REVIEWS


Trotskyism has always been defined negatively; trotskyism is non-stalinism. This may well help explain trotskyism's popularity; we're all trotskyists now. Unfortunately things are not quite so simple. The left's penchant for name-calling often denies a theoretical analysis: to name a position is thought to be sufficient to explain it. A critical marxism clearly needs to penetrate below the blanket endorsement and the vitriol which are popular currency in contemporary debate.

After the Gramsci boom inspired by 1968 there is now a revival of interest in Leon Trotsky (see list). The central question in this revival is elementary: who is Leon Trotsky? Incredible as it seems, this question has never been answered in terms other than banal: Heir to Lenin, or the Great Renegade, depending on one's affiliations. It is a sad indicator of the condition of marxism that the best recent analyses have not been the marxist ones. The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky, the most scholarly work to date, is written by a social-democrat attempting to retrieve Trotsky from the mythology engendered by his followers and enemies alike.

Interestingly, the Trotsky revival is largely a response to Deutscher's famous trilogy, The Prophet Armed, Disarmed, Outcast (Oxford 1954, 1959, 1963). In his memoirs, van Heijenoort suggests that Deutscher's trilogy has all the defects of a pioneering work — and more. Though attacking excessive partisanship, Heijenoort also laments the cleft between historians and participants, implicitly begging members of the left to write their memoirs (a request to which we might add our own voices here!).

Irving Howe's recent Trotsky is also a response to Deutscher: for Howe, Deutscher's ambivalence toward stalinism and his identification with his subject mar his work. But to proceed to the work under review — Knei-Paz' complaints are more theoretical in nature. In particular, Deutscher mirrors the radical Trotsky's self-denial. Deutscher glosses over Trotsky's early politics to maintain the 'unity of Lenin and Trotsky' line. For Knei-Paz, Deutscher definitionally cannot give us an adequate understanding of Trotsky. Deutscher takes on Trotsky's jacobin morality, portraying Trotsky as a variation on the 'Ghost Who Walks', who neither wins nor loses but will be vindicated on the Great Day.

So much for context — what is the content of this tome? In one sense The Social and Political Thought of Trotsky is basically a document, a dossier containing all the important aspects of Trotsky's thought. All the major works from youth through to exile and murder are summarised, analysed, at least in part criticised. Yet 'dossier' implies some disorder; where Knei-Paz organises his subject matter thematically, giving greater coherence and thrust to Trotsky's thought. Knei-Paz moves from 1905 to combined and uneven development, permanent revolution, Party, the Revolution and its Betrayal, to Trotsky as intellectual and man of letters. What holds this presentation together is the pursuit of Trotsky as the theoretician of permanent revolution. For permanent revolution is Trotsky's central innovation, and it is on this theory that Trotsky stands or falls. Trotsky cannot be understood as the Man with the Train or as the Prophet: Trotskyism can only be analysed as permanent revolution.

As it widely known, the theory of permanent revolution was produced through the collaboration of Parvus and Trotsky around 1905. Parvus had argued that the internationalisation of capital made the nation-state obsolete. Trotsky deduced from this functional internationalism — the notion that all twentieth century revolutions must be socialist (this was not Parvus' position — he was closer to Lenin in this regard). In the case of Russia, revolution could begin as bourgeois but could only be completed as socialist — why? — because the proletariat would be at the helm and the logic of proletarian power was socialist revolution.

Readers may have noticed already that this theory denies an elementary principle of marxism — 'men make history but not just as they please'. But Trotsky does not simply impute revolutionary consciousness to the working class or its 'representative', the Party. He simultaneously theorises automatic revolution via the principle of uneven development. Where for Gramsci and Lenin uneven development explains some of the problems of making socialism, for Trotsky it becomes a levelling mechanism which makes all situations revolutionary. Trotsky jumps from the fact of world market and uneven development within that market and the nation-state to the
teleology of the inevitable prairie fire: he converts uneven development from an explanatory device into the prime mover of world revolution. The world market is a world system therefore the whole caboodle must crash at once — the weakness of the weakest link infects the whole chain. But the logic of uneven development tells us the opposite: that the chain remains rigid though broken in one place.

History runs at different times: but the problem with differential times is precisely that they are differential. When we say that theory lags (all the time), or that politics lags (1929, 1968) or economy lags (1917) we are indicating discontinuity. There is no way that discontinuity can become a motor force. Uneven development implies fragmentation, not teleology. Marx's classic study of uneven development — The Eighteenth Brumaire — displays precisely this point. More often than not uneven development leads to bonapartism — not to socialism, as Trotsky thought, nor to bourgeois democracy, as the mensheviks thought. Trotsky’s notion that accumulated contradictions necessarily make for social progress reveals something of his shared background with the automatic marxism of the Second and Third Internationals. In politics nothing is automatic, everything is contingent. Certain comrades leap more than History does; and they do not always look first.

The careful reader may glean this much and more from Knei-Paz: reflection on this book and on Trotsky’s works reveals that permanent revolution simply does not follow from uneven development, that combined development is meaningless converted into a kind of socialist domino theory. Instead of analysing national specificities in the manner of Gramsci, Trotsky views all through this theory of automatic revolution, fitting all examples into a socialism or barbarism couple that correlates with ‘the Soviet Road’ or ‘the Nazi Road’. How is this possible? Armed with the all-explanatory scheme of permanent revolution, Trotsky moves into a method which owes much more to Hegel than to Marx. If the world explains itself globally, if the proletariat acts as History’s Agent, the problems of everyday socialist politics dwindle. The tune is familiar — socialism is the proletariat’s only vocation, socialism could have been made many times over were it not for treacherous communist parties, etc.

Knei-Paz’ contribution may not be as clear as the comments above might suggest. He is not a marxist, his concern is not with promoting marxist criticism or self-criticism. Nor does his book take the form of a clear critique: but we cannot castigate books for not being something other than what they are. The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky is similar in this regard to Liebman’s Leninism Under Lenin. These are the first really good books on the fathers of Bolshevism — if they do not live up to all our expectations it is because they are pioneering works, attempting first to establish the real record. Works of critique will follow after the air has been cleared. Meantime, Knei-Paz has not only given us a clear theoretical presentation of Trotsky’s themes and works, but has also provided us with valuable information. In portraying the Laxemburist Trotsky, for example, Knei-Paz gives a 22-page precis of the inaccessible 1904 text ‘Our Political Tasks’. Here we see a Trotsky whose existence was regarded by Deutscher as an aberration.

Though we can have few scholarly complaints about this book, some political comments are necessary. It would be dishonest to deny that Knei-Paz’ social-democratic predilections show through at times: thus, for example, the hints that the failure of bolshevism indicates the failure of marxism generally. Marxism appears here as a sullied nineteenth century ideal. More painful than this is the attitude toward a hypothetical leninism. Knei-Paz repeats Schapiro’s claim that Lenin set about destroying all opposition immediately. But, for example, factions were not banned until after the NEP. On the ‘totalitarian school’s’ account, there are two possible explanations. Either factions were fake; or Lenin tried to squash internal democracy unsuccessfully. At this point the reader expects either further evidence, or some kind of psychohistory ‘explaining’ the machinations of a power-hungry Lenin. The fact of historical continuity between Lenin and Stalin does not justify any suggestion of reading Stalin back into Lenin.

The point is not that Lenin was not authoritarian after circa 1918; nor can it be disputed that Lenin was no theoretician. The point is that Lenin was rarely dogmatic in his decision-making, that he placed a provisional status on most of his work and only into his last years began to elevate necessity into virtue (e.g. the ‘Twenty-One Conditions’ of the Comintern). Trotsky in comparison habitually justified his turns theoretically. At any rate, these problems make for the least persuasive part of Knei-Paz’ book. Other accounts such as Gerratana’s essay in New Left Review 103, Liebman’s book, Brinton’s Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control go much further toward explaining Lenin.

The last third of The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky falls off — it lacks the impact of the first two-thirds, partly because of the nature of the subject matter (Knei-Paz’ insistence on covering all Trotsky’s work engenders organisational problems), partly because ‘objectivity’ is more easily aspired to than achieved. In one place Knei-Paz cites the suggestion that the historian is a chronicler: but
neither this mammoth work of theoretical scholarship nor those problems just outlined can be explained via the notion of the author as chronicler.

Such quibbles, however, are insignificant in the light of Knei-Paz’ contribution to the task of rediscovering Trotsky as a preliminary to assessing his political relevance to the West today. This book is one of the few which can actually be read instead of the originals — a practice rarely advisable; and there is not now, nor has there ever been, justification in elevating ‘marxist’ texts over others simply on their claim to orthodoxy.

And Knei-Paz’ conclusion? It is, of course, that Trotsky is irrelevant. Most of the recent literature agrees — for rather different reasons. As marxism as critique advances, we can only lament the continuing fascination of so much of the left with figures like Trotsky, intriguing as a great revolutionary and yet so far away from suburban commonsense as lived working class experience, so far away from the forms of everyday life which daily renew bourgeois domination.

Other Writings on Trotsky


Hodgson, G., Trotsky and Fatalistic Marxism (Spokesman 1975) gives a rigorous critique of Trotsky’s automatism.

Howe, I., Trotsky (Fontana 1978) is the best cheap introduction to Trotsky. See also his review of Knei-Paz in New York Review of Books, 9/2/78.

Jenkins, P., Where Trotskyism Got Lost (Spokesman pamphlet 59, 1977) analyses the failure of orthodox Trotskyism to re-think the post-war world.


Michail, L., The Theory of Permanent Revolution — A Critique (CPGB 1977), and ‘Trotsky’s Revolution Betrayed’, Socialist Europe 3, manages to criticise Trotsky only by elevating Lenin to the status of God.

Red and Lavender Union, Permanent Revolution — A Vindication of Marxism (LRU 1976) — gays groping towards bolshevism. They eventually joined the Spartacists.

Studies in Comparative Communism, special Trotskyism number, 10/1-2 (1977) contains interesting historical material, polemics between Mandel and Dunayevskaya.

Thompson, P. and Lewis, G., The Revolution Unfinished? A Critique of Trotskyism (Big Flame 1977) provides a brief but sharp all-round critique of orthodoxy.


Warth, R., Leon Trotsky (Twayne, 1977) — another biography.

Finally, in ‘Marxism and Trotsky’, forthcoming in Telos, Peter Beilharz attempts a general theoretical assessment of Trotsky’s marxism.

If you ever wondered whatever happened, cinematically speaking, to Vietnam after The Green Berets, don’t worry, you’re about to find out. Three films on current release (Coming Home, The Odd Angry Shot, and The Deer Hunter) certify that Vietnam has made it as a suitable case for treatment.

Apparently enough time has elapsed for the war to assume what might be called manageable proportions. The day-in, day-out exhaustive television coverage which, arguably, made Vietnam the most reported and least considered conflict in history, undoubtedly rendered contemporaneous movie treatments superfluous. Additionally, the controversies about Vietnam which made it too hot a potato politically for smart money moviemakers to touch, hardly abated in the war’s immediate aftermath. Watergate, the decline and fall of Richard Nixon and related matters were safer “political” issues for concerned cinema interests to tackle.

But now the log-jam has broken, the reticence dissolved, and Hollywood is about to fall all over itself awarding Oscars to the biggest, if not the brightest of the Vietnam films: The Deer Hunter. It’s a 3-hour blockbuster of a movie, detailing the Vietnam experience of a group of young ethnic Americans, telling it, in one sense, like it was: the hour-long battle sequence is harrowing, disturbingly visceral. Yet in another sense, The Deer Hunter mystifies, elevating the war to fantasy. It robs it of its real national and personal significance, by denying it historical specificity. The war, in the film, simply happens; its very graphicness is a smokescreen, its sense of “actuality” veiling the fact that the film offers nothing more than description. The technical expertise, physical resources and sheer film time devoted by director Michael Cimino to the Vietnam sequences simply avoid confronting the key issue of the significance of Vietnam for American society generally, and for the generation who fought there.

It is possible, of course, to see The Deer Hunter as not centrally concerned with Vietnam at all but rather with yet another reworking of a well-known American literary theme, The Loss of Innocence: the naive, trusting American goes abroad (a variant has the country dweller come to the city), tussles with alien experiences (usually Politics and Depravity), and returns home bloodied but unbowed, sobered by “knowledge”, glad to be restored to the unalienated society that is America. The broad outline of The Deer Hunter is certainly consonant with this theme.

The film focusses on three members of a Russian-American community who volunteer for service in Vietnam. The film’s first hour concerns Michael, Nick and Stevie, and their fellow steelworkers, at Stevie’s wedding, and on a post-nuptial deer hunting trip. The emphasis is on the personal and cultural ties which bind them together, to their ethnic community, and to their country. The Russian Orthodox Church and the local steel mill are linked symbolically as significant institutions in the town. The local American Legion hall, where the wedding reception is held, is obviously mainly Russian in membership, linking ethnicity and patriotism.

On the hunting trip, the group’s boozy camaraderie is shattered. Theirs is a careless, brawling association rather than fellowship, and it is clear that their leader, Michael, feels superior to and distant from the rest. Although therefore somewhat detached from his community, Michael at the same time is seen to be bound to “the land” — he is proficient in Indian lore (shades of the “authentic” Americans!) and he professes a love for his home town.

It is in Vietnam that Michael, arrogant and innocent, learns real responsibility and commitment. Captured by the Viet Cong, Michael, Nick and Stevie are forced to play Russian roulette. Michael, in engineering their escape, forces Nick to risk his life in the game. Although the escape attempt is ultimately successful, Nick is traumatised by the experience and Stevie is badly injured. Back home, on leave, a chastened Michael attempts to restore the comrades — whose injuries are his responsibility — to their community, exercising a degree of moral force. He finds Stevie, legless and disoriented in a veterans’ hospital, and brings him home. He remonstrates with his civilian friends, taking issue with their carelessness with guns. On a nostalgic deer hunting trip he deliberately misses a sure shot at a stag, muttering resignedly “OK, OK”, recognising the arbitrariness of the relationship between hunter and hunted. In the film’s final scenes, Michael finds Nick, AWOL and a heroin addict, in the back streets of Saigon in the last days before the fall, making his “living” as a professional Russian roulette player. Nick rejects Michael’s pleas to “remember”, rejects the implicit sanctity of “home”, and finally loses the game. After Nick’s funeral in the familiar Russian American Legion hall, where the wedding reception was held, the film freeze-frames on their upturned glasses.

So the film’s cycle is complete. All the group sits round the table, the absent one present in their minds. The narrative reassuringly folds us back into the film’s definition of community (via the repetition of the church ceremonies and the hunting trips) and the film’s view that these are the eternal verities: small towns, good fellowship, caring and comfort, no matter how inarticulate. It is difficult to get outside The Deer Hunter's
world, to query its view that “community” is the answer to a hostile and random world, that it will make remembering less painful.

Yet, we must query that view. After all, how many Americans live in communities — even ethnic ones — where warm personal ties are a daily fact of life? And, even in the film’s own terms, can we realistically see “community” in the film as positive, as a source of strength? Doesn’t it rather appear as the pitiful refuge of the damaged, a defensive stockade within which the brutalized and bewildered whistle in the dark, trying to keep the unknown barbarians at bay?

This is not to say that a community of self-conscious, “remembering” individuals, creating a just sphere of shared norms and values is either impossible or undesirable. Quite the reverse. But The Deer Hunter’s community is one of despairing resignation, grounded in the film’s assumption that there are no historically specific relationships, only those of pure chance. According to the film, Vietnam simply “happened” to this community; its members can make no sense of it, they can only accept it.

At one level, of course, one can hardly disagree that many Americans did go to Vietnam without any very clear understanding of what they or their country were doing, despite the debates current at the time. But one can argue with a film that elevates such an absence of reflexivity or justification or even inquiry to a principle of personal and national existence. The motif of Russian roulette dominates the film — hazard, chance, the notion that death is just a single shot away. How is politics possible in such a situation? Given the arbitrariness portrayed in this film, how can we even hope? Why, indeed, think? criticize? conclude? act? and, most importantly, remember? This film is social amnesia run amok. Resist.

— Kathe Boehringer