

## MAOISM OR TROTSKYISM?

by JMP

The question “Maoism or Trotskyism?” might seem absurd to ask now, over a decade into the 21st Century, since such an ideological debate might, at first glance, appear to belong to a period of struggle before the collapse of actually existing socialism. After all, the last gasp of “anti-revisionist” Marxism-Leninism in the 1960s and 1970s was marked by sustained polemics against Trotskyism as well as counter-polemics by Trotskyist organizations. Innumerable tracts and books either asked the question “Leninism or Trotskyism?” or attempted to prove that Trotskyism *was* Leninism and that everything else was simply some variant of “Stalinism”. And those communist organizations that attempted to wage ideological struggle against both Trotskyism and the revisionism of the Soviet Union were often organizations that veiled themselves as “Maoist” because they identified with the so-called “Chinese path” rather than the “Soviet path”.

Now we are living in a period where the Soviet Union has long since collapsed and China has itself embarked on a revisionist road—a period that spelled the doom for an anti-revisionist Marxism-Leninism that had pinned its hopes on China as the centre of world revolution in the cold war period of imperialism, a movement that was doomed to fail because it was unable at the time to systematize the successes and failures of the second world historical socialist revolution. This is a period where capitalism has proclaimed its triumph, claimed “the end of history” for itself, and countless communist movements disintegrated. This is also a period marked by the rise of anarchism, post-modernism, and left-communist movements that openly disavowed Marxism-Leninism and any type of communism that bases itself on a “party of the vanguard” organized to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat.

And yet this is a period where Trotskyism and Maoism still exist, sometimes thriving, both claiming to authentically represent *and* even supersede the tradition of Marxism-Leninism that was supposed to have died in the 1980s. This is also a period where the anti-Leninist leftist currents are beginning to reach the impasse that was always present in their ideology, leading to disaffection and a renewed interest in the communist tradition that was supposed to have died when capitalism declared itself victorious over communism.

Furthermore, Trotskyism never went away and, despite sectarian splits and critical openings, has still maintained a consistent influence at the centres of capitalism, especially amongst marxist intellectuals living in North America and Britain, even when it was not openly proclaiming itself as “Trotskyist.” Here we can speak of the “post-Trotskyist” groups (such as those influenced by Hal Draper or Raya Dunayevskaya) who might more resemble anarchists in practice but who still declare a certain level of fidelity to Trotskyism in their understanding of history and key moments of theory. We can also examine the renewal of old Trotskyisms such as the International Marxist Tendency that, regardless of their possibly moribund approach to political action, still seem to be attracting young leftists who are fed up with the post-modern “movementism” that has now revealed its lack of revolutionary focus. In this context Trotskyism

was able to wage a somewhat successful ideological struggle within academia at the centres of imperialism and thus exert a significant level of control over the intelligentsia's discourse of Marxism.

At the same time, however, Maoism only emerged as Maoism proper at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s when capitalism was declaring communism extinct: first with the people's war carried out by the Communist Party of Peru (PCP), and the emergence of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM) with its 1993 statement *Long Live Marxism-Leninism-Maoism!*. It was in this context that the experience of the Chinese Revolution—its successes and failures—was systematically examined and “Maoism” was declared the third stage of revolutionary science. For the first time, then, “Maoism” was theorized as an actual ideology rather than just a “thought” that had replaced Stalin's thought as the interlocuter of Marxism-Leninism; the PCP and the RIM argued for *Maoism-qua-Maoism* rather than *Maoism-qua-Mao Zedong Thought*, claiming that what they called “Maoism” was a theoretical development of scientific communism, a continuity and rupture from Marxism-Leninism, because it possessed tenets that were universally applicable. Hence, the RIM would argue that Maoism is the latest encapsulation of Marxism and Leninism, and Marxism-Leninism as it was is no longer sufficient.<sup>1</sup>

The birth of Maoism would signify an explosion of revolutionary development and people's wars in the peripheries of global capitalism (in Nepal, India, Afghanistan, etc.)—what Mao called “the storm centres” and Lenin called “the weak links”—where Trotskyism was generally seen as an alien ideology. But the fact that Trotskyism has historically, with honourable exception, been treated as an alien ideology in the so-called “third world” does not necessarily mean it is theoretically bankrupt. Indeed, it is not enough to point out that a theory has failed to make any head-way in certain regions to relegate it to Trotsky's “dustbin of history”: various cultural nationalisms, some of which are quite reactionary, have often eclipsed Maoism in the global peripheries and yet we would not argue that this makes them properly anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist; and Maoism's failure to claim ideological hegemony amongst marxists at the centres of capitalism, regardless of some significant transformations here and there, should not mean that Maoism, as some have argued (even some who fancy themselves “Maoist”!), is only applicable to third world revolutions.

Moreover, the question “Maoism or Trotskyism?” should not be confused, as it sometimes is, with the older question of “Leninism or Trotskyism?” asked by anti-revisionists or rugged orthodox Stalinists. The latter was a question that was often asked in bad faith because it began by presupposing that, true to the Stalinist narrative of Trotsky's expulsion from the Soviet Union, Trotsky was an arch anti-Leninist, a “wrecker”, and possibly even an agent for imperialist reactionaries. The standard Trotskyist response to this polemical question was simply to cast

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<sup>1</sup> The RIM document *Long Live Marxism-Leninism-Maoism!* would proclaim that all communisms that argued for a communism pre-Mao, pre-Lenin, or even pre-Marx were “revisionist”, much like arguing for a theory of physics pre-Einstein was theoretically backwards.

itself in the mould of Lenin and, without using the precise terminology, declare itself Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist. Whether or not Trotskyists theorized “Leninism” correctly might be an important issue—and one that we will examine tangentially in some detail below—but the accusation that Trotskyism was the express enemy of Marxism-Leninism was most often a rhetorical stance and semantic game: since Stalin theorized “Leninism”, the argument went, Trotskyism must be anti-Leninist and thus anti-Lenin since it is also anti-Stalin.

Therefore, to ask the question “Maoism or Trotskyism?” as a Maoist is to try to investigate Trotskyism as a competing ideological current and to perform this investigation not to make sectarian points because of some religious adherence to the signifier “Maoist” but in order to point out why Maoism rather than Trotskyism is a necessary theoretical rallying point if we want to make revolution. Indeed, if Trotskyism was able to demonstrate that it was such a rallying point, that it was kick-starting Bolshevik-style insurrections the world over that, even in their failures, were providing a significant communist challenge to capitalism, then we would have to question the validity of Maoism. Since anything is possible, maybe this will happen in the future—and if it does we should all become Trotskyists and accept that this is the correct path to revolution—but maybe also the “movementist” post-modern approach will prove itself successful, or maybe capitalism really is the end of history, and so these multiple possibilities are not enough to prevent an ideological engagement with a theoretical tradition that has so far proven itself incapable of being a revolutionary science. For if we are taught by history and are communists, then we should also recognize that the only way to understand history scientifically is to theoretically systematize the lessons gleaned from history’s motor—class revolution. And since ideologies are historically mediated, we also have to examine whether or not they are viable in connection with class revolution.

Nor can we simply fall back on the old adage of anti-Trotskyism that marked the anti-revisionist Marxism-Leninisms of yesteryear. In those days it was enough to call Trotskyists “revisionists”—or worse, “social fascists” and “wreckers”—and then attempt to ignore them... except when their more orthodox adherents showed up at an event they hadn’t helped organize to chastise everyone for being fake communists. Yes, it is tempting to call someone who is calling you a “fake communist” by the same name, but this is just a mud-slinging exchange. Therefore, it is also important to recognize that Trotskyism is not simply “revisionism”<sup>2</sup>, that Trotsky was not an anti-communist renegade, as scholars like Grover Furr might have us believe, or that Trotskyists are not dyed-in-the-wool “wreckers” who intend to ruin communism. Even more importantly, it is necessary to recognize that Trotsky was a significant revolutionary during the Russian Revolution and that some Trotskyist theorists have even contributed to the Marxist theoretical canon. Indeed, the fact that Trotskyist intellectuals were able to wage a somewhat successful ideological struggle in the imperialist academic sphere is cause for celebration: it is due in a large part to their efforts that Marx and Marxism remain as valid academic pursuits.

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<sup>2</sup> Or if it *is* revisionism than it is *objectively* revisionist in the way that the aforementioned RIM document has proclaimed that any communism pre-Maoism is a form of revisionism-in-essence.

In any case, the current demise of the people's war in Nepal proves that Maoists also can be revisionists. The eventual behaviour of a degenerated RCP-USA in the RIM proves that Maoists can also be wreckers. These are charges that can be made of communists in every Marxist tradition; they are not some original sin attributable only to Trotskyism. If we are to properly ask the question "Maoism or Trotskyism?" we have to climb out of this rhetorical swamp.

We also must honestly ask "Maoism or Trotskyism?" as Maoists, rather than ignore this question altogether and go about our work, because Trotskyists are asking the same question. Ever since the emergence of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism and the people's wars that have blossomed in the storm centres of imperialism—ever since vital organizations at the centres of capitalism have started to gravitate, sometimes slowly and sometimes swiftly, towards this coherent form of Maoism—Trotskyist ideologues and intellectuals influenced by the tradition of Trotskyism have been writing theoretical engagements with Maoism.

Generally, these theoretical engagements have been quite poor. Loren Goldner's *Notes Towards a Critique of Maoism* is a recent example of these attempts to combat Maoism from a communist tradition that in some ways expresses a certain level of fidelity to Trotskyism. Jairus Banaji's critiques of Indian Maoism or Chris Cutrone's dismissal of Maoism altogether are other salient examples. These critiques most often venerate Trotsky over Mao, denigrate Maoism as "Stalinism", and indeed demonstrate the same understanding of Maoism possessed by the most orthodox Trotskyist groups like the Spartacist League and the International Bolshevik Tendency: that Maoism is simply "bourgeois revolution with red flags" because Mao's theory of New Democracy (which every Trotskyist assumes, having apparently never read the RIM statement or any of the theoretical expressions of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, is the prime definition of Maoism) is erroneously understood as "class collaboration." In none of these critiques is there any recognition that Maoism-qua-Maoism finally crystallized as a revolutionary theory only in 1993 and that a sustained engagement with the "maoisms" of the 1960s and 1970s is off the mark.<sup>3</sup>

These extremely flawed theoretical engagements, however, demonstrate the necessity to ask the question "Maoism or Trotskyism" from a Maoist perspective. On the one hand they show that some Trotskyists and/or post-Trotskyists are taking Maoism seriously (indeed, they cannot deny that it is currently the only variant of communism successfully mobilizing the masses at the storm centres of imperialism); on the other hand, it demonstrates a certain level of panic amongst orthodox Trotskyists (who, like all orthodox communists, are angry that people are choosing a communism other than their own), and amongst non-orthodox Trotskyists and post-Trotskyists who are confused by a communism that, at first glance, does not resemble the kind of communism they believed was *proper* communism.

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<sup>3</sup> see here the response to Goldner's article and the assumptions it shares with Trotskyist critiques of Maoism on *MLM Mayhem!* [<http://moufawad-paul.blogspot.ca/2012/10/message-to-insurgent-notes-please.html>]

Most importantly, though, these theoretical engagements with Maoism demonstrate the emergence of an ideological line struggle where those committed to a communism that, to whatever degree, is influenced by Trotskyism are trying to prevent people gravitating towards communism from committing what they see as an ideological error. They want young communists to back away from the temptation of Maoism, to adhere to a more respectable Marxist tradition, and they want this because they believe their tradition is the only tradition capable of bringing about communism. And since we Maoists believe the same, we should at least recognize that this attitude is laudable. The problem, though, is that we are making the inverse claim.

The point here is that Trotskyism and the communism inspired by Trotskyism cannot be dismissed as “revisionism” but should rather be understood as a theoretical dead-end. History has many dead-ends and blind alleys, after all, and it is our contention that Trotskyism is ultimately another theoretical anachronism that is incapable of developing a path to revolution; it lacks the theoretical tools necessary for providing ideological and practical unity to a revolutionary movement. So in this engagement we will demonstrate this failure on the part of Trotskyism by examining: a) its theory of “permanent revolution” which is *the* theory that defines Trotskyism; b) its complaints about “Stalinism” and the failure of actually existing socialism; c) its inability to be anything other than a dead-end when it comes to actually making revolution.

### **Permanent Revolution**

If Trotskyism can be boiled down to a key theory then it is the theory of “permanent revolution, best exemplified in *The Permanent Revolution* (1931) but also expressed in germ form in earlier documents such as *Results and Prospects* (1906). It is this theory that determines Trotskyism’s theoretical engagement with Maoism; it even explains why Trotskyism chooses to misunderstand Maoism. All Trotskyist organizations declare fidelity to this theory, even if they spend a lot of time arguing about what it means or attempting to modernize its theoretical terrain (i.e. Tony Cliff of the Socialist Workers Party attempted to do so and was called a “revisionist” by the orthodox Trotskyists), and so it is their theoretical linch-pin.

To give credit where credit is due, the theory of permanent revolution is actually the result of Trotsky asking a correct question: how does one sustain and carry forward a revolution in a country that has not had a bourgeois revolution—how can socialism be built at the global peripheries where the political context and productive forces that are produced by a bourgeois revolution are absent? Clearly Trotsky asked this question because of his experience in the Russian Revolution and the inescapable fact that Russia seemed to lack the necessary elements, directly following the Bolshevik seizure of power, for socialism: the persistence of the peasant masses who were themselves stratified and outnumbered the working-class, the supposed “grave-diggers of capitalism”; the absence of the forces of production that would have allowed for a predominant working-class *and* the foundations for socialization, an absence that led to

numerous economic plans on the part of Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership; and, perhaps most importantly for what would become the theory of permanent revolution, the lack of an infrastructure necessary to prevent socialism from degenerating since it would always be under attack by the more economically advanced capitalist nations. Moreover, since Trotsky was an important participant in the Russian Revolution, he wanted to argue, correctly and contrary to a very strong revisionist Marxist current at the time, that revolutionaries in underdeveloped countries (such as Russia) do not have to wait for an articulate bourgeois class to appear in these countries and have their revolution first.

Borrowing the terminology “permanent revolution” from Marx and Engels, Trotsky tried to make sense of the problems that confronted the revolution in Russia and summed up his understanding in the following manner:

“The Perspective of permanent revolution may be summarized in the following way: the complete victory of the democratic revolution in Russia is conceivable only in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, leaning on the peasantry. The dictatorship of the proletariat, which would inevitably place on the order of the day not only democratic but socialistic tasks as well, would at the same time give a powerful impetus to the international socialist revolution. Only the victory of the proletariat in the West could protect Russia from bourgeois restoration and assure it the possibility of rounding out the establishment of socialism.”<sup>4</sup>

So far so good: some Trotskyists would be surprised to discover that Maoists agree with most of this statement. Where we differ, however, is in how Trotsky fully theorizes his perspective on permanent revolution, the problem of which is contained in the last sentence of this summary where the final responsibility of socialist victory is accorded to the proletariat at the centres of world capitalism (in Trotsky’s day this was the “West” meaning “West of Russia”—central Europe, predominantly Britain and Germany). We’ll return to this later.

Furthermore, the main part of Trotsky’s revolutionary strategy in the context of peripheral countries is dedicated to a very specific analysis of the peasantry that sets it apart from the Maoist understanding. As noted above, Trotsky claims that the dictatorship of the proletariat must lean on the peasantry, but what he means by this is not that the peasantry in peripheral nations might be a revolutionary class but that, rather, they must be submitted to the discipline of the more advanced but minority proletariat class. Indeed, in *The Permanent Revolution* Trotsky accuses Lenin of “overestimating the independent role of the peasantry” and that Lenin accused him of “underestimating the revolutionary role of the peasantry.”<sup>5</sup> Hence he can speak of how the peasantry does not possess a revolutionary consciousness, that it will actually be counter-revolutionary (following Marx’s analysis of the French peasantry in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis*

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<sup>4</sup> Trotsky, *The Three Conceptions of the Russian Revolution*, <http://www.internationalist.org/three.html>

<sup>5</sup> Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution* (third chapter), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/pr03.htm>

*Bonaparte*), and that the proletariat will necessarily come into “collision” with the peasantry when it is consolidating the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Thus, Trotsky’s claim that the dictatorship of the proletariat must lean on the peasantry seems to be rhetorical; he is rather confused by the peasantry and its position within a revolution that emerges in a semi-feudal context. On the one hand he wants to think beyond the crude “stagism” (a charge Trotskyists will later apply to any theory of revolution that tries to answer the same question but that isn’t the theory of permanent revolution) inherent in the revisionist marxisms that consistently focused on a bourgeois revolution happening first; on the other hand he is still caught within the same positivist categories of class where, following very dogmatic readings of Marx, the proletariat must look like the proletariat in western Europe and the peasantry must eventually and always be like the peasantry in the France of the *18th Brumaire*. There is a tension here between the desire to break away from dogmatic applications of historical materialism and the gut reaction to stick within the safe territory of a “pure marxism”.

Ultimately Trotsky’s commitment to marxist orthodoxy would defeat his desire for marxist creativity, the form of marxism overwhelming its methodological essence. That is, Trotsky would prove incapable of particularizing the universality of marxism within a given social context: he understood the importance of the peasantry in semi-feudal countries but, by also seeing them as a counter-revolutionary force in the final instance, believed that the nascent working-classes in these countries, as we shall see below, needed to hold the revolution in permanence and discipline a most probably reactionary peasantry.

Generally Trotsky thought the peasantry would support a democratic revolution led by the proletariat but, because of their feudal consciousness, would cease supporting this revolution when it became socialist. Hence his reason for assuming the possibility of a “civil war” between the peasantry and the industrial working-class in *The Permanent Revolution*, a civil war that could only be avoided if there was an international revolution led by the working-classes in the more developed regions of global capitalism—again we are led to his emphasis about the “victory of the proletariat in the West” as the necessary mechanism to prevent bourgeois restoration.

But before we get into this international dimension of the theory, we should examine how Trotsky’s views of the peasantry were articulated within the semi-feudal context that gave rise to Maoism—the Chinese Revolution. Here, that in 1925 the Trotskyist current in the initial Chinese Party of China (CPC), represented by Chen Duxiu, opposed Mao’s argument, following rigorous social investigation, that the party needed to embed itself within a peasantry that was already engaged in revolutionary action. Chen did not think that the party should embed itself within the peasantry because he felt, following Trotsky’s line, that the peasantry would ultimately prove to be a reactionary force when it came to the struggle for socialism; instead he advocated remaining within the ranks of the Kuomintang and trying to win over the working class so that the party would have the necessary class forces to command the already revolting peasantry. Here, it is interesting to note that the representative of Stalin in the initial CPC, Li Lisan, advocated the

identical practice but for different reasons (the Kuomintang was a bourgeois revolutionary force was Li's erroneous argument) and so, at the end of the day, both Trotskyist and Stalinist ideological lines resulted in the same dead-end practice: while Mao split from this configuration of the CPC and rebooted the party in the revolutionary peasantry, those loyal to the political lines of Chen and Li were liquidated by the Kuomintang under Chen Kaishek in 1927.

Furthermore, one only has to have a conversation with an orthodox Trotskyist about revolutions outside of the developed imperialist centres to understand what a nearly religious adherence to the theory of permanent revolution means for an understanding of the peasantry. They will tell you that peasants have either a reactionary or "petty-bourgeois" consciousness because they are fully embedded in feudalism and that any revolution that bases itself on this peasantry—even if they are the most numerous class with nothing to lose—is not properly "marxist". The industrial working-class is the only class capable of being the back-bone for a revolution, is the argument, and if this class does not exist—and sometimes *cannot exist as a revolutionary class in a capitalist formation that will remain underdeveloped under imperialist oppression*—then there is no point in doing anything but holding the revolution in permanence and waiting for the more developed working-class at the centres of capitalism to lead the world revolution.

This is because Trotsky, in some ways intersecting with Lenin, understood that while revolutionary movements happened at the weakest links of global imperialism, the fact that the centres of world capitalism still possessed the economic power to crush these peripheral revolutions was something that needed to be understood. Unfortunately, rather than trying to make sense of the dialectic between centre and periphery, Trotsky placed the onus of revolutionary responsibility on the shoulders of the proletariat at the centres of global capitalism. This was, after all, a proper proletariat that should have a proper proletarian consciousness. As he argues in *Results and Prospects*:

*"Without the direct State support of the European proletariat the working class of Russia cannot remain in power and convert its temporary domination into a lasting socialistic dictatorship. Of this there cannot for one moment be any doubt. But on the other hand there cannot be any doubt that a socialist revolution in the West will enable us directly to convert the temporary domination of the working class into a socialist dictatorship."*<sup>6</sup>

In fact, Trotsky goes on to approvingly cite Kautsky's claim that "[s]ociety as a whole cannot artificially skip any stages of its development, but it is possible for constituent parts of society to hasten their retarded development by imitating the more advanced countries and, thanks to this, even to take their stand in the forefront of development."<sup>7</sup> So much for Trotsky's avoidance of "stagism": instead of it being possible for there to be socialist revolutions in the global

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<sup>6</sup> Trotsky, *Results and Prospects* (eighth chapter), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/rp08.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



peripheries, at best there can only be “artificial” socialist institutions<sup>8</sup> that can influence the more advanced nations to take the lead in producing authentic global socialism. One must wonder, then, what makes a socialism “artificial” as opposed to “authentic” when, according to Lenin, socialism is a *process*, a transitional stage where the bourgeoisie is placed under the dictatorship of the proletariat, and thus as heterogeneous as the period of mercantile capitalism, where there were various attempts to place the aristocracy under bourgeois dictatorship, that preceded the emergence of capitalism. But we shall return to this point about the Trotskyist understanding of *socialism* in the following section.

Trotsky’s theory of “combined and uneven development” was fundamental to his understanding of the theory of permanent revolution’s international meaning. Here we have a theory that seems to imply that capitalism is a global mode of production that develops in a combined and uneven manner, rather than a theory (as those influenced by what would become the Maoist tradition have argued) of a world system of capitalism where capitalist modes of production form the centres of capitalism, and impose/control global capitalism through imperialism, and capitalist *social formations* on the periphery that are still economically defined, internally, as pre-capitalist modes of production.<sup>9</sup>

If the world is a single mode of production, then it makes sense for there to be a single world socialist revolution determined in the final instance, obviously, by those who are at the correct international point of production, i.e. the industrial proletariat at the centres of imperialism. For if capitalism is a global mode of production, then its point of production must also be global and it makes sense to speak of a global proletarian class rather than various proletarian classes in various social contexts which might not have a nation ideologically but still exist within a national economic framework materially. In this context the nascent industrial working-class in the economically “backward” regions must not only place the most probably counter-revolutionary peasantry under their advanced discipline but also, due to the inability of building socialism in a particular region without a world revolution, hold the revolution in permanence and wait for the lead of their more advanced counterparts in the more economically “advanced” parts of the global mode of production—much like the workers at a small factory in a small town waiting for the workers in the massive factories in the big cities to have a general strike and start the insurrection.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Although Trotsky doesn’t specifically argue that the capitalist mode of production is global, his theory of “combined and uneven development” implies this understanding due to its inability to make a distinction between capitalism as a mode of production and capitalism as a world of system. Instead, for Trotsky, there is only one capitalism that is global, combined and uneven, and the unevenness is only due to the “anarchism” inherent to capitalism rather than a necessary fact of global imperialism imposed by capitalist modes of production that can only exist as modes of production at the centres of world imperialism. His most succinct definition of “combined and uneven development”, which can be found in the *The Third International After Lenin*, demonstrates this theoretical confusion.

Moreover, this internationalization of the capitalist mode of production causes multiple strands of Trotskyism to also internationalize the revolutionary party. While we Maoists must agree with our Trotskyist counterparts about the necessity of internationalism, we also hold that it is a false internationalism to establish an international communist party. This is because we Maoists believe that every nation has its own unique class composition<sup>10</sup>, its own particular version of a universal mode of production, and one cannot simply impose the analysis of class and class struggle that was developed in, say, Western Europe or the United States on regions as diverse as Pakistan, Vietnam, etc. Most often this type of “internationalism” ends up being a rearticulation of imperialist chauvinism where the “more advanced” elements of these international parties (i.e. the party members in the US or Britain) dictate the theoretical analysis and behaviour to their party counterparts in a third world country, failing to realize that a revolutionary movement in these regions can only proceed from a concrete analysis of a concrete situation rather than the imposition of an alien analysis connected to other regions.

Hence the failure of Trotskyist parties to launch even the beginning stages of a revolution anywhere, particularly at the peripheries of global capitalism; even in those rare instances where they had significant membership (i.e. in Vietnam before the rise of Ho Chi Minh’s party), they could not initiate a revolutionary process and were quickly eclipsed by those movements that had developed organically, however flawed the theory of these movements might have been, in these particular contexts. Thus, if communism is ultimately about making revolution, we have to question a theory that has been unsuccessful in launching a revolutionary struggle anywhere. And though it is true that Trotskyists claim that other revolutionary struggles failed because they did not take into account Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, the fact is that these ultimately failed revolutions were still more successful than any revolutionary movement guided by Trotskyism; the theory of permanent revolution is an originary failure—it has proved itself incapable of even launching a revolution... But I will talk more about this problem in the final section of this polemic.

If I am spending a significant amount of time trying to describe the ins-and-outs of the theory of permanent revolution, it is because a Maoist response to the core theory of Trotskyism requires an adequate summary. Moreover, as noted above, the Trotskyist understanding of Maoism can be traced to the fact that this is the foundational theory for the former ideology; thus, anything that appears to contradict this theory on the part of the latter must be treated, I would assume, as that theory’s most important facet.

Here, of course, we are speaking of *the New Democratic Theory* that was another way to answer the same question. Since the Chinese Revolution happened in a semi-feudal/semi-colonial context, the CPC under Mao was also interested in theorizing how socialism could be built and, because of this interest, there are moments where the theory of New Democracy and Permanent Revolution, at least in this sense, intersect. The divergences, though, are crucial—mainly they

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<sup>10</sup> And sometimes, even with a single country, different regions have different class compositions—albeit united under a single state.

are crucial because the CPC, unlike any Trotskyist organization, actually succeeded in answering the question and building socialism in China.

The theory of New Democracy is generally about how to build the forces of production necessary to produce socialism (i.e. the industrial infrastructure that normally would have emerged under capitalism but is often largely absent in a semi-feudal social formation) since the centralization of productive forces that is the hallmark of socialism is only possible if these productive forces exist in the first place. Rather than wait for a bourgeois revolution to produce the capitalist groundwork for socialism, though, the theory of New Democracy argues that: **a)** such a revolution is generally impossible in a country that is dominated by imperialism, and unnecessary since global capitalism means that every country is in some sense a capitalist formation; **b)** the economic infrastructure necessary for socialism will be built under the direction of the communist party, thus the productive forces will be submitted to socialist productive relations and politics will be in command; **c)** under the direction of the communist party there can be an alliance between the “revolutionary classes” in this period, an alliance necessary to achieve (b) that will consist of a worker-peasant alliance with the participation, to a certain degree, of the national bourgeoisie that would remain under the guidance of the party.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that Trotskyists focus obsessively on point (c), while dismissing the other points as “stagist” (ironic because the theory of permanent revolution also has its “stages”—artificial socialist institutions in the peripheries first, true socialist revolution led by the proletariat at the centres later), because they feel it is tantamount to “class collaboration” and that this, more than anything else, proves that Maoism (which they reduce only to this theory) is a theory of “bourgeois revolution with red flags.” They will often use examples that have nothing to do with New Democracy as it was practiced in China, and as it has been understood by Maoists now, to prove the class collaborative aspect of this theory. Indeed, Trotskyists will often cite the failure of Indonesian communism in the early 1960s as an example of the failures of New Democracy (and by extension “Maoism”) even though Sukarno’s theory of “Guided Democracy” was not identical to Mao’s theory of “New Democracy” and, in any case, what would produce the theoretical core of Maoist theory—the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution—had not happened when Sukarno proposed his approach to revolutionary nationalism in 1957. Nor was the Indonesian Communist Party behaving according to the theory of New Democracy; contrary to Mao’s theory noted above, this party had placed itself within the framework of a national bourgeois structure, and thus was under the command of the national bourgeoisie rather than vice versa. New Democracy, therefore, is only possible if the revolution is being led and completed by the communist party: communist politics must be in command; the

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<sup>11</sup> Mao’s *On New Democracy* can be found at the Marxist Internet Archive here: [http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2\\_26.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_26.htm)

relations of production politically necessary for socialism must direct the building of the forces of production economically necessary for socialism.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the reason the theory of New Democracy claimed that the national bourgeoisie in a semi-feudal and semi-colonial context could be a “revolutionary class” (but only to a certain extent and always under the direction of the party) was because this class, unlike the *comprador bourgeoisie* (that is, the bourgeois who represented imperialist interests), often had a vested interest in getting rid of imperialist interference and semi-feudal ideology. In the framework of building socialism in a semi-feudal/semi-colonial, this consciousness was objectively revolutionary. “Being a bourgeoisie in a colonial and semi-colonial country and oppressed by imperialism,” writes Mao in *On New Democracy*, “the Chinese national bourgeoisie retains a certain revolutionary quality *at certain periods and to a certain degree*... in its opposition to the foreign imperialists and the domestic government of bureaucrats and warlords.”<sup>13</sup> Note that Mao qualifies that this “revolutionary quality” is only possible “at certain periods and to a certain degree”; indeed, he would qualify the limits of this quality just a few paragraphs later which demonstrates why the theory of New Democracy has nothing to do with class collaboration and tailing the national bourgeoisie:

“At the same time, however, being a bourgeois class in a colonial and semi-colonial country and so being extremely flabby economically and politically, the Chinese national bourgeoisie also has another quality, namely, a proneness to conciliation with the enemies of the revolution. Even when it takes part in the revolution, it is unwilling to break with imperialism completely and, moreover, it is closely associated with the exploitation of the rural areas through land rent; thus it is neither willing nor able to overthrow imperialism, and much less the feudal forces, in a thorough way.”<sup>14</sup>

This does not sound like class collaboration. In fact, the way Mao understands the national bourgeoisie in a semi-feudal/semi-colonial context (which is a bourgeoisie, he would argue, that is different from the bourgeoisie at the centres of capitalism) is similar to how Trotsky understands the peasantry: a useful force to draw upon at a certain stage of revolution, but a stumbling block to revolution later on. Hence the reason to place the national bourgeoisie under

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<sup>12</sup> As an aside, as a friend and comrade who helped edit this polemic pointed out, it is “important to stress that Trotskyists confuse the theory of New Democracy or People’s Democratic Revolution with the Stalinist and post-Stalinist theory of National Democratic Revolution. The latter practically instructs communist parties in the third world to subordinate themselves to the ‘national bourgeoisie’ [as with Li’s line in the CPC pre-Mao noted above] and hence the debacles of Indian mainstream communism, which has morphed into just contesting elections repeatedly, and the far more tragic disaster of the PKI and Tudeh. New Democracy is very clear about the independent power of the party, of the working-class and peasantry, entering into alliances with the bourgeois forces of the Kuomintang only tactically, and subordinating the the national bourgeoisie to the peasantry and working class—not subordinating the working-class and peasantry to the national bourgeoisie.” (NA)

<sup>13</sup> Mao, *On New Democracy*, Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967, p. 14, emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14-15.

the command of the party during the period of New Democracy and the complaints, on the part of reactionary historians even today, of how these poor bourgeois people were tricked into collaborating with communism only to have their bourgeois “rights” taken away.

Indeed, and this is extremely important when it comes to the question of “Maoism or Trotskyism”, the period of New Democracy was over by the end of the Great Leap Forward (despite some of the GLF’s significant failures which, it should be noted, were not as tragic as bourgeois reactionary historians claim), and the conclusion of this period was openly declared by the faction of the party united under Mao, and socialism was finally emergent. In this context the problem was no longer how to build the context necessary for the dictatorship of the proletariat, but how to maintain the dictatorship of the proletariat and produce the social relations necessary for communism. Here it is significant to note that there was a political line in the party that did not want to go beyond New Democracy, that confused this period with socialism, and did not want to carry forth the struggle to consolidate the dictatorship of the proletariat. Thus, during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, there emerged a critique of the bad theory of “productive forces”—a theory arguing that we should only concentrate on building the productive forces necessary for socialism, rather than dealing with the political question of relations of production, and thus continue only with New Democracy and mistake this period as socialism.

The recent events in Nepal are a good example of this problem. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [CPN(Maoist)] launched a successful people’s war and was able to establish something akin to a period of New Democracy when it became the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [UCPN(Maoist)]. Since Nepal was also a semi-feudal/semi-colonial country it needed to establish New Democracy in order to produce the necessary context for socialism but the bourgeois line within the party triumphed earlier than it did in China and even New Democracy was abandoned as the revolution degenerated into what could accurately be called, but only at this moment of degeneration a “bourgeois revolution with red flags.”

However, since Maoists argue that a line struggle will always manifest within a revolutionary context—a struggle between those who do not want to go further down the socialist path and those who want to complete the revolution—this line struggle will happen whether or not there is a New Democratic revolution. Indeed, in China the line struggle existed before, during, and after the period of New Democracy; the bourgeois line did not attain victory until the end of the Cultural Revolution where the forces gathered around Deng Xiaoping emerged victorious and capitalist restoration—originally envisioned as a return to the period of New Democracy—began. Thus, the problem with the restoration of capitalism has nothing specifically to do with the theory of New Democracy; it is always, for Maoists, a possibility under socialism because socialism is also a period of class struggle—and this is the key theoretical component, that is universally applicable, of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism.

Therefore, it is important to note that the theory of New Democracy, even if understood properly, is only a theory, according to Maoism, that is applicable to revolutions that emerge at the peripheries of global capitalism. Revolutionary movements at the centres of global capitalism—

that is, movements that manifest within completed capitalist modes of production—will not pursue New Democracy since the problem New Democracy is meant to address has nothing to do with the capitalist mode of production where the economic infrastructure necessary for building socialism already exists. This is why Maoism, which has been promoted as a new theoretical stage of revolutionary communism, is not primarily defined by the theory of New Democracy since a new of communism should carry universal aspects that are applicable in every particular context. The theory of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism’s crucial point is what was noted above, and this point connects to further points about how the party should function, how the super-structure obstructs the base at given moments of historical development, how the party can be held to account by the masses, how to act towards people, and an entire host of concepts that not only take into account the important of third world revolutions—and agree along with Lenin that these tend to happen more frequently because these are the “weak links” of the capitalist world system—but also teach us something about making revolution in the first world and the problems we will necessarily encounter.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, the fact that there is no significant peasantry or a national bourgeoisie with some sort of “revolutionary quality” at the centres of capitalism means that the entire possibility of New Democracy in these regions is patently absurd. Rather, the fact that building socialism will mean the mobilization of the masses and a possible united front between communists, various sectors of the proletariat, some conscious elements of the petty-bourgeois (i.e. students and intellectuals), and (in the context of the US and Canada) oppressed nationalities—or even some small business owners who might be more inclined towards revolution than workers in privileged unions—is something worth considering. Moreover, the fact that any possible establishment of socialism will also mean a class struggle between those who want to push socialism forward and those who want to cling to bourgeois ideology—that is, that class struggle continues under the dictatorship of the proletariat—is the key element in understanding Maoism across regions. We will examine this point in more detail in the following sections.

### **Maoism is Stalinism?**

A significant problem we encounter when we engage with Trotskyism is the charge that any form of communism that accepts the basics of Leninism but that is not-Trotskyism is, ipso facto, “Stalinism”. Thus, after Lenin, there can only be Trotskyism or Stalinism and nothing else. Maoism, then, is treated as a variant of Stalinism and the reasons why it is a Stalinism are pretty simplistic.

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<sup>15</sup> For a more direct examination of the theory of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, we would ask the reader to consider Shashi Prakash’s *Why Maoism?* and the RIM document mentioned at various points in this polemic, *Long Live Marxism-Leninism-Maoism*. For an articulation of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to a particular social context in the so-called “first world”, we urge the reader to examine the Party Programme of the Parti Communiste Révolutionnaire (PCR-RCP), as well as this revolutionary party’s theoretical writings, available in french and english at [pcr-rcp.ca](http://pcr-rcp.ca).

Generally, Maoism is Stalinism according to Trotskyists because it supposedly accords to Stalin's theory of "socialism in one country." Here it is worth noting that Trotskyists are primarily responsible for defining "Stalinism" which they see as the only ideological option competing with Trotskyism in the Leninist terrain. The fact that Stalin argued that it was possible for a single country to build socialism (but not necessarily *communism* by itself, and this is important) not only rubs up against the Trotskyist theory of permanent revolution [see above] but is often interpreted, by the most uncritical Trotskyists, to mean that Stalin only cared about the revolution in Russia and thought that it was the only possible socialist revolution—the *socialism that could only happen in a single country* and damn the rest of the world.

Well it is true that the Chinese Revolution under Mao did attempt to build socialism in China without a world revolution and so I suppose this, if such is the qualification for "Stalinism", might make them guilty of the Trotskyist charge. At the same time, though, the Maoist understanding of the Chinese Revolution is such that it accords with a very important theoretical distinction between *socialism* and *communism*, a distinction made by Lenin in *State and Revolution* but lacking in Trotsky's *Permanent Revolution* writings. And this understanding is that socialism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, is possible in a single country and is the transition to communism, but that full communism, since it would necessarily be stateless, requires the entire world to also be socialist. But just because most of the world isn't socialist does not mean that a single country cannot establish a dictatorship of the proletariat; most significantly, the more storm centres that enter this transitional phase, the more likely world communism becomes.<sup>16</sup>

But Trotskyists are under the impression, because of the theory of permanent revolution and the fact that the world is conceived as a single "combined and uneven" mode of production, that the entire world must have a socialist revolution and that particular socialist revolutions are impossible. Nations in the periphery embarking on socialist revolutions, under this interpretation, can therefore hope for nothing more than a democratic revolution with "artificial socialist institutions" and will eventually run up against a civil war with their peasantry *unless* the revolution isn't commanded by the more developed proletariat at the centres of global capitalism. Once again we have a tension between the creativity Trotskyism desires to express and its inability to escape a dogmatic adherence to orthodox marxist categories. The socialist revolution at the peripheries must be permanent, we are told, must not submit to the trap of waiting for a bourgeois revolution; at the same time, however, this revolution is impossible, and can only be a *democratic* revolution (a bourgeois revolution?—here the categories become confusing, an act of hair-splitting), without the revolutionary intervention of the more economically developed nations.

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<sup>16</sup> Samir Amin once referred to this process as "delinking", arguing that the emergence of socialisms at the peripheries, by opting out of the global capitalist market, would negatively affect the capitalist economies at centres of imperialism since it would deprive them of global surplus.

So just as Trotsky conflates the categories of the capitalist mode of production and the capitalist world system, he also conflates the categories of socialism and communism. His justification for arguing that only a global socialist revolution is possible, and that socialism cannot just emerge in particular countries, is to be found in those passages where Marx and Engels also claim that only a world socialist revolution is possible—and Trotskyists are keen to remind us of this fact. The problem, though, is that Marx and Engels often used the terms *socialism* and *communism* synonymously and that it was not until Lenin wrote *State and Revolution* that further semantic clarity was added to these categories. That is, Lenin went to great lengths to point out the moments in the work of Marx and Engels where the concept of *socialism* (i.e. a centralized state where the bourgeois was placed under the dictatorship of the proletariat) was treated as a progenerative category for *communism* (i.e. a classless society). Under the Leninist clarification and concretization of these concepts, then, it is quite possible that socialism, or a dictatorship of the proletariat, can exist in particular countries while other countries remain capitalist—though, admittedly, the existence of such a socialism will be affected by external imperialist pressure. At the same time Lenin argued, following Marx and Engels but without the semantic confusion, that communism was only possible globally; after all, in a very pragmatic sense, the state has to wither away in order for communism to exist and, in the context of the capitalist world system, if a state was ever to wither away then it would seem that the imperialist nations would immediately crush this emergent communism. Trotsky, however, did not seem to accept Lenin's conceptual categories here and was led, perhaps by the way he understood world capitalism, to simply argue that socialist revolution was possible only with a world revolution.

Therefore, there has really never been any actually existing socialism according to Trotskyism, just degenerated/deformed workers states and Bonapartist (i.e. “Stalinist”) regimes. When capitalism is restored in these contexts, then, the Trotskyist response is simply to proclaim, and sometimes gleefully, that this is simply because they were never socialist to begin with! Maoists, however, take a different tack: they claim these regions *were* socialist but that they failed to carry the socialist struggle through to communism because, and this is the key insight of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism mentioned above, *class struggle continues under the dictatorship of the proletariat*. That is, capitalist restoration can happen because socialism is also a class society: the bourgeoisie, after all, is being held under the dictatorship of the proletariat and so it can always defeat this dictatorship and return to power. Significantly, bourgeois ideology lingers in the superstructure, becomes a compelling force in socialist society, and this is because most of us were born and raised in a context where bourgeois ideology was hegemonic—it is hard to simply break from this because we arrive, after a revolution, seeped in the filth of the past mode of production—and this ideology remains compelling *even for people within the communist party*.

And yet Trotskyists have a different story to tell about the restoration of capitalism in formerly socialist (ahem, formerly “deformed worker state”) contexts. Their story is rather simplistic and, as such, cannot account for very much: Stalin and the bureaucracy he produced ruined the Russian Revolution, mainly because Stalin and his bureaucracy wouldn't recognize permanent revolution. The solution to this problem, then, is to have had Trotsky instead of Stalin lead the Russian Revolution post-Lenin; it breaks down to a problem of great figures of history. But we



Maoists assert that Trotsky's leadership of the Russian Revolution wouldn't have made things significantly different: for one thing, he clearly wasn't capable of realizing that class struggle continued under socialism and even within the party (this insight was only possible in the summation of the Russian Revolution that happened during the Chinese Revolution, crystallizing with the theory of Cultural Revolution where the masses were unleashed upon the party headquarters), and his theory of permanent revolution predicts his failure—how he would have been able to command a global socialist revolution from a Russia that was being attacked by the forces of reaction is rather impossible to surmise. Thus, even according to Trotskyism, the Russian Revolution was destined to fail with or without Trotsky.

Again, we Maoists argue that the failure of any socialist revolution is *always* a possibility because socialism is a transitional stage and thus still a period of class struggle where a revolutionary class is attempting to complete its hegemony. We understand that revolutions can always fail, even before socialism, not because the revolutionaries involved lack some pure understanding of Bolshevism and a party with the magical ingredients of *true* democratic centralism, but because capitalist restoration is always immanent during socialist revolutions. There are line struggles in the party itself and sometimes the line that best represents the capitalist road will triumph.

Returning to the general question of Stalin and Stalinism, which is often the main concern of Trotskyism (since it defines itself as the only Leninism that is not-Stalinist), we should at least agree that it is important to correctly critique Stalin and the phenomenon that Trotskyists call “Stalinism”. Unlike Marxist-Leninists who declare complete fidelity to Stalin as *the* successor of Lenin, who argue that any revolutionary movement that critiques Stalin to any degree is not properly “Marxist-Leninist”, we Maoists think that every positionality within the communist movement (even Mao) should be subjected to a concrete and thorough critique. This is why we do not imagine that Stalin is beyond reproach, or that criticizing Stalin is tantamount to counter-revolutionary behaviour as the few remaining Hoxhaites would have us believe.<sup>17</sup>

However, simply focusing on Stalin as some sort of evil dictator who ruined the Bolshevik Revolution smacks of bourgeois moralism and retains some of the worst elements of reactionary propaganda regarding the Russian Revolution. Moreover, this perspective is unable to explain what happened to the Soviet Union *following* the Stalin period when Khrushchev denounced Stalin and the “Stalinist” period. Indeed, Trotskyists at this time praised Khrushchev because they felt he was proving the correctness of Trotsky's theories regarding the Soviet Union... But if this was true, then the intentional revisionism embraced by Khrushchev (his theory of peaceful co-existence with capitalism), which was the reason for his denunciation of the Stalin period, would have to be treated as also correct.

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<sup>17</sup> Enver Hoxha was the leader of the Albanian Revolution whose fidelity to Stalin as the pre-eminent Marxist-Leninist was thoroughly dogmatic.

So, if Khrushchev was clearly embracing revisionism and was not-Stalin, and clearly rejected anything that could be called “Stalinism”, then would this not make the Stalin period something more than just a “deformed/degenerated workers state” in that Khrushchev’s break from this period was the hallmark of revisionism (i.e. the peaceful co-existence thesis being precisely what was argued, in a smaller context, by Eduard Bernstein)? Even Trotskyist critiques of Khrushchev are unable to make correct distinctions between this period of the Soviet Union and the Stalin period, seeing it as the same thing (because there was a bureaucracy!) and refusing to recognize that Khrushchev’s rupture from this period was a serious epistemic break in the Soviet Union’s theory and practice; indeed, it shook the world, disaffected innumerable communist movements worldwide, led to the failed Bandung project, and cannot simply be treated as another variant of “Stalinism” or, even worse, a revolutionary rejection of “Stalinism” that proved Trotsky correct. At the most they try to claim that Khrushchev was just another “Stalinist”, as was Gorbachev and Yeltsin—a homogenization that is clumsy at best, idealist at worst.<sup>18</sup>

Rather than examine the failure of the Soviet Union as the result of an evil individual who possessed the power to produce a bureaucracy devoted to his nefarious plans—the kind of analysis that belongs in fairy tales and fantasy fiction—Maoists try to make sense of the failures of the Soviet Union in a historical materialist manner. We do not dismiss Stalin as an evil figure; rather we see him as someone who, at one point in time and for whatever reason, was leading a revolutionary state (if history had been different, and Trotsky had taken over the Russian Revolution and Stalin was in exile, we would have said the same about Trotsky) and, in attempting to lead, committed various errors.<sup>19</sup> But we see the approach to building socialism under Stalin as the error that produces revisionism and the failure of the Russian Revolution or any revolution for that matter.

Again: the theory that class struggle continues under the dictatorship of the proletariat explains both the failures of the Stalinist period and the revisionism of the Khrushchev period. Stalin did not understand the possibility of capitalist restoration as a natural part of socialism—that is, that socialism is still a class society—and that counter-revolutionary political lines come from the inheritance of bourgeois (and even semi-feudal) ideology, preserved in the super-structure. Thus, rather than seeing people who might or might not have adopted bourgeois political lines within

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<sup>18</sup> see Spartacist League, *Trotskyism, What it Isn't and What it Is!*, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/icl-spartacists/1990/trotskyism.html> where these ortho-Trotskyists argue this precise point. And this is a rather ludicrous point considering that Gorbachev has openly stated that he wanted to end the Soviet Union, that he was an anti-communist and despised Stalin, and has now been quite open about his love of capitalist “democracy” (he even appears in Pizza Hut commercials!)... So how does this make him a “Stalinist”?

<sup>19</sup> Here it is important to note the CPC’s polemical exchange with the CPSU, *The Great Debate*, specifically “On the Question of Stalin” [which can be found online at <http://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/polemic/gstalin.htm>] where they uphold the Stalin period of the Soviet Union against Khrushchev’s revisionism but, at the same time, point out that Stalin was indeed guilty of committing “errors of principle and... errors made in the course of practical work.” Here they accused Stalin of metaphysical and subjectivist thinking on important questions, of being divorced from the reality of the masses, of treating contradictions between people as contradictions between communism and its enemy, of wrongly convicting people as counter-revolutionaries, of wrongly exposing the scope of suppression, and of demonstrating chauvinism within the international communist movement. But apparently to uphold the Stalin period against the Khrushchev period is, for Trotskyists, tantamount to “Stalinism”.

the party and Soviet society as something that would necessarily happen under socialism, the forces assembled around Stalin—the so-called “Stalinist bureaucracy” as Trotskyists put it—simply acted as if these individuals and groups and ideas were the result of foreign interference or intentional treason. Moreover, they failed to understand that the party itself would be host to an organic line struggle that would be a reflection of the predominance of class struggle under socialism and that the party’s leadership would often preserve bourgeois ideology. And this theory, more than anything else, can explain why Stalin’s chosen successor, Khrushchev, who was initially quite happy to carry out policies of liquidation and political policing in the Stalin period, could also be a revisionist. Not because he was a foreign agent (as “Stalinism” would assume) and not because he was a bureaucrat (as Trotskyism would assume) but because bourgeois ideology and thus revisionism is always compelling—*especially* to people in positions of party leadership.

The Trotskyist analysis of “Stalinism”, however, tells us nothing about how and why socialism can fail other than “it wasn’t socialism to begin with”, or “just because some bad man was leading socialism”, or “if only there was not that cold bureaucracy than things would have been different.” And none of these explanations can explain how to build socialism properly except, perhaps, to hold the revolution in permanence and wait until everyone in the world builds socialism together. But would such a scenario prevent “bad men” from coming to power and ruining everything or would we need to have some sort of magical democratic centralism mechanism that would forever prevent such evil people from gaining totalitarian power? The solution is to just get a Trotsky in there, a solution based on personality types. Moreover, to assume that a bureaucracy (which, by definition, is an organized structure of administration) would not emerge in even the imaginary context of a single global socialist revolution is itself a fantasy: how would socialism be developed and consolidated in this context—spontaneously and without any struggle over administration? Bureaucracies can and will emerge despite any anti-bureaucratic attempts on the part of revolutionaries. Rather than pretend that they won’t because of some supernatural anti-bureaucratic powers on the part of pure revolutionaries, therefore, we should see them as spaces for class struggle under socialism: structures that will emerge but must be opened to the masses and placed under the control of the masses. Yet again, the Maoist theory of class struggle continuing under the dictatorship of the proletariat tells us something about building socialism and the struggles that will necessarily happen in this period—and this is the main reason why Maoism is applicable in every context, is a development following Marxism-Leninism, and is not simply reducible to a communism only for third world peasants.

Ultimately, there is no such thing as “Stalinism” beyond what Trotskyists say it is—and what they say it is really has no scientific meaning beyond “socialism in one country”, a theory that only Trotskyists obsess about. We Maoists do not recognize that there is anything worthy of being called “Stalinism” and that those who bother identifying as “Stalinist” are also adopting a dead-end communism that is no more scientifically relevant than Trotskyism.

## Making Revolution

As noted in the section about permanent revolution, Trotskyism has been singularly incapable of even embarking on the revolutionary path. This problem is generally the result of the failure of this theory's revolutionary strategy *politically* and *militarily*. Its political strategy was discussed above in reference to the theory of permanent revolution and the focus on world socialist revolution. Its military strategy is basically the Bolshevik strategy of insurrection, the so-called "October Road", where a mass strike and armed insurrection will follow after a period of protracted legal struggle.

It is important to note that all attempts to make revolution following the insurrectionist strategy have failed since the October Revolution and this, in large part, is why some Maoists speak of the universality of people's war as a military strategy for making revolution. Since this theory is still a subject of debate amongst the international Maoist movement, however, I will not spend time comparing it to the military strategy of insurrection in order to say why Maoism is superior to Trotskyism in this regard. After all, some Maoists and other non-Trotskyists (even some anarcho-communists) uphold the theory of insurrection.

The point here, though, is that none of these failed attempts to make revolution through insurrection were even Trotskyist; that is, Trotskyism has proved itself singularly incapable of even sparking an insurrectionary moment, though it likes to claim other insurrectionary moments as its own—either asserting that the Bolshevik insurrection was all due to Trotsky's work and he was leading the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution (a claim that ignores the period of guerrilla war that began in 1905 or the fact that Trotsky's contributions to the revolution were *tactical* rather than *strategic* and that the revolutionary strategy that produced the so-called "October Road" was due to Lenin), or naming themselves after an uprising performed by a group whose leading members did not like Trotsky.<sup>20</sup> Every failed insurrectionary attempt has been led by: a) Luxemburgists; b) Marxist-Leninists who often declared fidelity to the Soviet Union under Stalin; c) even anarchists, but only once, in the case of the Spanish Revolution.

Thus, there is not a single example of a Trotskyist attempt to actually make revolution and this is due, primarily, to the general *political* strategy of Trotskyism, the theory of permanent revolution. Indeed, if a socialist revolution cannot hope to succeed unless it is led by the advanced working-class at the centres of capitalism, and this revolution must ultimately be a *global* revolution in order to be properly called "socialist", then what Trotskyists are really advocating is holding the revolution in permanence until everyone is ready to go at it all together,

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<sup>20</sup> I'm speaking here of the failed Spartacist insurrection in Germany and the fact that Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht had written some pretty condemnatory things about Trotsky vis-a-vis the Russian Revolution. And yet still, despite the fact that the KPD at that time had no love for Trotsky or anything that would be considered Trotskyist, this has not stopped a notorious sectarian Trotskyist group from appropriating the name of this insurrection for themselves.

everywhere in the world, which of course means they have been waiting since the Fourth International and performing only a long and protracted legal struggle.<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes Trotskyists will defend their practice by claiming they are protecting a “true” Marxism and, in (with)holding the revolution in permanence, are simply preparing for the time when the working-class will realize, through decades of propaganda and entering trade unions, that this or that Trotskyist sect’s approach is correct and, like a sudden spark igniting, a proper Trotskyist revolution will erupt. Here we have another version of the tired “the time is not right” refrain that some Marxists, and not just Trotskyists, like to repeat ad infinitum. And yet this “time is not right” approach is intrinsic to the Trotskyist strategy of revolution: for the time has never been right across the entire world at the same time. The time for revolution, contrary to the Trotskyist assumption, will only be right if those whose “time is right” (or who make the time right) in specific contexts embark on protracted revolutions that are capable of disarticulating imperialism by pursuing the socialist path rather than waiting until everyone pursues it all at once. Thus, despite the Trotskyist claim that it is avoiding economic determinism by theorizing its version of permanent revolution, its strategy in actual practice ends up reasserting a productive forces approach, holding the revolution in abeyance until the global “combined and uneven” mode of production is at a balanced point where everyone can make a go of it altogether.

No one, however, is really gravitating towards the sectarian Trotskyist guardians of “pure Marxism” because, though they are probably the best examples of Trotskyist theory due to their orthodoxy, most people find their sectarianism, dogmatism, and missionary-Marxism annoying, offensive, and generally cultish. More importantly, then, are those influenced by the Trotskyist tradition but correctly leary of the productive forces approach (those who we generally refer to as “critical-Trotskyist” or “post-Trotskyist”), who still cannot break from the theory that produces a strategy incapable of making revolution. These groups often base themselves on Hal Draper’s “socialism from below” theory and end up, in practice, tailing mass movements. Others become little more than clubs for university students, intellectuals, and trade union bureaucrats (this despite Trotskyism’s toothless critiques of bureaucracy). Still others imagine that entering social democratic bourgeois parties and embarking on a reformist project, perhaps because its lack of militancy allows them to be respectable communists, will eventually allow socialism to emerge. In all of these cases, though, as with above, Trotskyism and those strands of Marxism highly influenced by Trotskyism have never seriously approached revolution in actual practice.

Since this is *the* most important facet of communism—*making revolution and overthrowing capitalism*—it is extremely telling that the Trotskyist tradition has no revolutionary experience to

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<sup>21</sup> Some Trotskyist groups, such as the International Marxist Tendency (IMT), have gone so far as to actually advocate revisionism by claiming that revolutionaries at the centres of capitalism can produce an insurrection by entering social democratic parliamentary parties and taking them over from the inside. It should be noted, though, that other Trotskyist and post-Trotskyist groups have critiqued the IMT for practicing revisionism, just as it should be noted that other Marxist traditions, including Maoism, have sometimes been guilty, based on a dogmatic reading of Lenin’s *Leftwing Communism an Infantile Disorder*, of the same entryist revisionism.

speaking of unless we count the Bolshevik Revolution in which Trotsky *participated* as a revolutionary. But this was not a “Trotskyist” revolution; after all, Stalin also participated in the Bolshevik Revolution (and to such a degree that he had an entire underground apparatus surrounding him and this, more than anything else, allowed him to push Trotsky out of the Comintern) but your average Trotskyist would have a conniption fit if you called the Bolshevik Revolution “Stalinist”!

So, unlike Maoism which, even before it was fully theorized, has inspired significant people’s wars throughout the world, Trotskyism has no revolutionary experience to call its own, has proven itself incapable of producing a revolutionary experience of its own, and thus cannot learn from its successes and failures when it comes to revolutionary strategy. Indeed, all Trotskyism can do is critique other revolutionary movements from a position of nowhere, a stand-point based only on its understanding of the Bolshevik Revolution and its belief that everything must be precisely as it imagines the Bolshevik Revolution to have been although, as an ideology, it has failed to replicate this instance and, more importantly, the world is not the same, spatially or temporally, as Russia in 1917. And though Trotskyists have participated in insurrectionary moments like mining strikes and factory take-overs throughout Latin America, in all of these cases they were simply tailing a larger mass movement rather than organizing and leading these struggles towards a revolutionary moment.

Of course, the way Trotskyism has traditionally rejected this charge, as I noted in the section on permanent revolution, is by pointing out that all of these other revolutionary movements have failed and that maybe they wouldn’t have failed had they followed the theory of permanent revolution. This is an easy charge to make because Trotskyists are able to claim a “pure Marxism” by the very fact that they have never had a chance, due to the fact that their theory prevents them from ever having a chance in the first place, to lead a revolution and thus encounter all of the messiness revolutions tend to generate, as well as the two-line struggle we Maoists say (based on our historical experience) is bound to happen; Trotskyism has not made any mistakes because it hasn’t done anything that would allow it to fail or be successful. It’s a bit like someone who has never gone to school claiming they have never failed a test: it’s an absurd and fallacious position but most importantly it demonstrates an idealist conception of Marxism, where a pure communism is like a Platonic form, existing outside of space and time, and that all we have to do is correctly reflect on its essence in order to produce a truly perfect revolution.

But we Maoists assert, along with Marx, that it is only possible to know something through practice; thus, it is only possible to understand revolution through revolutionary praxis, through trying and sometimes failing at revolution. We are taught by history, but not in circumstances we choose, and we can only solve those questions, as Marx was keen on reminding his readers, that are presented to us by history—if we solve them at all. Trotskyism, it must be said, has not even tried to solve the problem, in practice, of how to make revolution: it has only theorized this problem and relied on a theory that projects revolution far into the future, thus escaping the hard work of building an actual revolutionary movement.

Indeed, the obsessive need to argue that Maoism is pseudo-communism seems more a product of an ideology concerned with a pure Marxism (i.e. a Marxism that exists beyond class struggle, that can be discovered only by reading the precise words of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky as if these words are sacred) as well as an ideology that feels threatened when other Marxisms, unlike the supposed apex of communist theory (Trotskyism), actually succeed in building movements capable of launching revolutions. So rather than examine why these other communisms are successful and what their theories are actually saying—rather than question its own absence of revolutionary praxis—Trotskyism instead contents itself by arguing that these are fake revolutions and then, when these revolutions fail (because no revolution is determined to succeed and success is extremely difficult), some Trotskyists chuckle knowingly and argue that their theories can explain this failure when the truth is that the theories of those who failed actually do a better job, as noted in the previous section, of making sense of revolutionary failure.

In fact, some of the more orthodox Trotskyist groups try to argue that this lack of revolutionary history is a virtue: “the faction fights that have taken place since the inception of Trotsky’s Fourth International over 50 years ago have been struggles to preserve for the cause of the proletariat internationally the principles and revolutionary traditions that were brought to bear by Lenin’s Bolshevik Party in leading the toiling masses of the former tsarist empire to victory.”<sup>22</sup> Meaning, then, that the principle duty of a revolutionary is to preserve the traditions of the past, gleaned through a very particular social and historical context, and that such a pursuit justifies a factionalism and sectarianism that only exists because Trotskyist group *x* thinks that Trotskyist group *y* has the wrong ideological interpretation of very specific and rarified theoretical positions held by Trotsky.

Thankfully, these ultra-orthodox variants of Trotskyism are seen as ludicrous caricatures of Marxism by the majority of the left, including the majority of other Trotskyists and leftists influenced by Trotskyism, and the only reason they manage to persist is for the same reasons that cults manage to persist. We only mention this ortho-Trotskyist defense of preserving history at the expense of revolutionary action to indicate that some Trotskyists are quite aware of Trotskyism’s inability to produce or lead a revolutionary movement. Moreover, this orthodox sectarianism should teach us that the only reason to engage in ideological line struggle with other variants of communism is not, as some would have it, to promote banal sectarianisms and static factionalisms, but to clarify the theoretical grounds necessary for making revolution. Obsessing over these theoretical grounds without attempting to implement them in revolutionary practice—and thus being unable to learn how to articulate them creatively in a given social-historical context—is the antithesis of communism.

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<sup>22</sup> Spartacist League, *Trotskyism, What it Isn’t and What it Is!*, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/icl-spartacists/1990/trotskyism.html>

## Theory and Practice

Thus, as discussed at the outset of this polemic, the question “Maoism or Trotskyism?” has nothing to do with an abstract sectarian squabble; it is a question about concrete circumstances, about the theoretical grounds necessary to make revolution. Moreover, it is a question that emerges from a tradition of communism that has actually been attempting to make revolution and understand what this means since the significant but ultimately failed people’s war in Peru. After Peru there was Nepal that went further but still ran up against the problem of revisionism that emerged, as Maoism tells us, through the party’s two-line struggle. After Nepal there was the renewal of the people’s war in India which is still growing and throwing the country into a civil war. And in a few years the Maoists in Afghanistan might end up launching their people’s war, proving that the 21st century will be one of revolutions. In the centres of global capitalism new Marxist-Leninist-Maoist formations are emerging and trying to understand how to make revolution at the centres of capitalism—a question that has not been thoroughly examined for a very long time and that, most often, is answered with entryist and/or insurrectionist theories that have never been successful.<sup>23</sup>

This is why we are not interested in repeating the stale refrains that past Marxist-Leninist movements sang about Trotskyism. We think it is possible to recognize Trotskyism as one interpretation of the Marxist-Leninist tradition—we even think it is worth admitting that there are many Trotskyist individuals and groups who have provided useful contributions to theory and who have tirelessly sided with the masses—we just do not think that this interpretation, according to its theoretical foundations, is capable of being anything more than a revolutionary blind alley.

We also feel that Trotskyist engagements, as well as those that uncritically accept the Trotskyist narrative (i.e. Goldner, who is a “left communist” and not a Trotskyist, is a good example of this problem) of Maoism have never succeeded in making sense of this theoretical trajectory. When we encounter articles about Maoism by so-called “critical Trotskyists” that see nothing valid in the Chinese Revolution and that ignore all of the great revolutionary movements at the global peripheries that were inspired by this revolution—when we read theoretical engagements that treat Maoism as a phenomenon that happened only in the 1960s and 1970s and that ignore the fact that Maoism-qua-Maoism did not crystallize until the end of the 1980s—we tend to assume that this bad faith on the part of our Trotskyist counterparts tells us more about their lack of theoretical understanding than any mistakes on our part. Moreover, when we see the great people’s wars that have erupted since the emergence of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism treated by other communists as insignificant, or as “fake communism” despite the fact that they are successfully mobilizing the masses, and the failures of these revolutions promoted over their

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<sup>23</sup> Canada’s Parti Communiste Révolutionnaire (PCR-RCP), for example, has spent a lot of time trying to answer this question because they see it as essential to building a revolutionary movement in their social context. And the fact that this relatively new party is growing and demonstrating that it is a vital force is not only due to its militancy but to its creative and fresh application of Marxist theory to the context of Canada.



successes, we wonder whether these communists care about even trying to make revolution. As one Maoist comrade once put it, “these people don’t even think we should dare to struggle!”

But we *should* dare to struggle and we should develop our theory from both the successes and failures of our struggles, just as we have done with the successes and failures of Russia and China. And if we fail again this does not mean we were wrong for even trying but that we have failed to overcome the problems aptly described by Marxism-Leninism-Maoism or that we have encountered new problems that themselves will need to be systematically theorized. For we are taught by failures and setbacks just as much as we are taught by successes and we can learn nothing when it comes to revolutionary theory unless we actually attempt, through a thorough historical materialist systematization of past revolutionary movements (especially the world historical socialist revolutions of Russia and China), to make revolution. Lenin once famously argued that without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement, and this is correct. At the same time, however, without revolutionary movements and what we can learn through the experience of revolution there can be no revolutionary theory.

So we ask the question “Maoism or Trotskyism?” to clarify the grounds in which an ideological choice can and should be made. If the reader prefers a communism that has succeeded in keeping itself “pure” because it has remained, out of concern for this theoretical purity and because of its belief that a revolution must only happen if it is global, then Trotskyism is clearly the only viable option: after all, the Trotskyists can boast a lack of revolutionary failure—as well as pointing out the failures of the so-called “Stalinisms” it warns us to avoid—because it has never succeeded in approaching the point of revolutionary momentum where failure is even possible. But if the reader is willing to accept that making revolution is a difficult business—prone to failures more often than it is prone to success—desiring to understand how these failures and successes can be systematized, and willing to accept that the difficulty of making revolution will often produce more failures than successes as we stumble slowly but hopefully towards the next world historical revolution, then Maoism, with all of its “impure” messiness, is the only relevant communist ideology. For the world is indeed messy, and we come to revolution drenched in the filth of capitalist ideology and all of the mistakes that “weigh upon us like a nightmare”; it may take decades of inspiring but ultimately failed successive people’s wars to stretch beyond the next socialist horizon... But if we don’t try, and instead attempt to preserve an ideal Marxism as we wait in permanence, we will be overtaken by the armageddon promised by capitalism.