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LEON TROTSKY'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE MARXIST THEORY OF HISTORY

ABSTRACT. Trotsky's contribution to historical materialism has been subject to two broadly defined critical assessments. Detractors have tended to dismiss his interpretation of Marxism as a form of productive force determinism, while admirers have tended to defend his Marxism as a voluntarist negation of the same. In this essay I argue that both of these opinions share an equally caricatured interpretation of Second International Marxism against which Trotsky is compared. By contrast, I argue that Trotsky's Marxism can best be understood as a powerful application and deepening of the strongest elements of Second International methodology to a novel set of problems. Thus, against Trotsky's admirers, I locate his Marxism as both emerging out of, in addition to breaking with, Second International Marxism; while, against his critics, I argue that it was precisely the strengths of this earlier interpretation of Marxism that informed Trotsky's powerful contributions to historical materialism: his concept of combined and uneven development and his discussion of the role of individual agents within the Marxist interpretation of history.

KEY WORDS: Leon Trotsky, historical materialism, Marxism, historiography

INTRODUCTION

The centenary both of the Russian Revolution of 1905 and of Leon Trotsky's formulation of the theory of permanent revolution in 1906 is perhaps an apt moment to reconsider Trotsky's contribution to the Marxist theory of history. While Trotsky's place in the history books is guaranteed by the political role he played in the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, his position amongst the first rank of Marxist theoreticians has been contested throughout the 20th century; advocates have proclaimed his genius, whilst critics have dismissed his crude mimicry of greater figures within the classical Marxist tradition. Substantively, the debates on Trotsky's interpretation of

historical materialism have centred on two related themes: first, the connection between his Marxism and the Marxism of the Second International; and, second, the status and power of his conception of combined and uneven development as a novel contribution to the Marxist theory of history. Typically, those commentators who locate a clear theoretical break by Trotsky with Second International theory tend to argue that he made a novel theoretical contribution to Marxism, while those who stress the continuity between his ideas and Second International thought are more likely to reject this positive appreciation of his contribution to Marxism.

In contrast to both of these approaches, I follow those who point to Trotsky's borrowing from Second International thinkers (Donald, 1993: 76, 96), but go on to argue that Trotsky made something new and powerful from this borrowed material. Moreover, I challenge the negative appreciation of Second International Marxism which is shared both by Trotsky's supporters and his critics alike, and argue that it was from the strongest elements of Second International Marxism that he forged his analysis of the dynamics of the Russian Revolution, the power of which is evident through the confirmation of many of his substantive interpretations of Russian history by more recent research. Concretely, I argue that Trotsky deepened the interpretation of historical materialism he inherited from the Second International in two movements through which he learned from the two Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917. First, he articulated the conception of uneven and combined development to explain the class dynamics of the 1905 Revolution and to predict the dynamic of the 1917 Revolution; and, second, he deepened the Marxist conceptualisation of the role of the individual in history through his analysis of the part played by Lenin in 1917. Moreover, Trotsky actualised these insights in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, which remains one of the most powerful applications of Marx's method to historical analysis. I conclude that Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development is best understood as the pivot which links his analysis of Lenin's role in 1917, alongside his strategic comments on later revolutionary movements, to the most powerful elements of Second International Marxism.

DEBATING TROTSKY'S CONTRIBUTION TO HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

In his *Marxism and History*, Steve Rigby asserts that Trotsky's Marxism is an example of the crude form of "productive force determinism" into which historical materialism fell after Marx's death. Rigby thus equates Trotsky's understanding of Marx's theory of history with the (similarly bad) interpretations of Plekhanov, Kautsky, Lenin, Bukharin and Stalin (Rigby, 1998: 62). Likewise, John Molyneux argues that the weaknesses with Trotsky's methodology were "inherited by Trotsky from the Plekhanov–Kautsky interpretation of Marxism" (Molyneux, 1981: 196). Thus, Molyneux insists, the political break made by Trotsky with Second International Marxism was never matched by an adequate theoretical break with the crude productive force determinism that characterised Second International thought.

While this criticism of Trotsky's supposed failure to break with Second International teleology has been widely repeated (cf. Eley, 2003: 70; Thompson, 2004: 63–64), it has been countered by other commentators. Matt Perry, for instance, agrees with Molyneux's and Rigby's negative assessments of Second International Marxism, yet insists that Trotsky's historiography marked a decisive rupture with this earlier, crude, orthodoxy (Perry, 2002: 66–72). Similarly, Perry Anderson has argued that Trotsky's Marxism, alongside Lenin's and Luxemburg's, is best understood as a 'voluntarist' reaction against Second International 'evolutionism' (Anderson, 1980: 101).

If Trotsky's relationship to Second International Marxism is thus contested within the academy, the power of his *History of the Russian Revolution* (1931–1933) has been debated with equal passion. While all sides to this debate agree that Trotsky's *History* is a book with powerful rhetorical appeal, most of Trotsky's interlocutors have argued that whereas his *History* succeeds as a work of art, it fails as a work of scientific history (Rowse, 1947: 274–290; Knei-Paz, 1978: 505; Segal, 1979: 332; Beilharz, 1985: 45, 1987). Typical in this respect is Ian Thatcher, who, in his recently published monograph *Trotsky*, argues that Trotsky's *History*, because it was not 'based on any

new sources' and had a teleological structure, is useful neither for the new empirical evidence it brings to the story of the Russian Revolution nor for the insights drawn from its method (Thatcher, 2003: 183). More substantively, Thatcher dismisses Trotsky's "grand sounding" theory of uneven and combined development as "just another instance of Trotsky responding to Stalin." Further, he denigrates the entire structure of Trotsky's narrative of the Revolution as a story within which "there was a hero (Lenin) and a villain (Stalin)" (Thatcher, 2003: 182).

If Peter Beilharz is less unforgiving of Trotsky's *History*, he is ultimately as critical as is Thatcher of Trotsky's method. Indeed, while he praises both the 'excellence' of Trotsky's narrative, and the "sensitivity to the phenomenon of uneven development" that was drawn from his theoretical framework, he prefigures Thatcher's critique by arguing that the *History* is peppered with "worn out metaphors" which suggest a natural evolutionary, and a teleological, model of history (Beilharz, 1985: 40).

In opposition to these generally negative readings of Trotsky's historical methodology, a minority of students of Trotsky's work have defended his claim to have written a work of scientific history. C.L.R. James, for instance, argued that Trotsky's *History* "is the greatest history book ever written and one of the most stupendous and significant pieces of literature ever produced in any language." Indeed, James insisted that this book marked "the climax of two thousand years of European writing and study of history" (James, 1994: 118). In less hyperbolic mode, Perry Anderson argued that Trotsky was the first "great Marxist *historian*": "No other classical Marxist had so profound a sense of the changing tempers and creative capacities of the masses of working men and women, pushing at the foundations of an archaic social order 'from below' – while at the same time pre-eminently able to chart the complex shifts and organised political forces 'from above'." Trotsky accordingly attempted the kind of total history to which most historians only aspire (Anderson, 1980: 154).

For his part, Baruch Knei-Paz argues that while the "objectivity" of Trotsky's *History* "is undermined by the author's sweeping, unmitigated and unquestioning Marxist approach," because Trotsky wore his Marxism "lightly" the

History “is a work of great force and originality” (Knei-Paz, 1978: 499–501). As to Trotsky’s Marxism itself, Knei-Paz has suggested that Trotsky’s defence of the thesis that Lenin played an indispensable role in the October Revolution can best be understood not as a voluntarist break with crude Marxism, but as a subtle restatement of Marx’s crude determinist framework. Thus, Knei-Paz combines a “suspicion” that Trotsky “equated ‘objective necessity’ with success,” with a “surprise” at Trotsky’s claim that without Lenin the revolutionary opportunity “might not have materialised” to conclude that, for Trotsky, while Lenin played an “indispensable” role in the Revolution his prior existence and therefore his actions in the Revolution, were “inevitable” (Knei-Paz, 1978: 510). Interestingly, while Knei-Paz therefore interprets Trotsky’s analysis of the role of Lenin in 1917 as a variation on Plekhanov’s fatalistic account of the role of the individual in history (cf. Plekhanov, 1940), Isaac Deutscher has criticised Trotsky discussion of Lenin’s role in the Revolution as the “least successful” aspect of his *History*, precisely because it did not fit into Plekhanov’s model (Deutscher, 1963: 241).

How is one to negotiate these incommensurable claims that, on the one hand, Trotsky was a crude productive force determinist who wrote poor history, and that he was, on the other hand, a theoretical and political voluntarist whose *History* is the finest example of Marxist historiography?

Surprisingly, a reply to Trotsky’s critics can be constructed from evidence that they themselves supply. For example, while Knei-Paz wrote that “Trotsky did not write a ‘scientific history’,” he showed how Trotsky’s economic analysis of the pre-revolutionary regime had been “generally borne out by other sources” (Knei-Paz, 1978: 75, 501). Similarly, despite Thatcher’s dismissal of the concept of combined and uneven development, and his argument that “it is doubtful whether Trotsky made any lasting contribution to Marxist thought,” he points to parallels between Trotsky’s arguments and those advanced within more recent scholarship. Indeed, Thatcher claims that Waldron confirms the generality of Trotsky’s criticism of the tsarist regime’s failure to modernise; while Figes confirms Trotsky’s suggestion that it was peasants, returning from

military service, who acted as a radicalising force in the countryside; and Marot testifies to the pivotal role of the Bolsheviks in making the October Revolution. Even Richard Pipes occasionally “relies upon *The History of the Russian Revolution* for a factual version of events.” So, despite his criticisms of Trotsky’s method Thatcher concludes his discussion of Trotsky’s *History* with the claim that it remains “essential reading” for the student of the Russian Revolution (Thatcher, 2003: 185–187).

This is a strangely positive conclusion to Thatcher’s generally negative assessment of Trotsky’s *History*. Nevertheless, if, on the basis of these prefigurations of later research findings, we might accept that Trotsky’s book is more impressive than a superficial reading of his critics would suggest, this does not imply that Anderson’s classification of Trotsky’s thought as a voluntarist break with Second International thought is adequate. For, while Trotsky attempted to re-emphasise the role of individual agents within historical materialism, he did not forget that these agents, as Second International Marxists emphasised, operated within particular material conditions which set the parameters for the possible outcome of their actions. So, while Trotsky did not accept Plekhanov’s claim that history automatically called forth the great men and women needed to realise its telos (Plekhanov, 1940: 46, 53), neither did his analysis mark a voluntarist rejection of Marx’s materialism. Rather, his discussion of Russia’s combined and uneven development meant that he rethought the context within which agents acted – against the national frame of analysis of many of his contemporaries he stressed the international complex of capitalist and pre-capitalist relations of production within which the revolution was fought; whilst in his interpretations of actual historical processes he refused the temptation, supposedly a characteristic of orthodox Marxism, to reduce individual agency to social structures.

SECOND INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCES

It is undoubtedly the case that elements of Second International Marxism were mechanical, such that a typical reaction within

radical circles to its fatalism was to embrace a form of political voluntarism. This, for instance, is the usual interpretation of Gramsci's well-known response to the October Revolution as the "Revolution against Capital" (Gramsci, 1977: 34). However, while Gramsci's essay on the October Revolution is amongst the most celebrated of the expositions of political voluntarism, his was certainly not a lone voice; his distaste for Second International fatalism was prefigured by Trotsky, who wrote that in the 1890s he had been "repelled" by Marxism's "narrowness," because historical materialism seemed to him to be a "completed system" which excused capitalism, and imagined the socialist revolution only in the far distant future (Trotsky, 1930: 102; Knei-Paz, 1978: 11). According to Trotsky, what convinced him that there was more to Marxism than a mechanical apology for the development of Russian capitalism was his reading of the Second International Marxist Antonio Labriola's "profound" interpretation of historical materialism; as introduced to the Russians through Plekhanov's enthusiastic review (Trotsky, 1930: 123). Unfortunately, despite the importance of Labriola's influence on Trotsky's mature Marxism, and perhaps because "Trotsky generally avoided resorting to the authority of text" (Knei-Paz, 1978: 87), Labriola's name does not appear in the index of either Deutscher's, Molyneux's or Thatcher's studies of his thought.¹ Neither does he receive more than a one passing reference each in Knei-Paz's and Segal's books. Conversely, Beilharz does mention this relationship. Yet, in an attempt to delineate between Labriola's "uniquely sophisticated" interpretation of historical materialism and Trotsky's crude version of the same, he insists, on the basis of a passing comment made by Trotsky in *Terrorism and Communism*, that Trotsky had confused Labriola's ideas with those of Lafargue. However, as a reading of Labriola's *Socialism and Philosophy* shows, it was Beilharz, not Trotsky, who had misunderstood Labriola (Beilharz, 1987: 20; cf. Labriola, 1897: Ch. 1; 3; Trotsky, 1920: 145). Indeed, as Lowy, Pomper and Rees have stressed, Labriola's synthetic conception of Marxism remained a constant source of inspiration for Trotsky (Lowy, 1981: 46; Pomper, 1986: 39; Rees, 1998: 263–268).

Trotsky shared with Plekhanov a belief that Labriola had provided the most sophisticated Marxist critique of the pluralist approach to the interpretation of historical causality. Indeed, an examination of Labriola's arguments, alongside Plekhanov's review, explodes the myth, most eloquently defended by Raymond Williams, that Second International thinkers merely vulgarised Marxism. Williams, argued that "in the transition from Marx to Marxism," the concepts of base, superstructure, and forces and relations of production amongst others, "were projected, first, as if they were precise concepts, and second, as if they were descriptive terms for observable "areas" of life" (Williams, 1977: 77, 80). As Williams singled out Plekhanov for criticism in this respect, it is rather ironic to note that the "Father of Russian Marxism" had polemicised against much the same misrepresentation of historical materialism in his review of Labriola.

In his *Essays on the Materialist Conception of History* (1896), Labriola explicitly challenged traditional historiography's factoral approach to the explanation of historical causality. This approach, which he argued separated history into its economic, political, legal, ideological etc. components, lent itself to a misrepresentation of Marxism as a type of economic determinism. Indeed, Labriola insisted, it was only because the critics of Marxism held a reified conception of the economic that they could so misunderstand historical materialism. In an attempt to clarify Marx's method to these critics, he proposed to rename it the "organic conception of history." This is not to suggest that Labriola sought to discard Marx's concepts of base and superstructure etc., alongside the epitaph "economic conception of history". Rather, he sought to re-emphasise the dynamic nature of Marx's conception of productive base, which, at the level of the capital/wage labour relationship, "is the whole inner essence of modern history." Thus, with the young Marx, he insisted that history is at its heart an attempt by people to satisfy their needs through social productive activity; a process which, in turn, produces new needs and capabilities in an "upward development."

Labriola compared Marx's method with the method of "factors." The latter, he argued, could not simply be dismissed

as an erroneous approach to history; for it grew out of the desire on the part of historians to make scientific sense of the myriad of facts presented by history. Every historian, he argued, must proceed by first “an act of elimination,” through which she marks the delineation between her proposed area of enquiry and the surrounding general clamour of events and processes. Beyond this procedure, the narrator must organise those facts which she considers pertinent to her argument into discrete groups. Unfortunately, while this is a necessary moment in the process of analysis, there exists a tendency inherent to this scientific procedure to begin to conceive of these groups of facts as “independent categories.” Thus, the factorial approach reflects not mere error, but a partial, reified, movement towards a scientific approach to history. Labriola therefore resisted the temptation to simply reject the factorial approach; rather, he suggested, scientific historians must aim to “overcome it, explain it and outgrow it.” He argued that the very process of writing history demands that historians develop a conception of “reciprocal action” through which various factors interact. As this conception of “reciprocal action” implied a move beyond the original abstractions through which the historian’s materials were categorised, then it also implied something like Marx’s “organic conception of history.”

But why should such an “organic conception of history” remain attached to concepts such as base and superstructure? Labriola’s answer to this question related to his humanist model of history. He argued that because humans create and recreate themselves through an ongoing process of production by which they aim to satisfy their needs, then “the only permanent and sure fact ... is men grouped in a determined social form by means of determined connections” whose goal is to socially produce those things that they need. Such a conception of production offered a “base” for a theory of history that moved beyond that provided by the inadequate, because ahistoric, traditional concept of human nature. Conversely, and in contrast to non-Marxist conceptions of the totality as a “social organism,” Labriola insisted that social production – the economic understood as a non-reified process – determines the structure of the historical totality. By this argument he aimed to

move beyond the limitations of the factorial approach, without losing sense of the way in which societies are hierarchically structured totalities. So, politics and ideas etc. could, in his model, play a decisive role in history, without losing track of the fact that they themselves arose from the productive process upon which they later reacted. Labriola therefore suggested that while it was “foolish” to conflate historical materialism with economic history, it was true that the social totality was constructed as a unity, in the modern world, “by the working of the capitalist form of production,” which determines, “in the first place and directly,” class struggle, law, morals, and relations of power, and secondly, and indirectly “the objects of imagination and of thought in the production of art, religion and science.” Neither of these facts implied a predetermined pattern to history; rather, history refused any “preconceived” plans because “struggle incessant among the nations, and struggles between the members of each nation” preclude such an easy comprehension of historical processes. Indeed, while the productive process shaped the structure of social conflicts, it could not determine their outcome: the success or failure of revolution, while shaped by previous social evolution, could not be reduced to this latter process.

Plekhanov opened his review of Labriola’s book with an enthusiastic reception of his critique of economic history in particular, and factorial history more generally. Noting that “the theory of factors” had emerged as a scientific attempt to make sense of the course of human history, he bemoaned the process through which this breakthrough had eventually become fettered, in part, as a consequence of academic specialisation which tended to trap thinkers within a framework of unintegrated concepts. Plekhanov insisted that while all “historico-social factors” are useful “abstractions,” they involve an inbuilt tendency towards reification: “thanks to the process of abstraction, various sides of the social complex assume the form of separate categories, and the various manifestations and expressions of the activity of social man ... are converted in our minds into separate forces which appear to give rise to and determine this activity and to be its ultimate cause” (Plekhanov, 1946: 11). While Plekhanov would have agreed with Raymond

Williams that the metaphor of base and superstructure should not be taken literally, he remained convinced of its utility as a model of social structures. Indeed, Plekhanov posited historical materialism as a “synthetic view of social life,” which was free of a teleological component, and which involved a complex conception of society as a structured hierarchy. Social evolution, according to this model, occurred as a response to humanity’s constant recreation of itself through its attempts to satisfy its evolving needs. As these needs were “to a large extent ... determined by ... the state of his productive forces,” Plekhanov was able to embrace the concepts of base and superstructure without reifying them (Plekhanov, 1946: 12). It is with this model in mind that we should read his “nutshell” overview of the five social levels of base and superstructure as outlined in his *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*: “the state of the productive forces,” “economic relations,” “socio-political system,” “mentality of social man,” and “various ideologies” (Plekhanov, 1962: 73). Williams criticised this formulation, arguing that through it Plekhanov reified his abstractions (Williams, 1977: 80). However, it was precisely because Plekhanov believed that Labriola had pointed to a method whereby such a process of reification could be overcome, that he proselytised the latter’s views; with the proviso that he also insisted that there existed within these totalities a hierarchy of activities.

So, while Plekhanov made some sharp criticisms of certain of Labriola’s detailed arguments, the thrust of his review was positive; Labriola, he believed, had made a significant contribution to Marxism. In particular, Labriola’s critique of the factoral approach to history armed Marxists with a powerful reply to both the traditional methods of historical scholarship, and to suggestions that historical materialism was a form of economic reductionism. Labriola thus added to a method which aimed to comprehend the dialectical relationship between freedom and necessity without reducing history to a “fatalistic” process through which some iron laws worked themselves out (Plekhanov, 1962: 90).

If Labriola informed the form of Trotsky’s understanding of historical materialism, its content was deeply coloured by, first, his relationship with Alexander Helphand (Parvus) in the period

from 1904 to 1906, and, second, his reading of Kautsky's analysis of the dynamics of the Russian Revolution of 1905 (Trotsky, 1906: 33–34, 49, 65, 105, 110; 1907: 10).²

Trotsky's relationship with Parvus is probably the most well known of his pre-1917 intellectual associations, if for no other reason than because Parvus, who moved to the right in later years becoming a German nationalist and arms dealer, became a convenient stick with which the Stalinists beat Trotsky in the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless, in the 1890s and early 20th century Parvus was a leading member of the left of the German Social Democratic Party. Trotsky described him as "unquestionably one of the most important of the Marxists at the turn of the century ... His early studies brought me closer to the problems of the Social Revolution" (Trotsky, 1930: 172; 1940a: 429). Deutscher argues that Parvus' influence on Trotsky can be felt both substantively, in his theory of permanent revolution and in his analysis of the pre-revolutionary regime in Russia, and stylistically, through his "characteristic sweep of historical prognostication." At the heart of Parvus' Marxism was his global vision. As Deutscher points out, "already in 1904 Parvus viewed the approaching revolution not as a purely Russian affair but as a reflection in Russia of worldwide social tensions; and saw in the coming Russian upheaval a prelude to world revolution" (Deutscher, 1954: 104–105). Substantively, Parvus prefigured Trotsky's analysis of the dynamics of the Russian Revolution, though he did not, as did Trotsky, conclude that the Russian proletariat once in power could move beyond realising the demands of the bourgeois revolution (Knei-Paz, 1978: 21).

A similar analysis of the revolutionary dynamics in Russia was outlined by Karl Kautsky, who, in 1906, argued that the claim made by Marx in *Capital*, to the effect that the future evolutionary trajectory of less developed states would follow that of England, was no longer valid (Kautsky, 2004: 15). In two essays published in 1906, "The America Worker" and "The Driving Forces of the Russian Revolution and its Prospects," Kautsky located the historical basis for Russian exceptionalism in her relatively recent state-led move towards capital accumulation. He argued that this process had been executed by an

archaic state structure that was not only incapable of delivering complete modernisation but also proceeded without “a strong native capitalist class.” Thus, while a “political revolution” was necessary if Russia was to realise her ambition of matching the growth rates of the Western powers, the traditional Western agency of that transformation was missing. In contrast, while the Russian capitalist class was unusually small, the growth of capitalism had as its corollary the production of both a modern proletariat and a modern intelligentsia. Precisely because of the relative social weakness of the capitalist class, the intelligentsia had developed a level of “independence from,” and “opposition to,” capital that was unique in Europe. So, where, in the West, intellectuals tended to act as a medium for the transmission of capitalist values to the lower orders, in Russia the intelligentsia saw its role as the reverse of this; to reflect the interests of the peasants and workers against capital and the state (Kautsky, 1983, 2004). Consequentially, while the different social structures of America and Russia went some way towards accounting for their differential political scenes – America had the most homogeneous capitalist class, and, because of “mass immigration,” the most heterogeneous proletariat – the political consciousness of workers could not be reduced to these structural constraints: rather these could best be understood as a consequence of the “different ideological development of both nations.” Russian workers received more than their share of “revolutionary romanticism” from their intelligentsia, while the poor American’s had to make do with what Kautsky ironically described as the “healthy *Realpolitik*”, which deals only with the nearest and most tangible things” (Kautsky, 2004: 32, 38).

Kautsky opened this discussion of the Russian situation with an analysis of what he, reasonably, believed was the key issue at stake: the agrarian question. He insisted that if agriculture was to be “put on a sound economic basis,” then “the peasants must be satisfied” (Kautsky, 1983: 357). However, to satisfy the peasants, not only was a redistribution of land necessary, but the peasantry must also be offered both the necessary education and the necessary capital to effectively realise the potential of the land. Absolutism, because of its ties to the landed gentry,

was incapable of making the first step in this direction. The liberals were similarly impotent in the face of this dilemma, for they too fought against “the confiscation of the large estates,” and could no more than absolutism countenance the dissolution of the oppressive and expensive standing army. To thus compare, as Plekhanov had suggested, the coming Russian Revolution with its French predecessor of 1789 was “quite erroneous,” as the *petty bourgeoisie* could no longer act as the “leading class in the revolutionary movement.” Indeed, Kautsky went so far as to suggest that “Russia lacks the firm backbone of a bourgeois democracy,” and, as the class struggle intensifies, “it only accelerates the bankruptcy of liberalism” (Kautsky, 1983: 363–369).

The one class that could countenance the drastic measures necessary to solve the agrarian question were the workers; but this class was socially too weak to make a socialist revolution. Moreover, in expropriating the large landowners, a peasant rebellion would necessarily increase the social weight of small capitalist property. Workers and peasants might therefore be able to unite politically against absolutism on the basis of their ‘common economic interest’ against it, in a manner that was impossible for the workers and the liberal capitalists. Nevertheless, while such a revolutionary movement might prevail against the old order, and while socialists were encouraged to fight for hegemony within it, the outcome of the movement would break any preconceived Marxist models: ‘we are approaching completely new situations and problems for which no earlier model is appropriate’ (Kautsky, 1983: 371).³

TROTSKY’S HISTORIOGRAPHY

It was upon the foundations laid by the Second International Marxists, and in the context of revolutionary ferment, that Trotsky formulated two major contributions to historical materialism; or rather, he made one fundamental contribution, and one seminal restatement of a proposition that had been distorted within the Second International. His fundamental contribution was the law of combined and uneven development,⁴

which underpinned his strategy of permanent revolution, while he restated the classical Marxist conception of the role of the individual in history.

When Trotsky joined the Russian Social Democratic movement the broad shape of its strategic orientation had already been forged. Most important, in respect of his future evolution, was Plekhanov's argument, deepened by Lenin, that the Russian bourgeoisie was a structurally conservative class which would retreat from the kind of militant action necessary to realise any serious reforms (Plekhanov, 1883; Lenin, 1964). However, where Lenin, in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, had attempted to defeat Russia's Narodniks on their own ground by outlining the domestic dynamics of Russian capital accumulation (Harding, 1983: 5), Trotsky aimed to analyse Russia's transition to capitalism more securely within an international framework. He repeatedly insisted that a properly scientific examination of Russia's social formation could not be articulated if this analysis was undertaken from a one-sidedly national point of view (Trotsky, 1931–3: 38, 991, 1219ff). Indeed, in taking from Labriola and Plekhanov a materially bounded conception of the social totality (Trotsky, 1907: 54), and from Parvus the conceptualisation of that totality at an international level, Trotsky broke with the orthodox interpretation of the coming Russian revolution. Where Lenin had located the ancestry of Russian capitalism within its domestic structure, Trotsky stressed its international provenance (Trotsky, 1906: 49; Lowy, 1981: 48). Moreover, he partially explained the weakness of Russian liberalism at the turn of the last century by this fact: because the Russian bourgeoisie had not evolved spontaneously out of domestic conditions, it did not have the domestic roots of its European precursors (Trotsky, 1907: 37). And, because European capitalists were investing in modern plant and equipment in Russia, the Russian working class had leapfrogged a whole epoch of social evolution which the European working class had had to endure. So, although it was relatively young, the Russian proletariat was organised in units that were comparable to, and in some cases even exceeded, those of the most advanced sections of the European working class.

In common with all sections of the Marxist movement in Russia, Trotsky insisted that a contradiction existed between the need for Russia's productive forces to develop, and the inability of her archaic political superstructure to foster that growth: a contradiction which entailed that a bourgeois revolution was necessary if the fetters to capital accumulation were to be broken. Moreover, like Lenin and Kautsky, Trotsky argued that the bourgeoisie would recoil from this coming revolution. Indeed, like Kautsky, Trotsky insisted that it would be a mistake to mechanically apply Marx's statement, made in *Capital*, that the more backward states would follow the developmental course of the more advanced states (Marx, 1976: 91): "There could be no analogy" between capitalist development as it had occurred in England and as it was occurring in the "colonies;" "but there does exist a profound inner connection between the two" (Trotsky, 1907: 67). Building upon Marx's account of the increasingly conservative nature of the French bourgeoisie between 1789 and 1848, Trotsky insisted that after a further six decades of social evolution the bourgeoisie, nowhere, could act as a revolutionary class. This conclusion obviously had some bearing on the concept of a Russian bourgeois revolution. It is at this point that the specificity of his analysis of the coming revolution is manifest; for while he agreed with Lenin that the backbone of the coming revolution would be provided by peasants in the countryside (Trotsky, 1907: 50), he, following Parvus and in line with Marx's general analysis of peasant movements, insisted that, because modern revolutions are won and lost in the cities, the leadership of the coming revolution must necessarily fall to an urban class if it was to be successful (Trotsky, 1940a: 425; Knei-Paz, 1978: 18). As the bourgeoisie was a conservative class, only a workers' led revolution could realise the demands of the bourgeois revolution: "the Russian revolution is a 'bourgeois' revolution ... But the principal driving force of the Russian Revolution is the proletariat" (Trotsky, 1907: 66). At this point Trotsky's analysis moved beyond that of Parvus as well as those of Lenin and Kautsky; for he argued that the Revolution of 1905 had been led by the workers and had raised demands that far exceeded the limitations of the bourgeois revolution.

Therefore, the contradictions that had generated the need for a bourgeois revolution led to the demand for workers' power or socialism (Trotsky, 1907: 73).

This is the first element in Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution: the Russian bourgeois revolution had grown over into a socialist revolution. As this development was only conceivable because the Russian social formation was deeply structured by its position within the world capitalist economy, the sort of crisis that might be expected to trigger a second revolution in Russia was also likely to trigger revolutionary upheavals in the West. And as the success of a Russian revolution was likely to magnify such a crisis, Russia's coming revolution could be expected to spread throughout the international capitalist system. Thus, the revolution would become permanent in a second, deeper, sense; its domestic success was predicated upon the triumph of the international revolution (Trotsky, 1940a: 433; Molyneux, 1981: 21–29). As Russia's economic backwardness would act against the realisation of socialism, spreading the revolution abroad would “become, for the Russian proletariat, a matter of class self-preservation” (Trotsky, 1907: 333). And, if the Russians succeeded in this attempt, then any “theoretically ‘inevitable’ stages can be compressed to zero by the dynamics of development” (Trotsky, 1931: 241).

This argument was premised upon two key insights: first, while the Russian social formation was obviously singular, its form was in large part structured by its position within the global mesh of capitalist production; and, second, Russia's *sui generis* structure could not be explained as an embryonic form of more developed capitalist states. So, while the events of 1905 had “destroyed the myth of the ‘uniqueness’ of Russia,” they had, simultaneously, proved that “the Russian revolution bore a character wholly peculiar to itself, a character which was the outcome of the special features of our entire social and historical development” (Trotsky, 1907: 21). Indeed, in contrast to Krasso's claim that Trotsky tended to hypostatize social class, and lose sight of the specificity of any particular social formation, Trotsky painted a picture of Russia as a distinct, heterogeneous totality (Trotsky, 1907: 53; Krasso, 1967: 72).⁵

Thus, where, in their economic and historical analyses, Lenin and Plekhanov had stressed those features of Russian capitalism that it shared with the earlier emerging capitalism in the West (Plekhanov, 1883; Lenin, 1964), Trotsky, taking this analysis as read, moved to examine the specificities of the Russian social formation.

Because Trotsky was concerned to outline “the class dynamics of the Russian revolution” (Trotsky, 1907: 317), he criticised both Lenin’s and Plekhanov’s analyses of the bourgeois character of the coming revolution, not because their discussions of the low level of the development of the forces of production in Russia was unimportant – he wrote that “the development of the forces of production determines the social-historical process” (Trotsky, 1906: 37), but because their analyses failed to cognise adequately the dynamic forces of the coming revolution (Trotsky, 1940a: 432). In fact, he argued, Lenin and Plekhanov were apt to draw “absurd conclusions” from their theoretical analyses because they “refused to recognise Russia’s ‘special nature’” (Trotsky, 1907: 321, 328).

According to mechanical interpretations of the traditional Marxist theory of uneven development, the capitalist mode of production would develop in a non-uniform way across the globe from its birthplace in North-West Europe, with late comers replicating the general trajectory experienced by the first capitalist nations. Trotsky, by contrast, insisted that capitalism, through its uneven spread, would generate nationally and locally peculiar conditions whose dynamic structure would not mechanically duplicate those of earlier capitalist social formations. In particular, in those countries where there had been such industrialisation as to create a modern proletariat, but whose growth remained constrained by a feudal or semi-feudal superstructure, then the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution would fall to the working class because the petty bourgeoisie had become conservative. However, because the forms of power associated with workers’ struggles tended to challenge capitalist social relations, then these struggles would, in effect, act to combine the demands of the bourgeois and the proletarian revolutions.

The laws of history have nothing in common with a pedantic schematism. Unevenness, the most general law of the historic process, reveals itself most sharply and complexly in the destiny of the backward countries. Under the whip of external necessity their backward culture is compelled to make leaps. From the universal law of unevenness thus derives another law of combined development – by which we mean a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms (Trotsky, 1931–2: 27).⁶

When the model of combined development was originally conceived, Trotsky understood it to relate peculiarly to Russia. However, in the wake of the defeated Chinese revolution of 1927, he generalised it to account for the experiences of semi-modernised societies (Molyneux, 1981: 42). This has led Beilharz to argue that Trotsky, through this generalisation of the theory of permanent revolution, retreated from his nuanced analysis of Russian development to mechanically impose this model to *all* undeveloped states (Beilharz, 1985: 38). However, this critique is misplaced, for, as Mandel pointed out, Trotsky did not universalise the theory of permanent revolution; rather, he insisted that it was applicable only where there had been a degree of prior industrialisation (Mandel, 1995: 20).

So, while Trotsky broke free of the mechanical politics characteristic of Second International Marxism, he did not, contra Anderson's suggestion of his methodological voluntarism noted above, reject Marx's materialist insight that it was the level of the development of the forces of production that set the parameters of the historically possible (cf. Trotsky, 1940b: 361); on the contrary, he insisted that these forces must be conceived at an international, rather than a national, level. In his analysis of Trotsky's thought, Knei-Paz accepts and stresses both this point and the power of Trotsky's economic analysis of pre-revolutionary Russia. Nevertheless, he is very critical of the political conclusions which Trotsky drew from this analysis: "It correctly identified the dynamics of economic change. But it was an exaggeration as far as social and political change was concerned" (Knei-Paz, 1978: 105). However, as Molyneux has argued, Trotsky's economic analysis cannot be so easily divorced from his political perspectives: Knei-Paz's critique of Trotsky's political analysis is unpersuasive because, "the

existence of the Russian proletariat as ‘an independent, vital, revolutionary force’ was, both in 1905 and 1917, a demonstrable fact” (Molyneux, 1981: 39).

While Knei-Paz’s critique of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution is therefore unconvincing, there is a fundamental weakness with Trotsky’s theory; a weakness which became evident after the Second World War. Molyneux argues that while this framework marked a “major theoretical breakthrough because it challenged, in a number of ways, the dominant Marxism of the Second International,” Trotsky unfortunately posed it as “not only a strategy but also a prediction” (Molyneux, 1981: 40, 43). Indeed, this elision amounts to a special case of a form of fatalism that is a feature of a number of his weaker works.

Nevertheless, if the fundamental lesson that Trotsky learned from the 1905 Revolution was that national historical trajectories did not follow a preordained paths, in 1917 he learned that individual agents could play pivotal roles at certain historical junctures; and this insight immunised the stronger works of his maturity against the fatalism of his youth. Indeed, in 1928, he explained his decision not to join the Bolsheviks before 1917 as a consequence of his earlier fatalistic attitude to the class struggle with which he broke in 1917 (Trotsky, 1931: 173). He suggested that the central weakness with his earlier argument was that it was innocent of a sophisticated comprehension of the role of leadership in the socialist movement. If Trotsky’s most famous articulation of this argument was made through his discussion of Lenin’s role in 1917 in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, it is also true that he recognised the crucial role that he himself was playing in the 1930s.

Trotsky’s *History* is a monumental work within which he aimed to narrate the story of the Russian Revolution from February to October 1917. Its guiding thread is signalled in its preface, where he wrote, “the most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historic events ... The history of the revolution is for us first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny” (Trotsky, 1931–3: 17). Through his attempt to map the popular participation in the

revolution, Trotsky's *History* prefigures later attempts to practice history from below. Yet, the *History* is much more than a history from below; it is also deeply informed by Trotsky's own analysis of the Russian social formation, and combines an insightful analysis of the trajectory of Russia's workers, peasants and middle-classes, with narrative accounts of the political machinations at a number of different levels in Russian society: within the pre- and post-February regimes; within the armed forces; and within the bourgeois and workers parties.

In the *History*, Trotsky argued that "the proof of scientific objectivism is not to be sought in the eyes of the historian or the tones of his voice, but in the inner logic of the narrative itself." It was thus with an eye to this suggestion that he argued his book "reveals the inevitability of October" (Trotsky, 1931–3: 509). So, while it is the "first commandment" of historical narratives to be true to the facts (Trotsky, 1933: 187; cf. 1931–3: 316), Trotsky was well aware that the facts must be interpreted; they do not speak for themselves. The concepts that he utilised for his interpretation began from the "weighty facts of the social structure," and moved through classes and parties to "ideas and slogans" which are "the small change of objective interests" (Trotsky, 1931–3: 509). The fruits of this method, as Trotsky himself argued, must be "reckoned with" if the scientific status of the method itself is to be judged (Trotsky, 1933: 184). So, if modern scholarship coheres with a good part of Trotsky's analysis, to dismiss his method as teleological without explaining either this peculiar coincidence, or Trotsky's own rejection of teleology (Trotsky, 1931–3: 1192), seems counter-intuitive. Indeed, Trotsky does not argue that the success of October was unavoidable, but that "October" was: Russia's historically constituted structure pointed to the inevitability of a revolutionary opportunity, which may or may not have been seized. This did not mean Trotsky believed that any conclusion was possible from this conjuncture: the parameters of possible outcomes of the revolution might have been broader than a preordained victory for Bolshevism, but they did not include the triumph of liberal democracy; his analysis of the insignificant social weight of the Russian bourgeoisie pointed to this

conclusion, and was confirmed by the liberal Cadet Party's move towards supporting General Kornilov's attempted coup in 1917. Nonetheless, if a stable liberal democracy was not feasible, a counter-revolutionary dictatorship was. The practical choice, in late 1917, was between Lenin and Kornilov: a workers' revolution led by the Bolsheviks, or a bourgeois dictatorship under the military (Trotsky, 1931–3: 468, 575, 642). But this remained a choice; history was not to decide for Lenin through the cunning of Reason. Trotsky therefore recognised the importance of the Bolsheviks for the realisation of the potential of socialism with which the old regime was pregnant.

However, contra Thatcher, Trotsky did not reduce the story of the revolution to that of Lenin's heroic rise to power. Rather, Lenin appears as the last link in a chain of events. "Step by step we have tried to follow in this book the development of the October insurrection: the sharpening discontent of the worker masses, the coming over of the soviets to the Bolshevik banner, the indignation of the army, the campaign of the peasants against the landlords, the flood-tide of the national movement, the growing fear and distraction of the possessing and ruling classes, and finally the struggle for the insurrection within the Bolshevik party" (Trotsky, 1931–3: 1079). It is Trotsky's analysis of this final struggle within the Bolshevik Party that has been the focus of much criticism of his general method. Beilharz asks how was it that "Lenin was the only 'revolutionary' in the Bolshevik Party (Trotsky aside) after April 1917?" (Beilharz, 1985: 43), while Deutscher suggests that Trotsky's "grappling with the classical problem of personality in history" is the "least successful" aspect of his thesis (Deutscher, 1963: 241). With reference to the discussion of the role of other key actors in the *History*, Knei-Paz claims that Trotsky's method is to deploy "stereotypes," such that these actors are summoned on to the stage of the revolution merely to play some pre-ordained role through which the telos of history is realised (Knei-Paz, 1978: 509).

Both elements of this criticism – the arguments that Trotsky overplays the genius of Lenin, and underplays the scope for the creativity of non-Bolshevik actors – misunderstand Trotsky's method. For these two moments of his analysis are testament to

the fact that while Trotsky broke with fatalism, his was not a voluntarist theory of history. To this end, Alasdair MacIntyre argued that Trotsky's Marxism cannot be reduced to Deutscher's Plekhanovite analysis, because Trotsky recognised that "from time to time history presents us with real alternatives" such that our actions cannot be understood at such junctures as "just part of an inevitable historical progress" (MacIntyre, 1971: 59). Yet, the alternative courses of action from which we can choose are themselves constrained to a greater or lesser degree by our class location. In 1917 the political representatives of the Russian bourgeoisie – and in this we include all those who mechanically held to the bourgeois revolution paradigm – were more constrained than were the representatives of the revolutionary proletariat. Trotsky explained this phenomenon by the lack of a social base from which liberal democracy could flourish. The choice between Lenin and Kornilov was a real one, which left those who wished to evade it looking helpless before the growing social polarisation. As MacIntyre argued, the power of Trotsky's analyses of the key participants in the political drama – "the Shakespearean richness of character" – lies in his ability to differentiate between those actors who are replaceable representatives of social classes for whom there is little scope for an alternative strategic practice, and those, like Lenin, who cannot be so easily replaced because a crucial choice is at hand which alternative leaders were ill positioned to make (MacIntyre, 1971: 59).

This is not to suggest, as Beilharz does, that Lenin and Trotsky were, according to Trotsky, the only revolutionary Bolsheviks. Rather, Trotsky quotes Lenin repeatedly to the effect that the Russian working class in 1917 was more radical than the Bolshevik Party, while the Party itself was more radical than the Central Committee. The success of the Bolshevik Revolution was thus premised upon Lenin's ability to appeal to the rank and file members of the party against the more conservative Central Committee (Trotsky, 1931–3: 994). Lenin's decisive role in 1917 was, therefore, rooted in his comprehension of the dynamic movement of the class consciousness of the masses – a psychological ebb and flow which he aimed to understand, and which Trotsky aimed to record in his *History*

(Trotsky, 1931–3: 18). Conversely, the conservatism of the bulk of the leadership of the Bolshevik Party was rooted, on the one hand, in their continued adherence to the old Bolshevik slogan of a “Democratic Dictatorship of the Workers and Peasants,” and on the other, in the sociology of their position both within and against the old society: the obverse of their success at becoming embedded within the Russian labour movement was that they experienced a certain political inertia. Indeed, Trotsky drew a general lesson from this experience, alongside similar experiences in “Finland, Hungary, Italy, Bulgaria and Germany,” to argue that revolutionary situations inevitably generate political crises within revolutionary parties (Trotsky, 1924: 15; 1931–3: 989, 1015–1016).

Lenin’s role, in this context, was to enter a “chain of objective historic forces,” within which he acted as a “great link,” whose function it was to accelerate the learning process within the Bolshevik party at a moment when time was at a premium, such that without him the revolutionary opportunity could have easily been missed (Trotsky, 1931–3: 343). However, Lenin was only able to play this role in 1917 because he had built the Bolshevik party in previous years: “without the Party Lenin would have been as helpless as Newton and Darwin without collective scientific work” (Trotsky, 1940a: 205).

More generally the October Revolution was only conceivable as a workers’ revolution, because of Russia’s location within the international capitalist economy. As we have seen, this international framework was the bedrock of Trotsky’s perspectives for the revolution, and became Lenin’s after his studies for his book on imperialism at the beginning of the war: either the revolution spread to Europe or it would perish (Trotsky, 1931–3: 1227; Harding, 1983: 6). Given this prognosis it seems strange that Beilharz claims that Trotsky failed to account adequately for the rise of Stalin, or that Knei-Paz dismisses Trotsky’s biography of Stalin as “an exercise in demonology” (Beilharz, 1985: 47; Knei-Paz, 1978: 529). For, despite suggestions that Trotsky held to a naive vision of historical progress, the opposite is the case; the triumph of counter-revolution would, according to Trotsky, inevitably be the consequence of the failure of the revolution to spread

abroad; for, in such circumstances, the material scarcity, stressed by those Marxists who continued to adhere to the bourgeois revolution paradigm, would fetter the socialist aspirations of the government. Thus, deploying a method that is reminiscent of Engels' suggestion that the seizure of power by the Anabaptists in 16th-century Münster was tragic because the time was not yet ripe for their rule (Engels, 1956: 138–139), in his biography of Stalin, Trotsky famously refers to the suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion of 1921 as a “tragic necessity” which was ultimately caused by the relative economic backwardness of the revolutionary regime (Trotsky, 1940a: 337). Similarly, his most considered analysis of Stalinism, *The Revolution Betrayed*, is premised upon Marx's claim, made in *The German Ideology*, that “a development of the productive forces is the absolutely necessary practical premise” of Communism. Indeed, it was from this premise that Trotsky concluded “the basis of bureaucratic rule is the poverty of society in objects of consumption, with the resulting struggle of each against all” (Trotsky, 1936: 56, 112). Nevertheless, unlike Kautsky, who, from a framework that involved a much more mechanical application of Marx's productive force determinism than was evidenced in his writings after 1909, in 1919 categorised the Soviet system as form of state capitalism (Donald, 1993: 240), Trotsky held a more open interpretation of Marxism, according to which the Stalinist bureaucracy did not represent the final form of “bourgeois restoration,” but merely the “first stage” of this process (Trotsky, 1940a: 429). Moreover, Trotsky insisted that the only force which could counter this tendency was “the victory of the proletariat in the West” (Trotsky, 1940a: 433). In the wake of the defeat of the Western proletariat, and prior to the completion of the process of “bourgeois restoration” he characterised the Stalinist bureaucracy as a “gendarme” in the sphere of circulation; a parasitic growth whose existence was necessitated by the low level of the forces of production in Russia, but whose nature could not be mechanically reduced to those forces of production (Trotsky, 1936: 52–56).

Indeed, because the bureaucracy, according to Trotsky, had, at the level of production relations, evolved no antagonistic

relationship to the working class; then this layer could best be conceived as a bureaucratic caste, which, while parasitic upon the workers, was not *yet* a distinct social class (Trotsky, 1936: 248). Trotsky therefore insisted that despite the many deformations of the Stalinist State, it remained, in some sense, a workers' state. In fact, he argued, rather unrealistically, that the bureaucracy continued "to preserve state property only to the extent that it fears the proletariat" (Trotsky, 1936: 251). Segal criticises this argument, because in it Trotsky failed to recognise that Stalin's "personal despotism" was incompatible with a conception of Russia as a workers' state (Segal, 1979: 386). Despite the obvious power of this suggestion, Segal's claim that Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism betrayed a form of crude productive force determinism is difficult to square either with the latter's categorisation of Stalinism, or with his sophisticated discussions of the class dynamic of the Russian Revolution and Lenin's pivotal role therein (Segal, 1979: 387). Further, Segal's thesis fits uneasily with Trotsky's own sharp critique of mechanical Marxism: "history is not an automatic process. Otherwise why leaders? Why parties? Why programmes? Why theoretical struggles?" (Trotsky, 1940b: 362).

In fact, Trotsky's answer to the question of how the working class could have been politically expropriated by its own state was far from unequivocal: he maintained that the Soviet Regime was, in the 1930s, in a transitional phase, and that its final shape had yet to be decided. Thus, if the bureaucracy was to successfully legalise its *de facto* ownership of the means of production then this would entail "a complete liquidation of the social conquests of the proletarian revolution" (Trotsky, 1936: 249). Indeed, we should not reify Trotsky's understanding of Stalinism, for his arguments, as MacIntyre suggests, were in a process of development throughout the 1930s (MacIntyre, 1971: 54). This process can best be explained, first, by the very novelty of the Stalinist phenomenon: it was too much to expect of any one person that they adequately cognise its structure even as it took shape; while, second, it was Trotsky's "use of nationalised property as a criterion for socialism" rather than any residual productive force determinism that weakened his conceptualisation of Stalinism (MacIntyre, 1971: 57). Interestingly, in his

book *1905* Trotsky had suggested that despotic *class* states could exist on the basis of nationalised property, an insight that can be traced back to Plekhanov's criticisms of Labriola (Trotsky, 1907: 27). That Trotsky did not develop this insight in his analysis of Stalinism is unfortunate, but it is not grounds upon which we might condemn him as a crude economic reductionist: his discussion of the Stalinist state as a "gendarme" in the sphere of circulation, whatever its analytical defects, cannot be said to be a mechanical reduction of the "superstructure" to the "base."

Beyond his discussion of Stalin's despotic regime in Russia, Trotsky noted that Stalinism as a global phenomenon aimed to neutralise the revolutionary vanguard that had emerged in the 1920s by turning it into an arm of Russian foreign policy. It was in this context that Trotsky recognised the importance of the role that he himself was playing as an exile in the 1930s: a very different role, and in very different circumstances, to that played by Lenin in 1917. Commenting that, assuming the presence of Lenin, the October Revolution would have succeeded without him (Trotsky), and that even his role as organiser of the Red Army in the Civil War period was not vital, he argued that once Stalin had moved to liquidate the revolutionary leaders who had come to prominence in the period 1917–1923, both in Russia and internationally, then he (Trotsky) alone was in a unique position to act as a bridge between the earlier revolutionary period and later upsurges in struggle: he was now to play an "indispensable" role in the history of the workers' movement, for "there is now no one except me to carry out the mission of arming a new generation with revolutionary method over the heads of the leaders of the Second and Third Internationals" (Trotsky, 1935: 53–54).

CONCLUSION

In his unfinished biography *Stalin*, Trotsky noted that Lenin was able to play the pivotal role that he did in 1917 through a combination of his "personal attributes and the objective

situation” (Trotsky, 1940a: 204). In a sense this is a historical truism which merely repeats Marx’s claim, made in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, that “men make history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted” (Marx, 1973: 146). Nevertheless, Trotsky was no mere mimic of his master’s voice; for in his works of theory and history stretching from the period of the 1905 Revolution through to the 1930s, he profoundly deepened this insight, first, through his theory of combined and uneven development, through which he relocated the objective terrain within which agents acted from the national to the international arena; while, second, in his discussion of the role of the individual in history he explored the structural and multi-organisational context within which Lenin realised his vision. I would therefore argue that these two fundamental contributions to historical materialism, realised in his magisterial *History of the Russian Revolution*, are enough to ensure Trotsky’s position in the first rank of Marxist theoreticians.

So, in contrast to those of Trotsky’s interlocutors who have dismissed his contribution to historical materialism because of its close relationship to the supposedly crude Marxism of the Second International, and to those commentators who have defended his Marxism by pointing to the distance between it and Second International Marxism, I have argued that while Trotsky broke with Lenin’s national frame of analysis, and with the mechanical excesses of Plekhanov’s interpretation of the role of the individual in history, the power of his analysis of Russian history can best be understood as an example of his creative application of the insights and methods of some of the key theorists of Second International Marxism to the novel situation of Russia in the early years of the last century. In this sense, his theory of combined and uneven development is best understood as a pivot which links his analysis of the Russian Revolution, and Lenin’s role therein, with the best methodological insights of Second International Marxism. I suggest therefore, not only that Trotsky’s contribution to Marxism deserves a more positive reputation, but so too do the contributions made by Kautsky, Labriola, Parvus and Plekhanov.

NOTES

¹ Neither is his name mentioned in Cliff's (1989–1993) four volume study of Trotsky's political thought, nor in Mandel's two books on Trotsky, nor in the collections edited by Ticktin and Cox (1995), and Brotherstone and Dukes (1992).

² Knei-Paz is quite wrong to suggest that none of the Russians "took [Kautsky's arguments] seriously" (Knei-Paz, 1978: 18). For Kautsky's influence on Lenin and Trotsky in 1905/1906 see Donald (1993: 96).

³ This conclusion challenges the myth that Kautsky merely produced a crude mechanical systemisation of Marxism. On this see Blackledge (forthcoming).

⁴ As Knei-Paz points out, this phrase was not used by Trotsky before the 1930s, but is implicit in his analysis from 1905 onwards (Knei-Paz, 1978: 89).

⁵ For critiques of Krasso's argument see Mandel (1968: 37), and Lowy (1981: 49).

⁶ Jon Elster quotes these lines only to completely misunderstand them. Trotsky quite simply did not, contra Elster, believe that 'the epochal transition from capitalist to communist property regime can only come about through the privilege of backwardness'. Rather, he argued that the global development of the forces of production set the parameters for political action, such that the struggle for socialism had become an historical possibility in the semi-industrialised states *in addition to* being so the fully industrialised states (Elster, 1986: 55).

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