaceful disintegration of Stalinism, even the sense of belonging to a potentially revolutionary moment was lost. Nowadays, to all but the cognoscenti, the differences between, say, the ISO and the WWP as descendants of "Trotskyism," and the RCP as a descendant of Stalinism, must seem rather arcane. The proliferation of "parties" therefore appears as merely a psychological pathology of the Left, rather than a reflection of a significant history that has become multiply obscured.

Finally, let me say something about 1989. I was a young college student in the period 1989–1991, which proved to be an illuminating moment for me: It was, in fact, the moment I became convinced that Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism was fundamentally correct. I am still astonished that so few other people recognized this. This period was, however, a negative illumination, for if it justified Trotsky via a somewhat long historical detour, it was self-evidently a defeat. Nowhere did the working class rise to the defense of collectivized property and, in one country, Poland, a mass movement with a working class base was mobilized against the Stalinist bureaucracy. The ambivalent aspect of this restoration of capitalism is, of course, that in most cases it was accompanied by an expansion of political liberties, which, ironically, actually makes possible the advocacy of Trotskyist politics that was impossible for decades under Stalinism. The disappearance of Stalinism as an active political movement has had a paradoxical effect on Trotskyism, since one can no longer distinguish oneself by anti-Stalinism, which is all but universal on the Left, even among former Stalinists. But at the same time, Stalinist attitudes persist on the Left, even in an "anti-Stalinist" guise.

What then remains of Trotskyism, if not as a possible political practice, at least as a core historical memory? The short answer, I think, goes directly to the possibility of saving the memory of the Bolshevik revolution. Only Trotskyism provides an intellectually honest tradition on the Left through which one can redeem the Bolshevik revolution from both Stalinism and Social Democracy. The alternative is to dismiss the Bolshevik revolution as a gigantic mistake. As the Bolshevik revolution recedes and its hegemony over discourse on the Left disappears, the tendency is indeed to dismiss its continuing relevance.

The issue is no longer one of defending the Soviet Union, but rather of understanding its memory. The Bolshevik revolution is the great trauma of Marxism. On the one hand, it is the moment at which Marxism became a world-historical force and the hitherto merely theoretical possibility of the abolition of capitalism was raised to the level of actual possibility. But in another sense, it also represented a loss of innocence for Marxism, as Marxists for the first time were confronted with the reality of wielding state power. Of all the various Marxist traditions that have grappled with that experience, Trotskyism represents most fully—even if still inadequately—the consciousness of the ambivalence of that memory as both an emancipatory moment and subsequent defeat.

This is why Trotskyism matters to Platypus.

Responses

BP: Mike Macnair presented Trotskyism in terms of sectarianism, but his formulation seems extreme considering how, in Marxism, splits have always been inevitable among revolutionaries, and they have been handled in quite different ways. In Stalinist organizations splits were handled by terror—hardly preferable to Trotskyist sectarianism. In Social Democracy, from the moment that it abandoned the revolutionary project but continued its claim to be part of the Left, splits have been handled with acute repression. In this regard, the Labour Party in the U.K. and the New Democratic Party come to mind.

Trotskyism has distinguished itself in this respect. I would cite Cannon and the SWP in the 1940 split with Shachtman, during which Trotsky urged Cannon to use this as a vehicle for education, for development of cadres. Cannon's personal inclination was for a full split, but he decided to debate Shachtman thoroughly, even though he felt he was crawling through the mud in doing so. I think the question of splits has to be posed in a more holistic manner than simply seeing it as a "Trotskyist problem." The problem can be traced all the way back to Marx in the 19th century.

Richard, you said you were not interested in the question of what is to be done, but the question, "How did we get here?" To me, those questions seem inextricably linked; I'm not convinced they can be asked separately.

MM: The historical record strongly suggests that it is possible to get from grouplets to large parties by way of unification. Now, if the result is based on wholly unprincipled politics, then it will explode. The Rifondazione Communista in Italy, for instance, after an anti-revisionist split from the CPI (Communist Party of Italy), opened its doors to the Trotskyists and Maoists. It rapidly grew from small groups to a party of 100,000 with significant electoral representation and a real dynamic of creating a movement. Then, of course, it blows up over—God help us—the same bloody question of "defeatism" and "imperialism," the 1940 question. Another classic example of failed unification is the Scottish Socialist Party, a fusion of microscopic Trotskyist groups that became a relatively large organization. It blew apart over bureaucratic centralism, albeit in a particular way: They were hiding the fact that their leader Tommy Sheridan was going to sex clubs, because it was inconsistent with their sex-negative, anti-prostitution line. It blew up in their faces as soon as the Murdoch press got to know about it, which turned into a complete catastrophe.

Nonetheless, the Gotha fusion enabled the mass Social-Democratic Party, and the fusion of 1903 enabled the RSDLP (Russian Social Democratic Labor Party). In spite of the fact that they split into public factions at that very conference, the continued common identification with a single party enabled that party to grow to mass support in 1912–1914. And so on.

RR: It is true that there are Trotskyist parties that seemed to acquire a semi-mass character. You have the example of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, etc. But in all those cases the problem is that what you actually have are parties that, whatever their label, function as social-democratic parties.

I believe that, given the present low state of the Left, in a debate between a neo-Kautskyan perspective and a Trotskyist perspective, both are doomed to be "sectarian." But, if there were a revival of the Left on a significant scale, I actually think the predominant conception, given the history we have been through, would be some sort of neo-Kautskyan position, and this would not necessarily be good, because it would essentially recapitulate a failed history. If you are saying that the most one can expect under present conditions is left social democracy, that may be true, but then one should put it that way, rather than saying that left social democracy would be some sort of revolutionary movement.

"Responses" continues on page 4

MM: As far as the current, practical political line of the bulk of Trotskyists—and I honorably exempt the Spartacists and the IBT—Bernstein looks massively to their left. Today, Bernstein would be to the left of the British SWP, judged by their current line.

JW: Comrade Macnair has been making me dizzy today. I heard that Trotsky came over to Lenin's position on the party question in 1917, and I agree, but I don't know how that reconciles with the idea that the Bolshevik-Menshevik split of 1903 is a product of Stalinist falsification.

MM: No, I argued that the claim that it was more than a factional split is a product of the Stalin school of falsification.

JW: But you also argued that incremental electoralism, Bernsteinism, the idea of the "party of the whole class," was not susceptible to bourgeois influences. What do you think Lenin meant when he spoke of the "labor lieutenants of capital?"

MM: I did not claim that the German Social Democratic Party, or the Second International in general, was impervious to bourgeois influences. My point was that Stalinism proved more susceptible to bourgeois influences than the earlier form of organization.

JW: I simply don't think that's true. The degeneration of the Soviet Union happened under incredible international pressures, due to the isolation of an incredibly backward agricultural economy and the incredibly low level of the peasantry. Then there is the Civil War, the imperialists attacking and trying to strangle the Revolution—these conditions ultimately allow Stalinism to conquer, even though it does not conquer unopposed.

Speaking of sectarianism, Rosa Luxemburg was often dismissed as a "sectarian," as well. But the tragedy of Luxemburg, what made her "sectarian" in a certain sense, is that she was not convinced of Lenin's position earlier than she was. There were objective conditions against her as well, but the fact that she came over so late to Lenin's conception was the root of her tragedy.

I also want to address Platypus. The history of Marxism is a tragedy. The whole history of the Left is a tragedy in some sense. It is a huge tragedy that Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals fails. It's a tragedy that the Paris Commune is drowned in blood. It's a tragedy that we end up with the Stalin turn. I agree with Bryan: You cannot separate the question, "How did we get here?" from the question, "What is to be done?" We have to remember that the reason that there are people dying in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria right now is because of the class society that we live in—because of capitalism. There are people starving all around the world. Workers are dying in factories. I think that's where you start. Once you philosophically divorce Marxism it from the practical, programmatic aspect, I think you lose sight of that. What was consistent about Cannon, and one of the things I admire him for, is that revolution remained on the agenda for him in 1953. And if you are not starting from the point that revolution is on the agenda, then what is the fucking point?

RR: I want to make two points. I'm not trying to sidestep "what is to be done?" as a problem—of course I recognize that it is an essential question. I don't really know what is to be done, whereas I have a better sense of how we got here. There are people who know exactly what is to be done; if they are convinced that joining the International Bolshevik Tendency is the answer, they join the IBT.

Second, there was something I wanted to clear up. I was the person in Platypus who said Trotsky was out of place in the post-war world, but I feel the use of that statement in the introduction and description of this panel to be misleading. I said this originally in the context of a talk at the Left Forum about Trotsky and Walter Benjamin, in which I drew the analogy about Voltaire and Rousseau and the French Revolution. Voltaire and Rousseau both died in 1778, 11 years before the French Revolution, yet clearly the French Revolution is, in a profound way, the heir of both their ideas, and this would have been obvious at the time. I wasn't attempting to claim that Trotsky is somehow irrelevant to the post-war world. Rather, I meant to say that when one thinks of Trotsky and his political experience, it is embedded in that interwar period, the period from the 1920s to his assassination in 1940.

Trotsky (left) with Lenin (center) and Kamenev in 1919.

Q & A

There is a lineage of the modern right, specifically neoconservatism, that has its roots in Trotskyism. What is it about Trotskyism and the sort of questions it poses that its ex-followers end up as central figures in both the far left and the far right? Is there something about Trotskyism that made that phenomenon possible?

RR: At one point in the 1990s I was working as a cameraman for a friend who was a founding member of the Socialist Workers Party, and of the Communist League of America, David Weiss. David was making a movie about Trotsky's life, and he interviewed Al Glotzer, who had been Trotsky's bodyguard. Glotzer spoke quite glowingly about Trotsky, yet Glotzer had become, along with Shachtman, basically a neoconservative in his politics. At some point the Cannon-Shachtman split came up in the interview and, suddenly, it was as though it were 1939 all over again. So this is an interesting question, as it points to or suggests something like a latent character of Trotskyism.

There's a movie called *Arguing the World* about four Jewish ex-Trotskyists, the most right-wing of whom was Irving Kristol, the most left-wing was Irving Howe. The movie shows the arc of their rightward trajectory. One of the things they talk about is how there were two bays at City College: one for Stalinists and one for Trotskyists. What you clearly sense is that the Trotskyist bay is characterized by a culture of freedom of discussion.

One thing that's always fascinated me is that Maoists, when they abandon Maoism, almost always seem to become plain-old liberals. Trotskyists are more likely to become cranky neoconservatives. I rather respect that about Trotskyists. While I don't want to defend neoconservatism, I think this tendency represents the disgust with the dishonesty and philistinism of much of the Left. I think you can see that in someone like Christopher Hitchens. One thing about Trotskyism that I did not specifically emphasize, because it is not directly political, is the "non-philistine" character of Trotskyism, compared to what I would call a Stalinist tradition of philistinism. That's something people on the Left also have to think about: the culture of intellectual debate, and what kind of social milieu is being generated by a certain style of politics. Even though the neoconservatives don't actually represent a continuation of Trotskyism in a political sense, there is a way in which they do represent a continuation of a certain style of involved debate and culture.

MM: I think this tendency you have pointed to is simply a peculiarity of American politics. I don't know what caused it, but it isn't what happens to ex-Trots in Europe. Overwhelmingly, they either become Stalinists, or they become social democrats. Some of this depends on which is the mass party. If the Communist Party is large they tend to gravitate toward Stalinists. The people who have tended to become rightists are ex-Euro-communists. So, to me, this Trotskyist-turned-neocon thing just seems to be something about the dynamics of American politics that does not apply outside North America.

In 1976, Argentina suffered a devastating military coup that killed 30,000 people and forced hundreds of thousands into exile, but by 1982, the working class organized a general strike against the dictatorship. When the dictatorship invaded the Falkland Islands, much of the Left sided with the dictatorship when the British military subsequently attacked. Are you saying that just because the military action against a dictator is imperialist, revolutionary morality charges the Left with siding with a dictatorship?

JW: We were dual defeatist!

MM: I agree that dual defeatism was the right response to the South Atlantic War, although at the time I was persuaded by the position that Comrade Wright introduced in his principled speech, that the question was one of fighting on the colonized country as opposed to the imperialist country. Supporting the military victory of the colonized country was a touchstone of revolutionary morality. I don't actually think that anymore.

There is a great example that Trotsky gave. In the case of Ethiopia, the Trotskyists in Britain initially came to the right answer, which was that Haile Selassie was a British client, and that it was an inter-imperialist proxy war between Britain and Italy, and therefore dual defeatism was the correct position. Trotsky said, no, the victory for Haile Selassie would be an advance for the revolution. I think that was a mistake.

Jason, how does a blow to U.S. imperialism today lead to more possibilities for revolution in the U.S. and abroad? In what sense, in the history of Trotskyism, have you seen a blow to U.S. imperialism leading to more revolutionary possibilities?

JW: Vietnam—the U.S. defeat in Vietnam had reverberations that propelled the New Left: strikes, activity in the workers' movement, and radicalization. This was energized by the Civil Rights Movement too, of course, but also by the fact that the U.S. was losing the Vietnam War. Maoism, for example, started to look sexy when the Viet Cong were fighting the U.S. to a standstill.

MM: I am a little skeptical of that, for two reasons. There's an overlap between the rise of Civil Rights and the rise of wildcat strikes in the states in the early 1960s—but it wasn't obvious that the U.S. was losing the Vietnam War until at least the Tet Offensive in 1968, and probably not until later. So it seems to me that the war provided an opportunity for the Left to reach out to wider, extra-Left forces because of the political illegitimacy of the war. It posed an opportunity to undermine and attack the coherence of the American armed forces. But if you think about when Vietnam was actually won and the tanks rolled into Saigon in 1975, that's actually the trigger for the break-up of the New Communist Movement, the moment at which the New Left loses its élan.

RR: I also think there are two separate questions that are being conflated. First, there is the question of the empirical probability of a defeated U.S. imperialism leading directly to a revolutionary situation, which I think is highly unlikely. Second, there is the sense that it is one's revolutionary duty to advocate for the defeat of U.S. imperialism no matter what. I think that these two questions are separate, because there might be a difference between "revolutionary morality" and one's self-perception as a revolutionary. I think that positions advocating the defeat of U.S. imperialism are more about maintaining people's own sense of themselves as revolutionaries than the likelihood of an actual empirical prediction. I don't think that they actually believe that the defeat of U.S. imperialism is on the agenda simply because the latest war venture is not going well.

The possibility of revolution is immanent in capitalist society, in the sense that the objective conditions for socialism are more than overripe in a place like the United States. So, really, the obstacles are in people's heads, and the question of whether those obstacles can ever be overcome is a very difficult one to answer. But the obstacles to revolution don't have to do with the development of the productive forces. The tragedy of the absence of left politics in the U.S., or Europe—and, really, the decay of left politics worldwide over the past thirty or forty years—is completely different from the problem posed by Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals in France in the 1790s, when, really, I do not think the objective conditions existed.

BP: I tend to agree more with Jason on the question of U.S. imperialism. But how is revolution on the agenda? I agree with quite a bit of what Richard said, but I'd extend it. If you look around America, and around the world, it would be very hard for anybody on the Left to claim that revolution is not actually necessary. Is revolution on the agenda? Absolutely. It is overripe, and in that rottenness of the situation resides a great deal of the problem. But to the statement that there's no possibility for a revolutionary organization, as a historian, I would ask, "When has it been a good time to form a revolutionary organization?" If you want to go back centuries you will see that there were always incredible barriers. Now, circumstances are a little worse internationally, much worse domestically, but the fundamental question is the "distance from" and "degeneration of" 1917. But it has never been, and it never will be, an ideal time to form a revolutionary organization. If you keep waiting for the precipitous moment, history will pass you by.

JW: I want to clarify what I said about Vietnam, because I think it came across as a little mechanical. I believe it was significant that, where there had been and continues to be a strong strain of isolationism and pacifism in the U.S.—for instance, in response to World War I—in the 1960s and 1970s you actually had a split in the anti-war movement between the "Get out now," "Bring the boys home," "Save our troops" socialists and people like Maoists and the comrades of the Spartacist League at the time, who were actually calling for the defeat of U.S. imperialism. That is a significant development in terms of subjective consciousness, in terms of where the revolutionary will lay. What is needed is the will to advance subjective consciousness and to build a revolutionary party in the face of what are many and continuous opportunities that have presented themselves.

There is a difference between saying that there is a necessity for revolution and saying that revolution is a practical prospect, or even saying that forming an organization of people committed to revolution is a prospect. I think we would have to disentangle these different notions from this ambiguous idea of revolution "being on the agenda." Platypus as a project is about the possibility of putting revolution back on the agenda, but the issue is how to get there from here. Commitment to revolution and the recognition of its necessity is one thing, but the question of how we make it an actual, practical prospect is quite different. If we agree that the objective conditions are ripe, or even overripe, but subjective conditions are nowhere near ready, that seems to immediately raise the question concerning programmatic continuity. If the subjective conditions are so underdeveloped, how can one take for granted that the program of the Communist Manifesto *or of the* Transitional Program *is still applicable in the immediate sense, in that they provide the proper political platform for us today, and therefore all we need to do is organize around an already established program?*

MM: Whether, and in what way, revolution is on the agenda is the fundamental question. There is a difference between saying revolution is on the agenda in a historical sense, because it is immanent to capitalism, and saying revolution is on the agenda in the "medium-term" sense or the immediate sense. In the mid-term, the workers' movement was certainly on the rise between the 1870s and the 1970s, and in the immediate sense, Lenin gave us a wonderful test: "The ruling class cannot go on in the old way, and the masses will not go on in the old way." We've actually just seen, in North Africa, what it means for revolution to be on the agenda: The ruling class cannot go on in the old way and the masses will not go in the old way.

How do we know Trotskyism is not a dead tradition? How would we know if it really were dead?

JW: I think Trotskyism is still relevant, and I think that we revolutionaries should still identify with the movement Trotsky built, because I think the fundamental questions that he was addressing, the fundamental questions that the living continuity of Marxism addresses, are the questions that the world still poses to us today. We are still in an imperialist epoch and these are the best answers, the best solutions, that have been discovered so far. To dismiss them because of historical pessimism throws out the baby with the bathwater.

MM: In terms of what's going on in North Africa, the most probable outcome is defeat, because there is no revolutionary leadership. But the error of the Trotskyists (not necessarily Trotsky's error) is to disregard what led to February, 1917, which enabled the Bolshevik party to provide revolutionary leadership.

We have seen Trotskyists in revolutionary crises: The Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas of Moreno failed the test of revolutionary crisis in Argentina in 1976. The POR Combate in the early 1970s failed the test in Bolivia. The Trotskyist Left in Portugal failed in 1974–1976. But if we ask why they failed those tests, it is not primarily a matter of their political errors. They simply did not have enough forces. They imagined that Bolshevism was microscopic in February, 1917, just like the little groups we have now. But the Bolshevik party numbered 17,000 in February, 1917, at which time it was completely illegal. That's not a small organization; under illegal conditions, that's a mass party.

I hope that revolution is not on the immediate agenda in the United States, or in Europe, because if it is, the outcome will certainly be a very serious defeat for the working class. It does not matter how pure and militant each individual group is, nor how much personal will each has. As long as we have small individual groups and not parties of hundreds of thousands, any revolution that comes will be defeated.

We have time, perhaps, to set out on the road of building those parties which could meet the tasks of revolution when the ruling class cannot go on in the old way, and the masses will not go on in the old way.

BP: Revolutionary organizations form in non-revolutionary situations. Yes, if revolution were declared now it would be a massive defeat for the working class and for the Left. But what revolutionary organizations do in that situation is not simply proclaim that they are there to lead the revolution, but carry out the work that brings a new set of circumstances onto the horizon.

So is Trotskyism dead? How would we know?

There are traditions that die, and then there are traditions that should die. My sense is that Stalinism is a dead tradition. It had a long death march but I think it has been buried. That doesn't mean that it's been vanquished as a political force in every locale. But Trotskyism is not of that order at all. Its explanations, its historical record, its theoretical insights, and its programmatic articulations, strike me as the living continuity of Marxism and Leninism in a particular epoch. And we are still in that epoch of capitalist decay, living in the shadow of what Stalinism has done to the revolutionary left, to its promise and possibility.

RR: I don't think that Trotskyism is a dead tradition. I think it's one that unfortunately has become opaque, but that is a different problem.

I think that if Trotskyism were in fact a dead tradition, that would mean that Marxism is a dead tradition. I would say the same thing about Marxism as about Trotskyism—it has become opaque. Trotskyism is more opaque than Marxism because it's more specific to, and symptomatic of, the 20th century. Thus it is tied up fundamentally with the question of the Bolshevik revolution and Stalinism.

We only know if a tradition is dead in a negative sense, that is, as things get more barbaric and qualitatively worse. A tradition can be hopelessly obscured, buried so to speak. Its validity is not gone, yet it is inaccessible to people. An obscure, buried tradition is different than a dead one. The question is about accessibility to the meaning of Trotskyism and Marxism and how we disinter what is buried but not yet dead. |**PR**

Transcribed by Ryan Hardy.

---

1. James P. Cannon, "The Degeneration of the Communist Party and the New Beginning," in *The First Ten Years of American Communism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 29-30. Originally published in 1954. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1954/fych01.htm>.
2. Victor Serge, *Resistance* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1989), 35.
3. Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (London: Bolshevik Publications, 1998), 7. Available online at <http://www.bolshevik.org/tp/IBT_TP_0_Preface.html>.
4. James Roberston and Shirley Stout, "For Black Trotskyism," (originally published in SWP Discussion Bulletin Vol. 24, No. 30, July 1963), reprinted in Marxist Bulletin 5 (Revised) (New York: Spartacist Publishing Company, 1994), 19. Available online at <http://www.bolshevik.org/history/ICL/For%20Black%20Trotskyism.html>.
5. External Tendency of the iSt, *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 2, "Marxism vs. Social Patriotism" (Toronto, 1984). Available online at <http://www.bolshevik.org/TB/tb2contents.html>.
6. *Workers Vanguard* No. 847, 29 April 2005. Available online at <http://www.icl-fi.org/english/wv/archives/oldsite/2005/IraqResistance-847.htm>.
7. Leon Trotsky, "Stalinism or Bolshevism," in *The Writings of Leon Trotsky* (1936-37) (New York: Pathfinder Press, Second Edition: 1978), 416. Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/08/stalinism.htm>.
8. "Theses on the Role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution," in *Second Congress of the Communist International: Minutes of the Proceedings*, 2 vols., trans. Bob Archer(London: New Park Publications, 1977 [1921]. Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch03a.htm>.
9. Jason Wright, "Trotsky's Marxism: 'The Point, however, is to Change It'," *Platypus Review* 35 (May 2011). Available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2011/05/05/trotsky's-marxism-"the-point-however-is-to-change-it">.

continuity with revolutionary Marxism, cannot be described as ruins. However marginal Cannon and his small army of Trotskyists were in the United States of 1929, 1934, or 1943, their capacity to chart a path mattered. From no more than five or six steeled proletarian Trotskyists in the coal yards of Minneapolis in 1932, for instance, emerged organizing drives among Teamsters that culminated in 7,000 truckers, helpers, warehousemen, and others flocking to the union banner in 1934. This, in turn, led to the Minneapolis General Strike, which saw workers refuse to be beaten into submission by the police and the vigilante forces of capitalism, and which turned Minneapolis into a union town, overturning more than a decade of the dominance of the open shop, scabs, stool pigeons, and the politics of subordination. Finally, it was this General Strike, among other such developments across the country, that spearheaded the drive to industrial unionism leading to the CIO breakthroughs of the Flint sit-downs and the great post-World War II strikes that brought black workers and immigrants into American trade unions in unprecedented numbers in the 1940s.

Our situation today is objectively better than the circumstances in which revolutionaries in the United States commenced their efforts to form a Communist Party in 1919. Our situation is objectively better, too, than the circumstances in which Cannon and his allies struggled to form a Trotskyist Left Opposition against both capitalist ascendance and a Stalinist stranglehold over the Left in 1929, or in which Vincent Dunne and Carl Skoglund, the two key Trotskyists in the Minneapolis trucking sector, started their organizing in 1931.

Yet we are subjectively impoverished. It is not a problem of the will to fight, evident in so many ways in the recent sporadic upheavals in the United States and Canada, and epitomized by the grass-roots rebellion in Wisconsin. Rather, the problem is a lack of leadership. The failure of the so-called Wisconsin idea to resist established power does not lie merely in the fact that objective conditions are arrayed against it. Indeed, perhaps the most critical component of the failure lay in the illusions leftists held about the Democratic Party and the barriers erected in the movement's path by an ossified labor bureaucracy.

What led to this crisis of leadership? The answer is complex, just as the failure of the intellectuals in our time is legion. They have proclaimed themselves progressives, even revolutionaries, while they embrace every atavistic and puerile pseudo-intellectual turn imaginable, so long as their fresh and new ideas repudiate the fundamentals of Marxism and Trotskyism, the inevitability of capitalism's decay and the necessity of hastening its demise with alternative structures of working-class power. At the very point that capitalism was extending its reach into global dominance, progressive intellectuals reached for theoretical refinements that denied the salience of economic relations, class struggle, and all explanations that could allow one to see the crisis of capitalism and its resolution in its wholeness, its totality. Instead, many progressive intellectuals became submerged in the postmodern moment, out of which they have yet to rear their befuddled heads. Meanwhile, their befuddlement has weakened a generation of potentially revolutionary thinkers.

Such a trend, itself embedded in Stalinism and the contradictions of capitalism's late 20th century developments, has broken revolutionary continuity, the only guide in the midst of disjuncture and change. Those who advocate aestheticizing Marxism reify innovation and endlessly fetishize revisionism in order to be clever. There is a sense that the past must always be dead and buried, and if it is not disposed of, something must be done decisively to dispense with this past. I sense a little of this in the rather assured notion of Platypus that Trotsky is as out of place in the post-World War II world as Voltaire or Rousseau would have been in the world after the French Revolution. Traditions die, of course, and things change: 2011 is not 1917, which was not 1848. That said, there are important, venerable truths that need to be recognized, addressed, and acted upon.

As the irrationalist kernel of postmodernism bloomed into a thousand weeds of obfuscation, Marxists had to return to the claims of reason associated with Voltaire, Rousseau, and the Enlightenment. These thinkers were not dispensed with, because they are the best of the class forces they spoke for. Diderot's statement that humanity will never be free until the last monarch is strangled with the entrails of the last priest is as true today as when it was uttered on the eve of the French Revolution. Marxism assimilates the best thought of the highest stages of cultures that may not be entirely in support of working class revolution and proletarian internationalism. It does not forget the accomplishments of the past civilizations it struggles constantly to transcend. This is one way in which it differs profoundly from so much of the current intellectual pretense.

We know this because we know the specters that haunt us now: capitalist crises and Stalinism. Confronting these specters necessitates addressing the specter of communism that, at one and the same time, has, in recent history, been in retreat, but which nevertheless poses the only decisive alternative to both of these components of our contemporary malaise. The specter of communism, first identified as such by Marx and Engels in 1848 and sustained through periodic uprisings of the insurgent working class in 1871 and 1917, can only be reborn in our time through recourse to the legacy of Leon Trotsky, who speaks for Marxism's rebirth in the era of Stalinist degeneration. Trotskyism is the historical continuity of Marxism and Leninism. This legacy, of course, harbors some miscues, some faltering steps, and many pretenders who have abused its venerable truths. But this legacy lives in the necessities of our time. The question, "What has Trotskyism made of Trotsky's Marxism?" can only be answered decisively when Trotsky's Marxism is actually built into what it was always advocating: a revolutionary party of proletarian internationalism, capable of not only challenging capitalism, but defeating it.

Jason Wright: Looking back on the early years of the Communist Party, James P. Cannon, the "Old Man" of American Trotskyism, observed:

> On the basis of a long historical experience, it can be written down as a law that revolutionary cadres, who revolt against their social environment and organize parties to lead a revolution, can—if the revolution is too long delayed—themselves degenerate.... But the same historical experience also shows that there are exceptions to this law too. The exceptions are the Marxists who remain Marxists, the revolutionists who remain faithful to the banner.... The ideas of Marxism, which create revolutionary parties, are stronger than the parties they create, and never fail to survive the fall. They never fail to find representatives in the old organizations to lead the work of reconstruction.
>
> These are the continuators of the tradition, the defenders of the orthodox doctrine.[1]

Trotskyism continued and developed Leninism through political combat with Stalinist revisionism, just as Leninism preserved the revolutionary core of Marxism in struggle against the social-imperialist lackeys of the Second International. In a poem written in 1935, Victor Serge described the heroic figures of the past as a "Constellation of Dead Brothers," stars in the sky at the midnight of the century, by which revolutionaries could steer a "course...set on hope."[2]

The Second International's conception of a "party of the whole class" produced Eduard Bernstein's passive incrementalism and, ultimately, the shameful vote for war credits on August 4, 1914. Lenin's break with these social imperialists marked the rebirth of genuine Marxism on the international level, just as the Left Opposition's critique of "socialism in one country" kept the flame of revolutionary socialism burning after the Communist International was destroyed by Stalinism in the late 1920s. This produced a cadre that eventually came to view "unity" with the Democratic Party of racism and imperialist war as their main aspiration. Even the reformists of the Second International circa 1914 condemned electoral support of "progressive" capitalist politicians. Today "unity" is common practice for almost all Stalinist and ex-Stalinist formations, including Comrade Macnair's CPGB, which prides itself on putting "tactical flexibility" above socialist principle.

In the 1950s, one of the leading figures of the international Trotskyist movement, Michel Pablo, following the lead of Isaac Deutscher, abandoned the struggle to forge independent Leninist parties on the grounds that a "New World Reality" had imparted a "revolutionary dynamic" to historical developments. "Pabloism" is a form of objectivism, assigning the tasks of revolutionaries to a disembodied "unfolding historical process." What social-democratic reformism, Stalinism, and Pabloism all have in common is a tendency to negate the importance of the subjective factor in history and deny the indispensable and central role of a politically conscious and active working class in socialist revolutionary transformation.

American Trotskyism began in 1928 when the degenerating Communist Party expelled those cadres who refused to denounce Lenin's partner—Trotsky—in the October Revolution of 1917. Cannon characterized his group's first five years as the "dog days" of the movement. But in 1934 the tiny Communist League of America led one of the three successful general strikes that launched a gigantic wave of class struggle that ultimately established industrial unionism across North America. Each of these mass strikes was led by "reds"—the Communist Party in San Francisco, A.J. Muste's American Workers Party in Toledo, and the Trotskyists in Minneapolis.

After fusing with Muste's group the Trotskyists managed their way into the Socialist Party that brought hundreds of new recruits to their movement. On New Years Day in 1938 the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) was launched in anticipation of the founding of the Fourth International later that year. The main document of the Fourth International—the *Transitional Program*—is among the most important, least appreciated, and least understood documents in the history of the Marxist movement. It distills the lessons of October 1917—the only successful workers' revolution in history. It outlines the struggle to mobilize the proletariat for the seizure of state power from fights for minimal reforms up to the creation of armed workers' defense guards and the expropriation of the bourgeoisie.

In 1998, the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) produced an annotated version of the *Transitional Program* to mark the 60th anniversary of its original publication. In our introduction we observed, "The centrality of the subjective factor in the struggle for socialism (i.e., a disciplined political vanguard of the proletariat) lies at the heart of Trotskyism."[3] Much has changed since 1938, but one thing that has not changed is that the future of humanity hinges on the creation of an internationalist revolutionary leadership for the working class and oppressed. In recent months events in both Egypt and Wisconsin have provided negative confirmation of this proposition. In both cases the skillful intervention of revolutionary parties rooted in the working class could have had immense impact on the consciousness of the newly politicized layers of the population and pushed the struggle far beyond what was achieved.

The decline of the ostensibly revolutionary left in the U.S. in the face of the rabidly anti-communist capitalist ideological offensive of the 1950s was to an extent offset by the rise of the New Left and the various movements of the oppressed, namely black struggles for social equality, the women's movement, and the gay rights movement. The failure of the "Old Left"— the Communist Party and the degenerated SWP—to exert much influence on the New Left does not reflect the irrelevance of Marxism, but rather the distance that separates these revisionists from the revolutionary Marxism they professed.

Enormous social pressure and the political isolation of American leftists in the 1950s had sapped the revolutionary capacity of the SWP's aging cadres. By the early 1960s, Cannon's party succumbed to the same revisionist objectivism they had previously criticized Pablo for, as they hailed both Castro's petty-bourgeois guerrillaism and the liberal pacifism of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

If all those who identified with the Fourth International had embraced positions like the SWP, it would indeed have meant the movement Trotsky created was dead. But within the SWP, revolutionary elements organized themselves as the Revolutionary Tendency (RT) and declared war on the revisionist rot eating away at the SWP. A 1963 RT document entitled "For Black Trotskyism" identified the connection between tailing the Castroites and political adaptation to the bourgeois liberal leadership of the Civil Rights Movement:

> In their 1961 Cuban question documents, the Majority made it clear that for them the Cuban Revolution and, by implication, in the Colonial Revolution as well, the revolutionary working class party is, prior to the revolution, a dispensable convenience.... By their extension of this line to include the Negro question in the U.S., the SWP Majority has made the most serious overt denial yet of a revolutionary perspective. What they have done is to *a priori* exclude themselves from struggling for the leadership of a most crucial section of the American working class.[4]

The RT put forth a program of "revolutionary integrationism" first developed by Richard Fraser, an SWP cadre who pointed out that American blacks do not constitute a separate nation, but rather a specially oppressed color caste forcibly segregated at the bottom of the working class.

In November 1963, a few months after expelling the Revolutionary Tendency, the SWP leadership sent groveling condolences to Jacqueline Kennedy on the occasion of the assassination of the chieftain of U.S. imperialism. This act spoke volumes about the distance that then separated the SWP from its Trotskyist past.

The core cadre of the RT went on to found the Spartacist League (SL), which has since degenerated. But in the 1960s and 1970s the SL not only defended the authentic political legacy of Leon Trotsky, but also made important extensions to it, including identifying Cuba as a deformed workers' state qualitatively similar to Mao's China or Tito's Yugoslavia. The revolutionary SL also argued for a class struggle perspective for black and women's liberation in opposition to the cross-class ideologies of Black Nationalism and feminism then popular in the New Left. The SL was also known for upholding the rights of lesbians, gays, and other sexual minorities, and explaining the connection between coercive state regulation of consensual sexual activity and the bourgeoisie's reliance on the nuclear family.

The SL was also distinguished by its refusal to give any electoral support to bourgeois or petty-bourgeois formations—including popular fronts like Salvador Allende's Unidad Popular in Chile. The Spartacists' forthright defense of the Soviet Union, China, and the other deformed workers' states against both imperialism and internal counterrevolution contrasted with that of the SWP and most of the rest of the self-proclaimed "Trotskyists" who embraced both Lech Walesa's counterrevolutionary Solidarnosc, and the CIA-funded Afghan Mujahideen, forefather of today's Taliban and al Qaeda.

One of the most important contributions of the Spartacist League was the creation of trade-union caucuses based on the *Transitional Program* as vehicles for developing revolutionary consciousness within the working class. SL supporters in the unions rejected the apolitical "rank and file" economism common to most of their competitors and instead waged a political struggle to win the most advanced workers to a revolutionary program. In a few important unions, such as the Communications Workers of America, National Maritime Union, and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, SL-supported caucuses gradually won recognition as the leading opposition to the union bureaucracy.

This work was abandoned by the SL as it degenerated in the 1980s, but the work continued in the ILWU by friends and supporters of the International Bolshevik Tendency. In 1984 an International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) supporter Howard Keylor initiated an 11-day boycott of a ship in San Francisco carrying South African cargo. This "illegal" action, the first political strike by American workers in decades, established a precedent for a series of similar labor actions, including one-day shutdowns of all West Coast ports in April 1999 in solidarity with Mumia Abu-Jamal, and a similar coast-wide action on May Day, 2008, to oppose the war in Iraq. These exemplary actions, which offer a glimpse of the power of a class-conscious workers' movement in the future, also demonstrate the potential for revolutionary work in the unions.

Steadfast opposition to the imperialist predations of one's "own" rulers, and the defense of any indigenous resistance to such attacks, offer a litmus test for Marxists. This policy, elaborated by Trotsky in response to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, is part of the living legacy of Bolshevism. A critical moment in the SL's degeneration came in 1983 when it responded to the bombing of a U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon with a call for saving the survivors. To the SL's social-patriotic demand, "Marines Out of Lebanon, Now, Alive!" we counterposed, "Imperialists Out of Lebanon—By Any Means Necessary!"[5]

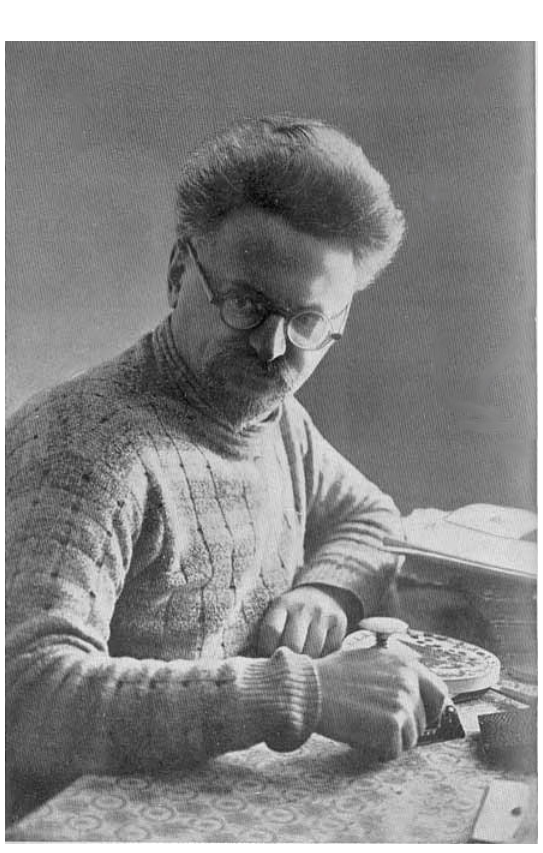
The SL's position on Lebanon in 1983, and its celebration of U.S. military intervention in Haiti last year (which was shamefacedly repudiated after a few months) contrasts sharply with its denunciation of Platypus founder Chris Cutrone's 2004 assertion that "the position of military support for any 'resistance,' despite the political nature of such military opposition, against imperialist power... is not applicable to the present situation in Iraq." The SL correctly responded: "Insofar as the forces on the ground in Iraq aim their fire against the imperialist occupiers and their lackeys, we call for their military defense against U.S. imperialism. Every blow struck against the imperialist occupiers is a blow struck against the enemy of workers and the oppressed all over the world."[6] However, apparently in the interest of maintaining the prestige of their leadership, the Robertsonian SL chose not to apply the same criterion to Lebanon.

Most of the key programmatic questions confronting Marxists today have been addressed in one form or another by revolutionaries in the past and their experience can provide valuable guidance. As regards Iraq, those who reject Trotsky's policy in favor of one of social-democratic neutrality, on the grounds that the Islamists are just too reactionary, in effect align themselves with the "critical" apologists for American imperialism. Not a good place for revolutionaries to be.

There is no question that the influence of revolutionary ideas in the American workers' movement is today at a low ebb. But the only way to change this is by taking up the weapons available in the arsenal of Marxism. There is no halfway house between reform and revolution, and no possibility of the victory of socialist revolution without first forging a revolutionary leadership in and of the working class. To do so, in our view, it is necessary to learn from and critically evaluate the best revolutionary traditions of those who preceded us—not to set about reinventing the wheel. This is why we named our journal *1917*.

In 1937 Trotsky observed:

> Reactionary epochs like ours not only disintegrate and weaken the working class and isolate its vanguard but also lower the general ideological level of the movement and throw political thinking back to stages long since passed through. In these conditions the task of the vanguard is, above all, not to let itself be carried along by the backward flow: it must swim against the current. If an unfavorable relation of forces prevents it from holding political positions it has won, it must at least retain its ideological positions, because in them is expressed the dearly paid experience of the past. Fools will consider this policy "sectarian." Actually it is the only means of preparing for a new tremendous surge forward with the coming historical tide.[7]



Trotsky going into exile, 1928.

Mike Macnair: I will also talk about continuity, though in a slightly different way. Inevitably, one has to interrogate the question one is given. I will start with a couple of trivia. I don't think there is anything wrong with martyrdom, in the sense that it goes with the territory. If you actually fight, there are going to be martyrs. Even in trade union struggles, as often as not, a scab will run down some poor picketer. Trotsky is that on a large scale. Second, it is quite wrong to suppose that the Spartacist League was unaffected by the New Left. In reality, the SL was far closer to the New Left in its party conception than the SWP, until Barnes took over and the SWP became a sort of Guevarist organization.

Now, the more fundamental points. First, what is Trotskyism? Trotskyism is the name we give to an organized movement that is founded on a certain explicit political platform. This platform consists of the theses, resolutions, and manifestos of the first four congresses of the Comintern, and the theses, resolutions, and manifestos of the International Left Opposition in 1931–1933, of the International Communist League in 1934–1938, and of the Fourth International as founded in 1938, as well at its emergency congress in 1940. After that, of course, people can still call themselves Trotskyists and reject everything which came afterwards in terms of the history of that organized movement. Ted Grant, for instance, said that the re-formation of the Fourth International in 1946 was fraudulent. *Lutte Ouvrière* in France have essentially the same line. On the other hand, then, there are many tendencies that take their history from groups which split to form a coalition of nationalists—the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1953. And there is a whole history of splintering since then.

I have said before there are 57 varieties of the far left. Certainly, Trotskyism has an inordinate history of splitting—splitting in an unprincipled manner, splitting prematurely, splitting in a pre-congress situation in order to deny legitimacy to the congress, and so on. So Trotskyism, however splintered, is an actual, existing, live political movement. It is not some hypothetical reconstruction of the political implications of Trotsky's theoretical work.

In the introduction to this panel, Trotsky was said to be the last survivor of "classical Marxism." In my opinion, the concept of "classical Marxism" is severely problematic. I am almost willing to say that "classical Marxism" is an amalgam in the same fashion as the "Bukharinite-Trotskyite-fascist counterrevolutionary front." The concept of classical Marxism takes a set of Marxists who had opposed political positions on a whole range of questions and forms them into this entity, "classical Marxism." I don't know where it came from; I think it was the Socialist Workers Party of the U.K., for whom it provided a cover for their eclectic adoption of Marx, but not Engels, plus Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, the early Lukács, and Gramsci—but only the Gramsci of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, or at best Quintin Hoare's extraordinarily contorted interpretations of Gramsci's already contorted *Prison Notebooks*.

On the other hand, the Northite author Emanuele Saccarelli has quite correctly demonstrated that Gramsci was on the Stalin side of the Stalin-Trotsky divide in the Comintern in the late 1920s. To say that Trotsky is the last survivor of "classical Marxism," or that he stands amid the ruins of "classical Marxism," is to say that he stands in the ruins of something that never existed, that he stands in the ruins of a castle in the clouds.

In order to understand these various authors it is necessary to interrogate the Marxisms of the Second International, and the Marxisms which in that period were outside the Second International, like Georges Sorel's version of Marxism, and the Marxisms of the Russian revolutionary movement—not just Bolshevism, but also Vperyodism and Bogdanovism, with its

"Opening remarks" continues on page 3