

Critical Notes on Trotsky's Marxism

by Paul Costello

In 1937 Joseph Stalin delivered the following judgment on the Trotskyist movement:

Present-day Trotskyism is not a political trend in the workingclass but a gang without principle, without ideas, of wreckers, diversionists, intelligence service agents, spies, murderers, a gang of sworn enemies of the workingclass, working in the pay of the intelligence services of foreign states.¹

In other words, communists were no longer required to respond to the Trotskyist movement as a *political deviation*, by means of *theoretical-political struggle*; the handling of Trotskyism was now a matter for the state apparatus, the police and the courts.

Further, since Trotskyism no longer represented a political deviation within the workingclass movement it did not have to be treated the way Lenin insisted deviations and errors should be tackled if they are to be genuinely combatted. Lenin's method, that one had to critically examine the theoretical and political source of a deviation in order to understand and correctly struggle against it, is entirely unnecessary when the problem is one of foreign spies and not a departure from Marxism-Leninism.

Louis Althusser has argued that the "crisis of Marxism," through which our movement is now passing, began to emerge in the 1930s. In those years, he has written,² the leading line of the Stalin group not only provoked this crisis, but, at the same time, *it blocked the crisis from exploding*. The explosion came, as we all know, only after Stalin's death, in 1956, with Khrushchev's speeches at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Soviet intervention in Hungary, and their aftermath.

The treatment of Trotskyism is an excellent illustration of Althusser's thesis. The replacement, under Stalin, of the correct handling of contradictions among the people and inner-party struggle by the unrestricted use of the state repressive apparatus, powerfully contributed to the crisis of Marxism. At the same time, Stalin's ideological justification for this process helped to keep the crisis from exploding. For Trotskyism, and all opponents of "orthodox" (Stalinian) Marxism, were now condemned not by political categories, but by juridical ones, and were characterized as criminal elements, working for foreign imperialism.

In any political struggle one counter-poses one's own political line and its theoretical underpinnings on a host of questions to those of one's opponents. Naturally, such a process requires one to critically examine the views of these opponents, and inevitably, one's own views as well. Thanks to Stalin's discovery of the "criminal" nature of Trotskyism, communists no longer had to treat Trotskyism *politically*; they did not have to examine its views, or its theoretical premises. At the same time there was no need to look too closely at the political line or the theoretical premises of "orthodox" Marxism itself; it was enough to know that it was true, embodying the "universal principles of Marxism."

By the late 1930s the Stalin group was arguing that the proponents of all opposing views in the communist movement, from the "left" (Trotskyists) to the "right" (Bukharinists), were nothing more than "agents of the bourgeoisie." By thus freeing "orthodox" Marxism from the need for any political struggle against these views, it insulated communist cadre from all opposing Marxist positions. At the same time it rendered superfluous any critical examination of "orthodox" Marxism's own history, political lines and theoretical foundations. In the monolithic unity of a monolithic communist movement, the official ideology takes on the appearance of "revealed truth," accepted unquestionably. Hence the "crisis of Marxism."

To therefore speak as if the "crisis of Marxism" is only a political crisis, and not a theoretical one as well, is an absurdity. Given the inseparable, dialectical connection between theory and political practice in the communist movement, a serious political deviation, such as the one represented by the Stalin group, always produces determinant effects in theory. Can anyone deny that the political practice of the Stalin group in dealing with its opponents in the Bolshevik party in the 1920s produced the Stalinian theory of the "monolithic party?" Equally, the practice of building socialism in the Soviet Union in the 1930s led to the reinforcement of economism within Marxist theory.

In short, the "crisis of Marxism" is an all-sided one, requiring, not simply political solutions ("rectification of the general line of our movement") and organizational solutions

("reconstruction of a communist party") but theoretical solutions as well.

Needless to say, while the Soviet state apparatus was able to physically liquidate Trotskyism as a political trend within the Soviet Union, the world communist movement which adopted Stalin's characterization of Trotskyism, was never able to destroy Trotskyism internationally. Quite the opposite. Trotskyism represents a specific theoretical-political deviation from Marxism-Leninism, a specific variant of the economism of the Second International. As such, its effective critique can be produced only from within a Marxist-Leninist problematic itself.

Yet as we attempted to show in *Theoretical Review*, No. 15,³ Stalinian Marxism is itself a specific, if different theoretical-political deviation from Marxism—a specific, if different variant of the economism of the Second International. The failure of "orthodox" Marxism to produce an effective critique of Trotskyism is essentially a reflection of the fact that "orthodox" Marxism approaches the critique of Trotskyism from non-Marxist premises.

The Evolution of the Critique of Trotskyism

This was not always the case. Until 1928-29 the critique of Trotskyism in the USSR represented the combined efforts of the Stalin group and those forces associated with Nikolai Bukharin. At that time the polemics were being conducted in a more or less political manner, and a number of important critiques of Trotsky's views were put forward. The most significant of these critiques were written from positions in defense of the worker-peasant alliance as embodied in the New Economic Policy (NEP), Lenin's conception of the socialist transition period.

With the complete victory of the Stalin group, and their own abandonment of the NEP, the critique of Trotskyism was increasingly written from a simple position of uncritical defense of the line of "orthodox" (Stalinian) Marxism. That is, it ceased to be a Leninist critique of a political deviation and was reduced to a mere apology for the prevailing line in the Soviet party and the Communist International, even though that line itself represented a substantial departure from Marxism-Leninism.

In the 1930s, particularly after the Great Purge Trials in the USSR, and the Stalin speech quoted at the beginning of this article, the critique of Trotskyism degenerated into invective, abuse and the fabrication of evidence of all manner of Trotskyist crimes. The best example of this type of historical fantasy is Sayers and Kahn's *The Great Conspiracy*.⁴ More recent critiques of Trotskyism from an "orthodox" perspective, such as Carl Davidson's *Left in Form, Right in Essence*,⁵ manage to avoid the worst excesses of the 1930s, but are still composed entirely of apologetics.

To give an all-sided treatment of Trotsky's thought or the contemporary Trotskyist movement is outside the scope of this article. Such a task is important because, while Trotskyism is not a dominant force in the revolutionary movement of any country, Trotskyism is a political movement and an intellectual current to be reckoned with today. The beginnings of such an all-sided treatment can be

found in a number of works, most importantly, Nicholas Krasso's "Trotsky's Marxism," and his "Reply to Ernest Mandel," which appeared in *New Left Review*;⁶ Kostas Mavrakis' *On Trotskyism: Problems of Theory and History*;⁷ and Geoff Hodgson's *Trotsky and Fatalistic Marxism*.⁸

Here we cannot repeat all the historical and political struggles and demarcations between Marxism-Leninism and Trotskyism which these works bring to the fore. In this short article we are attempting to illuminate some elements of Trotsky's theoretical problematic, as a follow-up to our critical examination of "orthodox" Marxism itself in *Theoretical Review* No. 15.

For some in our movement it is sufficient that "orthodox" Marxism drew a line of demarcation with Trotskyism in the 1920s and 1930s for us to reaffirm that demarcation today. We reject such dogmatism and have consequently suffered what can only be called "Trot-baiting" from our "orthodox" comrades. With the incredible fracturing of the Trotskyist movement, one can find Trotskyists on every side of the important issues facing the left today. There are Trotskyists who support the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and those who unconditionally oppose it, to cite only one example. Therefore to characterize an opponent's views as "Trotskyist" because there exist Trotskyists who might agree with it, is not only meaningless, it is politically dishonest as well.

If a line of demarcation is to be drawn with Trotskyism, as we feel it must, it is not because it is an "historic demarcation" of pre-1956 Marxism. Rather it is because *the theoretical problematic and political orientation of Trotskyism cannot provide the basis for the revival of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism in our time.*

Economism: The Second International and Trotsky

The year 1914 represented a decisive turning point in the history of the world Marxist movement. In that year the majority of Social Democratic Parties supported the efforts of their own bourgeoisies in the imperialist war. Opposition to the war became a *political line of demarcation*: on one side, the social chauvinists; on the other, revolutionary opponents of the war.

But drawing this line of demarcation, *by itself*, was not sufficient. This became clear as soon as the war was over. While opposition to the war had united revolutionary Marxists, anacho-syndicalist social-democrats, council communists and "left" social democrats, their opposition had its source in differing theoretical conceptions of the nature and tasks of the emerging communist movement. With the war's end, their divergences began to pull them in different directions. Some returned to the Second International, others joined the Communist International, still others sought a middle position, the "Two and a Half International." Still others formed extreme left groups in various countries, which were the object of Lenin's attention in "*Left-wing Communism—An Infantile Disorder*."

What the Communist movement needed was more than a demarcation on political lines, although this was an absolute pre-condition for political work. It also required an in-depth

analysis of the theoretical and political sources of the deviations which led to the collapse of the Second International during the war, and a rectification of the errors which made these deviations possible. As Althusser explains:

You must go to the root of things, analyse the reasons for an error in order to *understand* it properly and thus really be able to rectify it: if you do not, then even in the most favorable of cases you will only put it right in part, and a superficial part at that.⁹

The process of examining the root of the errors of the Second International was undertaken by many revolutionary Marxists after 1914, including Lenin, Gramsci, and Rosa Luxemburg. Today we can characterize the main source of these errors as theoretical economism. Economism elevates the contradiction between productive forces and production relations over the class contradiction (class struggle), and designates productive forces rather than the class struggle as the motor force in history. It defines capitalist crises not in terms of the class contradictions at the economic, political and ideological levels, but in terms of capitalism's inability to develop the productive forces.

Thus, while in 1914, revolutionaries were to be judged by the position they took on the war, *in the long run, the real test was to be whether or not they had broken with the theoretical-political premises (economism) which had provoked this crisis in the Marxist movement in the first place.*

Trotsky, from the very beginning, opposed the world war as an imperialist war and attacked the pro-war attitudes of the Social Democratic parties. But, it is indisputable that, in terms of the decisive test, Trotsky never broke with the economism which was the foundation of the Marxism of the Second International. His first written statement on the war (1914) makes this clear. "At the basis of the current war," he explained, "is the rising up of the productive forces, developed by capitalism, against the nation-state form of their exploitation."¹⁰

Lest one think that this was merely an example of youthful hyperbole, it is necessary to take note of another quote, this one from his *The Revolution Betrayed*, written in 1936: "Marxism sets out from the development of technique as the fundamental spring of progress, and constructs the communist programme upon the dynamic of the productive forces."¹¹ For Trotsky no other concept had the significance which he attached to the concept of productive forces. This does not mean that he entirely abandoned the concept of class struggle, but that he relegated it to second place: the class struggle intervenes to smash production relations which hinder the development of the productive forces.

In a work from the 1930s Trotsky makes this relationship clear in the course of reiterating his own version of the Second International's theory of the capitalist "breakdown":

Marx foretold that out of the economic collapse in which the development of capitalism must inevitably culminate—and the collapse is before our very eyes—there can be no other way out except socialisation of the means of production. The productive forces need a new organizer and a new master, and since existence determines consciousness, Marx had no doubt that the working class . . . will come to understand the situation and . . . draw the imperative practical conclusions.¹²

Trotsky's "Conception of the Epoch"

There are a variety of political problems we could examine in the light of Trotsky's theoretical problematic. Here we have decided to touch upon only two which have particular relevance for the present moment: the nature of capitalist crisis and Trotsky's assessment of problems of socialist construction in the USSR.

As we discussed in *Theoretical Review*, No. 15 the economism of the Marxism of the Third International found particular expression in the notion of the "general crisis of capitalism." Trotsky had a similar notion, the "conception of the epoch," which profoundly shaped his understanding of the revolutionary process. Indeed, for Trotsky, the very *possibility* of revolution itself, was only a reflection of the accuracy of this "conception." To reduce the objective factors in the revolutionary process to only economic ones and to downplay the political and ideological factors is one of the essential features of economism. Against this economism, which predominated in the Marxism of the Second International, Lenin repeatedly stressed the relative autonomy of the political struggle, insisting that political practice was not absolutely determined by economic factors and that class struggle could not be reduced to the role of handmaiden to the productive forces. In the course of the 1930s, however, this understanding was lost in the process of a theoretical slippage of "orthodox" Marxism back into the economist problematic of the Second International.

Like the perspective of the Second International, Trotsky's "conception of the epoch" began with the premise that capitalism was no longer capable of further developing the productive forces of society. Specifically, for Trotsky this meant that since 1914, world capitalism was doomed to steady, if fluctuating, economic decline, war, and revolutions. From this premise Trotsky drew the following equations:

- (1) Further development of the productive forces equals the impossibility of revolution.
- (2) Blockage of the development of the productive forces equals the essential condition for revolution.

In Trotsky's own words, spoken to the Third Congress of the Communist International:

If the further development of productive forces was conceivable within the framework of bourgeois society, then revolution would generally be impossible. But since the further development of the productive forces within the framework of bourgeois society is inconceivable, the basic premise for the revolution is given.¹³

Trotsky always insisted that his "conception of the epoch" was essential to any revolutionary perspective and strategy and that any alternative view, that, somehow, capitalism was capable of entering a period of sustained expansion, was a major concession to reformism. For if capitalism was on the decline and revolution permanently on the agenda, any significant reform struggles would not only be useless, but a diversion of the masses from the necessary preparation for revolution.

Lenin's insistence on the need for a concrete analysis of each conjunctural situation based on the balance of class forces, his conception of the relationship between reform

and revolution, and his observation that "there is no such thing as an absolutely hopeless situation" for capitalism,¹⁴ were absent from Trotsky's problematic.

In their place Trotsky constructed a pre-conceived, ahistorical permanently revolutionary situation, provoked by the effort of the productive forces to break free of the fetters imposed upon them by the nation-state. Just as the productive forces inevitably will provoke the crisis, so too must they force the proletariat to act on their own behalf. "The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership."¹⁵ In other words, the absence of *Trotskyist* leadership was the primary factor holding back the revolutionary process.

The strategy of permanent revolution corresponds perfectly to a permanently revolutionary perspective, because it is equally ahistorical and timeless, standing above all concrete social formations and countries. Trotsky's problematic is ultimately deterministic and fatalistic, representing mechanical materialism and economic determinism rather than Marxism-Leninism.

Trotsky's "conception of the epoch" had profound ramifications for his analysis of, and political intervention in, the tremendous class battles of the 1930s. While it should not be denied that, at times, his observations were sharp and insightful, overall, he failed to grasp the nature of the period itself as one of fundamental capitalist restructuring on a world scale. Throughout the 1930s Trotsky underestimated or even denied the ability of capital to pull itself out of the depression; thus he misunderstood the significance of the restructuring process as represented by Keynesian state intervention in the economy and the New Deal.

Having written that, "The present crisis, far from having run its full course, has already succeeded in showing that "New Deal" politics . . . opens no new exit from the economic blind alley,"¹⁶ Trotsky was incapable of perceiving the long wave of capitalist expansion which followed the Second World War. In fact, the outbreak of the war brought from his pen some of his most fatalistic predictions on capitalism's imminent demise. In response to questions sent him by a correspondent from the London *Daily Herald* Trotsky announced: "I do not doubt that the new world war will provoke *with absolute inevitability* the world revolution and the collapse of the capitalist system."¹⁷ (my emphasis, P.C.)

Is it any wonder that the obvious failure of this prediction to materialize, the manifest inaccuracy of the "conception of the epoch," as demonstrated by the vitality of capitalism in the post-war period, provoked a crisis in International Trotskyism after his death?

The Crisis of Trotskyism

At the beginning of this article we mentioned the "crisis of Marxism" which exploded in 1956, and the manner in which that crisis was both provoked and blocked by the politics of the Stalin group. Many in our movement, however, are not aware that the crisis of Trotskyism, provoked by Trotsky's own brand of theoretical economism, also exploded in the 1950s.

Orthodox Trotskyism clung, throughout the Second World War, to Trotsky's vision of a post-war capitalist

breakdown accompanied by world revolution, and the collapse of the mass-based communist and social democratic parties. Nonetheless, the immediate post-war period showed every sign of an economic boom, and the strengthening of the world communist and social democratic movements as a result of their participation in the anti-fascist resistance struggles and post-war reconstruction. The gap between Trotskyist "theory" and practice was increasingly evident.

Since Trotsky had always insisted that acceptance of the idea of long term capitalist expansion was a capitulation to reformism, Trotskyists were in a quandry: either hold true to his vision and ignore reality, or accept reality and abandon the revolutionary "conception of the epoch." For many Trotskyists the latter course became more and more appealing. In Geoff Hodgson's words:

Moulded by Trotsky's own conceptions they began to believe that the *existence* of the post-war boom was a *refutation* of revolutionary strategy and a *validation* of reformism. Their disillusionment was bound up with an increasing, gnawing doubt in their own revolutionary politics. They began to exaggerate the possibilities of reform, and to capitulate intellectually to reformism.¹⁸

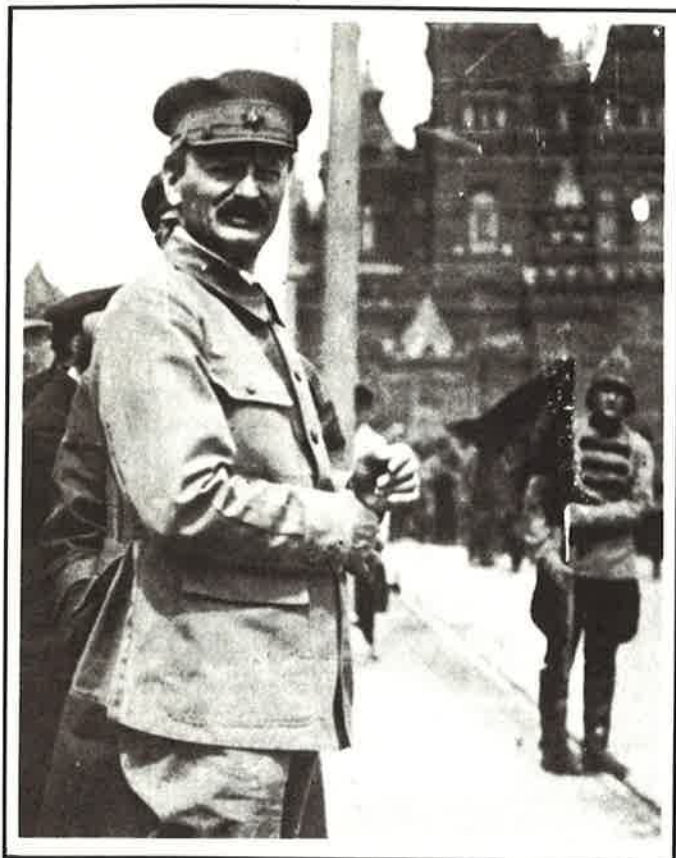
This reformist trend was led by the Secretary of the Fourth International, Michael Pablo (Raptis). At its Fourth World Congress in 1954 the Fourth International split between "reformist" and "orthodox" Trotskyists. Thirty-five years and innumerable splits later this dichotomy still remains, as any comparison between the politics of the Socialist Workers Party and the Spartacist League makes apparent.

More importantly, however, the crisis of Trotskyism forced a number of Trotskyist or Trotskyist-influenced intellectuals to begin to rethink their own theoretical legacy. In this process a number of these militants have contributed to the struggle against economism and the revival of Marxist theory. Perry Anderson, in his work on historical materialism, has openly broken with the "theory of productive forces." Ernest Mandel, in his writings on Marxist economics, particularly *Late Capitalism* and *The Second Slump*, breaks with Trotsky's conception that capitalism cannot experience prolonged periods of expansion. In his analyses of world capitalism today Mandel draws on the work of the Russian economist Nikolai Kondratieff, even though Trotsky himself took strong exception to Kondratieff's theory of long waves.

Today activists in the Trotskyist movement face similar problems to those confronting us in our own movement: how concretely to extend and deepen the break with theoretical economism, dogmatism and revisionism, in their specific Trotskyist forms, and thus positively contribute to the rebirth of revolutionary Marxism. One area where such work needs to be done is the issue of the nature of the contemporary Soviet Union.

Trotsky and the Critique of Soviet Socialism

Trotsky's critique of the Soviet Union under Stalin, like his understanding of the capitalist crisis, was an organic expression of his theoretical problematic. It is generally



known that Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, which he counter-posed to the theory of "socialism in one country," held that socialist construction could be successfully undertaken only on a world scale, and not in a single country. What is not as well known is Trotsky's discussion of the internal factors in Russian society which led him to this conclusion.

If Trotsky could insist that "Marxism . . . constructs the communist program upon the dynamic of the productive forces,"¹⁹ he was not adverse to building his critique of the line and practice of the Stalin group upon the same foundation. If the blockage of the productive forces was central to his notion of capitalist crisis, the underdevelopment of the productive forces in Russia was pivotal to his critique of "the revolution betrayed."

For Trotsky a true socialist society was one characterized by a higher development of the productive forces, technology ("technique"), and the productivity of labor, than could be achieved under capitalism. The strength of this economic base, rather than a correct political line and organic ties with the masses, was defined by Trotsky as the foundation of both socialist development and a strong socialist state. In this quotation from Trotsky's principal work on the USSR, *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936), the reduction of political practice to the economic, the liquidation of class struggle and a mechanical determinism are all rolled into one:

The strength and stability of regimes are determined in the long run by the relative productivity of their labor. A socialist economy possessing a technique superior to that of capitalism would really be guaranteed in its socialist development for sure—so to speak, automatically. . . .²⁰

To digress for the moment, this notion of the automatic development of socialism once the productive forces have reached a certain level of advancement should have a familiar ring to it. It is virtually indistinguishable from the formulations of the Stalin group, Khrushchev, et al, about "laying the material basis for socialism," or the ideological formulations accompanying the current Chinese campaign of the "Four Modernizations." All are ideological expressions of theoretical economism.

Trotsky's critique of the line and practice of the Stalin group flowed from this economist perspective. In his eyes the victory of the Stalin group in the Soviet party and state was the consummate political expression of Russian economic backwardness: being determines consciousness, and economic scarcity results in a deformed workers' state dominated by a Stalinist bureaucracy. In Trotsky's own words:

The basis of bureaucratic rule is the poverty of society in objects of consumption, with the resulting struggle of each against all. When there is enough goods in a store, the purchasers can come whenever they want to. When there is little goods, the purchasers are compelled to stand in line. When the lines are very long, it is necessary to appoint a policeman to keep order. Such is the starting point of the power of the Soviet bureaucracy.²¹

This quote is significant because in it Trotsky not only reduces the political dimension to a simple reflection of the economic, but he reduces the economic itself to the realm of circulation. Almost entirely absent from his writings is an understanding of the totality-mode of production, and the primacy within it of productive relations over productive forces. Equally absent is the recognition of the decisive role of politics and political line in the transition from capitalism to communism. In short, as with his notion of the capitalist collapse, Trotsky's theoretical framework is totally inadequate for the task of bringing a revitalized Marxism-Leninism to the analysis of the Soviet social formation.

Trotskyism and the Stalinian Deviation

Anti-revisionist communists in the United States have always announced their opposition to Trotskyism with the same fervor and diligence which they have demonstrated in their defense of Stalin and his historical contributions. The leading forces in the anti-revisionist, anti-"left" opportunist tendency also now tell us that opposition to Trotskyism is an "historical demarcation" defining our movement, in the same traditional context of defending the "essentially correct" line of the Stalin period.

If we are locked into this traditional framework then we are locked into the same pattern of responses. A list of appropriate political questions can be drawn-up, on one side grouped the correct lines and practices of "orthodox" Marxism, on the other, demonstrations of the "counter-revolutionary essence" of Trotskyism. Meanwhile, "orthodox" Trotskyists can make a similar list, drawing out instead the "counter-revolutionary nature of Stalinist betrayals."

The reduction of the totality of Marxism-Leninism to a simple list of political lines of demarcation is very

convenient. It allows organizations to define themselves without having to do the laborious study of the theory and history of our movement. It allows them to "train" their cadre to simply defend the line, rather than to think things through for themselves. In the end this political-line fetish threatens the revolutionary character of Marxist politics itself by liquidating the role of theory ("without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement").

Once politics is restored to its correct relationship to theory, things can become clearer. The fact that Stalinian Marxism and Trotskyism stood opposed to each other on a whole series of questions is not as ultimately decisive as the fact that they shared something more basic. They are, to use Stalin's words, "not antipodes but twins," not two mutually exclusive positions, but two variations on the same theme—theoretical economism.

Whatever their tactical differences, in the political struggle over the future of the Soviet Union Stalin and Trotsky both rejected the Leninist conception of the transition period built on a worker-peasant alliance as expressed in the NEP (although Stalin's opposition did not become apparent until 1929). Trotsky, with his theory of permanent revolution, was incapable of conceptualizing the specificity of the transition period under Russian conditions. Stalin's policy of one-sided, heavy industrialization and forced collectivization was predicated upon the extraction of a "tribute" from the peasantry and the reduction of the living standards of the masses.²²

Thus the decisive turning point in the Russian revolutionary process was not the defeat of the Trotsky-led forces in the mid-1920s, but the defeat of the Bukharin group in 1928-29. They alone had remained faithful to the Leninist program. Their defeat ended the Leninist phase of the revolution and inaugurated the "crisis of Marxism" whose effects can be seen so vividly today in Afghanistan, Poland and China.

If a list has to be drawn up, it should be one which, alongside the political differences between Stalin and Trotsky, also includes what they had in common. This list would place Trotsky's line that "Marxism . . . constructs the communist program upon the dynamic of the productive forces" next to Stalin's statement in *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* that "the party of the proletariat must . . . in drafting its program . . . proceed primarily from the laws of development of production."²³ The same list would place Trotsky's reference to the "development of technique as the fundamental spring of progress" next to Stalin's slogan, "Technique decides everything."

To us these are not simple coincidences of expression. Rather they are the unmistakable signs of a shared theoretical problematic. We do not study the past history of the communist movement for the primary purpose of determining who was right and who was wrong. The principal purpose for such an endeavor is to draw out the correct lessons for our own work today. We leave it to those who feel it to be their historic duty to defend and uphold Stalin's or Trotsky's legacy to do so. *History has already shown that this blind obedience to tradition has yet to significantly contribute to the rebirth of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism.*

The struggle to advance Marxism-Leninism in the present period must start outside the boundaries of the sterile

framework of critiquing Trotskyism by defending Stalin. In fact, it must proceed by breaking with this framework, and the common theoretical problematic of its twin antagonists. It is for this reason that we have always insisted upon the singular and irreplaceable importance of the work of Louis Althusser, Charles Bettelheim and their followers for the future of our movement.

They, above all, have forthrightly recognized the "crisis of Marxism" and delved into its causes and manifestations. At the same time, they have avoided the temptation to fall into Trotskyism or Social Democracy in grappling with these problems. Their work, with all its contradictions, contributes to the further development of Marxist-Leninist theory and politics in the context of clear lines of demarcation, not only with Trotskyism and Social Democracy, but also with the empty dogmatism and revisionism of "orthodox" Marxism and its modern progeny.

Not the clichés of the "orthodox" tradition but a rigorous critique of economism, reformism and voluntarism determine their demarcations with Social Democracy and Trotskyism. At the same time neither those views nor the fashionable ideas of Euro-Communism or "Marxist Humanism" determine their demarcation with "orthodox" Marxism.

What Althusser and Bettelheim propose is nothing less than a revolution in the way we understand Marxism-Leninism. For them Marxist-Leninist theory is more than the classics; it is a science, only the cornerstones of which were laid by Marx and Lenin themselves. Our task, as they would have it, is to return to our theoretical and political roots, to recover the revolutionary elements of Marxism-Leninism, so long suppressed and abandoned by the sterile dogmatism of the Stalin era. Armed with these revolutionary elements, and the subsequent contributions of others such as Antonio Gramsci and Mao Zedong, we can begin to set the science to work, producing and shaping the political line and practice of a new kind of communism, free from the fetters of the past.

The position that Althusser and Bettelheim have taken, marked out by the intersection of these lines of demarcation with Trotskyism, Social Democracy as well as Stalinian Marxism, is one of the greatest importance. It enables us to openly and honestly probe the contradictions of our own tradition, the Marxism of the Third International, from a firm Leninist foundation. For, if this tradition is the source of our present crisis, it also contains elements for our movement's rebirth. Without such an approach, without rigorous theoretical practice, an open critical spirit, and a willingness to examine our own historical tradition, no genuine rectification of errors, no genuine advance of Marxism-Leninism is possible.

Recently a striking Polish worker was quoted as saying: "For years and years, everyone asked, 'How much coal is being dug?' 'How much steel is being produced?' but nobody looked at what it all meant for the life of the worker."²⁴ The class struggle itself, more than anything else, more than any theoretical article, is demonstrating the vital need for an end to the hegemony of economism in the communist movement, for the rebirth of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism.

Notes on page 10

revisionism" like so much excess baggage. I do not believe, however, that the "fusionists" and "rectificationists" accidentally forgot to mention it. I believe that they, and by a different theoretical route most of the Trotskyist groups, have consciously decided that for better or worse the Soviet Union is the vanguard of world socialist revolution and that this was the convenient occasion to "unite" with it. In the interests of theoretical clarity, I hope that other Marxists will not swallow the same poison even if in diluted form.

In conclusion, there is perhaps one respect in which the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan did indeed advance the interests of international socialism: being bogged down in Afghanistan has weakened its ability to intervene against the workers of Poland.

With fraternal greetings,
David Finkel

Paul Costello responds:

David Finkel says that he is not convinced that rightist Afghani forces will have permanent hegemony over the "anti-Soviet national resistance." I would question the extent to which any viable national resistance exists which is independent of the rightist counter-revolution. Clarity on this question is an essential element for any correct political orientation.

Lenin always insisted that the working class in Czarist Russia could not remain indifferent to the struggle for bourgeois democratic rights, because the achievement of such rights would provide more favorable conditions for the revolutionary movement. Unfortunately, however, the communist movement has all too often ignored his advice, as when, during the "third period" in the history of the Communist International (1929-1935), it insisted that there was no fundamental difference between bourgeois democracy and fascism. But there is a difference, as the German communists learned to their sorrow, upon Hitler's accession to power.

Once again Comrade Finkel wants to say "a plague on both your houses," and "unequivocally" condemn both sides. But here the two sides cannot be equated. One side represents feudal reaction, the other a discredited and bureaucratic state apparatus dominated by a communist party kept in power by foreign troops. The one side represents the counter-revolution, the other the failure of Stalinian Marxism.

To the extent that the Afghani counter-revolution represents, as David Finkel admits, "one of the most reactionary and medievalist forces in the world today," I think we must recognize that the Soviet occupation, no matter what other problems it creates, still safeguards more favorable conditions for any eventual socialist revolution, than would be created by a rightist victory. As long as the counter-revolution remains a real danger, and the presence of Soviet military forces continues to check their advance, to that narrow degree, it is necessary for us to support the Soviet intervention.

Comrade Finkel's desire to oppose the intervention of the Soviet Union in the revolutionary process of other countries in defense of its own national interest is understandable. However, when this opposition is raised to an absolute, it blocks a correct understanding of our political responsibilities as proletarian internationalists. Opposition

to Soviet interference and the errors and crimes of Stalinian Marxism can never serve as a rationale or an excuse not to struggle against imperialism and counter-revolution.

This is a trap into which we have no intention of falling. The history of the Communist movement is full of groups which began as critics of the Stalinian deviation and ended up in the service of imperialism. In the beginning they saw this deviation as something to be struggled with; in the end it was elevated to an absolute evil, such that they could unite even with imperialism in the fight against it.

This trajectory is not an inevitable one, in spite of what "orthodox" Marxists might say. The struggle against counter-revolution and in defense of revolutionary Leninism can be successfully combined in the practice of proletarian internationalism. "The fight against imperialism is a sham and a humbug unless it is inseparably bound up with the fight against opportunism." Lenin said that.

continued from 8

¹ Joseph Stalin, *Mastering Bolshevism* (New Century Pub., 1945), p. 12.

² Louis Althusser, "The Crisis of Marxism," *Theoretical Review* No. 7.

³ Paul Costello, "Leninist Politics and the Struggle Against Economism."

⁴ Michael Sayers and Albert E. Kahn, *The Great Conspiracy* (Boni & Gaer, 1947).

⁵ Carl Davidson, *Left in Form, Right in Essence* (The Guardian, 1973).

⁶ *New Left Review*, No. 44 (1967), and No. 48 (1968).

⁷ Kostas Mavrikis, *On Trotskyism* (RKP, 1976).

⁸ Geoff Hodgson, *Trotsky and Fatalistic Marxism* (Spokesman, 1975).

⁹ Althusser, "Lysenko: Unfinished History," *Marxism Today* (Feb., 1977), p. 54.

¹⁰ *The Age of Permanent Revolution: A Trotsky Anthology* (Dell, 1964), p. 71.

¹¹ Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (Pathfinder, 1972), p. 45.

¹² *The Age of Permanent Revolution*, p. 224.

¹³ Leon Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, 2 vols. (Monad, 1972), Vol. 2, p. 4.

¹⁴ Lenin, *Selected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 399.

¹⁵ Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (Pathfinder, 1973), p. 73.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

¹⁷ Quoted in Hodgson, p. 34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

¹⁹ *The Revolution Betrayed*, p. 45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

²² See Charles Bettelhiem, *Class Struggles in the USSR. The Second Period: 1923-1930* (MR, 1978).

²³ Stalin, *Problems of Leninism* (FLPH, 1940), p. 608.

²⁴ *Arizona Daily Star* (reprinted from dispatch by John Darnton in *New York Times*), August 27, 1980.