The Prophet's Children: Parties, Sects, and Revolution

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John Kelly, *Contemporary Trotskyism: Parties, Sects and Social Movements in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2018)

John Kelly, *The Twilight of World Trotskyism* (London: Routledge, 2023)

What relevance, if any, does Trotskyism have to the contemporary left?[1] In *Contemporary Trotskyism: Parties, Sects and Social Movements in Britain* and *The Twilight of World Trotskyism*, John Kelly aims to make sense of what he views as the central paradox of Trotskyism. On the one hand, he rehearses the old cliché that Trotskyism is a sectarian disorder constituted through, as he puts it, an almost religious "attachment to elements of" a "doctrine" that is "largely impervious to empirical refutation or significant amendment"; on the other hand, he gives an account of how, despite this sectarian essence, some Trotskyist groups have proved to be not only "resilient" but also "influential" (*CT*, iii, 2, 12, 30, 80; *TWT*, 19).[2]

Kelly has a neat explanation for this paradox. Trotskyists have won influence within social movements and trade unions to the extent that they have

1. This essay extends criticisms I made of Kelly's understanding of Trotskyism in my "Theorising Trotskyism," *Studies in Marxism* 15 (2021): 120–129; see also John Kelly, "Response to Paul Blackledge," *Studies in Marxism* 15 (2021): 130–133.

2. For dismissive criticisms of Trotskyism, see Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. 3, *The Breakdown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 187; Ronald Segal, *The Tragedy of Leon Trotsky* (London: Penguin, 1979), 403; Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Hungarian Source" (1976), in *Political and Social Writings*, vol. 3 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 250–271, 269; Peter Beilharz, *Trotsky, Trotskyism and the Transition to Socialism* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1987), 1; Geoff Hodgson, *Trotsky and Fatalistic Marxism* (London: Spokesman, 1975), 10; Ian Thatcher, *Trotsky* (London: Routledge, 2003), 215; Baruch Knei-Paz, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

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downplayed their essential, sectarian doctrine (*CT*, 6, 32, 205, 212, 240). The political conclusion he draws from this assessment is as simple as it is damning: the left should reject Trotskyism even where it learns from the best practice of some Trotskyist groups.

Drawing as it does on a fairly detailed history of British Trotskyism since 1950 (alongside potted supporting histories of Trotskyism elsewhere across the globe), Kelly's conclusion has an air of plausibility about it. Nonetheless, the key to his thesis lies not in the facts recounted within it but rather in the conceptual lens through which this history is reconstructed: his notion of a "Trotskyist doctrine" (*CT*, 2; *TWT*, xiv). As we shall see, while Kelly attempts to explain away Trotskyist influence as a deviation from essential failings that derive from this doctrine, the concept itself cannot withstand critical scrutiny. Indeed, far from being a neutral descriptor of the essence of Trotskyism, Kelly's "Trotskyist doctrine" functions much like Schelling's absolute, which Hegel famously dismissed as "the night in which … all cows are black" – to negate the insights of his own history by reducing Trotskyism in all its variegated complexity to an imaginary, specifically sectarian, essence.[3]

If this procrustean method informs Kelly's dismissal of Trotskyism *tout court*, by conversely unpicking Trotskyism as a contested tradition from this conceptual straitjacket we can begin to rescue insights from the best of Trotskyism from his dismissive conclusions. In so doing, we intend to contribute to the dissemination of the fundamental lessons from capitalism's most powerful intellectual antagonist: the classical Marxist tradition that has come to us through Trotsky and the strongest forms of postwar Trotskyism.[4]

Of course, rejecting Kelly's conclusions does not imply inverting his error by denying the sectarian nature of much of contemporary Trotskyism. On the contrary, many modern Trotskyist organizations are sects, while other groups with more promising histories have declined into sectarianism. Nonetheless, the fact that some Trotskyist groupings have proved more promising and, indeed, influential than others at various junctures suggests that rather than a blanket dismissal of Trotskyism we need to sort the wheat from the chaff within the history of Trotskyism. To accomplish this task requires a more concrete analysis of the basis for Trotskyist sectarianism alongside a much more nuanced account of Trotskyisms (plural) than is evident in Kelly's books.[5]

3. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 12.

4. On Trotsky's relationship to classical Marxism, see Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky 1929–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 12.

5. The standard biography of Trotsky is, of course, Isaac Deutscher's magisterial three-volume study *The Prophet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954–1963). For brief orthodox Trotskyist defences of Trotsky's legacy, see Ernest Mandel, *Trotsky: A Study on the Dynamic of His Thought* (London: New Left Books, 1979); Mandel, *Trotsky as Alternative* (London: Verso Books, 1995); Paul Le Blanc, *Leon Trotsky* (London: Reaktion, 2015); and Pierre Frank, *The Fourth International* (London: Ink Links, 1979). For similarly brief heterodox Trotskyist

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Trotskyist "Doctrine"

Kelly claims Trotskyism has consistently failed "to achieve its major goals because of doctrinairism and sectarianism" (*CT*, 240). He argues that while Trotskyist organizations can be differentiated from other political formations through the explicit role of ideology in their daily lives, theirs is a specific form of ideology. Whereas they are wont to repeat Lenin's aphorism that "'without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement,' … doctrine is a more accurate term than theory because it denotes a body of incontrovertible propositions and associated texts" (*CT*, 9).

Unfortunately, these "incontrovertible propositions" tend to make Trotskyist groups irrelevant. Their "flawed appraisals of contemporary politics and economics, ultra-radical programmes and policies, failures in understanding the dynamics of protest and the baleful legacy of Soviet communism, … are rooted in Trotskyist doctrine and are therefore integral, not peripheral, features of world Trotskyism" (*TWT*, i). There are two steps to Kelly's defence of this claim. First, his definition of Trotskyism includes "all those organizations that self-identify as 'Trotskyist' or that locate themselves 'in the Trotskyist tradition,' irrespective of whether rival groups dispute such claims" (*CT*, 36). Second, he claims to have extracted a unifying "Trotskyist doctrine" from the shared beliefs of these self-professed Trotskyists.

Kelly outlines a nine-fold definition of Trotskyist doctrine: "the theory of permanent revolution (vs stages theory and 'socialism in one country'); the united front tactic (vs popular front); transitional demands (vs minimum and maximum demands); democratic centralist, revolutionary vanguard party; a new revolutionary leadership, the Fourth International (vs communist, social democratic and reformist labour movement leaders); building a rank-and-file movement against the trade union bureaucracy; a critical analysis of the Stalinist states (vs USSR as socialist); revolution as seizure of power and the creation of proletarian dictatorship (vs parliamentarism and reformism); and

assessments of his legacy, see Duncan Hallas, *Trotsky's Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1979); John Molyneux, *Leon Trotsky's Theory of Revolution* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981); C. L. R. James, "Trotsky's Place in History," in Scott McLemee and Paul Le Blanc, eds., *C. L. R. James and Revolutionary Marxism* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994), 92–130; and Irving Howe, *Trotsky* (London: Fontana, 1978). For detailed orthodox and heterodox overviews, respectively, see Kunal Chattopadhyay, *The Marxism of Leon Trotsky* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 2006), and Tony Cliff, *Trotsky*, 4 vols. (London: Bookmarks, 1989–1993). See also the important exchange between Nicolas Krassó, Ernest Mandel, and others from the pages of *New Left Review* in Nicolas Krassó, ed., *Trotsky: The Great Debate* (St. Louis: New Critics Press, 1972), and contributions from socialists associated with the journal *Critique* in Hillel Ticktin and Michael Cox, eds., *The Ideas of Leon Trotsky* (London: Porcupine Press, 1995). Terry Brotherstone and Paul Dukes, eds., *The Trotsky Reappraisal* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), is a collection of papers written in the wake of the opening of archives in Moscow, while a special issue of *Revolutionary History* (vol. 11, no. 1 [2013]) entitled "Trotsky and His Critics" brings together materials that criticize Trotsky for what they allege is his tendency to appraise events too closely through the lens of the October Revolution.

imperialist epoch as one of wars and revolutions (vs capitalist stability)" (*CT*, 17–18; *TWT*, 2).

This "doctrine" is apparently manifest in the following ways. First, because Trotskyists argue that reforms are no longer possible, they tend to pose political choices in terms of a too simple binary opposition between socialism or barbarism. Second, Trotskyist parties, when they stand in elections, tend toward utopian "we'll solve it all"–type manifestos in which they make themselves irrelevant through the ridiculous pose of demanding everything. Third, Trotskyists reaffirm their irrelevance by dismissing parliamentary politics as means to reform. Fourth, Trotskyists have proved themselves unable to conceptualize the relationship between class struggle and class consciousness. Fifth, Trotskyists conflate the concepts of protest, rebellion, and revolution and consequently misconstrue the revolutionary implications of the former. Sixth, Trotskyists imagine a fantasy revolutionary party as the fix for all of society's ills. Seventh, Trotskyists tend to proselytize for an equally fantastic new, mass, anti-capitalist workers' party to replace social democratic parties. Eighth, Trotskyists attach themselves to an unattractive model of the October Revolution. Finally, Trotskyists combine all these faults with ideological certitude, electoral delusion, and millenarian fantasy (*TWT*, 78–99).

Kelly argues that the doctrinally informed tendency to failure informs a parallel trend toward fragmentation as various Trotskyist groupings engage in bouts of mutual recrimination, each blaming the others for political failings that are better understood as a result of a shared doctrine. He insists that these divisions inform Trotskyism's Pythonesque essence as a collection of warring sects. Kelly mockingly points to the embarrassing situation where, as of 2022, there are apparently some 32 rival Trotskyist Fourth Internationals across the globe, with Britain alone being home to 21 competing Trotskyist groups (*TWT*, 41, 107). He suggests these figures show that Trotskyism is a failed project whose "doctrine" ensures it is made up of "organizationally small and politically irrelevant" groups that have not "led a revolution, won a national election or built an enduring, mass political party" (*CT*, iii, 1, 5, 236; *TWT*, xi, xiii, 1, 19, 76–99, 100).

While Kelly recognizes that political divisions among Trotskyists have informed doctrinal divisions, he dismisses the significance of these debates. Whereas "debates about doctrine, revisionism and orthodoxy have dogged the Trotskyist movement from its inception" – and indeed, modern Trotskyism has a "high degree of ideological flexibility and a willingness to modify or even abandon core elements of Trotskyist doctrine" – rather than follow the logic of this proposition to explore the plurality of Trotskyisms defined by a plurality of "doctrines," he insists on locating one overriding doctrine: "without some attempt to specify the key elements of Trotskyist doctrine, however difficult and problematic, it is impossible to make any sense of these disputes" (*CT*, 42; *TWT*, 3).

Kelly squares his recognition of the ideological and political fragmentation of Trotskyism with his belief that no Trotskyist organization has escaped

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the debilitating implications of Trotskyist dogma through what is, in effect, a Weberian conceptualization of doctrine as an ideal type. Because ideal types are "utopias" that do not exist in reality, notoriously these concepts can be attached to a variety of very different phenomena.[6] Similarly, Kelly subsumes all forms of Trotskyism under a single category despite the profound disagreements, and qualitatively different levels of influence, between these various groups.

Although this manoeuvre allows him to dismiss significant variation among Trotskyists, its cost is severe. Paralleling general problems with the deployment of ideal-type concepts, Kelly's delineation between Trotskyist and non-Trotskyist organizations is essentially arbitrary.[7] Consequently, his criticisms of actual Trotskyist organizations operate both at too high a level of abstraction and through abstractions that are inadequate to their objects. Indeed, his ideal-type Trotskyism informs a schematic method that tends, as E. P. Thompson once wrote of Perry Anderson's model of English history, toward a reductionist form of idealism.[8] Whatever Trotskyists do, Kelly insists that all we need to understand their essence is the master key of his Trotskyist doctrine.

All Trotskyist Cows Are Equally Sectarian in the Dark

A PRIME EXAMPLE OF THIS reductionist method is Kelly's discussion of Trotskyist influence. He writes that while various British Trotskyists have played leading roles in a number of important social movements – including the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, the Anti-Nazi League, the All Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federation, and the Stop the War Coalition – none of these groups succeeded in translating influence into mass popular support. Kelly explains this failing as a reflection of a gap between revolutionary politics and social movement politics: "In the first place, the conditions for movement success … call into question the necessity for a fundamental challenge to capitalism…. Second, the short-term success of social movements … provides a marked contrast to the long haul and the meagre fruits of the normal routines of Trotskyist activity…. Third, when Trotskyist groups throw themselves wholeheartedly into social movement campaigns, the normal organizational routines may atrophy" (*CT*, 117, 213). Similarly, though various Trotskyists have won some influence within the trade union movement, their influence tends to be greatest where they downplay their revolutionary politics. This is because of a contradiction between "effective collective action by unions …

6. See Max Weber, *On the Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1949), 90; Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 20.

7. William Outhwaite, *New Philosophies of Social Science* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 104; Simon Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology* (London: Palgrave, 1991), 248–255.

8. Edward Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1978), 275, 290.

around specific bargaining demands" and the desire of Trotskyist groups both "to develop revolutionary class consciousness" and "to recruit workers into their own particular organization" (*CT*, 175).

These tensions between movements mobilized around reformist demands and the revolutionary goals espoused by Trotskyists are real enough, but Kelly's suggestion that they illuminate a profound chasm between practical (reformist) politics and sectarian (revolutionary) Trotskyism is unconvincing. Trotsky was well aware both of these problems and of the history of Marxist attempts to negotiate them.[9] He insisted that while Marxists had been right to break with social democracy, this decision did not preclude joint work around shared, defensive goals, with all the difficulties that that entailed. Moreover, though these defensive goals are goods in themselves, second-order goods can emerge out of the struggle itself. Trotsky's perspective amounted to a deepening of Marx and Engels' claim that workers' self-activity contradicts capitalist alienation such that working-class collective struggles create the *potential* to exceed the original mobilizing demands of these struggles.[10] Of course, this potential is related to the broader socioeconomic context and the balance of class forces, neither of which impinges much on Kelly's narrative.

Seen from this perspective, the engagement of the more influential Trotskyist groups within nominally reformist movements is best understood not as a deviation from some sectarian essence but rather as a practical application of classical Marxism's refusal to reify the division between reformist and revolutionary *movements*. Conversely, Kelly's claim that these groups vacillate between revolutionary (sectarian) and reformist (practical) moments of activity is parasitic upon a reified definition of revolutionary politics as form of sectarianism.

In fact, Kelly's criticism of Trotskyism actually amounts to a broader critique of Marx's revolutionary politics. In the tenth *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx argued that "the standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or social humanity."[11] He extended this argument in *Capital*, where he wrote that the social totality can only be understood from the standpoint of the working class.[12] From this perspective, while political organizations *of* civil society remain trapped within the pseudo-natural constraints of capitalist social relations, nudging politics to the left or right without fundamentally challenging the logic of capitalism, revolutionary organizations – which necessarily operate *within* civil society without being *of* it – are able to orient beyond the capitalist parameters of

9. Leon Trotsky, "On the United Front," in *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, vol. 2 (New York: Monad, 1972), 91–109.

10. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German Ideology" (1845), in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 82, 87–88.

11. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1975), 421–423.

12. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 732.

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the present because they root their practice in what Georg Lukács called the "perspective of the actuality of the revolution."[13] Whereas Marx believed his social theory expressed the ebb and flow of the "real movement that abolishes the present state of things," Kelly's claim that Trotskyists have escaped the irrelevant limitations of sectarianism only where they have tacitly broken with revolutionary politics is predicated on the tacit reformist assumption that the standpoint of civil society continues to frame the parameters of the possible, and thus that Trotskyism's revolutionary orientation to workers' self-activity is essentially irrelevant and sectarian (*CT*, 4, 193).[14]

While this assumption undoubtedly reflects the fact that we have lived through an extended period of historically low-level class struggle in the West, Kelly's response to this experience reads like an inversion of caricatured Trotskyist sectarianism rather than a solution to its problems. Whereas a caricatured Trotskyist might imagine herself constantly on the barricades in an unmediated relationship to the actuality of the revolution, Kelly reifies decades of defeats into an assumed absence of any tendency toward revolution. But just as the caricatured Trotskyist's revolutionary rhetoric ensures her irrelevance to the messiness of actual struggles from below, Kelly's standpoint similarly blinds him to the way that even relatively low-level struggles can point beyond the confines of civil society. And because capitalism is built upon the alienation and exploitation of wage labour, even in the darkest days of reaction struggles emerge that tend, however falteringly, toward the revolutionary reconstruction of society. In these periods, revolutionary realism requires, *contra* Kelly, an orientation toward these struggles in their various ideological, political, and economic forms, while maintaining, *contra* the abstract sectarian leftist, a clear understanding of both the potential for these struggles to announce radical change and their (probable) limitations in a period dominated by defeats.[15]

Of course, because no one can predict which struggle will inaugurate a break with the cycle of defeat, there will be a formal overlap between revolutionary realists and sectarians insofar as both groups deploy the minority language of revolutionary socialism. However, the substance of their politics will be very different. As opposed to Kelly's conflation of these various forms, a more nuanced approach to the subject would highlight substantive differences between those Trotskyist groups whose activity is rooted in a more or

13. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin, 1971), 157; Lukács, *Lenin* (London: New Left Books, 1970), 11.

14. Marx and Engels, "German Ideology," 49; Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (1845), in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 11 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 99–197, 185.

15. Engels writes of the class struggle having three sides, "the theoretical, the political and the economico-practical (resistance to the capitalists)." Friedrich Engels, "Supplement to the Preface of 1870 for *The Peasant War in Germany*" (1874), in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 23 (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 626–632, 631.

less adequate understanding of the social totality, including a clear cognizance of the dialectical relationship between immediate struggles within capitalism and possibilities for a broader movement against it, and those groups that bypass this process, opting to displace realism with pseudo-revolutionary rhetoric.

Trotskyism or Trotskyisms

The real and profound differences among Trotskyists suggests that Kelly's "Trotskyist doctrine" is less a master key than an example of what Gaston Bachelard called an "epistemological obstacle," an imaginary relationship that acts as a "resistance of thought to thought."[16] Though a seemingly straightforward synthesis of insights from a number of important writers on Trotsky, even a cursory reading of the authorities Kelly relies upon reveals its deeply problematic and ideological character. In *Contemporary Trotskyism*, he cites Robert Alexander, Daniel Bensaïd, Duncan Hallas, and Ernest Mandel as authorities for his concept of Trotskyist doctrine, while in *The Twilight of World Trotskyism*, he adds Baruch Knei-Paz and Isaac Deutscher to this list, without adding anything of substance to his definition (*CT*, 17; *TWT*, 2).

However, *contra* Kelly, these theorists deny the existence of a singular Trotskyism. For instance, Hallas writes that "Trotskyism has come to mean many different things … since Trotsky's death. Widely differing and often mutually hostile groupings describe themselves as Trotskyist and it is not very profitable to attempt to set up a standard of orthodoxy to judge them by. There are many Trotskyisms."[17] Similarly, Bensaïd argues, "though the term Trotskyism (in the singular) refers to a common historical origin, it has come to mean so many things that it is more accurate to speak of Trotskyisms (in the plural)."[18] Meanwhile, Mandel made a clear distinction between authentic and sectarian forms of Trotskyism, while Alexander argues that Tony Cliff's criticisms of Trotsky and Trotskyism (shared by Hallas) were so profound that his politics went "beyond the limits of 'Trotskyism.'"[19] Finally, both Knei-Paz and Deutscher reference Trotsky's own denial that he was a Trotskyist – at least insofar as the term was understood by some of his followers.[20]

16. Dominique Lecourt, *Marxism and Epistemology: Bachelard, Canguilhem, and Foucault* (London: New Left Books, 1975), 135.

17. Duncan Hallas, "Trotskyism Reassessed," *International Socialism* 100 (1977): 14–19, 14.

18. Daniel Bensaïd, *Strategies of Resistance & "Who Are the Trotskyists?"* (London: Resistance Books, 2009), 15.

19. Manuel Kellner, *Against Capitalism and Bureaucracy: Socialist Strategy in the Work of Ernest Mandel* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 433–439; Robert Alexander, *International Trotskyism 1929–1984* (London: Duke University Press, 1991), 23.

20. Knei-Paz, *Social and Political Thought*, 426; Deutscher, *Prophet Outcast*, 475.

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All these writers recognize not only that Trotsky bequeathed a complex legacy but also that this legacy begat a complex network of diverse traditions. Specifically, while Trotsky played an indispensable role in upholding and extending the classical Marxist tradition against Stalinism, the detailed predictions he made in the 1930s for the future of Western capitalism and Stalinism were quickly falsified.[21] Consequently, when his followers responded creatively to the dramatically changed global environment after his assassination, they did so on the basis of competing interpretations of which parts of his legacy to reject and which parts to embrace and extend. As these various groups and individuals attempted to make sense of the postwar world, they constituted a range of opinion from those who justified their farewells to Marxism by reference to his falsified predictions, through those who guaranteed their sectarian irrelevance by dogmatically embracing these refuted conjectures, to others who laid the foundations for building relatively influential revolutionary groupings on the basis of a classical Marxist critique of Trotsky's mature works.[22]

If Kelly's one-dimensional definition of Trotskyist doctrine acts as a barrier to an adequate understanding of the theoretical roots of these differential practices, his definition of Trotskyist success is similarly unhelpful. Of course, it is true that no Trotskyist group has "led a revolution, won a national election or built an enduring, mass political party" (*TWT*, xi). Nonetheless, it is equally obvious that outside a revolutionary situation, Kelly has set the bar for success too high. Taking into consideration the very difficult circumstances faced by revolutionary socialists since World War II, it is much more reasonable to view success not as a zero-sum game but rather as a relative concept.

From this perspective, only two of the 21 British Trotskyist organizations as of 2022 had managed to win small but significant levels of influence within the British working-class movement over the preceding four decades: the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Socialist Party (SP) (*CT*, 125; *TWT*, 102). And though these two groups have recently fragmented after failing to come to terms with patterns of class struggle in the new millennium, they had previously managed to win some influence within the British labour movement, which qualitatively marked them out from the bulk of British Trotskyist groupuscules.

Despite this history of influence, Kelly substantiates his claim that "doctrine is a more accurate term than theory" for (British) Trotskyism by reference not to theory produced within these organizations but to the politics of Gerry Healy's infamously dishonest and hyper-sectarian Workers Revolutionary

21. Hallas, *Trotsky's Marxism*, 96–117. The key predictions can be found in Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972); Trotsky, *Transitional Programme* (London: World Books, n.d.); Trotsky, "The Workers' State, Thermidor and Bonapartism," in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1934–35* (New York: Pathfinder, 1971), 240–261.

22. Alex Callinicos, *Trotskyism* (London: Open University Press, 1990), 4–5.

Party (WRP) (*CT*, 9).[23] Notwithstanding recent splits, to judge the SWP and SP by the standards of Healy's group betrays not only a superficial approach to the subject but also a cynical method of judging all Trotskyist groups by the standards of the weakest.

For instance, even at the moment of Healy's greatest success, during the heyday of the British New Left in the late 1950s, Edward Thompson could contrast his "boredom" with "members of 'Marxist' sects [i.e. Healy's group] who pop up at Left Club meetings around the country to demand in a your-money-or-your-life tone of voice whether the speaker is a Marxist, whether he 'believes in' the class struggle, and whether he is willing to give instant adhesion to this or that version of the Creed" with his relationship to "comrades" around Cliff's *International Socialism* group (the precursor of the SWP), "which seems to me the most constructive journal with a Trotskyist tendency in this country, most of the editorial board of which are active (and very welcome) members of the Left Club movement."[24]

Thompson's ability to differentiate between these two groups contrasts markedly with Kelly's attempt to subsume them into a singularity. And in contrast to Kelly's one-dimensional model of Trotskyist doctrine, the difference between Cliff's and Healy's groups at this juncture had deep theoretical roots. Whereas Cliff's modification and abandonment of the weakest aspects of orthodox Trotskyism informed a political realism that allowed for open debate, Healy's attachment to these shibboleths ensured that his group found it impossible to break out of the sectarian ghetto.[25]

Background to Trotskyism

PERRY ANDERSON HAS ARGUED that Trotskyism was a "delayed birth." Despite emerging in the 1920s as a distinct political tendency, its fortunes would have to wait for 1968 before it could make the first significant steps out of the political ghetto.[26] Indeed, while Trotsky's name came to represent the optimism of the October Revolution, his legacy was distorted from the outset by the spectre of defeat. Alongside Lenin, he argued that though Russia itself was too backward to sustain socialism in isolation from the world system, as a weak link in the chain of imperialism, a socialist revolution was feasible in

23. John Callaghan, *British Trotskyism* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1984), 78–80.

24. Edward Thompson, "Revolution Again," *New Left Review* 1, 6 (1960): 18–31, 21–22; Paul Blackledge, "Reform, Revolution and the Question of Organisation in the First New Left," *Contemporary Politics* 10, 1 (2004): 21–36.

25. Duncan Hallas, "Building the Leadership," *International Socialism* 40 (1969): 25–32.

26. Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso Books, 1976), 96.

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Russia because it would act as a spark, initiating revolutionary transformations across Europe.[27]

However, as the Bolsheviks held onto power in the context of the devastating impact of war and civil war while hoping for salvation from revolutions across Europe, a bureaucratic caste emerged in Russia that increasingly interpreted the victory of socialism in terms of its own growing power.[28] When Lenin suffered a paralyzing stroke in May 1922, with two more strokes later in the year, the leading sections of the bureaucracy came to focus on the question of succession. Sometime over the winter of 1922–1923, a triumvirate of Zinoviev, who headed the bureaucracy in Leningrad; Kamenev, who headed it in Moscow; and Stalin, who controlled the central bureaucracy of the party, concluded a secret pact to ensure that they and not Trotsky would replace Lenin at the helm of the new Soviet state. These three were united by a fear that Trotsky, with whom Lenin had planned to challenge the bureaucracy in late 1922 and early 1923, threatened their power. After Lenin suffered another debilitating stroke in March 1923, this triumvirate set about cementing their authority through the creation of a cult of Lenin for which they, as Lenin's old Bolshevik loyal lieutenants, would be the true custodians. While Trotsky wavered in the immediate aftermath of Lenin's incapacitation, within the year he penned a sharp critique of Soviet "bureaucratic degeneration."[29] Unfortunately, by the time this work was published, the triumvirate had effectively taken control over the Politburo of six (without Lenin).[30] The absurd Lenin cult was further bolstered immediately after Lenin's death in January 1924 when Petrograd was renamed in his honour while his body and ideas were embalmed together in formaldehyde. Over this period, both "Leninism" and "Trotskyism" were invented as placeholders in a political game whereby the triumvirate aimed to neutralize Trotsky's standing within the Communist Party.[31] Through this process – and in a manoeuvre accepted as gospel by anarchists, autonomists, and Western Cold-War Warriors alike – "Leninism" was reimagined as the ideology of a bureaucratic elite, while "Trotskyism" became its utopian Other.[32]

27. Leon Trotsky, *Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1969); Marcel Liebman, *Leninism under Lenin* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), 78–83; Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern: A History of the Third International* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008), 7.

28. Moshe Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle* (New York: Monthly Review, 1968), 108.

29. Leon Trotsky, *The New Course* (1923; London: New Park, 1972), 14.

30. Edward Hallett Carr, *The Interregnum* (London: MacMillan, 1954), 283–284; Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky 1921–1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 75ff; Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle*, 40.

31. Frederick Corney, *Trotsky's Challenge* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 31.

32. In 1925, Alfred Rosmer wrote, "Trotskyism was invented against Trotsky, in order to fight him." Alfred Rosmer, Boris Souvarine, Emile Fabrol, and Antoine Clavez, *Trotsky and the*

As this domestic drama unfolded, the revolutionary wave that had swept central Europe between 1917 and 1923 ended in defeats in Bulgaria and Germany. These defeats meant that from the autumn of 1923 onward, Russia, without either external support or the domestic resources necessary to sustain socialism, was forced to stand alone against a hostile imperialist system.[33]

Stalin's response to the failure of the European revolution was to cynically reimagine defeat as victory. As late as April 1924 he repeated the classical Marxist claim that socialism could not be achieved "in one country alone, and without the joint efforts of the proletarians in several of the most advanced countries." However, in December of that year he changed tack, writing, "Having consolidated its power, and taking the lead of the peasantry, the proletariat of the victorious country can and must build a socialist society." More to the point, rather than admit this break with classical Marxism, Stalin turned reality on its head by insisting that "such, in broad outline, are the characteristics of Lenin's theory of the proletarian revolution."[34]

So, Stalin came to argue that, far from being derailed by the failure of the German Revolution, backward Russia could move forward to socialism irrespective of what Marx, Engels, and Lenin had written about the impossibility of building socialism in one country.[35] The ideology of "socialism in one country" was doubly useful to Stalin at this juncture. Through it he expressed the Soviet bureaucracy's growing sense of its own strength as it came to conflate the victory of socialism with its own rise to power while simultaneously framing "Trotskyism" as the enemy of (this vision of) socialism.[36]

This provenance meant that Trotsky tended to be wary of the term "Trotskyism" and often used scare quotes when discussing it. Nevertheless, he also recognized that in the 1920s and 1930s the term "Trotskyism" was becoming a synonym for the authentic revolutionary tradition. Additionally, Trotsky's enormous prestige on the left as organizer of both the October Revolution and the military defence of the new socialist republic ensured that the activists grouped around him almost naturally become known as Trotskyists – or Trotskyites in the more pejorative Stalinist style.

Origins of Trotskyism (London: Francis Boutle, 2002), 112. See also Liebman, *Leninism under Lenin*, 433; Callaghan, *British Trotskyism*, 1; Corney, *Trotsky's Challenge*, 65–72; Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 514.

33. C. L. R. James, *World Revolution 1917–1936* (1937; Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1993); Hallas, *Comintern*, 85–106; Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle*, 106.

34. Stalin quoted in Leon Trotsky, "Letter to the New York Times," 6 December 1939, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939–1940* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 125–129, 128–129.

35. Marx and Engels, "German Ideology," 48; Friedrich Engels, "Principles of Communism," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 6 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1984), 351–352; V. I. Lenin, "Report on the Activities of the People's Commissars" (1918), in *Collected Works*, vol. 26 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 455–472, 470.

36. Trotsky, *Revolution Betrayed*, 292.

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Trotskyism as Alternative

Although the Stalinist critique of "Trotskyism" in the 1920s and 1930s focused on the theory of permanent revolution alongside Trotsky's alleged underestimation of the peasantry, the truth is that these criticisms were the form rather than the content of the anti-Trotsky campaign. In essence, the triumvirate cynically hung their attack on Trotsky on whatever disjointed quotes from Lenin they could dig out of his collected works.[37] Conversely, the kernel of Trotsky's Marxism does not primarily relate to either of these concepts, or to any of the other features of his thought as listed by Kelly in his definition of Trotskyist doctrine (*TWT*, 2; *CT*, 19–35). Though these aspects of Trotsky's thought are of the first importance to an understanding of his contribution to Marxism, they are predicated upon four prior fundamental assumptions that underpinned his challenge to bureaucratic rule. First, he insisted, paraphrasing Marx, that "the liberation of the workers can come only through the workers themselves"; second, and flowing directly from this democratic and anti-bureaucratic vision of socialism, he argued that "the proletarian revolution requires the truth, and only the truth"; third, he agreed with Lenin's break with social democracy in 1914 because the Second International was "dead, overcome by opportunism"; and fourth, he eventually concluded that the Third International had proved itself as moribund as the Second when in 1933 it was wilfully ineffective in the face of Hitler's rise to power.[38]

Whatever its weaknesses, Trotsky's break with Stalinism was in essence part of a longer process of the continuous growth and renewal of the classical Marxist tradition going back through Lenin's and Luxemburg's critiques of Kautskyism and Engels' attack on opportunism to his and Marx's critique of True Socialism. The primary importance of Trotsky's legacy, from this perspective, stems from his association with the democratic and revolutionary refusal both of social democracy's reduction of politics to the left-face of capitalism and of Stalin's distortion of the classical Marxist tradition into an *a posteriori* justification for bureaucratic rule through the ideology of "Leninism" or "Marxism-Leninism."[39]

37. It is probable that Lenin had not read Trotsky's *Results and Prospects* prior to 1917; see Paul Blackledge, "Results and Prospects: Trotsky and His Critics," in Bill Dunn and Hugo Radice, eds., *Permanent Revolution: Results and Prospects 100 Years On* (London: Pluto Press, 2006), 48–60.

38. Leon Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours* (1938; New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 51; Karl Marx, "Provisional Rules," in *The First International and After* (London: Penguin, 1974), 82; Leon Trotsky, "The Soviet Economy in Danger" (1932), in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1932* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), 258–284, 259; Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, "The Position and Tasks of the Socialist International" (1914), in *Collected Works*, vol. 21 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 35–41; Leon Trotsky, "It Is Necessary to Build Communist Parties and an International Anew" (1933), in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1932–1933* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), 304–311, 305.

39. Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism* (London: Penguin, 1958). On the ideology of "Leninism," see Valentino Gerratana, "Stalin, Lenin and 'Leninism,'" *New Left Review* 1, 103 (May–June

Conjecture and Refutation: The Transitional Programme

Despite these strengths, Trotsky's work also included important flaws. These flaws were perhaps nowhere more evident than in his 1938 attempt to update the *Communist Manifesto* for the launch of a new, Fourth International: *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*. Universally known as the *Transitional Programme*, this document combined a powerful critique of contemporary capitalism with less successful predictions for its future. Within it, Trotsky portrayed capitalism as a system in crisis and condemned to stagnation, with no capitalist way out of this morass: "The disintegration of capitalism has reached extreme limits, likewise the disintegration of the old ruling class. The further existence of this system is impossible."[40]

If this problem cried out for a socialist solution, Trotsky insisted that the history of social democracy and Stalinism showed that neither could be part of this solution. This argument implied a crisis of leadership within the workers' movement as revolutionary workers strained at leashes held by (social democratic and Stalinist) reformist leaders. In this context, his new Fourth International aimed to offer leadership to the workers' movement based on "transitional demands" that would provide a bridge between their immediate needs and the broader struggle against capitalism.[41]

There was an obvious unity to this argument: the idea that transitional demands could act as a bridge between struggles within and against capitalism was predicated on the prior existence of both an intractable economic crisis and a revolutionary working class.[42]

The fact that the key predictions included within these texts were quickly falsified was obviously a problem for Trotskyism, but it need not have been a fundamental problem. Scientific predictions are routinely falsified, and scientific thinkers learn, in part, through the falsification of aspects of their work. In this sense, the history of Trotskyism in the 1940s need not have been exceptional; falsified perspectives in the postwar period should have led to theoretical and political debates as the scattered forces of the global Trotskyist movement sought to make sense of the evolving situation.

However, although the postwar crisis of Trotskyism was met with real and vibrant debate across the movement, the outcome of this debate was anything but a progressive resolution of the problems underlying this crisis.[43] Ironically,

1977): 59–71; Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates* (London: Verso Books, 2002), 193; Lars Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Paul Blackledge, "What Was Done?," *International Socialism* 2, 111 (2006): 111–126.

40. Trotsky, *Transitional Programme*, 19; Hallas, *Trotsky's Marxism*, 99–104; Leon Trotsky, "The USSR in War," in Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism* (London: New Park, 1971), 8.

41. Trotsky, *Transitional Programme*, 22.

42. Molyneux, *Leon Trotsky's Theory of Revolution*, 175–182.

43. Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *The War and the International: A History of the*

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the fragmentation of Trotskyism gave rise to its opposite: a monolithic orthodoxy that held to the detail of Trotsky's analyses *despite* the fact of their falsification.

Infamously, the archetypical example of this bizarrely dogmatic response to the end of the war was articulated within the American Socialist Workers Party. This group, though small, was the strongest section of the international Trotskyist movement. Moreover, its leader, James P. Cannon, was an impressive working-class militant with very strong revolutionary credentials.[44] Cannon had previously been a leader of the US Communist Party before becoming convinced of the reactionary nature of the ideology of socialism in one country.[45] Though Cannon was a tough, committed revolutionary who had been jailed for sedition during World War II, his response to the ending of the war evidenced a form of inflexibility that was to plague sections of the Trotskyist movement from that moment onward. In November 1945, he wrote,

> Trotsky predicted that the fate of the Soviet Union would be decided in the war. That remains our firm conviction. Only we disagree with some people who carelessly think that the war is over. The war has only passed through one stage and is now in the process of regroupment and reorganization for the second. The war is not over, and the revolution which we said would issue from the war in Europe is not taken off the agenda. It has only been delayed and postponed, primarily for lack of a sufficiently strong revolutionary party.[46]

This absurd statement could have easily been dismissed in a strong movement, and it could have been ignored in a decentralized movement. Unfortunately, Trotskyism was weak, centralized, and with a highly fragmented opposition. Consequently, as leader of the strongest section within the International, what Cannon said mattered. More to the point, he ensured that his perspectives became the "party line" across the movement. To this end, his key European allies, including Ernest Mandel (Germain) and Michalis Raptis (Pablo), worked to guarantee the victory of dogma across the Trotskyist movement. Like Cannon, these "unknown men," as he labelled the young Europeans, were committed revolutionaries of great integrity; Mandel had been imprisoned twice by the Germans during the Nazi occupation of Belgium, and Pablo had been arrested in Greece prior to the war before covertly organizing the Trotskyist movement in Nazi-occupied France. Nonetheless, despite their undoubted bravery, these two men and those around them played a disastrous role in postwar debates.[47]

Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1937–1949 (London: Socialist Platform, 1986), 160.

44. Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928–38* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

45. James P. Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 27.

46. Cannon quoted in Bornstein and Richardson, *War and the International*, 173.

47. James P. Cannon, "Internationalism and the SWP" (1953), in Thomas Bias, Paul Le Blanc,

In Britain, Cannon's allies did what they could to ensure Gerry Healy's leadership of the local Trotskyist grouping, thereby guaranteeing that Cannon's utterly unrealistic perspectives would be defended by an infamously sectarian thug.[48] Healy's position was secured after an exhausting internal struggle that saw a number of the leading cadre of the group give up the ghost while two rising stars, Tony Cliff and Ted Grant, were sidelined and expelled, respectively.[49] Their crimes? Cliff disagreed with Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism, and both he and Grant penned powerful responses to the leadership of the Fourth International's attempt to defend Trotsky's catastrophic economic perspectives even as these perspectives were being falsified by reality.

In 1946, the majority of the British Trotskyist group – the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), led by Jock Haston and Ted Grant – had taken up the cudgels against Cannon and his acolytes. Grant pointed out that "all the factors on a European and world scale indicate that the economic activity in Western Europe in the next period is not one of 'stagnation and slump' but one of revival and boom." Though Grant wrote that "a new recovery can only prepare the way for an even greater slump and economic crisis than in the past," the fact is that in the immediate postwar period, the leading cadre of the RCP differentiated themselves from Cannon by their preparedness to look reality in the face. In response to Grant, Mandel wrote that there was no postwar boom: "it is necessary to abandon right now any juggling with a boom that has not existed and that British capitalism will never experience again." Response to this piece was delegated to Cliff. He wrote that Mandel was both empirically wrong – Britain was experiencing a boom – and theoretically inept: Mandel had interpreted Trotsky's *Transitional Programme* "mechanically" as a rejection of any possibility of boom, whereas the fact that "the twentieth century is the century of socialist revolution does not exclude the possibility of certain reforms or semi-reforms being introduced."[50]

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and Bryan D. Palmer, eds., *US Trotskyism 1928–1965*, Part II, *Endurance: The Coming American Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2019), 674–686, 677; Duncan Hallas, "Fourth International in Decline," *International Socialism* 60 (1973): 17–23.

48. Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 468–471.

49. Callaghan, *British Trotskyism*, 33.

50. Ted Grant, "Economic Perspectives 1946," in *The Unbroken Thread* (1946; London: Fortress Books, 1989), 376–384; E. Germain [Ernest Mandel], "From the ABC to Current Reading: Boom, Revival or Crisis?" (September 1946), https://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/1947/11/abc-reading.html; Tony Cliff, "All That Glitters Is Not Gold" (1947), in *Marxist Theory after Trotsky* (London: Bookmarks, 2003), 139–154; Callaghan, *British Trotskyism*, 33–4. According to the Marxist Internet Archive, Mandel's essay was published in November 1947, while Cliff's reply to this article was published two months earlier. The truth is, both Mandel's response to Grant and Cliff's reply to Mandel were circulated together as an RCP Internal Document in September 1947 (Martin Upham, "The History of British Trotskyism to 1949," doctoral thesis, University of Hull, 1980, chap. 14, n8, https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/upham/14upham.html#n8). See also Jan Willem Stutje, *Ernest Mandel* (London:

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By contrast with Cliff and Grant, Healy's orthodox Trotskyism condemned itself to the sectarian wilderness through its attempt to paper over the falsified cracks in Trotsky's mature worldview. If this denial of reality is the rational core of Kelly's critique of Trotskyist doctrinal sectarianism, missing from Kelly's analysis is any sense either of how orthodox Trotskyism emerged as a break with Trotsky's thought or of how a number of heterodox Trotskyists broke with "orthodoxy" in various ways. Trotsky himself had written that "the most dangerous thing in politics is to fall captive to one's own formula that yesterday was appropriate, but is bereft of all content today," and the most interesting of Trotsky's heirs built on this method. They followed, in one way or another, Felix Morrow's claim that if Trotskyism was to accept Cannon's line, it "would become a madhouse."[51]

The Russia Question

At the core of Trotsky's critique of Stalinism, and the key text alongside the *Transitional Programme* that framed the subsequent fragmentation of Trotskyism, was his analysis of Stalinism: *The Revolution Betrayed*.

In *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky argued that the Soviet social formation was a contradictory whole combining a brutal, reactionary superstructure with a progressive non-capitalist base constituted through planning and the nationalization of the means of production. Trotsky explained the emergence of the bureaucratic distortions across Soviet society as a manifestation of material scarcity. While scarcity demanded some form of rationing, because the capitalist form of this process through the market had been suppressed the bureaucracy had emerged in essence to police rationing through queues. Moreover, although economic development was rapidly undermining the social basis of the bureaucracy, the bureaucratic caste that had grown to fulfill this function had fixed itself and its privileges at the top of society. This structure meant that freedom could only be won through a revolutionary reconstruction of the state. Nevertheless, the revolution would be of a peculiar sort: it was to be political rather than social, because it would leave intact the nationalized means of production. And though Trotsky called for the defence of this "degenerate workers' state" against external aggressors because of its progressive infrastructure, this should not be taken as evidence that he had

Verso Books, 2009), 278.

51. Trotsky, "It Is Necessary to Build," 305; Felix Morrow, "On the Tempo in Europe," *New International* 12, 2 (February 1946): 49–53, https://www.marxists.org/archive/morrow-felix/1945/11/europe.htm. Attempts to deploy Morrow's work to justify a total rejection of Trotskyism depend on a conflation of Trotskyism with orthodox Trotskyism. See, for instance, Peter Jenkins, *Where Trotskyism Got Lost*, Spokesman pamphlet no. 59 (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1977, https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fi/1938-1949/ww/essay01.htm.

any illusions regarding Stalin's regime.[52] Far from it; as Trotsky argued in 1939, "the USSR minus the social structure founded by the October Revolution would be a fascist regime."[53]

Though powerful, this critical analysis of the Russian social formation was immediately contentious.[54] Indeed, almost as the ink dried on *The Revolution Betrayed* a number of Trotsky's supporters challenged its claim that the bureaucracy was a caste rather than a class.[55] Trotsky's response to this criticism illuminated his broader worldview: he argued that because the regime's collapse was imminent, debating its essence wasn't worth the candle.

Thus, in September 1939, Trotsky argued that he expected the war to provoke a proletarian revolution that "must inevitably lead to the overthrow of the bureaucracy in the USSR and regeneration of Soviet democracy." In this context, arguments "as to whether the Stalinist bureaucracy was a 'class' or a growth on the workers' state will be automatically solved." If, however, the war failed to provoke workers' revolutions in the West, or if revolutions reproduced something similar to the privileged Stalinist bureaucracy, then "we would be compelled to acknowledge that the reason for the bureaucratic relapse is rooted not in the backwardness of the country and not in the imperialist environment but in the congenital incapacity of the proletariat to become a ruling class. Then it would be necessary in retrospect to establish that in its fundamental traits the present USSR was the precursor of a new exploiting régime on an international scale." He concluded that

> either the Stalin régime is an abhorrent relapse in the process of transforming bourgeois society into a socialist society, or the Stalin régime is the first stage of a new exploiting society. If the second prognosis proves to be correct, then, of course, the bureaucracy will become a new exploiting class. However onerous the second perspective may be, if the world proletariat should actually prove incapable of fulfilling the mission placed upon it by the course of development, nothing else would remain except openly to recognize that the socialist program based on the internal contradictions of capitalist society, ended as a Utopia.[56]

Drawing on these arguments, Trotsky's widow Natalia insisted that, for Trotsky, "the question of the character of the Soviet Union has not yet been decided by history," but as a "contradictory society" halfway between capitalism and socialism, it was bound to fall in one direction of the other, and it had

52. Trotsky, *Revolution Betrayed*, 52–60.

53. Trotsky, "*A Petty-Bourgeois Opposition in the Socialist Workers Party*," in *In Defense of Marxism*, 43–62, 53.

54. Howe, *Trotsky*, 157.

55. Ernest Haberkern and Arthur Lipow, eds., *Neither Capitalism nor Socialism* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996). For Trotsky's response, see *In Defense of Marxism*. On the combatants, see Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

56. Trotsky, "USSR in War," 9.

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eventually fallen in the direction of state capitalism.[57] While this argument seemed to cohere with the logic of Trotsky's writings on Russia, orthodox Trotskyism proved itself unwilling to embrace Natalia's claim because it implied the collapse of other key aspects of Trotsky's mature worldview.

Deepening Cannon's denial both of the end of war and of the reality of the postwar boom, orthodox Trotskyism – despite the fact that Trotsky had compared "Soviet Bonapartism" to "a sphere balanced on the point of a pyramid [that] must invariably roll down on one side or the other"[58] – extended Trotsky's model of the Russian social formation to account for the incredibly strong state that had defeated the Wehrmacht before reproducing itself across Eastern Europe, from whence it was challenging the US for global hegemony.

With orthodox Trotskyism thus emptied of its social content, it is hardly surprising that Ralph Miliband could claim that although Russia "badly requires serious and sustained Marxist political analysis," socialist anti-Stalinist debates on the nature of the Soviet regime had been "paralysed by the invocation of formulas and slogans – 'degenerate workers' state' versus 'state capitalist' and so forth."[59] Miliband had a point. Not only had Trotsky's concept of a degenerate workers' state been long emptied of its content, but the alternative "bureaucratic collectivist" and "state capitalist" models on offer from among heterodox Trotskyists appeared to be superficially descriptive, on the one hand, and mere name-calling on the other.

Nonetheless, there was substance behind these labels, and Miliband's failure to adequately address this issue fatally weakened his own otherwise serious and significant engagement with Marxist politics.[60] Indeed, the terms "degenerate workers' state," "bureaucratic collectivism," "state capitalism," etc., have a significance far beyond his dismissive claim that they are mere slogans.

In the first instance, if it was true that Russia remained a workers' state (with whatever caveats) through World War II, the fact that it reproduced itself by military means in Eastern Europe after the war implied not only that Trotsky's account of Stalinism was robbed of its social content but, much more importantly, that the vital link that he and Marx insisted on between socialism and proletarian self-emancipation was severed.[61]

57. Victor Serge and Natalia Trotsky, *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky* (1947; New York: Basic Books, 1975), 200.

58. Trotsky, "Workers' State," 258.

59. Ralph Miliband, *Marxism and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 14.

60. Paul Blackledge, "On Moving On from 'Moving On': Miliband, Marxism and Politics," in Paul Wetherly, Clyde W. Barrow, and Peter Burnham, eds. *Class, Power and the State in Capitalist Society* (London: Palgrave, 2008), 64–83.

61. Isaac Deutscher made this breach explicit; see Deutscher, *Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 554. Peter Beilharz outlined a useful critique of Deutscher in "Isaac Deutscher – History and Necessity," in *Circling Marx* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2021), 182–184. If Beilharz unfortunately reduced Trotskyism to Deutscher's interpretation of Trotsky's legacy,

The Trotskyist movement initially responded to the problem posed in Eastern Europe by making a distinction between the Eastern European bourgeois states and the degenerate workers' state in Russia. This solution was obviously inadequate once it became clear that the Russian and Eastern European states were essentially similar. By 1951, the orthodox Trotskyist movement settled on the claim that all these states were workers' states, with the proviso that Russia was a "degenerate" workers' state, while the Eastern European regimes were "deformed" workers' states.[62] The implications of this analysis was clear enough: not only was proletarian agency an unnecessary luxury for the transition to socialism, but also, and as its corollary, any mostly statized economy could potentially be characterized as a workers' state irrespective of its provenance and its leadership. Consequently, states constituted through peasant armies, Russian tanks, guerilla forces, parliamentary majorities, and military coups could all be labelled workers' states. Meanwhile, "orthodox Trotskyism" fragmented over which of these states to exclude from the label "deformed workers' state," and which to embrace, from an almost endless list of candidates.[63]

Conversely, though the "bureaucratic collectivist" model of the Soviet system – as favoured by Trotsky's critics within the American SWP – made more sense of the obvious strength and class character of the Soviet bureaucracy, it was famously politically indeterminate.[64] While proponents of this model could agree that the Soviet bureaucracy had coalesced into a new class of exploiters above the Russian workers and peasants, they disagreed as to whether this new social formation was more or less progressive than capitalism, or indeed, essentially the same.

Initially, the differences between Trotsky, on one side, and his critics such as James Burnham, Max Shachtman, Joseph Carter, Irving Howe, and Hal Draper, on the other, appeared merely terminological. Both sides condemned Russia's alliance with Nazi Germany and her invasions of Finland and Poland, and both sides agreed that the Soviet Union was progressive vis-à-vis Western capitalism (because of the suppression of private property) and should therefore be defended (unconditionally, according to Trotsky; conditionally, according to his critics) in a conflict with imperialist nations – notwithstanding their

a more nuanced development of a similar critique that highlights the complex nature of the variety of Trotskyisms is to be found in Neil Davidson's "The Prophet, His Biographer, and the Watchtower," in *Holding Fast to the Image of the Past* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014), 81–120.

62. Bornstein and Richardson, *War and the International*, 217–222.

63. Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 12–13, 760, 853, 869, 896; Callinicos, *Trotskyism*, 44–49; George Breitman, Paul Le Blanc, and Alan Wald, *Trotskyism in the United States: Historical Essays and Reconsiderations* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016); Paul Le Blanc, Bryan Palmer, and Thomas Bias, eds., *US Trotskyism 1928–1965*, 3 vols. (Chicago: Haymarket, 2019).

64. Tony Cliff, "The Theory of Bureaucratic Collectivism: A Critique" (1948), in *Marxist Theory after Trotsky*, 155–168.

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shared assumption that the Stalinist state was expected to collapse at the first sign of conflict.

Without transforming the substance of his version of the theory, Shachtman revised his political conclusions when, in 1941, he argued against siding with the Soviets at the outbreak of Operation Barbarossa because Russia had at this point become a mere "vassal" of the Allies. Subsequently, he once again changed his political conclusions, if not his essential model, as Russia proved itself to be nobody's vassal by defeating Germany and reproducing itself across Eastern Europe. From this point onward, he took to describing Stalinism as a "new barbarism." Burnham was the first to embrace the logic of this approach, when he dropped Trotskyism for a position as management guru and Cold-War Hawk, arguing for a preventive nuclear strike by the US against the USSR. Shachtman followed a similar, if slower and less lunatic, path to become an apologist for the Bay of Pigs, while Howe settled as a "democratic socialist" supporter of the West in the Cold War.[65] Conversely, though Draper agreed on the negative characterization of the Soviet Union, he dismissed the claim that the West was the "lesser evil" in the Cold War because a lesser evil needed to be practicable, and democratic capitalism was on its last legs in Europe. Though this theoretical underpinning of his argument was subsequently falsified by history, Draper continued to insist that the revolutionary left, rather than support the West against the East in the Cold War, should orient to workers' revolutions as a "Third Camp" independent of both sides of the Iron Curtain.[66]

Despite their political differences, all these writers shared Trotsky's assumption that a fully nationalized economy could not be a capitalist economy. In their contributions to the debates within the American Trotskyist movement, C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya challenged this premise. On the basis of a return to Marx on the essence of capitalism, they argued that the negation of capitalism could only come through workers' control over the accumulation process, and that the social content of nationalization depended upon the class that controlled it. They concluded that once the Stalinists had ended the last vestiges of workers' control, and because Russia was still dominated by the wage-labour relationship within a competitive imperialist context, its nationalized economy amounted to a form of state capitalism.[67]

By highlighting the essential similarities between Eastern and Western antagonists in the Cold War, the state capitalist model of Russia overcame the political indeterminacy characteristic of the bureaucratic collectivist approach. Moreover, it did so while reaffirming Marx's claim that socialism could only come through workers' self-emancipation.

65. Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 190, 191, 322.

66. Hal Draper, "The Triangle of Forces," in Haberkern and Lipow, *eds., Neither Capitalism nor Socialism*, 173–189, 176.

67. Anthony Bogues, *Caliban's Freedom* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 56–58.

However, a key political difference emerged among proponents of the state capitalism model. Those such as James, Dunayevskaya, and Cornelius Cartoriadis extended the idea of workers' self-emancipation into a complete rejection of Lenin's concept of a vanguard party.[68] Conversely, Tony Cliff coupled a state capitalist analysis with a parallel attempt to renew a democratic model of socialist leadership by unpicking both Lenin's politics from the Stalinist ideology of Marxism-Leninism and Trotsky's account of leadership from its caricature within orthodox Trotskyism.[69]

These debates lend support to Alasdair MacIntyre's claim, made when he was a member of Cliff's *International Socialism* group, that Trotskyism is a contested tradition, whose ossification in the hands of orthodox Trotskyism stands in stark contrast to its living force in the work of Trotsky himself, who "throughout his life … was prepared to reformulate Marxism," and those such as Trotsky's widow Natalia and his collaborator Alfred Rosmer. Whereas orthodox Trotskyism reduced Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism to a label, MacIntyre suggested that Rosmer and others extended the process of theoretical engagement that Trotsky had begun in the 1930s. MacIntyre pointed out that between 1928 and 1940, Trotsky "held at least four positions on the nature of the Russian state," and that over this period, "his analysis of Soviet totalitarianism became even more radical."[70]

Hallas extended this argument to insist that Trotsky's characterization of the Soviet regime as both exceptional and unstable had become indefensible in the wake of, first, Russia's victory over the Wehrmacht and, second, its imperial expansion, including the reproduction of its social structure, across Eastern Europe after 1945. Rehearsing arguments that Natalia Trotsky made when announcing her resignation from the Trotskyist Fourth International in 1951, Hallas wrote, "Trotsky's *analysis* of the class struggle in the USSR after 1927 has clearly been shown to be erroneous. The point is important. No 'orthodox' Trotskyist tendency today in fact defends Trotsky's *analysis* – they

68. C. L. R. James with Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs, *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (1950; Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1986); C. L. R. James with Cornelius Castoriadis and Grace Lee, *Facing Reality* (1958; Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2006); Raya Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom* (1958; New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); David Ames Curtis, ed., *Cornelius Castoriadis: Political and Social Writings*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

69. Tony Cliff, "The Nature of Stalinist Russia" (1948), in *Marxist Theory after Trotsky*, 1–138; Cliff, "Trotsky on Substitutionism" (1960), in *International Struggle and the Marxist Tradition* (London: Bookmarks, 2001), 117–132. Kelly erroneously conflates Cliff's politics with "Third Campism" despite pointing to the important political differences between these tendencies (*TWT*, 94, 105; *CT*, 65, 88–89).

70. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Trotsky in Exile," in Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson, eds., *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 267–276, 270–271, 274.

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substitute a label for the analysis. And this label covers a confused and shifting content."[71]

The fact that the Fourth International continued to hold to the label of Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism long after the falsification of its content illuminated a fundamental flaw in its worldview. This error was only compounded so long as those such as Healy continued to adhere to the catastrophic economic and social predictions of the *Transitional Programme* at a time, during the 1950s and 1960s, when the world experienced the most sustained economic boom in the history of capitalism. Together, these elements of orthodox Trotskyism ensured the divorce of (Healy's) Trotskyism from the (admittedly low-level) real movements against capital from below and its consequent decline into sectarian isolation.

In this context, concrete analyses of the balance of class forces tended to be displaced by pseudo-revolutionary phrase-mongering, as external-facing politics was replaced by pre-Marxist moralism held together by increasingly bureaucratic organizational structures. Indeed, bureaucratic instrumentalism became the typical counterpart to abstract, sectarian, and moralistic dogmatism within these organizations as, divorced from the real movement from below, their political perspectives took the form of ungrounded moral opinions whose social content was one abstract voice among many within an emotivist culture.[72]

A Legacy Worth Fighting For?

Perry Anderson has rightly pointed out that the weaknesses of Trotskyism stem from its origins as a product not only of persecution but also of defeat: "The failure of the socialist revolution to spread outside Russia, cause and consequence of its corruption inside Russia, is the common background to the entire theoretical tradition of this period." From the outset, Trotskyism experienced an enforced isolation from the workers' movement that "inevitably left its effects on the Trotskyist tradition as a whole."[73] Nonetheless, Anderson reminds us that this hostile context should not lead us to forget Trotsky's importance as a Marxist theoretician. His *Results and Prospects*, published when he was just 27 years old, "laid down with brilliant accuracy the future character and course of the socialist revolution in Russia." Beside this strategically central work, he also "wrote fundamental texts on the art of war (*How the Revolution Armed Itself*) and the destiny of literature (*Literature*

71. Natalia Trotsky, *Resignation from the Fourth International*, in Richard Kuper, ed., *The Origins of the International Socialists* (London: Pluto Press, 1971), 101–104; Duncan Hallas, introduction to Kuper, ed., *Origins of the International Socialists*, 3–13, 8.

72. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 23–35.

73. Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 42, 98, 100.

and Revolution)."[74] Moreover, his "*History of the Russian Revolution* (1930) remains in many ways the most commanding example of Marxist historical literature to this day." Similarly, the "quality as concrete studies of a political conjuncture" of his essays on the rise of Nazism "is unmatched in the records of historical materialism," besides which he "initiated a rigorous and comprehensive theory of the nature of the Soviet State." Most importantly, "Trotsky's life from the death of Lenin onwards was devoted to a practical and theoretical struggle to free the international workers' movement from bureaucratic domination so that it could resume a successful overthrow of capitalism on a world scale."[75]

This project, carried out in the harshest possible conditions, is conspicuous by its absence from Kelly's history. Whether or not Trotsky fully succeeded in this goal of renewing Marxism in the face of the cataclysm of Stalinism, he was "a brilliantly innovative theorist," and any socialist movement adequate to the tasks of contemporary anti-capitalism must address the problems he addressed and critically assess the answers he gave to these problems.[76]

If the positive essence of Trotskyism is best understood through the lens of Trotsky's break with Stalin, and while the significance of this breach bears comparison to Lenin's role in 1914, the context of Trotsky's break with Stalinism was far less propitious than the moment Lenin broke with social democracy. Whereas Lenin announced his split with social democracy at a lull in a period of working-class radicalization across Europe that had begun around 1910 and culminated in the revolutionary wave of 1917 to 1923, Trotskyism emerged in the context of a series of defeats for the international left from Britain and China through Germany to France and Spain.[77] And though these defeats tended to confirm Trotsky's analyses of the failings both of social democracy and Stalinism, they simultaneously strengthened the ideological hold of Stalinism over the left.[78] As the Red Army increasingly appeared to be the only realistic barrier to the military expansion of Nazi Germany, Trotskyist groups found it increasingly difficult to break out of the political ghetto.[79]

74. Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 11, 14. On Trotsky's contribution to historical materialism, see Norman Geras, *Literature of Revolution* (London: Verso Books, 1986), 147, 218, alongside my "Leon Trotsky's Contribution to the Marxist Theory of History," *Studies in East European Thought* 58, 1 (2006): 1–31; Richard Day and Daniel Gaido, eds., *Witness to Permanent Revolution* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

75. Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 96–97.

76. Le Blanc, *Leon Trotsky*, 13.

77. Ralph Darlington, *Radical Unionism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2013), 77–82; Hallas, *Comintern*, 118–160.

78. Leon Trotsky, *On Britain* (New York: Monad Press, 1973); *On China* (New York: Pathfinder, 1976); *The Struggle against Fascism in Germany* (New York: Pathfinder, 1971); *On France* (New York: Pathfinder, 1979); *The Spanish Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973).

79. Tony Cliff, *A World to Win* (London: Bookmarks, 2000), 18.

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Trotsky lamented this scenario, arguing that it tended to generate a sectarian mentality among his followers: "The period of existence as a Marxist circle engrafts invariably habits of an abstract approach to the problems of the workers' movement. He who is unable to step in time over the confines of the circumscribed existence becomes transformed into a conservative sectarian."[80] Four years later, he commented on the weakness of the movement that bore his name: "We are not progressing politically.... We are in a small boat in a tremendous current. There are five or ten boats and one goes down and we say it was bad helmsmanship. But this was not the reason – it was because the current was too strong. It is the most general explanation."[81]

So, whereas the brief renewal of revolutionary Marxism between 1917 and 1923 had been predicated on the successful workers' revolution in Russia alongside a moment of real revolutionary possibilities across Europe and Asia, the late 1920s and the 1930s were marked by a series of catastrophic defeats for the left that could have hardly been a less propitious moment to renew revolutionary Marxism. Moreover, Lenin had stood alongside the likes of Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg as Marxist revolutionaries of the first rank with a host of only slightly less impressive figures across Europe and beyond whose credibility within the international socialist movement stemmed from their experiences as leaders of real and important movements from below.

In sharp contrast to this moment, Trotskyism was, in the late 1930s, on Trotsky's own admission, more or less a collection of sects that increasingly tended, as Marx suggested of an earlier generation, to see their "*raison d'être* and [their] *point d'honneur* not in what [they have] *in common* with the class movement, but in the *particular shibboleth distinguishing* [them] from that movement."[82] More importantly, their sectarianism was less a product of their doctrine than a manifestation of profoundly difficult objective circumstances: as Marx wrote, the "development of socialist sectarianism and that of the real labour movement always stand in indirect proportion to each other."[83]

Unlike Trotsky's objectivist account of the problem of sectarianism in the 1930s, Kelly argues that the "weaknesses and failures of the Trotskyist movement are neither conjunctural nor episodic, and nor are they primarily the result of mistaken choices, poor leadership or unforeseeably adverse circumstances." Rather, "the failings of Trotskyism ... are chronic, persistent and pervasive because they are rooted in an inflexible attachment to an outmoded

80. Leon Trotsky, "Sectarianism, Centrism and the Fourth International," in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1935–1936* (New York: Pathfinder, 1977), 152–160, 154.

81. Leon Trotsky, "*Fighting against the Stream," in Writings of Leon Trotsky 1938–1939* (New York Pathfinder, 1974), 249–259, 251–53.

82. Karl Marx, "Marx to Schweitzer," 13 October 1868, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 43 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988), 133.

83. Karl Marx, "Marx to Friedrich Bolte," 23 November 1871, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 44 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989), 252.

and irrelevant doctrine and sectarian hostility to those who disagree" (*TWT*, 105).

Beyond Sectarianism

In a diary entry of 25 March 1935, Trotsky wrote, "I think that the work in which I am engaged now, despite its insufficient and fragmentary nature, is the most important work of my life – more important than 1917, more important than the period of the Civil War or any other.... There is now no one except me to carry out the mission of arming a new generation with the revolutionary method over the heads of the leaders of the Second and Third Internationals.... I need at least about five more years of uninterrupted work to ensure the succession."[84]

It is indicative of Kelly's profound misunderstanding of Trotsky's thought that, while he notes this passage, rather than develop a concrete analysis of it he tries to explain Trotsky's claim in terms of a supposed psycho-dramatic overcompensation for his youthful Menshevism. "At first glance, it is tempting to discount this claim as self-evident hyperbole but it is worth recalling that Trotsky was a late convert to Bolshevism and his party loyalty was often questioned by some of his critics, not least Stalin. His insistence on the salience of the Fourth International may have reflected both tactical and strategic considerations as well as an awareness of his own fraught relations with the Bolshevik Party in pre-revolutionary years" (*TWT*, 9; *CT*, 26).

This argument is quite simply nonsense. Trotsky's assertion about the importance of his role in the 1930s goes to the heart of both his understanding of Marxism and his argument that Stalinism marked a disaster for the workers' movement. If he was right about the catastrophic consequences of Stalinism, it follows that he needed to complement Lenin's earlier break with social democracy with his own breach with Stalinism. Consequently, paralleling Lenin's role after 1914, Trotsky recognized that he must do all that he could to help renew Marxism after Stalin. If the unpropitious context in which Trotsky worked mediated against the ultimate success of this endeavour, all anti-Stalinist socialists owe him a debt for his role in beginning to unpick Marxism from its distorted Stalinist form.[85]

Kelly's converse claim that all Trotskyists stand condemned by a doctrine they inherited from the Old Man is actually contradicted by his own comments on the strongest of the British heterodox Trotskyist groups: the International Socialists (later SWP). He writes that whereas "many Trotskyist activists have constructed an idealized and sanitized account of Trotsky, suppressing or significantly downplaying many of the profound problems with his

84. Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky's Diary in Exile 1935* (London: Harvard University Press, 1976), 46–47.

85. Duncan Hallas, "Trotsky's Heritage," *International Socialism* 2, 40 (1988): 53–64.

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political views and actions … two writers from the SWP have written far more critical and useful accounts of Trotsky, namely Hallas' short introduction and Cliff's four-volume biography" (*CT*, 18–19).

Unfortunately, despite noting this critical tradition, Kelly fails to engage with either the substance or the implications of these criticisms of Trotsky and Trotskyism. This lacuna would be bizarre if it did not have an obvious political explanation. Alex Callinicos argues that Cliff's work amounted to a profound "reorientation" and reconstruction of Trotskyism based on the idea of proletarian self-emancipation as against orthodox Trotskyism's preservation of "the letter of Trotsky's writings at the price of depriving" them of their substance.[86] Conversely, to defend his idea of a singular Trotskyist doctrine, Kelly dismisses Cliff's and Hallas' criticisms of Trotsky and orthodox Trotskyism as being of no substantive importance. Indeed, despite drawing on Callinicos' work, and notwithstanding his description of how Cliff was able to build one of the largest sections of the global Trotskyist movement, Kelly simply ignores Callinicos' interpretation of this break (*CT*, 42, 47; *TWT*, 30). So whereas, for instance, Christoph Henning has argued that "it was only by breaking with Trotsky's ideas that Trotskyism was able to emerge from its sectarian isolation – as in Britain and France, where parts of the Left have a Trotskyist background," Kelly dogmatically asserts that Cliff's heterodox ideas did not really "produce any radical questioning of orthodoxy" and that his organization remained "for all its ideological heterodoxy and tactical flexibility … a revolutionary organization committed wholeheartedly to many of the key tenets of Trotskyist doctrine" (*TWT*, 102; *CT*, 86–87).[87]

This criticism serves to obscure how Cliff developed his and Grant's ad hoc postwar criticisms of Cannon and Mandel into a critique of Trotsky's mature work that was rich enough for Alexander to comment, as we noted above, that he went "beyond the limits of 'Trotskyism.'"[88] Though Kelly references Alexander's work (and indeed, relies on it for much of his history of Trotskyism outside Britain and for his definition of Trotskyist doctrine), he fails to engage with this claim. This gap in Kelly's argument leads him to skirt over the question of how Cliff's break with Trotsky informed his ability to take the first steps toward breaking out of the political ghetto after 1968.

Out of the Ghetto?

Both Cliff and Grant were able to avoid the worst excesses of Trotskyist sectarianism in the 1950s and 1960s by looking reality in the face. But whereas Grant's criticisms of orthodox Trotskyism remained relatively superficial and ad hoc, Cliff's critique developed into something far more systematic. After

86. Callinicos, *Trotskyism*, 73.

87. Christoph Henning, *Philosophy after Marx* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 103.

88. Callaghan, *British Trotskyism*, 31–34.

penning the most comprehensive account of Stalinist state capitalism, he generalized this argument to criticize Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.[89] Subsequently, alongside Mike Kidron – who, tellingly, wrote that the *International Socialism* group "is not Trotskyist but Trotskyist derived" – Cliff linked the theory of state capitalism to an analysis of the postwar economic boom through a critical extension of Bukharin's theory of state capitalism and Edward Sard's theory of a permanent war economy.[90] Moreover, in locating contradictions immanent both to Soviet state capitalism and to the permanent arms economy, the International Socialists were able to marry short- to medium-term economic and political realism in the 1950s and 1960s with a longer-term perspective for the emergence of revolutionary opportunities once these contradictions became manifest.

The possibilities for revolutionary advance extended dramatically in 1968, when, as Anderson argues, "for the first time in nearly 50 years, a massive revolutionary upsurge occurred within advanced capitalism." This revolutionary upsurge created a space where the unity of Marxist theory and working-class practice could "once again" be "rendered potentially conceivable" after it had been "severed" by the defeats of the 1920s and 1930s.[91]

By opening a space for the renewal of revolutionary socialism after it had thus far been precluded in the postwar period, 1968 created the conditions for the rebirth of Trotskyism as the principal tradition for the "renaissance of revolutionary Marxism on an international scale." It created the conditions for Trotskyism's escape from the "enforced isolation" that had been reinforced by a tradition, "asserted more by will than by intellect," of "triumphalism in the cause of the working class, and catastrophism in the analysis of capitalism."[92]

Anderson's 1974 perspectives for Trotskyism were partially confirmed by the successes that various far-left groups across the West experienced in the

89. Michael Howard and John King, *A History of Marxian Economics*, vol. 2 (London: MacMillan, 1992), 64; Callaghan, *British Trotskyism*, 45, 170–171; Cliff, "Nature of Stalinist Russia"; Tony Cliff, "Permanent Revolution" (1963), in *Marxist Theory after Trotsky*, 187–202.

90. Mike Kidron quoted in George Thayer, *The British Political Fringe* (London: Anthony Blond, 1965), 142. In his obituary of Kidron, Richard Kuper wrote that in the 1950s and 1960s, Cliff and Kidron's group jettisoned "the shibboleths of both communism and Trotskyism [while] looking reality squarely in the face." [Kuper], "Michael Kidron," obituary, *Guardian*, 27 March 2003, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2003/mar/27/guardianobituaries.books1; Tony Cliff, "Perspectives of the Permanent War Economy" (1957), in *Marxist Theory after Trotsky*, 169–176; Michael Kidron, *Western Capitalism since the War* (London: Penguin, 1968); Kidron, "Reform and Revolution" *International Socialism* 7 (1961): 15–21; T. N. Vance and Walter J. Oakes [Edward Sard], *The Permanent War Economy* (Alameda, California: Center for Socialist History, 2008); Nikolai Bukharin, *Imperialism and World Economy* (London: Merlin, 1972).

91. Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 95–96; Chris Harman, *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After* (London: Bookmarks, 1998).

92. Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 100–101.

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decade after 1968.[93] Interestingly, in an earlier book, Kelly evidenced how Cliff's International Socialists seized the opportunities for growth presented by the re-emergence of generalized working-class struggles in the period from 1968 to 1974. Cliff's group "was significant because it alone managed to attract industrial workers active in disputes, and on this basis to build a network of rank-and-file groups that would operate throughout the 1970s."[94] Similarly, John Saville noted in 1970 that International Socialism was beginning to make "the transition from a fairly open sect to something approaching a small party."[95]

However, by 1983, Anderson noted that Trotskyism's promise had not been fulfilled, and a decade later he concluded that the Portuguese Revolution marked the closure of the moment of revolutionary optimism that had opened in 1968.[96] Whether or not one agrees with the detail of Anderson's analysis, he did recognize a real sea change in the objective situation: the space for the unification of revolutionary politics with the workers' movement that had been opened in 1968 seemed to be closing again from the mid-1970s.[97]

Unsurprisingly, the growth of revolutionary socialist groups of various stripes in the decade after 1968 fostered excessive revolutionary optimism. However, as bourgeois democracies restabilized from the mid-1970s onward, this optimism eventually mutated into exhaustion and collapse as these groups discovered diminishing returns on militancy.[98] Though more realistic than most Trotskyist factions, International Socialism erred in the direction of extreme revolutionary optimism in the mid-1970s before making a more realistic appraisal of what they called a "downturn" in class struggle from the late 1970s onward.[99]

This was the moment when a crisis of the revolutionary left went hand in hand with a broader crisis of Marxism, when it appeared that class politics

93. Harman, *Fire Last Time*, 336.

94. John Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics* (London: Verso Books, 1988), 113–114.

95. John Saville, "Britain: Prospects for the Seventies," *Socialist Register* (1970): 208.

96. Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso Books, 1983), 79; Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso Books, 1992), xi.

97. Paul Blackledge, *Perry Anderson, Marxism and the New Left* (London: Merlin Press, 2004); Blackledge, "Marxist Interpretations of Thatcherism," in Mark Cowling and James Martin, eds., *Marx's "Eighteenth Brumaire": (Post)Modern Interpretations* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 211–227.

98. Harman, *Fire Last Time*, 331–346.

99. Tony Cliff, *The Crisis: Social Contract or Socialism* (London: Pluto Press, 1975); Cliff, "The Balance of Class Forces in Recent Years" (1979), in *In the Thick of the Workers' Struggle* (London: Bookmarks, 2002), 373–422; cf. Ernest Mandel, *Revolutionary Marxism Today* (London: New Left Books, 1979). At this juncture, Mandel equivocated, writing a perspectives document that offered all things to all people: "upsurge or decline; it was neither fish nor foul," according to his biographer. Stutje, *Ernest Mandel*, 204.

was being increasingly displaced by new social movements.[100] And as defeats began to pile upon defeats for the international workers' movement, so neoliberal capitalism inaugurated a mushrooming of social inequality. This context bred a combined feeling of impotence and rage, informing in its turn a move toward increasingly abstract moralistic discourse as the "the political vision" that had been expanded in 1968 was once again narrowed.[101] Commenting on this tendency, Alain Badiou wrote that for many ex-revolutionaries the turn to ethics was experienced as a return from Marx (politics) to Kant (morality).[102]

It was to guard against this retreat into abstract moralism, alongside political tokenism and reformism, that Cliff, in the early 1980s, steered his group away from what Trotsky had called the "centrist swamp."[103] He argued that as ex-revolutionaries and industrial militants, alongside Labour Party and Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) members, lost faith in the anti-capitalist potential of the industrial struggle that had seemed so promising just a few years previously, they tended toward a hyper-radical moral discourse that covered a retreat toward political passivity and reformism. Cliff insisted that if the SWP did not turn away from this swamp, "then as the downturn continues we are going to find ourselves high and dry. The swamp will surround us and get bigger, so we have to build our little island to keep ourselves out of it."[104]

Although it was rejected by orthodox Trotskyists, this perspective made sense as a short- to medium-term response to the rightward trajectory of many ex-revolutionaries under pressure of the crisis of militancy.[105] Certainly, it protected the SWP from the fate of those once largish revolutionary groups across Europe that either collapsed in on themselves in this period or dissolved into left reformism.

Conversely, the growth of the Labour left in the late 1970s and 1980s created a space from which Grant's group, after decades of entryism into the Labour Party, grew to its greatest influence. Thus, the movement into the Labour Party that Cliff feared became the mechanism through which Grant's group grew. This difference was not merely of a tactical kind. Whereas Cliff's break with Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism was rooted in his return to the core

100. Anderson, *In the Tracks*, 76; Daniel Bensaïd, *An Impatient Life: A Memoir* (London: Verso Books, 2013), 198.

101. Dominique Lecourt, *The Mediocracy: French Philosophy since the Mid-1970s* (London: Verso Books, 2001), 98.

102. Alain Badiou, *Ethics* (London: Verso Books, 2001), 1–4; Paul Blackledge, *Marxism and Ethics: Freedom, Desire, and Revolution* (New York: SUNY Press, 2012), 4–13.

103. Trotsky, "Sectarianism, Centrism and the Fourth International," 158.

104. Tony Cliff, "Building in the Downturn," *Socialist Review* 53 (April 1983): 3–5.

105. Darren Rosso, *Daniel Bensaïd: From the Actuality of the Revolution to the Melancholic Wager* (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 148–150.

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of classical Marxism's claim that socialism could only come through revolutionary proletarian agency, Grant generalized from his defence of Trotsky's characterization of Stalinism to left reformist conclusions. He argued that if workers' states could be created in Eastern Europe without either proletarian agency or smashing the existing states, then left-wing MPs could conceivably enact a similar transition in the West. Nationalization of the means of production rather than the political rule of the working class became, for Grant, the defining characteristic of socialism: "What causes the conflict within capitalism is the fact that the laws manifest themselves blindly. But once the whole of industry is nationalised, for the first time control and planning can be consciously asserted by the producers."[106] His collaborator Peter Taaffe spelled out the political implications of this approach: "If the next Labour government introduced an Enabling Bill into Parliament to nationalise the 200 Monopolies, banks and insurance companies which control 80–85 per cent of the economy, a decisive blow would be struck against the 196 directors of those firms who are the real government of Britain."[107]

Notwithstanding important differences between them, both Cliff's and Grant's groups saw their influence first grow in the 1970s and 1980s, respectively, before waxing and waning in the decades after Thatcher's ascension to power, as they moved from activities in various electoral, trade union, and social movement campaigns. Unfortunately, despite some successes, neither of these groups was able to move beyond a membership of a few thousand, and both experienced internal crises as the possibilities of further growth always seemed just out of reach.

Return to the Ghetto?

Rather than being a consequence of some mythical doctrine, the objective circumstances attendant to the restriction of revolutionary opportunities after the restabilization of bourgeois democracies in the 1970s provides the key to understanding the weakness of revolutionary socialism over the last few decades. If we naturalize this sociohistorical fact, revolutionary parties necessarily appear as no more than sectarian anachronisms. This, unsurprisingly, is Kelly's conclusion, reinforced by his one-size-fits-all model of Trotskyism. From this perspective, he is incapable of asking, except in a rhetorically dismissive manner, the key question that must be asked of contemporary Trotskyism: could the kind of crises the world experienced around 1848, and 1917, and on a lower level in 1968, occur again, and if it could, how ought the left to prepare for it?

If Kelly's criticisms of Trotskyism effectively naturalize the standpoint of civil society, in the decades after World War II the best of British Trotskyism

106. Ted Grant, "Against the Theory of State Capitalism," in *Unbroken Thread*, 197–247, 218.

107. Peter Taaffe, *What We Stand For* (London: Militant, 1986).

sought to maintain revolutionary politics in what they recognized was a non-revolutionary situation. Thus, Grant, in an ad hoc way, and Cliff, in eventually a more systematic manner, laid the foundations for long-haul projects for socialism by attempting to explain the boom and its internal contradictions. Grant lost sight of this realism when he embraced an extreme political optimism that bore little relation to the realities of the day.[108] Conversely, Cliff's intuitive and descriptive account of the downturn in the class struggle allowed him more realistic perspectives at this juncture.

Unfortunately, the theory of the downturn was never developed into a coherent account of how a historically low level of class struggle could continue for almost five decades and counting. Unlike Kidron's deepening of Cliff's early ad hoc criticisms of orthodox Trotskyist catastrophism, since the 1980s neither Cliff nor the group around has have proved adequate to the task of making sense of what has turned into almost half a century of mainly retreats for the left.

One consequence of this gap in their analysis has been an ongoing tension between tendencies toward unrealistic claims – that each brief resurgence of class conflict announced the imminent arrival of a new upturn – and internalized recrimination tending toward sectarian isolationism, once it was recognized that one swallow hadn't made a summer. While the former approach has the appeal of fostering active interventions even in low-level struggles, the long-term consequences of an inadequate account of the period since the mid-1970s paralleled weaknesses with orthodox Trotskyism's unreal rehearsal of the catastrophic perspectives of the *Transitional Programme*. The ungrounded politics of both tendencies have led to the loss of members to exhaustion and splits in clouds of moralistic recriminations.

Kelly cites Callinicos' astonishing observation that the SWP has spent the last four decades anticipating the upturn to come: "Preparing for the upturn we saw was a kind of active process, being involved in strikes and struggles, building rank and file groups and so on. But of course the upturn never came. And to some extent we're still debating why it hasn't come" (*CT*, 67). Cliff evidently became impatient with the meagre fruits of this debate when he attempted to reanimate a part of Trotsky's legacy he had cut his political teeth debunking half a century earlier: "Capitalism in the advanced countries is no longer expanding and so the words of the 1938 *Transitional Programme* that 'there can be no discussion of systematic social reforms and the raising of

108. For instance, in the wake of Thatcher's third election victory, in 1987, he wrote, "The future lies with Marxism. No amount of witch-hunts, no amount of persecution, in industry, in the unions, in the Labour Party, in society as a whole, will be able to hold back the development of Marxism. Marxist ideas will conquer in the Labour Party and in the trade unions, preparing the way for the overthrow of capitalism and the transformation of society." Ted Grant, "Election Results a Prelude to Future Storms," *Militant International Review*, no. 35 (Summer 1987), https://www.marxists.org/archive/grant/1987/election.htm.

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the masses' living standards' fits reality again."[109] His biographer commented that this statement "seems bizarre."[110] Indeed, it is bizarre. At the end of his life, Cliff repeated Trotsky's desperate substitutionist hope that slogans might overcome the limitations of revolutionary politics in a non-revolutionary situation.

Conclusion

If this appeal to dogma seems to confirm Kelly's dismissive critique of Trotskyism, the possibilities for revolutionary advance evidenced in the decade from 1968 points beyond this ahistorical criticism of revolutionary politics. The key difficulty for socialists remains, as Daniel Bensaïd noted, how to maintain revolutionary perspectives outside a revolutionary situation.[111] Marxism is a revolutionary theory that will only ever appeal to minorities in non-revolutionary situations, and to very small minorities in periods of defeat and retreat. The main danger for small minorities in such situations is that they become sects, divorced from the working class and tending toward either introversion or substitutionism *for* the masses.[112] For Marxists to retain their revolutionary orientation in periods when the generalized class struggle is at a historically low ebb, their theory must be alive both to limitations of contemporary practice and to the opportunities to intervene within immanent processes that tend to future revolutionary possibilities. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s the International Socialists sketched such a theory, since the 1980s their successor organization has failed at this level; in failing, the SWP has tended – like Trotskyists more generally – to degenerate into one more abstractly dogmatic, moralistic voice within civil society's emotivist culture.[113]

Unfortunately, because Kelly naturalizes the standpoint of civil society, he misunderstands the social basis for this problem. By contrast with his myopic viewpoint, the best of Trotskyism remains relevant because Trotsky's rejection of Stalinism from the perspective of the October Revolution allows for the imaginative proximity of democratic revolutionary politics. Whereas

109. Tony Cliff, *Trotskyism after Trotsky* (London: Bookmarks, 1999), 81–82.

110. Ian Birchall, *Tony Cliff: A Marxist for His Time* (London: Bookmarks, 2011), 541.

111. Bensaïd, *Who Are the Trotskyists?*, 17.

112. Bornstein and Richardson, *War and the International*, 240–241.

113. Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that all revolutionary organizations are condemned to degenerate into either or both moralistic and instrumentalist caricatures of Marxism because of their inability to transcend the standpoint of civil society (*After Virtue*, 261–262; *Marxism and Christianity* [London: Duckworth, 1995], 101). It is perhaps better to say that this failing is a more limited consequence of a conjunctural loss of their intrinsic contact with the "real movement that abolishes the present state of things," the solution to which is rebuilding that relationship. Paul Blackledge, "Alasdair MacIntyre as a Marxist and as a Critic of Marxism," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 88, 4 (2014): 705–724.

anarchists, autonomists, liberals, and social democrats have obscured the importance of this revolutionary moment of human potential through trite claims that Lenin led to Stalin and that Trotsky was Stalin's failed anti-Pope, Trotsky's critique of Stalinism for its "betrayal" of the hopes of the Bolshevik Revolution creates a space for a positive reappraisal of classical Marxism's relevance to contemporary anti-capitalism.[114]

If our hopes for an end to the ongoing environmental and socioeconomic catastrophe continue to depend on a wager on the possibility of a revolutionary break with capitalism, the revolutionary tradition continues to have much to learn both from Trotsky and, *contra* Kelly, from the strengths and weaknesses of the various strands of Trotskyism.

114. On autonomism, anarchism, and Trotsky's democratic alternative, respectively, see Paul Blackledge, "In Perspective: John Holloway," *International Socialism* 2, 136 (2012): 89–10; "Marxism and Anarchism," *International Socialism* 2, 125 (2010): 53–80; "Soviet Democracy in 1917," in Xavier Márquez, ed., *Democratic Moments: Reading Democratic Texts* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 129–136; "Freedom and Democracy," in Alex Prichard, Ruth Kinna, Saku Pinta, and David Berry, eds., *Libertarian Socialism: Politics in Black and Red* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 17–34.

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