

return to FD

29 November 1967

Dear Raya:

[I just read your draft on Trotsky as a theoretician and it pleases me immensely.] I've learned so much in reading your materials, on the one hand, and E.P. Thompson's, on the other, about looking at the way people think and develop their ideas; that it's "revolutionized" my own thought and writing. All this in just a few months.

I found especially fascinating your treatment of the fundamental theoretical difference between Lenin and Trotsky--especially, Trotsky's failure to see the working class as the subject of revolution. This puts into perspective, as you point out, his ideas about the nature of the Russian state, and makes clear the reason for his insistence that state property forms were revolutionary. I'm not as interested in the Trotskyist movement as you, so I would look for the way this theoretical perspective operated, for Trotsky, before Stalin came to power. About a year ago I studied Trotsky in preparation for a language exam--I hadn't read much before. I had read a great deal of Lenin, however, and I noticed that whereas he mentioned workers' control a great deal, Trotsky didn't--despite his brilliance, and despite his deep concern with cultural problems. I wrote to a friend with this contrast between Lenin and Trotsky in mind, saying,

"It may just be ignorance on my part, but in all that I've read by Trotsky...I've never found a clear, consistent orientation toward workers' control. Not just in the trade union debate (where he was for extension of military communism and production-orientation), but in everything--no clear notion of workers' control. I've brought this up to ~~my~~ my comrades, and some of them suggest that with Trotsky it was assumed; implicit--but from my own reading, I don't think so."

You can imagine how excited I was to find that you uncovered the theoretical backdrop to this problem in Trotsky--and to the same problem among my friends. You point out that "Trotsky took dialectics for granted; it remained 'inner', somewhere, where in the back of his head." Then, you suggest that for the revolutionary theoretician, dialectics cannot remain in the back of the head but must be brought to the forefront of a consciousness to be shaped by and to shape objective and subjective developments. If workers' control was likewise in the back of Trotsky's head--as my friends suggested when they said it was "assumed" and didn't really have to be discussed--then it, too, was in the wrong place. Such a fundamental tenant of socialism must be an active element in consciousness, and if it's not, if it's laid aside even temporarily, then it's no longer a force. I suspect that all these omissions, assumptions, and lapses of Trotsky--regarding the dialectic, the working class as the subject of revolution, and the question of workers' control--are identical, the same thing.

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The problem among Marxists today is that the very same omissions, etc. are perpetuated. My friends said Trotsky "assumed" workers' control and therefore didn't mention it--and for them, that's good enough. It shouldn't be. Even (or I should say, especially) "dialectics" is a dirty word among Marxists, who are afraid of being called nuts or mystics. It's ironic, because people like Sidney Hook, who contributed so much to the devaluation of dialectical thinking, are today the worst sell-outs and 100% hostile to the socialists who remain militant--yet these same socialists and Marxists still hear the voice of Hook and the others deriding dialectics as mysticism, and scaring them off. It may be that the only thing that keeps our friends and comrades straight is the heritage of Lenin, especially works like State and Revolution. I only hope we can overcome the heritage of the Trotskyist movement (I've been hoping this for a long time, but not for all the ~~same~~ self-enlightened reasons that cause me to hope now)--which is extremely powerful among those of us who have fallen under the spell of the old Workers' Party

One major aspect of this Trotskyist heritage concerns the role of the peasantry in revolution. I really hope that you write much more on this (I'm sure you're aware that your one chapter could be a book, the ideas are so important for today)--perhaps you'll have some of it in your New Politics article. We in the ISC had quite a debate on the NLF in Vietnam last spring (actually, not so much a debate as having the question aired several times) and Trotsky's position was tirelessly repeated--not as Trotsky's, because no one was fully aware of its origins, but as the Marxist position (the peasantry is unable to act as an independent force, etc.). I can assure you that so far as I know, this is "the Marxist position" in many people's minds, and it affects their thinking on peasant revolution, profoundly. On the one hand, some young socialists continue to disbelieve in peasant revolution--it's impossible, and that's why there's Stalinism. On the other hand, some young socialists reject what they see as orthodox Marxism (including a rejection of any role for the working class, other than counter-revolutionary), and become Maoists, or take up Regis Debray. Either alternative is a disaster for their theory of revolution.

Another aspect of the Trotskyist heritage (and remember, I'm speaking of its consequences for unorthodox Trotskyists, not the SWPers, who barely count nowadays and who seem to have selected out only the most unhealthy aspects, anyhow) is the idea of the vanguard party, which you so nicely trace to Trotsky's belated agreement with Lenin's 1903 notion (which, again, you discussed so well in your book). As I'm sure you're aware, the Trotskyist movement--in the absence of revolutionary upheaval and a strong, vanguard party--modified this theory by adding a Labor Party "stage" of working class development (notice the most rigid and unyielding evolutionism), which would precede the

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vanguard party, or more accurately, develop working class consciousness while the vanguard party waited in the wings. Today, the Labor Party variation of vanguard party theory is still with us. I believe it met a real test this summer, during the revolts in the black ghettos. Most of my comrades simply plugged the revolts into their Labor Party theory (now called independent political action), suggesting that this was the course of action black people ought to take. I criticized this static approach in our discussion bulletin, saying that, the revolts

"haven't made the slightest dent in our theory. It becomes unbelievably ludicrous ~~to~~ when we talk about the ~~potential~~ possibilities of this or that potential political movement, just as we've done for years, while we act as if the real revolt isn't even happening. Part and parcel of this dreamlike discussion is the notion that we know precisely what ~~is~~ 'advanced consciousness' is; after all, we have the 'correct' solution (Independent Political Action), and anyone who agrees with it is bona-fide 'advanced.' So, the black people aren't advanced--but if they came out for Independent Political Action, like us, then they would be."

You may not agree with my own ideas about the black rebellions, but I think you would without question agree what the root of the problem with my ~~own~~ friends--and the Trotskyist movement, broadly speaking--is: they have looked upon theory, not as activity, but as mere application of formulas; not as critical thought to reflect and shape what goes on around them, but as something created in the past. This helps account for the persistence of vanguard party theory--while vanguard party theory in turn reinforces their view of theory as a whole. For if that's all theory means to them, it couldn't mean any more for the masses, and therefore the masses would sure as hell need a vanguard party and all the in-between steps.

If I were to make some suggestion concerning your chapter, they would be along the following lines. First of all, I hope that many of the important ideas will appear again and again in the book as a whole. I mentioned that the chapter could be a book--perhaps in context it will be simply part of one.

Secondly, elaborate concrete examples of the fundamental division between Lenin and Trotsky would be invaluable. For instance, the one I mentioned, on workers' control--it fits in perfectly. Another obvious one would concern the trade union debate--not a 'different' example, but a narrower one that shows the immediate, practical consequences of theoretical differences.

Thirdly, I hope that you fill in with background material--such as a paragraph or two on precisely what Lenin's Theses on the National and Colonial Question were (as you did to a certain extent with Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution). Very

often when you write you assume a tremendous amount of background knowledge on the part of your readers, which may not be present. I remember when I read ~~my~~ your essay on Sartre, I could follow part of it--but not nearly as much as I felt I should, even without having read Sartre. I gave it to a friend of mine who had read Sartre--but then he said he'd have to refresh his memory ~~by~~ by reading it again. The question of whether he ought to read Sartre again is not being raised here--I'm suggesting that you leave too much to the reader's personal knowledge and his memory. It is in the nature of what you write and the level on which you write that much more is to be gained by the reader if he's familiar with, for example, Lenin and Trotsky. But you ought to do more story-telling, I feel, either to acquaint the reader with what ~~is~~ you're discussing so he won't be totally lost for a while, or to refresh his memory. Sometimes you put me in the position of feeling forced to know your source material as well as you before I can profit from what you're saying, when you ought to inspire me to feel that I voluntarily ought to read it to gain the full essence of what you're saying.

Of course you know that I get a tremendous amount from what you write, even if occasionally you leave me behind--I got a lot from your essays in New International over five years ago, when I was first learning about socialist theory, in Indiana. As I said at the beginning, you've contributed heavily to a "revolution" in my own thought, over a very short period. I'd like very much to get any drafts you could send. I can promise you that I'll read each with great care, although I probably won't be able to comment as extensively as this time. Your draft arrived at a very opportune moment--I just finished an essay on the early AFL, and was resting up before beginning the next section of my dissertation--the next section will be on the IWW, or perhaps the Knights of Labor. Both will be included. My work on the dissertation has been the reason why you haven't heard from me for so long--I haven't let up since I started last June; I'm determined to finish it by this June, and I'm well along the way, with over half done. (Title now: Immigrants and the American Working Class Movement, 1864-1919). It starts with the First International, and is, broadly speaking, on internationalism in the American working class movement, primarily as concerns immigrants and immigration. When you finish your book, I'll send you what I've done--I'm sure you'll see the influence of a conscious recognition of Marxist humanism. I feel the section I've just finished, on the AFL, is my best so far.

I sent a letter to Olga recently, which she promised to send on to you. I hope you find this one some measure of help in writing your book. I'm certainly looking forward to its completion. Martha will get the chapter on Trotsky this weekend, and will probably write to you over Christmas vacation. I'm sure she will have some good ideas--different from mine in some respects, and perhaps a little clearer.

Best wishes,

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