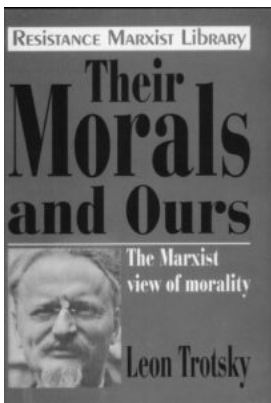
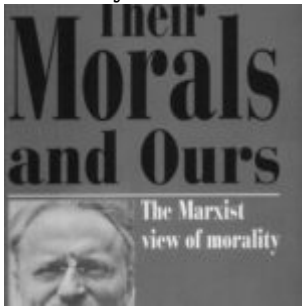


# Revisiting Their Morals and Ours

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In the more than sixty years that I have been a socialist, I have heard fellow socialists say on innumerable occasions that an issue under discussion did not “involve a moral question.” They were usually right, mostly because the hegemonic individualistic American political culture approaches all sorts of social questions with a strong bias against structural, and particularly social class, explanations of behavior, relying instead on notions of individual responsibility that tend to slide easily into issues of morality and immorality. For example, take the notion of the “deserving poor.” It was originally developed in the first half of the nineteenth century to limit private and public aid to those whose conduct stayed within the limits of “moral” individual behavior rather than provide such aid simply based on the recipients’ income or class situations. Today in the United States, several states require recipients to work a certain number of hours to “deserve and earn” such benefits as Medicaid.

At the same time, I cannot recall even a single instance of a fellow socialist stating that the issue at hand was or involved “a moral question.” Is it because there are no “moral questions” that radical and socialist activists deal with in their political lives? That is hardly the case. For example, I have been present at innumerable strike picket lines and been impressed by the moral indignation of the strikers’ (and their supporters’) reaction to strike breakers crossing or attempting to cross the picket lines. No radical or socialist worthy of her name would consider such actions, or the expression of moral sentiments that usually accompany strike actions, to be misguided even though they primarily express a moral outrage. Of course, scabbing should also be analyzed in other than ethical terms, as for example, when an increase in the number of scabs coming from the strikers’ ranks suggests a weakening of the strike. Nevertheless, in the context of combat, there is a powerful ethical component to the old question of “which side are you on?” What is true of strikes is also true of many other situations, as when formerly radical and left-wing people switch sides, an act that is commonly referred to as selling out, as pure an ethical accusation as one can get.

Why then are many leftists, especially those who, ironically, have been primarily politicized by ethical concerns, so reluctant to call moral issues by their name when morality is pertinent and may even be the most important aspect of the situation at hand? Perhaps many radicals and socialists

fear that invoking ethics in any form may taint them with an association with liberal politics, even though the liberal approach to politics is quite different from those of revolutionaries and Marxists. Most important, many socialists and radicals may be reluctant to utilize ethical categories like justice because there is a widespread perception that Marx and Engels repudiated the utilization of ethical and moral categories. There were several reasons for Marx and Engels' approach, but most of all, they saw ethical categories as undermining the materialistic basis of their critique of capitalism on its own systemic terms as opposed to empty appeals to eternal, ahistorical themes such as justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity.

These issues have been discussed in depth and at length by Marxist philosophers for many years, and they are far more complicated than the simple-minded "Marxist" repudiations *in toto* of moral and ethical thinking may suggest. The British philosopher Norman Geras, when he was still a Marxist, painstakingly and rigorously analyzed this issue while considering the different views of other Marxist philosophers. Geras concludes that Marx, while "disowning, when he is not actively ridiculing any attachment to ideas and values, ... is nevertheless quite free in making critical normative judgments, [and is] author of a discourse that is replete with the signs of an intense moral commitment." For example, Marx repeatedly talked about the capitalist appropriation of surplus value with such morally laden terms as "robbery" and "theft." Similarly, when discussing primitive capitalist accumulation, Marx asserted that the greatest part is not played by right and labor, as in the idyll of political economy, but "in actual history [by] conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short force." (Norman Geras, "The Controversy About Marx and Justice" in Alex Callinicos, ed., *Marxist Theory* [Oxford University Press, 1989], 265, 225-6.)

### **Leon Trotsky and Political Morality**

While Marx and Engels' theories and views on a wide variety of subjects, including morality and ethics, had world wide influence, it could be argued that Leon Trotsky's views and practices related to those issues had more immediate practical relevance than those of Marx and Engels, although Trotsky shared, in general terms, the common interpretation that ethics and morality had no place in Marxist analyses. Trotsky was one of the main leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution as chief organizer of the Red Army and foreign minister of a revolutionary regime that tried to put into practice the teachings of the founders of Marxism, the most important school of socialism. As a major revolutionary government leader, Trotsky was politically responsible for several highly controverted actions on the part of the Soviet government that had very important moral consequences, such as the uncontrolled and illegal actions of the secret police (Cheka) and the suppression of the revolt of the Kronstadt sailors in March 1921. He promptly assumed political responsibility for those events and continued to do so until the end of his life. In addition, he never rectified his early false claim that the Kronstadt rebels agitated for "Soviets without Communists." In fact, a majority of Communist Party members in the garrison actively supported the rebel program.

One effect of the suppression of this revolt was that it elicited strong objections, then and years later, not only from the usual opponents of the soviet regime on the right but also from various quarters on the left. As Isaac Deutscher, Trotsky's most important biographer, relates, during the winter of 1937-1938, a number of writers who had at one or another time been associated with the anti-Stalinist Marxist left, such as Victor Serge, Boris Souvarine, Anton Ciliga, and Max Eastman, raised, in a critical manner, the issue of Trotsky's political responsibility for the repression of the sailors' revolt at the Kronstadt Naval base, and also pondered the significance of that event in explaining the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalinism. (Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast, Trotsky 1929-1940*, Vol. III, 436.) A few months later, in 1938, Trotsky responded to these critics in *Their Morals and Ours*, a forty-page pamphlet. Compared with Trotsky's major historical and political works, this was a minor one in terms of length and quality but very important in terms of its subject matter.

Some of the objections raised by critics of the pamphlet are, in my view, unconvincing, such as the claim that the pamphlet approves the notion that “the end justifies the means.” It is worth noting that the well-known American philosopher John Dewey’s main objection to Trotsky’s approach was not at all about the issue of means and ends, as such, but was about what he saw as Trotsky’s a priori and unjustified choice of the class struggle as the principal means to bring about the socialist revolution’s desired ends. Trotsky maintained that there is a “dialectic interdependence of ends and means,” and postulated that the ends are justified if it leads to increasing the power of humans over nature and to the abolition of the power of some humans over others. In terms of the means leading to the desired revolutionary ends, Trotsky further contended that those means are permissible that *really* (Trotsky’s emphasis) lead to the liberation of humankind, and he declared that “permissible and obligatory are those and only those means ... which unite the revolutionary proletariat, fill their hearts with irreconcilable hostility to oppression, teach them contempt for official morality and its democratic echoers, imbue them with consciousness of their own historic mission, raise their courage and spirit of self-sacrifice in the struggle.” Trotsky concludes with the assertion that

the great revolutionary end spurn those base means and ways which set one part of the working class against other parts [of the working class] or attempt to make the masses happy without their participation; or lower the faith of the masses in themselves and their organizations, replacing it by worship for the ‘leaders.’ Primarily and irreconcilably, revolutionary morality rejects servility in relation to the bourgeoisie and haughtiness in relation to the toilers. (41)

Trotsky’s pamphlet did not specifically discuss the Kronstadt events or the criticisms he’d received a few months earlier. In light of Trotsky’s arguments above, the question arises as to what Trotsky’s mostly valid but often abstract notions about which means are permissible in a revolutionary struggle relate to the very concrete criticisms of specific acts and atrocities committed by the revolutionary government in Kronstadt or, I may add, in a large number of other situations. (I discussed some of these at length in *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy*, such as the continuing, openly illegal behavior of the Cheka.) Thus, to seriously take on his critics, Trotsky should have outlined his position on the specific Bolshevik practices of which his government was accused, just as he answered in detail the Stalinist slanders and calumnies against him to the 1937 Commission of Inquiry headed by John Dewey, rather than evading these issues as he did in *Their Morals and Ours*. However, Trotsky later did address two of these concrete questions (the absence of public trials and the taking of hostages), at least rhetorically, in a subsequent pamphlet, “Moralists and Sycophants Against Marxism,” published in June 1939.

Some of the practices of the Bolshevik leadership were more defensible than others. Thus, as Trotsky argued in the June 1939 pamphlet, the capture of hostages to be exchanged for prisoners taken by the enemy, or for other concessions from them, was, or could be, based on the principle of selectivity rather than an indiscriminate seizure of real or suspected opponents. Even the killing of the tsar and his family had at least a rational basis, given the importance of even the tsar’s youngest descendants as bearers of monarchical legitimacy and rallying symbols for the White opposition during the Civil War. There were, of course, other considerations relevant to whether the tsar’s family should have been executed, particularly because children were involved. But what possible justification could Trotsky have given for the widespread government practice of collective punishment based on people’s membership in certain social classes and ethnic groups rather than on their actual conduct? (This punishment was very different from the nationalization of some of these people’s capitalist property.) An example was the Red Terror, instituted by Lenin in Petrograd in 1918 in response to the assassination of major Bolshevik leaders. People were targeted, at least in part, based on who they were rather than what they had done or were preparing to do; many people of bourgeois background were punished although they were in fact collaborating with the Bolshevik

government. As historian Alexander Rabinowitch reports in *The Bolsheviks in Power* (Indiana University Press, 2007), the Red Terror's indiscriminate policies were opposed even by a substantial part of the local Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd. Thus, in this instance, Trotsky's vaunted criterion of selectivity was not only violated in practice but also in principle.

It is usually claimed, and rightly so, that authentically popular uprisings and revolutions will unavoidably engage in excesses, in the sense that mass anger and indignation against the ruling and oppressing groups blinds people, usually momentarily, to the best interests and goals of the revolutionary movement, let alone to considerations of mere humanity. But expressions of "normal" institutional revolutionary government policy are not such "excesses."

Perhaps anticipating such criticisms, Trotsky maintains in *Their Morals and Ours* that he "cannot give a ready answer to the question as to what is permissible and what is not permissible in each separate case. There can be no such automatic answers. Problems of revolutionary morality are fused with the problems of revolutionary strategy and tactics." (41) Here Trotsky is engaging in both evasion and sophistry. No revolutionary partisan with her feet on the ground would suggest that leaders such as Trotsky should or could have produced a list of every conceivable transgression in every conceivable situation, especially when we know that the character of an action is unavoidably affected by its context. But it is striking that Trotsky could not even come up with one or two examples of actions that were not permissible *under any conceivable circumstances*. Are there, for example, any conceivable "problems of revolutionary strategy and tactics" that would make rape by soldiers (a horrible but frequent accompaniment of wars) or deliberate physical torture permissible? If not, why not say so openly and explicitly in the context of discussing "their morals *and ours*"?

Trotsky's untenable positions in these two pamphlets forces him into false equivalences to justify an attitude that could perhaps be described as "moral nihilism." Thus, in *Moralists and Sycophants Against Marxism*, when discussing the seizure of non combatants in a struggle, Trotsky raises the issue of the "tens of thousands who were duped and conscripted by force" into Franco's army in Spain. Here, Trotsky ignores a very major issue: Those who were forced to fight for Franco were, after all, *fighting* against the Republican armies, who could not ignore that reality and had to fight back. That situation in Spain was very different from the situation of non combatants elsewhere, who do not, by virtue of their conduct, force anybody to fight back.

A similar attitude was evident in Trotsky's claim, in the same pamphlet, that "public trials are possible only in a condition of a stable regime. Civil war is a condition of the extreme instability of society and the state ... so it is impossible to reveal in public trials the conditions and circumstances of conspiracies, for the latter are intimately linked with the course of the civil war." Trotsky could have made a better case had he argued that prison sentences can become meaningless in situations of a "moving front" and that the death penalty may unfortunately be the only meaningful sentence that a revolutionary tribunal can give in those highly unstable circumstances. But as Victor Serge argued in 1940 (*Unpublished manuscript on Their Morals and Ours*, [www.marxists.org/archive/serge/1940/trotsky-morals.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/serge/1940/trotsky-morals.htm)), "During the [Russian] civil war there was perfect order behind the front itself, in the interior of Soviet territory. ... There was nothing to prevent the functioning of regular courts, which might in certain cases have sat in camera, before which the accused could have been able to defend themselves, have their own counsel present, and show themselves in the light of day."

### **Trotsky's (and Lenin's) Quasi-Jacobinism**

Trotsky's evasions and sophistries in discussing revolutionary morality should not be characterized as an oversight or defect but rather as an expression of what I call his (and Lenin's) "quasi-Jacobin" politics. By this I do not necessarily mean the actual politics of the Jacobins in the French

Revolution, but rather a political tradition based on what some leftists *perceived* as the essence of Jacobinism, primarily the notion that there should not be any limits to the actions that revolutionaries consider necessary to the success of the revolution. Revolutionary success was usually defined by some Marxists as the seizure and holding of power by the revolutionary working-class movement (the reference to the working class here is why I call this kind of thinking “quasi-Jacobinism”). This would explain why Trotsky resisted making any commitment to avoid certain actions, even if these were quite minimal in terms of their military significance and consequences. This outlook paid no attention to the fact that success in taking and/or holding power is by itself no clear indication of who is holding power. Militarily successful actions can help to transform a movement away from its original politics and into something entirely different. However, Trotsky’s “quasi-Jacobin” approach was not universally adopted by revolutionary Marxists. It was certainly not the approach of Marx, Engels, or Luxemburg, and even Trotsky himself rejected such politics when he published the pamphlet *Our Political Tasks* in 1904 (as a response to Lenin’s book “*One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*”), where Trotsky criticizes Lenin precisely for Jacobinism.

The refusal to accept any limitations on what revolutionaries do to achieve victory is closely tied to Lenin’s and Trotsky’s rejection of any kind of rules, even those that stipulate conditions for waiving them in certain situations. As the Marxist scholar Hal Draper noted, Lenin argued as early as April 1906, in the pamphlet *The Victory of the Cadets and the Tasks of the Workers’ Party*, that the *soviets* or workers councils that arose in 1905 “represented a dictatorship in embryo, for they recognized *no other authority, no law and no standards, no matter by whom established. Authority—unlimited, outside the law, and based on force in the most direct sense of the word—is dictatorship.*” Reviewing another formulation utilized by Lenin in this pamphlet, Draper wondered whether a lynch mob could not also be considered an example of what Lenin had termed “dictatorship of the people.” (Hal Draper, “*The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ from Marx to Lenin*” [Monthly Review Press, 1987], 92, Lenin’s italics.) More than 12 years later, Lenin, now the head of the revolutionary government, was still defining the dictatorship of the proletariat as a rule “won and maintained by the use of violence by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, rule that is unrestricted by any laws.” (V. I. Lenin, “The Proletarian Revolution and Kautsky the Renegade,” in *Collected Works*, Vol. 28, July 1918-March 1919 [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965], 236.) It is important to note that Lenin was writing here not only about the civil war that he thought likely to develop after the victory of the revolution, but also about the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” For a revolutionary Marxist like Lenin, this term referred to a transitional epoch possibly lasting many years, a lengthier period than that of the civil war and social upheaval that is likely to immediately follow the violent overthrow of the old ruling classes. Of course, as I explained at length in *Before Stalinism* (149-151), Lenin would sometimes defend formal rules as, for example, asserting that “the Party tie ... must be founded on *formal, bureaucratically worded rules* (bureaucratic from the standpoint of the undisciplined intellectual), strict adherence to which can alone safeguard us from the willfulness and caprices characteristic of the [informal] circles.” (V. I. Lenin, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 7, September 1903-December 1904 [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1961], 390-1, Lenin’s emphasis.)

It should not be surprising that a political ideology opposing rules would encourage arbitrariness as a political tool. As we know, the struggle against arbitrariness has been a central feature of working-class struggles in the United States and abroad. One of the main tasks of militant shop stewards is to enforce the rules laid out in the contract, which employers and supervisors are prone to ignore. What is, after all, the treasured principle of seniority about, if not to prevent favoritism based on management’s interests, convenience, and whims? Moreover, under the hierarchical division of labor, which would continue to exist at least in the early stages of socialism, rules would continue to be necessary to protect the democratic rights of those people doing the most routine and least challenging jobs. History has taught us that people making decisions and doing the most interesting work will do everything they can to remain in those advantageous positions even if they are not the

capitalist owners or the managers of their workplaces.



Leon Trotsky

### **Revolutionary Socialist Warfare and Warfare 'as Usual'**

It is not surprising that in *Their Morals and Ours*, Trotsky, an experienced military leader, argues that “different classes in the name of different aims may in certain instances utilize similar means. Essentially it cannot be otherwise. Armies in combat are always more or less symmetrical; were there nothing in common in their methods of struggle they could not inflict blows upon each other.” (14) There was truth in what Trotsky was arguing here, but only a partial truth. Moreover, this argument could be used to naturalize the worst kinds of abuses by the leaders of revolutionary armies. While emphasizing the similarity of methods between revolutionaries and the reactionary defenders of the existing systems, Trotsky says nothing about the crucial differences in the methods of struggle that can be expected to prevail on both sides. After all, this was the same Trotsky who, at the peace negotiations with Germany at Brest Litovsk in the spring of 1918, called on the German soldiers to rise against their warmonger generals and bring the war to an end through revolutionary means, hardly a slogan of “regular” warfare.

Aside from the critical issue of how “regular” armies differ from revolutionary armies when it comes to the nature of internal military discipline, the conduct of warfare is not merely the use of a collection of “neutral” tools that can be used by either side regardless of the political ends that each is defending. The military strategy and tactics promoted by Joseph Stalin and by U.S. Pentagon generals cannot be used for good as well as for bad ends. The deliberate famine provoked by Stalin in the Ukraine in 1932 may have been effective in promoting his political and economic ends. Similarly the “strategic hamlets” and widespread use of Napalm against civilians may have promoted U.S. military goals in Vietnam. But such tactics cannot be used to promote socialist ends; instead, they were horrendous practices that socialists and democrats should have opposed as such. The list of these deliberate (or at least consciously tolerated) recent atrocities, especially those made possible and facilitated by modern technology, is very long, and I will just provide a few examples: The Nazi Holocaust principally directed against Jews but also against gays, the Roma people, and others; the millions of victims of Stalin’s totalitarian reign in the USSR; Winston Churchill’s support for famine in Bengal in 1943; the rape of an estimated half a million German civilian women by Russian soldiers in 1945; the extensive use of torture in the ruthless British suppression of the

"Mau-Mau" revolt in Kenya in the fifties; the torture carried out in the equally ruthless French repression of the Algerian revolution in the fifties and early sixties; and Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward, which caused the deaths of tens of millions of Chinese people by famine and massive repression from 1960 to 1962. The Cambodian genocide of the late seventies was, in proportional terms, even worse than Mao's atrocities.

The carpet bombing of the German city of Dresden in February 1945 by the British and U.S. air forces starkly presents the difficulties involved in taking a stand against deliberate atrocities. While the Nazi regime was in its last throes, it was still in power in Germany. Yet civilians in Dresden were not unavoidable victims of warfare but were deliberately targeted by the British and American air forces, with the result that 25 thousand primarily civilian Germans were killed. As described by Robert S. McNamara in the film "The Fog of War," civilians in Japanese cities were systematically fire-bombed besides the cataclysmic nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki toward the end of the war. Would it have played into the hands of the German and Japanese rulers for Americans to object to these Allied criminal actions? Would it have been "petty bourgeois moralism" to oppose all these atrocities regardless of which side was carrying them on?

The threat of nuclear warfare that became reality with the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the U.S. Air Force in 1945 placed these issues at center stage. For one thing, a most important aspect of the over forty- years- long Cold War between the Soviet bloc and the U.S.- led Western bloc was precisely the issue of the "balance of terror" between the two contending sides. While this "balance" does not currently play the role it did during the Cold War, we should not forget that Russia, the United States, and several other powers have ready access to nuclear weapons.

When I participated in the British peace movement while I was a graduate student in London in the early sixties, there was a debate between some leftist groups who supported the "workers' bomb," that is, the Soviet bloc possession of nuclear weapons, and other groups who opposed nuclear weapons by both East and West; I worked with the latter. We argued that the USSR and its satellites were not workers' states and also that nuclear bombs could not be used by our side, since by their very nature these weapons could not distinguish between oppressors and the oppressed. Of course, Trotsky could not have known about the destructive power of these weapons, and in this sense, we know more on this than he did because the history that has transpired since his time has taught us lessons that we have an obligation to incorporate into our socialist outlook.

One who took these lessons seriously was the late Daniel Bensaid, an important leader of the 1968 uprising in France and one of the principal figures of French Trotskyism. Taking off from Trotsky's *Their Morals and Ours*, Bensaid amplified, in a far more concrete and specific manner, Trotsky's discussion of the means that were not acceptable in the revolutionary struggle. In this context, Bensaid argued for a categorical rejection of weapons of mass destruction that make no distinction between civilians and combatants, a principled opposition to wars of race or religion, and opposition, for both political and moral reasons, to attacks such as those of September 11, 2001. Anticipating the usual objections, Bensaid admitted that "no rule can respond to all concrete situations. But at least it makes it possible to designate and circumscribe the exception, instead of banalizing it." Bensaid went on to argue that while violence cannot be eradicated in the foreseeable future, we must work at least to discipline and restrain it, "which presupposes the development of a new legal culture, and a [new?] culture of violence itself. ... Why should it be impossible to develop a culture of dominated violence? Certain military codes and certain martial arts have sketched a few pointers in this direction. Under the threat of collective self-destruction, our era has a responsibility to invent in its turn new regulations and new customs." (Daniel Bensaid, *An Impatient Life. A Memoir*, David Fernbach, tr. [London: Verso Books, 2013], 165-66.)

Is Bensaid's a utopian program? Not in terms of changing the sometimes- calloused political culture

of the left. In society at large, his goals would require very radical and revolutionary changes. In addition, the program would be particularly utopian if it ignored that all revolutions and radical social changes carry, to one degree or another, political and cultural vestiges of the old society. The issue is whether the leaders and activists of the new revolutionary movement consciously combat these old vestiges or do the opposite and try to take advantage of the old society's vices to build and consolidate their power.

### **Trotsky in Transition – His Politics in the 1930s**

Trotsky's stance in *Their Morals and Ours*, and more generally his polemic against Victor Serge and other left-wing critics of the practices of Leninism in power, is that of a defeated but tough-minded revolutionary leader retrospectively identifying with the responsibilities and tough choices he faced as a man of power less than two decades earlier. The tough stands he took during the thirties reflected in part the politics of Leninism in power, an openly dictatorial regime, although different from the totalitarian Stalinism that followed. At the same time, however, the extreme suppression of democratic rights by the Stalinism that preceded Hitler's rise in Germany (for example, the violent collectivization of agriculture in the USSR and the accompanying Ukrainian famine) forced Trotsky to move in a more democratic direction. I would argue that even *Their Morals and Ours* shows some signs of that tendency, at least in the seriousness with which Trotsky addressed the issue of means and ends.

By the late twenties, Trotsky had been expelled from the CPSU and exiled from the USSR. By that time, he no longer called on his followers in the USSR and throughout the world to work within the various Communist parties but asked them to organize independently and in opposition to the parties. Moreover, in 1936, Trotsky took a major step away from the political foundations of Leninism in power in his major work *The Revolution Betrayed*. He not only agreed that a multiplicity of political parties was legitimate under socialism but also argued strongly against "Marxist" defenders of the one-party state, particularly when they argued that the Communist parties were the only true representatives of the working classes. As Trotsky put it,

In reality classes are heterogeneous; they are torn by inner antagonisms and arrive at the solution of common problems not otherwise than through an inner struggle of tendencies, groups and parties. It is possible, with certain qualifications, to concede that "a party is part of a class." But since a class has many "parts"—some look forward and some back—one and the same class may create several parties. For the same reason one party may rest upon parts of different classes. An example of only one party corresponding to one class is not to be found on the whole course of political history—provided, of course, you do not take the police appearance for the reality. (Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* [Merit Publishers, 1965], 267.)

Unfortunately, Trotsky's defense of democracy was uneven, especially when it came to his views on internal democracy in a revolutionary party. As he argued in "Moralists and Sycophants Against Marxism" in June 1939, "The internal democracy of a revolutionary party is not a goal in itself. It must be supplemented and bounded by centralism. For a Marxist the question has always been: democracy for what? For which program? The framework of the program is at the same time the framework of democracy."

Thus, in Trotsky's 1939 view, internal democracy in a revolutionary party is only a means and not an end, instead of being both a means and an end, or, in broader terms, the revolutionary's customary way of engaging in political activity. Viewed in this alternative way, the internal democracy of a revolutionary party is not dependent on the program it adopts to face a certain political situation, and of course any specific party program is supposed to be, in any case, the one chosen by the



majority at a party conference or convention. As far as centralism is concerned, the devil is in the details. It is perfectly democratic to insist that the party carries out majority decisions and that the minority cannot publicly oppose such decisions, although it might be allowed to abstain if the minority thinks that questions of principle, and not merely of strategy and tactics, are at stake.. The problem is that “democratic centralism” is quite often accompanied by blatantly undemocratic practices, such as the paid party organizers acting as a body consciously separated from the membership and as political representatives of the leadership, necessarily supporting the leadership’s political line (as for example, at a conference or convention) rather than following their own political judgment. In other words, under this version of “democratic centralism,” the leadership uses employees of the organization as political patronage. An even more important issue is the leadership developing into a virtual faction that hides from the membership its internal differences. This raises fundamental questions like the fact that the members don’t know and can’t learn what the real politics of different leaders are when they come up for reelection.

Trotsky’s views became gradually more democratic in the 1930s, although as we have shown above, in an uneven manner. At the same time, he continued to think, at least until the beginning of World War II, within the limits of an iron- cage view of historical development that saw private capitalism as being only possibly succeeded by socialism. Even when faced with the monstrous realities of Stalinism in the USSR, he could not allow for the possibility that a new mode of production and class system was being created in that country. Instead, he developed the concept of a degenerated workers’ state to explain the social nature of the USSR, as if nationalized property by itself constituted the basis for any kind of workers’ state. This was the same underlying outlook that led Trotsky, in the second half of the twenties, to see Stalin as a lesser evil than Bukharin, because of the latter’s proposals to provide economic concessions to the Soviet peasantry. For Trotsky, Bukharin represented the potential threat of capitalist restoration, while Stalin did not. He did not contemplate even the possibility that Stalin may have represented a totalitarian alternative to both private capitalism and socialism. On the other hand, in his analysis of the likely effects of World War II, in September 1939, Trotsky opened the door for a possible future change of mind when he argued that “war accelerates the various political processes. It may accelerate the process of the revolutionary regeneration of the USSR. But it may also accelerate the process of its final degeneration.” In the same article, Trotsky indicated that “[t]he historic alternative, carried to the end, is as follows: either the Stalin regime is an abhorrent relapse in the process of transforming bourgeois society into a socialist society, or the Stalin regime is the first stage of a new exploiting society. If the second prognosis proves to be correct, then, of course, the bureaucracy will become a new exploiting class.” (Leon Trotsky, “The USSR in War,” *The New Internationalist*, Vol. 5, No. 11, November 1939, 325-332.)

Trotsky’s opposition to Stalinism was not that of a “sore loser” but a principled stand in defense of working-class internationalism against Stalin’s great- Russian chauvinism and totalitarianism. In his opposition to the submission of the international Communist movement to Russian domestic and foreign policies, Trotsky at the same time developed a brilliant analysis of fascism and how to fight it, and he attacked the lunacy of Communist policy, particularly in Germany, where the Communist Party claimed that Social Democracy was a form of fascism and therefore refused to call for a united working-class front against fascism that would prominently include the Social Democrats.

Whatever Trotsky’s limitations and errors, he proposed a better politics to face the twin evils of fascism and Stalinism than most of the international left. In the United States (and elsewhere), magazines like *The Nation* and *The New Republic* as well as most left opinion outlets became shameful apologists for Stalinism. At the same time, Trotsky was under the ruthless persecution of Stalin’s agents, which led to the assassination of almost his entire family and loss of his own life in Mexico City in 1940. No wonder that Trotsky felt increasingly isolated, and this political isolation in

turn encouraged a certain kind of political desperation and sectarianism. His vitriolic attacks on Victor Serge and other left critics were entirely disproportionate to the content and tone of these critics. It was perhaps this increasing isolation and political desperation that also led Trotsky to call for the formation of a Fourth International in 1938. It included 21 delegates representing organizations in eleven countries, the largest being the American Socialist Workers Party, which claimed a formal membership of only 2,500. Unlike the previous internationals, Trotsky's Fourth International was created with a small working-class membership and little support beyond a few localities like Minneapolis.

Leon Trotsky was not only a brilliant historian, literary critic, and military leader. He also made significant contributions to Marxist understanding with his development of the theories of uneven and combined development and permanent revolution. However, I don't believe those important contributions warrant the existence of separate *Trotskyist* organizations today in the context of the politics of the twenty-first century. Stalinism is still very much alive in many of the conceptions favored by a majority of the international left, but there is no doubt that it has become only a shadow of what it was until late in the twentieth century. Instead, a democratic revolutionary socialism for our time needs to draw on a variety of sources for its theoretical development and practical political work. Of course, Trotsky must be part of it, but also Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, and the V.I. Lenin that led the October Revolution with his brilliant application of Marxism to the understanding of the existing relation of forces and political conjunctures rather than holding on to the rigid schematic categories of historical development favored by classical social democracy. In 1925, Trotsky himself provided a very apt analogy when discussing what cultural contributions of the bourgeoisie and other previous ruling classes should be preserved and rescued for the construction of the new working-class order. Trotsky cited post-Justinian Roman jurisprudence, which gave inheritors a certain degree of choice through the establishment of "inventorial inheritance," and claimed that "the revolutionary state, representing a new class, is a kind of inventorial inheritor in relation to the accumulated store of culture." I suggest that the same approach with respect to the broad socialist and Marxist tradition can be applied to the gigantic task of constructing a political movement dedicated to the defeat of the increasing threat of barbarism and to bringing about the victory of a democratic revolutionary socialism.