On 'Stalinism'

The problem with coming up with a simple definition of Stalinism is that – since the term has been used to talk about such diverse elements as ideology, political practice, political parties and movements, forms of state governance and so on – to avoid a definition that is hopelessly unwieldy and ridiculously over-inclusive an *a priori* decision as to what exactly the term is to be applied has to be made, a decision which methodologically logically requires in turn some sort of definition. This elemental tautology lies at the heart of the great bulk of discussions on the nature of Stalinism. This lack of methodological clarity is only compounded by the fact that the very term itself has passed into the vernacular of politics as a term of abuse, applicable to anyone one doesn't like, especially anyone with an 'authoritarian' bent: thus not only was Gerry Healy a 'Stalinist' in his pomp, but so was Tony Blair and in turn Margaret Thatcher too. Does the term have any value then? I am going to argue that it does, but what I intend to do here is try to return an analytical content to it, and to strip it of its pejorative force. A subsidiary objective of mine will necessarily be to argue strongly against the increasingly common view that the question of 'Stalinism' – or, more accurately, the matters to which the label 'Stalinism' is, not always fortuitously, applied – is now an historical rather than a contemporary one[1] – a view which has been very much current within USFI circles over the last ten years or so. I shall suggest that an account of how the concept of Stalinism has been dealt with by ostensible non-Stalinists over the years raises questions acutely relevant to the kind of political clarification that revolutionaries need in the here and now and will need in the at least foreseeable future.

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The best place to begin all this is not to try to come up with a 'new' definition of Stalinism, since that would be merely to repeat the methodological tautology just referred to, but look at how the term itself has been used in the past, to see what can be rescued from its usage, and what has to be abandoned. For logical reasons, not the worst place to start would be with the writings of Trotsky: and although I say 'logically' so, another subsidiary target of mine is going to be the straightforwardly silly idea that there are two fundamental currents within Marxism, Stalinism and Trotskyism, the one definable by what the other is not. I hope to make it clear by the end that conceptions of this type are very much a part of our problem and not of a possible resolution.

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[1] For Example: 'As a corollary to my earlier post on this topic, it follows that with the demise of the Stalinist regimes, the question of Stalinism *per se* becomes historical, not contemporary, a sort of object lesson (and a very important one, of course) on the danger in tying one's conception of socialism to the practice of a particular regime, especially those regimes.

'Thus, while I am sympathetic to […] [the] point on the importance of a "thorough knowledge of the history and lessons of the Stalinist counter-revolution", I don't agree that such knowledge is […] "a precondition for the rebirth of any serious socialist movement." An important subject for thorough discussion, but not a precondition for fusions, regroupments, etc. Richard Fidler , 'Re: Did Stalinism end in the 1950s?', <
http://archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/marxism/2002w49/msg00283.html>.

Nevertheless, to begin with Trotsky. The only time in his writing that you find anything approaching an attempt at a concrete and *scientific* definition of Stalinism is in his book *The Revolution Betrayed*,[2] a work which essentially deals with Stalinism as a historico-social phenomenon, and in which the word 'Stalinism' only appears twice, both references within three paragraphs of each other, right at the end of the book. Trotsky's book (written in 1938) gives us the following account of the socio-historical phenomenon – the Soviet bureaucracy – that is its subject:

> No help came from the West. The power of the democratic Soviets proved cramping, even unendurable, when the task of the day was to accommodate those privileged groups whose existence was necessary for defence, for industry, for technique, and science. In this decidedly not 'socialistic' operation, taking from ten and giving to one, there crystallised out and developed a powerful caste of specialists in distribution. [...]
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> The present Soviet society cannot get along without a state, nor even – within limits – without a bureaucracy. But the case of this is by no means the pitiful remnants of the past, but the mighty forces and tendencies of the present. [...]
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> The basis of bureaucratic rule is the poverty of society in objects of consumption, with the resulting struggle of each against all. When there are enough goods in a store, the purchasers can come whenever they want to. When there are few 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. It 'knows' who is to get something and how has to wait. [...]
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> [The bureaucracy] arose in the beginning as the bourgeois organ of a workers' state. In establishing and defending the advantages of a minority, it of course draws off the cream for its own use. Nobody who has wealth to distribute ever omits himself. Thus out of a social necessity there has developed an organ which has far outgrown its socially necessary function, and become an independent factor and therewith the source of great danger for the whole social organism.[3]

On the strength of this analysis, Trotsky could come up with the following definition of 'Stalinism' as a socio-historical phenomenon:

> Caesarism, or its bourgeois form, Bonapartism, enters the scene in those moments of history when the sharp struggle of two camps raises the state power, so to speak, above the nation, and guarantees it, in appearance, a complete independence of classes in reality, only the freedom necessary for a defence of the privileged. The Stalin regime, rising above a politically atomised society, resting upon a police and officers' corps, and allowing of no control whatever, is obviously a variation of Bonapartism – a Bonapartism of a new type not before seen in history.
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> Caesarism arose upon the basis of a slave society shaken by inward strife. Bonapartism is one of the political weapons of the capitalist regime in its critical period. Stalinism is a variety of the same system, but upon the basis of a workers' state torn by the antagonism between an organised and armed Soviet aristocracy and the unarmed toiling masses.[4]

This is Trotsky's *scientific* definition of Stalinism: as a social phenomenon arising on the basis of a set of historically specific material circumstances – in short, Stalinism as 'proletarian bonarpartism' – and it seems

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[2] An unfortunate translation: the book's English subtitle – *What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?* – is much more faithful to the book's original title. See Perry Anderson's *New Left Review* article 'Trotsky's Interpretation of Stalinism', (May-June 1983, 49-58), reprinted in Tariq Ali (ed.) *The Stalinist Legacy* (Harmondsworth, 1984), 121.

[3] Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (New York, 1972), 59, 111-13.

[4] Ibid., 277-8.

to me to be both eminently reasonable and on reflection the only *possible* scientific definition. Yet as soon as it is posed a range of questions begin to suggest themselves.

In the first place, although Trotsky's account is absolutely not pejorative in any sense, it does open up the question of what attitude revolutionary socialists take to the phenomenon: there is extant in the political tradition that likes to call itself 'Trotskyist' a view that 'Stalinism' understood in this sense – to be clear, how the regime organised itself and what it did – was 'wrong', and that we, the bearers of the whole unadulterated truth of Marxism, would have done things better. But to say this is to pose the question: if Stalinism as a social phenomenon arose within such clear material conditions, in what way *could* we have done it better? If we say that Stalinism as a social phenomenon emerged on the basis of the isolation of the revolution, caught in the grip of a given structure of historical development, in what sense can we say – without breaking out into precisely the kind of vulgar voluntarism that Mark Jones so accurately and eloquently captured in his description of the operation and practice of the Soviet bureaucracy[5] – that we could indeed have done it differently? And to what degree can we say that in this set of circumstances, unfortuitous but real enough, that Stalinism so understood was in fact inevitable?

It is necessary here to emphasise quite how new and unexpected the problem of the isolation of the world's first workers' state was: we are sometimes, I think, inclined to take it for granted. But while for pre-revolutionary Bolshevism it was entirely logical to expect the revolution to break out in backward Russia itself, the idea, as Mark has very clearly explained,[6] that proletarian power could survive there isolated from the wider European revolution – fundamental in the development of the latter being Germany – was an idea that would have been regarded as absurd. In this sense, that the Soviet Union did in fact eventually collapse can come as no surprise; but that it would take something over six decades for this to occur would have been regarded as impossible.

What then was the regime to do? In the early to mid 1920s, faced with the problem of the temporary (and it was in fact temporary) wane of the European revolution, as the leading political force in a proletarian state, a proletarian state within a whisker of being fatally debilitated by the ravages of revolution, intervention and civil war, what should the regime have done? Should it have simply bowed its head to the laws of history and relinquished state power? To ask the question, I think, is to answer it. Such a course would have been an unthinkable derogation of revolutionary responsibility: the only possibility, unappetising as it seemed, was to have tried to effect some kind of holding operation while waiting for the historical tide to turn, indeed, doing all that was possible to effect that turn itself.[7]

But in truth neither of the two courses outlined above was followed: rather than effecting a clear 'holding operation' what was done was done as if it would have been the normal way forward in ideal circumstances.

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[5] Mark Jones, 'RE: Did Stalinism end in the 1950s? (corrected for typos, very sorry for double posting)' <http://archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/marxism/2002w49/msg00297.html>.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Parenthetically, here I would say that although Trotsky remained a convinced internationalist - understood in the sense that he understood that the resolution of these questions lay in the arena of the international revolution and not within the physical borders of the Soviet Union, I sense that he doesn't completely break free from a kind of 'subjective voluntarism' himself: there is an idea in Trotsky that a 'better policy' within the Soviet Union could have ameliorated the in effect historically doomed, all else being equal, situation in which the state found itself. This is only a nuance in Trotsky, but if one looks at, for example, Mandel's writings on Soviet development, the way in which he treats the Soviet social structure as a qualitatively superior method of organising human affairs, with the implication that in this form it had the possibility of a lease of life almost in perpetuity, this kind of conception is taken one logical step beyond. Without wishing to denigrate Mandel's legacy, which I hold to be a truly heroic one, it is necessary to admit a certain and curious reflection of 'Stalinist' conceptions apparent in his thought on this question.

When the Bolsheviks first banned inner-party opposition and opposition parties they did so on the explicit and generally understood grounds that these were temporary and exceptional measures that had been forced on them by the deleterious internal and external position in which they found themselves: under the police state that came later such methods of operation were theorised as the optimal method of Marxism. Stripped of its voluntaristic excesses, for example, the drive towards industrialisation begun in the late 1920s would have anyway been necessary, but this in turn became theorised within the context of building 'socialism in one country' as its goal. In short, what should have been temporary and exceptional measures designed to buy the revolution time and a breathing space became in effect commonly understood normal practices, in turn their own orthodoxy; and as what was previously regarded as temporary and exceptional became orthodox, a political ideology was developed that justified this change, and through which the bureaucracy itself sought, by means of the vocabulary and syntax of Marxism, to legitimise itself.

And here we reach a point which is fundamental to our purposes: for if we accept the definition of Stalinism above as a social phenomenon, we also have to take stock of the set of ideological concepts developed by the regime that too are commonly defined as 'Stalinist'. Chief among them is of course that of the possibility, indeed the desirability, of building socialism in one country. This idea is held to be so quintessentially Stalinist that it is necessary to point out that the idea of a 'national' road to socialism in one form or another has also been a ubiquitous one within social-democratic reformist socialism, the fundamental difference being that in the latter case the move to socialism is predicated on using parliamentary power to direct the bourgeois state in this direction, whereas the ex post facto Soviet model was developed after the political rule of the Russian bourgeoisie had already been broken. Nevertheless, in their common conception that a socialist order could be constructed within the borders of a single state, independently from or even against other states, there can be found a remarkable similarity (even if it is the case that the greater part of European social-democracy has rather shifted from 'socialism in one country' to 'nicer capitalism in one country'). 'Socialism in one country' Soviet-style was in fact nothing more in reality than a social-democratic reformist idea given a new, 'Marxist' gloss. In this respect, given the natural nationalist reflex expressed by these ideas, it is no more surprising that the Soviet version of 'socialism in one country' should have led to the patriotic excesses of 1941-45 than the fact that the social-democratic vision of the superiority of one's own national working class should have broken out into social-chauvinism in August 1914.

But according to Trotsky's analysis, 'socialism in one country' was not alone the quintessence of Soviet ideology, for, as he noted, again in *Revolution Betrayed*,

> Together with the theory of socialism in one country, there was put into circulation by the bureaucracy a theory that in Bolshevism the Central Committee is everything and the party nothing. This second theory was in any case realised with more success than the first.[8]

Of course this observation will strike a chord with anyone with any experience of activity in a would-be Trotskyist or sub-Trotskyist group: 'democratic centralism' without the democracy, top-down discipline and decision-making, no rights of forming internal platforms, imposed slates in elections, no public discussion of party policy: it matters little whether you call such practices 'Stalinist' or 'Zinovievist', their presence is clearly near ubiquitous across all currents within the Marxist movement. But anyone who has passed any time in a modern (or not so modern) social-democratic organisation will see, maybe in a less concentrated way, similar processes at work: the view that the leadership of a party is everything and the membership nothing is not such an exclusively 'Stalinist' idea, and neither is the cult of the personality. It seems as if there is some sort of automatic reflex driving towards this form of bureaucratic organisation within workers' parties in general, and to demarcate such tendencies as exclusively 'Stalinist' seems to me to

[8] *Revolution Betrayed*, 97.

be unwarranted, even if 'Stalinist' practices classically occurred within a distinct overall ideological framework.

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Nevertheless, even if we can identify these ideas – 'socialism in one country' and the top-down fetishisation of the 'leadership' and the 'leader' – as core to the self-justificatory ideology of the Soviet bureaucracy (despite the fact that a good case can be made for not regarding these concepts as exclusively or even particularly 'Stalinist'), we also have to address the fact that when people use the term 'Stalinism' they often use it to talk about not only Stalinism as a phenomenon internal to the Soviet Union but also as a system of international politics: in short, the term 'Stalinism' has been routinely used to talk about what has been perceived as the Soviet bureaucracy's international apparatus - the Communist International and the parties originating from it. How have the Communist Parties and the Soviet bureaucracy been yoked together in a way that allows the same political characterisation to be applied equally to them both? The argument runs like this. At the same time as the process of degeneration began in the Soviet Union - exactly when appears to be a matter of taste but the consensus will have it at somewhere around the early to mid 1920s - there occurred, at the behest of the bureaucracy, a similar degeneration in the Comintern and its constituent parties outside of the Soviet Union. As the structures of the Soviet state and the apparatus of the CPSU were manipulated and bent to the will of the bureaucracy so it could further its own interests at the expense of those of the working class both in the Soviet Union and elsewhere (so the story goes) the parties of the Comintern were transformed – through bureaucratic pressure – into instruments not of the working class and socialist revolution but of the separate and distinct conservative interests of the Soviet bureaucracy. This subordination of the interests of the working class to the interests of the bureaucracy is the defining feature of many commonplace explanations of what Stalinism really is, and historical experiences such as the way that the 'Stalinised' CPGB failed to prepare for 'revolutionary struggle' in 1926, the defeat of the Second Chinese Revolution of 1927, the triumph if Hitler, the French Popular Front, the role of the Spanish Communist party in the process of revolution and counter-revolution of 1936-39 are, so to speak, trotted out as evidence of, on the one hand, the growing divergence between the interests of the bureaucracy and the cause of socialist revolution, and, on the other, the way in which the parties of the Comintern were increasingly used as instruments of the former to the detriment of the latter.

This is effectively the classical definition of Stalinism that has passed into the 'Trotskyist' lexicon: Stalinism as a concatenation of parties, movement and apparatuses, with the social phenomenon of bureaucracy at its base, linked together in the common project of securing to position of the bureaucracy at the expense of the interests of the working class and oppressed globally.

Now, there are a range of objections that one can make against this use of the word 'Stalinism' – some obvious, some less so.

The most obvious is that – if this interpretation has any truth to it (and in my view it has a kernel, but only a kernel) – then it can only function as an accurate description of the operation of the Communist Parties outside of the Soviet Union within the confines of a very specific political conjuncture. If, for example, one can make the judgement that the western European Communist Parties functioned as effective servants of Moscow in, for example, 1939 – and, with some very important reservations which I shall address shortly I think there is a sense in which one can – it is certainly not the case that one could say the same thing after around 1945-6. For whatever errors the western European Communist Parties made after the Second World War, and they may well have been legion, what one can most certainly not say is that these errors

arose from a willing defence of the interests of the Kremlin bureaucracy over those of socialist revolution. And what one can say with regard to the western European Communist Parties in this respect can be said a fortiori with regard to the Communist Parties of Yugoslavia, China and Vietnam: for whatever else one could say about, for example, Tito, that the making of the Yugoslav revolution of 1941-6 was carried out at the behest of the Soviet bureaucracy is not one of them, for it was carried out 100 per cent absolutely and willingly against it. Indeed, it was precisely over the theoretical confusion posed by these developments - parties supposedly 'Stalinist', and therefore 'counter-revolutionary to the core'[9] – leading popular revolutions against capitalism – that the post-war Fourth International tore itself apart over 1951-3.

Thus the analysis of Stalinism as an 'international movement' breaks down as a workable explanation of the functioning of the role of the Communist Parties immediately after the end of the Second World War. (The Comintern, of course, was dissolved in 1943.) One reason why this in fact might have been so is hinted at by Trotsky in his 1928 discussion of the Comintern's Draft Programme:

> If it is at all possible to realise socialism in one country, then one can believe in that theory not only after but also before the conquest of power. If socialism can be realised within the national boundaries of backward Russia, then there is all the more reason to believe that it can be realised in advanced Germany. Tomorrow the leaders of the Communist Party of Germany will undertake to propound this theory. The draft program empowers them to do so. The day after tomorrow the French party will have its turn. It will be the beginning of the disintegration of the Comintern along the lines of social-patriotism. The communist party of any capitalist country, which will have become imbued with the idea that its particular country possesses the 'necessary and sufficient' prerequisites for the independent construction of a 'complete socialist society,' will not differ in any substantial manner from the revolutionary social democracy which also did not begin with a Noske but which stumbled decisively on August 4, 1914, over this very same question.[10]

But if we can say that the definition of 'Stalinism' as the international apparatus of the Soviet bureaucracy and the characterisation of the Communist parties as 'Stalinist' on this basis breaks down definitively after the Second World War, when could the beginning of this process be dated: when could we say, in other words, that the Communist Parties stopped being ostensibly revolutionary parties and became – as the theory would have it – dupes of the Kremlin?

The answer – even if the general interpretation is accepted – is: surprisingly late. To return to Trotsky's interpretation: it is customary to date the phenomenon of the Communist Parties acting as the international apparatus of the Soviet bureaucracy against the interests of the socialist revolution to as far back as the mid-1920s, and to wheel out examples as the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee, the Second Chinese Revolution or the successful rise of German fascism as proof of the argument, painting a picture of every defeat in this period as the product of a conscious policy of betrayal at the behest of the Kremlin – a kind of left mirror-image of the 'evil-empire'. But when, in April 1939, Trotsky met with C L R James, their recorded conversation – which merits reproduction at some length – makes it very clear that Trotsky at least had little truck with this kind of enormous conspiracy-theory view of the Comintern:

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[9] Interestingly, the attribution of the idea of 'Stalinism' as unmediatedly 'counter-revolutionary' to Trotsky, although common, is false. It turns out to be in fact an invention of Joseph Hansen: '[...] The power to make such changes [i. e. the post-war social overturns in eastern Europe] did not require us to revise the concept of Stalinism developed by Trotsky. Stalinism still remained counter-revolutionary to the core.' 'What the New York Discussion has Revealed' [23 February, 1953], International Committee Documents 1951-1954, vol. 1 (New York, n.d.), 32. See also ibid., 38: 'The main lesson to be learned from our brief analysis of Stalinism is that it is counter-revolutionary in essence.'

[10] Trotsky, 'The Draft Programme of the Communist International: A Criticism of Fundamentals', in *The Third International After Lenin* (New York, 1970), 72.

JAMES: You would not agree with Victor Serge that the bureaucracy sabotaged the Chinese revolution; in other words, that its attitude to the Chinese revolution was the same as its attitude toward the Spanish?

TROTSKY: Not at all. Why should they sabotage it? I was on a committee (with Chicherin, Voroshilov, and some others) on the Chinese revolution. They were even opposed to my attitude, which was considered pessimistic. They were anxious for its success.

JAMES: For the success of the bourgeois democratic revolution. Wasn't their opposition to the proletarian revolution the opposition of a bureaucracy which was quite prepared to support a bourgeois democratic revolution, but from the fact of its being a bureaucracy could not support a proletarian revolution?

TROTSKY: Formalism. We had the greatest revolutionary party in the world in 1917. In 1936 it strangles the revolution in Spain. How did it develop from 1917 to 1936? That is the question. According to your argument, the degeneration would have started in October 1917. In my view it started in the first years of the New Economic Policy. But even in 1927 the whole party was eagerly awaiting the issue of the Chinese revolution. What happened was that the bureaucracy acquired certain bureaucratic habits of thinking. It proposed to restrain the peasants today so as not to frighten the generals. It thought it would push the bourgeoisie to the left. It saw the Kuomintang as a body of officeholders and thought it could put Communists into the offices and so change the direction of events. [...] The party was excited over the Chinese revolution. Only during 1923 had it reached a higher pitch of intensity.

No, you want to begin with the degeneration complete. Stalin and Company genuinely believed that the Chinese revolution was a bourgeois democratic revolution and sought to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.

JAMES: You mean that Stalin, Bukharin, Tomsky, Rykov, and the rest did not understand the course of the Russian Revolution?

TROTSKY: They did not. They took part and events overwhelmed them. Their position on China was the same they had in March 1917 until Lenin came. In different writings of theirs you will see passages that show that they never understood. A different form of existence, their bureaucratic habits affected their thinking and they reverted to their previous position. They even enshrined it in the program of the Comintern: proletarian revolution for Germany, dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry for semicolonial countries, etc. [...] I condemned it in my critique of the Draft Program.

JAMES: What about Bukharin's statement in 1925 that if war came revolutionists should support the bourgeois-Soviet bloc?

TROTSKY: After Lenin's testament Bukharin wanted to show that he was a real dialectician. He studied Hegel and on every occasion tried to show that he was a realist. Hence 'Enrich yourselves,' 'Socialism as a snail's pace,' etc. And not only Bukharin, but I and all of us at various times wrote absurd things. I will grant you that.

JAMES: And Germany 1930-33?

TROTSKY: I cannot agree that the policy of the International was only a materialisation of the commands of Moscow. It is necessary to see the policy as a whole, from the internal and the international points of view, from all sides. The foreign policy of Moscow, and the orientation of the Social Democracy to Geneva could play a role. But there was also the necessity of a turn owing to the disastrous effect of the previous policy on the party inside Russia. After all the bureaucracy is deal mg with 160 million people who have been through three revolutions. What they are saying and thinking is collected and classified. Stalin wanted to show that he was no Menshevik. Hence this violent turn to the left. We must see it as a whole, in all its aspects. [...]

> In Germany they hoped now for a miracle to break the backbone of the Social Democracy; their politics had failed utterly to detach the masses from it. Hence this new attempt to get rid of it.... Stalin hoped that the German Communist Party would win a victory and to think that he had a 'plan' to allow fascism to come into power is absurd. It is a deification of Stalin.
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> JAMES: He made them cease their opposition to the Red Referendum; he made Remmele say 'After Hitler, our turn'; he made them stop fighting the fascists in the streets.
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> TROTSKY: 'After Hitler, our turn,' was a boast, a confession of bankruptcy. You pay too much attention to it.
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> SCHUESSLER: They stopped fighting in the streets because their detachments were small CP detachments. Good comrades were constantly being shot, and inasmuch as workers as a whole were not taking part, they called it off. It was a part of their zigzags.
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> TROTSKY: There you are! They did all sorts of things. They even offered the united front sometimes.
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> JAMES: Duranty said in 1931 that they did not want the revolution in Spain.
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> TROTSKY: Do not take what Duranty says at face value. Litvinov wanted to say that they were not responsible for what was happening in Spain. He could not say that himself so he said it through Duranty. Perhaps even they did not want to be bothered about Spain, being in difficulties at home.... But I would say that Stalin sincerely wished the triumph of the German Communist Party in Germany 1930-33....'[11]

On the strength of this it is clear that, at least for Trotsky, there is little evidence to support the view that in any meaningful sense Stalin, the Comintern and the Communist Parties actually willed, for example, the defeat of the Chinese Revolution or the triumph of Hitler. But Trotsky comments that 'in 1936 [the Comintern] strangles the revolution in Spain', and in the Transitional Programme (written in 1938) he refers to the 'cynically counter-revolutionary role' of the Comintern.[12] [11] By the second half of the 1930s, it seems, for Trotsky the degeneration of the Comintern is complete. But even if this argument is accepted (and I am going to argue that there is a big reservation we have to make in order to accept it) it leads to the conclusion that the 'parties of the Comintern as dupes of the Kremlin' interpretation, if it is to hold any water at all, can only do so from the middle of the 1930s to the middle of the 1940s: a mere ten years. Outside of this period, as a characterisation of the role and policy of the Communist Parties explanandum and explanans simply do not fit.

(Let me just say parenthetically here that the precise interpretation of, for example, the Spanish revolution is outside of my concerns. For me, the line of the PCE led the revolution to defeat. But the conception that one can decide one's political friends and enemies on the basis of historical interpretation of past events outside of the bearing that such interpretation may have on the present – we were right in 1937 and you were wrong! – is a particularly pernicious item of sectarian baggage that has found itself smuggled into the Marxist wardrobe: it is what I call the 'red badge of courage' theory of political organisation, and, since it is useless, I do not intend to open up a debate on such questions either here or anywhere else unless it is indeed framed in the context of what bearing this would have on what we do in the present.)

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[11] From Trotsky, Writings of Leon Trotsky 1938-39 (New York, 1974), 261-5 (unbracketed ellipses in original text). 'Schuessler' is Otto Schuessler, a German who had been Trotsky's secretary in Turkey. The theme of the discussion was James' book *World Revolution*. The text of this discussion along with others can also be found in the collection of James' work *At the Rendezvous of Victory* (London, 1984) (this excerpt 61-4).

[12] *The Transitional Programme for Socialist Revolution* (New York, 1977), 113.

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So, if, on the strength of the above, we can say that the only period in which it is conceivable that the role of the Communist Parties can be interpreted as a function of their place within the international apparatus of the Soviet bureaucracy is that from the middle of the 1930s to the middle of the 1940s, this is not necessarily to say that this interpretation itself is a valid one without serious modifications. For how true is it really that the parties of the Comintern were such willing dupes of the Kremlin and nothing more? Perry Anderson once made the point that reducing the history of the Communist Parties to the influence of Moscow simply 'ignores the complex dialectic between the national and international determinants of party policies', an approach which, ironically, simply reproduces the traditional Cold War scare-story interpretations of Communist history.[13]

The dominant politics of the European Communist Parties of the 1930s, once the ultra-leftism of the 'third period' was passed, was informed by the strategy of the Popular Front: a strategy which posed the subordination of the socialist revolution to the necessity of an alliance with the progressive bourgeoisie to eliminate impediments to bourgeois democracy – concretely, in this conjuncture, fascism. As Trotsky points out above, the similarity between this idea and that of the old Menshevik two-stage theory of revolution is clear, for this latter posed in the same way the necessity of a bourgeois-democratic revolution as a necessary preconditional first stage for a future socialist. In both theories the common feature was the projection of a national bourgeois democratic stage of the revolution. And it is this conception of the march towards socialism taking a national form that is the decisive characteristic both of the line of the Communist Parties in the 1930s and 40s and of pre-revolutionary Russian social-democracy. In the latter case, the young Trotsky's position, which was also to be the position that Lenin effectively came to after his 1917 return to Russia, was that it was perfectly reasonable to pose socialist measures as concrete and immediate goals alongside 'democratic' ones; indeed, that the logic of unfolding revolution would itself lead in this direction, and that consciously attempting to limit the revolution to bourgeois tasks alone would spell disaster. There was, in short, to be no bourgeois-democratic 'stage'. But this view was not adopted – as is commonly imagined – on the basis of a break with 'stagism' *per se*, but on the view that to decide the social content of the coming revolution it was not sufficient to look at Russia alone. For both Lenin and Trotsky the 'stage' that had been reached was not the national stage of the peculiar Russian admixture of social and political conditions but the global stage of imperialism. The key for both Lenin and Trotsky was that proletarian revolution was historically posed as both possible and necessary because of the stage of the capitalist mode of production and the capitalist mode of production had to be analysed fundamentally on a world – not a national – scale. Needless to say, this conception has little to do with the 'everything is possible' voluntarism that today passes itself as 'Trotskyism': the iron laws of human social historical development formed the context in which Lenin and Trotsky mapped out the contours of the unfolding revolution. Their fundamental innovation was not an anti-stagist 'historicist' voluntarism, but a concrete analysis of a concrete situation on a global, rather than national, scale.

But it was precisely a 'national-stagist' conception, with Menshevik knobs on, that subsequently became the predominant line of the Communist Parties in what is seen as the high period of 'Stalinism' as an international phenomenon: what is taken as the 'Stalinist' two-stage theory of revolution, or the 'Stalinist'

[13] 'It is [...] necessary not to bend the stick too far in the other direction, that of the characteristic Cold War histories, which tend to present each national communist party as if it were just a puppet whose limbs were manipulated mechanically by strings pulled in Moscow. That was never the case.' Perry Anderson, 'Communist Party History', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981), 145-146.

conception of the popular front, is in fact nothing other than precisely this conception applied differentially to differing national political contexts.

Nevertheless, the striking feature of the reception of such supposedly 'Stalinist' ideas outside of the Soviet Union is that they were hardly foisted on the parties of the Comintern from outside; for it was not a case, as Tom Nairn once noted about the popular reception of modern nationalism, of force-feeding to anyone the idea of a national road to socialism, of a consequent conception of social advance along nationally-delimited stages: there was already an audience both receptive to and eager for these ideas. To take the example of Spain: even if it is held that the line of the Comintern and the PCE was determined by the material interests of the Soviet bureaucracy, this does little to explain how the PCE was able to build itself as a mass party over the course of the civil war out of what was even by the middle of the decade nothing more than an ineffective rump. Moscow gold and Moscow guns simply does not account for why these ideas were so attractive.[14]

Now, even of it is held, as it is by me, that the 'national-stagist' line carried out, for example, by the PCE and Comintern in Spain was indeed disastrous for the revolution, it needs to be pointed out that, without an a priori commitment to the kind of conception of the capitalist mode of production as a global phenomenon referred to above, the idea that the struggle for socialism is a national one is not such a strange one. The fundamental idea of revolutionary strategy is that the precondition for social advance is the prior capture of state power. Yet the states that we face are precisely national and not international. In this sense the struggle for socialism does have a national aspect, in that the proletariat must first deal with the national bourgeois state with which it is confronted.[15] [15] And, on the basis of surface appearances, are we not faced with a national bourgeoisie, an national capitalism, a national economy, and national classes? The idea that it is possible spontaneously to come to the kind of judgement that Lenin and Trotsky made regarding the world stage of capitalist development with regard to the Russian revolution without an a priori theoretical – 'scientific' – understanding of the global modus operandi of the capitalist mode of production would be 'spontaneism' on a grand scale.

Some time ago I wrote a note Lenin's *What is to be Done?*,[16] a document to which I ascribed a fundamental importance in the development of Marxism. I noted Lenin's comment:

> The basic error that all the Economists commit [...] [is] their conviction that it is possible to develop the class political consciousness of the workers from within, [...] from their economic struggle [...].
>
> Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers. The sphere

[14] The following figures give some idea of the scale of the growth of the Spanish Communist Party during the civil war: just before the elections of February 1936 the PCE had 30,000 militants, in January 1937 200,000 and in March 1937 250,000 in the 22 provinces controlled by the Republicans. In Catalunya in this period the PSUC passed from 5,000 to 45,000 members; and in Euskadi from 3,000 to 22,000. Joan Estruch, *Historia Oculta del PCE* (Madrid, 2000), 132.

[15] It is precisely this point that Roman Rosdolsky deals with in his short but seminal article 'The Workers and the Fatherland: A Note on a Passage in the Communist Manifesto', International 4.2 (Winter 1977). It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Rosdolsky's contribution to Marxism, especially in relation to the national question. I have this article on disc, and would be happy to forward it on to anyone who wants it.

[16] Ed George, The Revolutionary Significance of What is to be Done?' <http://archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/marxism/2002/msg05443.html>.

> from which it alone is possible to obtain this knowledge is the sphere of relationships of all classes and strata to the state and the government, the sphere of the interrelations between all classes.[17]

And I made the following remarks:

> [...] 'within' and 'without', 'inside' and 'outside' are defined [...] as a function of the distinction between the partial and the global. Sectional struggles, trade union struggles for example, 'organically' only lead to sectional, partial consciousness: what the working class needs, therefore, is a centralising, totalising instrument – effectively a revolutionary party – to unify the experiences of its multifarious, partial struggles. [...] This was Lenin's fundamental innovation, a re-assertion of the political element of socialist strategy, founded on the conception of the revolutionary party as a pro-active, subjective political instrument.

Of course, Lenin wrote *What is to be Done?* before his break with what we can call 'national-stagism'; yet his method here is of cardinal importance for our purposes. The conception of the struggle for socialism as essentially a national one is as much an example of partial consciousness – 'trade-union consciousness' – as the view of the supporters of 'economism' that the economic struggle within the factories alone was sufficient. It is one of the ideas that organically arise on the basis of the appearance of bourgeois society - and which are, in this sense 'partially' correct - yet are insufficient in themselves for the development of revolutionary socialist consciousness, and which, moreover, are not organically amenable to self-correction: meaning that full socialist consciousness needs a theoretical – scientific – understanding of the global (understood now both literally and metaphorically) relations making up bourgeois society. Such a scientific understanding was for Lenin, predicated on organisation: the theoretical understanding that was necessary was impossible to achieve without a revolutionary party. Or to put it another way, what Lenin meant by 'revolutionary party' was the type of organisation that would bring this process about. It was, in turn, on this theoretical innovation that the entire remaining course of Lenin's political evolution was predicated.

There are two points that need to be registered here. The first is that there is a qualitative difference between the type of organisation that Lenin suggests – a type of organisation that has to be consciously fought for – and that that normally obtains within the working class movement. For the consequence of the modus operandi of the classic social-democratic type organisations (of which, as has already been noted on this list, the Communist Parties form a sub-group) is not to engender the type of totalisation that Lenin envisages as essential for the development of revolutionary socialist consciousness but precisely to reinforce and institutionalise the sectoral divisions that organically arise within bourgeois society, be they functional ('parliamentarism'), national, or vertical and horizontal sectoralism. Indeed, the very structure of social democratic organisations mitigates against totalisation: if the phenomenon of bureaucracy broadly understood can be said to have a functional characteristic then it is precisely this: that it arises from degrees of 'partial' consciousness and acts as a block to their supercession. Moreover, such forms of organisation, arising as they do on the basis of partial, sectoral, consciousness, themselves are the organic and natural forms of political organisation that bourgeois society prompts: without conscious political struggle for the revolutionary party as a totalising instrument the working class movement will spontaneously throw up bureaucratic and conservatising social-democratic type political organisations. If the contour of the struggle to build a revolutionary party can be summed up in one sentence, then it is the struggle to break free from and overcome the limitations of this partial and sectoral consciousness that the working class movement develops organically within bourgeois society and which finds its reflection in the type of political organisations that it spontaneously produces. It is against this necessity that particular attempts to build revolutionary parties can be judged in terms of (relative) success or failure, against the degree to which they have been successful in overcoming the limitations of partial conceptions of the struggle for socialism.

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[17] 'What is to be Done?'*, Collected Works*, vol. 5, 421-22.

The second point flows logically from the first. If at root what we have denominated 'Stalinist' ideologies and political practices in reality fall within this general problem of organisation and politics, then we are precisely not dealing with a conjunctural problem: the kinds of difficulties posed by consideration of the practice of the 'Stalinist' Communist Parties are in fact nothing to do with the phenomenon of 'Stalinism' per se but are a reflection of perennial problems facing the socialist revolution. In this sense undue attention on 'Stalinism' as a – or the – problem precisely obfuscates what is really necessary: it fails to be able to explain the very phenomenon under consideration as much as it fails to draw out the necessary practical lessons.

* * *

It is now possible to make some summary conclusions of my argument.

1 The term 'Stalinism' retains a validity as a scientific label for the phenomenon of proletarian bonarpartism, in which a relatively privileged administrative corps develops in a state within which the bourgeoisie has been expropriated politically and socially but which has become to a greater or lesser degree isolated. To some extent there is a natural tendency in this direction in the socialist revolution, in that, since the locus of bourgeois rule lies in the state, which in its bourgeois form can only be national, unless we expect in a utopian fashion 'simultaneous revolution' (which is not and never has been synonymous with 'permanent revolution') socialist revolutions will inevitably be isolated for greater or lesser periods. And we can say that as a general rule both the tendency in this direction and the likelihood that the revolution will fail, i.e. that bourgeois rule will be reimposed, are proportional to both the duration and the degree of the isolation. Socialism in one country in all its varieties remains the utopian fantasy it always has been.

2 That understood in this sense 'Stalinism', by virtue of its being a scientific concept, loses all pejorative value.

3 That the term 'Stalinism' to refer to political parties, members of political parties, particular political practices, particular ideas or ideological trends, outside of a very particular historical conjuncture – that of 1935/6 to 1945/6 – loses any explanatory power whatsoever and leads only to obfuscation; and that within this concrete conjuncture, the term 'Stalinism' can only be applied with very important reservations.[18]

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[18] In fact, perhaps the only period in which a case could really be made for the Communist Parties acting as the dupes of the Kremlin without significant domestic mediation is that between the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of August 1939 and the German invasion of the Soviet Union of June 1941. Nevertheless, embarrassing though this period was to be for subsequent hagiographers, it is necessary not to over-estimate the degree of twist and turns in policy on the part of at least one of the two parties most affected – the French and the British. In the latter case, although Britain's entry into the war post-dated the signing of the pact, and the party struggled at first to clarify its line, dallying for a brief period with support for the war effort, its eventual turn against the war did not in fact entail a break from the method of the popular front. The party's line was for a 'people's peace' and a 'people's government', and its principal campaign from the mid part of 1940 for a 'people's convention' (eventually held in January 1941) in which the perspective of a patriotic parliamentary opposition loomed large. With the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, after another short delay to rectify the line, the party could comfortably now support the war effort, but again through the rhetoric of the people's front. What stands out in the party's practice right through this

4 That these reservations mean that even within this conjuncture the term 'Stalinism' to describe the practice of the Communist Parties tends to under-estimate the indigenous organic tendencies within the workers' movement to develop a partial understanding of the road to socialism, to look toward national solutions, and to develop bureaucratic structures.

5 And, finally, that these organic tendencies are not particularly 'Stalinist', are not phenomena that have been confined to historical conjunctures, but represent perennial problems for the workers' movement, consciousness of their causes, reality and dangers representing the only effective method of combating them and overcoming them.

And the consequence of all this? If it is accepted that what is dubbed the politics of 'Stalinism' is not in fact a phenomenon engendered by the bureaucratic regime in the Soviet Union, but a particular variation of perennial tendencies within the workers' movement, then two conclusions can be reached. The first is that, by their perennial nature, these problems are still with us. This is evidently so: the most cursory glance at any of the revolutionary organisations coming from a non-Stalinist tradition shows that they have inherited, to a greater or lesser degree, political traits and habits that have been routinely denominated as 'Stalinist'. We have recently had long (and important, in my view) discussions on the phenomenon of 'Zinovievism': by this, as I understand it, we are talking about a set of political practices and organisational methods which to some degree, in their monolithism, approximate to what is understood in this respect by 'Stalinism'. But it is not the case that these practices, problematic though they be, arise from an uncritical reception of extant models of political organisation: that the methods of the – forgive the question-begging terms – partially ('Zinovievist') or fully ('Stalinist') degenerated Communist International were simply copied. That models existed, that texts were available to serve as holy writ: these are undoubtedly important factors in the process of development of flawed ideological models. But it is not the foundation of the problem. The tendency towards what we can loosely call 'bureaucratism' appears to be an organic tendency within working class organisations, and an a priori awareness of this danger a necessary condition for its amelioration. The legitimacy bestowed on such practices by precedent, be it practical or textual, is purely secondary. It is thus clear that 'Zinovievism' and 'Stalinism' in this sense have outdated not only both Zinoviev and Stalin but the political apparatuses with which their names have been associated.

'Zinovievism' – the tendency towards bureaucratic and monolithic organisational practices – is one aspect of this question. There are two more. The first is what we can call 'nationally-conceived' socialism: the taking at face value the surface appearance of the functioning of capitalism, leading to an effective acceptance of the concept of 'capitalism in one country', leading in turn, without too much of a logical leap, to the possibility of 'socialism in one country'. Again, as I have tried to emphasise, this is an idea that is not borrowed from an external source but a product of an organic tendency of working class organisation in bourgeois society. Now of course every self-proclaimed Trotskyist group will jump to dissociate themselves from these concepts; but the truth is that their opposition to nationally conceived socialist progress is largely formal. An example: the old Militant group in Britain, under the tutelage of Messrs Grant and Woods, as

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period is not so much a slavish obedience to Moscow but rather a *fundamental continuity of popular frontist politics* with a concomitant uneasy shifting from pacifism, to chauvinism, to pacifism and back again. It is perhaps only in France that the dictates of the Kremlin over-ruled all other considerations in this period: although the party's deputies initially voted for war credits, the PCF subsequently adopted the position, also held by Moscow, that France was an aggressor nation and Germany the aggrieved peaceful party. The party was, consequently, completely debilitated and isolated (no small matter under conditions of fascist occupation). As France was overrun, the party's enduring commitment to the line of the popular front led it to advocate the construction of a 'people's government' out of the struggle against Vichy; yet at the same time the party was to denounce de Gaulle as 'a tool of the City of London', and tentative approaches to rebegin legal publication of *L'Humanité* were made to the Vichy regime. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the party was able to shift its position to an assessment of de Gaulle as representative of the patriotic bourgeoisie: with this position, the party could enter the Resistance. Normal service, in this sense, could be resumed.

orthodox Trotskyist as you could want for in its self-presentation, used to advance as a key strategic slogan the nationalisation of the top 250 monopolies, or such like (I believe that it went down to 200 at some point in the early 1980s, I suppose as a result of the inexorable tendency towards the concentration and centralisation of capital). Now never mind all the other questions begged by such a formulation (who is going to do it and how): the idea that one can pose a 'socialist transformation' in one country (Britain in this case) by a workers' government nationalising (another question-begger) the 'commanding heights of the economy' is foolish to the point of absurdity. What would happen then? To what degree would what would happen in other countries affect this development? The Militant was largely silent on this matter: but this is the fundamental question, important beyond all others. Most 'Trotskyist' groups have formulations, more or less sophisticated, along these lines. Indeed, push most honest revolutionaries and they would come out with something very similar: a reflection of the paucity of understanding of these questions extant on the revolutionary left. The idea that 'socialism is international' has become a cliché, an empty phrase robbed of content, an icon, to follow Lenin, only fit for hanging on the wall and praying at. How many left groups in Europe seriously address the question of Europe in a concrete way (and by 'concrete' I don't mean empty slogans along the lines of 'a workers' Europe not a bosses' Europe')? On this issue there is an effective silence. But this is the strategic question that left in Europe must face: even the Mensheviks understood it clearly. It is something else we have lost because we have not understood where 'nationally-conceived socialism' comes from.

The other aspect of this problem is what I have called 'impossibilist voluntarism'. The Trotskyist left is badly infected with this. For if you have developed a set of concepts and ideologies so out of kilter with the essence (not the appearance) of bourgeois rule then your political line is bound to come across as impossibilist. I have spent so long listening to would-be revolutionaries coming out with formulations like 'we start not from what is possible but from what is necessary' that when I hear it nowadays I want to weep. The idea of Marxism as 'practical politics' – or as Trotsky once put it, of the dialectic as 'really clear thinking' – seems too to have gone. It is, on the strength of this, little wonder that the disparagers have such an easy time of it belittling Marxism as an exercise in religious faith, when what is necessary to sustain this kind of politics really does require a suspension of rationality.

These are, as I say, perennial problems. We faced them before 'Stalinism' existed and we face them the same now that it has gone. What has been called 'Stalinism' was little more than one local expression - or better, a series of local expressions - of them. We really do forget this at our peril.

León

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