

More on Marot's "October Revolution"

April 8, 2014

This is in response to an earlier comment on Dan La Botz's review of Jean Marot's *The October Revolution in Prospect and Retrospect*. I agree that the review is excellent, though I'd say in response to Gasper that the book is more than merely "interesting". Loren Goldner got it right: "this is a very important book, one of the very few books published since 1991 on the 'Russian Question' that will compel people (this reviewer included) *to think through their commitments*" [my emphasis]. So, on point two of the comment, "that Cliff doesn't take his analysis far enough" even though central to Cliff's anatomy of the USSR as "state capitalist" is his analysis of the bureaucracy as "'a social force with its own interests", and at the risk of repeating what the review noted, I'll offer a few comments in support of Marot's contention.

La Botz notes that Marot makes "a powerful refutation of what is worst in Trotsky", while he "believes that Cliff doesn't take his analysis far enough." The former is the key to the latter. Marot critiques Cliff for "failing to look reality in the face" by "adequately registering the enormity of [the] appalling, stomach-churning fact" that in having to choose between the revolutionary self-activity of the Russian working class or the nascent bureaucracy in 1928-29, Trotsky and the Left Opposition instead threw their weight behind Stalin's politically anti-democratic and economically exploitative policies, policies which Trotsky failed to see were in fact not laying the material foundations for socialism at all, but on the contrary were instead laying the groundwork for a bureaucratic class antagonistic both to the peasantry and the working class. Moreover, Trotsky, by sowing the seeds for working-class defeat in Russia, contributed to worldwide working-class defeat in 1933-38 and beyond. The phrase, "Trotsky was wrong" occurs too many times to count in *The October Revolution in Prospect and Retrospect*. And why, according to Marot, does Cliff tergiversate? Because Trotsky "did not appear to workers to be that redoubtable fighter against bureaucratic repression that Cliff, despite Trotsky's equivocation, would like socialist militants to believe that he 'objectively' always was."

Marot's analysis begins with Marx - along with Second International Marxists, including the Bolsheviks - being *right*. Socialism requires material prerequisites created by a mode of production other than socialism, which Russia clearly lacked. Nevertheless, although socialism could not be built in Russia, the Bolsheviks were right in October 1917, which is why they won the backing of the working class. However, in the absence of a revolutionary breakthrough during the *biennio rosso*, they had no choice but to opt for the NEP and a democratic alliance between working class and peasantry (Marot has little to say about the lack of democracy in the Soviet Republic by 1921, e.g. the suppression of Kronstadt, factions within the party, competing socialist parties, freedom of expression and so on). But the Bolsheviks were wrong - Lenin and all factions after his death, "Left", "Center" and "Right" - in their assessment of the peasantry, a class which, in its self-movement would never produce class differentiation, primitive capital accumulation, in a word, capitalist development, a development which both Bukharinist "right" and Trotskyist "left" believed could be gradually, democratically harnessed to socialist construction. It was simply objectively impossible to both develop the forces of production while meeting the democratic aspirations of the vast peasant majority. They could only be preserved by indefinitely postponing economic development. But when the NEP hit a brick wall of under-production by 1927-28, it is at the succeeding critical juncture of 1929-1933 that Trotsky's failings, according to Marot, were nothing short of egregious.

"Without correct theory, there cannot be correct politics." Trotsky's theory was wrong, his politics, disastrous. It is here that Cliff fails to go far enough. Stalin's murderous "solution" to the crisis of 1929 would indeed develop the economy through what Marot calls a "second serfdom" but at the

bloody expense of the Soviet republic. And, while Trotsky, in accord with his objectivist and juridical definition of socialism as state ownership of the means of production, proclaimed, "with Stalin against Bukharin," it was in fact Bukharin who was "head and shoulders above Trotsky" in understanding that the only alternative to Stalin, whom he realized would destroy Bolshevik aspirations, was a preservation of the *smychka* (the working class - peasant alliance). But both the Left and Right Oppositions failed equally in refusing to countenance the abolition of the CP's monopoly of political power by uniting in embracing the mounting worker and peasant resistance to the impending Stalinist "enservment". Marot insists that only by the raising of workers' and peasants' awareness through struggle against Stalin's anti-peasant, anti-worker CP could counter-revolution have been forestalled.

Cliff, according to Marot, is correct both in recognizing that the Left Opposition believed that Stalin's policies of rapid industrialization and collectivization were socialist ones, to which there was no alternative, and in emphasizing that Trotsky failed to understand the character of the bureaucracy as a ruling class. But here is where Cliff becomes impaled on the horns of a dilemma, for how could the Left Opposition both defend Stalin's USSR as a workers' state, laying the material foundations for socialism, while simultaneously standing in opposition to the rising Stalinist bureaucracy? Cliff attempts to square the circle by claiming that the Left Opposition capitulated, while Trotsky maintained his opposition. But Marot says he's wrong. They differed over tactics, over how best to compel Stalin to continue his "turn to the left", not strategy. Both the capitulators and Trotsky continued to support the CP's monopoly on political power as the agency of socialist construction, abandoning in the process any attempt to mobilize the working class.

But the nub of the issue is not so much Trotsky's incorrect analysis of the bureaucracy and the peasantry but of the working class itself. Thus, Marot quotes Cliff's cogent summary of Trotsky's 1924 *The New Course*, "'On the one hand the party was strangled by bureaucracy, but on the other Trotsky was unwilling to call on social forces outside the party to combat the bureaucracy.'" So, while Cliff does say that Trotsky's sociological analysis of the Stalinist "Center" was wrongheaded in failing to see the bureaucracy as an incipient ruling class, he does not go far enough in recognizing that this was part and parcel of Trotsky's substitutionist politics. In fact, by 1929, this substitutionist, top-down thinking had become endemic among all members of the Left Opposition, Trotsky included. Trotsky, as early as 1921, had come to believe that the political dictatorship of the CP, not the democratic self-organization of the working class, would begin the construction of socialism. Moreover, even when Trotsky did finally draw the conclusion that the Stalinist bureaucracy was not "centrist" and could not be moved "left", he retained his flawed sociological analysis of the USSR as a workers' state (state ownership of the means of production somehow = socialism). Trotsky, according to Marot, juxtaposed "the actually-existing working class with its vital, every day, material interests" with the imputed "general historical interests of the working class, ostensibly embodied in the party-state."

Marot goes further in suggesting that Cliff shares in Trotsky's underestimation of the revolutionary potential of the Russian working class. When Stalin's ruthless embarkation of industrialization and collectivization cut the ground from under the Left Opposition's feet, Cliff is correct in asserting that "Stalin's stunning, practical refutation of Trotsky's sociology politically devastated Trotsky's followers." Members of the Opposition would all eventually surrender, not out of fear, but out of conviction. Stalin, after all, was carrying out their program. But the critical issue for Trotsky, the Left Opposition and Cliff himself is what was their attitude "toward those workers and peasants who *did* unequivocally resist Stalin's murderously exploitative policies of industrialization and collectivization? Could the leadership of the Left Opposition have unreservedly supported *their* fight against Stalin and his policies?" Marot maintains that Cliff - for instance in his analysis of the public appearance of the United Opposition at the Red Square Parade of November 1927 - claims that the

Russian working class lacked the will to fight for the Opposition. But Cliff has it backwards. The Opposition, habituated to its substitutionism, lacked the will to fight for the working class, a working class which Trotsky occasionally characterized as atomized and culturally backward. The Decists were right; Cliff, Trotsky and the Left Opposition, wrong.

Finally, while Marot recognizes Trotsky's brilliance in analyzing fascism and in critiquing the Stalinist Comintern's disastrous "third period" and subsequent Pop Front policies in Spain and France, Trotsky's sectarianism on "the accursed Russian Question" prevented him from calling for an alliance with Brandler, who, while siding with Stalin on internal Russian affairs and myopic on international ones, was in agreement with Trotsky in calling for a KPD/SPD united front in Germany. And, while Trotsky and the Left Opposition stressed that socialism could only be fully realized on an international scale, their failure to bring Bolshevik politics to bear against Stalinism in good time helped objectively not only to ensure the victory of the anti-worker bureaucracy in the USSR but the defeat of the working class elsewhere as well. Had the Left and Right Oppositions joined in allying with the Russian working class and peasantry to topple the Stalinist bureaucracy in the late '20s, thereby preserving the *smychka* and the Soviet Republic, while they would have been unable to develop the forces of production and embark on the road to socialism, perhaps they could have renewed the momentum of 1917's (permanent) revolution.