One can easily agree with Peter Beilharz in his review of Baruch Knei-Paz’s *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky* (ALR, April 1979) when Beilharz writes that “a critical marxism clearly needs to penetrate below the blanket endorsement and the vitriol which are popular currency in contemporary debate” on Trotsky.

Unfortunately Beilharz’s “penetration” reflects ignorance and gross distortion which, one might add, is reflected in the poor bibliography at the end of his review. If one must try to “save” Trotsky from the “trotskyists” and stalinists, it is also necessary to “save” him from the academic marxists.

Equally, it is necessary to save him — and socialism — from the purveyors of “suburban commonsense” whom Beilharz seems to regard as the ones with the answers.

“Trotskyism can only be analysed as permanent revolution” Beilharz claims. Assuming he means Trotsky and not the varied brands of “trotskyism” current in Australia or elsewhere, it is an inadequate definition, but it is of course true that the theory of Permanent Revolution is the key to understanding much of Trotsky.

Beilharz’s understanding of this theory is, however, to say the least, lacking. Best to go to Trotsky himself, to see how in his 1930 introduction to his *Permanent Revolution* he defined the three main aspects of his theory: First, “it pointed out that the democratic task of the backward bourgeois nations led directly, in our epoch, to the dictatorship of the proletariat and that the dictatorship of the proletariat puts socialist tasks on the order of the day ....

“The second aspect of the theory has to do with the socialist revolution as such. For an indefinitely long time and in constant internal struggle, all social relations undergo transformation .... This process necessarily retains a political character, that is, it develops through collisions between various groups in society which is in transformation.”

“ar the international character of the socialist revolution which constitutes the third aspect of the theory of permanent revolution, flows from the present state of the economy and the social structure of humanity .... The maintenance of the proletarian revolution within a national framework can only be a provisional state of affairs, even though, as the experience of the Soviet Union shows, one of long duration .... ”

It is important to note that the “democratic tasks” for Trotsky did not simply mean the establishment of political, bourgeois democracy but, above all, the overthrow of all pre-capitalist forms. In backward capitalist countries that meant an agrarian revolution, replacing feudal and other forms with capitalist relations of production. However, in the period of imperialism, the possibility was excluded of a bourgeois revolution such as occurred in Europe, in France in 1789 and elsewhere and in Japan in the late 19th century, which not only established bourgeois democracy but transformed the economy into a modern capitalist one in all fields.

The only way to test this first aspect of Trotsky’s theory of the Permanent Revolution is to examine world history over the past 75 years. Such an examination shows very clearly that in backward capitalist countries, despite numerous political revolutions and periods of bourgeois democracy none have carried out the “democratic tasks” of the bourgeois revolution, unless there has been a revolution led by communist parties. India is perhaps the best example of this. Despite some considerable industrialisation, the rural revolution has not been carried out, and so India has not carried out a revolution which will allow it to become an advanced industrial country.

The “socialist countries” have all proceeded in a short period of time from the “democratic revolution” to a “socialist revolution”. This again confirms Trotsky’s theory in its first aspect, even though the Communist Parties maintained the fiction in the period of the “National Democratic Revolution” that it was not a dictatorship of the proletariat but a united front with the “anti-monopolist” bourgeoisie.

As the second aspect of the theory as outlined by Trotsky, it seems to me rather self-evident, from the history of the past 62 years, that the post-capitalist societies are not the perfect societies some may have believed in the Stalin period, which smoothly progress to a classless society.

Finally, it seems equally clear that it is impossible to consider a socialist revolution in one country in isolation from the total world revolutionary process. As for the argument, to which this point is linked, concerning whether it is possible to build “socialism in one country”, this
has also been answered by history: unless of course one defines socialism as what already exists in the Soviet Union, etc.

One last note: much of the controversy about the theory of Permanent Revolution has come from the advocacy in advanced capitalist countries of the possibility of an “anti-monopoly revolution” which would, somehow, for an historical period, allow a Popular Front of workers’ parties and “progressive” bourgeois parties to nationalise all the major monopolies and yet not progress in a short time to a full socialist revolution, and that this could somehow happen in a single nation state. If Chile showed anything, it showed that a revolution cannot stop halfway.

Of course, some trotskyist sects deny altogether any period in which “democratic (or anti-monopolist) tasks” would be carried out in the process of socialist revolution. For them, it must be a one-day (or ten-day) socialist revolution in which all the tasks, “democratic” and “socialist”, are instantly carried out.

Beilharz’s criticism of Trotsky for “theorising automatic revolution” is really incomprehensible. If anything, Trotsky over-emphasised political leadership — the subjective factor — in which nothing is automatic but dependent on human decisions. It is even more ludicrous to claim that Trotsky ignored the problem that uneven development leads to bonapartism. Has Beilharz not read Revolution Betrayed?

Beilharz suffers from all the serious diseases of academic marxism exemplified by the Telos academics. Theories are abstracted from reality, to be tested by their own and other logic and not by history. Of course, Trotsky can be criticised as can Marx and Lenin and many others for telescoping history, for seeing the logic and underlying possibilities of revolution leading to them quickly becoming reality. Marx saw 1848 as a prelude to proletarian revolution. Lenin and Trotsky saw 1917 as the prelude to socialist revolutions in western and central Europe. Many saw the defeat of imperialism in Indochina as a prelude to a revolution in the rest of South-East Asia.

Revolutionaries are, by nature, optimists, because of the pressing need for socialism (above all in underdeveloped capitalist nations) and the objective possibilities. Beilharz picks this up in Trotsky, but ignores it elsewhere. But this revolutionary optimism is not the equivalent of seeing “automatic” revolution. Revolutionary optimism is a “motor force”, providing a subjective element essential in any movement or party. Of course, in itself it is insufficient. “Pessimism of the intellect” which allows an analysis of the enemy and objective countervailing forces is, as Gramsci summarised, vital.

I wrote earlier of “saving Trotsky from the trotskyists” and it is important to avoid identifying Trotsky with his followers (or epigones?). The latter, in their vast majority, and despite their differing orthodoxies, have become sects, dogmatising Trotsky and setting up an orthodoxy of their own invention. To try to understand these sects, it is of little purpose referring back to their God-head: it is necessary to analyse (if it is worth the time and effort), their own theory and practice in today’s world.

Trotsky is no God-head, any more than are Marx, Engels, Lenin or Gramsci. All — and many others — have made great and important contributions, not only in the past, but also to an understanding of our present reality. But only a creative marxism (or better expressed, scientific socialism) based on, above all, an analysis of our complex reality, can really utilise the heritage of the “Greats”.

Trotsky’s epigones (to use one of his favorite words) also inherit the tradition of the international. Here Beilharz has a point: the tendency to see World Revolution and concretely the European Revolution, as a relatively short-term possibility, led to over-centralisation of the world communist movement, and the acceptance, particularly in distant lands such as Australia, of the word of the “International Secretariat” or whatever, as gospel. Under Stalin, this centralisation was used to turn communist parties largely into instruments of Soviet foreign policy.

The differing “trotskyist” Internationals carry this centralisation to absurdity: every twist and turn dictated by the International leadership is applied, particularly in Australia, with iron discipline, independent of the local situation. We have a phenomenon of “stalino-trotskyism”...

But there are also dangers in a purely “national” marxism, for although ending the umbilical links with past Internationals as interpreted by Stalin, Mao, or for that matter, Trotsky, a purely national marxism runs the danger of a narrow parochialism, shutting out experiences and views from other parties and movements. While it is a necessary phase, perhaps of relatively long duration, to allow analysis of one’s own national reality and peculiarities, “national” marxism cannot ignore the international context. A new type of international, without big brothers or great leaders, overcoming nationalism and so on, and finding a new unity will, in my view, emerge in the future, combining internationalist analysis with national theory and practice.

Space does not allow me to take up other points raised by Beilharz. That is also due to the fact that I have not read Knei-Paz’s book. However, if Beilharz accurately reflects Knei-Paz’s analysis in his review, I can only say that, as always, it is necessary to go to the original source rather than rely on some “scholarly” crib.

— Denis Freney.