

A Balance Sheet of Trotskyism

WHAT IS the balance sheet of Trotskyism? In terms of its own perspectives and of the tasks it set itself the Trotskyist movement is no nearer achieving its goals in 1993 than it was at its inception. Despite all their valiant efforts and occasional successes, all the Trotskyist groups have remained marginal to events. This is true not only of Britain but worldwide. Nowhere, except for short periods in Argentina, Bolivia and Ceylon, and perhaps Indochina, have Trotskyist parties come anywhere near becoming a significant force in the working class movement.

It is true that Rome wasn't built in a day, and the time scale must be viewed in terms of historical epochs and not in years or even decades. One should not expect to reach the promised land in one's own lifetime. I have some sympathy with this point of view. But against this one must remember that, according to our own analyses, the terminal crisis of capitalism and the period of wars and revolutions started with the 1914 war, three-quarters of a century ago. We must remember that the Fourth International was founded in 1938 on the basis of the expectation of the imminent revolutionary crisis and travail of capitalism following on the war that broke out in 1939. We now know that this perspective was wrong. We have witnessed not the collapse but the growth of capitalism. We have seen the collapse of the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe lead, not to a resurgence of Socialism, but to a return to capitalism – a return welcomed by large sections of the working class. The influence of Socialist ideas of any sort – parliamentary, gradualist or Marxist revolutionary – is weaker today than it has been at any time since the late nineteenth century. Is this what one should expect after three-quarters of a century of a period of “wars and revolutions” and of the “terminal crisis” of capitalism?” The patient is taking an unconscionable time to die.

Many comrades have tried to explain – or explain away – these repeated failures of the revolutionary movement by pointing to secondary factors which have either postponed or “masked” the development of revolution. They have insisted that numerous revolutionary situations have occurred during this period, but that in each case capitalism has been saved only thanks to the treachery of either the Social

Democratic or Stalinist misleaders of the working class (or both), by the weakness or fragmentation of the revolutionary forces, or by other “secondary” factors. But this begs the question! Why have the Social Democrats and Stalinists, despite their repeated “betrayals” and “exposures” – each time correctly foretold by the Trotskyists – still been able to maintain the support of far larger masses of workers than have the Trotskyists, despite their “correct” policies? Does this not prompt us to ask ourselves whether this can be explained by the fact that reformist policies have always found a deeper echo within the working class, and that the mass of the workers have remained attached to reformism and impervious to revolutionary ideology – even in “revolutionary situations”, such as the post-liberation turmoils in Italy and France, France 1968, Portugal in the 1970s, etc.

If this is so – and I believe it is – then this leads inevitably to the next and fundamental question. Was Marx wrong when he argued that the working class must, because of its position within capitalist society, almost inevitably, sooner or later, develop a revolutionary consciousness, change from a class-in-itself into a class-for-itself? Was he wrong when he wrote in *The Holy Family*:

“It is not a question of what this or that proletarian or even the whole proletarian movement momentarily imagines to be the aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is and what it consequently is **historically compelled to do**. Its aim and historical action is prescribed **irrevocably** and obviously in its own situation in life as well as in the entire organisation of contemporary civil society.” (My emphases – HR.)

I have, reluctantly, come to the conclusion that Marx was wrong. The working class is not “historically compelled” to arrive at Socialist or Marxist consciousness – with or without the assistance of professional revolutionaries. Undoubtedly, the position of the working class in capitalist society, and the contradictions and tensions within that society, the continual struggles between workers and employers, must be a factor impelling large numbers of workers to question the existing set-up and look for alternatives. But there is nothing inevitable about this. Workers can and do reach all sorts of what to Socialists might seem illogical and perverse

conclusions. We have underestimated the tenacious hold of bourgeois ideology, inculcated by the educational system and the mass media, on working class consciousness. Above all, we have underestimated the force of inertia. We have underestimated the fact that, unless their situation becomes absolutely unbearable, working class people will prefer to adapt to an existing society and try and marginally improve their condition within it, rather than embark on the perilous voyage of revolution on uncharted seas. Does this sound unduly pessimistic? I do not think pessimism or optimism enters into it. One must look at things as they are – not as one would wish them to be.

Another possible explanation is that the Leninist theory that capitalism has, as imperialism, entered its highest and **final** phase is wrong, that we have mistaken the middle age “menopause” of capitalism for its terminal illness. Maybe we have underestimated the resilience of capitalism and its ability to structurally reform itself. These questions are being raised by many who are trying to rescue Marxist theory from the dead hand of “orthodox” dogma in discussion journals and various forums up and down the country.

Whatever the combination of factors, it must be acknowledged that the general political climate in Britain during the postwar period was unfavourable to the development of revolutionary Marxist currents. It is this, and not the mistakes or imperfections of this or that Trotskyist group, that explains why they have all remained marginal sects. The dogmatism, the bitterness of the internal disputes and splits that have bedevilled the movement, the unhealthy dominance of individuals, the cliquism and intolerance of criticism, were all

essentially products of the isolation of the Trotskyists from the main stream of the broad labour movement. All the negative traits of the Healy tendency that I have described were present in all the Trotskyist groups to a greater or lesser degree. The immense gap between the general political consciousness (or lack of it) of the broad labour movement and our own ideology meant that whatever the strategy or tactics we adopted – within the Labour Party or outside it – our success was limited. It is not without significance that it was precisely when we (the Healy tendency) were, according to our critics, trying to camouflage ourselves as good Labour Party members and left social democrats that we had our greatest successes.

None of what I have said implies that the struggle for a better society must be abandoned. A glance at the daily papers or watching the news on television with its pictures of starvation in Africa, ethnic conflicts, wars, torture and destruction all over the world, and the homeless sleeping on the pavements of London, is enough to remind one that humanity is in deep crisis and there are plenty of evils to fight. The question is – **How?**

The first step is to rid one’s mind of false conceptions. We believed the road to the better society was through proletarian revolutions led by revolutionary parties modelled on the Bolshevik party of Lenin and Trotsky. I will not be so bold as to assert categorically that some variant of this road is impossible. I think it is possible, but highly unlikely, and fraught with pitfalls. We must look for other, more promising, roads. I do not pretend to know what they are. I can only hope that by critically re-examining the past and by asking the right kinds of questions we shall collectively get nearer the right answers.