The Third Camp, Socialism From Below, and the First Principle of Revolutionary Socialism

written by Daniel Randall | February 18, 2018

"The socialists consider it their principal, perhaps even their only, duty to promote the growth of this consciousness among the proletariat, which for short they call its class consciousness. The whole success of the socialist movement is measured for them in terms of the growth in class consciousness of the proletariat. Everything that helps this growth they see as useful to their cause; everything that slows it down as harmful."

—George Plekhanov

An old Jewish story tells of a student who visited the great rabbis of the day and asked each to tell him the entire Torah while standing on one leg. All dismissed him, insisting the task was impossible, except for Rabbi Hillel, who said, "'Do not do unto others that which is hateful to you.' That is the whole Torah. All the rest is commentary. Now, go and study."

With all the necessary qualifications about the differences between a religious text and a necessarily materialist and critical politics, might it be possible to distill revolutionary socialism down in a similar way? Of course, it is not; but then "do not do unto others that which is hateful to you" isn't really "the whole Torah"; it's a literary exercise for Hillel to communicate the golden rule, or first principle, that he considers to be the essence of Jewish faith. One can argue, convincingly, that revolutionary socialism has two such principles: first, that value in capitalist society, and wealth in all societies, derives from labor. From this we get the foundational and irreplaceable focus on class. Second, and more significant for this article, the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself. This idea, that liberation from the exploitation and oppression that are necessarily integral to capitalism cannot be carried out for us by any external force, handed down from above, or done on our behalf, but rather must be our own act, consciously and independently organized by our class—this is our first principle, our golden rule, if we have one.

It is this golden rule that underpins the two related but distinct concepts this article explores: the third camp and socialism from below.

The Third Camp

"Even those of us who consider ourselves partisans of the tradition that bears its name must admit that the concept of the third camp is not well known beyond some small corners of the revolutionary left. Even there, it is often considered a relic of the world that bore it."

Although its conceptual roots lie further back, "third campism" as a discrete political tradition cohered in the 1939-1940 schism in the American Trotskyist movement. Grasping for an adequate response to the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the Russian invasions of Poland and Finland, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) split, effectively down the middle, in a debate about whether they could still maintain their position of unconditional defense of the Soviet Union.

Leon Trotsky's supporters on the "majority" side of that debate compiled a collection of his essays, *In Defense of Marxism,* that covers it. The debate was also surveyed, with explicit editorial sympathy for the "minority," in two volumes entitled *Fate of the Russian Revolution,* published by Workers' Liberty. The "minority" perspective came to be summarized by the slogan, "Neither Washington nor Moscow, but the Third Camp of international socialism." The SWP split apart, and in 1940 the "minority" founded the Workers Party, which would become the Independent Socialist League in 1949.

The roots of the concept of the third camp go deeper. It was not merely an attempt to create a theoretical framework to understand developments in Russia, although it emerged through that, but a reassertion of something integral, even foundational, in socialist politics: the idea that the working class cannot rule except by and for itself. In his reply to Trotsky in the debate that split the SWP, Max Shachtman, the leader of the "minority," put it like this:

> I repeat, I do not believe in the bureaucratic proletarian (socialist) revolution [that is, the ability of the Stalinist bureaucracy to advance the cause of socialism]. … I reject the concept not out of "sentimental" reasons or a Tolstoyan "faith in the people" but because I believe it to be scientifically correct to repeat with Marx that the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself. The bourgeois revolution … could be made and was made by other classes and social strata; the bourgeoisie could be liberated from feudal rule and establish its social dictatorship under the aegis of other social groups. But the proletarian revolution cannot be made by others than the proletariat acting. … No one else can free it—not even for a day.[1]

Shachtman's conclusion represented a form of return to first principles. In 1853 Marx and Engels, both of whom emphasized that democratic forms are necessary to working-class rule, had referred to the revolutionary potential of burgeoning working-class movements as a "sixth power in Europe,"

which could "assert its supremacy over the whole of the five so-called 'great' powers."[2] Trotsky himself had coined the term when, in 1918, he described the revolutionary working class as an independent "third camp" in the 1917 February Revolution, opposed to both the first camp of "all the property-owning and ruling classes," and the second camp of "the compromising groups."[3]

At the end of his life, Trotsky was wrong to argue, against Shachtman and others, that the gains of the 1917 revolution were still expressed, in however degenerated a form, in the Stalinist state. But his vital roles in making that revolution and then in defending it from Stalinist sabotage showed that for Trotsky, the golden rule of revolutionary socialist politics was precisely that all efforts must be directed toward building up working-class consciousness and political independence. This was the thread of his politics, which those who would found the third-camp tradition saw themselves as picking up and extending.

That tradition today is scattered and semi-submerged.[4] But it contains much that could help reinvigorate and renew socialist politics, and reorient a left in disarray.

Socialism From Below

In 1960 Hal Draper, who emerged as one of the foremost theorists, writers, and organizers of the third-camp tradition, and who co-founded the journal in which this article appears, wrote the pamphlet *The Two Souls of Socialism*. Draper argues that socialist thought throughout history can be divided between "socialism from above" and "socialism from below"—the former advocating utopian-elitist conspiracies, or statist dictatorship, to deliver socialism to the masses, and the latter advocating the masses' self-activity and self-organization. He describes working-class self-emancipation as the "First Principle" of revolutionary socialism.[5]

As a literary device, the concept of socialism from below is useful. But to extrapolate from these three words a "way of doing politics," as Dan Swain called socialism from below in a June 2015 article for *rs21*, republished by *New Politics*,[6] obscures more than it clarifies.

The diffuse, loosely networked social movements of the past decade—the Tahrir Square uprising in Egypt, the Spanish "*Indignados*," the global Occupy movements—caught many leftist imaginations, seeming to express a potential new grass-roots politics from below that was brushing aside the old orthodoxies and staid structures of parties and unions.[7] But it was in large part precisely because these movements had no adequate, permanently organized structures, able to impose above—at the level of politics, government, and society—the demands and aspirations generated below, that the movements dissipated—or, as in the case of the Arab Spring, were effectively confiscated by reactionary movements that *were* organized above.

We require, in other words, a comprehensive perspective for working-class power, from below and above. To achieve that, our class needs its own political organizations: democratic revolutionary parties. An overemphasis on socialism from below as the summarizing concept of revolutionary politics can lead, and, in Draper's case, perhaps did lead, to de-emphasizing the vital necessity of permanent political organization. The idea of socialism from below can serve us as a literary device, but only if it is part of a more thoroughgoing *independent working-class politics*.

The Left in Disarray: The Long Retreat from the First Principle[8]

These are odd times to be a partisan of class politics and moreover of the idea that authentic socialist politics are the politics of working-class self-liberation. The economic crisis of 2008 shook the immense mystique that neoliberal, free-market capitalism had built up in the minds of millions,

and the consequences and sequels of that crisis are still working themselves through. Looked at from one angle, that crisis provided, and continues to provide, an epochal opportunity to spread the idea that the working class, the global social majority, which produces society's vast wealth, should also control that wealth.

But 2008 found much of the revolutionary left in the midst of a long-term "retreat from class." That was the phrase used by the Marxist writer and historian Ellen Meiksins Wood in her 1986 book, *The Retreat from Class: A New True Socialism*. The book was a polemic against those socialists, mainly but not exclusively from Stalinist or Stalinist-influenced backgrounds, who were galloping away from class-struggle politics in the direction of a hodgepodge of post-modernism and barely reformist liberal identity politics. Some of those criticized remained in the tent of broad leftist or even labor movements, but largely on their right wings. Yet much of post-Trotsky Trotskyism, without ever really going over to the right or explicitly abandoning principles, had also undertaken its own version of the same retreat, a systematic backing away from the idea of independent working-class politics as the foundational core of socialism, a retreat from the first principle of working-class self-emancipation.

Utterly disoriented by their Biblicist adherence to the claim that the Stalinist states somehow represented historical progress, post-Trotsky "orthodox" Trotskyists were able to substitute a whole variety of locums for the independently organized working class—other forces and movements that they argued could be unconscious bearers of the socialist project, or at least potential allies, and whose victories against imperialism would be beneficial for socialist interests no matter how murderously hostile they were in practice to actual working-class organization.

The retreat from class has taken a variety of forms, not always in the direction of passive support for anti-imperialist locums. Elsewhere on the left, other tendencies recoiling from a low ebb of class struggle and disoriented by changes in capitalism have argued that automation, atomization, and precarity have rendered the workplace no longer privileged as a site of anti-capitalist organization, and organized labor no longer privileged as an agency for socialist change.[9] Some eco-socialists, responding to climate crisis, have also argued that there is no longer any privileged agent of socialist transformation nor or any privileged role to be played by the international proletariat.[10]

These arguments deserve a hearing. The socialist movement is not a religion, and no idea should be sacred in left thought. If the two golden rules for revolutionary socialism proposed at the beginning of this article no longer stand up to reality, they should be amended and reshaped or ditched entirely, and our politics should be reassessed. If it is no longer the case that labor creates wealth, giving the working class a privileged position as an agent of revolutionary social change, we should indeed move to some kind of post-class politics. But the evidence does not suggest this.

Far from disappearing from the historical stage, the wage-working proletariat is expanding. It has become the biggest single class only recently. Capitalist globalization has led to the creation of vast new working classes, and with them, new labor movements, throughout the world: in South Korea, in Brazil, in India, in Mexico, in Nigeria, and elsewhere. It is a profound historic tragedy that, at moments when the international left should have been seizing the potential for labor-movement growth and renewal by building movements of internationalist class solidarity, much of it was instead focusing on cheer-leading the enemies of labor. When an independent labor movement, an embryonic third camp, began to emerge in Iraq following the U.S.-British overthrow of the Ba'ath regime, the global far-left largely ignored it, preferring instead to idealize the so-called resistance to U.S.-British occupation, led by competing factions of Sunni-supremacist sectarians and Shi'a clerical-fascists.

There are certainly challenges inherent in attempting to reverse the retreat from class: Independent

labor organization is still weak throughout much of the world. Neoliberal ideology has sunk deep and increasingly global roots that organized socialists must struggle to confront. Debates about tactics, strategies, and forms of organization are all vital. But is there anything objective, material, in today's world which suggests that socialist politics must reassess its foundational principles that class is central and that our politics must be one of working-class self-emancipation? The evidence suggests not.

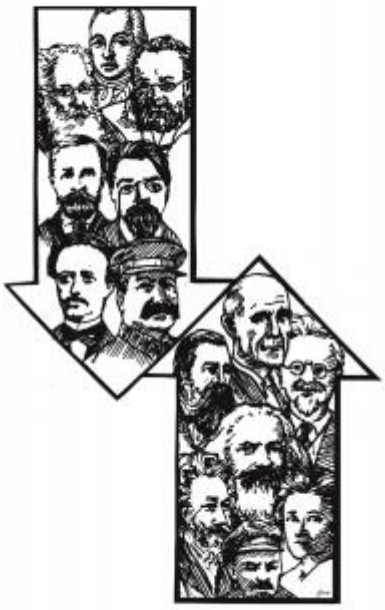
In returning to class, we can learn much by rediscovering the theorizing and practice of those socialist traditions that have, at times of upheaval and crisis on the left, cleaved to the idea that the only consistent socialism is socialism as working-class self-liberation.

Renewing the Third Camp,
Reasserting the First Principle

It might seem odd to look to a semi-submerged historical tradition, shaped in and by a different world, as a source for contemporary socialist renewal. But the third-camp tradition as it developed was not the product of some obscure quibble over the theoretical characterization of a particular state. Rather, it was an effort to reorient the revolutionary socialist movement, undertaken by activists who could see clearly how Stalinism was deracinating, distorting, and destroying socialist politics.

In attempting to renew socialism as a politics of working-class self-emancipation, the third campists emphasized both aspects: independent working-class self-activity and organization, and emancipation and freedom. Kicking back against the bureaucratic statism, top-down command structures, and enforced, monolithic ideological homogeneity that Stalinism had made hegemonic in left politics, both as models for the "socialist" society and the cultures of organizations aspiring to build it, the third campists sought to reconnect socialism with its libertarian core.

What does it mean, then, to aspire to the renewal of the third-camp tradition today? It certainly does not mean adopting a religious attitude to tradition, claiming some unbroken chain of political doctrine from Marx and Engels through Lenin and Trotsky to Shachtman and Draper. Neither does it mean excluding all that is valuable in working-class socialist traditions outside this genealogy.



The renewal of the third camp, in a world of left disarray and insurgent populism (occasionally on the left but largely on the right) fundamentally means reasserting independent working-class politics. It means reconnecting to the first principle of revolutionary socialism, that working-class emancipation cannot be won by hitching our wagon to the parties or politics of other classes, but only on the basis of our class organizing by and for itself. To renew the third camp today means a return to class as the key axis for political organization; a return to understanding struggle between classes, within every country, as the motor of social change; and a re-forging of socialism as a project of working-class self-liberation.

The literary emphasis that the concept of socialism from below places on mass, grass-roots upheaval, with all that this implies in terms of a vibrant, fructifying democracy rather than systems of command and control, whether in our own organizations or the society we aspire to build, can aid that renewal. But ultimately it is the concept of the third camp, of *independent working-class politics*, that is key.

This first principle of revolutionary socialism goes right back to its conception as a discrete politics. The work of Marx and Engels was dedicated to helping the working class understand itself, organize itself, become a class for itself. Class remains the fundamental social conflict, the relationship that holds the key to unlocking revolutionary social change. Renewing the third camp, helping our class become a class for itself, remains the key task of socialists today.

Everything that helps this is useful to our cause; everything that slows it down is harmful. That is the essence of revolutionary socialism; that is our golden rule. Everything else is commentary, strategy, and tactics.

Footnotes

1. Max Shachtman, “Crisis in the American Party,” *New International* (Vol. 6, No. 2, March 1940)

43-51.
2. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Extracts from the *New-York Tribune* on the Crimean War,” in Blackstock and Hoselitz, eds., *The Russian Menace to Europe* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953), 121-202.
3. Leon Trotsky, “Work, Discipline, Order” (Report to the Moscow City Conference of the Russian Communist Party, March 28, 1918), from *The Military Writings of Leon Trotsky* (1918).
4. Those interested in how the tradition developed, and dissipated, might read Peter Drucker’s *Max Shachtman and His Left* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994); Julius Jacobson, “The Two Deaths of Max Shachtman,” *New Politics* (Vol. 10, No. 2, January 1973); and the interviews, articles, and recollections collated in Workers’ Liberty’s symposium on the third-camp left. As for its semi-submersion, until the Marxists Internet Archive digitized and uploaded archives of the Workers Party/ISL newspaper *Labor Action* in the mid-2010s, the only widely available source of writing from the 1940s first generation of the third-camp tradition was the first volume of *Fate of the Russian Revolution*, published by Workers’ Liberty in 1998.
5. Hal Draper, “The Two Souls of Socialism,” *New Politics* (Vol. 5, No.1, Winter 1966), 57-84.
6. Dan Swain, “Socialism From Below,” online at newpol.org/socialism-below (accessed 05/04/2017).
7. See, for example, Wheeler and Lunghi, eds., *Occupy Everything! Reflections on why it’s kicking off everywhere* (London: Minor Compositions, 2012).
8. Sean Matgamna’s *The Left in Disarray* (London: Phoenix Press/Workers’ Liberty Books, 2017) explores the historical trends described in this section in more detail.
9. See, for example, the essay “Six Theses on Anxiety and Why It Is Effectively Preventing Militancy, and One Possible Strategy for Overcoming It,” written by the Institute for Precarious Consciousnes and especially promoted by the UK-based group Plan C.
10. Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature* (London: Zed Books, 2007) 241, 257.